

The Socio-pol-ethical Confluence of the Architect: The Idiot, the Activist and the Dreamer

Paco Mejias Villatoro, Tanzil Shafique

PhD, Associate Professor of Architecture. Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University
paco.mejias@xjtlu.edu.cn

Assoc. AIA, MArch, Studio leader, PhD Researcher, University of Melbourne
tanzilidmam.shafique@unimelb.edu.au

Estudio Abierto / Open Studio
www.thisstudioisopen.org

Keywords: architect; politics; ethics; social; aesthetic

Architecture and politics are endeavors conceptually connected in an indivisible way. Architecture is the frame for human cohabitation, an activity that is embedded into the necessity of negotiation (for getting agreements), and legitimization (for looking after agreements) – both processes deeply rooted in the political sphere. From the home to the city, architecture reflects negotiation with others, as for instance, for a fair distribution of property, light or air in all the rooms of a house or in all the buildings of a city. This negotiation is driven by the architect who is legitimized to do so on behalf of the community, thus becoming a political agent responsible for the welfare of the community with respect to the built environment. The architect is legitimized to apply the *Force of the Law*¹ in the defense of common interest and goods – that includes the natural, cultural and built heritage. Hence, architecture can be understood as legitimized built-violence acting against individuals on behalf of the community for reorganizing people's lives according to moral laws and/or political interests. From the formal separation of bedrooms in a home to the hierarchical geometry of planned cities, we can see a wide variety of situations where architecture forces people to live in an “unnatural” way. Louis Kahn remarked, “architecture is what nature cannot make. Architecture is something unnatural but not something made up.”² In contrast, we can find weak architectural framing in some communities (say, the Kalahari tribes), where relaxed morale promotes togetherness. A similar cohesiveness is observed in the non-hierarchical urban fabrics of informal settlements. Both contexts are characterized by their political informality. The connection between the formality of politics and architecture is also a demonstration of the strong link between both missions.

Historically, architects have been serving the state – essential pieces of the political machinery. Monuments, palaces, military constructions, churches... all the magnificent examples of architecture from the past were built in tune with regimes, usually marginalizing and exploiting the population. The history of urban planning has followed the same path: from Haussmann's plan for Paris to the long history of political promotion of the anti-urban ideology in the United States,³ urban planning has been used as a strategy for weakening the population by controlling space and dispersing it. Architects have been mostly affiliated in the defense of the interest of the political establishment disregarding people's concerns and desires. In all these cases, architecture was politically charged. We can even say that the architecture that these regimes have built was spatially and formally tailored by the political ideologies they served.

1 Jacques Derrida, “Force of law: the metaphysical foundation of authority,” in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld & David Carlson (Routledge, 1992).

2 Robert Twombly (ed.), *Louis Kahn: Essential Texts* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003).

3 Steven Conn, *Americans against the city: Anti-urbanism in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

The process of de-politicization of architecture that started in the 20th century was brought onto the scene by modernity. With the clear exception of the Russian Constructivism between 1921 to 1932, the political position of modern architecture was extremely confusing. Although the official discourse of modern architecture throughout the 20th century seemed to be in defense of a more social approach, some of its most significant figures showed severe political contradictions.

Le Corbusier's political position was more than confusing, to say the least, moving from socialism to fascism and back. Influenced by the work of Henry Provensal,⁴ Le Corbusier's contradictions came from the struggle between the scientific rationality of modernity, and a political thinking aligned with the most romantic chain of the German philosophy – especially Schelling and Nietzsche.⁵ As Brott explained, the idea that Le Corbusier had about 'revolution' was not proletarian, but a "violent reversal by an authority," an idea much closer to a fascist perspective.⁶ He considered himself a combination between "Henri Provensal's *artiste du futur* and the Nietzschean *Surhumain*."⁷ The political inclination of Le Corbusier is embarrassingly absent from his major exhibitions, such as *Le Corbusier: Mesures de l'homme*, that took place in the Centre Georges Pompidou in 2015.⁸ This same year, three books were published in France denouncing the fascist ideology of the French/Swiss master.⁹ The Le Corbusier Foundation, the Pompidou Center and eminent scholars reacted to them defensively,¹⁰ revealing how the discipline wishes to maintain a veneer of objective, apolitical stance.

