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The Scape of No-Place

A Conversation With Josep Lluis Mateo

Sabine von Fischer

The program for the first three semesters of Prof. Dr. J.Ll. Mateo at ETHZ is a trilogy of “Object Semester 1,2,3” in which he strives to assess the contemporary paradigms in architecture.

The idea of “Object Semester 1,2,3” is in the name: It is an attempt to discover architectural ideas from a tabula rasa, in an unlimited setup without prejudice. All we know about the buildings which we will design is that they are objects. What are the conditions for these objects? Are they objects of our desire, shaped by the desires of others, by programs, global economies, circulation, security, temperature, ventilation, technical installations? To find out what is fundamental in architecture, in our case means to discard context.

Therefore, during the first semester in the winter of 2002-03, the program was to design a “Scenic and Sonic Structure”, a large club space for electronic music and techno culture in a “No-Place”. The site could be anywhere or nowhere; a “tabula rasa”. Beyond questions of structure and acoustics, the scenography of the interior was a major focus for the project. The second “Object Semester” with the title “Nature and Artifice” took on the design of a research cabin on Alpe Salei in the Vergeletta Valley in Ticino. The small house is a laboratory and a retreat at the same time, a solitary structure in a landscape where no other house can be seen.

These first two semesters opened up as many questions as they were able to answer. Continuing the discourse of the semesters, this interview is an attempt to further investigate the paradigms of architecture.

“Scape” is also used as a short form of “escape”. Are the new forms of “scapes”, an escape from traditional notion of place?

Without word games: the term “Scape” as you mention it, is a suffix amplifying the meaning of a substantive, and transforming it into a more generic picture, into a panoramic vision. Landscape in our case is the more generic and interesting word, that we can implement here.

In “Object Semester 2”, you worked under the assumption that a remote site is the appropriate ground on which to test architectural paradigms. Do you believe that the mechanisms of today’s global economies have changed the perception of such landscapes?

We must use the non-realistic condition of the academic project for our specific intentions in research and knowledge. Situated in a remote area, the project of the last semester has placed the students in a naked, exposed and initial situation. I think all the architects love this specific moment when you are confronted with something and you must react as if it was the first time, with no tradition, like the first man on the moon. Returning to your question: Global economies have produced, as you know, a big explosion of many cities. I would like to propose two remarks: first, this urban explosion has happened, everywhere, without the ordering principles of classical architectural paradigms, even without any architectural convention. If we find some laws, we could connect them to the organic world: movement, telluric explosions, life, death... In fact we know and use the contemporary city as if we were in a landscape, without being in the abstract, geometric and stable stage that one could imagine in some of our old European Cities. So, one thesis could be that the contemporary city has many things in common with the natural global landscape.

The other thesis is independent. When something grows up, its opposite also grows. This is a Chinese principle. Not the opposition of contraries (as in Hegelian dialethic), but the mutual reinforcement (Yin-Yang). In many cases global reinforces local. In our argument, city reinforces landscape.

In the first semester, you asked the students to eliminate the place and the landscape as a first step, to design a building without context. Then, in a second iteration, the building could inform and generate a landscape. Do you think that this notion of a “No-Place”, where internal parameters will shape the object as well as its context, has general validity in architecture today?



Visit of ETH students to CCIB construction site.

The “No-Place” discussion is fundamental in contemporary practice. It has two different sides. First, we want to reconsider the history of the overbearing influence of context in our projects; currently we are in a situation where the generic forces us to introduce strong new energies, which then are difficult to relate to the weak sentimentalism of the old places. Second, “No-Place” was a proposition made by the French anthropologist Marc Augé for defining new spatial paradigms like airports, stadiums, convention centres, etc.: Massive spaces that loose traditional tectonic qualities.

When you suggest eliminating context to investigate the architectural object as such and under its internal conditions, does the definition of landscape become a problem of the interior?

