

THE VIOLENCE OF THE PLANNED

It was in Brazil that I sensed most clearly the pathos of the planned.



I had tumbled out the plane after nineteen hours of travel, wanting nothing more than some exotic cocktail and then bed. Instead, I had been taken by Ana and Silke direct to the favela of Aglomerado da Serra in Belo Horizonte. I think that the intended shock was their form of jetlag cure. It worked. Their aim was not to romanticise the favela (how can one except at a distance?) but to expose me to its internal dynamics, and in particular the extraordinary capacities of improvisation, negotiation and

resourcefulness in the face of scarcity. Well that is what I saw when given the right lenses to look through.¹

What the local government saw was mess: social mess, aesthetic mess, political mess, and just plain mess. This mess was counter to the norms prescribed by institutional rules, and so they employed professionals to tidy up that mess. They brushed aside a sector of the favela with apparent ease; the physical bonding was indeed fragile, knocked together as it was with improvised technologies. But what they overlooked was the strength of the social bonding, which was so indelibly tied to the spatial organisation. When these professionals came to replace the physical, there was a dramatic overcompensation in reaction to the existing conditions in the favela.

No drains in the favela :: *massive drains in the new quarter.*

Shifting property boundaries in the favela, the result of endless social negotiations :: *strict demarcation in the new quarter that shuts down that social interaction.*

Fuzzy definitions of inside and outside in the favela, tuned to the climate and liquid life :: *strict inside in the new quarter, baking in baked cement walls.*

And so on.

The production of space in the favela, unmediated as it is by professional intrusion, is an almost direct expression of a particular social organisation. The pathos comes when the professionals intervene, and not only misunderstand that social organisation but do everything possible to eradicate it. The marks of the favela's self-organisation are in so many ways intolerable to the modern mind, because they evolve in ways beyond control or reason. If such an agglomeration of people can not only survive but actually organise itself despite everything, then where does this leave the professional or the politician? The spaces of the favela are an all too visible reminder of institutional impotence, and the poignancy of this direct spatial expression too

¹ The lenses were provided by Ana Paula Baltazar and Silke Kapp, and are best summarised in Silke Kapp, Ana Paula Baltazar, and Denise Morado, "Architecture as Critical Exercise: Little Pointers Towards Alternative Practices," *Field: A Free Journal for Architecture* 2, no. 1 (2008): 7-30.

much to bear. Hence their official designation as “abnormal agglomerations” by the Brazilian authorities in the 1950s.²

It was in Brazil that I sensed most clearly the violence of the planned.

There is violence in the favelas, some of it mythical, some of it all too real. The violence is manifested through through blood, guns, poverty, abuse. These visible symptoms of violence are unsettling to our liberal consciences, and so are adopted as signs of what is wrong with the world. It is a violence that Slavoj Žižek calls subjective, in so much as it impinges, in all its hurtful obviousness, on our human sensibility. But what Žižek argues is that this very visibility of subjective violence distracts from, and thus masks, underlying forms of violence, or what he terms ‘objective’- the systemic violence he finds in our institutional systems, a violence that is much less visible because of its very normality. Systemic violence is, he argues, “the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems.”³

Žižek’s dialectic of violence is too slippery to apply direct to the little story of the favela, but in the spaces of the unplanned favela and the planned quarter one can sense the partial evidence of these two forms of violence and their consequences. On the one hand the visible symptoms of subjective violence in the favela, so shocking that they must be eradicated or turned away from. On the other hand the invisible violence of the planned, which so insidiously determines the lives of those planned for.

But how, I hear you ask, can the actions of surely well-intentioned professionals be designated as violent? This is a rhetorical trope too far!

I am not, of course, accusing professionals of intentional violence. Architects, almost uniquely among the creative sector, always start with positive intent. Where a poet might write about grief, a novelist construct stories of angst, a composer summon

2 Daniela Fabricius, “Resisting Representation: The Informal Geographies of Rio de Janeiro,” *Harvard Design Magazine* 28 (2008): 7.

3 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile, 2008), 1.

up torrents of emotion, no architect sets out to make the world a worse place. It is counter-intuitive to intentionally construct misery. However, the issue is not so much with the sometimes naivety of these good intents, but the value system within which they are framed and enacted. I have argued elsewhere that it is a value system that is still in thrall to the basic tenets of the modern – the will to order, to control, to stamp out contingency.⁴ The construction of a better world is thus too often associated with the construction of an ordered world. While these tenets may have a ‘self-evident’ logic in their initiation (self-evident because self-determined and so self-fulfilling), their consequences are perhaps less edifying; indeed violent. Think of Captain Ahab, that harbinger of modernity in Melville’s *Moby Dick*. - “all my means are sane, my motive and my object mad” – and then think of an architect. My means – let’s say the drains in the planned quarter – are indeed sane, but my objects – those segregated and segregating buildings – are quite mad. Who can argue with drainage? But that invisible logic masks the madness of the effect.

