

This paper investigates the limitations of normal representations of urban space. It suggests that the formal, scalar and graphic techniques that are often employed- diagrammatic, large scale, and rationally orientated - lead to a detached view of the city in which a series of social and political issues are excluded. The paper proposes an investigation of the city at a smaller scale, looking at fragments and urban miniatures. It is at the smaller scale that the personal can be viewed as political, that the particular incident can be viewed as part of a wider structure, and that the body is seen not as a diagrammatic object but as the subject of conflicting forces. The paper concludes that the urban miniature is a pedagogical method of revealing the 'hazardous play of dominations' that shape our cities.

#### URBAN REPRESENTATION

The way that we conceive of and eventually make our cities, and the buildings that constitute them, is to a large extent determined by the way that we represent them. It is therefore continually surprising to find how limited the methods of urban representation are, and how similar they are across cultures. Taking the Nietzsche maxim, 'we only know what we make', it follows that if the method of making is limited, then so will be what we know. This myopia has particularly worrying effects in the design of our cities.

The standard method of architectural production is still enthralled by the classical model - stable, unified and ordered within a coherent system. Because the system is essentially rational, it demands a linear trajectory of investigation and production. A typical architectural project thus proceeds in a steady manner from the scale of the city through the scale of the building to the scale of the architectural detail. At each stage along this route, particular issues are investigated and kept within the exclusive territory of the relevant scale - a limitation exacerbated by the particular representational techniques employed at each stage. The standard set of professional drawings is mimicked in the schools, with the site plan (1:2000 to 500) holding the real power as the forum for urban discussions, the building plan (1:200 to 50) fostering functionalism and inherent meaning, and the detail (1:20 to 5) assuring technical competence. It is in the nature of linear processes that decisions made at an

early stage determine what follows. The reading of the city at a large scale is thereby privileged.

This method of urban investigation assumes certain tendencies. As in the Renaissance Ideal City, the method of representation conspires with what is being represented to produce an alliance of exclusion. The formal devices of the figure ground, the diagram, the zone and the type all contain the investigation within tidy boundaries and engender a certain type of quasi-scientific analysis, in which questions of quantity are addressed before those of quality.

Eventually the city is reduced to a series of codes in which the issue of content is bypassed. The codes are by their very nature reductive and exclusive. The scale excludes the realm of the body, the graphic excludes the social and political, and the rational method excludes the imaginative, the suppressed & the irrational. The city as a master plan is not seen as a melting pot of inhabitable differences, but as a system which is there to be controlled. The authority of the large scale plan is ruthless in what it ignores, suppresses or overrules. In these circumstances, designers see themselves not as citizens but as detached orderers. The will to order is of such a strength that, even if an ordering system is not immediately apparent in an existing urban situation, abstract codes and methods will be employed so as to reveal one - or in fact impose one. Whilst the intentions behind the ordering may be benign and well-founded, their method of operation is not. The removal of the operator from a personal involvement in their construct inevitably leads to a structure of power being imposed.

However, such methods of investigation remain the norm within architecture schools. Their perceived instrumental basis makes them more accessible as models of instruction than the messier discourse of the social and political arena. A set of urban strategies (typological, formal, quantifiable) are legitimated through intellectual reasoning, but in fact manifest themselves as procedural methods. The teacher is placed in a position of power as master of the method, whilst the student is not able to develop individual responsibility or awareness under the imposition of rational structures.

Whilst the influence of political structures on urban development is the subject of much discussion at the theoretical level, techniques of representing these

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structures and engaging with them as designers are not yet fully formulated (beyond seeing them as issues of technical or rational procedure). It is necessary therefore to develop methods of investigation and representation which can deal with the content of the city and its political and social life - methods which move beyond the detached & quantifiable and place the designer within the contingencies of life on the ground. One such method may be the Urban Miniature.

