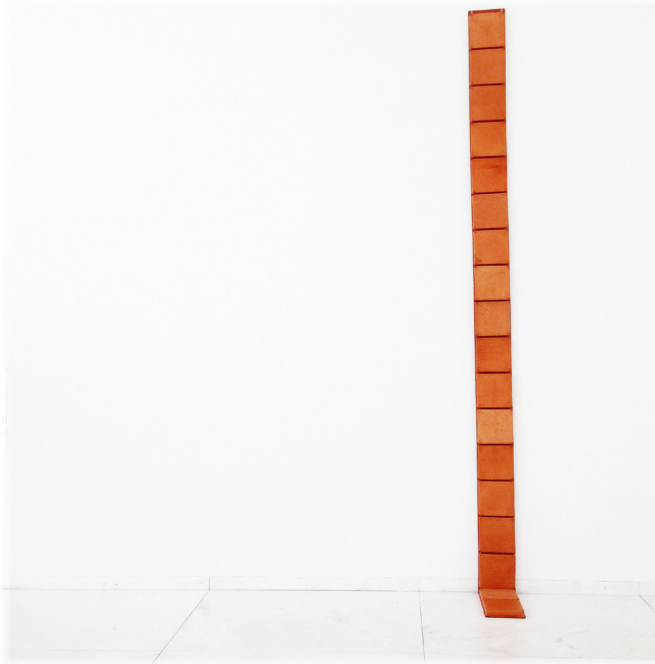


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Playing in Space; Profaning Architectural Practice

Carlos Jacques

School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Al Akhawayn University
Av. Hassan II
Ifrane 53000
Morocco
c.jacques@au.ma

Abstract

There are no intrinsically radical ways of moulding architectural space. But once it is understood that space is made through social relations, that it is as a social practice, what emerges is the need to imagine spatial practices, in urbanism, architecture, or whatever, beyond their subservience to regimes of oppressive power. What then might, for example, a radical architectural practice look like? Without any pretence to proposing norms, and in consonance with the idea that human spaces are created, a liberating architecture cannot consequently be reduced to any fixed aesthetic and/or functionally defined form. It must rather be conceived of as a practice that creates spatial forms open to the multiplication of desires, and not their domestication.

Inspired by the occupation movements of city squares in early 2011, this reflection is an invitation to question, to reject, functionalist orderings of architectural space. It is an apology for an architecture of excess, of the monstrous; an architecture that allies itself with overflowing energies, wild experimentation, iconoclastic irreverence. To profane architectural practice is to render it anarchic.

Keywords

Space; occupation; anarchism

... it is pointless trying to decide whether Zenobia is to be classified among happy cities or among the unhappy. It makes no sense to divide cities into these two species, but rather into another two: those that through the years and the changes continue to give their form to desires, and those in which desires erase the city or are erased by it.

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

1.

This reflection on architecture was animated by the eruption of occupations of city streets and squares in early 2011, movements in which the anonymous many appropriated “public” spaces for purposes no longer permitted or imagined. Each occupation exploded the narratives and histories of technocratically administered well-being; each profaned spaces moulded by the sanctities of power and the flows of wealth; each was the uncaused and unpredicted creation of a “myriad of new possibilities”.¹ Without any political party affiliation, without any hegemonic organization, without known leaders, the movements arose as pure *events of shared self-making*, where the location, the place of the event opens to all humanity (“This *plaza* has no borders”, could be read amid the eruption of texts that decorated Madrid’s Puerta del Sol under occupation by the 15th of May movement)²; a place where “all speech is listened to, all propositions are examined, all difficulties are treated for what they are.”³ Like a child who turns reality into a play thing, a toy, rendering it thereby susceptible to multiple uses limited only by dreams and freedoms, oblivious to what should and should not be done except as its imagination dictates, the occupation of cityscapes redefined them as open and horizontal, without closed functions. Squares became spaces of festival, carnival, disclosing dimensions of constructed space forgotten or repressed, and opening thresholds onto new spatial possibilities. The city, its urban plans and architectural forms, was freed, however momentarily, for unprogrammed uses, for radical desires. The striated landscapes of urban space were transgressed; the almost sacral nature of city ordinances, regulations, urban authorities, functional division of spaces, city toponymy, monuments, buildings, streets and squares and so much more became toys in a proliferation of spatialities that testified to a profaning of the *urbe* by ways of life, bearers of new ways of making space.

