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Cary Siress

2000:1 present speculation

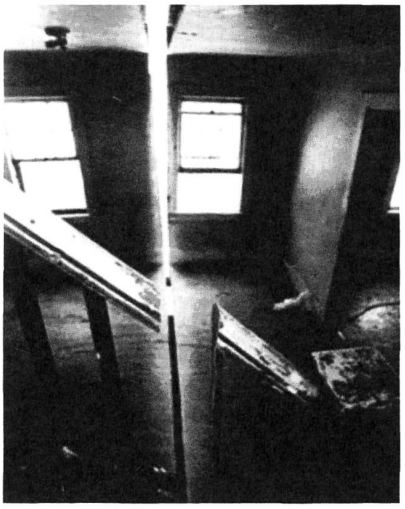
All of you undisturbed cities, haven't you ever longed for the Enemy?
Rainer Maria Rilke[1]

There is no need to be polite or delicate when one is entertaining themself with speculation: the city is an exhausted referent for any practico-theoretical dicsourses concerning the future of architecture.

To those who insistently harbor a super-erect transcendentiality in their positivistic perspectives of the city, or who continue to inhabit the mythological world of case studies that deal with the city, such a speculation, by necessity, will seem absurd. And yet, to an audience who is potentially aware of the stakes inherent to any speculative enterprise, namely, the exposure of the radical contingency of "reality as we know it" (that the real and the grounded are in a constant state of mobilization), the proposition that the city can no longer serve as a legitimating subject matter of architecture discourse, however provocative, perhaps amounts to nothing more than another cynical critique of the narrowness of the profession and of debates such as those present in the current journal. Such are the risks of speculation.

But what do we mean by speculation? We know that the so-called crisis of representation (the perpetual process of delegitimation fueled by new demands for legitimation) amounts to an erosion of the legitimacy principle of knowledge, an erosion that is always at play in speculative endeavors. Speculation loosens the weave of the encyclopedic net in which each science negotiates its place, thus setting them free. Dividing lines between various fields of knowledge are thus called into question – disciplines disappear, overlaps occur at previously defined borders, new territories are discovered. The speculative enterprise thus splinters into a network of areas of inquiry, the respective domains of which are in constant flux.[2]

But how do speculative enterprises establish their legitimation? There is no denying the dominant existence today of techno-science, that is, the massive subordination of cognitive statements to the finality of the best possible performance (in terms of the ratio of input to output) – the tech-



nical phylum. In the case of architecture, it seems that its legitimizing strategies are increasingly inclined towards an exclusive criterion of performativity (no doubt influenced by current technological advances) for which the justification of architecture work is no longer to produce an adequate model of some "outside" reality, or even to engender possible new realities, but rather to simply produce more work, to generate new and fresh architecture statements – the qualitative forsaken for the quantitative – or, as the well-known modernist credo emphatically states, "to make it new" – architecture for architecture's sake.

That the city is central to the speculative enterprises of architecture is persistently evidenced by the conservation of a few scattered centers, some monuments here or maybe there, as well as some museographic remains (museographied city). This of course is performed by those who are at "home" in dominated space, manipulating interchangeable and exchangeable qualities and signs through representations derived from an established order: statuses and norms, localized hierarchies and hierarchically arranged places, and roles and values bound to particular places. These over-signifying spaces are so laden with signs – signs of well-being, happiness, style, art, wealth, power, prosperity, etc. – that not only is their primary meaning effaced (that of profitability for those in charge), but meaning itself disappears altogether. The power of the sign is thus extended both by the power of established knowledge over society and by the sign's own hegemony over human beings (Hegel's "power of negativity"). What is produced from such efforts amounts to nothing more than the proliferation of mere stereotypical signs of the city, a global signal system – the signs and images of urbanness – transcity – a beyond city, city no longer as an event or rupture but a permanent, seamless fissionary milieu of/for exchange.