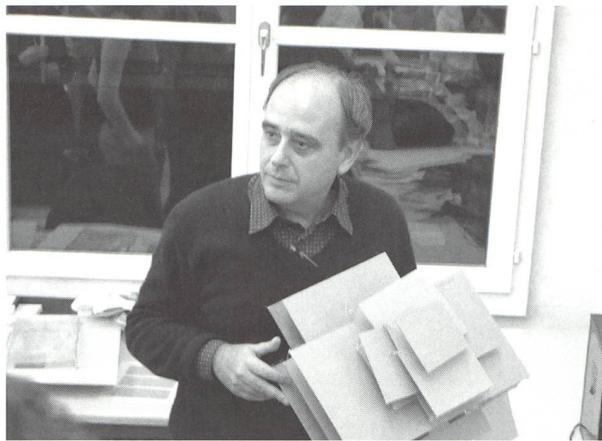
What I have found interesting were the reactions to our question. What is a “No-Place”? Many reacted by pointing out traffic infrastructures as a contemporary expression of a “No-Place”, motorways and all their iconography. Another possibility of the problem of the “No-Place” is connected to a search for prototypes. A prototype is clearly a project not defined by contextual forces; you have to consider how many prototypes we use. From the student’s side, it was to relate the project to an existing site, inventing a specific site where their project fit.

Is the “No-Place”, the “Ort ohne Eigenschaften”, then a negation of public space?

The “Ort ohne Eigenschaften” is basically another place. We were studying techno music, and I have found it very exciting how people like Brian Eno were discussing silence, sound, attention. For instance, “Music for airports” is a piece for being listened to without paying attention, with big empty sections. It is a way of working in the “No-Place”.

At the final review of the second semester, the “Nature and Artifice” program had produced a wide range of small houses which relate their concepts to forces and

Aaron Betsky: *Some Fictions About the Big Fact: Barcelona Convention Center, Josep Lluis Mateo, Recent Work*, in 2G n.25, Barcelona 2003



J. Ll. Mateo at the HIP Pavilion at ETHZ.

figures of natural formations such as trees, stones and rocks. Is architectural form a ghost image of nature, or is nature a platonic idea beyond such interventions?

For many cultures and traditions, architecture is in connection and continuity with the organic world. At the end, the most exciting trend of the ecological contemporary dimension lies in this hypothesis. Architecture can react with intelligence and sensitivity to the wind or to the cold equally as it does to the force of gravity.

In his writing on the Barcelona International Convention Centre, Aaron Betsky expands on the generic quality of such spaces. In the case of the CCIB, he claims, this has become an inspiration. How do you involve in formal decisions while remaining fascinated with generic space?

This building is clearly, in a programmatic sense, a “No-Place” (as in Marc Augé’s terms). We tried to introduce more energy into demolishing its own autarchy, its own isolated vacuity and then to add more consistent tectonics. But all this activity has been made from the logic of generic, vast, flexible, informal. Working with the structure is a tool. Take large span beams to use them with no expression, in a domestic way: A surreal tension. In fact, surrealist devices are more interesting than Pop-Art rhetoric.

Do you consider the scenic quality of the Convention Centre mimetic to the complexity of natural landscapes?

Not at all. The Convention Centre Complex is a conglomerate of different parts which have different roles in relation to the global picture. It is a building at the edge between city and sea; and it is also dealing with the place not in a simple, but in a real dialogue, with memory. The tension between organic-informal and rational-geometric, as it derives from the past, has been at the roots of the project. The undulating facade and the mountainous roof are parts of the plot, but this is more complex, also leading to other directions.

Josep Lluis Mateo is the principal of MAP Architects in Barcelona and professor for architecture and design at ETH Zurich since 2002.

Sabine von Fischer is an architect and works with Josep Lluis Mateo at ETH in teaching and research.

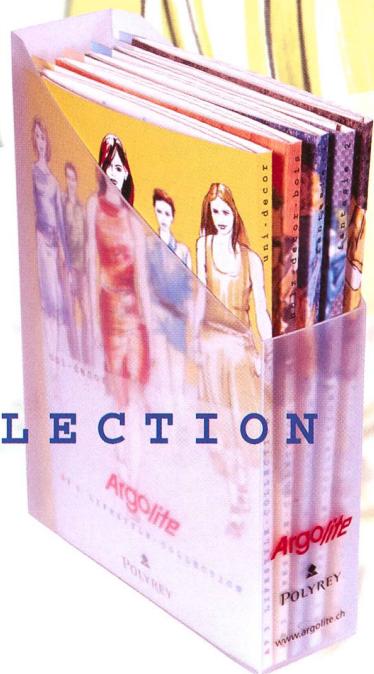


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