TOWARDS A POLITICAL URBANISM

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Mankind tends to create shapes. We chase the perfection of different kinds of shapes: physical and material ones, as well as cultural, intellectual or virtual ones. Nations, religions or art are all examples of this need to live under the pressure of a deeply-rooted belief. Neither architecture nor urbanism can escape the power of reason; they are also influenced by ideological principles. Cities are built in a material way, but also according to emotional, symbolic or metaphorical ideas. History has seen how city plans and projects have been designed under totalitarian ideologies that intended to build urban space as their direct consequence. Ideal cities have been imagined based on intellectual constructions, pure and abstract ideas of what the perfect city should be. However, perfection will never be reached. As Witold Gombrowicz advised, many times these pure, intellectual forms have provoked the dehumanization of human life.

After the last century's ideological crisis, the dominant trend at present claims to overcome the struggles between antagonistic political stances in what has been called the post-political era. Nevertheless, in reality this supposed lack of theory has exerted a global hegemonic influence, more universal than ever. The hegemony of neoliberalism has filled in the emptiness of the political discourse; individualism and the idea of universal consensus have substituted the polarized world. In Žižek words, "what has happened in the latest stage of post-1968 'postmodern' capitalism is that economy itself (the logic of the market and competition) has been elevated to the rank of the hegemonic ideology."[1]

How have neoliberalism and global capitalism impacted contemporary cities? Why has urbanism become powerless before the leadership of the market, allowing itself to be seduced by the phenomena of iconography? Both economic and political power have been crucial in the configuration of new urban developments based on free-market logic, at the same time that metropolises worldwide have experienced an uncontrollable growth and have extended their boundaries beyond any attempts at planning. This situation has been accepted with resignation to the point of declaring the death of urbanism.[2] However, if we still aim to take part collectively in performing contemporary urban culture, we cannot renounce urbanism as an inevitable failure; rather we must redefine its broader context as well as its ultimate goals.

To understand the present situation we should look at the dynamics that have driven urban policies and urban transformations in recent decades, in which the "remaking of urban built environments –infrastructural or residential, recreational or environmental redevelopment", as well as processes of urbanization and investments in the real-estate market, "have all come to play a more central role in the global economy"[3]

As Neil Smith has shown, important urban operations have been defined by the movement of capital, in many cases affecting both their image and configuration:

"The crash this time round exposed the unprecedented extent to which city building has become integrated into the sphere of financial capital, and vice versa. None of these developments is entirely new of course: industrial zones predated 1970s and property capital has always been linked to finance capital. What is new today is the intensification and consequent density of these connections and their coming together in a larger project of city building"[4].

In the context of the global economy, cities have also become global and transactions have taken the place of politics; or rather transactions have come to determine politics. "As nations become more firmly tied to one another by trade and investment flows, they increasingly manage those flows through their key international center."[5] In the past decade Europe and Asia have seen their cities rise in the worldwide ranking of global operations and this has had repercussions on the urban landscape. Architecture, which is naturally subject to the structures of power and is always comfortable in the shadow of a dominant ideology, has followed orders in carrying out the task of representation. It has built the physical setting for and provided the image of the intangible, transforming it into urban reality. Global Neoliberalism has impacted contemporary urban scenarios, transforming them into a sort of competition based on the production of marketable symbolism. Uniqueness and originality are the qualities that have made contemporary architecture so special and so tradable. As David Harvey points out, "the struggle to accumulate marks of distinction and collective symbolic capital in a highly competitive world is on. But this entrains in its wake all of the localized questions about whose collective memory, whose aesthetic, and who benefits."[6] A new hegemonic shape has been set out and has been modeling new urban identities by creating banal and self-referent architecture.

This kind of architecture has sought out its own self-affirmation over and above its relationship with others. Its visual impact has become a priority more important than the experience of its use or how it adapts to its programs. Program, not aesthetics, is the determining force in how architecture and the city are experienced. Structural and typological work has been replaced by the most superficial of formalities. All decisions have become subordinate to the attainment of a
powerful, unique image: all response to urban context has been reduced to something schematic, mimetic, or simplistic.

