The City as a Mess

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Introduction

This paper builds a speculative history of the city. Step by step, it presents the relationship between figures and ground and how it reflects on the policies of what became known as the public space.

After the rational subject author of the city – when formally figures relates to a ground – and the irrational subject author of the city – when figures relates to figures – I propose that the city is produced by all sorts of objects, like Legislation, roads, humans, bricks, political ideas, chemistry, economics, environmental conditions, artworks, electrical waves… The image of this new comprehension of the city is the Mess, a concept that I borrow from the sociological and philosophical work of Bruno Latour and John Law.

To relate it back to architecture, I list a series of formal characteristics of the Mess with the goal to create the image of the city that is not produced only by human authors.

Formal roots of the rational city

The problem of formal organization has a long history in the discipline of Architecture. Since its first western treatise, Vitruvius' *De Architectura Libri Decem,* to Corbusier definition of architecture [1] and until the Gestalt studies of psychology of form, Architecture was understood as a problem of how figures meet on a common ground.

Formal composition in urban scale is the byproduct of the emergence of differentiated class society, "when certain categories of work were no longer carried out by the people who worked the land but by others who were freed from this obligation and who were supported by the surplus produced by the cultivators."[2]

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[1] *"Architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light."* Le Corbusier, *Vers une Architecture,* 1923
[2] BENEVOLO, 1975

A new idea of the Public was then produced, requiring its spatial manifestation. The place of negotiation of public and private is, by definition, the ground. Traditionally, the ground is what constitutes a common ground where the rational citizen is able to take part politically in the polis. It's continuity in the renaissance city is only broken by the fortress walls that define what is inside the city, the space of the rational human being, and the outside, the space of uncontrolled nature. The wall has its functional role of protecting the city from the outside (the barbarians, the animals or the Other) but it has its symbolic role, creating a split between the space of rational control – the city - and the space of unexpected surprise – the wild.

The formal problems of the city were posed theoretically in Vitruvius' *De Architectura Libri Decem.* The roman builder proposed a set of formal problems for city planning:

1. *Ordenatio:* ordering of space according to quantity;
2. *Dispositio:* parts to whole relationship;
3. *Eurythmia:* proportion of inner parts;
4. *Symmetria:* complementarity of elements in a composition;
5. *Decore:* conformity with rules, customs and traditions;
6. *Distributione:* organization of building site and logistics

Each of these principles had direct application on the design of cities. With the rediscovery of Vitruvius in the 15th Century, it became explicit that cities started to be planned as machines. The Rational author plans "to bend nature to human utility", without recourse to any symbolical or mystic order.

The work of Albrecht Duerer was emblematic of this transformation, turning drawing into a scientific tool to reproduce natural forces to be controlled by humans. In his treatise of measure, he adopted the term diagram (what divides and makes visible, or "outline") to refer to sectioning of reality through perpendicular planes. This was a radical act of estrangement of reproduction of reality: instead of the vanishing point perspective of *construzione leggitima*, that

is always related to an observer, orthographic projection gave autonomy to the objects through non-humanistic view of reality. [3]

Through the means of this technique, objects could be experienced through pure rationality and do not require anymore a human eye to produce its own image. Besides this production of a new way of seeing reality independent from a human, another important characteristic of orthogonal projection is that it does not only represent objects in space but space of objects, not just figure on the ground, but the ground itself. In this kind of drawing, what is absent – the void of empty space – is made present.

With the development of orthographic projections, the emergence of the grid produced a spatial organization logic for the rational city, where circulation axis coincided with the public space, producing a public ground where the privately owned figures could sit. The grid produced an idea of homogeneous space, where its plots could be dealt as commodities. The rationality of ordering of the grid produced a very specific spatial organization of figures (privately owned buildings) on a ground (the shared public space).

Hong Kong as the problem of the Mass

As it's common in Architecture, pressures from social, political and economic systems have triggered formal problems development in the built environment that need to be thought *a posteriori.* Such is the case of Hong Kong, the small City-Estate land that presents urban density in levels without precedents. The city growth produced a new effect of figure to figure relationship that is similar with *Vacui Horror* of baroque art.

The original settlement, that followed topographical curves of the slopes, was substituted by the logic of the grid, sprawling large landfills. Massive figures occupy the whole plot, simply extruding its outline. Usually these figures receive public use besides being privately owned – shopping malls, office receptions, hotel lobbies. But this public use is different from the idea of the rational citizen of the *polis*. The inhabitant of these figures is the irrational subject, the consumer.