## THE MINIATURE

The miniature has a literary legacy in which its ability to release the imagination is championed. Gulliver is described in an incomplete field, but once the scale is established the imagination rushes in to fill the void. The miniature is perceived as a site which concentrates the attention to such an extent that one can no longer ignore the detail or what it may represent beyond. But, as Susan Stewart points out, “such a reduction does not produce a corresponding reduction in significance”<sup>1</sup> Small scale does not mean small meaning; instead, the miniature has the possibility of summoning a world beyond.

In architectural terms, this is not to recall the voice of Mies. His God was not one of the spectral imagination, but rather The One surveying the universe with a pair of compasses. For Mies, the detail was the inevitable resting place of a linear process of rationalisation. The perfection of the system means that it can be understood at every level - and the detail represented to Mies the system’s finest technical achievement. The danger of this stance is, however, that it ends up reflecting its own internal logic, and the detail is isolated in a rational and technical framework.

The ability of the miniature to condense a wider order is also described in a very different philosophical field to Mies’. For Gaston Bachelard “the miniature is one of the refuges of greatness”.<sup>2</sup> The word refuge is indicative of the direction of thought. Here the miniature is seen as the authentic repository of experience. The

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1 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives Of The Miniature, The Gigantic, The Souvenir, The Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 43.

2 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon P., 1969), 158.

summation of the human condition into archetypal conditions finds its natural expression at the small scale. It is here that the imagination is most productively released, allowing the miniature to address worlds beyond itself. The wall, the stair, the attic, the wardrobe - all become *topoi* from which the imagination is projected. The oneiric condition thereby induced allows individuals the freedom to speculate removed from the constraints of their political condition.

It is the action of the miniature to summon a world beyond that is its most productive characteristic. However, both the rationalist and phenomenological models, in their very opposite pursuits of the essential, avoid seeing the world as a field of contingent political and cultural forces. I wish to propose the use of the miniature not as a summary of the wider order of things, but as one of its catalysts to its productive disorder. The intention is not one of anarchy, but rather to see the miniature as a place of resistance against the forces that the larger scale systems allow to develop unchecked. This follows Kandinsky who dreamed of: “a great city built according to all the rules of architecture and then suddenly shaken by a force that defies all calculation”.<sup>3</sup>

## THE URBAN MINIATURE

Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of the large scale urban gesture is the way that it purports to be extraordinary, when in fact its ultimate manifestation is often overbearing in its triviality. It is with this realisation that one looks for another point of entry into urban issues. Michel de Certeau makes a startling polemical leap in moving from a rooftop view of New York down into a walk along the city’s streets. In the leap he shifts the mode of vision from the detached to the engaged, he manoeuvres from a decaying system to a set of subversive elements, and (crucially) fragments a supposedly timeless order into the differences constituted by the everyday.<sup>4</sup>

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3 as quoted in: Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984), 110.

4 de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Chapter 7.

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de Certeau's language is extraordinary - on the top of the World Trade Centre "one's body is no longer clasped by the streets, nor is it possessed by the rumble of so many differences"<sup>5</sup> - but then so is what he is describing; it is apparent that the extraordinary is found at the level of the everyday and the small scale. This level becomes the richest vein of investigation into those actions and practices that the larger urban system was to suppress, but which in reality flourish - not despite of the system, but actually consequent on the limitations of its genesis. Following de Certeau's route would therefore suggest an inquiry into the city at a scale of the miniature, collapsing the purported order into its inconstituent parts. This demands the removal of the designer from a detached podium and their subsequent engagement with the discourse of life.

This model of the urban miniature is cognizant of, but eventually more productive than, Foucault's use of the fragment and small scale incident as a manifestation of a wider controlling structures of power. The eventual conclusion of his society is one of impotent despair, entrapped by systems beyond our control. In contrast, as a skeptical optimist, I see the miniature as a point of resistance to the mechanisms of power. It has the possibility of confronting wider issues, but in a way that is always wary of their power.