DADASCAPES

This typical architectural behaviour and its consequences are magnified when one moves from the scale of the building to the scale of the city. Cities, in all their uncontrollable dynamics, in all their differences, in all their ambivalences, throw up endless challenges to the ordering tendencies of the architect. The urban unruly is an affront, and that affront must be banished or at best controlled, not worked with. One might think that the very complexity of cities would in turn lead to a more complex set of instruments with which to design the city, but strangely the reverse is true. Under the urban magnifying glass the causes of professional distress are ever more evident, and in consequence the professional solutions to ease that distress more ruthless. The complexity of cities is not met with subtlety, but simplicity. Le Corbusier’s call for surgery on the city, rather than medicine,⁵ is an apt metaphor for modernity’s war on urban ambivalences.

4 Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009).

5 Le Corbusier, *Précisions* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), 172-174.

If conditions are abnormal, when measured against the ordered rule of modern thinking, then they must be normalised through radical measures. This is achieved by bringing architectural instruments and value systems up to the city. These instruments – of ordering, of beautifying, of measuring, of detailing – are suspect enough at the scale of the building, because their effect is only temporary: the contingencies that the instruments would wish to suppress inevitably come back to haunt the impossible purity of architecture. If people have just about dreamt themselves into believing in the autonomy of the individual building, that dream turns nightmarish in the city, as conflicting forces rub out the pretend order of the designer as fast as the marks are made.

A gap opens up between the urban instruments (and the professional values that operate them) and the urban condition (and the human differences that exist within it). It is a tragic gap because its effects are quite so manifest. I don't particularly care that Mies van de Rohe's Dr. Farnsworth was rather uncomfortable in her icon.⁶ I do care intensely when this discomfort, the effect of the impoverished value system and reductive instruments, is exponentially multiplied to the urban scale and becomes a matter of millions living out the divided lives in divided cities. It is an effect that has been grossly exaggerated in the hysteria of the early years of this century, as the juggernaut of the capitalist marketplace drove up swathes of new cities in which the 'glamour' of the formal, planned, half was directly mirrored in the anguish of the informal half. Dubai, the new Mumbai, the Pearl River Delta, all spatialise the conditions of capitalist production in a manner so spectacular that we almost forget the prescience of Engels' walks through the backstreets of Manchester, where he first so clearly identified the effects of capital on spatial production.⁷

In our comfortable European salons we observed this distant development with a mixture of disdain and envy. At the same time we despised the UAE in all its vulgarity but needed its extraordinary capacity as a potential playground for the

6 See Alice T. Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House* (Yale University Press, 2007), 126-150.

7 Friedrich Engels, *The Condition Of The Working Class In England* (London: Penguin Classics, 1987).

rolling out of our theories. The transfer of parametric urbanisms, Datascares, space syntaxes and other urban instruments from the refined pages of books to actuality happened with astonishing speed. What is interesting about all these contemporary urbanisms is quite how firmly they are caught within the frame of Enlightenment thinking, in which analysis based on 'rational' principles becomes the base for instrumental proposition. Take Datascares. Pure modern: a faux-sophistication of multiple gathering of facts in an attempt to harness them, and the magical conversion of them into form. But the direct, instrumental, shift from fact to form is clearly absurd: the selection of data is inevitably reductive of the complex dynamics of life, and the algorithms to convert the data into form guided more by aesthetic preference than by objective measure.⁸ They are actually Dadascares, but Winy Maas of the Dutch architects MVRDV, who developed the term, does not allow us to see them as such because he is so smart and so witty. Pig City! How we all laughed at that! Lowlanders redeemed by smelly animals! How funny is that? But don't laugh; this is serious, this is sustainable, the facts show it. And so on. Bludgeoned by an excess of data, and seduced by the conveniently fresh form that resulted from it, we lost our senses. We sat on our hands in reviews while earnest architectural students used the same late Enlightenment tools to grapple with everything from rubbish systems to solar systems (but not buildings, how passé are they?), and did not have the heart to point out that the waste bins were rather clumsy and the space ships plain absurd. Dadascares. As architects uploaded their hard disks onto paper and called the resulting piles 'books'. Dadascares.