This reflection then is written amid a sea of resonances, of occupations become cradles for radically democratic, assembly based, auto-

1. Badiou, February 18, 2011.

2. *15-M At Sol*.

3. Badiou, February 18, 2011.

mous self-determination, of appropriated abandoned city lots greened for play and food, of factories and rural lands reborn for sustainable life, of resistance to eviction and the taking of policed unused housing for shelter and dignity, of the acts of appropriation of food from commercial centres of over-abundance and the waste of excess, of the self-organisation of social services before the retreat of the State, of the creation of *okupied* social centres, spaces of conviviality, solidarity and resistance: all of these created spaces and so many others in our “time of riots”⁴ push us towards the question, among others, of how we can conceive of architectural and urban space not as confining and satisfying presumed needs (an ambition coincident with regimes of power), but as liberating desires, as “means of testing a thousand ways of modifying life.”⁵

Man must stop making and manipulating, and instead allow architecture to happen.

William Katavolos

2.

It is not uncommon, in efforts to circumscribe *modern* architecture, to speak of it in terms of form and/or function. In rupture with past architecture, the modern would be styled after machines, stripped bare of ornamentation, and organised rationally in a functional distribution of spaces. Yet however useful classifications and definitions of this kind may be, they carry with them the risk of passing over the differences and tensions, the heterogeneity, of the architecture designed and built under its name. And critical positions and practices within modernism are in parallel weakened, for they are often reduced to simple proposals of alternative forms and functions; an aesthetic posturing that offers little resistance to functional imperatives.

If a unity there is in modern architecture, it lies elsewhere. And by analogy with Immanuel Kant’s answer to the question “What is enlightenment?”, namely, “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity”, with “immaturity” understood as “the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another”,⁶ one might say of modern architecture that it is the self-consciousness and autonomous design of built space, freed from the burden of past architectural forms, canons and non-architectural demands. Architecture thereby freed from presumed extra-

4. Badiou, 2011: 14.

5. Chtcheglov, 2009: 36.

6. Kant, 1991.

neous and secondary exigencies, becomes then, and conceives of itself as, an art exclusively concerned with space. “Have the courage to use your own understanding!”, Kant’s motto for the enlightenment, becomes, in its architectural guise, “Have the courage to freely shape space, as space, for yourself!” Yet Kant’s autonomous thought, a thought for thought’s sake, would come to grief on an unthought at its very heart, that of the underlying contingencies necessary to thought, but that are at the same time unsusceptible to illumination. As “the locus of an empirico-transcendental doublet”,⁷ to employ Michel Foucault’s terminology, the thinking subject that is *modern man* “is that paradoxical figure in which the empirical contents of knowledge necessarily release, of themselves, the conditions that have made them possible.”⁸ Enveloped in folds of realities which render thought possible, in our being, life and language, thought cannot in turn unveil what lies beneath itself without further pushing back the shadows of its existence. The “immediate and sovereign transparency of a *cogito*” breaks upon the shoals of its own, yet inevitable, non-knowledge.⁹ “I think”, but “I am not” only what I think. “Man has not been able to describe himself as a configuration in the *episteme* without thought at the same time discovering, both in itself and outside itself, at its borders yet also in its very warp and woof, an element of darkness, an apparently inert density in which it is embedded, an unthought which it contains entirely, yet in which it is also caught.”¹⁰ This Other of thought, this “unavoidable duality”, is both exterior to it and indispensable.¹¹ And like some promised land of primitive wholeness, to which return or future reconciliation is possible, modern self-knowledge will assume the undertaking of bringing its Other as close as possible to itself. The “whole of modern thought is imbued with the necessity of thinking the unthought.”¹² An ethical imperative thus affirms itself within thought, the demand for the “elucidation of what is silent”, “the illumination of the element of darkness that cuts man off from himself.”¹³ This is no ethics of moral norms or standards, a morality *thought* for pure souls; it is rather an ethics that calls for “a certain mode of action.”¹⁴ More fundamentally, “modern thought is advancing toward that region where man’s Other must become the Same as himself.”¹⁵ The central question

7. Foucault, 1973: 322.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 326.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 327.

