

Relational Architecture: Dense Voids and Violent Laughters

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Starting from an analysis of Georges Bataille's text 'The Labyrinth' (1935-6), this essay addresses the always changing relationship between architecture and the city, considering in particular the architectural 'void', as both a physical space and a disciplinary domain. In the city, architecture operates in a 'void' that is dense of tensions, unevenness, singularities, stratifications and movements, and must devise strategies for addressing and inhabiting these networks of relations. Focusing in particular on Peter Eisenman's definition of the 'interstitial' as a spacing condition of form-form relation, and on Rem Koolhaas's 'strategy of the void' and its congestion with architectural 'junk', this text argues that different postmodern positions on architecture in the city have addressed the 'void' as a space that is not feared, and therefore 'designed' by the architectural project, but tensioned with the potentiality of Bataille's convulsive laughter: that destabilizing and de-compositional force that transverses relations of structured organizational contiguity, and challenges their forms with a force that travels across the (architectural) 'void', revealing the unstable and dynamic nature of both architecture and urban constructs.

Introduction

Architecture operates in the city through a complex network of relations that always reach beyond its own specifics. The space of the difference, of the non-coincidence between architecture and the city both defines and delimits architecture as a discipline, producing the complexity of the inhabited built environment. While architecture “makes” the city, the city is made not only of architecture; on the other hand, architecture does not only provide a defining component of the built city, but produces also an ongoing discourse on the changing nature of the urban environment. Architecture is a partial presence in the city, and the city is not the only context and concern of architecture. Yet, there are other and less evident forms of engagement and uneasy overlaps which articulate the relation between architecture and the city. This essay addresses the relational nature of architecture in the city, exploring the less obvious and less visible forms of their relation. I call the spaces of these relations “architectural voids”, not because these are physically void spaces in the city, but because they seem not defined by architectural interventions (buildings, projects, designs). This difference is, of course, itself far from clear. What is architecture? What is not architecture? The question produces the need for a redefinition. As architecture is not only building and it addresses not only buildings, its work in the context of the city must concern itself also with that which is not architecture (but is built), as well as with that which is not built but both influences and is influenced by architecture (and is therefore its concern). Even when such voids are not described as a physical void (a vacant lot, an unbuilt area, an empty expanse) or represented as an architectural void (a space defined and built by concerns that are not those of architectural design), these “voids” are densely occupied by architectural concerns. In other words, architecture cannot dispose of its surroundings, be they physical or intangible, and these “architectural voids” are indeed very dense of architectural concerns and possibilities. This text addresses the role of these “dense voids” in articulating the relation between architecture and the city, as they call for a constant negotiation and for a redefinition of architecture as a discipline – a constantly changing discipline defining itself “in relation”. What emerges from the exploration of this idea is the possibility to expand the definition of architecture in a dynamic sense, while re-establishing its critical role in the urban space.

Architecture has always borrowed narratives, tools, concepts and images from other disciplines, always defining itself in relation with an “other”. Architecture is by definition relational: internally, in how it organizes itself through rules or paradigms of form and space making; externally, in how it relates to forms of inhabitation, use, and cultural and physical conditions. The relationality of architecture is ever more evident in the city, in the unresolved and always changing relationship between architecture and its urban contexts. Different schools of thought and disciplinary definitions

attribute to architecture more or less formative roles in the city and in its extended metropolitan and territorial dimension. The problem remains however, of how architecture addresses the field of its relations and how it engages with what is “not architecture”, defining it and being defined by it: the architectural “void” in the city – intended as both a physical space and a disciplinary domain.

Modern Architecture created an ideological pneumatic void in which to operate with its fiction of the tabula rasa, a cultural operation of relabeling which dismissed the past as no longer architecturally relevant. This fiction of a cleansed totality failed, and its fragmented implementations found themselves immersed in a very full architectural void that the discipline once again had to face. The necessary discontinuity that the architectural project produces thus finds itself operating in a void that is already dense of tension, unevenness, singularities, stratifications and movement, and architecture must devise strategies for addressing and inhabiting these networks of relations.

Different postmodern positions on architecture in the city have addressed the architectural “void” as a space that, while not feared (and therefore “designed” in order to control it), is understood as tensioned by potentially destabilizing forces that transverse and challenge relations of structured organizational contiguity. It is these forces that such positions aim to activate and render explicit (embody) in the city. (I am thinking here of the theoretical proposals of Bernard Tschumi, Peter Eisenman and Rem Koolhaas, in the 1970s and 1980s in particular). Void space is no longer considered an uncontrollable dimension (the non-city outside opposed to the historical walled city), or the controlled result of a design carved inside what the project has already determined (consider, for instance, the clear distinctions of public and private space etched in Giovanni Battista Nolli’s plan of Rome,¹ but also the even bolder black and white opposition of figure and ground in the city of collage proposed by Colin Rowe²).

