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BREAKING THE HABIT

Renaud Baeckelandt, Joachim Nijs

*«It's funny you know... in this universe that we live in there's two main motivating forces—and I tweet about it all the time—it's love or fear»
— Kanye West on «Jimmy Kimmel Live», August 10th, 2018*

I Breaking the habit

Love and fear may be the most powerful emotions to affect us. They work beyond self-control and, most importantly, experiencing real love, real fear, can change us, deeply. But while an experience of war, heartbreak or spiritual oneness can make you a new man or woman, love and fear's colourful strokes over your life's canvas will only stand out over a homogeneous grey background, covering the larger part of the picture. In truth, human behaviour follows a force more powerful than emotion. Our actions follow habit more than anything else.

«I tweet about it all the time». The phrase accidentally slips into Kanye's philosophical moment. Even when dangerous, life-threatening sometimes, we are masters at convincing ourselves of our habits' harmlessness. Strangely, nature has programmed you and me to feel as if the easiest thing to do right now is repeating yesterday's routine. By repeating the same actions, we wire our neurones into an entrenched pattern of thought. «Rational» thinking has us believing that we control our habits when in fact it works the other way around. The rationalising voice accounting for our behaviour is not reason but ego trying to sustain itself.

We look up to love and fear for their power to disrupt these entrenched behaviours, our sense of self, and to propel us into a more beneficial routine. Purposely severing your routine is like learning to speak a new language. What you gain is more than just the ability to switch between systems of thought. What you gain, really, is the ability to compare both, thus opening space for critical distance. You take the power back.

21 days. According to many popular apps and programs of self-help, that's how long it takes to adopt a new habit. This number originally comes from plastic surgeon Maxwell Maltz, who noted in his 1960 book on Psycho-Cybernetics that that's how long it took his patients to get used to their new face. In reality, the time to take or shake a habit will vary substantially according to the situation. But the fact that we can hack our body

into a new operation mode using a conscious, repeated effort over a limited amount of time is an important discovery.

II Habitat dissolved

Architects, for better or for worse, share a responsibility in shaping daily habits. From the primitive hut to the smart house, architecture has evolved to give its inhabitants ever greater comfort. But in an age where distraction, temptation and finally addiction lure around every corner, our biggest discomfort may be being too comfortable. Combining architecture and biohacking, or the process of making changes to your lifestyle in order to «hack» your body's biology, can we imagine a built environment that instructs a healthy distance from our daily routines rather than blindly strengthening them? Can we conquer the main motivating force in this universe—the habit?

Compared to the hormone-laden reactions of love and fear, daily habits appear bleak and banal. Yet it could very well be that your habit of breathing through your nose rather than your mouth has been much more impactful on the course of your life than the emotional peaks you believe made you «who you are». Like the air you breathe, the habit is invisible because it is always there. The only way to see the habit, to feel its grip over your life, is, breaking it.

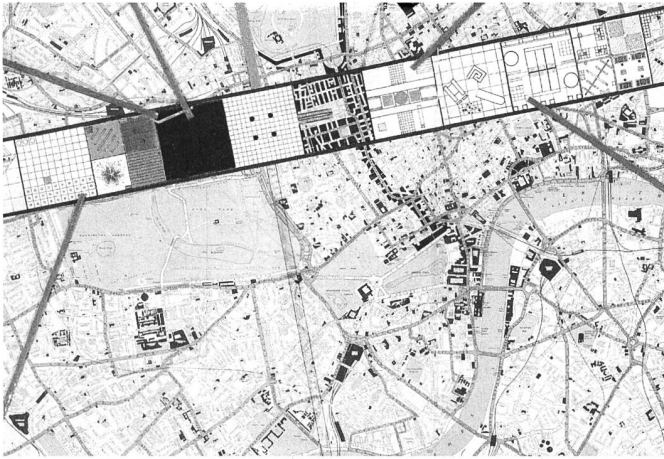
René Heyvaert, a Belgian artist trained as an architect, helps us see the matrix. By splitting a spoon in half and cutting off the pointy ends of a fork, he brings our conscious attention back to the repetitive behaviours we take for granted. Freed from its functionalism, the object can no longer be labeled a spoon or fork. We are forced to grant it a second look. Heyvaert's broken silverware echoes like a Japanese koan, an unsolvable riddle devised by Zen masters to test their apprentice. «What is the sound of one hand clapping?»

