They don't represent us

Urtzi Grau
University of Technology Sydney, School of Design Architecture and Building, Department of Architecture
Sydney, Australia
urtzi.grau@uts.edu.au

Cristina Goberna
Columbia University, Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation
New York, USA
cg2322@columbia.edu

Keywords: *Representation, Occupy Wall Street, 15M, public space, square*

ABSTRACT
The wave of urban protests characterized by the occupation of public space that has proliferated globally since 2010 has, as a common link, the questioning of representation models. Architecture, traditionally responsible for institutional representation to the citizens, is not only part of the controversy but it also defines protest methods. Reviewing the 15-M and Occupy Wall Street files, the article researches the demands on the practice of architecture implicit in these manifestations.

*In the summer of 2011, thousands of citizens occupied the squares of Spanish cities, which would eventually be known as the 15-M movement, referring to the date of the first demonstration, or "*los indignados*", of Stéphane Hessels´s* Indignez-vous *(2010). The differences with the occupation of squares during the Arab Spring of 2010 are as important as the formal similarities. If on the North of Africa people demanded democratic regimes, in the South of Europe they demand a redefinition of the existing democratic regime. However, citizens on both sides of the Mediterranean choose common protest strategies; the establishment of campsites in the public space of their cities for extended periods and the use of social networks to coordinate events, discuss their contents and distribute information.*

In September 2011, following an on-line call of Adbusters *magazine (Adbusters, 2011), the same operation is repeated in New York. The installation of a permanent campsite in Zuccotti Park, next to Ground Zero in the South of Manhattan, marks the foundation of Occupy Wall Street (OWS). Thanks to the use of social networks and the centrality of its physical location, OWS gets an instant media repercussion, globalizing the protests and extending them in time beyond the Mediterranean basin and of homogeneous ideological contents[1] – for example, recent protests against the Chinese regime in Hong Kong started from the campsite under the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank, Norman Foster branch, where initially there were protests against the control of banks over the city politics[2].*

The irruption of OWS means the establishing of the term "occupy" to define this type of event, a concept that, although in Spanish it seems to refer to the "okupa" movement, it does not have the same connotation in English as it is not like the term "squat". The differences are not only semantic. If the okupa movements provide housing, social centres and cultivation areas in abandoned sites or buildings, protests in the North of Africa, the 15-M and OWS have in common the transformation of public space in the city into domestic spaces as a form of protest.

Housing production and adapting existing spaces for new uses are two operations associated to architecture. But they are not the only reasons to put these protests in the realm of architectural production. Tahrir Square in Cairo, Plaza del Sol in Madrid and Zuccotti Park in New York became for months miniature cities reproducing recognizable urban models and problems. If in Tahrir and Zuccotti Park the territory was divided into zones according to religious and gender criteria in the first case, and ideological in the second, the maps of Acampada Sol *distinguish streets and squares in the zones of specific uses[3]. The three cases displayed electrical infrastructure and included separate areas for medical services, food preparation and waste management, for cultural activities and discussions. In the case of New York and Madrid, the protesters even took over existing monuments and renamed them. In short, the three cases are examples of city production as a form of protest.*

The protest, in any case, is not in architectural production per se, but in its implementation outside the usual processes, skipping regulation, zoning,

procedures, and – especially significant – the professionals required to produce architecture. Even though architects were not absent from these events (Jon Aguirre Such, for example, one of the main representatives of 15M was studying architecture at the school in Madrid and is now one of the members of the urban innovation office Paisaje Transversal[4]). Their explicit participation as citizens, not professionals, contrasts with the role that experts from other disciplines such as medicine, nutrition, economics or communication, had in the protests.

