

pressure
from below
must
therefore
also confront
the state in
its role as
organiser of
space

to our readers...

We have witnessed a political agenda marked by consensus rather than conflict—a democracy more recognizable in stalemated than in action. Political subjectivity and difference has been stifled and ‘politics,’ a set of practices and power relations that organize social order, has been relegated to the realm of mere management and administration. However, after the seemingly unchallenged triumph of neoliberalism, we find ourselves in the midst of global unrest and disillusionment. From Ferguson to Hong Kong, diffused systems of power and control that underpin the everyday have become glaringly obvious.

We prioritize “the political” over “politics.” For us ‘the political’ (*le politique*) is inherently conflictual. It is the space where power is challenged and reordered. In this third volume of *+*, we explore how architecture stands as a series of actions—how architecture itself acts politically. Architectural practice is a medium of dissent with the potential to occupy, resist, reject, topple, subvert, and criticize current hegemonic systems and ideologies. An alternative cannot exist without an existing, opposing term, position, and possibility. As architects, we propose new forms and images, but

also think about the tactics to achieve those ends. This volume is concerned with strategies that promote friction and provide space for the political.

Lessons from the 60’s and 70’s have taught us that the everyday is a potential site of resistance. Even the most perfunctory of spaces can be recast and scrutinized under the lens of capital, gender, and race. We have seen Chantal Mouffe’s notion of agonism—the adversarial relation between antagonistic parties where a “conflictual census” is reached—enter architectural discourse. Yet, its discussion remains at a theoretical level aiming to envisage a new form of democracy. We ask, is there another mode of operation for the architect that is projective and generative? How can architecture reform, push back against, or operate politically in reaction to systemic notions of power? Over the course of the semester we will release particular viewpoints juxtaposed with a quote in order to collect a diverse range of opinions regarding the political relevance of architecture.

the political

bernard tschumi

around the mountain or through the mountain

Bernard Tschumi in conversation with C and W. Recorded December 2nd, 2014.

C: A recurrent reference for many contemporary political thinkers are the May 1968 student protests in France. These actions seemed to spark various disciplines to re-question the state of society and the direction it was taking. Can you describe how these events perhaps liberated a new way of thinking about architecture differently?

BT: The “events,” as they were called at the time, generated a renewed questioning of the relationship between politics and urban space. It also provided hints at the fact that we were not in the 1920s anymore, just as today we are not in the late 60s.

The main question was: whether there is a link between cities as we know them and the socio-economic structure that created them. The sociologist-philosopher Henri Lefebvre wrote that the city, or any landscape we see around us, is a projection of society on the ground. He gives the example of the Tuscan landscape around Florence and says: You think that it is nature, with its rolling hills and cypress trees. Not at all—it is the direct projection of society and landownership once upon a time.¹ He goes on to explain how the feudal system and the Florentine aristocracy literally structured almost everything you see around you today. This apparent cause-and-effect relationship between politics and urban space raised a series of questions that had already been raised half a century earlier in 1917, after the Russian revolution. The revolutionary hypothesis was that architecture could simultaneously act as a mold and a reflection of the society to come. That is an incredible notion: that you dream of a new society, and by designing and building a new type of urban space and a new type of architecture, you will transform the world into the society you aspire to.

C: And this is a notion you explicitly reject...

BT: I don’t reject it. I love the idea. But it is not so simple.... It is a fairly behaviorist interpretation of architecture. For example, it assumes that living in a loft will make you a different human being than living in a bourgeois apartment. Or, that pedestrian streets and piazzas will generate more democracy than tower blocks in the park. The fact that those questions were raised again in ‘68 was extremely important insofar as architecture was not quite as neutral as one might have wished, nor was it quite as powerful as one might claim.

W: From here, you can start to make distinctions between the notions of space and event. How do these two ideas contribute to your answer to the question, “What is architecture?”

BT: Let me start with an example: a house where every room leads to another room versus a house that has a corridor giving access onto every room individually. No need to go on at length about the different social implications of these houses or the relationships of the various people who live in them... In other words, as an architect, depending on how I design things, I may generate conditions and events that are quite different, depending on one design or another. The way that architecture and events interrelate is important for all of us as architects, but I am not implying that there is a direct and measurable cause and effect relationship between spaces and what happens in them.