The goal here is not to resolve the mystery but to uncover the fallacies of the mind itself. If you look at the

A



B



C



A Fork with sawed off teeth and split spoon, work without title, René Heyvaert, 1979

B Exodus, Rem Koolhaas with Madelon Vriesendorp, Elia Zenghelis, and Zoe Zenghelis, 1972

C Project for the French pavilion for the Venice Biennale, Claude Parent, 1970

mutilated cutlery of Heyvaert with adult eyes, the broken spoon will soon end up in the trash. But look with the eyes of a child and it is a treasure: a magic wand, or the beginning of a horror story. It is the kind of souvenir a seven-year old would bring home from a vacation of playing pirates on a pile of garbage abandoned on the beach of a Greek island.

III Voluntary prison

Even when possibilities are endless, for a game to work, its liberation from the rule of normality must be met with new, deliberate constraints. In a football stadium or on the schoolyard, mental boundaries are coupled with spatial ones as architecture too is divisive and limiting by nature. From mountaintop Zen monasteries to Hollywood rehab facilities, architectural devices for «breaking the habit», welcome their voluntary prisoners in a game-like setting—an isolated world, set with its own rules.

In his graduation thesis at the Architectural Association, Rem Koolhaas shows us how all architecture is a prison, albeit a good one at times. As the citizens of his walled city voluntarily lock themselves up into an exciting metropolitan strip running through central London, irony points out that the old city is the real prison. The design, inspired by the West-Berlin enclave, proclaims self-limitation a legitimate form of freedom. Maybe even a necessary condition?

In prisons, we rely on the categorical constraints of concrete walls to mold the behaviours of others, so why not do the same for ourselves? In the 1970s, Toyo Ito built a house for his sister and her two daughters who had just lost their husband and father to cancer. After this tragic loss, the mother and her two girls felt they could no longer set forth their lives in their high-end Tokyo condominium. Their heartbreak needed to be accompanied by a break in their daily rituals.

The bent concrete tube Ito designs for them works as a protective shell as much as it works as a prison. Openings, even to the interior courtyard, are kept minimal. A beautiful space but an asphyxiating house, that's how it feels looking at the pictures. After twenty years of inhabiting the White U, the family decides they have moved on, and finally demolishes their

«machine for grieving». Breaking it must have felt like a breath of fresh air. And with it, broken, the spell of grief.

IV Architecture for a player

In a way, the transformative magic of the White U only really starts working once it has been destroyed. There is delicious irony in the fact that while striving towards an ideal behavioral pattern, the enlightened moment is found, not in the anticipated balance, but in the break, the switch between patterns. The status quo is revealed as the player's true opponent. The prison is outcome-oriented and fixes mental barriers that mirror the physical boundaries. But a good game is process-oriented, played for the sake of playing, with no single outcome in mind other than continuous self-improvement.

Designers are used to streamlining the established routines and rituals of individuals and society into a coherent play. Conservative architects will build an environment that supports existing habits while the revolutionary types try to tweak our habits in a new direction. But what would an architecture that is purposely designed to break our habits—just for the sake of breaking them—look like?

Games like chess rely on an architecture in which the playing field is neutral and free. The architecture of the board itself is limitless but the alternation of black and white squares provides a framework for effectively limiting oneself within it. The perception of the space changes once you decide to lift up a pawn or a knight. It is up to the player to superimpose an evolving constellation of safe havens and no-go zones on the static checkers grid.

Translated into a building, we could imagine something along the lines of Claude Parent's sloping constructions. Parent leaves the content of architecture intact but introduces a force-field by simply tilting every floor by x degrees. Whilst keeping the space open and free, it is easily charged with meaning, opening your mind to previously unimagined patterns of use. Wherever you stand, normality is put to the test. Balancing at the edge of functionality, the building regains presence as an object to be discovered. Like Heyvaert's broken spoon, it can break you into a player and inspire countless games.