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«This perspective is radically ecological because it is the only effective way to design true ‹nearly zero-energy buildings›; to take into consideration the existing fabric of social relations influencing the quality of places and re-shaping new ones; as well as to make us fully aware, once and for all, of the finite nature of the world and the resources it presents us with.»

WE INVENTED SOME THINGS THAT MAKE NOISE BUT NOT A SINGLE ONE THAT CREATES SILENCE

atelier local

Atelier local is an architecture practice founded in 2019 by Maria Rebelo and João Paupério. Both studied architecture at the Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto (FAUP). After completing their diploma, they have both worked as architects for Baukunst, between 2015 and 2018. Maria has also worked for Atelier da Bouça, between 2018 and 2021. Since 2020, João is a researcher at the Centro de Estudos de Arquitectura e Urbanismo, FAUP, where he conducts a PhD research with the title «On the Periphery. From Paris to the World: City and Landscape, Subalternity and Subversion». They are currently part of the editorial board of Punkto journal.

The title we chose for this essay belongs to Noël Coward's play «Design for Living», originally written in 1932, about the misadventures of a romantic trio. To be precise, it was taken from a pamphlet advertising an interpretation of the play in Porto — performed at Teatro Nacional de São João, 2023 — which has been lying around at our studio, triggering some fundamental questions for our own practice: how does one create silence through architecture? Does this silence concern the expressive language of the architectural object or its methodology of design? And most recently, what are the implications of this silence, from an author's point of view, at a time when artificial forms of intelligence are beginning to speak in our place?

By the moment we found that pamphlet, its quote reminded us of another text written by Ivan Illich in 1982. It is titled «Silence is A Commons» and in an axiomatic tone subtitled: «Computers are doing to communication what fences did to pastures and cars did to streets». (1) Indeed, this text was the polymath's presentation at the «Asahi Symposium Science and Man — The computer-managed Society» held in Tokyo, about the social transformations implied by the introduction of new technologies in everyday life. As a «political issue», those transformations — developed by late capitalism during what was then observed as the «third industrial revolution» (2) — were of particular concern to the author. For him, the fact that technology occupied a central role in people's lives constituted for many not only a degradation of their own well-being, but a degradation of their capacity to intervene as active and participating citizens. Their ability to make critical and informed choices was gradually replaced by a propensity to follow pre-programmed options. Indeed, he claimed, «observations of the sickening effects and implications of this programmed environments show that people in them become indolent, impotent, narcissistic and apolitical», which lead their political condition to decay as people ceased «to be able to govern themselves and instead demanded to be managed». (3)

What is particularly interesting is that in order to justify his remarks, Illich undertakes an archaeology of those transformations tracing back to the First Industrial Revolution. In other words, he traces them back to the systematic process of «enclosure» which, particularly in England from the 16th century onwards, began to transform common lands into private property and peasants into an incipient proletarian class. For the philosopher, the reasoning behind these transformations did not differ significantly from a qualitative point of view, as they were both consequences of a «new ecological order» where the environment shifted from being perceived as «commons» to being perceived as «resource». To some extent, he believed, the circulation of motor vehicles — transporting both people and commodities — did the same to streets; and modern means of communication have done it to the «commons of speech». According to his perspective, «the silence which so far had given each man and woman his or her proper and equal voice» was a fundamental condition for their ability to speak. (4) Yet since the introduction of loudspeakers, those who did not have access to one, were silenced. Silence ceased to operate as the platform for dialogue in order to become a tool for exclusion. In contemporary terms this may be understood, if we reflect on how the apparent freedom of expression allowed by social networks is easily contradicted by shadow banning techniques or the cunning machinations of algorithms written and managed by private companies.

We could suggest that over the «longue durée» of history the emergence of architecture as an autonomous disciplinary field has had a similar effect on the «commons» of vernacular architecture. In other words, that it affected the capacity for each person to consciously and self-determinedly produce the space of their own existence without the need for a hierarchy of thought headed by an architect. However, not only is such a statement complex and non-linear, as it far exceeds the scope of this essay. Therefore, let us return to our already challenging point of departure: «Is it possible to create silence in or by the means of architecture?» From our point of view, we may answer yes without too many reservations. And to argue for it, we shall use two concrete examples, namely the proposal for a structure and garden in Quatre Vents, Molenbeek, developed by the architecture office Baukunst between 2009 and 2016; and the proposal for Léon Aucoc square, in Bordeaux, developed by the architects Anne Lacaton & Jean-Phillipe Vassal in 1996.

