

# Roofscapes and the spatiality of the common

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*ABSTRACT. The relationship between forms of delimitation and expropriation of the commons through the management of the "public" have led to a world of enclosures and exact division lines. But this is not how the individual perceives and experiences space, this is how bureaucracy builds it. The body's individual spatiality is understood as the complex topological extension configured by the sensible world at every turn, reflecting while allowing the crossings, junctions, intensities, densities, proximities, etc., which weave together the experiential fabric wherein he lives. This individual spatiality, when it resonates with others, produces a form of common spatiality, the understanding of which can and should act as a new frame of reference for intervention strategies and spatial politics in the contemporary world. The roofscape, as a space not fitting within the canonical division of public/private, is a unique study case to frame these new concepts.*

*KEYWORDS. Roofscapes, common spatiality, political, body, Tangier.*

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### Tangier mornings, 2010.



Fig.1

A curious relationship is born with the woman in front, with the striped skirt and a headdress that makes her look like a Millet painting in motion. She is moving, one could say dancing, slowly on the roof, a couple of streets away, among the clothes hanging from a string and wonderfully shining in the early morning hours. A layered reality of planes turn the place into a tangle of proximities and distances, textures, visibilities, colors and small movements that begin to stir with sunrise. She's there every morning and the distance does not prevent the observer from distinguishing her facial expressions, a peaceful calm and a smooth background of joy, but this feeling does not appear through her face, in contrast, seems better defined through her movements, careful, quiet without necessity, a certain slowness... This slow but rhythmic symphony unfolds around generating this curious landscape... (Fig.1)

The roofscape of the Tangier's medina is drawn from within the observer stare, but it is impossible not to recognize the shared presence of other landscapes unfolding there, around every moving figure. After a while, the observer gives up trying to untangle this view and simply lets go into the multiple dimensions of this common landscape.

It is not difficult to imagine that the woman who inhabits her roof with minute care might be the granddaughter of one of the figures crowding the city rooftops in 1908, the day of the proclamation of Moulay Hafid. La Ilustración Artística published back then a photograph showing the crowded streets of Tangier on the day of the proclamation of the new Sultan (Fig.2). If we look closer, on the roofs of the nearby buildings a mass of women is to be discovered. Carefully covered they weren't going to miss this historic moment, even if they had to do it from their particular observatory in the city: the roofs.

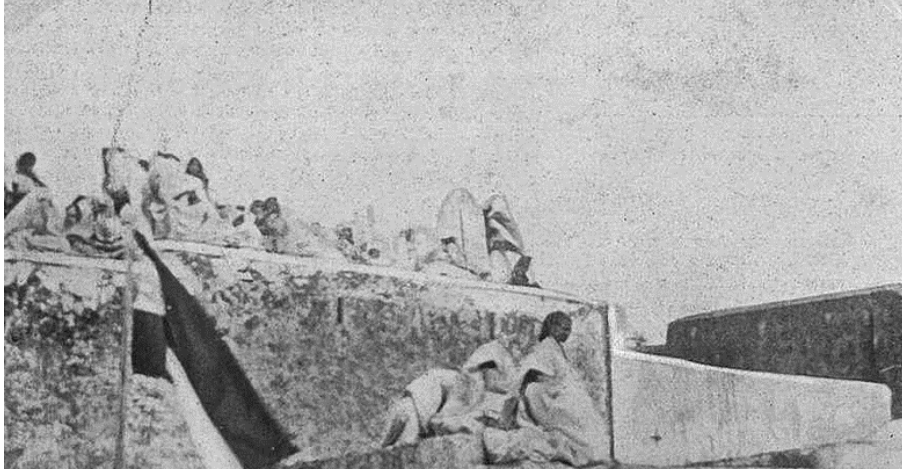


Fig.2

Fatima Mernissi has described, throughout her work, this intimate protected sphere where they are the owners:

"My mother and the women of my uncles would dress like princesses and fly to the roof before the appearance of the moon of the 'Achoura feast. They were armed with glowing braziers in which they would put gri-gri disguised with some incense while publicly chanting the poem-formula (rubi) that bewitches husbands forever. As my mother finished reciting the rubi (a poem invented by women) on the roof, her eyes fixed on the moon and her hands weaving imaginary traps around the jawi burning on the hearth, the powerful djinn were mobilized to control my poor father, oblivious to what was happening " (1)

José Manuel Navia was thinking about the writings of Mernissi and her description of the roofs when he talked of "rooftops of hope" (2) while describing Pietro Masturzo's photo "From the rooftops of Tehran". This photo (Fig.3), World Press Photo winner of 2010, was at that time hidden behind all the media production that followed the civil protests and election results of June 2009 in Iran. The core of the story seemed to be the use and possibilities of the new digital social networks and tools to structure protest, and thus Masturzo's photo was doomed to oblivion (3).