Taking the feminist maxim, 'the personal is the political', the miniature has the opportunity to become a site of political and social investigation. This requires a viewing of the miniature not as a detached fragment but as part of an open urban construct. What happens, for instance, if an entrance door is considered not as a materially defined component, but as an urban artefact, i.e. as an object which is subject to the full range of urban social forces? What wider issues are manifested in the door and how may it reflect the superimposition of a series of political and social issues? How does the way that a person engage with the door have implications for their engagement at the level of the city?

Through asking such questions, the designer is made to confront a series of conditions that are excluded under the normal canon of urban investigation and representation. It is at the small scale that the personal can be viewed as the political.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 92.

The small scale allows the individual to confront the world aware of the constraints it may impose of them or the freedoms it may offer; at the small scale the individual is empowered to act. At the small scale the designer thus immediately locates his/herself as an engaged (but critical) citizen rather than as a detached observer. It is at the small scale that the particular incident can be interpreted as part of a wider structure - and the designer can now formulate points of resistance to the controlling mechanisms. It is at the small scale that differences can flourish, as opposed to being suppressed by the large scale operation. It is at the small scale that the body is seen not as a diagrammatic object but as the subject of conflicting forces. Finally, it is at the small scale that the everyday is addressed as something with extraordinary productive possibilities.

The idea of a door as an urban situation may appear paradoxical, but what such a notion introduces is the everyday acts of leaving, entering passing as legitimate and productive areas of investigation. As a device for the designer, the miniature can be interpreted in a number of different ways. One may start the investigation of the city as a social activity and focus on small scale actions (say waiting for a bus or going shopping) and work out from there, finding appropriate architectural responses along the way. Alternatively, one may identify a particular quality (say that of alienation or of playfulness) and locate it at the level of the fragment before moving out to the scale of the city. Or else, the interest may lie in physical procedures (say cutting or recycling) which are best explored initially in the making of models or artifacts before finding their analogous conditions within the social realm. In all these examples, and many more beyond, the common fact is a starting point in which the miniature is seen not as a technical component or as an isolated incident, but as the introduction to the world beyond.

Crucial to this operation of the urban miniature is that it demands the designer to assume responsibility for the decisions made. Lefebvre, the great philosopher of the everyday, notes: "Such are the varied aspects of the everyday: fluctuations beneath stable masks and appearances of stability, the need to make decisions and judgments."<sup>6</sup> The idea of the designer as maker of decisions and judgments is very different from the rational procedures of the normal urban investigation. In these

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models, a linear trajectory guided by formal and functionalist criteria relieves the burden of judgment. The rationalist system abrogates the responsibility, whilst the urban miniature confronts the designer with the society in which they must eventually operate, and in this moment of personal confrontation decisions must be made.

In conclusion, I wish to cite the reaction of philosophers to Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life*:

“So the professional philosophers generally ignored the book; for - starting with its title - it entailed relinquishing the traditional image of the philosopher as master and ruler of existence, witness and judge of life *from the outside*, enthroned above the masses, above the moments lost in triviality, ‘distinguished’ by an attitude and a distance.”<sup>7</sup>

This description of the philosopher has striking similarities with the image of the architect. It is likely that the same resistance to relinquishing a source of power may be encountered in the architect and architectural school. The distance of the large scale urban investigation has a certain comfort. The logic of a linear method of investigation smoothes out difficulties. The architect has power because they know the rules.

And yet this power can corrupt. It is necessary to interrupt the normal trajectory (large-scale to small-scale), if we are to reveal the “hazardous play of dominations”, that shape our cities and our lives.

Lefebvre's response to his critics is clear and precise:

“Philosophers (*architects*) and philosophy (*architecture*) can no longer be isolated, disguised, hidden. And this is precisely because everyday life is the supreme court where wisdoms, knowledge and power are brought to judgment.”<sup>8</sup>

It is in this context that the urban miniature can be seen as a poignant, empowering, agent of democratic change.

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6 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 1991), 15.

7 Ibid., 5, Lefebvre's emphases.

8 Ibid., 6. My additions in italics.

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