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Architecture and public space: between reassurance and threat.

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ARCHITECTURE AND PUBLIC SPACE,

BETWEEN REASSURANCE AND THREAT

"We modern civilizations have learned to recognize that we are mortal like the others", [1] declared the French poet Paul Valéry shortly after the end of World War I in his essay *La Crise de l'Esprit*. In the aftermath of September 11th, architecture and urban design have been struck by a similar realization of the frailty of what they had tried to achieve from the very beginning of modernity: an environment that would contribute to the political and social pacification of the planet. For the attack against the World Trade Center meant that the twin towers were not interpreted as innocent symbols. Although they had been initially intended as a tribute to global prosperity, the terrorists targeted them as the epitome of a worldwide system of economical and cultural oppression[2].

This context should perhaps represent and incentive to reexamine the fundamental assumption lying behind architectural and urban practice, namely the intimate conviction that architectural and urban design are systematically on the side of order against disorder, looking for stability instead of instability, fostering peace rather than promoting conflict. Throughout the twentieth century, they were for sure exceptions to this state of mind. On the eve of World War I, the Italian Futurists had for example praised the aggressive side of Modernity, the beauty of industrialized conflict. Their leader, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, had been especially adamant on that point in the founding manifesto of the movement in which one could read statements such as "Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece." [3] Later on, Fascist and Nazi architecture was clearly imbued with militaristic values. But the general trend was a quest for architectural and urban principles that would heal the social diseases of the time, enabling mankind

to get rid of war and riots. Le Corbusier was especially clear on that subject with his recurring alternative between architecture — a new and modern architecture for everyone — and the perspective of revolution and chaos. [4]

History can perhaps be useful to distance oneself from the typically modern assumption of the possibility for architecture to be a pure instrument of betterment and progress. Even if one decides to leave aside episodes like Albert Speer's contribution to the Third Reich dreams of grandeur, can architecture be free from any violent dimension, in other words can it be totally innocent?

A rapid tour in a more remote past shows indeed that architecture, as well as public space, have had often close ties with threat and violence. At certain moments of history, theses ties have not only concerned specialized domains like military architecture. Threat and violence have represented a broader source of inspiration for entire sectors of architectural and urban design. More generally, there is probably no architecture and public space without some relation with violence. Beyond the capacity of modernity to deceive itself on that point, the lesson to be drawn from these episodes could perhaps apply to some aspects of the present situation.

ARCHITECTURE, THREAT AND VIOLENCE, FROM VITRUVIUS TO THE FIRST INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

Contrary to the peaceful image that theorists have often tried to promote, threat and violence have been present in Western architecture almost from the start. After all, Vitruvius himself was an engineer versed in military matters. Beside the five orders and other fundamental developments on the architectural discipline, war techniques and engines are very present in his ten books on architecture. From the Renaissance, on, this military dimension was among the reasons that insured the success of his treatise among theorists and practitioners. Indeed, fortification was seen as a branch of the architectural discipline, a branch that influenced furthermore various other domains of architectural practice.

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If one takes the example of French architecture, the influence of fortification is noticeable in many famous Renaissance and seventeenth-century buildings, from the gate of Philibert Delorme's castle of Anet that used forms typical of the bastioned system to Claude Perrault's Observatory with its sharp angles that played with the directions of the sun in a way somewhat reminiscent of the relation between fortified walls and projectiles [5]. The relation between the latter building and the aggressive politics of domination led by King Louis XIV was made further evident by a comparison drawn by Jean-Baptiste Colbert, his main minister, between the triumphal arch that Claude Perrault had designed to celebrate the military victories of the Sun King and the Observatory that was supposed to celebrate the scientific achievements of the French nation. "Triumphal arch for the terrestrial conquests – observatory for the skies", [6] noted the minister. According to him, the astronomic discoveries were clearly to be interpreted as an extension of the terrestrial conquests of his master. In seventeenth-century France, architecture was by no means an innocent practice. It has to do with power, military threat and conquest. The same was true of the formal gardens designed by Le Nôtre. They were also clearly related to fortification techniques and more generally to the military realm with their massive earthworks, reminiscent of the bastioned system and their well-ordered flowerbeds that seemed to parade like disciplined regiments. [7]