The urban void is no longer an intimidating vacuum of design that lies beyond the control of the project and can be subjected instead only to ideological domination. In architecture’s recent past this domination took two different forms. On one hand the ideal of early Modernism proposed a tabula rasa where the void space is dominated by the gaze of the architect and vectorialized by transportation routes (mainly motorways), and thus indirectly controlled (think, for instance, of Le Corbusier’s urban proposals, from the Plan Voisin for Paris, to the Ville Radieuse, to the Plan Obus for Algiers). On the other hand, and as a reaction to this, the avant-garde architectural projects of the 1960s and early 1970s, apparently treading lightly on the ground, devised in fact its nearly total neutralization and artificialization, rendering it available to the forces of non-design (as, for instance, in the city- or world-scale projects by the British group Archigram and those of the Italian collective Superstudio).

¹ G. B. Nolli, *Topografia di Roma* (Rome, 1748).

² C. Rowe and F. Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 1978).

But what happens if we think the possibility of a pre-architectural and pre-urban void – that is, before it is addressed, defined or designed by architecture – as being always already implicated in a network of relationships, of which the architectural is only one of the possible codified forms of expression? Never neutral and always tensioned, this void is never “empty”, but is both made and occupied by the forces that make it and use it. Here I consider a series of architectural positions which, from the 1970s to today, have chosen to inhabit and activate this void, theorizing it and using it in their projects without ever attempting to “design” it through formal control.

Violent laughter as architectural tool?

In his text on the Labyrinth, Georges Bataille discusses the ‘composite character of beings’, suggesting that at the basis of human life lies ‘a principle of insufficiency’.³ It is the image of the labyrinth, its incompleteness and its intrinsic unknowability, that allows Bataille to address human insufficiency as a dynamic form of being, and to question the stability of human social forms. In this context the reference to the Labyrinth is important because, while the labyrinth is one of the archetypal spaces at the origin of architecture, it is also significantly characterized by mutable and experiential qualities, rather than by a given form that can be defined and known in its every detail. For Bataille, man exists as a “being in relation”,⁴ in a relationality that is mediated by words and by the representations of existence that are constructed through language; therefore ‘knowing – when a man knows his neighbour – is never anything but existence composed for an instant’.⁵ Bataille extends the idea of the temporary and unstable nature of the connection between human beings from the interpersonal relation to the much vaster and complex network that is human society. The ‘knowledge of human beings thus appears as a mode of biological connection, unstable but just as real as the connections between cells in tissue’. Crucially, ‘[t]he exchange between two human particles in fact possesses the faculty of surviving momentary separation. A man is only a particle inserted in unstable and entangled wholes’.⁶ What is relevant here is the fact that the connection between humans forming ‘unstable and entangled wholes’ occurs not in isolation but within a tissue, that is, it is a connection within connections, part of wholes that are both complex and plural. Furthermore, this connection is not only momentary and labile, but also productive of memory, as it leaves traces that enable the acknowledgement and the recognition of a past. It is, also, a relationship that allows for physical and temporal discontinuity. It is the physical spatial discontinuity within temporal repetition that becomes crucial when we speak of the city, and of the work of architecture in it.

³ G. Bataille ‘The Labyrinth’ (1935-6) in G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-39* (trans. A. Stoekl) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 172. Writer, critic, philosopher, independent intellectual who operated outside academia and across disciplines, Georges Bataille (1897-1962) offers in his work a counter-reading of the reality in which he operated. The subversive character of his texts does not consist in a demolition from the outside of established sets of values, but in a systematic and pungent exposé of their contradictions and intrinsic ambiguities.