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[3] For more information on the implication of Duerer on urban planning, MARULLO, Francesco, *Logistics Takes Command,* in Log 35, Fall 2015

Above it, the air space is again commercialized, giving birth to skyscrapers which seats over the mall. Architecture becomes the ground for architecture.

The experience of the public in the city is not related anymore with its ground. The inhabitant circulates from figure to figure and it's common to pass through malls, hotel lobbies, office receptions and train stations to access other buildings. The connectivity of the public space in the ground, and its figure x ground relationship, is substituted by the three dimensional connectivity of passageways in different levels, producing the experience of a figure to figure relationship.

Hong Kong enhances three dimensional connectivity to such a degree that it eliminates reference to the ground altogether. The history of Urbanism across time and cultures, from built forms to open space, has been one of relationships of figure to ground. Hong Kong manifests a vision of continual figure to figure relationships. The city is a mass connected in 3 dimensions producing the effect of urban-scaled interior.

Connections between figures happens indifferent to the floor level, as an air conditioning ductwork. Instead of a ground, the city has connectivity - it's possible to walk without ever leaving a continuous network of elevated or underground passageways through interconnected shopping malls, train stations and office and hotel lobbies. The city is not anymore for the romantic and humanist idea of the citizen, but it's about the engagement of all kinds of objects, including humans. The public activities don't happen on the ground, but inside these privately owned figures. Political protests inside shopping malls. The city, thanks to its figure x figure relationship and 3d interconnectivity, can be understood as a Mass.

From Mass to Mess

The interest on figure x figure relationship has its political face, its goal is to demonstrate that the ground, that used to be the public, lost its social value and function. It's already proven in the case of Hong Kong. However, its figure x figure relationship is still too organized. You are still able to recognize the characters of the figures. What I would like to propose is the production of Mess, as a new kind of spatial organization.

The idea of the Mess was introduced in the field of Sociology and Philosophy by Bruno Latour and John Law. I would like to summarize their ideas to produce my own understanding of what it means in the field of Architecture and Urban Design.

Bruno Latour, on his Actor-Network Theory, proposed the concept of the Imbroglio, a confusion where it's not possible to see who is acting in who, but only actors on a network interacting.

> *"Sociologists are often accused of treating actors like so many puppets manipulated by social forces. But it appears that puppeteers, much like sopranos, possess pretty different ideas about what it is that makes their puppets do things. Although marionettes offer, it seems, the most extreme case of direct causality—just follow the strings—puppeteers will rarely behave as having total control over their puppets. They will say queer things like 'their marionettes suggest them to do things they will have never thought possible by themselves' When a force manipulates another, it does not mean that it is a cause generating effects; it can also be an occasion for other things to start acting. The hand still hidden in the Latin etymology of the word 'manipulate' is a sure sign of full control as well as a lack of it. So who is pulling the strings? Well, the puppets do in addition to their puppeteers. It does not mean that puppets are controlling their handlers—this would be simply reversing the order of causality—and of course no dialectic will do the trick either. It simply means that the interesting question at this point is not to decide who is acting and how but to shift from a certainty about action to an uncertainty about action—but to decide what is acting and how"[4]*

Latour is arguing that there's a diversity of actors in the game of the real, *"very few of whom look like humans."[5]* For him, all these actors are always related with some kind of support, which he calls Figuration.

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[4] LATOUR, 2005, p60
[5] LATOUR, 2005, p50

> *"What is doing the action is always provided in the account with some flesh and features that make them have some form or shape, no matter how vague"*[6]

For Latour, the imbroglio is a hybridization of different disciplines that needs to be negotiated in the network: *"Press the most innocent aerosol button and you'll be heading for the Antarctic, and from there to the University of California at Irvine, the mountain ranges of Lyon, the chemistry of inert gases, and then maybe to the United Nations"*[7]

For us, Latour is still respecting the figurativeness of each object and reinforcing the importance of the ground, even understanding it as a network or field. For him, even when the figures have a vague figuration, it's still possible to recognize it somehow and its connectivity, or cartography, can still be mapped.

Another sociologist, John Law, proposes another figure of language to deal with the real[8]. For him, in Social Sciences, there's a privilege of one understanding of the real, which is characterized by:

1. *Primitive out-thereness*: There's something Out-There, beyond ourselves;
2. *Independency:* Whatever is there, it's relatively independent of us;
3. *Anteriority:* What is real precedes our existence somehow;
4. *Definiteness:* What is out there is precise;
5. *Singularity:* There's a single reality.