Pietro Masturzo, a freelance photographer, went to Tehran shortly before the 2009 election with no more protection than his camera. During his first days there he covered the events and movements that took place in the streets, but he was detained and all his photographs confiscated. Under these circumstances he had no choice but to take refuge in the homes of students and members of the opposition that took him in (4). Thus, by chance or necessity, he discovered that along him the voices of citizenry had taken refuge there too because in the streets of the city they were silenced through the violence of their state. That is how a strange new city unfolded in front of his eyes with the potential to harbor and awaken the voice of a multitude drawing a unique soundscape every single night:



Fig.3

"The silhouettes of the four girls on the roof seem taken from a Chinese shadow theater. They are very young. But any hint of frailty disappears when at night, at about half past nine, they sing in chorus the Allah-u akbar and the Morg dar diktator (God is the greatest and Death to the dictator), just as their parents had done 30 years ago to escape the tyranny of the Shah. Suddenly, from a nearby building, a powerful male voice is seconded by two or three more fluted, childlike ones, maybe a father and his children. They respond by repeating the motto. As if they had agreed on the script, other neighbours come together. Through the windows of the staircases their figures can be seen, lit up, rushing to the rooftops. At ten, it never fails, someone joins with a trombone to the protest." (5)

Although it is women again who star this picture, it is not only them climbing to the rooftops to find the horizon for political action and invention they cannot find elsewhere. There are young people, elders, children, men and women coming together every night up to these roofs to call out and feel the answers. It is society as a whole who has lost its frame of action having been dispossessed of their lieu par excellence: the public space of the streets is no longer theirs, it has become the property of a state that silences their voices through direct and indirect forms violence.

In the nineteenth century the state's ability to control the public space of the cities did not reach that far. During the century of revolutions the city became the space of shared use and undefined property the citizenry needed, and the streets and corners were turned into unrivaled spots for the creation of new social frames of reference.

In 1868, the heart of the city of Cadiz gives birth to a revolution that would end the reign of Isabel II. From a not so distant London the papers report with text and images (Fig.3) (6) of the recent state of exception. With moving words and a call to arms the existing order has been destroyed and with it the application of its laws.

The city of Cadiz knows well what turning the city into a state of exception means, each year the carnival takes its streets. But this the roofs house armed revolutionaries while the streets are occupied with barricades... the clothes though keep drying in the sun.

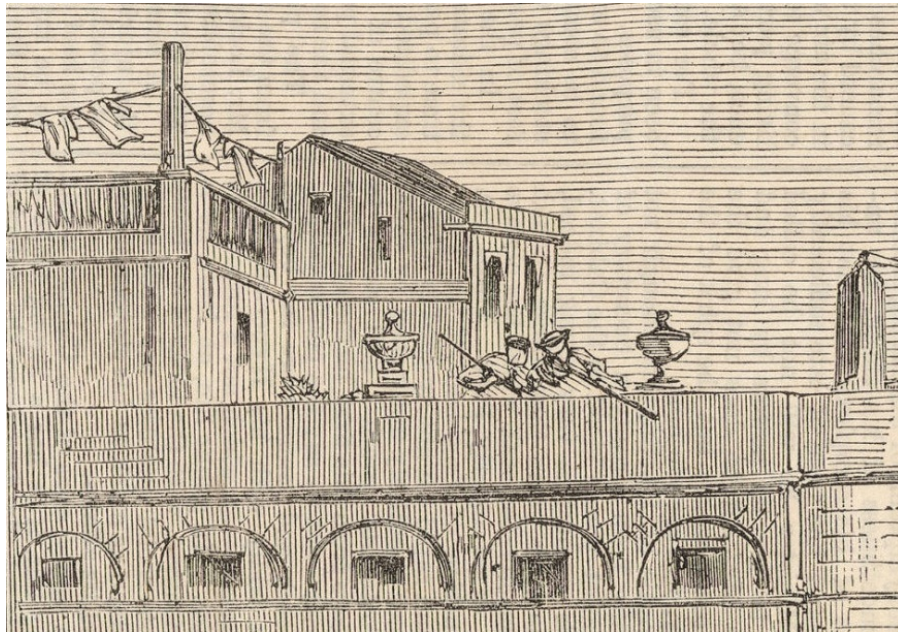


Fig. 4

Three years later, in 1871, it is the city of Paris who makes room for the idea of social space through the breaking of the existing order: to invent a new reality, in Cadiz and Paris, we must begin from the space and uses of the everyday:

“The significance of the Commune is most evident in what Marx called its “working existence”: in its displacement of the political onto seemingly peripheral areas of everyday life- the organization of space and time, changes in lived rhythms and social ambiances. The insurgents’ brief mastery of their own history is perceptible, in other words, not so much on the level of governmental politics as on the level of their daily life: in concrete problems of work, leisure, housing, sexuality, and family and neighbourhood relations.” (7)

We see the need of the individual, both in his private intimate sphere (women on the roof) as in the collective one (the revolution in Cadiz or the voices from the rooftops of Tehran) of a field of action from where to project their reality, inventing it at every turn, the need for a space that unfolds the possibility of the political. It is this field of relationships that we want to call a common spatiality.

### **The roofscape of Cadiz as seen through the camera obscura**

In 2010, a few days before inhabiting the rooftops of Tangier, a visit is made to Torre Tavira in Cadiz, one of the more than 160 watchtowers that were built in the

city during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to encompass the commercial explosion the city thanks to the trade routes with America. There a different entrance to the roofscape of Cadiz is discovered: at the top of this tower a camera obscura still exists.

The origin of the camera obscura, easily made through the opening of a hole in the wall of a dark space, thus creating a lens that projects the outside onto the interior wall as an inverted image, can be traced back to the tenth century as part of the broader development of optics in the Arab world.

It is fascinating to discover the roofscape of the city of Cadiz through this mechanism. On a white disk of about two meters in diameter arranged horizontally in the center of the dark room, a blurred matt image of the city appears, we are far from the bright colors the latest digital technologies have accustomed us to. But the most striking thing for the eye that follows the movement of the image while it's adjusted and focused through a series of mechanical movements over our heads is the appearance of movement within the image. First the sea in the distance, chopped, small white spots break its surface. The feeling that this is not a static image but one with the ability to capture the movement through simple reflection sharpens the observer's perception. The figures moving through that strange intermediate plane of the roofs are especially attractive, a man playing with a dog, the clothes hanging here and there... the appearance of this landscape is produced by the direct inclusion of the subject who experiences within it, not through an analytical distance, but by a body experiencing it.

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben described in one of his firsts books, *Infancy and History* (AGAMBEN, 2006), the threefold condition of understanding: experience, imagination and knowledge:

"Nothing can convey the extent of the change that has taken place in the meaning of experience so much as the resulting reversal of the status of the imagination. For Antiquity, the imagination, which is now expunged from knowledge as 'unreal', was the supreme medium of knowledge. As the intermediary between the senses and the intellect, enabling, in phantasy, the union between the sensible form and the potential intellect, it occupies in ancient and medieval culture exactly the same role that our culture assigns to experience. Far from being something unreal, the *mundus imaginabilis* has its full reality between the *mundus sensibilis* and the *mundus intellegibilis*, and is, indeed, the condition of their communication –that is to say, of knowledge." (8)

The conditions for knowledge, says Agamben, lie in that narrow movement between the tangible world of our experience and the makings of our imagination. But today we are used to assume without questioning all kind of constructs. That disconnection between our experience and our ability to, through imagination, link it and recreate it, to make it part of our knowledge, can lead us right into the absurd.

One good example is the public/private division, and the stereotypes with which the concept of the public has been loaded in recent times. This idea of "public" is in our imagination linked to a progressive and/or socialist vision of social organization and has become the focus of much architectural reflection in recent years. The privatization of public space, its disappearance, even its death has been discussed... But it may be necessary to look at what that concept means, especially in the contemporary world, because although if the urban public have been for example the streets, traditional places for a carnival or a revolution, in the times of

biopolitics, these spaces have become the property of the state and taken away from the everyday of the multitude. Judith Revel and Antonio Negri, clearly explain the origin of this conception of public property:

"... deux manières de s'approprier le commun des hommes. La première, c'est le recours à la catégorie de «privé» ; la seconde, c'est le recours à la catégorie de «public». Dans le premier cas, la propriété est une appropriation du commun par un seul, c'est-à-dire aussi une expropriation de tous les autres. (...) La seconde catégorie, en revanche, c'est celle du «public». Le bon Rousseau qui était si dur avec la propriété privée quand il en faisait, à just titre, la source de toutes les corruptions et souffrances humaines, tombe alors immédiatement dans le panneau. Problème du contrat social –problème de la démocratie moderne: puisque la propriété privée génère l'inégalité, comment inventer un système politique où tout, appartenant à tous, n'appartienne pourtant à personne? (...) Voilà donc ce qu'est le public : ce qui appartient à tous mais à personne, c'est-à-dire ce qui appartient à l'État. Comme l'État, ce devrait être nous, il va bien falloir inventer quelque chose pour enjoliver sa mainmise sur le commun : nous faire croire par exemple que s'il nous représente, et s'il s'arroge des droits sur ce que nous produisons, c'est parce que ce «nous» que nous sommes, ce n'est pas ce que nous produisons en commun, inventons et organisons comme commun, mais ce qui nous permet d'exister. Le commun, nous dit l'État, ne nous appartient pas, puisque nous ne le créons pas vraiment : le commun, c'est ce qui est notre sol, notre fondement, ce que nous avons sous les pieds : notre nature, notre identité. Et si ce commun ne nous appartient pas vraiment –être n'est pas avoir-, la mainmise de l'État sur le commun ne s'appelle pas appropriation mais gestion (économique), délégation et représentation (politique)" (REVEL & NEGRI, 2008)

The relationship between forms of delimitation and expropriation of the commons through the management of the "public", the decision of who's person or institution is the owner of what, or the legal lines that separate citizens depending on which side of the border you were born, have led to a world of enclosures and exact division lines. But this is not how the individual perceives and experiences space, this is how bureaucracy builds it. The subject, on the contrary, depends on the complex tangle of a common spatiality.

The body's individual spatiality is understood as the complex topological extension configured by the sensible world at every turn, reflecting while allowing the crossings, junctions, intensities, densities, proximities, etc., which weave together the experiential fabric wherein he lives. This individual spatiality, when it resonates with others, produces a form of common spatiality, the understanding of which can and should act as a new frame of reference for intervention strategies and spatial politics in the contemporary world.

The roofscape analyzed here, as a space not fitting within the canonical divisions of public/private, is a unique study case to frame these new concepts. In order to establish the framework from which this approximation is done, two references from the world of 20<sup>th</sup> century art will be used: the Jardin d'Email, made by Jean Dubuffet in 1974, and the Bodyspacemotionthings installation by Robert Morris of 1971.





Fig.5

In the Sculpture Garden at the Kröller-Müller Foundation in Otterlo (Holland), the visitor arrives to a clear in the forest to find a large rectangular enclosure of 30x20m surrounded by a continuous and irregular white wall. When surrounded a small opening is found, through it the body feels compressed while forced down through a dark and narrow passage and taken up to the large topographical garden upstairs. It is then a vast, continuous and complex landscape unfolds before the visitors' eyes, built from a unique topography that is made from Dubuffet's characteristic white planes and thick black lines.

But it is not a space to be conquered through vision, for it is precisely the different inclinations, jumps, falls, curves, that instantly connect the body that inhabits it. Body and built form overlap instantly to build a complex and unique spatial relationship. The center of gravity of the visitor is urged to activate, stabilize, be experienced at every step. This space is capable of introducing rhythms, pressures, speeds, inclinations, to the position of the body, thus making way for the movement linking such moments: the body passes without noticing it from walking to jumping, running, collapsing, lying... Thus, topography and body create a unique and dynamic space, whose relations are reconfigured in a dialogic situation, which, though objectively elusive, is nonetheless subject to experience.

Only three years earlier Robert Morris had created *Bodyspace* in London, an interactive exhibition in which a series of inclined planes, scales, volumes or tunnels became an invitation to action for the visitor's body. He was compelled to climb, bend, balance, slide, crawl... around this peculiar playground.



The exhibition had to be closed only four days after its inauguration due to a mixture of excessive enthusiasm from the visitors and the use of unsafe materials that ended with some minor injuries. The exhibition was recreated in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern in 2009 following the original documentation.

Concepts such as balance, compression, friction, resistance, support... become grounds for the construction of the body's direct spatiality, and Morris, when making them present in the most essential way, loaded with importance the key role of the body in its direct relation with the physical environment when building its perception of space.