⁴ Ibid, p. 174.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

7 Ibid

The relational possibilities of architecture in the city, beyond the physical connections established and materialized by the infrastructural networks (which now include also the non visible and the non always physically situated connections of digital networks), can be redefined as an instant of composite existence, an unstable connection between beings that contributes to the making of the ‘unstable and entangled wholes’⁷ that Bataille proposes. For Bataille, being as a whole is composed of particles that maintain their autonomy, and whose connection is momentary, partial, and precarious: ‘every isolable element of the universe always appears as a particle that can enter into composition with a whole that transcends it. Being is only found as a whole composed of particles whose relative autonomy is maintained’.⁸ Being is always precarious and negotiated, yet Bataille acknowledges the formation in this relational system of knots or concentrations, nuclei where ‘being hardens’.⁹ It is at this point that he shifts his argument from the idea of ‘being’ to its multiple aggregations, and to society and its key form of expression, the city. With the multiple aggregations of being

8 Ibid

9 Ibid

relatively stable wholes are produced, whose center is a city, in its early form a corolla that encloses a double pistil of sovereign and god. In the case where many cities abdicate their central function in favor of a single city, an empire forms around a capital where sovereignty and the gods are concentrated; the gravitation around a center then degrades the existence of peripheral cities, where the organs that constituted the totality of being wilt.¹⁰

10 Ibid

This is essentially a condensed description of the traditional historical European city, and of its organisation around its dual centre of political and religious powers. It is also the history of the super-urban centralization produced and organized by nation states, and of the formation of their capitals. Bataille does not stop here, and his dynamic vision sets the whole process in motion, in an ongoing cycle of constructions and destructions, organizations and their explosions: ‘universality, at the summit, causes all existence to explode and decomposes it with violence’.¹¹ As dynamic as Being, the City changes, and indeed it can be only if it changes. Far from smooth or gradual, this change is produced by the explosion of a discontinuity. Bataille exemplifies it with the idea of the ‘laughter’.

11 Ibid

Laughter intervenes in these value determinations of being as the expression of the circuit of movements of attraction across a human field. It manifests itself each time a change in level suddenly occurs: it characterizes all vacant lives as ridiculous. [...] But laughter is not only the composition of those it assembles into a unique convulsion; it most often decomposes without consequence, and sometimes with a virulence that is so pernicious that it even puts in question composition itself and the wholes across which it functions.¹²

12 Ibid

Laughter becomes the expression of a tension that pervades both Being and the City, it varies in intensity activating societies and cities as dynamic fields, and manifests itself in paroxysms that produce both cohesion and discontinuity. 'Laughing with' and 'laughing at' establish relations of association and opposition, produce condensations in groups, and construct difference, but both laughters are always labile, volatile and renegotiable. What interests Bataille is not only the violent explosion and the dynamic nature of the laughter, but the fact that laughter is contagious in both an associative and a dissociative way. To a laughter responds another laughter, and it is the possibility and the intensity of this reaction that enables him to question the centrality of power and of the city by means of the very same forces that produce them:

[...] through a necessary reversal, it [laughter] is sent back [...] from the periphery to the center, each time [...] the center in turn reveals an insufficiency comparable to that of the particles that orbit around it. [...] laughter traverses the human pyramid like a network of endless waves that renew themselves in all directions. This reverberated convulsion chokes, from one end to the other, the innumerable being of man ...¹³

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ '[I]t is not only the composition of elements that constitutes the incandescence of being, but its decomposition in its mortal form. [...] laughter is thus assumed by the totality of being.' Ibid, p. 177.

¹⁵ Bernard Tschumi's architectural provocations and theoretical projects and writings of the 1970s were heavily and explicitly informed by Bataille's theories. In the text 'The Architectural Paradox' (1975) Tschumi draws from Bataille's architectural metaphors of the Pyramid and the Labyrinth, to expose the intrinsic tension between architecture as a formal definition and embodiment of hierarchies (the pyramid as a structuring conceptual device), and architecture as a spatial experience (the making of and the journey through the unknown labyrinth). B. Tschumi 'The Architectural Paradox', in *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 27-52. Other architectural projects and texts of the same years do not refer to Bataille's theories in a direct way, but they equally question the stability of architectural forms, social structures, and urban orders.

The network of relations that organize social life is thus destabilised and set in motion, the centre is emptied of meaning and of its controlling power, and the pyramidal social order is shaken. Architecture is not only a metaphor here. As the embodiment of the rituals that both manifest and confirm the power of the centre, architecture can also become the ritual of embodiment that reveals the insufficiency of the centre.¹⁴ If we embrace Bataille's idea of the laughter as the agent of both the composition of elements and the decomposition of form, then in the city seen as a dynamic relational space, architecture needs to be redefined, from a role of control, definition and enclosure, to a nodal player and activator of its tensions. Although it is not directly referred to by the contemporary architectural discourse, Bataille's image of a city that combines composition and decomposition, constructs interconnected discontinuities and operates through densely tensioned voids recurs in the architectural projects which from the 1970s to the present have critically addressed the legacy of Modernism. Appropriating, using and transforming the architectural and formal language of modern architecture, these projects attempt to come to terms with Modernism's unresolved relation to the city, be it the existing historical city or the new one proposed on the tabula rasa (always only partially realised and altogether already compromised by reality).¹⁵