13. Ibid., 328.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

of modern thought, and it remains our question, is how this “sameness” is to be thought, without naivety or the repetition of sterile *aporias*? Or more radically, how can we think beyond it if the *aporias* are inevitable? How can we think past the thinking subject, beyond *man*?¹⁶

Modern architecture, defined as the “mastery of space”, to cite Walter Gropius, will replicate the same doublet of modern thought analysed by Foucault.¹⁷ Aspiring to a pure, absolute dominion of space, its ambition could only end in purposelessness, severed as it would be from the conditions of its possibility. An architecture that seeks sovereignty of space through space, a mastery of infinite space, as Hans Hollein once celebrated it, was still the mastery of man over space.¹⁸ If architecture is “not the satisfaction of the needs of the mediocre”, if it “is not an environment for the petty happiness of the masses”, if a “building is itself”, it nevertheless cannot escape the finitude of its *arkhe*, its ruler or master builder.¹⁹ The *arkhi-tecton*, and all that envelops her/his creativity, is architecture’s Other; the space of her/his mastery remains the space that *she/he* moulds, the space conceived as fit for dwelling, a space to *inhabit*, from the Latin, *habitare*, the frequentative of *habere*, to have, to hold, to possess. Hollein’s *absolute architecture* would thus amount to a refusal of possession, the exclusion of inhabiting, and consequently, against programmed intentions, the dissolution of architecture in infinite space. If architectural form need not follow function, in Hollein’s words, form remains finite as the idiom of our being in the world.²⁰ Erich Mendelsohn expressed the problematic, the doublet, of modern architecture, and implicitly the *ethics* of this architecture’s “mode of action” succinctly: “The finiteness of mechanics plus the infiniteness of life.”²¹ The “finiteness” here is human power extended by machines, daunting yet limited before the infiniteness of life and its inexhaustible spatiality. The mature autonomy of modern architecture is thus bound by, consciously and/or unconsciously, the gesture of giving forms to human possibility. And its passion for radical autonomy will find its contours in an ethics of trying to *contain* and give expression to that same autonomy in the guise of what is properly human; the Other of architectural practice upon which its autonomy will necessarily be sacrificed in the *aporia* of endeavouring to model man’s truth, when it is man’s *being-in-the-world* that enfolds the art of giving form to space.

If modern architecture’s self-consciousness teems with essentialising discourses, it is because of the ethics which sustains it. Architecture is va-

16. *Ibid.*, 342.

17. Gropius, 1965: 24.

18. Hollein, Pichler/Hollein, 1971: 182.

19. *Ibid.*, 181, 182.

20. *Ibid.*, 182.

21. Mendelsohn/Hoetger, 1971: 106.

riously called upon to create “the true form of things”,²² to give shape to an “absolute nucleus”,²³ to be an “organic entity”,²⁴ susceptible to become part of “man’s flesh and blood”,²⁵ a “second skin”, a “bodily organ”.²⁶ It is asked to organise life, to create order through laws and fixed principles,²⁷ which could then serve as the basis for the elaboration of elemental and universal forms and functions,²⁸ summarised in the first De Stijl manifesto as the struggle for “an international unity in life, art and culture.”²⁹ However diverse the language used, the desire for unity between human being and free spatial form is the constant ethical leitmotif, and equally the source of the fragility, if not the impossibility, of architecture’s modernity.

