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«It is a place where you can start dreaming, you can start thinking, you can start inventing. Silence — it is this mix of tranquility and horizon.»

FROM THE DESERT TO
THE METROPOLIS
A CONVERSATION WITH
JEAN-PHILIPPE VASSAL
Johanna Roth, Joshua Guinness

Johanna Roth studied architecture at the Berlin University of the Arts with Jean Philippe Vassal, the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid and at ETH Zurich. Johanna is interested in architecture as a field of cultural communication and its implications within contemporary society. She currently works as a project architect at Peter Märkli's office in Zurich and teaches at ETH Zurich with Jan de Vylder.

Joshua Guinness is a project architect at the Architecture Land Initiative in Zurich, a cooperative working on trans-scalar projects in architecture, landscape, and territorial design. Joshua is the founder of E-FX, a platform investigating spatial strategy as a means to shape culture, society, and politics. He is a teaching and research assistant at VOLUPTAS, ETH Zurich.

For this conversation with Jean-Philippe Vassal, we travelled to his Paris office overlooking the horizon of the metropolis. While studying with him for several years at the UdK in Berlin, one of our most powerful revelations was how the generosity of space is characterized by a feeling of silence. We discussed how his early experience of living and working in the desert in Niger influenced his way of thinking about urban space and housing, and how silence can be understood as a quality in re-imagining architecture in relation to the city.

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JR JG

How did your experience in Niger, working on a small-scale house and learning from the experiences of the local people, subsequently merge into a manifesto for your own architecture? Could you explain how this process made you «re-learn» architecture?

JPV

What is interesting in Niger is the juxtaposition of dimensions: you experience the very small and the very large at the same time. If you are in the desert in the North of Niger, you feel alone in the vastness of the space. You may see another person in the distance, also moving alone. Your movements might approach each other slowly, then meet — or maybe diverge again. Because the space is so exposed, you perceive every movement very intensely. The environment consists of pure land. The horizon line separates the sky above from the sand below. The desert is so vast that it renders the notion of scale irrelevant. All that matters is the immense space and the human being's movements within it. This juxtaposition makes everything more intense. Someone passing through the desert might stop to place three branches in the sand and cover them with a piece of cloth. Immediately, he has created a shelter for the day through the shadow. This interplay between dimensions is what I found most striking in Niger. You are in an infinite space, yet every small detail has an enormous impact. Precision becomes key. The desert is inhabited in a very immediate way. That is why you feel a great proximity to the different kinds of people that live there.

JR JG

How was the feeling of silence, as a state of mind, present in Niger?

JPV

The desert is so powerful and impressive in its expansiveness that you are completely with yourself. You have to confront yourself.

JR JG

Two of the core values that we observe in your built work are that of surplus space and indeterminacy (unprogrammed space). You could summarize these qualities as the silence of space. How are these values rooted in your learnings from vernacular architecture and everyday life in Niger?

JPV

In the reality of the desert, most of the time you have no roads. Just traces. These traces might be gone the following day because of the wind. They are never permanent. This situation creates an incredible amount of freedom. You have the feeling that you can leave a given path at any moment. In the desert, space is something free. There is no reason to buy or sell it. It is abundant, similar to air or light. It is free for everyone. As an architect it is fantastic to play with this space and begin to organize it, knowing that in the end, the space will always allow the possibility to escape. The horizon is always present, reminding you of the infinity of space and the possibility to move. This ever-present line of the horizon is very important to us. That is why we always live and work in places where we can see it. Looking at the horizon, you see the landscape, the clouds, and the weather. If I see the horizon from my living space, my living space extends all the way to this line. It becomes my space. Although it is yours as well — it is everyone's. This is something that I probably took, unconsciously, from my experience living in Niger.

JR JG

In your first built work, the hut in the desert in Niger, the domestic space consists of two separate volumes, with an open, unprogrammed structure for everyday life in addition to the home's nucleus. How did you aim at transferring this understanding of domestic space to your early practice in France? Which initial principles, that you collected in your manifesto, have remained in your work to this day?

JPV

Domestic space can be defined by objects. It can be a dish, a bottle, a bed. A seat, a carpet, or a curtain. The objects that you use, and the necessary space around them, are what define a living environment. Objects define areas, which might or might not need partitions between them. I like talking about partitions instead of walls. We try to avoid creating barriers through walls so that space can be more fluid and ephemeral. Your living space can change from day to day, according to the changes in climate and season.

JR JG

For us, silence is a spatial quality. A specific condition of space in which a sense of openness and fluidity emerges. You could call it generosity.

