

Reciprocity in Political Architecture

catalysing perpetual interaction and prolonged articulation

political premise

Articulation and interaction of one body towards an other creates a political moment. A political movement is created by perpetual interaction and prolonged articulation of bodies in alliance. As architects we have the responsibility to provide our cities and its citizens with space that fosters perpetual interaction and prolonged articulation of bodies in alliance.

With this premise, the project is unlocking and reclaiming one of the last sections of generous green space in London, the Artillery Ground. At the moment this well-kept lawn is owned by the Queen and maintained by the Honourable Artillery Company. It is occasionally rented out for exclusive private events, but not accessible to the public. By installing three new gates in place of the existing entrances, the ample field is opened to the public. Three relatively small interventions activate and transform the vast space into an Articulating Ground, without occupying the field itself. As a place of increased negotiation, and perpetual interaction of human bodies, and bodies and space, the articulation of dissensus is prolonged, fostering political moments and movements within the fabric of the city.

gates as symbolic tools for exercising power

Gates were chosen for their inherent function of literally unlocking space. Originally, “[t]he city gate or portal took its name from the plow that was carried (*portare*). The gate threshold arises from the interruption of the line distinguishing inside and outside: the gate is the exception of a distinction. The gate gives access to the space beyond the threshold; it frames the unbordered field.”¹ In the 15th century, Moorgate provided something similar. It was built close to the site to give people access to the recreational Moore Fields, which were one of the last sections of open land in the city.

Gates are loaded with ambivalent connotations. They are opening borders, yet still part of them. Bernhard Siegert emphasizes the double-sidedness of the gate. It negotiates “[...the distinction] between the political (the space of the polis) and the extrapolitical (the wilderness outside the city gates), the space of law and that of lawlessness, or safe and dangerous places.”² Thus, gates become mechanisms of control and tools for exercising power.

Moreover, gates were often elaborately decorated with symbols and inscriptions explaining the gate’s purpose. For example, the Ishtar Gate³ in Babylon was constructed using cedar wood and blue glazed brick depicting dragons, aurochs and lions, symbolizing the gods and goddesses of the Babylonian Empire. An inscription honoured the king and Marduk, the patron deity of the city. Through the gate ran the walled Processional Way, which was used for a New Year’s procession.

permanently inducing ephemerality

Gates and the passage through them cannot be thought separately. Here, the permanent and the ephemeral are coming together. This connection becomes particularly apparent in triumphal arches, where the theatricality of gates is used, but the protective mechanism is not needed. “[Every] arch resembles a city gate, yet is placed at the very heart of the city’s urban fabric, not at its walls. The arch presupposes, implies, and imposes passage through its central portal, but with its elaborate decorative scheme suggests that each passage beneath it, surrounded by its imagery, has a distinctly ceremonial or ritual character.”⁴ Defining a space for movement of people, triumphal arches denoted significant sites.

In the Renaissance, temporary triumphal arches emerged. They were erected for special occasions, often in a sequence through which processions were staged. Each arch conveyed a particular message, depicting figures, medallions, and other symbols in the structure.

During these triumphal processions, temporary arches were erected next to masonry gates, and ancient marble arches, which were newly decorated for the occasion. For these celebrations ephemeral and eternal structures were of equal importance. According to Salvatore Settis, “it was this momentary event – the ceremonial entry of a sovereign [...] – that “revived” the eternity of the ancient monuments, restoring to the arches and ruins their function as ceremonial backdrops for a neo-triumphal procession.”⁵ However, after the event, temporary triumphal arches, often made out of lath and plaster, were torn down. What remained was their detailed engravings and records of memories. Masonry and marble structures on the other hand became monuments, and reminders through history, they continued to carry their symbolic message.

A similar operating principle between temporary and permanent structures is the relationship between stage sets and theatre buildings. The theatre building houses periodically changing stage sets. However, during a performance the building and the set are of equal importance.

1 Siegert, Bernhard. *Doors: On the Materiality of the Symbolic* (2012)

2 Ibid.

3 See Bahrani, Zainab. *Mesopotamia: Ancient Art and Architecture* (2017) p. 278-285.

4 Settis, Salvatore. *Drawing, Memory, and the City: William Kentridge's Rome*. In: *William Kentridge: Triumph and Laments* (2016) p. 166.