The militant and trenchant prose of Le Corbusier’s writing on architecture may serve as a paradigm for architecture’s strivings and its unthought. Le Corbusier defined architecture as a pure art, a *tekhne*, of “the masterful, correct, and significant play of volumes brought together in light” while simultaneously placing the house at its centre.³⁰ The latter was to be conceived as responding to natural human functions intuitively aspired to by all.³¹ Le Corbusier’s house was “the ordinary and common house for normal and common men.” It should be rooted in the human: “the human scale, the typical need, the typical function, the *typical* emotion.” No mere arbitrarily assembled shelter, the *new architecture* was to design and build houses on the foundation of the common organism of “men”, an organism said to possess identical functions and needs, and a natural element of the biological family.³² Without such a ground, architecture could only fail to be an *art*; it would be reduced to arbitrary construction, incapable of properly *housing man*, contributing thereby to frustration, alienation and, reading Le Corbusier’s *Toward an Architecture*, to revolution. But then men, and it is *men* that Le Corbusier speaks of, become the darkness that haunts the “volumes brought together in light”. The mastery of space is held fast by the weight of assumptions regarding what human beings are. The art is tarnished by such corporeal needs as eating, sleeping and evacuating. And for the art to remain art then, our physical condition must itself be puri-

22. Van de Velde, 1971: 13.

23. Poelzig, 1971: 16.

24. Lloyd Wright, 1971: 25.

25. Graeff, 1971: 71.

26. Häring, 1971: 126.

27. De Stijl, 1971: 66; Van Doesburg and van Esteren, 1971: 67.

28. Muthesius/Van de Velde, 1971: 28; Van Doesburg, 1971: 78.

29. De Stijl, 1971: 39.

30. Le Corbusier, 2007: 102.

31. *Ibid.*, 83.

32. *Ibid.*, 84.

fied to absolute functions reproducible spatially in the shaping of houses and cities. What human being though can be reduced to absolute functions? The absurdity of the pretension was perhaps best expressed by Adolf Loos, who before the phenomenon of erotic toilet graffiti, could find nothing more to say than that it was a sign of criminality and degeneracy. The toilet's function is to piss and shit in, and should the human insist on any other kind of parallel activity, in this instance "artistic", this could only be seen as symptomatic of moral and cultural degeneracy. In Loos' words, a "country's culture can be assessed by the extent to which its lavatory walls are smeared."³³ The purity of architecture then was to be had in the purification of humans. This in turn however condemned modern architecture to increasing forms of functional reductionism. The heroic art would become the maidservant of inescapably fragile bodies.

The failure of the vision of modern architecture, Le Corbusier's and others', is perhaps nowhere more manifest than in the programmatic declarations of the different *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM) gatherings beginning in 1928, with the Charter of Athens of 1933 standing as their final testament. In the Charter, the city's destiny, and the house as its basic social cell, is affirmed to be the satisfaction of "*the primordial biological and psychological needs of their inhabitants.*"³⁴ The frustration of these ambitions however was evident in the stated need to continually refine design, so as to be able to contain the human essence fully through rational planning and building. Only then could the crisis "raging in all the big cities and spreading its effects throughout the country" be vanquished.³⁵ Yet what if the "crisis" was but the sign of the impossibility of architecture's ethics of confinement, of the ideal of unity between human need and ordered space? And what if this impossibility was not due to the difficulty of the labour, whose final end is but delayed, but rather to the mutual dependence of the act of ordering space and need and that both emerge together against agencies that can never be fully mastered? In a CIAM inspired meeting in 1957, under the name of "*groupe d'études d'architecture mobile*" (GEAM) in Paris, after the dissolution of the CIAM, the statement produced and published in 1960 affirmed that existing "construction and those still being put up today are too rigid and difficult to adapt to life as it is lived."³⁶ What the statement however testified to, contrary to the intentions of its authors, was not the inadequacy of design, planning or construction, but to architecture's creativity as the expression of human life, life that cannot itself be captured by that creativity. The reign of order from which

33. Loos, 1971: 13.

34. CIAM, 1971: 143, 137.

35. Ibid., 137.

36. GEAM, 1971: 167.

well-being is born, following Le Corbusier,³⁷ ends in enforced functional forms sustained finally by political and economic power. And before this reality, the GEAM could only impotently propose variable and interchangeable constructions, alterable and interchangeable functions of spatial units, and the ability of inhabitants “to adopt their dwellings themselves to the needs of the moment.”³⁸ The ethics of early modern architecture was thus domesticated through the administration of spatial integration and adaptation; what remained of “man” could now be managed by the civil servants of urbanism.

