

DENSITY, NETWORKS, EVENTS

DENSITY

Density, congestion and crowds make up the city and precede its architectures and grand perspectives. This silent effect of mass is the backcloth against which buildings are set and with which the architect has to work. More than monuments, it is the image of the métro at rush hour that fascinates and repels visitors from Orléans, Nice or Amiens.

Density makes the city and makes us its inhabitants, even in its discontinuous outskirts. Its omnipresent mass of occupants rebuilds continuity in places where only isolated verticals are perceived, as witness the fragile silhouette of an old building since lost in the sterile homogeneity of a continuous façade. It is the presence of millions of individuals packed within a few hectares that are the invisible aesthetic and social table on which our dishes must be served.

A megalopolis, a capital, is always more than a town. It is a heterogeneous mix of cultures and customs, as we see on market days on the boulevards of Paris.

A capital's spatial qualities also stem from its juxtaposition of contrasting activities and scales, reflecting the perpetual intermingling of peoples.

The City is formed by processes of sedimentation, addition and *collage*.

The discourse on sedimentation, from Bernard Huet to Antoine Grumbach, is not historicist but aesthetic in origin - it invokes surrealist *collage* as a means of criticizing Modernity.

Collage is an inexorable fact, as we see when contemplating and touring our cities - it is the very expression of democratic society. Instead of attempting to combat this reality, we ought rather to integrate, within the design process, aesthetic principles underlying the chance encounter between an umbrella and a sewing machine, as developed by the surrealists in the wake of Lautréamont.

The most striking city effects are those of violent juxtaposition: the emergence of a piece of mediæval city wall in a 17th century town house, or a seventies high-rise block set amid suburban housing fabric. Our task is to work with this

contradictory material, in order to redefine the city's essential continuity whilst at the same time respecting its specificities, its otherness, its cosmopolitan flavour and its impurities.

In collage, discontinuity is in fact a facet of continuity. The phenomenon is not new: our royal squares - the Place des Vosges or the Place des Victoires - reflect the rationale of the concertina; they are urban *rooms*, inverted monoliths positioned here and there, radical breaks with the pre-existing fabric. They are proffered voids, incisive openings, pockets in total discontinuity with the compact fabric of the city.

NETWORKS

I should now like to propose a potted history of urban networks. My history is not that of the historian or the sociologist, but that of an architect, whose knowledge is difficult to define, except that it is closely linked to the fact of *making*, which is the only thing I can claim to do.

This history breaks down into three distinct periods.

In the first period, the networks become city, or the city becomes a series of networks. This finds its clearest expression in the Paris of Haussmann. The Haussmannian city deploys a continuous street grid. Its boulevards are extensions of the roads and railways that organize the national territory. Its (absolutely subordinate) constructions are of two principal types: those in alignment, which "hollow out" the networks, and "monuments" which indicate its articulations.

The second period dissociates communication routes from built space as such.

With the emergence of underground transport lines, certain of these networks (the métro and the Urban Expressway, for instance) are freed from the constraints of built space. Two quite distinct spaces are organized independently of one another, and are randomly related by tube stations.

Amplifying this process of disconnection, theorists of the Modern Movement completely isolated buildings from the street grid, as witness Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin for Paris.

In the third period, the networks are disconnected from lines of communication. The system of networks is amplified and

becomes more complex: now immaterial, it is freed from all spatial constraints. I am talking of course of the telephone (the proliferation of cellphones is a clear instance of this), television (the “new door”, in Paul Virilio’s words), the personal computer (work-at-a-distance), internet and the web...

Today’s networks transcend the city. The street is no longer relevant; the key agents are métro corridors, cellphones, television ... We simultaneously inhabit a homogeneous continuum of virtuality and discontinuous fragments of space.

Architecture no longer has to organize continuity, forge relations or create an urban backcloth - a function entirely devolve to the networks. And the networks that organize our existence (the métro, the telephone, television) are closed circuits. Architecture should therefore palliate the homogenization of networks, affirm singularity and create autonomous free zones.

It is both urgent and necessary to build architectural events, poles of identity around which inhabitants of the city can find their bearings, establish specific identities and thus promote encounters. Radio waves are the reference pole, the city must now enter into dissidence and assert its identity as a patchwork of differentiated places. The right and duty of every designer is to promote the city of tomorrow as a variegated, multipolar field of architectures, forms, sensations and intensities.

The Atomized City

Today’s “new deal” enables us to better perceive the axes that homogenized the nineteenth-century city, and more secretive hallmarks that ushered in the twentieth-century city - what Richard Scoffier has called the “city of shards”.

The earliest photographs of Paris reveal that its public spaces were treated as open-air rooms given over to the community, and despite the presence of strong opposition from various quarters, an impression of continuity predominates. This combined notion of opposition and continuity is what created the wealth of the city - as André Breton recorded in his narratives of walks in Paris and its suburbs. His books demonstrate that the urban fabric was so complex and varied as to trigger all sorts of association, enabling the stroller to wander unknown streets in the manner of the poet. In our homogeneous cities, on the other hand, associations and correspondences have

become a rarity, and the “poetic” quality of our walks has been impoverished. For this reason, it is imperative to resist the homogenization of urban fabric and the consequent impoverishment of social relations.

