Public Loudspeaker
Philippe Buchs

1

For the organization of a rave, certain steps should be carefully considered. First of all, one should find a place, a hidden spot behind closed doors, break the locks, jump the fences in order to access spaces out of the grid; off spaces. This phase is normally led by small groups of individuals that operate silently, invisibly. Once one gets to know how to access the spot, the phase of setting up begins. A series of tools and machines is required: generators, sound systems, lights, technical equipment brought in place just before the event. Afterwards, the exact location and time is shared through the communication channels of ravers, ensuring to maximize the audience without drawing unwanted attention. When the time has come, a communal adrenaline rush is rhythmized by the loudspeaker base line of Acid House. Time stands still, bodies move freely in forbidden spaces, action comes in circles lingering in a parenthesis of life. At the end, one lets behind the secret place as found, and leaves, immersed in the light feeling of having experienced infinite freedom.

Raves find their way through the cracks of our system. They exist as exceptions in the loopholes of rules set by dominant culture. Raves appropriate existing spaces for short periods of time, though the process and the attitude required are similar to squatting. The question then becomes, how do these alternative expressions of culture affect the urban space, what are the methodologies for bypassing the rules, and which are the forms of plural society they suggest?

2

In the 1980s Geneva was one of the squat capitals of Europe. (1) The movement started in the early 1970s in order to protest against speculation through the occupation of buildings and through direct militant actions. Sparked by the generalized tendency of displacing low-income populations towards the outskirts and the grands-ensembles appearing at the periphery of the city, (2) as for example «le Lignon», student initiatives together with activists reclaimed through squatting life within the urban centers. This highly political type of procedure forced the state into negotiations with the squatters of buildings, resulting in the invention of a new type of contract «le contrat de confiance»,

where people would be allowed to live in an empty building under certain conditions: The first one is that they were permitted to squat only if the respective owner had no specific development plans for the subsequent ten years; the second is to care for the building and to be responsible for its maintenance. (3)

Whilst this contract is the embodiment of an ethos of «laissez-faire», often adopted from liberal states in order to avoid the responsibility of housing the population and providing the essential qualities of life, it simultaneously represents an opportunity, a step forward towards a collective management of space.

At the time, what was fascinating considering the normsof today, is that a dialogue for cohabitation was possible between different visions of society. Indeed, from the anarchists and anti-capitalists of the 1970s, (4) the profiles of squatters started to vary progressively. There where the marginalized people who did not fit the norms, the artists who needed these structures to simply sustain themselves in the absence of means, and to freely develop their creativity, and finally, the people who were keen to experiment different and novel forms of collective living.

This parenthesis embodied by the «contrat de confiance» lasted for eleven years (1985–1996), ending in the early 2000s with a strong campaign of cleaning the city from the squatters, concluding in 2007 when the most iconic housing squat called «le Rhino» (5) was dismantled. Since then, without any strong presence in the city, this alternative culture was silenced and marginalized. During this time the young generation still organized raves under bridges, in the forest, in industrial zones, and also in a secluded place called Porteous.

3

Porteous is a building located in the southwest of the city of Geneva and was part of the biggest water purification plant of Switzerland. The building, now protected, (6) was conceived by the architect George Brera in 1964 and was abandoned in the early 2000s (7) for a newer system of water purification. Its situation is rather exceptional; with an overhanging structure of twelve meters over the river Rhône, the relation of this brutalist building to the surrounding nature is

A View of Porteous approaching from the north fa-
cade. Light, glass and water. Image: Aglaé Rochette