W: But certain capabilities arise....

BT: Certain capabilities do arise from the architecture, but within a certain domain. An example I always give is a building at the corner of 21st Street and Sixth Avenue in Manhattan: the church that was originally used as a place for worship and then became every possible thing from a furniture storage barn to a nightclub to a gym....

W: This relates a lot to the notion of type: you still refer to it as a “church” even though it hasn’t been one since its first programmatic instance.

BT: It’s good you say that. Is it a church because of its type? Or, in this particular case, because of the thin, two-inch “gothic” veneer they put on the very common masonry that encloses the space? I think it is more in the “decorated shed” category than even in the nature of type.

But you have a point, and we arrive at a really important debate. While some architects or thinkers try to establish a correlation between program and architecture, or between ethics and politics, others say this doesn’t make sense. One ideological group would say horizontal band windows belong to the left, while vertical band windows are on the right. Another ideological group would say, for instance, there is no socialist architecture or fascist architecture: that there is only architecture in a socialist or fascist regime.

C: By relegating the political agency of architecture to a function of the regime in which it was built concludes that architecture is innocent—which is an ideology we take issue with. We would argue that architecture is more deterministic than saying it is just a container in which anything can happen anywhere. Would you say that architectural form has no implicit agency? It is only the context that provides it with its political nature?

BT: Per se, the object is what it is. I asked myself that question a lot at the time of Parc de la Villette, whether those small buildings that I called ‘folies’ were to have any political meaning. I could say that, in terms of the way different public populations would mix, the organization of the park as a whole had a political intention that I could explain, articulate, and strategize. The superimposition of the three autonomous systems of points, lines and surfaces was in a sense political. However, arriving at the scale of the “folie”, the scale of the object, that was something that I felt was quite different. In other words, the “folies”, as an object, had to act like a mirror: people would project their own phantasms on them. In no case were they behaviorist tools that would make you behave or do things in one way or another. Whether the iPhone has smooth edges or sharp edges has absolutely very little to do with its social or political effect. However, the fact that the iPhone exists has an enormous political effect. The same goes with anything you do as an architect: there are certain aspects of your work that are intensely political and others that are absolutely devoid of political influence.

W: Bruno Latour, for instance, argues that objects can act. Actors don’t have to be human. Actors can be tools, things that we use. Imagine a rock and a gun beside each other on a table. Each object creates two completely different circumstances that enable many different possibilities. To use another example, we could look at a tunnel versus a boulevard. These spaces allow and produce different power relationships. Both are about access, evidenced by the etymology of the word ‘boulevard’ from ‘bulwark.’ We are looking for a more nuanced understanding of the material reality of architecture, how it shapes power relationships, and affects the agency of those actors inside it.

BT: Let me go over the gun and the rock analogy first. You can say that the gun has both an effective, performative role: it can kill, and at the same time it has a symbolic role in our society. The rock also suggests certain associations. The way we look at them cannot be entirely neutral: their significance also derives from the context in which you locate them. Similarly, the power of architecture has also to do with the conditions or the circumstances in which it is located.

Hence, the example with Latour needs to be located. There is a third term to the equation, which is ‘where?’ You can take it in a poetic sense or a political sense. The poetic sense is like the famous surrealists statement by Comte de Lautréamont of the chance meeting between the umbrella and the sewing machine on the dissecting

table.² The dissecting table is important. It is the third term. We, as architects, have the power to establish, or fine-tune these relationships, whether it is a sewing machine, an umbrella, or the dissecting table. Fine tuning these strange types of encounters is very much a part of our architectural power.

As to the tunnel and the boulevard, it is quite clear that if I conceive or build a boulevard around the mountain or a tunnel through the mountain I achieve very, very different effects. Therefore, you as an architect, as a planner, make certain decisions that will have an effect on the life and, potentially, the society, but they will not necessarily change the society and its socio-economic system.

W: Your response at Vishaan Chakrabarti’s book release stressed how cities used to have concepts.³ As a political tool, the concept is of utmost importance: it is the thing that enables politics. David Graeber states that “the political is that dimension of social life in which things really do become true if enough people believe them.”⁴ When I think of this alongside your comments, it seems the concept is the architect’s ability to create alternatives that would allow people to reimagine and believe in a new organization of the material world. This could be the beginnings of political agency in architecture.