We could say that in a way Robert Morris had isolated, as if Bodyspacemotionthings were a laboratory in which to bring apart the different elements of a chemical compound, the elements, forces, situations, opportunities Jean Dubuffet had merged into one continuous landscape in the Jardin d 'Émail. The complex possibilities for the body present in his garden are those that Robert Morris isolates and identifies.

These two interventions allow us to introduce the concept of disposition proposed by Keller Easterling, and which helps us to link the reality of the built environment with the body that goes into action. Easterling believes that the built form should also be considered as a part capable of action and reaction, having "dispositions, tendencies, propensities, or properties that interact with other factors". She recognizes at the same time the impossibility to control this potential or disposition of forms, nor the possibility of their scientific coding, demanding instead an understanding of the arts of making, of the uses (10), coming closer thus to the approaches of Michel de Certeau. Recognizing the existence of such latent potential that does not require the presence of motion, the event, to exist "disposition locates activity, not in movement, but in relationship or relative position."

These examples and derived concepts might help to find clues from which to analyze the space of the roofscape, because it is not through a merely descriptive analysis of a given built environment nor through a dive into purely sociological aspects in which the use of these places becomes detached from its material base, that we will be able to understand it in an operative way. What is looked for and n analysis born from the recognition that it is in this intimate connection between body and built space, which cannot be analyzed but from the consideration of actions, uses, repertoires... where the idea of a common spatiality resides.

## **Biography**

Lucía Jalón Oyarzun is an Architect graduated in the ETSAM, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid and PhD Candidate in the Advanced Architectural Projects program at the same school. She coordinates the Master and PhD program there while being a researcher in the Cultural Landscape Group. Her research interests focus on the relation between the political and the production of space, the spatiality of the common and the relationships between body and built environment. The research from which this article is a small section started in the journey made to the territory of the Strait, from Cadiz to Tangier in October 2010 as part of the Laboratory of Large Scale and Landscape from the Master in Advanced Architectural Projects at the ETSAM. Special thanks must go consequently to the tutors who have encouraged this work ever since, Darío Gazapo and Concha Lapayese.

## Notes

1. MERNISSI, Fatima, *Magia del incienso*, in El País, 17/09/2003
2. NAVIA, José Manuel, *Azoteas de esperanza*, in elpais.com, 12/02/2010
3. This goes along a now popular idea that the political forms of the multitude have moved towards the virtual leaving behind the physical component of the city, thus despising and ignoring the potential for social production of the city. See CALDERÓN, Verónica, *Twitter contra los mulás*, El País, 18/06/2009 or PEINADO, Fernando, *La censura iraní no puede detener el poder de Twitter*, elpais.com, 17/06/2009.
4. PAONE, Mariangela, "Me habían detenido y desde las azoteas pude contar lo que estaba ocurriendo", publicado en elpais.com, 12/02/2010
5. ESPINOSA, Ángeles, "La fractura de Irán", in El País Domingo, 21/06/2009
6. The engraving discussed was published by the Illustrated London News on December the 24<sup>th</sup>, 1868.
7. ROSS, Kristin. *The emergence of social space*. London, Verso Books, 2008, p.33.
8. AGAMBEN, Giorgio. *Infancy and history*. London, Verso Books, 2006, p.27
9. REVEL, Judith and NEGRI, Toni, *Inventer le commun des hommes*, in «Multitudes», n. 31, 2008.
10. EASTERLING, Keller. "Disposition" in Hauptmann, D. y Neidich, W. (Eds), *Cognitive Architecture. From biopolitics to noopolitics. Architecture and mind in the age of communication and information*. 010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 2010, pp.250-265

## Legends

- Fig.1 Woman in the rooftops of Tangier in October 2010.
- Fig.2 Photo from 1908 published in La Ilustración Artística showing Tangier the day of the proclamation of Moulay Hafid as Sultan of Morocco (detail)
- Fig.3 "From the rooftops of Tehran", photograph taken by Pietro Masturzo during the revolts following the presidential elections of 2009 in Iran.
- Fig.4 Engraving published by the Illustrated London News on December the 24<sup>th</sup>, 1868 (detail)
- Fig.5 Jardin d'Émail, 1974, by Jean Dubuffet in the Sculpture Garden of the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands, and images from the exhibition Bodyspacemotionthings in the Tate Gallery, London, back in 1971 and in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in 2009.

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