Despite the changing social and artistic ideals that shaped eighteenth-century architectural production, the connection between architecture, threat and violence was to remain fundamental. Michel Foucault's analysis of the new panoptic scheme mobilized for hospitals or prisons, with its intricate blend of generous belief and disciplinary practices, is well known. Panoptic prisons were inspired by a desire to reeducate through surveillance and associated threat. Beyond the penitentiary realm, this kind of hybrid between social generosity, on the one hand, threat and violence, on the other, permeated an entire range of productions. Boullée's famous utopian compositions are thus constantly balancing between these two poles of Enlightenment political thought. Beside purely civilian programs like museums or assembly halls, the architect designed a series of city gates clearly permeated with the desire to "speak" an aggressive military language. [8] There are also striking similarities between the architectural vocabulary he tried to promote and the evolution of military

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architecture around the same time. It is no hazard if General Marc René de Montalembert's forts that were to influence many later military realizations seem almost Boulléean in appearance with their simples and dramatic looking masses. [9] Despite the eighteenth-century aspiration at transforming society in order to avoid unnecessary conflicts, its architecture kept a complex balance between reassurance and threat.

Generosity and threat were often present in the same project. Beside prisons, programs like courts of justice were especially suited to this alliance between the two dimensions, an alliance explored at a theoretical level by Italian philosopher Cesare Beccaria. Published in 1764, Beccaria's highly influential treatise, *On Crimes and Punishments,* was permeated by the research of the proper type of sentence that would at the same time contribute to the redemption of the criminal and reassert the right of society to punish him severely. Many eighteenth-century projects for courts of justices positioned themselves within this frame. This was the case of Ledoux's proposal for Aix-en-Provence new court. [10] A contemporary student project of the Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées, a civil engineering institution in which architecture occupied an important place, is even more explicit. [11] Whereas the marble stairs and the columns of the project speak of the majesty and generosity of justice, the cavernous openings in the basement that give light to the underground prison carry a definite threat.

Nineteenth-century examples of this constant overlap between peaceful and more aggressive concerns are almost as easy to find. One must not forget in particular how the Gothic revival was rooted both in a social discourse exalting the liberty of the people and in racial considerations founded on the idea of an eternal struggle between nations and civilizations. Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc is typical of this connection between these two seemingly discrepant themes. Gothic was for him intimately linked to an urban civilization that he interpreted in terms of individual emancipation, and to a racial impulse, with definitely aggressive connotations, that could not be entirely rationalized. Even in his *Reasoned Dictionary* of Medieval architecture there is a dark side of Gothic in profound accordance with the tensions of nineteenth century culture. [12] This conflictual aspect is still traceable in Auguste

Choisy apparently more dispassionate history of architecture. Choisy's diagrams of the diffusion of the Gothic style describe a process very analogous to invasion and military conquest.[13]

That kind of ambiguity was probably lost with the Modern Movement quest for a purity of intention that architecture had never truly possessed in former times. Forgetting the dark side of reason, the modern architects and urbanists tried to construct a world in which conflicts would necessarily disappear at one point or another. Architecture was either to make revolution impossible, if one was to follow Le Corbusier formula, or to achieve it in a way that would put an end to the turmoil of history. This attitude was all the more paradoxical, that modernity had begun with a fascination for military conflict exemplified by the Futurists. More generally, the perspective of war and the galvanization of energies it entailed fascinated many designers in their pursuit of and heroic modernization. Later on, the destructions of the two world conflicts and the numerous situations of *tabula rasa* they generated represented a source of inspiration and a series of concrete opportunities for modern urbanism.

Digging further, modern architecture was even more ambiguous in its desire to create a new human being emancipated from the prejudices and defects of the past. In multiple cases, this desired bordered on eugenics. Le Corbusier himself did not always escape this pitfall in his writings. [14]

But the denegation of these complex relations to war and violence remained quite general. Modern architecture saw itself in the white clothes of the totally innocent. Beyond its fashionable dimension analyzed by Mark Wigley in one of his books, [15] modern architecture initial obsession with the white color might have something to do with this attitude of denegation. Such an attitude was to survive the modernist era despite the post-modernist attempts at the demystification of the architectural agenda. It is by the way striking how the contemporary obsession for sustainable development is totally oblivious of the unavoidable ambiguity of architecture with its ambition to contribute unequivocally to the salvation of mankind and its environment. Just as

there is no architecture totally deprived of any aggressive dimension, there is probably no environment-friendly, no green architecture without some dark recess.

PUBLIC SPACE AND THE MYTH OF PEACEFUL CITIZENSHIP

What I just said about architecture is also true of the way public spaces have been generally considered throughout the twentieth century. If countries like France or the United States, the discourse on public space is usually saturated with images referring to peaceful agoras or refreshingly civilized Italian piazzas, as if these models were unsurpassable landmarks implying harmonious relations between citizens. Even the reconstruction of a city like Beirut has given into this imagery.