JPV

In our experience, it comes down to building spaces — or finding them, because they may already exist — where you want to rest. This might be because they have enough shadow, the air is fresh, and maybe you have a beautiful view of something far away. This could be described as silent space: a space that makes you feel happy through its simplicity and comfort. Everyone remembers such spaces. Spaces where you find peace in just staying, just resting. We should think very carefully about these moments of silence. In reflecting on these moments, we should try to understand how they were made, what they were constructed of. What are the reasons for making a moment like this so pleasant? They are constructed of extremely simple, essential elements. In this

sense, architecture as the organization of space is related to poetry, the organization of words. They both revolve around the construction of specific situations through the precise manipulation of relations between very basic elements.

JR JG

Silence, beyond being a spatial quality, is also an approach to space that you taught us: A way of seeing space. Silence is a method of research for creating qualitative living spaces by stripping a given context of historical burden, program, or ideological over-coding. How might one translate this sensitivity for specific spatial qualities to the scale of planning? Should planning be rejected altogether in favor of architecture, or is there a way of tackling larger scale transformations that can leave space for the specificity of architecture?

JPV

This brings me back to the situation of the lone man walking through the desert. The space is huge, and a single man crosses through it. But there is another man moving through the desert at the same time. And another one. And another. The sum of all these individuals' movements creates the urban whole. If individual projects emerge from an intensity of observation, of researching and spending time on very local situations, then the urban plan should just be their multiplication — always with the same intensity and precision. It is all about the gradual transformation of the city. The city exists as it is, and it is constantly changing. You have to start from the specificities of the existing, not from a general masterplan.

JR JG

Whereas the desert is an open, exposed milieu, in which architecture is needed in order to create an inhabitable enclosure, our cities are already entirely constructed. How do you inject desert-like conditions into the urban fabric?

JPV

One of the most important features of life in the desert is the concept of mobility. Perhaps you could call it nomadism. Today, in our societies, we see a strong tension between the desire for mobility and change on the one hand, and the institution of property on the other. In our economic system, housing is increasingly subject to financial forces that treat living space as a quantifiable asset. Every square meter is counted. This fixates space and stands in the way of flexibility.

JR JG

Does the role of the architect have to adapt in the face of this increasing privatization and commercialization of space?

JPV

First of all it is a question of resisting. Of not accepting the status quo of planning, not accepting the ongoing densification and simultaneous increase in rents. It is a question of deciding who you actually want to work for. When you build a small house, you usually have a client that you are building for. But when building collective housing, you usually sit opposite an investor, a social housing firm, or the city administration. The future users are invisible. The architect

can use this ambiguity in order to propose spaces that go beyond this standardization. If you try to derive the design of living spaces from understanding people, you can propose much more diverse and generous spaces. That is why it is key to ask yourself: For whom am I really building? This is already a subtle form of resistance. If the actual client does not agree to this approach, it might be better to separate and stop. Take a project of ours like Cité Manifeste in Mulhouse. We had a client who was clever enough to give us total freedom to define a new kind of housing. Our only limitation was the budget. This freedom was great. But of course, as often when designing collective housing, we didn't know who the future residents of the building would be. This is when the generosity of space becomes key. With light, mobile partitions instead of walls, you increase possibilities. A completely transparent facade can always be adapted and closed at will in the future, but you cannot change a window in a stone wall — it will always determine the living space in advance. Architects should therefore aim at offering a multiplication of possibility and choice, all the more so when they do not know who they are really building for. But this generosity doesn't consist merely in the surplus of space or physical flexibility. It is also the diversity of the space that makes it generous. Define some spaces that are dark, some that are very light, some facing the sky, some facing the street. This diversity increases the possibilities of future appropriation, whereas standardization diminishes them.