While the Madrid campsite included specific work committees for nursing, food, communication and daily OWS meetings where budgets were agreed for the hospital and the kitchen without discussing the decisions of the professionals directing them, the urban planning of the campsites did not seem to require specific knowledge[5]. Organizational decisions were collective and all the interlocutors were considered to be experts in city production. Attempts to include architecture committees into OWS failed in spite of the late efforts of Storefront for Art and Architecture gallery to get involved and, in the process, give a voice to the architect´s role[6]. Self-management of the occupied space was presented as incompatible with the architect´s role, to the point of arguing that the New York homeless knew more about the operation of a campsite than any architect.

But it is necessary to look beyond the radically individualistic libertarianism hidden behind such statements. Refusing to admit that the knowledge of architects is valid to deal with the problems of a settlement of several thousand people is essential to these protests; it is what defines them as a new type of demonstration. If appropriations of architecture and of the city have been usual methods in the commune of Paris, the new model takes over architecture and city production. And by doing so, it displaces the profession that has historically been in charge of it.

*In the case of Madrid and New York, architecture´s role in the 2008 financial crisis partially explains this. Initially reduced to the merchandise that allowed the growth of private debt, it would lose all its value after the explosion of the bubble of property developing companies, thus leaving thousands of dwellings empty in a clear demonstration of their risky overvaluation (in the Spanish case, public debt increase made even worse by the proliferation of iconic buildings – so highly praised at the MoMA exhibition "*On–Site: New Architecture in Spain*" [7] –, as well as the prominent role of these buildings in cases of political corruption, intensified the connection between architecture and crisis).*

But it is the slogan "they do not represent us" that allows going beyond financial reasons after architecture's public credibility crisis. Chanted in the streets of Madrid as a critical summary of the democratic deficiencies of western systems, the slogan identifies representation as a key topic to understand protests. If to the incapacity of democratic government systems to involve citizens we add their appropriation of the economic power, distorting its functioning in favour of a few, it can be concluded that the institutions responsible for representing citizens are not doing so, and that, therefore, they are not properly represented.

With a few exceptions, every political regime has had the ideological flexibility of architecture to build images, buildings or cities that stabilize their values in front of the public. Western democracies have not been different. From the Washington Capitol to the reconstruction of the Bundestag, architecture has been entrusted with defining the image of democratic institutions and, by extension, of those represented in them. This use of architecture extends to all types of institutions. The European Central Bank uses architecture to differentiate the value of its bank notes that increase their value as the architectural works that illustrate them approach the present (de Koning, van Santen, & Cattrysse, 2012). The explosion of iconic architecture in the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia that preceded the 2008 crisis, represents the economic model that allowed developments such as the power structures that propitiated them (and it does so using specifically architectural documents). The elevation of Burj Khalifa, or the plant of Palm Jumeirah, or The World Islands in Dubai have defined the public image of the Gulf, becoming a symbol of its success and its failure). Its value is even clearer in the recent statement of the Chinese president Xi Jinping against contemporary architecture in China (Yi, 2014),which, acknowledging the connections between politics, architectural language and state representation, are at the same level of Nikita Khrushchev's statement that finished stalinist architecture in 1955 (1993).

As experts in representation, responsible for building the image of institutions in front of the citizens, architects are not exempt from crisis. They are in the centre of it and there is an evident reason. Contrary to other disciplines, the use of architectural documents does not require a high degree of specific knowledge. The documents that define a project, whether they are infographics, elevations, plans, descriptions, or others, circulate fluently among a variety of publics. Citizens, politicians, promoters, institutions, persons affected, are capable to understand them, perhaps not fully, and use them to project their interests. In spite of containing a similar amount of technical information, a legal or medical document, a scientific document can hardly be used without the help of someone expert in the subject. It is not by chance. The implication of multiple agents is an intrinsic characteristic of architectural production and the permeability of the documents used, a need. By definition, architectural documents have to be easily understood by the different interlocutors and establish a common discussion frame, their value derives from this. They are capable of mediating between opposite positions around an object in discussion. They are capable of representing different publics in a controversy.