A closer historical inquiry reveals a muddier history where public space has always been characterized by violence as much as by more serene exchanges. The agoras and forums of the Ancients were marked by recurring episodes of violence, riots and murders of all kinds. The Italian piazzas and more generally the mediaeval public spaces were places of armed clashes between various factions.[16] Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is in this respect truer than the images forged and circulated by planners and urban designers. In the same perspective Baron Haussmann use of public space as a potential military asset in case of riot or rebellion were by no means exceptional in nineteenth-century metropolises, even if their strategic importance has been often exaggerated by historians. [17]Like architecture, public space is profoundly ambiguous.

In the past, the conflictual nature of public space often translated in terms of incompleteness. A lot of urban squares were for instance never finished, as a result of contradictory forces that were exerted on them. Today, urban places, like the celebrated Djemaa el-Fna square in the city of Marrakech, Morocco, provide a spectacular example of this unfinished character, so different from the well-ordered and pathetically empty public spaces that designers try to implement today.

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There again, it is striking to observe how despite the multiple failures that surrounds us, the myth of the totally peaceful, uneventful public space has not only endured but conquered new territories. From William Mitchell to Stephen Graham, the discourse on electronic public spaces generally reproduces the same basic assumptions, as if a space of encounters could be pacific only. [18]

AFTER SEPTEMBER 11TH

Returning to the present, what kind of lessons can we draw from these historical elements? The essential one is for me the loss of innocence, or rather the rediscovery of the fundamentally ambiguous nature of architecture.

The ambiguity was probably more evident in the pre-industrial age, at times when the ambition to improve substantially the conditions of the people was almost immediately contradicted by the quirks of nature or the vagaries of man. In a world constantly confronted with crises, total and definitive pacification seemed out of reach. With the development of scientific and technological knowledge, our societies have perhaps forgotten that pacification is at the very most a progress, never a definitive state. Twentieth-century architecture and urbanism have often followed this path, behaving as if instability and disorder, threat and violence were problems that could find a definitive solution through good design.

Today, designers should perhaps assume the loss of innocence of their practice rather than sticking to the modern faith in the good-natured character of architecture and urbanism. The risk is otherwise to appear as utterly provocative. Indeed, the most provocative aspect of modernity was perhaps its aspiration to be universal without coming to terms with the violence implied by this universalism. A caricature of this attitude can be observed today with the multiplication of friendly-looking offices and condominiums that are in reality inseparable from the rise of social anxiety and function under video surveillance. There something almost insulting, in that kind of denial of the true context in which these realizations take place.

What I am advocating here is certainly not the invention of a new kind of panoptic design clearly establishing itself as a mean of coercion. In-between the denial of the violence at work in the world and the total submission to it there is probably a way to be found. This way is probably critical. Even if architecture can no longer pretend to save the world or even to heal it, it can express some its fundamental tensions, making these tensions decipherable by the public.

For architects, being critical today has certainly not the same content in the heyday of Marxist theory, when one was supposed to denounce an existing political and economical domination in the perspective of a radical change. The reason is that we can no longer believe that a new golden age is awaiting us. Actually, we seem to be immerged in an everlasting present, deprived of any clear historical perspective, hence the "end of history" famously advocated by Francis Fukuyama a few years ago[19].

For architecture and urban design, a new pitfall is perhaps the temptation to transform the violence and the threats of our time into universals, like these politicians and scholars who present the so-called "war against terrorism" as a new crusade opposing the West and the Islamic civilization. We live for sure in an age of globalization, but this situation does not imply that violence and threat are necessarily global. Actually, they are often local, even if their consequences can be widespread.

This perspective could perhaps lead a possible substitute to the critical regionalism in which Kenneth Frampton used to see the redemption of the modern legacy[20]. Instead of expressing local permanence in tension with the allegedly universal values of modernism, what is perhaps at stake now is to be able to convey some sense of the local instability that pervade any attempt at permanence.

Beyond its numerous digital implications, I would interpret in this light the success of themes like the interface in today architecture. For the interface is never peaceful. It has more to do with conflict that with anything else. As an interface, architecture is perhaps no longer looking for plenitude. Its task is perhaps to make zones of potential or actual conflict more visible.

In the aftermath of September 11th, we are finally reminded that the power of architecture is not only to contribute to the built environment. Shortly after World War II, confronted with the destruction of entire cities, Europeans began to realize that architecture could be also meaningful because of its complete disappearance. Reprint of ancient postcards of Berlin and other major German cities multiplied, showing was existed before the war. Monuments were no longer tributes to permanence but to the necessarily ephemeral nature of human realizations. The collapse of the World Trade Center and the painful feeling of absence it has generated point in the same direction. Today architectural meaning might very well be displaced, lying now in the discordance between a desire of presence and permanence and the realization that presence and permanence are to large extent illusory.