But, this kind of metaphysics is unable to deal with the majority of social relations. For him, most of the things "don't quite fit". We should better understand reality as a Mess. Taking a Post-Structuralist detour, Law introduces the critique of the metaphysics of presence: There's still the principle of Out-thereness, but this out-there is not independent from us, because it's built, and is not anterior to us, for the same reason. Eventually, it can be built to be made definite and singular, but there's no reason why reality should be like that.

To deal with such a Messy Reality, Law proposes, in a derridanean way, that we should think about the possibilities of Allegories, where you always mean

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[6] LATOUR, 2005, p53
[7] LATOUR, 1991, p2
[8] LAW, 2006

something else or more than what is being said. It's the art of decoding more meanings than what is literally there, producing multiplicities, indefinitinesses and undecidabilities.

His example couldn't be more architectonic from a phenomenological point-of-view. When writing his report about a study of the treatment of alcohol-induced liver diseases in the United States of America, this is how he portrays the messiness he found:

> "Finding the door is difficult enough. In a terrace, between two cheap store-fronts in a run-down part of Sandside. The kind of street only three blocks from the big store that doesn't make it. That doesn't make it at all. That smells of poverty. That speaks of hopelessness. It is a nondescript door. Unwelcoming. A tiny spy glass. An inconspicuous notice. Nothing very obvious. Nothing very appealing. We are ringing the door-bell. Is anyone listening? Has anyone heard? Dimly we hear the sound of footsteps. We sense that we are being looked at through the spy glass. Checking us out. And then the door opens. And we're being welcomed through the door by a middle-aged woman. To find that there isn't a proper lobby."[9]

He produces what Levi Bryant would call an Onto-Cartography, or the mapping of different beings. The study of the health system can't deal simply with problems of health, but it's reality is a Mess of streets, social etiquette adequateness, stores, poverty, door-bells, people hearing or not, footsteps…

> "Instead, we're facing a flight of stairs. Carpeted, cheaply. Yes, shoddily. So we've been admitted. We are, yes, Vicky Singleton and John Law from Lancaster University. And now, we're being led up a flight of stairs. And the building is starting to make an impression. An impression of make-do."[10]

Carpet, stairs, researchers, authors, educational institutions and architectural effects ensembles in a not clear way to produce the multiple realities.

> "Of scarce resources. Of inadequacy. For we're being told people have to come up all those flights of stairs. Some of them can hardly walk through drink. And some can hardly walk, full stop. Up this long flight of stairs. For

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[9] LAW, 2006, p13
[10] LAW, 2006, p13

we're in the kind of Victorian building where the rooms on the ground floor are twelve feet high. Big fancy three-story houses. Built at a time of optimism. At a time of some kind of prosperity. Which, however, has now drained away.

So the clients need to negotiate these stairs, turn around the half landing, up a further short flight, and then they are on the first floor. Next to the room that is the general office, library, meeting room, leaflet dispensary, the place with the filing cabinets, the tables, the chairs. People are milling about. At the moment no clients, but a researcher who is smoking. Several social workers, the manager, community psychiatric nurses coming and going.

The leaflets and the papers are spilling over everything. Brown cardboard boxes. Half-drunk mugs of coffee. New mugs of coffee for us. Clearing a bit of space. Not too much. There isn't too much space. Files and pamphlets are pushed to one side. Two more chairs. And the numbers in the room keep on changing as clients arrive, or people go out on call, or the phone rings. One client hasn't turned up. Relief at this. The pressure is so great. And then there's another with alcohol on his breath. A bad sign. The staff are so keen to talk. Keen to tell us about their work. Keen to talk about its frustrations and its complexities."[11]

The argument is that the reality can't be read in the neat world of rationality, but there's always something more on the text, something *withdrawn,* that's vague, multiple, incoherent, loose, shifting. Reality can't be made neat and tidy.

It's a politics of the real: 'There is more in heaven and earth, Horatio, than is dreamed of in your philosophy.' What start to call for my attention in this patch of text is that most of elements that he uses to produce an image of reality belongs to the world of building and Architecture. It looks like what Architecture can do so well is to produce the image of the real, doesn't matter how weird and strange is this real.