... the provisional, the free realm of ludic activity ... is the lone field of true life, though it be constrained fraudulently by taboos claiming to be eternal.
Guy Debord

3.

The writer Georges Perec once tried to map in an unequivocal, sequential and nycthemeral manner the functions of the different rooms of an apartment.³⁹ It was an exercise in absurdity, but it served to demonstrate that however precise an architect’s ideas may be regarding the particular function of each room in an apartment, that rooms were in the end more or less alike: that “they’re never anything more than a sort of cube, or let’s say rectangular parallelepiped.”⁴⁰ In sum, Perec reminds us, “a room is a fairly malleable space”,⁴¹ and that therefore it is not difficult to imagine the rooms of an apartment depending on completely different functional relations, for example, on functional relations that find their place *between* rooms, or an apartment “whose layout was based on the functioning of the senses” (we could then speak of a gustatorium, an auditory, a smellery, a feeler, and the like), or a division based on “heptadian rhythms”, where each room would be used exclusively on a single day of the week.⁴² Functionality is not thereby abandoned in these experiments, but what the satire seeks to make evident is that whatever function apartment rooms possess,

37. Le Corbusier, 2007: 122.

38. GEAM, 1971: 167.

39. The map begins as follows: 07.00, The mother gets up and goes to get breakfast in the KITCHEN; 07.15, The child gets up and goes into the BATHROOM; 07.30, The father gets up and goes into the BATHROOM; 07.45, The father and the child have their breakfast in the KITCHEN; 08.00, The child takes his coat from the ENTRANCE-HALL, and it continues in the same vein until 22.00, The father and the mother go to bed in their BEDROOM. Perec, 1999: 28-30.

40. Ibid., 28.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid., 31-2.

it is not one fixed by a correspondence between a human need and a distinctive space. Indeed, the space is malleable, as we are, and how we live, make, space is very much a matter that is underdetermined.

More interestingly philosophically and architecturally still, following Perce's reflections on the plasticity of space, is his consideration of the possibility of a "useless room, absolutely and intentionally useless", "a functionless space" that "would serve for nothing, relate to nothing."⁴³ Perce admits that it was impossible for him to follow this idea through; even language failed in "describing this nothing".⁴⁴ "How does one think of nothing? How to think of nothing without automatically putting something round that nothing, so turning it into a hole, into which one will hasten to put something, an activity, a function, a destiny, a gaze, a need, a lack, a surplus ...?"⁴⁵ The effort is nevertheless described as not without value, because it "seemed to produce something that might be a statute of the inhabitable."⁴⁶

But what then if Perce's "a-functional space", the hole that appears as we surround it with purpose, points to the empty space, the void, which the doublet of modern knowledge struggles to fill through complete self-knowledge or that modern architecture attempts to complete through the coincidence of form and need? What if the ethical task for both were to be instead to keep this space open, as an openness; to conceive then, in the case of architecture, of this space without purpose as that which holds open possibilities of spatial forms and the inhabiting of forms? Perce's room without purpose would then reveal another dimension of *inhabiting*, a dimension which escapes the word's family ties with *having* and *possessing*. If all designed space is haunted by purposelessness, then our possession of such spaces must always be incomplete; they may be *used*, but never *mastered* or *owned*, as something will always escape our grasp. The imposition of function on space reveals our power, a power to hold and enframe. But that is only made possible by the original absence of function. It is because space enfolds within itself no purpose, that it can be shaped for endless number of purposes. In place then of seeking to fill all space with utility, Perce's "statute of the inhabitable" would be an inhabiting beyond fixed functionality, severed from a submission to purpose, and therefore open to a functionless being in space. Structure and form do not thereby evanesce, but rather take on the nature of a *threshold*: a temporary form given life through a function that holds within itself the possibility of other functions in other spaces. Built space is thus conceived of as a threshold for desires. As regards architecture, it would then cease to "*be understood as the endea-*

43. Ibid., 33.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid., 35.

vour to harmonise ... the environment with man”,⁴⁷ as in Futurist proclamations, or as the construction of the “‘art-edifice’ of Man”, in the language of the Bauhaus.⁴⁸ In other words, the architect must cease to aspire to be the master/*archon* of built space for what are presumed to be pre-given, proper human needs. The latter do not exist, except as determined by regimes of power, of which architectural practice has been more often than not an instrument.