BT: I would agree, with one small hesitation. In your quote is the word ‘believe.’ A belief is often a sort of half-truth, a sort of cliché, which may not correspond to facts and belongs more to the realm of interpretation.

Back to cities and concepts: it completely changes the nature of an urban experience whether you are in a grid city or a concentric city. This is why you cannot separate space and what happens in it. Similarly, the nature of the concentric city today is very different than what it was in the middle ages, even though the city is identical. It’s always about the correlation. Space is not neutral.

C: At the end of your introduction to *Architecture and Disjunction*, you mention that space and event can be conflated. You suggest the possibility of “new media technology that at once defines and activates space.”⁵ The protests in Tahrir Square may serve as one such conflation, both space and event.

W: There was a more complicated relationship between the space and what was happening. The event was facilitated in the virtual sphere on Facebook. You can’t dissociate what happened on Facebook from what happened in real space, nor the other way around. This complicated the relationship between the virtual media and the physical square itself. But, this is not a new problem it is the way media mediates between our interactions with spaces.

C: It may not be entirely new, but I would say it is significantly different than space and event before because of the simultaneity of it. People’s ability to partake in an event while not being in the same space as the other people is quite revolutionary.

BT: What you both just described are exactly the new conditions that we are in today. The example that you gave is an important example, but there are a lot of others that are less dramatic, simply from everyday life. We use the city very differently now that we have access to the internet. It is quite fascinating and no one to my knowledge has yet developed serious hypotheses or tried to demonstrate that we need different urban concepts or urban designs in order to deal with this new relationship between the real and the virtual. This is an incredible void of investigation that needs to be filled. Especially at a time when new cities are built at such a pace that seventy percent of the world population will soon live in cities that are currently built without a concept, without an idea.

C: In her essay, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces,” political theorist Chantal Mouffe states: “according to the agonistic approach critical art is that which foments dissent, art that makes visible that which the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate.”⁶ This first sentence sounds extremely similar to your own concepts of “exemplary action” and “counter-design” that reveal or demystify the contemporary political climate. The following sentence goes on to state that critical art “is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aimed at giving a voice to all those that are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony.” With “exemplary action” and “counter-design,” the political goal is to erode or question the status quo, which allows for the space for new ideas. Those spaces, however, could easily be filled with a new form of the existing hegemony. Mouffe, on the other hand, specifically identifies and privileges a minority or anti-consensus idea to fill the space.

BT: Chantal Mouffe’s work is interesting when you place it in architectural terms. For example, she will say that the political cannot be dissociated from a conflicted dimension, that certain antagonisms can never be reconciled; therefore adversaries will have to admit the legitimacy of their respective demands, even if they never will find a common ground. Similarly, in architecture, you are often confronted with the irreconcilable differences between say, the logic of short term capital investment verses that of long term social use. These differences rarely find a resolution. Or, on a more mundane level, between sustainability and ubiquitous glazed transparency. Or, more politically, between public space and private space. The difficulty of reconciliation at the societal level means that architects actually have a lot of power to intervene in these relations by subtly managing such irreconcilable differences. Architecture does not change society, but by intelligently operating from within, it can transform everyday life.

1. Henri Lefebvre. *Writings on Cities*. Trans. and ed. by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas. Blackwell Publishers. 1996. p.109.

2. Comte de Lautréamont. *Les Chants de Maldoror*. 1869.

3. “Pharmacist: A Country of Cities: A Manifesto for Urban America.” Lecture and responses: Vishaan Chakrabarti, Kenneth Frampton, Laurie Hawkinson, Bernard Tschumi, Reinhold Martin, Gwendolyn Wright. Sept. 16, 2013. www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBC_Pa1a6bc

4. David Graeber. *Debt: The First 5000 Years*. Melville House. 2012.

5. Bernard Tschumi. *Architecture and Disjunction*. 3rd Ed. MIT Press. 1997. p.16

6. Chantal Mouffe. “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces.” *Art and Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts, and Methods*. Vol. 1, No. 2. Summer, 2007. www.artandresearch.org.uk