Wherever possible, we must try to recover the emotion triggered by the juxtaposition of a street corner, a factory chimney and a housing block, the surprise on seeing a gigantic warehouse and a tiny workshop existing side by side at the back of a courtyard. We must implement a careful mix (of colours, shapes and materials) and inject “imaginary” into the new emotional wastelands that contemporary cities are tending to become; combine the riches and formal invention of a “Garden of Delights” with the hybrid social reality of the Parisian street; and rediscover the near-inexhaustible density found in the narratives of Hieronymus Bosch; yet remain open to a variety of idioms, habits and flavours...

Islands to be invented

The megalopolis is not a unity; it is an collection of streets, or of units of “drift” (as Guy Debord depicted them). Moreover, over and above the power of the mayor, the megalopolis corresponds to a multiplicity of powers.

It is by ceaselessly inventing new islands that we can make the city live. To counter the architecture of objects, I seek to promote one of situation. I do not mean servile contextuality, but the invention of specific situations relative to the site in question. There can be no absolute rules, no single model to be respected - we must simply know how to exploit the opportunities intrinsic to each context. The city, the cityscape and the skyline are in no way blank pages wanting poetic infill, nor are they museums - they are existing works, and our task is their pursuit, not creation *ex nihilo*; to compose new architectural forms by pinpointing the latencies of each and every context. Gradually, a necessary federating image emerges, but in a sense, it is invariably predetermined by contingent elements.

EVENTS

The Andy Warhol theorem

Like many of my contemporaries, I remain fascinated by Andy Warhol's premonitory *mot* to the effect that, in the year two thousand, everyone will be able to be a star for at least ten minutes of their lives. My view is that this should be taught as axiomatic in schools of architecture everywhere.

Paris and London are megapolitan exceptions: the most fundamentalist of Talibans is an exception to the rule, as is the most democratic of Swedes.

No one is commonplace, and commonplace architecture interests no one, given that we are all exceptional.

Much has been said about "innocuous", commonplace architecture, an architecture "without qualities" This aesthetic discourse, which is absolutely legitimate and invokes Robert Musil (*The Man Without Qualities*) and the *nouveau roman*, from Alain Robbe-Grillet to Marguérite Duras, nonetheless brings with it real transformations which are far from poetic. Cities are becoming more and more commonplace - at a rate that can only be described as exponential. Only offices, housing and shops remain, while small industries and crafts, which brought life and colour to the city, have been exiled. Architectural and urban regulations have trivialized the morphology of the city block; inner courtyards have been emptied and transformed into private gardens; and streets have been uniformly "padlocked". Faced with this invariant trend, the idea of asserting singularity, exception and the architectural event, far from being narcissistic, constitutes an act of resistance, and even a public health measure. I do not mean that continuity is not an essential concern - the autistic blocks of Japanese or American towns should not be taken as role-models. But continuity is not the same thing as uniformity - it presupposes rhythms and cadences, counterpoint and syncopation. Isolated events are indispensable to all sequencings, in that they organize and structure them.

The Exception Is the Rule

In fact, Paris is a city of exceptions, which reproduces itself not in continuity, but by accident.

In the seventies and eighties, (?architects and town-planners) believed in the possibility of symbiosis between the city and its architecture. But they were deluded: whole districts built on these disastrous ideological lines have become as many faceless graveyards. The places we love are in conflict with these two close yet distant instances. As Spreckelsen so rightly remarked, monuments most closely associated with the identity of Paris -

the Eiffel Tower, the Sacré Cœur, the Arc de Triomphe, the Pompidou Centre, the Louvre Pyramid - are anything but Parisian. This reflection also holds for its most everyday, banal architectural productions...

Sep Janiak

I have always been fascinated by the visions of the painter Sep Janiak - for instance his images of Notre-Dame cathedral in a jungle setting, or of the Ministry of Finance building guarded over by an Egyptian sphinx. Like a seismograph, Janiak succeeds in recording the impact which these buildings have on our "imaginary". Somehow, they are always elsewhere, out of frame, in a dreamlike reality, rather like the doors of science fiction which open onto the cities of analogy. Each Parisian space should possess monuments of this type, thus affording the ceaseless transition from real to imaginary...

Poles of Identity

Every village has its church-spire, and each fragment of the megalopolis should be clearly identifiable, with its own specific identity - its magic gateway to another world.

Just as waves are created by the dual process of ebb and flow, these poles of identity are created in two phases:

firstly, voids enable visitors to pause and look. They are havens of peace for old people, children, tourists and all those for whom public space should be a focus for encounters, dialogue and city life. Current models are for the most part incapable of meeting this demand.

Boulevard de Belleville, rue Oberkampf, Albi: when confronted with a brief and a site, I always ask myself the following question: what specific space ought the city offer the passerby at this point? Architecture, like medical treatment, should always be an act of generosity, and the architect must concern himself with the question of the inhabitants' right to space and the city, just as doctors concern themselves with their patients' right to good health;

secondly, figures emerge and dominate by their sheer force of attraction.