This is not a call for an architecture of resistance or liberation, however this has been imagined in the past. As Michel Foucault put the matter simply once, “I don’t believe that it ever belongs to the structure of things to guarantee the exercise of freedom.”⁴⁹ “Freedom is a practice”, a way of being in the world; whatever guarantee it commands is in the practice itself. And what perhaps characterises it above all else is the refusal of conceptual or practical closure to an end, which amounts to the sealing over of our openness to the world. Extended to architecture and architectural practice, this becomes the rejection of any pretence to formal and functional finality in the design and construction of space. Spaces are instead to be played with, something that assumes the profanation of spaces, of their shaping and uses.

The onetime *Situationist* Constant, speaking of his city *New Babylon*, described it as a possible architectural and urban space in which utility would be obsolete. The “city of New Babylon will no longer be centred on utility, but on the game. It will not be outlined as a utilitarian society in the style of today, but as a ludic society.”⁵⁰ If we take Constant’s utopia as more than a design, a plan, as he himself did, and see it rather for what it is, a spatial metaphor for free ways of being, then what he put forward was the sketch of a life in which all human spatial forms are profaned. Giorgio Agamben teaches us that to *play* and to *profane* are one and the same: they are the restitution of things to our free use, divorced from any practical means-ends logic.⁵¹ They do not overthrow distinctions, but rather *de-activate* them, *disabling* their moral hold upon us. In playing with designed and built space then, to profane architecture, is to render impotent the ethical conceit of seeking to bind architectural form with human desire in a kind of sacral-artistic unity. As the architect Bruno Taut once wrote, “Down with everything serious!”⁵²

47. Sant’Elia and Marinetti, 1971: 38.

48. Schlemmer, 1971: 70.

49. Foucault, 2001 : 1094-5.

50. Constant, 2014: 167.

51. Agamben, 2005: 95.

52. Taut, 1971: 57.

No inhibitions should be placed upon the individual's desire to build! Everyone ought to be able and compelled to build, so that he bears responsibility for the four walls within which he lives. ... A stop must finally be put to the situation in which people move into their living quarters like hens and rabbits into their coops.
Hundertwasser

4.

The proliferation of occupations of urban spaces in our time have freed desires and refashioned subjectivities in a manner that has not been a cry for novel and adequate representations, more consonant with demands and needs. It has rather given birth to an anti-representational politics that puts into question the hegemony of hegemony in all domains of human creativity. (“¡Que no! ¡que no! ¡que no nos representan!” was the perhaps the central slogan of Spain's 15M). With regard to cityscapes and built spaces, the movements have loosened and smoothed spaces, allowing for shifts across thresholds of formerly controlled territories and identities. In parallel, they have shown less concern with securing and defending spatial heterotopias of dissidence than with undermining the borders which marginalise and exclude heterotopias from controlled spaces.

“Power lives on our incapacity to live; it maintains infinitely multiplied splits and *separations* at the same time that it plans *almost* as it likes allowable encounters.”⁵³ The words are Théo Frey's, writing for the *Internationale situationiste*. If architecture's role in such power is modest, it is nevertheless present in the ordering of *spatial* separations. That role loses all creative legitimacy once it is made manifest that it rested upon the illusory possibility of containing human being ethically within formal and functional spatial orders. With the illusion unmasked, it remains for the builders, for all of those who can build, to keep open the spaces of collective self-creation of spatialities and subjectivities.

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53. Théo Frey, 2009: 210.

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