


without having the time for reflection, discussion and creative process. Cibic's work in the context of the *Encyclopedic Palace* continues to speak precisely about that: her display of *Parliament art*, the discussion of the committee, the discussion about ornament, and finally the view at the end of the path. Her work is looking back, disclosing and reconstructing the position between the architecture of the State and the market economy that will determine the meaning of her art in the time of eroding boundaries of the present and maybe of an already forgotten history. (Fig. 16) 

PROJECT INFO:

Artist: Jasmina Cibic.
 Curator: Tev Logar, Galerija kuc
 Architecture Consultant: Mateja Setina
 Visual Art Consultant: Manca Bajec
 Visual Identity: Ajdin Bai
 Director of Photography: Mark Carey
 Art Media Consultant: Natasha Plowright
 Vinko Glanz Archive Consultant: Dr. Nika Grabar
 Opening Performance: Primo Bežjak, Gregor Lutek

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DULAR, M. (1940). *Ljubljanski sejem za našo gospodarstvo in kulturo* (The Ljubljana Fair for our Economy and Culture). *Kronika slovenskih mest*, 7(2), 77-84.

RENDELL, J. (2013). *Staging Devices: Setting the Scene for What Might Have Been*. In *For Our Economy and Culture* (pp. 192-195). Ljubljana: Muzej in galerije mesta Ljubljane, Galerija kuc.

NOTES

(1) The typeface was designed by Lucijan Bratu. Its starting point is the type design from 1944 of Joe Plenik, Glanz's teacher.

(2) The original title is "Ljubljanski sejem za našo gospodarstvo in kulturo" [The Ljubljana Fair for our Economy and Culture]. It was published in *Kronika slovenskih mest*, vol. 7, n.º 2 (1940), 77-84.

Project or Product? A Critique of the Ideology of the Architectural Project

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ABSTRACT

Architects speak about their work as projects, and it's an admirable form of optimism about the future. Projects are future-directed. They always look forward; they are an anticipation of victory over the forces of entropy in the world. But as such they demand the jettisoning of ballast and the rejection of whatever impedes their flow. To be "postcritical" – a term that was in vogue among architects just a few years ago – is to be without friction. In this sense the ideology of the architectural project is one of forgetting. To remind ourselves that architecture is produced, that architects are producers as well as authors, that buildings are not just finished forms but moments in a cycle of production, and that architecture strives to be beautiful in a world that is often and tragically ugly is to give the things we make a history and a conscience and to insist on the solidarity of our work with society at large.

Architects tend to speak about their work, whether built or unbuilt, as "projects." With its etymological meaning of throwing forth (and Heideggerian and Corbusian resonances⁽¹⁾), the word project suggests a sovereign act of creation or "immaterial labor" that envisions and plans the production of material substance. Yet the freedom and autonomy implicit in this conception of the design process – the image of a diver on a high board with waiting water below springs to mind – are, as every practicing architect knows, an illusion. The architect's imagination is always rooted in a specific historical context and material circumstances. Moreover, architecture is a social product, and architects are employed in producing not just buildable ideas but commodities that will enter a circuit of value and use. That is why Walter Benjamin, in his well-known essay "The Author as Producer" (1934), enjoins those who are engaged in artistic and intellectual forms of labor to ask not just what the position of their work is with regard to contemporary relations of production, but also what its position is within those relations (Benjamin, 1979).

From the standpoint of this injunction, the arc of modern architecture that extends 150 years from the erection of the Crystal Palace to the destruction of the World Trade Towers could be described as a continuous process of forgetting. By definition, the most "radical" architecture

of the epoch strives to leave behind the reality out of which it is projected and to rise in a new ground zero. At the very beginning of industrial modernity, Joseph Paxton's drawing on the back of an envelope – an eleventh-hour solution to an aborted competition – was to become the emblem of an unprecedented "space-time" architecture. Compared by Sigfried Giedion to the sublime effect of a painting by Turner, the vast and ethereal glass structure realized by a former gardener in Hyde Park had, in the reports of countless contemporary visitors, the atmosphere of a "fairy spectacle." Giedion quotes from the travel diary of one, a German political exile named Lothar Bucher:

"We see a delicate network of lines without any clue by means of which we might judge their distance from the eye of the real size. The side walls are too far apart to be embraced in a single glance. Instead of moving from the wall at one end to that at the other, the eye sweeps along an unending perspective which fades into the horizon. We cannot tell if this structure towers a hundred or a thousand feet above us, or whether the roof is a flat platform or is built up from a succession of ridges, for there is no play of shadows to enable our optic nerves to gauge the measurements. If we let our gaze travel downward it encounters the blue-painted lattice girders. At first these occur only at wide intervals; then they range closer and closer together until they are interrupted by a dazzling band of light – the transept – which dissolves into a distant background where all materiality is blended into the atmosphere.... It is a *Midsummer Night's Dream* seen in the clear light of midday" (as quoted in Giedion, 1954, pp. 251-252). Within the narrative economy of

Giedion's book *Space, Time and Architecture*, the weightless-appearing Crystal Palace is the herald of a new optics and the threshold of the revolution about to unfold in architecture. "Industry, after all the blight and disorder it had brought about – Giedion writes – now displayed another and a gentler side, aroused feelings that seemed to belong only to the world of dreams." (1954, p. 247)

But to this architectural dreamworld of 1851 we may compare a description of the glass industry near Birmingham given by Friedrich Engels just six years earlier in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. It was here that Chance Brothers, the manufacturer of the 300,000 sheets of plate glass out of which the Crystal Palace was constructed, had its operations:

"In the manufacture of glass, too, work occurs which (...) cannot be endured by children. The hard labour, the irregularity of the hours, the frequent nightwork, and especially the great heat of the working place (100 to 130 Fahrenheit), engender in children general debility and disease, stunted growth, and especially affections of the eye, bowel complaint, and rheumatic and bronchial affections. Many of the children are pale, have red eyes, often blind for weeks at a time, suffer from violent nausea, vomiting, coughs, colds, and rheumatism. When the glass is withdrawn from the fire, the children must often go into such heat that the boards on which they stand catch fire under their feet. The glass-blowers usually die young of debility and chest affections" (Engels, 1999, pp. 215-216). The fairy-tale palace in the park emerged, in other words, from the

malevolent landscape of the early industrial factory, the same satanic world of belching smokestacks, scorched earth, and ecological catastrophe that had overwhelmed Karl Friedrich Schinkel a quarter century earlier when he toured Birmingham's factories on his englische Reise. Schinkel was actually on a fact-finding mission for the Prussian state in 1826, deputed to report back about the level of Britain's technological development (and possibly to engage in some industrial espionage); but in the years following, the new reality of production and – especially while the Crystal Palace was being built – the half dozen manufactories of heavy plate-glass in England became destinations for journalists and social documentarians. In her book *Victorian Glassworlds*, historian Isobel Armstrong offers a vivid account of this factory tourism. Authors like Charles Dickens described a volcanic scene of glass-blowing hardly less awe-inspiring than the Crystal Palace's spectacle of glass-showing. Paxton's exhibition building in London and the factory established by the "fanatically driven" Robert Lucas Chance in Spon Lane, Smethwick, were parallel but complementary worlds, the latter the dark side of architecture's new "mass transparency" (Armstrong, 2008, p. 37).

The name Chance Brothers has uncanny appropriateness given the economic and technical contingencies that necessarily affect all architectural realization. In the case of the Crystal Palace, the rational and modular system conceived by Paxton, which stakes the building's claim to be the first truly modern architectural structure, was based on a four-foot-one-inch by ten-inch sheet of plate glass.

This dimension, the largest that could be produced at the time and never used before in a large-scale construction, gave the building its distinctive appearance.

Almost a century and a half later, Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao would likewise owe its material appearance to a contingency of production. Gehry initially envisaged the surface of the building clad in hand-polished stainless steel. He had reservations, however, about the material's variable reflectivity under changing light conditions. Zinc and leaded copper also had drawbacks; the engineers in Bilbao were concerned that these metals might leach into the adjacent Nervión River. Fortuitously, Gehry received a promotional sample of titanium from a vendor just before the bids for the building were made public. Although used for half a century in aerospace design as well as in other industries requiring lightness, strength, and resistance to corrosion and toxicity, titanium previously had only been employed as a building material in small roofing applications in Japan. It was also prohibitively expensive owing to the laboriousness of its extraction and commercial production. Gehry was nonetheless attracted by its consistent velvety sheen and asked the executive architect in Bilbao to include it as an alternative in the bid. Just then Russia, the largest producer of titanium in the world, placed a large quantity on the market, causing prices to drop momentarily. Within a week a sufficient amount was purchased to clad the building (Barrow, 2000, pp. 499-505).