This situation of political confusion was not different in the case of Mies van der Rohe. Despite the theoretical interest into Modern Architecture presenting it as an agent of social redemption,¹¹ Mies van der Rohe's primary intent was "to define cultural reform in terms of aesthetic and spiritual ideas rather than material and social matters."¹² As Welch pointed, even when Mies accepted to be director of the Bauhaus in 1930, the school's ideology, close to the Russian socialist ideals, was not exactly matching Mies's more liberal and capitalist beliefs. After the Bauhaus was closed in 1933, Mies negotiated with the Nazis the conditions to re-open it, conditions that included the dismissal of Kandinsky and Hilberseimer as the most politically dissident members. Mies accepted these conditions with the expectation of getting commissions, being consequently invited to a few competitions organized by the Nazi government, such as the *Hall for the German People* in the Berlin exhibition of 1934, and the *German Exposition Building* for the Brussels World Fair in 1935. A point to note is that in the latter, participants needed to demonstrate "racial purity."¹³ In Mies' sketches for both projects, one can notice the Nazi swastika and mottos rendered in the views. Moreover, Mies' plan for the German pavilion in Brussels was a decomposition of the swastika's geometry.¹⁴ Despite this, none of the entries for the Brussels pavilion fulfilled Hitler's idea of the needed monumentality and, finally, the Führer decided not to participate in the World Fair. Mies also showed explicit support to the Nazi regime joining several party bodies (such as the *Reichskulturkammer*, established by Goebbels and the *National-Sozialistische Volkswohlfahrt*), with the clear intention of remaining in Nazi Germany – he rejected

4 Paul Venable Turner, *The Education of Le Corbusier* (New York: Garland Pub, 1977).

5 György Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason* (London: Humanities Press, 1981).

6 Simone Brott, "The Le Corbusier Scandal, Or, Was Le Corbusier a Fascist?" *Fascism* 6 (2) 2017: 149.

7 Ibid.: 152.

8 Ibid.

9 François Chaslin, *Un Corbusier* (Paris: Seuil, 2015); Xavier Jarcy, *Le Corbusier, un fascisme français* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2015); Marc Perelman, *Le Corbusier: Une froide vision du monde* (Paris: Michalon, 2015).

10 Brott, "The Le Corbusier Scandal."

11 Joan Ockman, *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985).

12 Celina R. Welch, "Mies van der Rohe's Compromise with the Nazis," *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Hochschule für Architektur und Bauwesen Weimar. Ausgabe A* 39, 1/2 (1993): 103-09.

13 Ibid.: 108.

14 Ibid.: 106.

a few offers from American universities. Only when he realized that his dream of becoming the architect of the Nazi government was futile, did he move to the United States.¹⁵

The political inconsistencies of two of the most significant figures of modern architecture could be a symptom of the incapacity or disinterest that modern architecture had for making clear political statements. This fact could be related to certain particularities, in modern times undeniably associated to a more socialist and democratic ideology. If in the past architecture efficiently represented power and control (through monumentality, overwhelming scale or strong geometries), the architectural translation of democracy became more problematic. As Leach reminds us, both Frank Lloyd Wright and Vincent Scully attempted to establish connections between architectural typologies and democracy, both unsuccessfully.¹⁶ Jencks and Valentine arrived at a contradictory conclusion about how architecture for democracy looks like, determining that it cannot be too uniform or too variegated.

Nevertheless, there are some properties that we can ascribe to a democratic architectural typology, based on what we could call “open determinations” about spaces and uses. The buildings that radically promote public space (as the Sao Paulo Art Museum by Lina Bo Bardi in 1947), the ones devoted to the openness of use (as the Fun Palace by Cedric Price 1961), or the projects based on incompleteness (as the Quinta Monroy in 2004 or the Villaverde Housing in 2016, both by Elemental) can all be associated to democratic ideologies through the promotion of people’s gathering and participation. It is important to note that when the masters of modern architecture referred to some of these ideas (promotion of the public space, indeterminacy of program or shape), they did not do it with a political intention but with an aesthetic one. The square that the Seagram Building generously offers to the city of New York serves the perception of the pristine geometry and materiality of Mies’s skyscraper, and it is not due to any democratic intention of providing public space. When Le Corbusier designed each of the Chandigarh’s housing urban sectors as informal Indian villages, it was done as a planned informality framed in the rigorosity of the rationalist grid, balancing each other in a beautifully composed master plan. The desolated open space of the Chandigarh’s Capitol could be also an example of planning for the sake of the presence and monumentality of the buildings.

This way of thinking, where architecture serves itself, is one of the fundamental mistakes of the approach of modernity that led to socio-political indeterminacy and contradiction. Even when Venturi wrote his seminal book about contradiction, he inherited from modernity a mono-disciplinary approach, declaring at the very beginning his intention not to relate architecture with other disciplines, mentioning specifically no interest in making a more social and human art from architecture.¹⁷ We should note here that architecture has some specificities that tend to blur interdisciplinary approaches. On the one hand, architecture is indivisible from its related disciplines – say urbanism, but also social sciences; hence architectural statements must be, paradoxically, at the same time one and multiple, a holistic uniqueness, with simultaneous aesthetic, political and ethical considerations that mean taking care of the object and people, and being sure about the adequacy of both. On the other hand, architectural statements are never fully coherent because they are based on common agreements between all the agents involved in the process – usually with contradictory interests – and it is finally subjected to the undetermined interaction with the inhabitants.