The city as an unstable whole

Bataille's text on the Labyrinth uses of the figures of the Labyrinth and the Pyramid to define different forms of order and of experience, and their role in the making and the undoing of the city, which is directly connected to the making (and changing) of the social being of man. An unstable 'stable' whole, the city is subject to processes of formation, centralization, explosion and decomposition. It is in this circuitous movement of composition and decomposition that Bataille introduces the 'laughter' as a sudden change: the ridiculous that dismantles established orders produces change, as it composes those that it assembles in a collective convulsion. Laughter traverses the human pyramid of order in a reverberated convulsion that destabilizes. Bataille's true understanding of the city is better understood, rather than from the explicit architectural metaphors that he uses, through the very disruptive action performed by his 'disturbing prose',¹⁶ and through his own strategy of transgression of established hierarchies. His prose is itself part of the unstructured violent laughter that he writes about, an anti-discursive mode that refuses form. Even his entries for the Critical Dictionary of the magazine Documents are not definitions, but performed transgressions of definitions. His own writings, that is, embody the convulsive force of which he writes.

Bataille's work on the Labyrinth can be considered in relation to a rethinking of architecture in the city, not because it evokes a physical place or its project, but because the space of the labyrinth – which in its mythological origin remained retrospectively unknowable even to Daedalus, its architect – offers a fitting image of the insufficiency and incompleteness of existence, in the sense that no being is ever complete and is constantly redefined in an open relation to others. The Labyrinth is also the figure of an interior always related to an exterior that, equally, cannot be specified in advance (projected). Being in relation then is expressed not only by language, but also by relations of spaces that intentionally fail to define both their boundaries and their inner order (the labyrinth, but also the city). Like language, the city puts us in relation to others, in ways that cannot be controlled. This is of course the contemporary city that has dismissed or surpassed the enclosures and physical divisions of the historical city, as well as the spatial control and allocation of activities (zoning) of the modernist city. It is the contemporary city that accepts not only the uncontrollable violence of the burst of laughter, but also its multidirectional ripples, which transform the space of the city into an active (magnetized) field without a centre. If we accept this vision of the contemporary city as a space of relations and disorientation and as a space without a centre, the role and the possibilities of architecture in it need to be redefined in a way that goes beyond a mere 'surfing' on the ripple of change.¹⁷ This needs to be a breaking point for architecture, at a time when it is divested of previous certainties and needs

¹⁶ N. Leach, 'Georges Bataille' in N. Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 20.

¹⁷ That is, beyond Rem Koolhaas's idea of an architecture that 'does not control the waves, but [...] recognises them and knows how to go with them, even against them'. R. Koolhaas, in R. Koolhaas, B. Mau and OMA, *S,M,L,XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), p. 1286.

to reinvent itself, its languages and its possible ways to negotiate its role within the city.

Relational architecture

Bataille explicitly discusses architecture and its role in society on several occasions in his work. His entries for the *Critical Dictionary of Documents* on 'Architecture', the 'Slaughterhouse', the 'Museum', 'Dust', and the 'Skyscraper'¹⁸ show how architecture represents society and incarnates its structures and orders. Architecture is pictured as one of the disciplines that petrify society, providing it with a 'mathematical overcoat'¹⁹ of rationality, stability and oppression. Slow in its own changes and in incorporating society's changes, architecture builds a resistance to the violent laughter of change. But Bataille's most interesting passages on architecture – most often in the form of indirect passing references, as in the text on the Labyrinth – are those in which architecture is referred to a wider context. It is there that, rather than focusing on a specific example or building type, architecture is opened up and almost dissolved into a more general discourse on the city and society. What emerges is the difficult relationship that architecture establishes with a space that it cannot control in either form or time: a space that is apparently void of architecture but is in fact full of tensions and shaken by the Bataillean laughter. It is precisely this dense 'void' full of relations that recent architectural theories have been addressing, in a long stretch of time and recurring reworked ideas.

