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Architecture is a Political Act

Zvonimir Kontrec

2005

In discussions about art, architecture is often avoided, especially architecture that appears after the start of the 20th century. As hard as it is for people to grasp abstract art as "Real art" while the painting of Mona Lisa occupies the spot of art in their consciousness, it is so much harder for them to recognise art in contemporary architecture when the three-dimensional abstract painting becomes their home, to find art in entirely imagined city quarters or whole cities. Of course architecture has a unique position among the arts because by its nature it is most often more tied to the material than the transcendent. Nevertheless, in order for it to materialize from the construction of an individual building to determining the interrelationship of the settlement, it must be preceded by a creative act. However it is, architecture is always geared towards society, its end user. If we imagine the living conditions of 19th century cities, the unhealthy and dysfunctional layout of rooms in blocks, congestion of the city through excessive construction in a relentless race for a greater exploitation of land, it is not hard to imagine that in such a period the advent of functionalist architecture was a political act, as was, for example,

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the raising of monumental buildings that serve to emphasise authority, albeit with the opposite meaning

Prior to the advent of Situationist theory architecture wasn't of particular interest to anarchist thinkers and neither was anarchism to architects. (Though the creator of the term postmodern architecture Charles Jencks, obviously acquainted with the anarchism of Bakunin and Kropotkin, in the 70s claims that one reason for the success of the great architects Aalto and Le Corbusier was also in a peculiar mutualist organisation of their studios although he himself presumes that they weren't acquainted with anarchism). When Kropotkin speaks of art he asserts the art of the cathedral as an expression of the collective spirit, while Reed denies it 60 years later asserting that the artistic prowess of medieval cathedrals is first and foremost a creative expression of one person, the creator of the plans to build the cathedral, so in line with that he doubts the possibility of artistic value that comes about as a result of the work of multiple planners, emphasising the individual creative act as the measure of true art.

Nevertheless the late 50s and 60s were the years in which the advent of Situationist theory moves revolution into everyday life which is in principle the space in which architecture operates, with which the communication between anarchism and architecture begins. For the Situationists modern capitalism is the primary power which transforms all social life into spectacle, and the planning of cities is one of the weapons of the capitalist state...they wanted to realise a base for experimental life through the alternative use of cities which emphasised the feelings of free play and the system of activity in art, architecture, film, literature to, in the end, free people from work and all systems of societal oppression. In the beginning they imagined unitary urbanism, which opposed specialised functions, and appeared as a result of a modernist outlook on the city as a machine, so they look at the city as a set of feelings through which we experience it. Guy Debord and Asger Jorn

own discretion. In 1993, during the siege of Sarajevo he stayed inside the city working on breaking the cultural embargo and giving suggestions on what he called "Radical Reconstruction". He believes that it's wrong to satisfy the wishes for the city to look the same as before the destruction, considering that the city changed both politically and demographically. He envisions reconstruction in three phases which preserve the traces of its destruction to varying degrees and calls them injection, scab, and scar. Also interesting are his encounters with film corporations. He was called on to work on the scenography for the film *Alien III*, but quickly left, unable to stand the spirit of profiteering and safe decisions. In 1995 in the film *12 Monkeys* he recognised the copying of his published works. For the scene in which they torture Bruce Willis in the "interrogation room" (Woods' neo-mechanical room) he says, is the perfect example of the misuse of ideas within the framework of corporate logic.

He perhaps best describes his works with the statement "Architecture is war. War is architecture. I am at war with my time, with history, with all authority that resides in fixed and frightened forms".

Trust Initiative” tried in 1998 in Birmingham, local residents alone pointed out problems and would then work out a strategy alongside the architect, such as, for example, when a local youngster pointed to the disconnect of the place where the youth gathers together, and together with the architect worked out a plan for their spatial and functional connection. During the reconstruction of the Camden street in London, the architects created a program on the basis of the wishes of the people who used that street, residents, shop owners, passer-by and tourists, and also organized workshops for children in the local primary school.

Perhaps the most interesting person that deals with experimental architecture today is Lebbeus Woods. He’s one of the rare architects of today who understands the inherent politicisation of architecture, and even writes about it in his books “Architecture is a Political Act”, and the bilingual English-Croatian “War and Architecture” dedicated to the ruins of Sarajevo and Vukovar and the architectural questions which those events create. He speaks of the anarchitecture free of hierarchies in which people live wherever, and however they want. And in harmony with that he projects “Solohouses” in which live individuals who choose to live in solitude in a technological surrounding which enables isolation from other people, but also from one’s own internal world. On the other side he creates proposals for free zones which should encourage interaction between free individuals. Other than for Berlin and Paris, he also created a proposal for a free zone in Zagreb, in which he seeks to disrupt the rigid structure of the city by envisioning movable constructions put down by helicopters, encouraging the freeing of people from rigid attitudes on the city and comments: “One doesn’t walk on his toes on the execution ground of democracy”. It should be said that he doesn’t make concrete drawings, but instead sketches his visions that should serve other people as stimulus for elaboration. Even when it comes to models he lets the people creating the model do it at their

recommended connecting parts of Paris, which are considered to have preserved the intensity of ambience, through a network of roads through which people will “Wander” without a goal to experience the feeling of free play. The situationists suggested new uses of existing objects to free people from their symbolic meanings, for example, abandonment and partial demolition of churches, destruction of graveyards, moving of art pieces from museums and their redistribution to bars. After 1960, the situationists abandoned all urbanism as bourgeois.