5 Ibid. p. 170.

Inspired by a stage set that envisioned the demolition of the old, traditional theatre, Lina Bo Bardi restored Teatro Oficina⁶, “a street called Theater”. The project transformed a temporary set into a permanent structure. Furthermore, it granted the theatre company the right to stay after having occupied the building for twenty years. A “street” or passageway is running through the long, narrow building. It was designed to expand into the urban area: into a public square. Along the walls a blue painted metal structure is constructed, that can be partially disassembled. It forms a series of galleries, floors and platforms which could become stages at any time. Lina Bo Bardi turned the architecture itself as well as the public, technicians, plants and objects into actors.

reciprocal affordance

The representative notion of gates and triumphal arches could be tackled in a comparable manner. By turning the gate into a space in itself, that can be negotiated, changed and inhabited, the symbol becomes an affordance. According to James Gibson “[an] affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychological, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer.”⁷ The gate, conceived as an affordance, is still a tool for exercising power: it is not imposing a fixed hierarchy, but it is rather empowering the people to perpetually negotiate existing relations. In doing so, the relation between the gates and the ample field is influenced as well. The gates catalyse activity on the field, and the field gives importance to the gates. This interdependency is a dynamic process, in which the activities of human beings are vital.

It is this reciprocity between human bodies and their material environment that constitutes every political space. This is stressed by Judith Butler, she argues that “[...] bodies in their plurality [...] find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments; at the same time, those material environments are part of the action, and they themselves act when they become the support for action.”⁸ Considering this power of a plurality of bodies, as well as the material support of their action, the architecture of political space has to be conceived as a reciprocal process.

dissensus and negotiations

Reciprocal processes will create places of increased negotiation, where individuals step into dialogue with an other to interact and discuss, where people come together in public. As Jacques Rancière claims: “The essential work of politics is the configuration of its own space. It is to make the world of its subjects and its operations seen. The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus as the presence of two worlds in one.”⁹ This dissensus does not mean confrontation between personal interests or opinions, but a manifestation, or demonstration that makes visible what has not been seen before, that which was previously denied or suppressed and puts it on the same level as the already accepted. These are necessary as they allow for conflict, movement and change.

Marcel Hénaff and Tracy B. Strong ask: “How can one be heard locally? Who controls the words that one hears? How may a space of and for discussion be constituted?”¹⁰ These are questions that have to be asked in every architectural and artistic project, and they will always be answered differently, but this never-ending debate is what drives the evolution of thinking. Variations, intonations, extrapolations, deviations, improvisations, they all become part of this development, they do not just repeat, but tweak the existing, They are essentially expressions of political dissensus, and “contribute to liberating political possibilities by undoing the formatting of reality produced by statecontrolled media, by undoing the relations between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable.”¹¹ as Jacques Rancière claims.

6 See De Oliveira, Olívia. Lina Bo Bardi: obra construída (2002) p.184-193.

7 Gibson, James. The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception (1979) p. 129.

8 Butler, Judith. Bodies in Alliances and the Politics of the Streets (2011)

9 Rancière, Jacques. Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics (2015) p. 37.

10 Hénaff, Marcel and Strong, Tracy B. (Ed.). Public Space and Democracy (2001) p. 39.

11 Rancière, Jacques. Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible (2013) p. 65.

The first assemblies, those places, where the hardly visible was shown, the unarticulated was expressed, were ephemeral happenings, performative acts as Marcel Hénaff and Tracy B. Strong argue. “[T]he place of assembly is brought into existence by calling for it, it is created by the action of human beings. It is a kind of space that human beings make for and by themselves.”¹² These spontaneous gatherings are diminishing rapidly, due to the current increase in surveillance and control in cities. Assemblies cannot be called out spontaneously any more, as demonstrations, even small protests need to be announced and registered days in advance. What is worse, especially in London, due to privatization of land use rights, assemblies, or even longer stays, are simply prohibited on many streets and squares.¹³ This is a dangerous development, that we need to slow down, and turn around, in order to maintain a dissenting public, where not only one opinion is accepted, and a deviating one is hushed. My claim is that architecture and performative practices make significant contributions to the debate on dissensus.

performative practice

Essentially, performative practices are political acts. Based on human interaction, they are making the body political. Without the necessity of speech, we negotiate in perpetual articulation. Performativity only becomes perceivable through difference, through a change in direction, tempo or volume. Inevitably this creates dissent: unquiet movements that playfully explore the potentials of relations. From the first approach, to a contact, to a shared activity – one learns from and with the other. By mirroring another person’s behaviour we change our perception, we learn about ourselves and we create a space in between the two of us. From myself to the other through myself.