The relational nature of architecture may seem obvious, and it is intrinsic to its making since the very beginnings (in themselves multiple, uncertain, open and relational). Designed for human inhabitation and interaction, architecture needs to respond to requirements that are both practical and more extensively intangible (social, political, psychological, etc., depending on its spatial and temporal conditions of production). Architecture establishes, that is, a series of external relations, rules, narratives and situations (what Peter Eisenman has called the "exteriority" of architecture). Yet, in each instance of its implementation, in its every "act" (design, construction, practice, writing), architecture calls into question also its own languages, its materials, its history as a discipline, thus producing a self-redefinition at every re-enactment. Architecture changes itself in each and every of its "instalments". It is enmeshed in a web of relations, both external ("exteriority") and internal ("interiority"), which affect it and which it produces.²⁰ These relations occupy also a space that is only apparently void of architecture's direct intervention. It is in these apparent voids that the relational nature of architecture emerges more evidently, where possible alternative practices of architecture are better revealed: it is in these "voids" that the silence of architecture, but also the discourse and the critical space of the written text of architecture,

¹⁸ G. Bataille, in G. Bataille, M. Leiris, M. Griaule, R. Desnos, *Encyclopaedia Acephalica* (London: Atlas Press, 1995). 'Architecture', pp. 35-6; 'Slaughterhouse', pp. 72-3; 'Museum', p. 64; 'Dust', pp. 42-3; 'Skyscraper', pp. 69-72.

¹⁹ G. Bataille, 'Architecture', in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, p. 35.

²⁰ Peter Eisenman has introduced the notions of an "interiority" and an "exteriority" of architecture, in order to distinguish between elaborations that are intrinsic to formal research within architecture (this, too, always already informed by different geometries and forms of representations), and the moments in which architecture opens up to external concerns and imports an exterior narrative, be it religious, natural, technological, mediatic, geographic or digital. The definitions are clearly summarized and systematically exemplified through the texts and projects included in P. Eisenman, *Diagram Diaries* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1999).

take place, as well as other alternative practices. It is in the space of this interstice that the relational nature of architecture becomes more evident.

The relational nature of art practices has been proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud in the 1990s as a new aesthetics and as a form of material criticality. Bourriaud suggests that ‘interactive, user-friendly and relational’ art practice could ‘open up [...] obstructed passages, and connect levels of reality kept apart from one another’.²¹ This view marks the shifts occurred from art practices ‘traditionally earmarked for their “representation”’ to a praxis that appears ‘to be a rich loam for social experiments, like a space partly protected from the uniformity of behavioural patterns’.[9] It is in the interstices of these partly protected spaces that ‘perceptive, experimental, critical and participatory models’[12] operate to propose ‘ways of living and models of action within the existing real’[13]. What is described here is not a revolution, but the possibility of a coexistence of other forms of operation within an existing condition. Relational art takes as ‘its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context’.[15] At this point, as Bataille’s discourse in ‘The Labyrinth’ had shifted almost naturally and automatically from the individual being to the plurality of being to the relations and tensions that make the city, Bourriaud not only contextualises the praxis of relational art in the urban environment, but observes how the evolution of art toward a relational practice ‘stems essentially from the birth of a world-wide urban culture, and from the extension of this city model to more or less all cultural phenomena’.[15] The ‘growing urbanisation of the artistic experiment’ then defines not only the location of art practices, but intrinsically characterizes the modus operandi of a practice that is produced by, and also produces, ‘a system of intensive encounters’.[15] This is an art form whose ‘substrate is formed by intersubjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme, the “encounter” between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning’,[15] and the social dimension of the city is its natural environment. For Bourriaud the work of art thus intended ‘represents a social interstice’, intended in Marxian terms not as a rupture but as ‘a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system’[16] suggesting other possibilities within this system. Therefore, ‘contemporary art models more than it represents, and fits into the social fabric more than it draws inspiration therefrom’.[18] Form is redefined from within as a system of relations, as a ‘coherent unit, a structure (independent entity of inner dependencies) which shows the typical features of a world [...] a principle of dynamic agglutination’ [20]. “[F]ormations” rather than “forms”[21], art’s ‘form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise’.[21] In different ways relational art claims ‘the sphere of human relations as artwork venue’[44], but Bourriaud warns,

²¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris, Les presses du reel, 2002), p. 8. The following quotations from this volume are marked by the page number in brackets.