The fact that a New York-based museum franchise was designed by an architect in Los Angeles using raw material mined in the former Soviet Union, then sent to a plant in Pittsburgh to be chemically treated and laminated, shipped to Spain to be digitally cut and folded by an Italian-Spanish subcontractor set up for the joint venture, and finally brought to the site in the Basque capital where the titanium panels were bent to the required curvature before being installed surely says as much about the global realities of architectural production today as the endlessly circulated images of the finished building and even the experience of actually going to the museum to bask in the famous "Bilbao effect." Yet the same schism between the worlds of production and consumption that underlay Paxton's building in the mid-nineteenth century contributed to the aura of Gehry's building in a "postindustrial" age.

The term postindustrial is, of course, a euphemism. Even in a digital age, and one where robotics are more than a science-fiction fantasy in many new types of workplace, heavy production necessarily occurs somewhere. In today's global marketplace, it is hardly uncommon for the components of buildings to come from far-flung and unlikely locations. But these origins are usually rendered utterly invisible, as in the case of Bilbao, where the museum's metallic surfaces glamorously billow like Marilyn Monroe's skirts, in the memorably over-the-top description of one smitten critic (Muschamp, 1997). Nor can what we are describing be relegated to the prosaics of "sourcing." Whether we view a building's life-history, or what we

might call its biography – the provenance of its components, the complex types of labor that go into the various steps of its realization – as a social-anthropological matter or a cultural one (the latter type of approach related to Fredric Jameson's concept of the political unconscious), we will uncover an intricate and layered web of production, distribution, and consumption. As James Smith and Jeffrey Mantz write in an essay with the Philip Dickian title "Do Cellular Phones Dream of Civil War?": "the contemporary Western consumer's detachment from the social life of things is enabled by the fact that these things are systematically stripped of all social referents, and hence of meaning" (2006, p. 77). Smith and Mantz's essay concerns the public's lack of knowledge about the circumstances surrounding the mining of coltan (columbite-tantalite, a crucial component of the microchips found in all cell phones, laptops, and other digital devices) in Goma, a city bordering Rwanda in the deeply impoverished and war-torn area of eastern Congo.

But architectural historians and critics have always tended to gloss over genealogies of this sort in favor of genius. A century and a half ago Karl Marx recognized that in a capitalist economy the process of production disappears from view the moment the product arrives on the market. We may state this axiomatically: the sweat of production evaporates in the sweetness of consumption. To take another example, the speed with which reports of abuses at Foxconn's factories in China, where Apple products are made, grabbed headlines at the time Apple was launching its latest version of the iPhone, and then just as

quickly disappeared, is indicative. And while the plexes of Silicon Valley and the repurposed shipyards of Bilbao are a long way from the sootscape of early industrial England, the human sweatshop has never ceased to exist. Having first departed the modern city for the suburbs and the hinterlands (ushering in a new service economy while leaving behind archaeological remains that could later be turned into condos), it ultimately moved offshore. Out of sight is out of mind, at least until some scandal erupts in the global village, making everything far away near again: a toxic spill by a manufacturer of solar panels, say, or an exposé of intolerable conditions suffered by foreign construction workers⁽²⁾.

In *Capital Marx* focuses in on the blind spot between production and consumption. The mystification of the relations of production creates commodities abounding in “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.” Once having entered the realm of circulation, he writes, a simple table “evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will” (1976, pp. 163-164). Even things rooted in the ground like buildings take on a life of their own, giving rise to “the bewitched, distorted and upside-down world haunted by Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre” (Marx, 1981, p. 969). This inverted logic, whereby “all that is solid melts into air,” is the basis of Marx’s theory of the commodity fetish, which he initially derived from Enlightenment studies of primitive religion. In *Du culte des dieux fétiches*, Charles de Brosses had described the way native cultures on the west coast

of Africa venerated material objects – “a tree, a mountain, the sea, a piece of wood, a tail of a lion, a pebble, a shell, salt, a fish, a plant, a flower, a certain type of animal like a cow, goat, elephant, sheep, in short anything imaginable” – and superstitiously attributed protective powers to them (1760, pp. 18-19). Likewise, in a consumer economy, objects take on values and meanings entirely unrelated to those that determined their material existence. The social construction of values in the capitalist system of commodified objects resembles the arbitrariness of meaning in that of language, where (as Saussure would elaborate half a century after Marx) the connection between signifier and signified has also been severed: “Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men’s social product as is their language” (Marx, 1976, p. 167).