When philosophers such as Marcuse (1978) and Adorno (1991) alluded to the link between aesthetic and revolution, trying to invoke the political capacity of aesthetics, they referred to an autonomous artistic expression able to work disconnected from any social relations and, in doing so, able to criticize them. Architecture cannot be included here because it is incapable to be disconnected from the society in which it is always embedded. Walter Benjamin also pointed to the incompatibility between politics and aesthetics when he stated that aesthetics brings

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Neil Leach, “Architecture or Revolution?” <https://neilleach.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/architecture-or-revolution.pdf>, last accessed Sept 15, 2018.

¹⁷ Robert Venturi, *Complejidad y contradicción en la arquitectura* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, [1966] 2014), 22.

an anesthetization of the political, and that the attempt to put aesthetics and politics together “culminates in one thing: war.” It was exactly this dilemma that led to the demise of Russian Constructivism, when the aesthetic individual expressions of some of the members clashed headlong with the political engagement of others.¹⁸

This impossibility of the confluence between aesthetic and politics is contradicted firstly by the very fact that, as Sudjic reminds us, architecture “is intimately concerned with the instinct to control” and, at the same time, it has to “establish a relationship with the rich and the powerful,” because they have the resources to build.¹⁹ Other thinkers support this relationship between aesthetics and politics from a more theoretical perspective. Scarry argued that the focus on aesthetics does not necessarily distract our attention from social injustice, but the opposite, “by requiring of us constant perceptual acuity.”²⁰ She clarified that aesthetics is related to two different ways of perception: the passive (where we observe things without intention to modify them) and the instrumental perception (where the observation is a prelude to the interaction with the observed).²¹ If the former could be socially and politically neutral, the second is not, because it always includes a desire for change. This explanation is another way to state the indivisibility of architecture, where passive perception happens at the same time with the instrumental perception, and, in so doing, demonstrates the confluence between a passive aesthetic experience and an active interaction related to politics. We could point here that modernity’s dismissal of the importance of real inhabitants – hence of the significance of their interaction with architecture, so of their instrumental perception – was a key topic in the *habitat* discussion that triggered the end of architectural modernity through the dissolution of the CIAM in 1959.

A second phase of the process of the de-politicization of architecture happened in the late 20th century, with the generalizing logic of neoliberalism. The wild development of free-market policies all over the world – including countries officially affiliated to communism, such as China – has resulted in a definitive moment of political dismissal. In line with governments populated by de-ideologized technocrats, architects become depoliticized agents driven by equally depoliticized economic forces. In this way, architects abandoned their political responsibility by moving to the economic sphere. This process of radical de-ideologization is finally materialized in architectural decisions shaped for serving an individual’s interest against communal ones – a deeply unethical position. In so doing, architects lost any legitimization to act on behalf of the population, and architecture ruined its public and political dimension. Professional codes of ethics delivered by architects’ associations focus on mutual competence between fellows, dismissing the fact that society grants architects the monopoly of practice in “exchange for the greater good that comes from our advanced knowledge”, which highlights the public dimension of the profession.²² Architects lost faith in themselves and so did society at large. Architects became a loyal piece of an economic machine that contributes to subjugating people down under the pressure of unfair mortgages, as referees of the real estate market. About the significance of keeping the public dimension of professionals, Snyder reminds us of the importance that lawyers had for the accomplishment of Hitler’s massive executions, thus dismissing their social agency of defending public justice. Hitler’s personal lawyer, Hans Frank, became the governor-general of occupied Poland, and another lawyer, Arthur Seyss-Inquart, was the one who ran the occupation of the Netherlands.²³ As Snyder asserted, “professions can create forms of ethical conversation that

18 Christina Lodder, *El Constructivismo Ruso* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial Sa, 1988).

19 Deyan Sudjic, *The Edifice Complex. How the Rich and Powerful Shape the World* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 11, 15.

20 Elaine Scarry, *On beauty and being just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 62.

21 *Ibid.*, 61.

22 Fisher, Thomas R. *In the Scheme of Things. Alternative Thinking on the Practice of Architecture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 136.

23 Timothy Snyder, *On tyranny. Twenty lessons from the twentieth century* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017), 39.

are impossible between a lonely individual and a distant government.”²⁴ We would add that they can and they must.