In-between presence and absence, built and destroyed, a vast field is perhaps unfolding under or eyes. The domain of the incomplete or the unfinished that is neither a foundation nor a work in progress, neither a ruin nor a trace, is lying before us. We might very well then rediscover the relevance of some of the theoretical positions held by the Italian Radicals in the early 1970s, like their denunciation of the compulsion of architecture to appear as an achievement, a compulsion admirably conveyed by projects like the Continuous Monument. [21] Architectural design, when it is looking for the perfection and finish might very well give birth to the ultimate prison or the unavoidable trap. This represents perhaps its ultimate violence. The time has perhaps come to give to engage truly the possibility of architecture as an open process.

[1] Paul Valéry, *La Crise de l'Esprit*, Paris, 1919, republication in P. Valéry, *Oeuvres*, t. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 988-1014, p. 988 in particular.

[2] Confer Jean Yves Andrieux, Frédéric Seitz, *Le World Trade Center: Une Cible Monumentale* (Paris: Belin, Hersher, 2002).

[3] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "Manifeste du Futurisme, in *Le Figaro*, 20 February 1909, translation on the web: http://www.unknown.nu/futurism/manifesto.html

[4] The alternative is already present in *Towards a New Architecture*. The final chapter is indeed headed "Architecture or Revolution".

[5] See Anthony Blunt, *Philibert de l'Orme* (London: Zwemmer, 1958), Antoine Picon, *Claude Perrault 1613-1688, ou la Curiosité d'un Classique* (Paris, Picard, 1988).

[6] Quoted by Michael Petzet in "Claude Perrault als Architekt des Pariser Observatoriums", in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* , XXX, 1967, n° 1, pp. 1-54.

[7] See Chandra Mukerji, *Territorial Ambitions and the Gardens of Versailles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[8] Confer Jean-Marie Pérouse de Montclos, *Etienne-Louis Boullée* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994).

[9] Montalembert's fortification techniques are well described by Janis Langins, *Conserving the Enlightenment: French Military Engineering from Vauban to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2004. On the relations between Montalembert's formal vocabulary and Boullée's compositions, see Philippe Prost, *Les Forteresses de l'Empire: Fortifications, Villes de Guerre et Arsenaux Napoléoniens* (Paris: Le Moniteur, 1991).

[10] See Marie Bels, *Sur les Traces de Ledoux* (Marseilles: Parenthèses, 2004).

[11] M. Sevestre, project for a court house, 1782, Library of the Ecole Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées, MS 105.

[12] See Martin Bressani, *Science, histoire et archéologie. Sources et généalogie de la pensée organiciste de Viollet-le-Duc*, doctoral dissertation defended on 27 March 1997 at the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne.

[13] Auguste Choisy, *Histoire de l'Architecture* (Paris, 1899, reprint Paris: SERG, 1976). On this aspect of Choisy's theory, see Thierry Mandoul, *L'*Histoire de l'Architecture *d'Auguste Choisy: Entre Raison et Utopie*, doctoral dissertation defended on 11 May 2004 at the University of Paris VIII.

[14] This eugenics dimensions of modernity is currently under investigation by the French historian of art and architecture Laurent Baridon. It is one of the themes of his forthcoming book *Le Mythe de Dinocrate. L'Architecte, le Corps et l'Utopie.*

[15] Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, Masschusetts: MIT Press, 1995).

[16] This aspect is well conveyed by the French historian of mediaeval culture Jacques Heers in *La Ville au Moyen Age en Occident: Paysages, Pouvoirs et Conflits* (Paris: Fayard, 1990).

[17] The classic interpretation of the military importance of the boulevards was first given by David H. Pinkney, *Napoleon III and the rebuilding of Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958). For a more nuanced assessment of their role, see Antoine Picon (editor), *La Ville et la Guerre* (Besançon: Editions de l'Imprimeur, 1997).

[18] See for instance William J. Mitchell, *E-Topia: "Urban Life, Jim – But not as we Know it"* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1999), Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Telecommunications and the City: Electronic Spaces, Urban Places* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

[19] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

[20] Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", in Hal Foster (editor), *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983).

[21] See Peter Lang, William Menking, Superstudio: Life without Objects (Turin: Skira, 2003), Dominique Rouillard, *Superarchitecture: Le Futur de l'Architecture 1950-1970* (Paris: Editions de la Villette, 2004).