JR JG

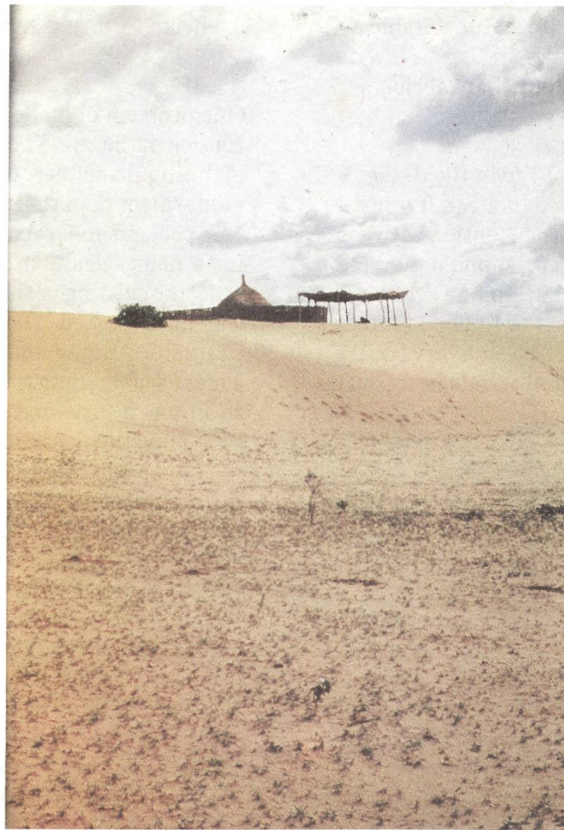
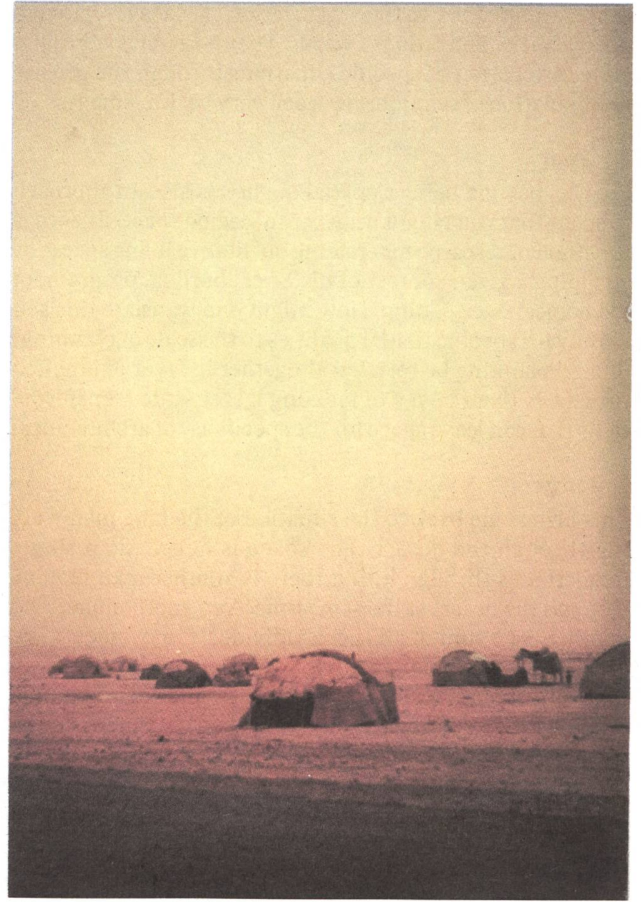
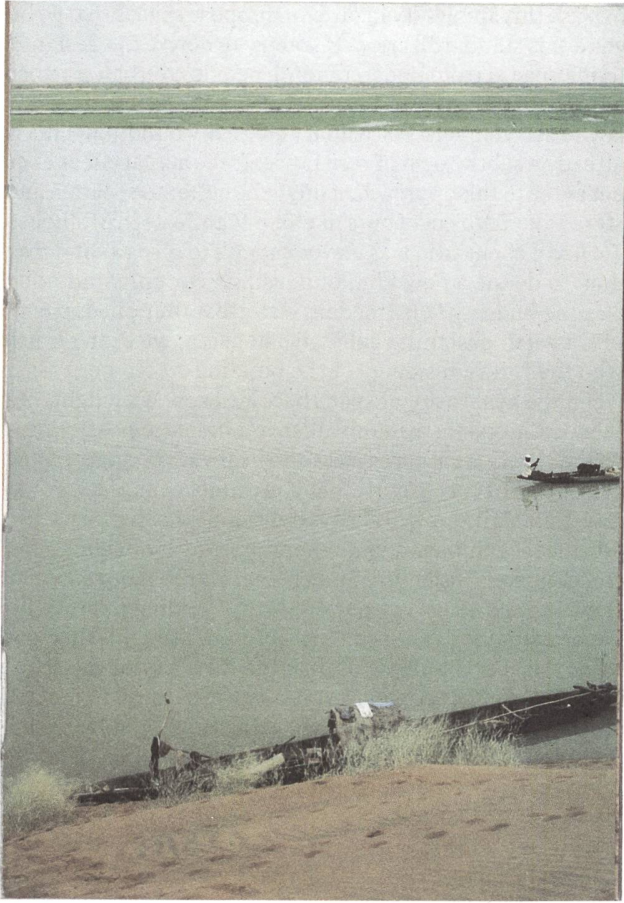
By intensifying the existing, space can become more diverse and specific. Embracing a given context as the basis for something new also means giving up a certain amount of control as an architect or planner. This indeterminacy, in itself, is a form of generosity as well.