It is in this context that we need to recognize the fundamental cultural contradiction of capitalism based on the fact that society is not cohesive, but shaped by three different spheres: the techno-economic, the political and the cultural.²⁵ These three spheres converge in society responding to contrary desires, hence, society cannot be evaluated in a cohesive way and its evolution cannot be easily predicted. If, for instance, we talk about individual desires, we can state that the fundamental aim in the techno-economic sphere is efficiency, in the political sphere is legitimization, and in the cultural sphere is beneficial knowledge – desires that will guide actions in different, or even opposite, directions. Consequently, the way to evaluate any fact in the different spheres is driven by diverse principles, such as measuring utility in the techno-economic sphere, the majority in the political field, and assessing ontological belief in culture. Keeping in mind that architecture is a discipline that deals necessarily with these three spheres, it will be easy to understand the origin of its fundamental contradictions and indeterminacies. If we recognize the growing dominance of the techno-economy in capitalist contexts, we will better comprehend the impossibility for architecture to successfully respond to all its demands and make political statements.

Using more recent terminology for expressing this contradiction, we can say that society could be understood as an *assemblage*.²⁶ Thinking in terms of society as an *assemblage* is based on the philosophical work of Deleuze (1968) and his later collaboration with Guattari, particularly in the book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). The word “assemblage” is a translation of the French word “agencement,” which has two different meanings: as a noun, it means “an arrangement, a layout or a construction” whereas, as a verb, it is the process of arranging in a particular composition. Assemblage is a “fragmentary whole” that emerges from the particular relations between different heterogeneous elements, held together only by their co-functioning or “symbiosis.” What is important in this relationship is the capacity of the different elements of denying the existing hierarchies deterritorializing (in Deleuzian terms) and reorganizing themselves in new hierarchies and relationships able to adapt to the circumstances (or reterritorializing). This spotlights the importance of the flow and the flux rather than that of the thing itself, since the relationship produces emergent properties that the parts do not possess individually.

Architects act in configuring these relationships between the various elements of the societal assemblage. As the relationships are not stable, giving rise to emergent properties that could not be foreseen, there is a constant reshuffle and a constant production of novelty in a society, which makes it difficult to operate with static principles. This explains why 20th century architectural manifestos claiming universality did not work out as intended, due to the shifts in a society that could not be considered a priori. Such loss of rootedness in a fixed reality results in a schizophrenia incompatible with political clarity.

While, as we have explained, politics cannot be done through aesthetics (through the focus on the object), we propose that it can be accomplished through the ethics of the subject. If the object (architecture) has a static condition, the subject (the architect), could be more flexible using his/her “dramatistic consciousness.”²⁷ In *Empathic Civilization*, Jeremy Rifkin charts the rise of a global consciousness in which humans become self-aware that they are not “individuals,” but rather are a set of different roles, each one with a different set of desires, commitments and dispositions. This goes against the methodological individualism, which underpins the current picture of the world where humans are seen as indivisible and unitary. Rifkin’s concept allows us to see each human (in our case the architect) as made of different roles that they perform based

24 Ibid., 40.

25 Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

26 See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, [1980] 2013).

27 Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (Penguin Group, 2009).

on the context. What this allows for us is to re-conceptualize the architect as not a singular, universal body, but as a multiplicity assuming different roles, permitting him to adapt to the dynamic condition of the social *assemblage*. He/she becomes able to assume the vertigo of his/her ethical responsibility – by which we mean the responsibility to act on behalf of the common good. For this, as the different conditions of the social *assemblage* are constantly shifting, the architect consequently needs to suppress his/her sense of a singular self and his/her desires, and actively practice through empathy, the “capacity to become the other”. The architect will thus cease to be the singular individual that the first moderns were. To reclaim any relevance in a world in crisis, he/she must be an actor who fluidly takes on roles as needed in response to the shifting societal need. There is no ulterior motive, nor any ego lurking behind these roles; the architect is made of these roles alone. He/she does not use them to further his own agenda. He/she is not the individual wearing these various masks. He/she is the masks themselves.

For such a dramaturgical architect, we propose three roles: the *Idiot*, the *Activist* and the *Dreamer*, connected respectively with the social, political and ethical. In a *socio-pol-ethical* confluence, the roles provide a way to resist the present, reclaim the past, and speculate on the future. Vitruvius’ triad tells what architecture entails, but not how architects should act. We propose the following triad of roles that the architect should play interchangeably in a dynamic and constant de- and re-territorialization, to engage socially, politically and ethically with the community and/or the users.

The Idiot

The Idiot resists the present, challenging his social context.

When Dostoevsky wrote his novel *The Idiot* in 1874, in the middle of one of his most severe epileptic crises, he was fully conscious of the risk that he was assuming. He shifts the original idea of a detailed planned plot for a much more interesting situation, where he loosens control over the narrative, thus recognizing the independence of his characters. This idea, extremely innovative for a modern moment of full control and secured outputs, resulted in a unanimously negative literary critic. The autonomy of the characters from the writer resulted in an extremely emphatic persona, revealing the egocentricity of those around him. As Hesse explained, the Prince Leo Myshkin (Dostoevsky’s idiot) is able “to be everything, to empathize with everything, to sympathize with everything, to understand and accept everything in the world.”²⁸ If he were an architect, he would be a visionary of what an architect should be in the 21st century.

