

Architectural Association

Diploma 14th

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Volker Bradke:

Architecture Between the Generic and the Common

The object of Unit 14 is the relationship between architectural form, political theory, and urban history. At the centre of this relationship lies the project of architecture. This relationship is proposed not as a deterministic cause and effect relationship between these bodies of knowledge, but as a strategic link to be constantly adjusted and empirically tested.

Above all Unit 14 is firmly rooted in the practice of architecture, in its possibilities, in the legacy of its history. Anything that we cannot think, or practice architecturally we must pass over. Preliminary, or a-posteriori "research" cannot give any systematic answer on how to make architecture, but only clues, or arguments about why we make architecture.

Volker Bradke

In 1966 the German painter Gerhard Richter composed a multimedia installation that examined the everyday life of an average German young man: the 22 year-old Volker Bradke. What is interesting about this installation is how it mixes the generic nature of its subject with the monumentality of its representation. On the one hand, the subject remains elusive, average, lacking any specific attribute; on the other, its representation is emphatic, almost mimicking the rhetorical, monumental effect of social realist painting. The formal and political ethos of this artwork is the best way to introduce this year's topic for Dip 14: the relationship between forms of labour, the generic and the common in architecture. By labour we mean not simply one activity among others, but an essential human condition: the productive (and re-productive) status of our life. By generic we mean what is common within the general condition of the city. By common we mean how to transform the latent generic condition of the city into a collective sphere, beyond the idea of it being simply a public and private space.

Labour and the City

A major aspect that emerged towards the end of the previous year and that will form the initial hypothesis of new studio concern the increasingly merging between living and working within a "hybrid" urban space. Rather than seeing this phenomenon sociologically, or to celebrate it as the advent of a "liquid society" in a permanent state of flux, we have studied the phenomenon of "living & working" with the social and

economic transformations of labour itself. The politics of labour, its struggles, and its organization in relationship with the city-form is thus the crux of the studio research.

In the second half of the 20th Century, production and the extraction of economic value has dramatically shifted from the space of the factory and the tertiary office, to the city itself. The city as vast bio-political apparatus, but also as a mineral form made of inhabitable spaces, services, and infrastructure has become a vast all-embracing “social” factory. If labour was choreographed in the factory by the order of the assembly line and in the office by the rigid managerial treatment of employees, today labour coincides with any aspect of life. Labour is no longer just the biological effort necessary for the survival of the human specie, and clearly separated from work, and political life, as was argued by Hannah Arendt in the 1950’s. Today labour is the very core of human production where life, culture, affects, and politics are absorbed into one continuous space of relationships. Labour has become ubiquitous, diffuse, totalizing to the point that has incorporated into itself all the aspects of the city and its life. It is labour, and its social and political organization that we have to tackle in order to find the clues towards the formulation of a new project for the city. All empirical analysis and mappings of the city developed in the last decades and that have focused on the city ever-changing features such as lifestyles, identities, multiculturalism, density, growth without connecting these features to the reality of labour have fall victims of the post-modern illusion that in the contemporary city anything goes, everything is different, and creativity – the mantra of neo-liberal ethos – is a new Eden of social possibilities.

The main premise of the Unit work is to oppose such empirical approach to the city and to return to the possibility of formulating a “theory of the city” based on the critical relationship between labour, the generic, and the common.

Generic Architecture

The term generic comes from the Greek substantive “race”, “kind”, “species”, and from the verbs “coming-into-being”, “generating”, “producing”. The term generic refers to an undifferentiated common quality which is prior to the individual. Thus the category of generic is strongly linked with the category of labour. According to Marx, man is a social individual, an entity that is made of both singular determinations and generic faculties. In

his *Economical and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844) he merges pre-individual characteristics of human life and the engendering life activity into one human essence through which man becomes aware of itself: production. Production here must be considered as generic activity of the human being, something that is irreducible to any specific form of labour, a pre-individual capability of production, something of which labour force is its most concrete manifestation. Labour Force is thus something that exists in potential, it is about not production as a past thing – i.e. the goods or things that have been produced – but production as possibility. To extract value from production consist precisely in controlling, addressing, capturing that possibility. For this reason such possibility includes not only production, but also the re-production of the species.