But, as my teachers always used to tell me, that is not clever, and it is not funny. Captain Ahab was very prescient about the condition of modernity, but the flux of hypermodernity was beyond even his divining powers. We are now at the point where our means are insane, our motives and our objects madly distracting. Something has to give. We need to find new tools and language to bring to the city. The collection of empirical data or the use of technically determined models is not, of course, redundant acts just because they are late Enlightenment acts. The issue arises

8 MVRDV are clearer about the aesthetic impulse of Datascares – statistics "have an aesthetic appeal of their own" – than some of the cruder followers in architecture schools around the world.

with which facts one chooses to gather, how one engages with them critically, and then how that interpretation might inform the production of the built environment. Too often empirical data or software-driven tools are merely used for their potential to create ‘innovative’ form or to give a semblance of objective authority to architectural gestures, or else allied to an ironic take on contemporary political conditions.⁹ In all cases we are left in a state of equivocation as to how to respond to these conditions. Stances are not taken, because apparently the work is done by the facts.

Architecture, as stuff, cannot be used as a critical tool in its own right as a means of overcoming this equivocation (because that would vest too much significance in architecture as stuff), but the architect in his or her role as spatial agent,¹⁰ is bidden to take a stance against equivocation, otherwise we end merely perpetuating or, worse, glorifying the politics of capital and social injustice. Just because the morality of the modernism was so misplaced in its association of order and beauty as vehicles for redemption, does not mean that ethics should be dismissed *tout court*. Quite the opposite: as the instruments of the modern have been found wanting in their political and moral equivocation, so we need to engage in new ethically motivated interpretations of urban conditions.

LIQUID CATALYST

Let’s start with language, that instrument which Žižek identifies as one of the key components of objective, institutionalised violence. Cities, typically, are described in need of renewal, reconstruction, redevelopment. Urban renewal. Urban Reconstruction. Urban Redevelopment. That *re-* is a telling adjunct to use, designating as it does repetition: to new again, to construct again, to develop again –

9 Thus Rem Koolhaas, the most assiduous and intelligent documenter of the contemporary, and one of the most subtle gatherers of empirical evidence, states that “we would consider maybe 70% of our output highly ironic.” Of course there is irony in even stating a percentage, but this does not avoid the charge of equivocation. See: David Cunningham and Jon Goodbun, “Propaganda Architecture: interview with Rem Koolhaas and Reinier de Graaf,” *Radical Philosophy* 154 (2009): 35-47.

10 Jeremy Till and Tatjana Schneider, “Beyond Discourse: Notes on Spatial Agency,” *Footprint* 4 (2009): 97-111.

as if we got it wrong the first time round and need another go, but not so wrong that we don’t cling to the promise of those words: new, generate, develop. They are words of the modern. “To start again from the foundations,” says Descartes, the founding figure of the modern, and with it initiates and justifies the storm of progress under whose clouds we still live.

The benign nature of terms such as urban renewal actually hides the potential violence of their modernising implications, in so much as to renew implies that what is there already is in some way unacceptable and must to a greater or lesser extent be effaced. These terms are often applied to places that have slipped out of the frame of rectitude – those places on the urban periphery, the bits with the underclass, of diverse communities, the ‘bad’ neighbourhoods, areas of social and industrial decay. In renewing, regenerating, redeveloping these areas the metaphorical implication is that they, and the people who dwell there, have nothing to offer in themselves and so it is necessary to start again, from the foundations. This is not to say that what is already there is necessarily good – many contexts for renewal are physically and socially in a terrible condition – but rather that it is not so irredeemably bad that clearance is inevitable. To renew the city as formal structure is to invoke the promise of freshness, but to renew the city as social construct is to cast stigma on what is there already, rather than work with its very particularity and potentiality.

This suggests that we need to find new language to describe our cities; words that eschew the modernist dialectics of new/old, developed/primitive, generating/stultifying and formal/informal, because the first term always overshadows the second. It may be argued that in some recent discourse the informal has escaped the hold of its partner, the formal. Thus urbanists such as Ananya Roy and Nezar Al Sayyad hold the informal up as a new urban paradigm, and Rem Koolhaas finds virtues in its anti-modernist dysfunction.¹¹ But the danger of this is that designers will appropriate the informal as physical condition alone, offering new shapes of reified

11 Nezar Al Sayyad, “Urban Informality as a ‘New’ Way of Life,” in *Nezar Alsayyad, Urban Informality* (Lexington Books, 2004). Koolhaas’ analysis of Lagos with his Harvard students has attracted criticism as a form of ghetto tourism, but his analysis of the informal remains acute, if unresolved in terms of its productive implications.

messiness and new stringencies for the post-crash world of austerity. In fact the power of the informal lies, as Al Sayyad notes, as a means of “understanding urban culture”, and thus exactly not in the potential for aestheticising it. While it is all too easy to squint one’s eyes in the favelas and see Tuscan villages – poverty appropriated as aesthetic – the real lessons lie not in its static form, but in its dynamic set of negotiations, and how then the professional may or may not join in these ongoing exchanges.