JPV

One problem of modernist housing projects was their conception of the city. They were too often based on tabula rasa planning principles. One alternative to the tabula rasa of modernism departs from a consideration of the existing. Our projects for transformations of large modernist housing schemes dealt with this question. Analyzing and evaluating the existing problems and qualities of the living spaces was the first step. Then we proposed additions and superpositions. Adding undefined spaces along the facades was a means of opening the existing up and enriching it. These additions re-oriented the relations between the old spaces. Suddenly, the possibilities of moving in between the existing rooms were multiplied. If prior to this, you entered a flat through a corridor leading into three individual bedrooms that each ended with a window in the wall, our alteration enabled you to use the existing windows as passages to the winter garden, which would, in turn, connect to the other rooms. Increased mobility creates new possibilities of choice. A simple addition of three meters along the facade can have a radical impact.

JR JG

This goes back to the potential of the desert, where there is always more than one path you can take.



(fig. a, b, c) «Il fera beau demain», France, 1995. exhibition catalogue.
Images: Anne Lacaton & Jean-Philippe Vassal

JPV

It is this possibility of extending one's living space towards the exterior, from a collection of closed rooms towards the light space of a winter garden. You see the horizon line. This is the desert again—but at the same time, you are still in the city. You have the two sensations at once: to see the horizon, but to still feel connected to being a citizen. It is then not about connecting and relating to others directly, as you would in a public space, but about experiencing the vast exterior world from within your own home. It is a moment of silence, where the horizon gives you the freedom to dream while you look out into the city which you form a part of. Like the straw hut in the desert that offers you shadow and rest amidst the vast openness, the space of your apartment should offer both intimacy and the possibility of relating yourself to the horizon, to the outside. Silence — it is this mix of tranquility and horizon. It is linked to freedom.

JR JG

A line of flight.

JPV

Architecture is about this mechanism of transition. If you live in the city, you might be outside in the street, in a café. At a given moment, you leave. You slowly approach the place where you live. The next moment, you are in front of the building's entrance, and the building itself disappears from your view. You open the lock, go inside the dark staircase, enter a corridor with several doors, and you open yours. When you step into the apartment, you will see the daylight again through the windows across from you. You go towards the facade, traverse the winter garden, towards the balcony, and look out. From there you see the place where you were sitting a few minutes before. This mechanism of architecture, which brings you from a situation two minutes before to the present one, is essential. Within this tiny window of time, this little voyage, you experience plenty of diverse moments.

JR JG

Many of these moments you might not be able to control.

JPV

Architecture is about creating fragments. These fragments will continue other existing fragments, and will, in turn, be continued by others. If architecture is similar to poetry, the space we design in is an open text. You can start from a page in the middle, or start at the end and then come back. The text that you write will open up to another text. The book is never finished. The craft of the architect is aggregating fragments into specific constellations. But inside these organizations, or on their edges, some new fragments will always emerge and connect with the existing. Leaving space for these emergences of unforeseen events and situations is important. The project should never be an end, but a beginning.

JR JG

This is a beautiful vision. In your view, which aspects of our building culture must change in order to allow for this acceptance of indeterminacy and coincidence?

JPV

The exciting, rich spaces that we wish for often already exist in reality — even if they are only small parts or fragments of our cities. So the first important point is to remember that they do exist and pointing out to what is good, rather than only what is bad. Be it in the Sahara, in a hyper-dense Asian city, in the Argentinian Pampa. Observing and showing very precise relations in space that create interesting situations — it may be the atmosphere of a café, the quietness of a room, the air quality or temperature somewhere. Interpreting and understanding these fragments in order to re-adapt them to other contexts is the core of architecture. Your ability to observe is your greatest value. Another vital aspect, in my opinion, is for architects to become engaged in the politics of the city. More and more citizens are becoming aware of the importance of urban questions, Political struggles against demolition and unwanted developments are proliferating, and architects should support these efforts. Architecture will then not always be about building, but about pointing out the qualities of the existing. All these acts, in their addition, will transform the city.

JR JG

Maybe we could say that silence, as an attitude, means riding oneself of preconceptions and accurately observing the real qualities of a space.

JPV

I find the concept of silence very interesting in this regard. It comes down to observation. Take time to observe. Take time to listen. Taking time means to think while listening, to pause. To stay close to the existing while allowing for introjections and additions to what you observe. This precision and proximity to reality relieves you of the need for scale, for abstraction. There is only one scale, which is this reality.