How does the Idiot resist? The community or users with whom the architect is to engage may hold normative assumptions that are detrimental in the long run. Taking an argumentative stance to prove them wrong can often be unfavorable and it hardly changes the detrimental assumptions. How can the architect resist these kinds of societal demands or desires of a client? We suggest that this can be achieved by framing questions that are against the grain, questions that are not instantly answerable, questions that, on the surface, can be seen simply as idiotic, but with the potential to slow down thinking, to jar the assumptions held strongly out of place and to open the door for an alternative reasoning.

The modern architect was charged with an idiocy based on pure provocation, on showing the originality – an absurdity – of his/her proposal, that we recognize closer to the idiots filmed by Lars von Trier (1998). The contemporary architect is a new Idiot, as described by Isabella Stengers in her *Cosmopolitical Proposal*,²⁹ a character charged with resistance:

[Isabelle Stengers] proposes the figure of the Idiot as a conceptual character capable of creating a state of suspension, of indeterminacy, by interrupting general understandings of a situation or problem. Stengers proposes Bartleby, a character developed by Herman Melville, as an example

28 Hermann Hesse, “Thoughts on *The Idiot* by Dostoevsky” [1919], in *My belief: essays on life and art*, ed. Theodore Ziolkowski (London: Triad Paladin, 1974).

29 Isabelle Stengers, “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” in *Making things public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

of the possibilities that the figure of “the Idiot” can offer in a sort of ecological questioning of an environment, forging new political questions. In Melville’s short story, *Bartleby* is a clerk who embodies the ultimate form of resistance because he lives his environment in a way that defies being understood by all those surrounding him. As his superior continually tries to approach him to negotiate a working relationship, Bartleby offers nothing other than a “I would prefer not to” – in a sense a soft answer, but one that resists faithful communication and seems to paralyze any “normal” relationship of address, opening an empty space around him. This is the space that Stengers proposes as a state of indeterminacy. Bartleby’s state of refusal is not exactly a negation – that would be a claim – and the indeterminacy is not exactly a neutral state – that would not be a force. The refusal is a resistance. Like in a process of casting, a negative is taken from a positive, as the first step is to adhere to the surface of what exists and alternate it.³⁰

Social resistance occurs when the Idiot asks questions that cause a suspension of normalcy, questions so banal yet so poignant that force us to confront a reality that we sometimes forget. The *Idiot* questions the norms that are put in place. In an era of ever-increasing speed, the first act of resistance would be to slow down and look at the given situation. When everyone acts, and inaction is seen as morally unacceptable, the Idiot suggests that we pause. For example, in architecture, the Idiot would ask, “do people really need this architecture?”

The idiot’s agency comes from recognizing his/her intellectual incompetence. She/he does not play along in societal roles, portraying a fake facade of knowledge even though she/he is a social being. She/he has no answers. She/he simply asks. She/he questions the present. By pausing, by slowing down, she/he allows ontological assumptions to be questioned and reconfigured.

The Activist

The Activist reclaims his/her political role.

Once we slow down, we perhaps need to act. Who acts? The *Activist*. The first act? Reclaiming agency as social performer, rather than merely producing aesthetics.

The real understanding of the complexity surrounding us can only be accomplished from our capacity to change it, a deeply *think + do* act. Hence, reclaiming competence as an *Activist* of the built environment and not just a passive designer to whom the world is presented is the first step to achieve; it is an attitude that goes much further than the traditional thinking where the risk of failing inhibits actions. The *Activist* is aware but undaunted. The only certainty that he can invoke in such risky task is to reclaim from the past all the instances in which architects, as agents of change, worked for society through actions and not just words or drawings.

The *Activist* looks to the past to reclaim from history moments of competence. She/he is unafraid to fail, for she/he knows that to fail without acting is worse than to fail while trying. She/he is a political beast who knows that to reclaim is to empower. Justin McGuirk’s book *Radical Cities* (2016) charts the changes made by such architect/activists across Latin America.³¹ Engaging with the community, architects, such as Teddy Cruz in Tijuana or Alfredo Brillembourg in Caracas, show that the role of the architect is not to present fully-formed ideas to the community, but to become an ally in their struggle for a better built environment. The *Activist* does not see him/herself as a passive figure on the sidelines waiting to be called into action. Rather, the *Activist* understands that only by implicating in the ongoing attempts of a community, a city or even the world can he situate architecture politically. He understands that what he designs shapes society, that is, it has an ontological function. He understands the role design played in creating the social and environmental exigencies. Arturo Escobar, in his book *Designs for the Pluriverse* (2018), calls for such a redefinition of design:

30 Barbara Alves, “Relocations: The Idiot as a Figure of Miscommunication,” *Parse* 3 (2016).

31 Justin McGuirk, *Radical Cities* (New York: Verso, 2016).

The contemporary crisis is the result of deeply entrenched ways of being, knowing, and doing. To reclaim design for other world-making purposes requires creating a new, effective awareness of design's embeddedness in this history. The contemporary conjuncture of widespread ecological and social devastation summons critical thought to think actively about design for autonomy, centered on the struggles of communities and social movements to defend their territories and worlds against the ravages of neoliberal globalization.³²

The activism we talk of is not merely reactive, but prospective – the activism of bringing the community, client or user, into the fold of design decision-making. The *Activist* strives to collaborate, to communicate, to participate, precisely for the reason that she/he wishes to create more roles for the society she/he is serving beyond that of consumers. By bringing the community into the design process, the *Activist* enables the creation of new roles for the people involved, and produces a further sense of purpose and ownership of the design project. The *Activist* activates the community.

However, we are cautious to not reduce the role of the *Activist* only into participatory forms of design. As Dunn writes,

...we must not, however, confuse acting in the political sphere with the fetishization of community-centred and participatory design, which have been the dominant mode of architectural activism over the last decade. For every project that plays an important part in aiding the disenfranchised, there are a dozen that are wrapped up in marketing exercises for developers and a web of NGO's that make up the non-profit industrial complex. As the activist group *INCITE!* notes, the non-profit industrial complex serves to divert public monies into private hands through foundations, manage and control dissent, redirect activist energies away from mass movements, allow corporations to mask their exploitative and colonial work practices through "philanthropic" work, and encourage social movements to model themselves after capitalist structures rather than to challenge them.³³

The *Activist* role we sketch here is interested in scrutinizing the "system", the *status quo* that has resulted in the current state of affairs, rampant inequality, loss of humane values from the built environment, the fetishization of commodity and a narcissistic culture of self-absorption. The *Activist* engages with the struggles that he finds around himself, be that against xenophobia, against sexism, against corporatism, and sees his praxis intertwined with what is happening on the streets. It is worthwhile to remember that the radical architects we deem worthwhile, those that we endlessly quote – the Situationists, Superstudio, Archizoom, the Constructivists – followed the mass movements on the ground and used their architecture as a way to support them. As Dunn notes, "in the case of Constructivists it was the forging of a new aesthetic to match a newly ordered society, for Superstudio and Archizoom it was using paper architecture to estrange and elucidate the spatial conditions of the capitalist city. The Situationists theorized the way that aesthetics have been operationalized for systems of control."³⁴

What is crucial is to reclaim that role of challenging the status quo for supporting what is better for society and to think about how these could be operationalized in everyday practice. The trick is not to think of activism outside of practice as a separate activity that drains time without pay. The *Activist* is always at it, even when doing a banal project. He invests time to think of how to integrate a radical critique of the existing situation into the project. For such modes of activism and in order to bring the support of the people, what is required is the third role, that of a *Dreamer*.

32 Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the pluriverse : radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2018), 19-20.

33 Kieffer Dunn, "Radical Praxis: Activism Within and Beyond Architecture," <https://medium.com/@KiefferDunn/radical-praxis-activism-within-and-beyond-architecture-a91f9f2f8e2a>, last accessed Sept 15, 2018.

34 *Ibid.*

The Dreamer

The Dreamer initiates a common imaginary, a fable of what things can become.

The *Idiot* made you pause and think about the present. The *Activist* made you aware of the struggles from the past into the present, but we say that is not enough for an architect. The most crucial role is to produce a common imagination, a desire for people, a binding force that makes people see beyond what the status quo wants them to see. That is the job of the *Dreamer*. The *Dreamer* sabotages the subjectivity that the capitalist realism has produced. The American Dream was one such subjectivity, and people all over the developing nations were enamored by it. The single-family house, the white picket fence, the front lawn, the car parked — the collective desire still remains. It is not enough to argue rationally about the ecological cost of suburban living or the social alienation produced by such “lonelitopia.”³⁵ What is needed is nothing short of new imaginaries of how we can live with respect to nature and ourselves.