B Moment when the first squatter enters the building.
Image: Aglaé Rochette
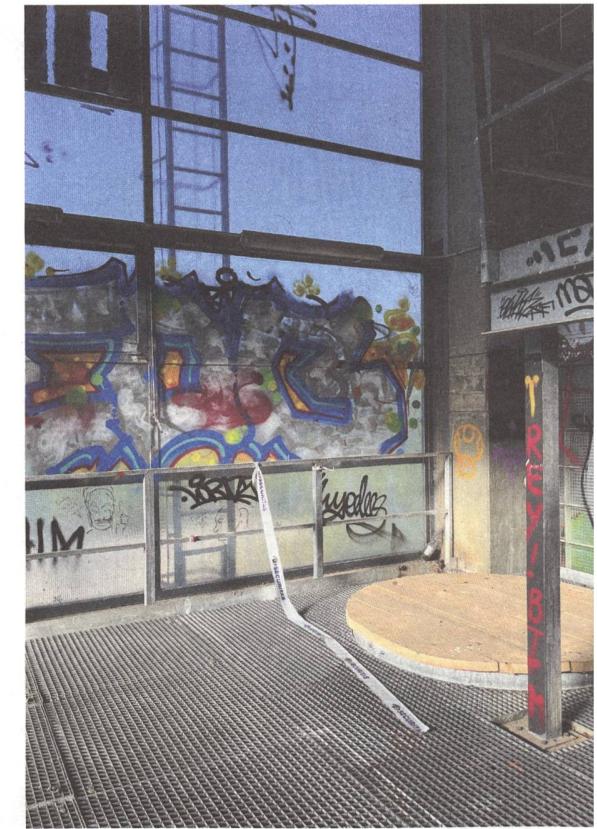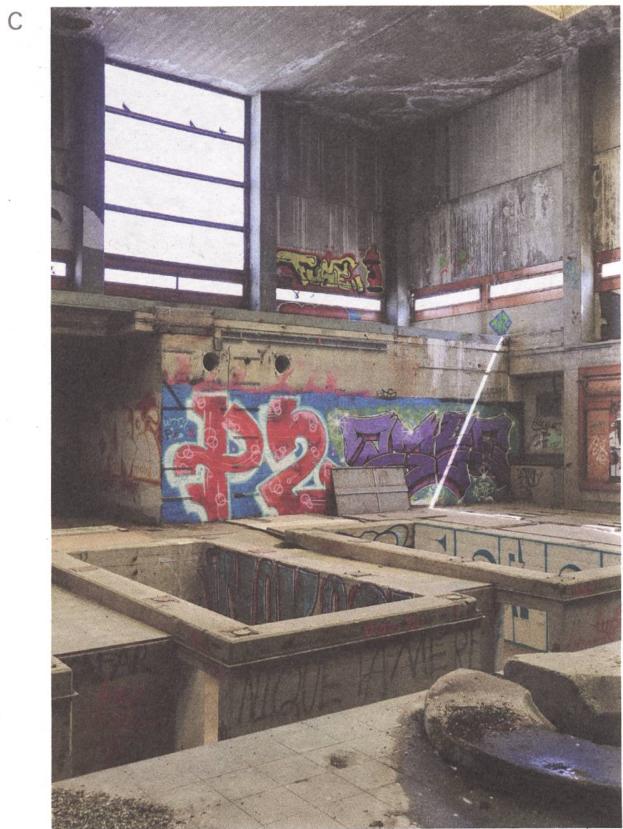
C Interior view from the ancient «Salle des machines».
Image: Charline Dayer for Sujets Objets /

E View from the rooftop. Left unmaintained during
20 years it became a beautiful garden. Image:
Aglaé Rochette

D Interior view from the overhanging structure.
Image: Charline Dayer for Sujets Objets /

spectacular. Its secluded situation from the city fabric, and the incredible richness of its interior spaces designed for machines, made it a hotspot for ravers for the last twenty years. A place of freedom outside the grid. Until 2018, when, from an unprogrammed shelter, the state decided to transform the building into a detention center for minors. From freedom to its complete absence, and from no rules to only rules.

This was a very controversial decision, resulting in revolts amongst alternative circles. Therefore, a plan was conceived to turn the situation around. As the building was carefully sealed by the forces of order to avoid the appearance of new inhabitants, the collective «Prenons la Ville» (8) noticed a weak point in the overhanging structure which was not being protected. They had found the loophole, the crack in the system.

On 25th of August 2018, the collective embarked on a peculiar DIY raft, floating on the Rhône from the center of Geneva, in the direction of Porteous. Once arrived, like pirates, they docked on the building and managed to enter the loophole. The message was clear: One should not fight social issues with jails but with culture and public programs. In order to have the maximum impact and visibility, they organized a program of cultural events, and showed the population that Porteous – and squats – are something positive. After almost one year of squatting, they created a deal with the state; Porteous will become a cultural center, but in exchange the squatters should leave the building and manage the project within a legal framework.

From this moment on, the question was how to make this project happen without it turning into an institution. The path was full of oppositions and contradictions, but the collective managed to find their way in a world that was completely foreign. Architecturally a clear strategy had to be found. Considering all the norms of security, climate, accessibility, and structure that need to be applied to a classic cultural center, the budget, and the time to renovate would be disproportionate, and probably far from the initial idea of the squatters. This situation was an opportunity for the collective. They had to find a strategy in order to start the project as fast as possible. In 2022, they submitted a building, (9) permit for a first part of transformation. The idea was that a small space, a minor portion of the building, would have the function of a building-site hut, and would ensure the possibility of hosting events during the renovation of the rest of the building. Regarding the financial model, the decision was made to start without any public funding, thus running the process faster. What was clear for everyone is,

that despite the architectural qualities of the building, what needed to be preserved is its fantastic emptiness, its possibility to host any function, its capacity to transform and evolve. Since the end of June 2023, the first phase is complete and the first space is open, ready to host events and workshops, and imagine what a center for culture could mean today.

To explore how to think differently of the impact that citizens – architects included – could have, examples like this are needed. Self-initiated projects might present multiple difficulties, from institutional resistance, to financing and public acceptance, but they simultaneously constitute an alternative on civic existence. As the name of the collective «prenons la ville» indicates, it is also a question of daring to re-appropriate that which already exists. From raves, to squatting, to Porteous, identifying cracks, transgressing restrictions and gently appropriating that which is empty and disregarded, are all ways of defining a vocabulary for common living and imagining new types of public space. Within these processes, we may discover a more holistic approach to cultural projects, where norms could be questioned at the service of the community.

Philippe Buchs is an architect based in Geneva. He studied architecture at Lausanne (EPFL), where he obtained his master's degree in 2017. Since 2019 he has been teaching, first at EPFL at the chair of Kersten Geers and then at ETH Zurich at the chair of Alexandre Theriot. In 2020 he co-founded the architectural office Sujets Objets / which has been working on the project Porteous since then. He is also involved in the experimental practice Arimna where the boundary between art, design, curation and architecture gets blurred.