The first project (fig. a) is framed by a broader programme of the city of Brussels that aimed to create an archipelago of green public spaces by transforming leftover plots into communal gardens. In the case of Quatre Vents this meant opening up a plot landlocked by a dense urban block. (5) Under those circumstances, the architects proposed to work with the existing plot walls, «as found» (6), in a manner which is revealed by the parcel plan often accompanying lectures and publications on the project. Playing with those limits — rather than limitations — the architects proposed to transform the plot into a new shared garden whose quality of place was defined by the construction of a new concrete canopy floating above pre-existing brick walls. A see-through perimeter which no longer defined the boundaries of private property, but rather of a space newly opened to the public. In Baukunst's words, this structure is nothing but «a primitive shelter» (7) acting both as a protection against weather — particularly relevant in a city as rainy as Brussels — and as a sign that the status of the plot has been reconfigured from private into public, from enclosure to commons: in a word, «a space of ‹all probabilities› ». (8)

Yet, what we find particularly interesting about this proposal is not often found in publications, which usually give preference to the seductive imagery of a concrete canopy inspired by Mies van der Rohe's 50×50 house. In one of the first lectures given on the studio's work, Adrien Verschuere explained that the original request for the competition envisaged the construction of a small pavilion of about 100 square meters and an ambiguous programme, built according to low-energy construction standards. (9) According to him, the modest size of the pavilion made it clear that there was no point in building it. Its small size limited the possible uses in its interior, hence not justifying the energy inevitably spent on its construction, no matter how efficiently.

On the other hand, by enclosing this exterior space, the pavilion would potentially undermine the idea of de-privatising the plot, at least from a symbolic perspective. In a Bartlebyan sense, the first operation of the project was actually to state «I would prefer not to» (10) build it. Instead, Baukunst proposed to mutualize the programme of the pavilion within already existing rooms of the adjacent school, to which the garden ought to serve as a new entrance or as an extra playground. The most important thing in the project was not the «object to be-built» but its proper «absence», that is, the «space» and the relationships it ought to frame. (11)

Indeed, Mies van der Rohe's 50×50 house was not a sort of fetish to be reproduced, but merely a useful ready-made attesting the secondary importance of its appearance as an architect's signature move. Another relatively unknown detail which is relevant to demonstrate this, is the fact that until the final stages of design the structure was conceived in steel, such as Mies', only to be transformed into a concrete structure at the last minute for sheer economic reasons. At the suggestion of the engineering team, the materials changed, but the form remained, ensuring its possibility to exist as well as the necessary space so that trees on site could remain where they were. In this case, to create silence was an indispensable premise of the project, meaning both a formal and programmatic attitude. A design approach which dismisses the importance of the architect not in the sense of removing relevance from architecture, but of strengthening it by letting «something» else and «someone» else speak during the process. On the one hand, it does so by allowing figures other than architects play a relevant role in the final appearance of a design, be it engineers or simply already existing trees. On the other hand, by refusing a pre-given programme, thereby enabling future users to become more aware of their active role in the production of space. (12)

Although while working with Baukunst we have no recollection of ever having discussed the project for Quatre-Vents with reference to Lacaton & Vassal's square (fig. b), at least within the office, we are deeply convinced these projects are related. (13) According to the brief, the couple of architects were called upon the city council of Bordeaux to «embellish» its old public plazas. Opposed to that premise, the architects' answer was straightforward: «there is nothing to do and our project is to do nothing». A proposition which was fully realized — and, not least important, properly paid. (14) After careful months of observation and local surveys, they concluded that there was nothing wrong with the existing square. It already possessed «the beauty of what is obvious, necessary, sufficient» and people seemed «to be at home in it, in a harmonious and tranquil atmosphere.» (15) From the point of view of the commission this meant that it was only necessary to slightly alter the circulation and to give the existing square proper care. Repairing the ground so that pétanque games could continue to take place, or repairing the damaged benches and cleaning them more frequently from the lime-tree sap that sometimes limited their use. After all, they claimed, «why should the ground cover have to be changed, the bench or the street lamp replaced for another one more in style? Nothing here required such changes.» (16)