In this context, the phrase "they do not represent us" questions far more than the mechanisms of representation of western democracies. The use of uncontrolled architectural production as a means of protest – and the success and global expansion of this format – creates a crisis of a notion much wider than the mechanisms of political representation that includes the role played by architecture in the construction of the public sphere. Or, similarly, it questions the capacity of architects to produce mediation documents.

*Recent responses to this crisis from the field of architecture have been as intense as vacuous. The schizophrenic alternation between escapist calls, that the claim for a return of the autonomous project (a strange Alliance between the diaspora of the semi defunct Berlage Institute and the Whites of the East coast of the United States) and the denial of all disciplinary knowledge camouflaged in activist attitudes (or what is the same, a large part of the Lisboa Triennial and the associated "*Adhoquismos*") have not mitigated it, they have intensified it. Disciplinary discourse and social commitment, once isolated, become histrionic caricatures of the basic architecture constituents: funny but dysfunctional.*

The specific knowledge of architects – their capacity to represent, to construct mediation documents – emerges at the intersection of these two attitudes, not at their separation. It is semiautonomous. It is half way between the internal discourse and social responsibility. The strength of disciplinary knowledge shows its capacity to have an effect on the world; the capacity to operate in the world validates disciplinary knowledge.

The demand derived from the slogan "they do not represent us" of 15M and OWS, is the need to update the mechanisms of representation production that form part of the internal knowledge of architecture. There are multiple experiences in that direction: The integration of participative mechanisms in design processes, the production of tools that allow citizens to participate in discussions that define their environment or the development of urban models that foster implication in their management. These are very well known and recognised strategies that adjust the representation regime that relates citizens, architecture and the city, in many cases appropriating technologies that were used in protests for the coordination, discussion, decision making and distribution of information.

But readjusting disciplinary knowledge has to imply the revaluation of the architect as a public figure, as someone who has an effect on the world. Thus, it becomes urgent to recover architecture´s cultural relevance – which is minimal in spite of the ubiquity of the same, it is enough to remember the systematic disappearance of architecture critics from newspapers – and following their steps, that of the architect as a public intellectual, someone that, as Susan Sontag might define, constitutes a figure that is not only political but who has also political and ethical principles, someone committed to critique and committed to critical and adversary ideas about culture (Sontag, 1995). Or, in Toni Judt´s definition, someone that combines the rigour of erudite discourse with public recognition (2012). But even more important, according to Judt, someone that puts his credibility at risk in order to question hegemonic consensus (2012). m

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NOTES

(1) Since 2011, protests in 274 places have been included under "occupy".

(2) Occupy Hong Kong began in November 2011 at the time of global protests against banking power as OWS did. In 2014 it was changed to Occupy Central with Love and Peace under the auspices of Benny Tai Yiu-ting, professor of law at the University of Hong Kong, redirecting its attention to the electoral reform of Hong Kong sponsored by the Chinese government.

(3) The BBC produced the most complete plan of the Tahrir occupation, which defines the functional division of February 2011 (BBC News, 2011). On the other hand, the Zuccotti Park plan published by OWS has been spread by different media.

(4) During the Summer protests 2011, Jon Aguirre became the unofficial spokesman of the campsite participating in debates on different Spanish media, until he became one of the personalities of the year in *Time* magazine 2011 (Andersen, 2011).

(5) The committee list of the Sol campsite included 15Hack, Ágora Sol Radio, Análisis Sol, Archivo 15M, AudioviSol, BiblioSol, CoordiCom, Difusión en Red de Acampada Sol, Formación Sol, Intérpretes de Lengua de Signos de Acampada Sol, Legal Sol, Solfónica, Teatro Quince de Mayo (15Mpedia, s. f.).

(6) From 16 to 22 December 2011 the New York gallery Storefront for Art and Architecture organized a series of events under the title "*Strategies for Public Occupation*" (Storefront for Art and Architecture, 2011).

(7) See Riley, & MoMA, 2006.