Other practical efforts embrace more extreme formalisms of signs by referring to a fetishized consistency of knowledge derived from linguistics which, through the well-known methodical study of chains of signifiers (and signifieds), extends the sovereignty of linguistic signs to anything suscepitible of carrying significance or meaning thus reducing everything in their path – music, art, architecture, life in general – to language and only language. The irony of such efforts is that linguistics, in seeking to furnish knowledge with a solid core, has succeeded only in establishing a

1 Rainer Maria Rilke, Book for the Hour of Prayers (1899-1903), in: Robert Bly, Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke, Fitzhenry & Whiteside Ltd, Toronto 1981
2 Jean-Francois Lyotard, La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris 1979, p.39
3 Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, trans. by D. Nicholson Smith, Blackwell, Oxford 1974, p. 134
4 Edward Soja, Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory, Verso, London 1989, p. 80
5 Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, op.cit., p. 31
6 Edward Soja, Postmodern Geographies, op. cit., p. 120
7 Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, op.cit., p. 417

***Abbildungen aus:** Hal Foster, The Return of the Real, Massachusetts Institute of technology, 1966*
S. 165 oben aus: J. Crary and S. Kwinter, Incorporations, New York 1992

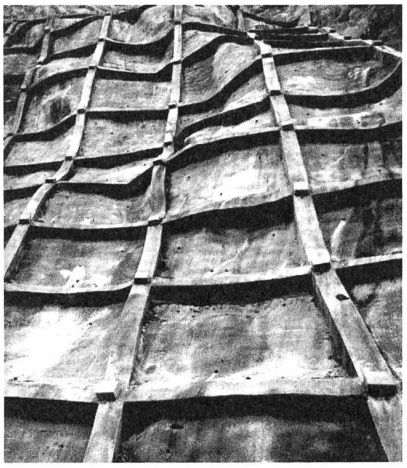
void, a dogmatically posited vacuum which, when not surrounded by silence, is buried in a mass of metalanguage, empty words and chit-chat about discourse.[3] With such assaults of reductionism, the "pioneering" confrontations with established representational orders of society are staged in recurring gestures of hesitation and indeterminacy, distancing themselves from action through fervent devotion to the all-important process (and usually remaining there), while pantomining a fashionable distaste for the definitive. Such intellectual acts operate more often than not only in the feeble comparative regime of representation, reducing the real differences that occur spontaneously in the city to induced (forced) differences despite the city.

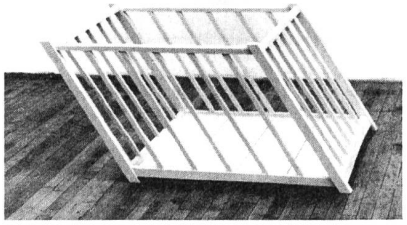
Parallel to these efforts and equally suspiscious are those "strategic" acts of surgery (on a body no longer present?) performed in the name of academics and research. Such strategies, although perhaps recognizing the obsolescence of ideas of a unitary object (the city) or a unifying view (the architect/author as ultimate authority in such matters), proceed to carve territories (periphery, center, suburb, subterrain, interstices, etc.) from the city to at least reclaim some artefactual domain in/on which to continue research or debate; a morselization (striation) that supposedly guarantees fertile new territory for the continuing search to legitimize architecture's efficacy and relevance. In the attempt to establish this domain for architecture, the predilection for partial representations with which such searches for knowledge are confounded, establishes an alliance (however unintentionally) with the schizophrenic tendency of society itself, which, within the overall framework of a strictly controlled and thus homogenized totality, paradoxically splits itself into the most heterogeneous parts (housing, business, leisure, sport, tourism, etc.). Such searches inevitably produce mere shards of knowledge and operate well within the dominant (and dominated) framework of the given society. Furthermore, these analytical approaches, wavering between description and dissection, and always teetering on the brink of existence, excel only in the handling of cutting tools (both conceptual and physical) which confine themselves to intensive interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary montages never managing to reconnect elements that have been separated or to rejoin the severed and reanalyse the comingled and coextensive.