It's possible to note the difference of the overall formalism of (post-)structuralist Imbroglio and Law's Mess. Instead of overall organizations where events happen,

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[11] LAW, 2006, p13

there's a loose and fast coupling of things-for-whatever, including non-human objects.

Law's description of the experience of the health clinic is similar with a listing of objects. Ian Bogost defends that the act of listing is an ontological work. It shows that the real is composed by objects that has a beginning and an end. "*Lists help underscore those separations turning the flowing legato of a literary account into the jarring stecatto of real being. List offer an antidote to the obsession of deleuzian becoming, a preference for continuity and smoothness instead of sequentiality and fitfulness*"[12].

For Bogost, "*A Mess is not a pile, which is neatly organized even if situated in an inconvenient place underfoot. A Mess is not an elegant thing of higher order*"[13], as chaos would be understood in Complexity Theory. "*A mess is a strew of inconvenient and sometimes repellent things. A mess is an accident. A mess is a thing that you find where you don't want it. We recoil at it, yet there it is, and we must deal with it.*"[14]

If Latour's Network is too orderly, Law's Mess is too disorderly. It's a way of sprawling objects to draw new cartographies, like flat ontology. "*It posits a lurid of intractable picture of the massive dispersion of beings, but then it provides no common ground that unites them*"[15]

The image of the real

The experience between objects is always *withdrawn*. Graham Harman argues that an object can never be fully grasped, it's not reducible because it always produces effects that can't be experienced by other objects. It's not just the rational subject (neat realism) or the irrational subject (metaphysics of presence) that can't access the object in its full data set, but even the objects can't access completely each other.

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[12] BOGOST, 2012
[13] BOGOST, 2012, p20
[14] BOGOST, 2012, p21
[15] BOGOST, 2012, p21

Architecture can take advantage of the Mess considering that it's a spatial organization where entities from all different statuses meets and blend. It can produce a new architecture where objects like humans, data services, capital and products inhabit the same ontological plane.

As Architecture produced the image of the real for the rational man in the Renaissances' city, the image of the real for the irrational consumer on Hong Kong, it can now produce the image of real for a new understanding of us: just one more object on a flat ontology. This is a city as the negotiation of all objects, like legislation, Architecture, bricks, health systems, cars, Capital, anarchism, in between the endless list of objects that exists. Result of interactions in the flat ontology, the formal manifestation of the city is the Mess.

Conclusion

Architecture, through all its history, is by excellence the discipline that produces the idea of the real, doesn't matter how weird this reality should be. As shown, it made real the idea of rationalization of the city against the wild. In Southeast Asia, it produced a completely different image of reality, with the endless interiority of figure to figure.

Now it's time for architecture to produce the image of the Mess. Formally speaking, these are its physiognomies:

- *It has no uniting ground:* the image of the plane for flat ontology should look more like the image of the point of Bogost's tiny ontology[16] or Harman's black holes.
- *Autonomy of whole and parts:* there's no whole where the parts respond to (top-down) and there's no emergent behavior of the parts (bottom-up). There's just objects interacting with each other in an irreducible manner producing local coherences but not global. As every object, the whole is made of its part, but this whole does more things than its parts alone. Both whole and part are autonomous.

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[16] The idea of something "flat" is always related with a two dimensional plane. Planes, by definition, are able to produce differences according to how each location of it is charged. Bogost introduces the idea of the Tiny ontology because there should not be differences in the ontological status of beings, arguing that it should be more like a point than a plane. It should be like a black hole where everything meets.

- *The parts have no identity:* There's no figuration, in Latour's sense. Every part can't be completely experienced because the relation between any object is withdrawn.
- *It's in constant construction:* Sylvia Lavin, in a conversation with Eric Owen Moss, talks about Culver City: "*it's messy image that there's more than one thing and that was totally resistant to any form of composition*"[17]*.* She adds one more point: it's a constant self-making city, there's no final image, it's in eternal construction.
- *There's no privilege of the Human:* Moss replies that the physical structure of Los Angeles, that includes Culver City, is made of *"old trucks, riverbed, freeways, the power grid, they're enormous pieces of infra-structure"* that produces what Lavin calls *"a collision of things that in fact it would make it impossible to think about a master plan in any traditional coherent way."* So, objects like infrastructure plays a role as important as the human author, the legal system, economical exchanges and technological development.
- *There's no uniting envelope:* there's no surface that produces an identity of the whole. The spatial perception and the visual reading of the Mess is always fragmentary.

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