In this logic of particularities and non-replicable values, transient identities emerge and drop in the global cities top list like values on a stock exchange. What matters is not the production of urban content but to be the first and the only one. But that status doesn't last forever: in a few years the tallest building in the world –built or not, in this case it doesn't matter that much- moved from Taipei to Dubai to Kuwait to Jeddah in a nonsense race to reach the top step of the podium. The great contradiction of the global cities' league is that the more unique architecture is being built, the less original it becomes. The ubiquity of iconic architecture has turned distinction into generic. Brand architects and engineering corporations have been spreading their rhetorical singularity

worldwide, but what is being replicated in many cases is nothing more than simple images: banal aesthetic premises characterized by a complete lack of urban or cultural content; autistic and meaningless buildings—pure and simple formality bowing down before the almighty image. They are a representation of what architecture could be, but have forgotten its primary condition and also its potential. Sail-shaped buildings and turning towers are breeding all over both Europe and Asia. The metaphorical repertoire seems to have no end: dunes, mountains and peaks, as well as palms, cucumbers and octopuses are the inspiration of the new geniuses. The same tower can be found in Barcelona and Doha: it is enough to replace its skin and adapt it to each local culture by using folkloric decorative elements. The image, the icon, the gesture—what can easily gather symbolic capital—prevails over anything else. Architecture is afflicted by self-adoration. Arata Isozaki exemplified it quite clearly when talking about how the Qatar National Library was conceived.

"The Emir looked in my book and pointed at a project. 'I like it. I want something like this'. […] I said, 'No, no, this is my student-time project.' The Emir said, 'it doesn't matter'.
It became the National Library. I didn't mind developing an idea for a seemingly mismatching condition."[7]

Many examples can be found in emerging Middle East cities where impudent designs are taking on the image of far existing identities to imitate their supposed success. Cities like Dubai "are rising as platforms for investment in their regions and often boast stronger legal systems, as well as more stable regimes and better overall business and living conditions, than powerful megacities in Latin America, India and China."[8] What is the ideology behind Abu Dhabi or Dubai? Even when it seems that there isn't any, aren't they looking for the aesthetics of exclusivity? Money and power have to be flaunted, and that requires the configuration of fake western models. The new developments on the outskirts of Doha are close to becoming the empire of fiction, where representations out of the capitalist urban imaginary are being reproduced without any critical edge. The urbanity of the old town has been lost between condominiums, suburban villas and international resorts. Urban space no longer exists. What remains in between gated communities and walled villas is the absolute emptiness of the desert. The downtown is nothing more than an accumulation of towers creating a beautiful picture, but nothing relates this absence with the collective use of both public and private space in Manhattan. Just like in the suburban American model, the gathering place is the temple of consumerism: Villaggio--a mall where the most exclusive fashion brands are combined with a Venetian canal, an ice rink and a funfair,--is the cathedral as well as the most successful leisure center. Malls, skyscrapers and isolated compounds based on a car-dependent lifestyle are the new communities being built in Doha.
This is the profound contradiction of a society that wants to build the city of the future without a past, and where the present is not taken into account. The urban experience is reduced to a train journey in which you can see the landscape through the window and stop in different realities that have no physical connection to one another. You can visit a hypermarket, a museum surrounded by the sea, an exclusive private beach, a luxurious hotel. You can get off at the office, at home, at a friend's...but any territorial depth has been erased, any friction with the exterior is avoided.

Whereas proposals like those made by the Smithsons in the 1960s worked with the ideas of structure, identity, community and the "scale (of complexity) of association,"[9] in the post-political city this hierarchy has been reduced to zero. There are only two levels of depth: inside and outside. But the thematization of the city and the decrease of the scales of association do not only occur in leisure spaces. Residential complexes are also being laid out, more and more often, according to thematic representations and that is precisely where their value lies; it is how they are portrayed and how they are marketed. Developers' criteria come before design criteria; the principle is marketing the city.

As explained by the director of The Pearl in Qatar, a residential project made up of 10 thematic districts, publicity serves as a means toward garnering prestige for the architecture:

"Initially we were treated with skepticism, people did not know much about the country. But the uniqueness of the concept, the massive campaigns to promote the project globally through commercials, advertisements, billboards, exhibitions, road shows etc. helped garner interest. Luxury outlets were initially skeptical of coming to the region, not just Qatar. We were selling based on plans. But now you can see all the brands that are here at the Pearl."[10]

The fact that political and economic agents use marketing strategies in order to promote cities as brands is nothing new, but when large-scale capital investment operations are involved, there is no doubt that the question at hand is making a profit. Architecture as an instrument for social change disappears, in this case, and it is turned into just one more tool of business harnessed in the interest of capital. It becomes nothing more than a part of the marketing strategy, as is evident from this presentation of the complex:

"The ingenious design of Porto Arabia re-creates the glamorous character of the French Riviera. With its striking Islamic features - elegant horseshoe arches, filigreed walls and Islamic artwork, Porto Arabia offers one of the most comfortable living experiences in the Middle East
all inspired by traditional Mediterranean architecture, with a subtle taste of French, Spanish and Italian architectural influence. Here, the ambiance is similar to that found in the South of France, where the essence of Old World grace and craftsmanship have been marvelously melded with all the advantages of what modern living offers."[11]

We find the same type of rhetoric in the descriptions of The World project in Dubai:
"There is nothing after The World. Not everybody wants to buy a lot of land, but everybody dreams of buying an island. That's what we're doing here.
[…] the rest of the products, even as they get denser, will be incredibly luxurious. What's exciting about this is, once you live out there, you've got all of these islands, and each of them has something to offer. One night you can get on a boat to go to a restaurant, the next time you go to see a movie. Everything you do regularly you can do it here in an exclusive way, by boat, as a community."[12]

What is referenced here is not a social community, but an exclusive community: a small minority with access to privileged resources who live segregated inside an ideal world. In

the context of the reductionism that the privatization of the city and the negation of conflict impose on urban experience, gated communities emerge as the ultimate level of the construction of an urban simulacrum. In between the walls of these residential and business condominiums, an idealized life seems to be possible to the point that they can be commercialized as a Real Estate brand. Of course this is not a local phenomenon, but increasingly spread worldwide. Alphaville developments commercials in Brazil are a paradigmatic example in advertising: "Alphaville is a world of quality, of safety, of trust, of certainties. Alphaville is a world of happiness. A world made of dreams."[13] What started as a response to violent situations in Sao Paulo in order to provide security for those who could afford to live in private towns, is now being reproduced in terms of exclusivity and luxury in many other places, even in countries with a very low crime rate like in the Middle East. The image of a perfectly reconciled society is sold with no concern for what remains shut out. Conflict is kept outside the system. "The them/us discrimination that any construction of a collective identity entails"[14] is physically translated into the urban environment by defining the boundaries of what a community is where its limits lie. Fences and gates are recurrent architectural elements used in the construction of the new urban built environment.

In this context, politics or, more precisely, the political has been officially excluded from both the theory and praxis of the urban Establishment. The political as a confrontation of different or even antagonistic ideas has been replaced by the fiction of a rationalistic agreement. As Chantal Mouffe argued, this post-political idea of a global consensus is opposed to democratic objectives and reveals a "complete lack of understanding of what is at stake in democratic politics and of the dynamics of constitution of political identities."[15] In the same way, conceptually pure shapes in architecture are pretending to build a city beyond antagonism. Whereas, what democracy urgently needs in order to consolidate and extend its principles is a healthy confrontation that can grasp the contradictions inherent in any society.

This evasion of the political not only implies an impoverishment of cohabitation in the city, it is also fraught with the dangers of exclusion. How can we create a space in which pluralist democracy is possible? How can we integrate the creation of political and social collective identities into urban realities? At a time when all kinds of mediation are being questioned, social participation and democratic confrontation should be a preliminary stage in design. Political discourse should be brought back into the center of the discussion on urbanity. In order to avoid spaces of privilege and to promote a democratic urbanism based on equality and principles of individual autonomy, democratic politics should create the conditions for conflict to find its expression in agonistic terms. Because to deny the dimension of the inevitable antagonism that exists in every society, "does not make it disappear, it only leads to impotence in recognizing its different manifestations and in dealing with them. This is why a democratic approach needs to come to terms with the ineradicable character of antagonism. One of its main tasks is to envisage how it is possible to defuse the tendencies to exclusion, which are present in all construction of collective identities."[16]

Man should understand that imperfection is his nature, as well as that of his creations. And that cities and democracy share a fundamental condition: both are evolving structures in a never-ending process to explore how social communities and collective identities can be articulated. A political urbanism should work with the pluralistic dimension of every society, it should understand that difference is a value and forget about universal models. Difference should be celebrated as the basis upon which every reality is built, as well as uniformity should no longer be a democratic policy or an urban tool. An urbanism committed to the objectives of a radical democracy should prefer diversity to homogeneity, promiscuity to repetition, accessibility to exclusivity; it should be based on a variety of architectures, like society is based on a diversity of individuals. Because the political has no size or scale, no image or form, it is only related to the way in which the complexity of reality is articulated.

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