As Paolo Virno argued “Capitalists are interested in the life of the worker, in the body of the worker, only for an indirect reason: this life, this body, are what contains the faculty, the potential, the dynamis. The living body becomes an object to be governed not for its intrinsic value, but because it is the substratum of what really matters: labour-power as the aggregate of the most diverse human faculties (the potential for speaking, for thinking, for remembering, for acting, etc.)”. Social contracts such as the welfare state were always attempt to maintain human life of workers not for the sake of itself, but always in order to maintain the possibility of labour force as the fundamental source of wealth. Indeed the modern concept of population refers to a complex of factors in which human life as such – as generic bios – is conceived as a source of potential labour force. Bio-politics the technique of political government that concerns the development and maintainance of life itself is precisely the management of population and the creation of social milieux that are functional to the possibility of production and re-production.

The generic is thus the fundamental spatial, formal, and even existential attribute of this condition. If what is at stake in modern civilization is the possibility of production, and if that possibility in order to remain as such has to be conceived as generic faculty of the human species, than such condition is formally and spatially conceived as generic, that is as typical, general, and thus shareble common condition.

In architecture a fundamental manifestation of this condition is the concept of *typical plan*. A typical plan is a spatial scheme that is designed to maximise production in its interior. Yet the concept of typical plan can also be generalize as the very architectural paradigm of modernity. In order to govern the uncertainties and the unforeseeable development implicit in the process of production, the spatial frame in which production

occurs have to be reduced to the least formal complexity. Thus standardization is not, as many assume, only a matter of mass production. Standardization of (architectural) space is the response to the uncertainty and precarity implicit in any form of production. The result of this condition was radical and intelligible in modernity. Think of the factory space with its reduced spatial aesthetic, or the austere architecture of social housing. In the last forty years the growing ethos of up-rootedness implicit in the even more generic nature of contemporary labour has been countered with an architecture made of redundant differences. These redundant differences can be assumed as the ideological and symbolic mask to the ethos of the generic implicit in the nature of contemporary labour. To unmask such condition and to define a contemporary generic architecture as the manifestation of a common sphere will be the main task of the unit.

Over the year architectural form will be addressed precisely in terms of its ability to construct and represent the idea of common space. Because of this, the unit will insist on issues of architectural form, composition, syntax and materiality. It is our conviction that only by engaging with form in its deepest, most elemental condition is it possible to trace architecture's political motivation.

The task for the unit will be the design of a housing for a council composed of approximately 1,600 people closely connected with a public transport network. The design will proceed from inside-out. Each project will be developed starting from the basic single cell of one inhabitant. This will then be developed to form the basis for the entire complex. The qualities of the resulting design will emerge out of the sharpness of the argument, the immediacy of its representation (the project must be expressed with very few drawings) and the conviction of its idea.

Case Study: Rome's Railway Ring

The context of the project will be the city of Rome. A city of monumental exceptions, Rome will form the dialectical (back)ground to the idea of a common architecture. The extreme and conflicted history of the city will challenge the possibility of a common and generic architecture, and yet at the same time the very idea of the common and generic will be a return to the defining characteristic of ancient Roman architecture.

Since its constitution, Rome is undeniably the archetypical city – a city that incarnates the very meaning of ‘political form’, or of the representative role of city-form and architecture. The historical richness of Rome is not to be understood only through an art-historical reading, but springs from the successive political regimes that had chosen Rome as their symbolic centre, as their capital city. Each of the political powers that ‘Rome’ has claimed (the Roman Empire, Christianity, the Roman Republic, The Kingdom of Italy, the Fascist Regime, the Italian Republic, and even the 3.000.000 people that, protesting against the second Iraq War in February 2003, have formed the biggest anti-war demonstration in history), has always redefined its political charisma, and the form of its architecture.