In the history of cities, particularly in the chapter regarding French urbanism from Haussmann onwards, the «embellishment» provided by architectural designs has had a perverse link to gentrification practices, contributing to transform the urban environment from «commons» into «resources», thereby directly or indirectly excluding underprivileged people by making land more valuable. That is, of making the usufruct of space more expensive, therefore more inaccessible to the majority of people. (17) Consequently, this has partially defined the role of architects and architecture within urban renewal processes. In the proposal for Léon Aucoc square, however, the absence of a new design, a new image or novelties of any kind, actually made it possible to preserve «the silence which so far had given each man and woman his or her proper and equal voice» (18) in the enjoyment of the existing square. Making it clear that «doing» or «not-doing» are valid choices for any architecture project, but potentially with very different outcomes.

Amongst other conclusions, we may claim that the cunning of Anne Lacaton and Jean-Phillipe Vassal's option for silence has obviously a strong ethical-political stance; in fact, both Baukunst and Lacaton & Vassal's proposals share this quality. They materialize strong «ecosophical» perspectives seemingly echoing the thought of Felix Guattari, when he argued that an ecological perspective ought to be based on three interlocked dimensions: an «environmental», a «social» and a «mental» ecology. (19) What this means, in essence, is that by opting for silence both projects demonstrate that not-doing is not so much a strategy of refusal for refusal's sake. It is above all an embodied will to take the side of what already exists, whenever possible. This perspective is radically ecological because it is the only effective way to design true «nearly zero-energy buildings»; to take into consideration the existing fabric of social relations influencing the quality of places and re-shaping new ones; as well as to make us fully aware, once and for all, of the finite nature of the world and the resources it presents us with.

Finally, as we approach the finish line, we are still left to answer one of our initial questions. From an authorial point of view, what are the implications of «silence as an alternative» at a time when artificial forms of intelligence are beginning to speak in our place? If the world was undergoing a Third Industrial Revolution when Ivan Illich wrote about silence, our current advances on automation (that are clearly forcing the way to a Fourth Industrial Revolution) pose the exact same kind of questions. Manifestly, digital instruments such as Generative Pre-trained Transformers — such as ChatGPT — as well as Text-to-Image Models — such as Midjourney or Stable Diffusion — call into question the specific knowledge and the specific tasks of architects. SWAPP — a software based on artificial intelligence — already promises «AI-powered construction documents in minutes», delivering «accurate, detailed, and complete architectural construction documents and BIM models faster than ever before». (20) Envisioning, needless to say, a profound reorganisation of architecture as labour.

On the other hand, it is equally clear that all those AI generative programs raise ethical and authorial issues concerning architecture, as well as other artistic practices. Not so long ago a close friend of ours used some of these tools to

(fig. a) Laçaton & Vassal, Place Léon Aucoc, Bordeaux, 1996.
Image: Lacaton & Vassal

(fig. b) Baukunst Quatre-Vents, Molenbeek, 2014.
Image: Maxime Delvaux

try and justify the construction of a fictitious one thousand metres tall tower in the old centre of Porto. Although to him this appeared from the outset as an absurd idea, ChatGPT elaborated arguments which, although not necessarily authentic, were frighteningly compelling in their rhetoric. In itself, this illustrates why Ivan Illich' arguments concerning technology as a political issue are still topical today. Some will justify that these are just new tools adding to so many others; or that the choice of parameters and final results is ultimate and will ultimately remain the responsibility of an architect. In a pragmatic analysis, they may also argue that these artificial intelligences may improve the efficiency to address objective issues, liberating the mind for subjectivity. Or else, that these programmes process and synthesize information in the same way practices like Baukunst, for instance, perform 3D montages or collages — only faster and with a scope that human minds cannot even afford to imagine. All this seems indisputable and it is undeniable that «the production time of the machine is infinitely less than the time we need to select images or make decisions». (21) Nevertheless, it seems equally evident that the greatest strength of these forms of intelligence is also their greatest weakness. They always respond to a question with accurate or convincing solutions. Whilst sometimes the most pertinent way to answer a question is simply deciding not to do it before reformulating the question itself. Once again, we have invented many things which make noise, but not a single one which creates silence. As far as we understand, artificial intelligence still belongs to the former. In the latter lies the singular condition of authorship as a form of resistance.