These approaches do not stem from a “social” or “sociological” form of art. They are aimed at the formal space-time constructs that do not represent alienation, which do not extend the division of labour into forms. The exhibition is an interstice, defined in relation to the alienation reigning everywhere else.[82]

Dense voids and the interstitial

The idea of the interstice as a space of coexistence and experimentation of other forms of architecture within and as an interference with dominant systems has been addressed by Peter Eisenman, whose writings and projects on the ‘interstitial’ in architecture have taken the definition of design beyond the production of a form in relation to a function.²²

While Eisenman’s definition of the ‘processes of the interstitial’ remains exquisitely architectural and formal, his project attempts to break and blur the established dualities of architecture through a consideration of the ‘spacing’ that it performs. Architectural form is thus divorced from the requirements of a prescriptive function, and while the production of architectural form remains the main purpose of the process, form (or rather the process of forming) is precariously generated by the introduction in the design process of a secondary diagram that is used as an interference within the functional programme of the project’s brief. The architectural interstitial thus produced is not an in-between space between solid and void, or between the architecturally controlled and the non-designed, but a space of reinvention of authorship in the architectural design process. In this scenario, architectural authorship does not produce a design decision that controls form, but is the agent that introduces the interference (the ‘blurring’) in the functional diagram of architecture. Architecture is no longer signified by its function, but it works within the condition of space making without predetermining a form compromised by reality – it is a relational form of variation.

Bataille had already disrupted the definitions of architecture determined by function, and had performed a fresh reading of architecture’s rituals, seeing the Museum as a purifying system for its visitors, and the Slaughterhouse as a vestige of the sacrificial temple. In architecture, Eisenman’s process of the ‘interstitial’ produces a spacing condition that is determined by a relation of form to form, rather than by an opposition of form to space: what results from this process is a spacing – a space in process, rather than a given static condition – that, liberated from functional determination, enables the coexistence and overlaps of differences (of forms, of occupations) and vibrates in tension. Eisenman’s process of the interstitial introduces an interference in the diagram of architecture and, through an aleatory, arbitrary, ‘even chaotic activity’,²³ it draws architecture out of its interiority, and makes it function ‘by

²² P. Eisenman, *Eisenman Inside Out: Selected Writings, 1963-1988* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2004). P. Eisenman, *Written into the Void: Selected writings, 1990-2004* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

²³ P. Eisenman, ‘Processes of the Interstitial: Notes on Zaera-Polo’s Idea of the Machinic’, in P. Eisenman, *Written into the Void: Selected writings, 1990-2004* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 57.

²⁴ Ibid

contagion, rather than by comparison, subordinate neither by the laws of resemblance nor utility'.²⁴ Liberated from the exclusive imperatives of form as resemblance and of function as utility, architecture can thus be opened to incorporate the tensions of its outside in the very process of its making. In architectural design this corresponds to a 'blurring' of the distinction of the background and the figure in the definition of the form of architecture. Eisenman's walls do not crumble in front of Bataille's convulsive laughter, but shake with it to reinvent a new architecture. His project progresses not by opposing figure and ground, but by constructing a relationship of figure and figure. This produces a condition of spacing in which the operation of the interstitial (not a physical space in-between) can propose 'a void within a void, an overlapping within space of space, creating a density in space not given by the forming of a container within a profile'.²⁵ The interstitial addresses and brings into architecture an operation of spacing that traditional forms and practices of architecture cannot explain, or are able to confront only through the opposition of volume and space, solid and void. 'The condition of this new idea of the interstitial is thus one of movement as opposed to its former condition of stasis'.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

Post-architectural clumps

²⁷ R. Koolhaas, 'Junkspace' in A+U Special Issue: OMA @ Work (May 2000), pp. 16-24. Here I use the version in A.K. Sykes, A. K. (ed.) *Constructing a New Agenda. Architectural Theory 1993-2009* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press 2010), pp. 134-151.

²⁸ R. Koolhaas, *Delirious New York. A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (London & New York: Thames and Hudson, 1978).

²⁹ R. Koolhaas, 'Postscript. Introduction for new research "The Contemporary City"', A+U, 217 (October 1988), p. 152.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ R. Koolhaas, 1994, p.29.

³² R. Koolhaas, 'Postscript. Introduction for new research "The Contemporary City"', p. 152.