It is the understanding of the city as a set of dynamic forces rather than as static forms that demands us to reconsider the language of how we approach it. The standard use of words such as ‘tools’ and ‘instruments’ is perhaps inappropriate, given that they bring with them associations with equipment that might be used to adapt the physical structure of something - equipment such as roads, buildings, drainage, axes, and urban blocks. More productive for our purposes is Ivan Illich’s comparison of the tools of industrial society with what he calls ‘tools of conviviality’. For Illich, tools are much more than pieces of equipment: they include institutions, schools, medical systems, all of which under the conditions of industrial society lead to a “manipulation of the individual”. The operations of professional institutions, including architects and urban designers, can be seen as part of this manipulative tendency. In contrast, the tools for conviviality enable “autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment” in contrast to “the conditioned response of persons to the demands made on them by others”.¹² Convivial tools are those that “give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision. Industrial tools deny this possibility to those who use them and they allow their designers to determine the meaning and expectations of others. Most tools today cannot be used in a convivial fashion.”¹³ Again, architects and designers align with the character of industrial tools in the way that they attempt to determine the meaning and structure of urban form, often over the desires of the dwellers.

12 Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (Harper & Row, 1973), 11.

13 Ibid., 21.

Illich’s radical optimism lies in his hope for the autonomous and self-determining acts of individuals to effect change for the better, away from institutional intervention. Although laudable in its intent it is questionable whether such autonomy could, or indeed should, be achieved. The complexity of the city, and the necessity of considering the relations between urban forces, challenge the validity of autonomy, as do the unacceptable living conditions of the relatively autonomous informal settlements, of slums. To dismiss the contribution of professional intelligence is potentially to throw the baby out with the institutional bathwater. However, for that intelligence to be deployed appropriately, and in tune with Illich’s general aspirations for conviviality, requires a manifest shift in values and ways of working.

The Italian designer and scholar Ezio Manzini makes the point well about how design needs to adapt to cope with the conditions of late modernity, conditions that Zygmunt Bauman identifies as “liquid”.¹⁴ Manzini writes: “Design was born and has developed its conceptual and operational tools in a world that looked simple, solid and limitless. This triad of concepts has been swept away by the force of new phenomena: by the discovery of system complexity, by the need to learn how to navigate in the fluidity of events, and, today, with reference to the transition towards sustainability, by the emergence of limits.”¹⁵ Most bathetic (in the sense of slipping from the sublime to the trivial) are the designers who attempt to freeze the liquidity in the production of ‘liquid’ architecture: the parametric urbanists who confuse complexity of form with complexity of thought, as the true banality of their designs is barely hidden under the gloss of the surface. Manzini’s approach is to work with the fluidity, but not through its physicality but through its sociality. The initial attention of the designer is not turned to the production of the objects in the name of technical and aesthetic innovation, but rather to “social innovation and (then) propose products and services to effectively enable its realisation.”¹⁶

14 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

15 Ezio Manzini, Stuart Walker, and Barry Wylant, *Enabling Solutions For Sustainable Living* (Manitoba: University of Calgary Press, 2008), x.

16 Ibid., 21.

For Manzini, a prime role of the designer is to empower others, and act as a facilitator in the distribution of design skills and thinking. This is rather different from the approach of participatory design in which, at best, others participate with the professionals or, at worst, are invited to make token gestures that the professional may or may not choose to work with.¹⁷ In liquid design, on the other hand, the designers bring to the table not their professionalism but their spatial intelligence as a catalyst to release the latent spatial intelligence of others, and then use their know-how to enable the implementation of the social and spatial innovations that then arise. Manzini's own work a good example of this in operation, for instance in his Sustainable Everyday Project which collects together examples of how people have intervened to make their lives that little bit better through, among other projects, food production schemes, communal living, and transport sharing.¹⁸ Manzini and his collaborators do not here act as designers in the classic sense of the word; rather, they are facilitators of social innovation and co-creators of the designerly aspects of this innovation. More 'architectural' is the inspiring work of Elemental in Chile, and Lacaton Vassal and Exyst in France.¹⁹ Here the designer acts as a catalyst – a liquid catalyst to accommodate the contingencies of any condition – which liberates the desires and enables the needs of others; a very different operation from that of the manipulation by professional tools or the violence of the planned.