Using speculative thinking, the *Dreamer* draws the community into a reality that is tantalizingly close, generating a desire in you to long for it. Speculative thinking is a means of creating the future in the present and is also crucial in constructing narratives that involve clients/communities and generating the necessary synergy from them. We draw a parallel here with the Donna Haraway’s concept of “speculative fabulation,”³⁶ which is the practice of luring an audience into an alternative reality, that is about bringing out possibilities already latent in existing conditions by means of a narrative. What follows from empathic thinking is beyond caring, it is about imagining futures that are strange yet familiar, that draw the client or the community into new realities. We see that act of producing new imaginaries as a crucial political act. We see practicing speculative fabulation as an empathic task by the architect allowing him/her to transcend the current normative image/aesthetics producing role. She/he speculates about the future and spawns a collective imagination ethically convinced that his/her dreams are collective dreams. She/he is not naïve. She/he understands the opacity of knowledge under which the discipline operates. The concept of “speculative fabulation” gives us a way forward beyond the dogmatic hegemony of a single episteme (that of scientific instrumental rationality). The *Dreamer* speculates with the joy of things that never happened before – and yet she/he speculates ethically to dream for herself is to be stuck in the quagmire of personal fantasy. She/he speculates and tells stories of a future that is tantalizing. It creates a collective imagination as it stems from the aspiration of the people, but “speculative fabulation” is also about showing them how to dream of a better future. The speculations are plural, in which a “tentacular thinking” (thinking across scale, across human/non-human, across time) permeates deeply to unfold a multiplicitous and multispecies narrative. The narrative is complex, yet, held in structure by an ethical order. Ethics as the fact of willing for others what we are willing for ourselves, and to feel with this the Sartrean vertigo of how extraordinarily important our decisions, actions and speculations are.

What we have illustrated in this essay is that politics in architecture can be rethought once we start to go beyond the normative assumptions of what the architect does. Sticking to the 20th century (Howard) Roarkian conception of the architect – the all-knowing genius ego – has given us the starchitects and the reduction of architecture to the production of spectacle. Moving beyond requires not just a simple redefinition but forsaking the ontological footings so dear to us. There is no individual architect, there never was. The architect has always been an assemblage of different roles in the service of society and the common good. It is high time we become aware of these roles. Architecture is about aesthetics, but not at the expense of its ethics – the consciousness of its social and political responsibilities. How can we be aware of the responsibilities? Only if we start to see empathy not as a sentimental value, but rather as a fundamental design tool. To practice the different roles – the *Idiot*, the *Activist* and the *Dreamer* – what we need is nothing

35 Tanzil Shafique, “Lonelitopia: How Urbanism of Mass Destruction is Crushing the American Dream,” *Journal of Urban Design and Mental Health*. 2 (2017).

36 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

short of getting used to becoming the “other”: to see the world from the shoes of the site, the client, the community, the city and the world. To hold contradictory desires of each of these roles, we must learn to be a reflexive practitioner, not firstly of our trade, but to seamlessly move from one role to the other depending on the social need.

It was Mahatma Gandhi who said, “anyone who says they are not interested in politics is like a drowning man who insists he is not interested in water.”³⁷ Seeing architecture as far removed from politics has led to a loss of agency by architects. It is time we reinvent the discipline, navigating the socio-pol-ethical confluences by being *Idiots*, *Activists* and *Dreamers*. What would reality be like if architects were to see themselves taking these roles? To speculate on that, and as a way of concluding, let us invite you to the following:

It's June 10, 2050. It's raining in Addis Ababa. The Museum of Transmodern Art (MOTA) is holding a press conference (New York is no longer the pseudo-capital of the world). A new book titled ‘Resist, Reclaim and Speculate’ is being published through crowdsourcing. It becomes an instant sensation. After decades of playing to the tunes of an oppressive ‘capitalist realism’, the architects are charged with this manifesto and the dawn of a new architecture — a collective intelligence from bottom-up revolutionizes the discipline of architecture. The book, which was written by 1000 architects of 100 countries demolishes the idea of the single architect as the know-it-all genius. The architects resist the call to produce just spectacular images as marketing for the profit-maximizing machinery, they resist being used to further the agenda of neoliberalism, they ask questions which makes the system pause. The architects no longer put on a fake detachment from society, they stop wearing black turtle-necks, they stop crumpling paper and modelling it in CAD software to produce masterpieces, they resist the urge to claim the mantle of genius. These architects, who collectively wrote this book, come from all colours and all nations. Some have official registrations and some don't. They couldn't care less. What matters to them is to produce a humane built environment that enriches human existence.

These architects of the 21st century look back at the turn of the century, dumbfounded to understand why their predecessors took so long to realize that architects are stewards of the environment, that architecture professionals are much like doctors who are there to protect the collective environment, not makers of singular buildings, take photos in prestigious magazines and run after self-aggrandizing prizes. These architects, being the activists that they are, are part of the movements across the world, from designing a forest eco-reserve to stop mining companies in the deep Amazon, to designing with informal settlers their own communities that protect them from speculators. They work with environmentalists to re-wild the suburbs of Detroit. They work with Black Lives Matters to produce places that require no police supervision skipping the laws of segregation. They work for a city where authoritarian diktats are not needed, people self-govern themselves through consensus much better than being subjugated to either state or capital.