Within the Situationist movement were also the works of the Dutchman Constant Nieuwenhuys who developed the social and architectural program “New Babylon” within which the “Ludic society” through play and art frees itself from the automation of productive labour of “Utilitarian” society. He’s inspired by the Roma camps and the nomadic way of life and suggests connecting networks and sectors which would enable the circulation of nomads. Materials should enable the change and flexibility of internal spaces. Movement in New Babylon is imagined as moving within a labyrinth through which people would be freed from their usual experience of time and space and would create the possibility to create their own experience of time and space. He imagined sectors of living which would stand 15-20 meters above the ground so that the surface of the Earth could be used for agriculture, parks, reserves of natural resources, and the complete automation of production centers. He again imagines residential spaces as labyrinths with great numbers of spaces with irregular angles with many stairs, unnecessary angles, and open spaces. He imagines special premises for echoes, cinema screenings, a room for contemplation, for rest, for erotic games, all to create possibilities for the free play of the senses.

At the same time some other movements are appearing that promote utopian views on architecture, for example, the very well known British group Archigram, which, despite starting off from a somewhat similar political milieu, though with a

stronger influence from American pop culture, fails in giving a strong conception of a society for which that architecture is aimed at.

In the 70s the term anarchitecture is born, it was related to the works of a group of artists gathered around Gordon Matta-Clark. Matta-Clark studied architecture in New York in a recognised study, after his studies he moved to the artistic neighborhood SoHo and began dealing with conceptual art, connecting it to architecture. Unlike other architects, he thought he couldn't give to society by building new structures because he himself cannot change his surroundings in a way to encourage any serious change. His idea was expressed as a process of destruction, and not structuring, that's why he focuses on existing structures in abandoned parts of the city. He made incisions on the buildings and by doing so revealed new vistas and passages. As objects of his work he chose archetypal building types; for example, if it was a rental building in a ghetto, tearing down the walls symbolised the destruction of interpersonal and class barriers which imprison the poor. In his works "Splitting" and "Bingo" he takes typical buildings from the suburbs which symbolise the "Self-imprisonment" of the upper socioeconomic class. Breaking down these building types tended towards a freer and more open society. His most notorious, and at the same time the strongest work is "Window Blow-Out" (1976). Borrowing an air rifle from the painter Dennis Oppenheim he blew out the windows at the building of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York, and then replaced them with photos of broken buildings in the South Bronx. His stance was that architects aren't interested enough in collapsing buildings, that is, that they're only interested in them as structures to be removed so that they can be replaced with objects that soon begin the cycle anew. He thought that contemporary architecture doesn't satisfy human needs, but instead creates dehumanised situations.

After these events in architecture, a new movement called "Deconstructivism" appeared (the works most well known to the public being the works of Frank Gehry, the Museum at Bilbao and the Dancing House in Prague). Even though these architects cite anarchism as their inspiration (alongside chaos theory and similar ideas) this isn't about the movement as much as it's about aesthetic inspiration.

Towards the end of the century situationist theories are again actualising through the appearance of new theories about consumerism, the theories of Hakim Bey on autonomous zones, and the appearance of the world wide web also brings with it new ideas on architecture, but also actualises views on its political role. It's becoming trendy to deal with the difficulties of the virtual space and new media without understanding how this strengthens the powers of that media to the extent that it begins changing our understanding of spaces and slowly separates us from physical reality. Paul Virilio suggests architecture, dance and theater as forms of resistance, which, through the material world of touches and movements, distances us from the powers of media and its manipulations.

"Culture jamming" starts appearing in connection to architecture. Groups like the Space Hijackers or Team7 are turned towards creative usage of spaces which seek to lessen the authority of architecture. Team7 for example, in one of their rebellious "constructions" on the university building of Arlington, Texas, using signs and orange nets such as those on construction sites, they successfully direct people into entering and leaving the building through a window on the second floor. As a rule, their structures end their lives after a few hours when confused citizens call the police.

Also interesting is the establishment of a "true democracy", in which the citizens, working together with the architects, seek to actively cooperate towards reconstructing their immediate surroundings, stated a group of three architects and an artist - MUF. In an initiative titled "The Can Do Scarmen