This approach between two individuals was the starting point for the radical performance *Ravemachine* by Doris Ulich and Michael Turinsky¹⁴. An “abled” body learns from and with a “disabled” body. Additionally, they make use of a tool: the ravemachine – Turinsky’s electric wheelchair. Together they use it to energize each other, liberating themselves from their normal perception and personal behaviour by stepping into a dialogue with an “other”. The tool becomes an affordance, that they use to reconfigure established relationships and to challenge existing activities.

This affords instability, which is necessary for movement. Its reciprocal influence is demanded by Hannah Arendt: “The character of the public realm must change in accordance with the activities admitted into it, but to a large extent the activity itself changes its own nature too.”¹⁵ Constantly reconfiguring itself, it is a space where multiple rhythms can coexist, where togetherness in difference develops a forceful strength, an architecture that can affect the nature of human activities.

articulating interaction

The Articulating Ground and its gates make dissensus visible. In a perpetual, cumulative construction process, the architecture is not imposed on its users, and does not repeat the farce of participation in the planning process. Instead, the construction site is opened which allows for an architecture that can be adjusted over time by perpetual interaction.

Over the last centuries, most gates have run through many transformations, being converted and adapted to new needs. Originally, Moorgate was a postern or narrow passage in the London wall. It was broken, and extended to a gate to make it suitable for heavy traffic. Later, the entrances were made higher to enable the army marching through with pikes held high. Despite the fact, that its symbolic function did not change, we see a periodic adaptation. Today, after it was torn down in the 18th century, the area around the site is still called Moorgate, showing the importance this structure once had.

12 Hénaff, Marcel and Strong, Tracy B. (Ed.). *Public Space and Democracy* (2001) p. 2.

13 A thorough analysis by Guardian Cities and Greenspace Information for Greater London CIC (GiGL) has revealed all privately-owned public spaces (POPS) in London in a mapping. See <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/jul/24/revealed-pseudo-public-space-pops-london-investigation-map> (accessed 31.12.2018)

14 Some information on the project: <https://www.dorisulich.at/en/projects/30-ravemachine> (accessed 3.1.2019)

15 Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition* (1958) p. 46.

The gates of the Articulating Ground will extend those periods of conversion. They will be developed in small conscious steps, not bound to being finished as soon as possible, but the contrary: short, intense periods of production, and breaks in between to let it thrive, to let it breathe. The interplay between contraction and dilation, creates a rhythm. By dilating the construction period, infinitely extending it in fact, these rhythms become visible, tangible, and most importantly changeable, as they will never be hidden behind construction fences, suspended ceilings or polished facades. Always unfinished and transforming, the gates themselves become contractions, the ample field becomes a dilation, together they create a place of actual negotiation, of interaction between bodies, and bodies and space. Every person will leave marks and traces, which lets the gates, as well as the Articulating Ground as a whole, grow. In this way, bodies in their plurality become the creators of the field and the triumphal arches, of a vibrant monument.

concrete utopia

Today, the city is not enclosed by a clear ring of walls any more, borders are rather interfusing the city. Therefore, mechanisms of power distinction take different forms, and we need different tools to point them out and dismantle them.

According to Henri Lefebvre, the conception of a new space can only be based on an architectural project. "Concrete utopia has its departure in spatial practice, in the effective appropriation of dominant space, an opportunity for a space of representation to take shape: that of pleasant habitations associated with definite but still multifunctional structures."¹⁶ Concrete utopia begins with enjoyment and the pursuit to change architecture. Therefore, we must change the mode of its production. As architects, we have the tools and the responsibility to do so. We have to awaken the senses and tackle our perception. We do not need an omniscient master plan to change the field. A precise, reciprocal intervention, or three in this case, is enough to catalyse perpetual interaction and prolonged articulation.

16 Lefebvre, Henri. *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment* (2014, written in 1973) p.141.