For Eisenman, the process of the interstitial in architecture can equally produce a void or a densely occupied space. Translated to the urban scale and retrospectively considered, this point can help to understand the consistency of Rem Koolhaas's position on the contemporary city, as it oscillated (but only apparently) from the 1980s urban 'strategy of the void' to the total congestion of the text *Junkspace*²⁷ in 2000. After the *Delirious New York*²⁸ indigestion on an alternative and congested North-American architectural modernity, in the late 1980s Rem Koolhaas refocused his attention on the European city, proposing a critical post-architectural modernity through a series of urban projects. "Free" of architecture' and dealing 'with "nothingness"',²⁹ these projects proposed to organize the city through its voids to 'create new cultural conditions'³⁰, proposing 'a new conception of the city, a city no longer defined by its built space but by its absences or empty spaces'.³¹ In the same years Koolhaas put forward his proposal for a research to address 'the yet to be recognised beauty of the late twentieth century urban landscape [...] a research into the emerging forms of architecture in the city of today, [...] to search into the consequences and possibilities of actual mutations', and document and interpret 'a number of apparently spontaneous and independent processes at work in cities'.³²

*These processes all seem to lead to an unavoidable fragmentation of the existing city, a displacement of the centre of gravity of urban dynamics from the city centre to the urban periphery and a remarkable ingenuity in avoiding urbanistic rules.*³³

³³ Ibid

A few years later, when in 'Beyond Delirious' (1994) Koolhaas considers Giovanni Battista Piranesi's reconstruction of the Roman Forum, he is not interested in identifying and discussing the recognizable large geometrical forms associated with its major public monuments, but in the 'smaller debris, programmatic plankton in which presumably the less formal activities of the city are accommodated'.³⁴ And, commenting on the mid-eighteenth century etching but thinking of the contemporary city, he continues: 'This mixture of formal and informal elements and the mixture of order and disorder which this single image represents are the essential conditions of the city.'³⁵ At a vaster scale than Eisenman's projects, OMA's (Koolhaas's Office for Metropolitan Architecture) projects of urban "voids" are inevitably related to – and in fact working for and inviting in – the coexistence of their necessary other: the spontaneous fragment, the debris, the plankton of existence that (re)occupy the architectural and urban void. This is a very dense and very mutable void, shaken by the reverberating ripples of the Bataillean return laughter, and the agent of the demise of an architecture of prescriptive formal, social and programmatic definition. The counterpart of these dense (and tense) urban voids translates into the possibility of buildings of 'incredible' density 'with no programmatic stability. [...] The liberating formula of such a clump of a building could be that we would no longer have to be very intense about making buildings for specific programs'.³⁶ What Eisenman defines in terms of a generative architectural process by interference, Koolhaas finds in the city, as a sort of architectural ready-made to be embraced by an architectural project that has lost the exclusivity of programmatic and formal definition. 'If we consider these clumps of buildings mainly as permanent accommodations for provisional activities, [...] [w]e no longer have to look for the rigid coincidence between form and program'.³⁷ This dense and tense void, coagulated in an architectural clump that no longer relates form to programme and no longer has exclusive control over form itself, is now ready to explode the contemporary city into Junkspace.

³⁴ R. Koolhaas, 'Beyond Delirious'. *The Canadian Architect*, 39:1 (January 1994), pp. 28-30.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid, p. 30.

³⁷ Ibid

Busy hollowness

The terrifying characteristic of Rem Koolhaas's text *Junkspace*,³⁸ as unstructured as the space it describes, is that in fact this is not a manifesto or a proposal for architecture, but an educated and argumentative acknowledgment of a de facto situation – indeed a cynical look at what is there. Too full, congested with the debris of progress and of so-called civilization, *Junkspace* is a saturated space where tensions and relations

³⁸ R. Koolhaas, 'Junkspace' in A.K. Sykes, A. K. (ed.) *Constructing a New Agenda. Architectural Theory 1993-2009* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press 2010), pp. 134-151.

are dead, and where the convulsive laughter that shakes differences, collapses pyramids and reactivates space through cycles of composition and decomposition is no longer possible. This is the death of architecture: whatever happens after Junkspace or in Junkspace is no longer architecture. It is death without annihilation. Bataille writes of the dark abyss of existence and of the struggle with nothingness, but Junkspace is the space – the Being, the City, the Architecture – where there is no regenerative void, where the convulsive laughter comes to involve all and everything, until everything, shaking together, in unison and oblivious of differences, comes to a standstill.

What can we draw from this? That architecture needs void, the other, the space of discontinuity across and within which it can constantly renegotiate its position, its relations, and its very being. It is not the void that threatens architecture, but the saturation of space, the proliferation of the everything, the erasure of discontinuities, the killing of distances – the seamlessness of Junkspace. Yet, if ‘Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course’, it is also ‘the sum total of our current architecture’.³⁹ Junkspace

³⁹ R. Koolhaas, ‘Junkspace’, p. 136.

substitutes accumulation for hierarchy, addition for composition. ...