These architects, how did they get so many things done? — you perhaps ask. They dreamt of better ways to live, they engaged with people, they channelled the collective aspirations into tangible material reality. They were instrumental in creating collective dreams. They showed how the people could live without cars, without polluting the environment, without consuming mindlessly. The collective dream was so tantalizing, the fable so fantastic, that people wished for such a change. They went beyond what society trained them to be, they asked questions, they engaged with people and together they dreamt what then became reality through a collective and empathic collaboration.

If we sound drunken, and difficult to follow, then we ask, much like our *Idiot*, is it us or you? We find it difficult to follow the self-referential academic debate in journals or the ivory towers and the toothless criticism of the *status quo*. We find it difficult to follow a culture of

37 Mahatma Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi: An autobiography* (Delhi: Navajivan Publishing House, 1968).

architecture where the reduction to an image is celebrated and the failure to call out the naked emperor (meaning us, the architects).

To re-engage with politics, we simply ask architects for a radical engagement with the reality of the world, the reality of a soulless suburban street, the reality of a waterless shanty, the reality of public spaces only occupied by the rich, the reality of carbon-burning architecture and inhumane conditions under which architectural practices produce their spectacle (all those unpaid interns and long hours destroying family life). We simply ask them to be an *Idiot*, an *Activist* and a *Dreamer*.

We don't demand the impossible, this is the minimum that future generations demand of us to ensure a collective equitable existence.

REFERENCE LIST:

- Alves, Barbara. "Relocations: The Idiot as a Figure of Miscommunication." *Parse* 3 (2016).
- Bell, Daniel. *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books, 1974.
- Brott, Simone. "The Le Corbusier Scandal, Or, Was Le Corbusier a Fascist?" *Fascism* 6 (2) 2017: 196–227.
- Conn, Steven. *Americans against the city: Anti-urbanism in the Twentieth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Chaslin, François. *Un Corbusier*. Paris: Seuil, 2015.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, [1980] 2013.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Force of law: the metaphysical foundation of authority." In *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, edited by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld & David Carlson. Routledge, 1992.
- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *The Idiot*. London: Granta Books, [1874] 2003.
- Dunn, Kieffer. "Radical Praxis: Activism Within and Beyond Architecture". <https://medium.com/@KeeferDunn/radical-praxis-activism-within-and-beyond-architecture-a91f9f2f8e2a>, last accessed Sept 15, 2018.
- Escobar, Arturo. *Designs for the pluriverse : radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2018.
- Fisher, Thomas R. *In the Scheme of Things. Alternative Thinking on the Practice of Architecture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- Gandhi, Mahatma. *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi: An autobiography*. Delhi: Navajivan Publishing House, 1968.
- Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Hesse, Hermann. "Thoughts on *The Idiot* by Dostoevsky" [1919]. In *My belief: essays on life and art*, edited by Theodore Ziolkowski. London: Triad Paladin, 1974.
- Jarcy, Xavier. *Le Corbusier, un fascisme français*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2015.
- Leach, Neil. "Architecture or Revolution?" <https://neilleach.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/architecture-or-revolution.pdf>, last accessed Sept 15, 2018.
- Lodder, Christina. *El Constructivismo Ruso*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial Sa, 1988.
- Lukács, György. *The Destruction of Reason*. London: Humanities Press, 1981.
- McGuirk, Justin. *Radical Cities*. New York: Verso, 2016.
- Ockman, Joan. *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology*. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985.
- Perelman, Marc. *Le Corbusier: Une froide vision du monde*. Paris: Michalon, 2015.
- Rifkin, Jeremy. *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*. Penguin Group, 2009.
- Scarry, Elaine. *On beauty and being just*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Shafique, Tanzil. "Loneltopia: How Urbanism of Mass Destruction is Crushing the American Dream." *Journal of Urban Design and Mental Health*. 2 (2017).
- Snyder, Timothy. *On tyranny. Twenty lessons from the twentieth century*. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017.
- Sudjic, Deyan. *The Edifice Complex. How the Rich and Powerful Shape the World*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2005.
- Stengers, Isabelle. "The Cosmopolitical Proposal." In *Making things public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, 994-1003. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017.
- Trier, Lars von, Bodil Jørgensen, Jens Albinus, Anne Louise Hassing, Troels Lyby, and Nikolaj Lie Kaas. *The Idiots*. [London]: Umbrella Entertainment, [1998] 2004.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Turner, Paul Venable. *The Education of Le Corbusier*. New York: Garland Pub, 1977.

Twombly, Robert (ed.). *Louis Kahn: Essential Texts*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003.

Venturi, Robert. *Complejidad y contradicción en la arquitectura*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, [1966] 2014.

Welch, Celina R. "Mies van der Rohe's Compromise with the Nazis". *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Hochschule für Architektur und Bauwesen Weimar*. Ausgabe A 39, 1/2 (1993): 103-109.