The persistence of the city as the central focus of such disparate speculative efforts of architects (of which there are myriad other examples) elucidates the fact that the discipline of architecture still nervously guards the city as its own site par excellence. However disparate they may seem, they are all fixated on the city. This seems to imply that there are no (or will be no) other possible sites for architectural experimentation/research. Statistics that cite the future growth-rate of cities or that refer to the future inevitability of the city as home for the the majority of humanity seem to make the urban bandwagon all the more tempting. However, it should likewise be noted that cities have developed new sets of uses and more specifically, modalities of unstable, superficial, anomic and, at most, anonymous social relations despite the attempts of the discpline of architecture to accomodate (theorize and incorporate) such tendencies or to render them otherwise – architecture for architecture's sake despite the city and the city (for whoever's sake) despite architecture.

Taking the risks inherent to any speculation about the future of architecture (speculation always involves the possibility of loss), how might a refocusing on SPACE (rather than city) give rise to inventions of something other, (or singular, or transformative, or critical) in ways that we think or build? Surely, this is to ask how to think architecture differently, in terms of space, without assumptions or the apparent naturalness, or the evolutionary fit (Elisabeth Grosz) assumed to hold between being and building.

This would require an understanding of space in ways other than in terms of a primordiality or neutrality that has lingered from an essentially physical view propogated throughout the history and philosophy of science and usurped by the discipline of architecture (space as something external to the social context and to social action and relations – the naively given container of society that can only be illuminated or manipulated/created by legitimate specialists). Although space itself may be given, the organization, and the meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience.[4] Space is not a scientific (nor architectural) object removed from ideology and politics or the social domain, it has always been political, strategic and social.[5] With this perspective, space is identified in terms of its interactive/interdependent relationship with social relations; in other words, social relations are both space-forming and space contingent. As socially-produced space, spatiality shatters the traditional physical-mental dualism and forces a major reinterpretation of the materiality of space, time and matter in that, not only are the spaces of nature and cognition incorporated into social production of spatiality, they are significantly transformed in the process. This means that both the material space of physical nature and the ideational space of human nature have to be seen as being socially produced and reproduced. Thus, there can be no autonomous naturalism or science with its own separate causal logic. In the context of society, nature, like spatiality, is socially produced and reproduced despite its appearance of objectivity and separation.[6] Socio-dynamic space is the world scale, delocalized, multi-faceted, with both general characteristics and specific tensions and profiles; a socially-produced space formed by pressures, tensions and conflicts; a space of high mutability, imprecise, increasingly aformal and always subject to the contiguity and simultaneity of varying scales; a space that is elusive to the recently familiar counterparts of an architecture of the city and its progressive colonization of space. Such an understanding of the socio-dynamics of space might begin to dispel those insidious, crusty (property) lines which so many architects draw around/through the concept of space in order to make it their own (creation) – spatial separatists.





As for speculation concerning the future of architecture, why must we linger in the domain of undisturbed cities? Must the enemy, as suggested by Rilke, be the outside, the unthought, the exterior, what resists assimilation, what remains foreign even within presumed identity, an outside that is always immanent to the inside – an outside (of city) that is the virtual condition of the inside, but, as equally real? Would not a critical spatialization of speculative architectural practices at least intervene to activate an outside, a stammering, a disturbance or pause inside the closure of expectations, a crack opened up in the habitual and formulaic, to produce spaces other than those we know through, and only through, the city? Experimentation and innovation, realignment and transformation, though not without force, more often than not, have difficulties generating their own space, and often run the risk of aborting. Understood from this vantage point, the world of signs clearly emerges as so much debris left by a retreating tide: whatever is not invested in an appropriated space (i.e. long-lived morpholgies of various building typologies or their urban patterns of accumulation and organization) is stranded, and all that remains are useless signs and significations (the stuff of which undisturbed cities are made). Space's investment – the production of space - has nothing incidental about it: it is a matter of life and death.[7]