The way another recent building by Gehry, his condominium at 8 Spruce Street in downtown New York, has been marketed exemplifies this phenomenon. Like Bilbao and most of his buildings, its magical existence is traced to an inspired sketch (if not an artfully crumpled napkin). Having opened in 2011 as “the tallest residential tower in the Americas” and a symbol of the city’s resurgence after 9/11, it is currently known, with exquisite metonymy (and hubris), as “New York by Gehry.”⁽³⁾

This returns us to the architectural project and the idea of “immaterial labor” with which we began. It is no accident that architecture has become a pervasive metaphor in contemporary discourse. One commonly hears reference to the “architecture” of a political campaign, a military strategy, or software. Architecture’s paradigmatic status in today’s “knowledge economy” has much to do with the similarly pervasive idea of the project. A recent work of sociology has even coined the idea of the “projective city”. In the projective city, social relationships are flexible, nonhierarchical, networked, and above all based on projects. Unlike in the preceding “urban” formation, where salaried employees held positions in vertically structured offices away from home, work is no longer clearly separated from private life. Citizens take on a variety of jobs, which they obtain through their networks and often carry out concurrently. Those who are most successful are opportunistic, innovative, and mobile, and they work effectively in teams. Expertise, while still defined by competence and intelligence, depends less on standardized knowledge than on the ability to adapt to changing and fluid situations and to integrate and redistribute diverse forms of information. The projective city is not an actual city but a contemporary social logic that underwrites – and serves to justify – what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have called “the new spirit of capitalism” (2005). Their book of that title, originally published in France in 1999, is intended as a sequel to Max Weber’s classic study. The new Geist of the project began to come into being in the 1960s, they argue, around the same time as the personal

computer. Today it's a characteristic mode of organizing work in advanced capitalist societies. As an ideological construction, the projective city also naturalizes some of those societies' most oppressive features. The price of freedom from bureaucratic hierarchy in the workplace, for example, is paid for in loss of job security and precarity of wages and benefits (the decline of tenure and expansion of adjunct status are equivalents in academia), while the consequence of discarding regular work schedules and vacation time is the emergence of the 24/7 workday.

Clearly this description of the projective city has affinities with the organization of architectural practice over the last century. Architecture's collaborative mode of working, its habitual recourse to charrettes, its inherent hybridity as a form of expertise, and, not least, its creativity all make it an exemplary profession, and indeed give it luster, in present-day culture. Yet few beginning architects are strangers to the insecurities and inequities inherent in a field where the flow of commissions is often feast or famine, and where individual authorship is frequently rendered anonymous or reappropriated by others who know how to mobilize the machinery of celebrity.

To conclude: architects like to construe their work as "projects," and in many ways this is an admirable trait. To project buildings and cities into the world requires confidence about the future. Projects anticipate victory over diverse forces of entropy. Yet they also, as we have argued here, demand a jettisoning of ballast and a rejection of anything in their path that impedes flow. To be

"postcritical" – a term recently in vogue among architectural intellectuals (Somol & Whiting, 2005) – is to be without friction. In this respect the ideology of the architectural project demands a certain degree of amnesia. To be reminded that architects are producers as much as authors; that buildings are not just finished forms but moments in a cycle of production; that architecture belongs to the world of commerce and also has political consequences; and that in striving to be beautiful it often ignores a world that is ugly and oppressive – all this is to establish solidarity between architecture and other social products and to give history and conscience to the things architects make. **m**

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NOTES

- (1) Cf. Heidegger's concept of the project as something thrown forward (entworfen) into the world as a future existential possibility, which he develops in *Being and Time*; and Le Corbusier's famous definition of architecture in *Vers une architecture* as a bringing of forms to light: "le jeu savant, correct et magnifique des volumes assemblés sous la lumière."
- (2) See, to take two examples at random, Andrew Jacobs, 2011; Angela Giuffrida, "U.A.E. Construction Workers Stranded, with No Pay and No Prospects," *New York Times*, February 9, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/10/world/middleeast/10iht-M10WORKERS.html?pagewanted=all>."
- (3) See www.newyorkbygehry.com