The dramatic vicissitudes that have built Rome as we know it today, demonstrate how its history is far from a linear accumulation of ‘beautiful’ artistic interventions. The city has been a battlefield of ideas and ideologies that have produced an extraordinary culture of conflicting heritage. The use, selection and representation of this conflicting heritage – a complex of politics, projects, transformations and manipulations – has always been the core of any appropriation of Rome’s myth. The relevance and importance of this myth reaches far beyond local urban interests and is bound to the fate and meaning of today’s global civilization.

Today Rome’s historical complex is reduced to its mere “image”, as a consequence of its massive and narrow-minded exploitation as hub in the tourist industry. This situation has transformed the city’s charisma in the historical, political and social entropy we can discover today. The city appears as divided in two sectors: on the one hand the city centre that is being conserved and restored for the sake of its appeal as tourist destination, on the other hand the “real” city, the so called periferia, that since long has not been the subject of any cohesive project.

The Unit will focus on an overall vision for the city that would take a critical stance towards this status-quo. The basis for this vision will be the areas along the never completed railway ring, a system of public transport that can potentially surround the city centre and connect the ancient city with its periphery.

The idea of surrounding the capital with a railway ring was first suggested after the Second World War; with the occasion of the 2000 Jubilee, the ring was almost completed but for a gap between St Peter’s and Vigna Clara stations on Via Flaminia. The northern section of the ring is expected to be completed by 2011, as a part of a larger scale

reorganisation of the railway system of the capital, which entails the creation of a new international high-speed rail station at the beginning of Via Tiburtina. Termini, Rome's current central station, will then become a regional hub. The railway ring has always been conceived as a purely functional element, and its structuring potential has never been fully exploited. Moreover, technological developments and changes in network planning have left behind a large area of underused tracks that have gradually become brownfields. This drosscape could allow interesting development opportunities as it lies on the boundary between centre and periphery, in a strategic position to manage the flux of travellers. While the ring does not have a clear structure yet, it could in the future become the backbone that links a series of urban green spaces with suburban *terrains vagues* and regional parks such as the archaeological parks of Veio and Via Appia. To strengthen the strategic character of the ring, we propose twelve main ring stations situated at the beginning of the consular roads. These stations will serve as interchange between different means of transport thus becoming the new gates of Rome. The gate would serve as managing element of a project that aims to explore the potential of existing voids by transforming the brownfields in residential neighbourhood into a new city parks.

The defining element of these twelve stations will be a building or settlement for 1.600 inhabitants. Last year we have called this building "Immeuble Cité". The Immeuble Cité is a building that is meant to contain a city within itself. This year we expect the building to be simply a house for those people that have decided to live together by sharing their own space as *common* space. We imagine these people to have exit what remain of the welfare state. They self-organize themselves, yet this does not means that they live as marginal subjects. On the contrary these inhabitants aim to the same (if not better) life than an average middle-class inhabitant, and yet they want to be in control of their own space, they own resources, and their own labour power. We have called these communities "Soviets" that is "Councils" assembly of a limited number of people that self-manage themselves within a limited portion of space. A clear reference to this mode of life is the monastery. These councils have to be conceived as a secular and contemporary version of a monastery where its inhabitants find refuge from the exploitation of the metropolis and re-claim their own labour power for their own sake. The design of these artifacts will address not only functional and programmatic issues, but also the symbolic aspects. What sort of architecture will be used for the councils? Just as the early Christians used Pagan Roman institutions and architectures to build their

own spaces, we imagine these inhabitants symbolically re-using the legacy of a generic architecture – the architecture of their exploitation – as the “ruins” through which to build their *own* architecture. The legacy of generic architecture will be assumed no longer as form of spatial alienation, but as a form that symbolize the re-appropriation of labour power by the class of producers. Like Gerhard Richter’s Volker Bradke we’ll attempt to confront the most banal, abstract and generic attributes associated with the metropolis with a will to monumentality. This means that the architecture of these new “Soviets of the Multitude” have to be different, yet *not too different* from the generic architecture of the contemporary metropolis.

Preliminary Readings:

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Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966)

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