Junkspace is overripe and undernourishing at the same time, a colossal security blanket that covers the earth in a stranglehold of care ... [fusing] public and private, straight and bent [...] [it offers] a seamless patchwork of the permanently disjointed. Seemingly an apotheosis, spatially grandiose, the effect of its richness is a terminal hollowness, a vicious parody that systematically erodes the credibility of architecture, possibly forever ...⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 137; emphasis in the original.

Continuity is the essence of Junkspace. It ‘deploys an infrastructure of seamlessness’ and it is ‘sealed, held together not by structure, but by skin, like a bubble’.⁴¹ Is this the Labyrinth then, long gone the Pyramid? An ‘all interior’ whose only recognizable order is its outer skin? A pure space of the experiential? But even experience is killed here, and all is rendered predictable, edited, organized. There is no danger, no surprise, no unknown here – space is filled to its bursting point. What is voided here is the experience, so that there is not only the decomposition of the structured Pyramid but also the meltdown of the experiential Labyrinth, and ultimately the erasure of all that is architecture.⁴²

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² ‘[A]lways interior, so extensive that you rarely perceive limits [...] Junkspace is additive, layered and light weight [...] Junkspace always changes, but it never evolves. [...] It is a space of collision, a container of atoms. It is busy, not dense. [...] pretends to unite, but it actually splinters. It creates communities not of shared interest or free association, but of identical statistics, a mosaic of the common denominator.’ Ibid, pp. 138-46.

Text as new laughter?

A problem for architecture, Junkspace requires a way forward, a violent shake out of its perpetual and saturated ‘state of becoming’⁴³ that in fact forbids change and criticality. Fredric Jameson has suggested that

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ F. Jameson 'Future City' in A. K. Sykes (ed.) *Constructing a New Agenda. Architectural Theory 1993-2009* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010), p. 247.

Koolhaas's text, by identifying and 'performing' the very characteristics of Junkspace, is itself a first attempt to break 'out of the windless present of the postmodern back into real historical time'.⁴⁴ Interpreting it as a project in words, Jameson considers Koolhaas's text instrumental to the creation of a fundamental discontinuity, a breaking in the urban congestion that is necessary for the possibility of architecture.

*It is the writing that is the battering ram, the delirious repetition that hammers away at this sameness running through all the forms of our existence [...] and pummels them into admitting their own standardized identity with each other [...]. The sentences are the boom of this repetitive insistence, this pounding on the hollowness of space itself; and their energy now foretells the rush and the fresh air.*⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Ibid

For Jameson, the problem of Junkspace

*is then how to locate radical difference; how to jumpstart the sense of history so that it begins again to transmit feeble signals of time, of otherness, of change, of Utopia. The problem to be solved is that of breaking out of the windless present of the postmodern back into real historical time, and a history made by human beings.*⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Ibid, pp. 263-4.

Jameson suggests that Koolhaas's text is an attempt to do this by mimicking and exaggerating, in words, the very characteristics of Junkspace, 'until the tendency itself becomes apocalyptic and explodes the world in which we are trapped into innumerable shards and atoms'.⁴⁷ The implicit question here is whether Koolhaas's text could be interpreted not as mimicry of Junkspace, but as a parody and a critique of it. The text should therefore be properly assigned to the architectural discourse, as part of a critical practice of architecture that can break into the 'all purpose indeterminate magma'⁴⁸ of Junkspace, to make space, that is, make room, produce a new void, and restart the project of architecture in the city. This interpretation has important repercussions not only on the redefinition of the role of architecture in the transformation of the contemporary city, but also towards an understanding of architecture that acknowledges the importance of its discursive practices. For Jameson the Junkspace text both anticipates and produces 'an orgasmic breaking through into time and history again, into a concrete future'.⁴⁹ What is fundamental here is that at a moment of physical and formal impasse architecture needs to return to the text, not only as a form of critical reflection on the discipline, but as an 'interior' agent of its practice that can trigger its re-construction. Far from representing and embodying in stone the structure of society, this architecture of the critical post-formal is a 'project' in the sense that it acts as a relational force of change. In this case it is the text that produces a 'void', that space of the difference that makes the project possible, again.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p 264.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p 259.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p 264.

This is not an institutional architecture shaken by Bataille's laughter, but a laughter generated within architecture that becomes critical agency in the city, for a post-Junk architecture. As in Eisenman's processes of the 'interstitial' – producing through interference a space that is void and yet full, delineated and yet undefined, formalized and yet relational – a post-Junk architectural space is open, relational, multiple, dense but not full, tensioned but not saturated. Always moving and changing, it is void but not hollow, and ready to be shaken, yet again, by laughter, and to laugh with it.