To be inhabited, travelled, looked at and loved, the city has to be appropriated - and it must contain surprises. We need buildings that are both discreet and named (perhaps even decried) - buildings that welcome the onlooker and at the same

time stand erect, calm and serene like the tutelary deities of Easter Island and elsewhere.

We need scenographies capable of transforming our districts into villages of the future. Contemporary megapoles want the hollowed-out forms of as yet unnamed public spaces, and must erect belfries, steeples and other salutary presences to keep watch over the destinies of occupant and passerby alike. I believe that any and every street corner can furnish the pretext for an architectural event. Yet I also believe it is necessary to retain areas of calm and tranquillity (such as my rue Ramponneau building): the balance of the street is born of these contrasts.

The Festive City

We should try to rediscover those festive architectures - whether triumphal arches or the Bastille elephant - of which Gavroche dreamed and which drove Victor Hugo to delirium. Just as Rem Koolhaas analysed Coney Island for his theoretical study of Manhattan, we ought perhaps first to enjoy the fun of the fair before proceeding to build Paris.

PROJECTS

In conclusion, I should like to say a word or two about my own projects, which I place in three categories:

“Free Spaces”

These are built voids; spaces that fracture closed blocks and are offered to the passerby, the pedestrian. They furnish protected commercial enclaves, breathing spaces, and *parvis* or passageways for all who inhabit the city.

At 100, boulevard Belleville I created a small square - an open courtyard - and overhanging gangways. This concavity creates a protected, intimate space set back from the street, freed of the busy atmosphere of the street while remaining a cosmopolitan space of dialogue and movement .

At 113, rue Oberkampf I imagined a belvedere overlooking a sunken garden, a covered patio prolonging the post office

entrance. Suddenly, the narrow sloping street affords views of another, more bucolic horizon.

I myself suggested adding a sequence of workshops and offices for craft industries and the liberal professions, so as to enrich the diversity of a complex designed for a homiogeneous population in rapid rotation (young post office workers). In the same way, I wanted to design a wide variety of housing units so as to meet the requirements of difference, the exception I consider essential. In these spatially qualified places, requiring little or no material investment, the empty spaces permit immediate appropriation. They also take their legitimacy from their situation within the project as a whole.

This device can also be seen at Albi, where the problem was not the treatment of irregular party walls, but of a ravine marking a cesura in the urban fabric. The space in front of the theatre follows the slope of the valley in the manner of an open-air proscenium (the proffered void corresponds precisely to the solids stipulated in the brief).

“Polarities”

These interventions are attempts to absorb oversized spaces that pose a threat to the city. They are also figures that rearticulate fallow land within the city. The crèche at rue des Recollets articulates the entrance to the Parc Villemin and the aligned façades leading to the canal Saint-Martin.

With rue Pelleport, the case was somewhat different. The problem was to confer a common scale on groups of buildings of contrasting dimensions: neo-Haussmannian street façades, a seventies low-rise block, and the small town houses of the rue des Pavillons. The monumental character of the figure overlooking the crossroads (“the Watch” (or: “the Lookout”) is palliated by the composition of the building (a succession of folds dilating toward the outside and condensed at the centre).

“Accumulations”

I also design non-urban proposals. These schemes, which do not create urban promenades, are so to speak autonomous compositions.

At the theatre in Blois, fragmentations and accumulations prefigure the city to come. On the banks of the Loire, colourful volumes set on a gigantic stage constitute a festive setting for theatre and music.

Set amid pylons, metal boxes, aeroplanes and motorways - an embryonic suburban landscape - the restaurant at Roissy constitutes an additive composition of blue blocks in levitation, creating a shelter related to reinvented nature.

Finally, I should like to speak of one of my earliest projects, “The Itinerary as a Constituent of Space”. To respond to the brief of this national competition for young French architects - “Building the suburbs”, I had to tackle several pressing problems. In the absence of urban density, how can one recreate the densifying effect of the street? How is it possible to crystallize spatial relations without mechanically reproducing traditional urban configurations?

In response to the dilated space of Romainville, along an existing thoroughfare, I imagined a metonymic sequence capable of recomposing the continuous city street. A side-street palliates devastating radio-concentric traffic-flow from Paris, dooming the municipality to its suburban status and dependence on the megalopolis.

In the course of my many visits to the site, the theme of an eventful itinerary became obvious to me, as did the notion of working with sculptural forms - a relative betrayal of the official brief, yet reflecting a precise analysis of needs. The punctuations (bus shelter, market...) constituted a dramatic progression, an Ariadne’s thread, a recital of forms.

Though I have never built this project - and though I have never built anything like it - my architectural realisations have always been inspired by its principles. 113, rue Oberkampf and 100, rue de Belleville were both conceived as narrative structures involving visual and physical itineraries - compact fables of form and colour.

Translated by Kenneth Hylton, January 1997