THE URBAN WEAVE

Most of these examples operate at a relatively small scale, so the question remains as to whether the accumulation of multiple catalytic actions is enough to constitute a resilient urban future. The answer has to be that they are a necessary but not sufficient solution, because cities are also about connections. As we have seen

17 see Jeremy Till, "The Negotiation of Hope," in *Architecture and Participation* (London: Routledge, 2005), 23-44.

18 See www.sustainable-everyday.net

19 For these and others, go to www.spatialagency.net, a compilation of examples of spatial agency collected as part of research project by Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till.

above, the normal thrust of urban language is one of overwriting existing conditions in an attempt to refresh them. This overwriting often constitutes an erasure, particularly of the unseemly elements that in all their multiple diversity do not fit standard patterns. We have also seen the impossibility of this rush of renewal, as the city wells up to stain the freshest of marks.

Surely it is better, instead, to work with, rather than over, these divergencies? The metaphor I want to suggest here is that of weaving. This is not in the Semperian sense of weaving as material stuff,²⁰ but of weaving as an act of working the warp and weft so that the whole is much greater than the sum of the parts. The warp is the fabric of the city as found, the weft is made up of the catalytic acts that run through and negotiate with the given. Some of the lines of the weft work across the scale of the city, for example the bus system in the Brazilian city of Curitiba, where the mayor Jaime Lerner instigated a wholesale change in the urban fabric through the implementation of an ambitious transport and sustainability strategy, with in particular a huge investment in bus infrastructure. Others are very localised, for instance the urban farms of Havana where local communities have come together around the idea of productive landscapes in the heart of the Cuban capital.²¹ All of them are necessarily adaptive to what is there already.

Adapting is an inevitable consequence of architecture's dependency. The standard response to architecture's openness to the other forces and dependencies is to either deny them or attempt to control them. In the sharp light of institutional control notions such as adapting and negotiating are seen as weak and compromising of professional authority. But in the urban weave, adapting and negotiating are seen as not only inevitable but also positive, because the warp of the given conditions – of neighbourhoods, of infrastructure, of connections – provide multiple opportunities to seize the moment. Hegel's definition of contingency - the "unity of actuality and

20 For the nineteenth century architectural theorist Gottfried Semper, weaving was one of four exemplary arts that formed the primordial basis for architectural production.

21 Best documented in *André Viljoen, Katrin Bohn, And Joe Howe, Continuous Productive Urban Landscapes* (Elsevier, 2005).

possibility”²² – sets up contingency as a condition to be dismissed, because the openness of that possibility is too much for the philosopher of reason to tolerate. But that phrase, the unity of actuality and possibility, is the essence of urban weaving: the actuality of the warp with the possibility of the weft, and the designer acting as the co-catalyst for the release of the possibility. For the modern mind, actuality is something to be worked over; for the contingent mind it is something to be worked with. Far from adapting and negotiating being cast as weaknesses and threats, as they are to the modern mind, in the contingent world of the urban weave they seized as strengths and opportunities.

If weaving is traditionally aligned with the female, then this sensibility acts as a useful counter to the urban tool of the masterplan. Where the masterplan, in its gendered language, and its method, is too clearly associated with the imposition of power, weaving is necessarily about a subtle working of warp and weft. If the warp is given, then the weft, as it weaves in and out, can never overpower the warp, but it can and does adjust and animate it. And if the masterplan often turns towards an aesthetic clarity – all those grids, axes, blocks, figures and grounds – as a signal of its authority, then the weave disassociates itself from instant aesthetic satisfaction, and offers up something which bears longer contemplation at the scale of both the whole and the local.

The gendered, and thus diminished, status of weaving in relation to architecture is made all too clear at the birth of modernism in the Bauhaus, when Gropius suggested to the Council of Masters that “selection should be more rigorous right from the start, particularly in the case of the female sex, already over-represented in terms of numbers.” He also recommended that no “unnecessary experiments” should be made and so women should be sent direct from the Vorkurs (initial six month training) to the weaving workshop – the unnecessary experiment apparently denoting the taking of women from their traditional craft into the male world of architecture. Within years no women were admitted to architecture.²³ But now, ninety

22 Issues of contingency are discussed in *Science of Logic*, Vol. 1, Book2, Section 3, Chapter 2A. The quote is from: G.W.F Hegel, *Science of Logic* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969), 545.
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years later, as the limitations of the modern have been so exposed, so Gropius’ arrant sexism and associated values should be consigned to the dustbin, and weaving claim its rightful place as an metaphor and means to deal with our turbulent times.

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