

For a Post-critical Architecture

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ABSTRACT

The future of architecture is post-critical: we must empty architecture of its narrative superstructures through the erasure of subjectivities in order to rediscover a certain blankness or psychological neutrality of things. In this process, we can discover the formal and programmatic possibilities of things for the design of spaces and buildings through quantifiable scientific knowledge. This is a paradigm shift where space no longer has meaning, but instead has physical and chemical presence. We must engage the targets of critical theory (subjectivity, multiplicity, diversity) but change its tools (narrative, story), replacing them with objective, scientific, neutral, nonnarrative approaches. This is where the semantic gives way to the somatic, and where storytelling and fiction make room for the measured properties of the world, in a new objectivity of things, of space.

The real subject of architecture is space. Space is not only a subject of study, and of the project, but is also a subject in itself. From the English 'it' or the German

'das', it is the thing outside of humanist subjectivity, without adjective or feeling.

Nothing is more distant from this definition than French architecture since the '80s, which no longer presents itself but rather reveals itself through signs; by contextualization, analogy, reference, allusion, representation, symbolism, narration, metaphor, or by appealing to our collective memory, to our historic or popular culture. Critical thinking behind this postmodern divergence of the concept of space comes from the Frankfurt School, which has since the '50s, and later relayed in France by Michel Foucault or Jean-François Lyotard, investigated the project of modernity and rationalism since the Enlightenment, detecting under the objective notions of progress and science a subjective economic and political 'narrative': that of capitalism and control. Criticism in architecture first comes from the United States with Robert Venturi (*Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 1966) and from Italy by Aldo Rossi (*L'architettura della città*, 1966).

By criticizing the modern project, Robert Venturi introduced architecture as a language of meaningful images that connects as much to the history of architecture as to the everyday landscape. Aldo Rossi anchors the architectural project in an urban history of civilization shifting the physiological nature of the modern inhabitant towards values of culture and memory.

For our part, we seek to affirm the inherently neutral nature of space, to

be "freed from all bondage to a pre-ordained state of language" (to quote Roland Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero*, 1953: 76). To be amodal, clear, transparent and innocent, "without being overlaid by a secondary commitment of form in a History not its own" (Barthes, 1953: 77) such as white architecture. We belong to a new genealogy, which would start from the neutral and zero level of Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot and Alain Robbe-Grillet, and progress to a different genealogy as practiced today by Thomas Clerc and Aurélien Bellanger.

Firstly, all sentimental load would have to be removed from space, any duty to meaning, any psychological connection, a withdraw of gender in order to reach the neutral, to define space as something, that tells no story, that conveys no feeling. Our project is no longer the one of the 1950s, which according to some interpretations attempted to draw the neutral toward the pure, the colourless and inert. On the contrary, the neutral that we seek today is polarized, intensified, dynamic, heavy or light, hot or cold, dry or wet, composed of waves, particles and pressure. A space that would no longer be meaningful. A conveyor of human meanings would become something without gender, without psychology, but nevertheless totally endowed with physical, electromagnetic, chemical, biological, thermodynamic properties. The literary form of Aurélien Bellanger's first novel, *The Theory of Information* (2012), is of great help in understanding the fundamental difference between our time and that of forty years ago. A novelist

no longer relies only on the moods and vague intuitions of the everyday as his only body of knowledge for imagination, but instead is connected today with the enormous depository of scientific knowledge accessible easily through Wikipedia and Google Scholar. In fact, the knowledge of space we once had and the imagination that one could draw from it were of such an incredible poverty, that an architect could only qualify space in exhaustive terms of small or large, vertical or horizontal, bright or dark, open or closed. Learning more required spending hours travelling to a library, to search without a search engine and keywords, to find information somewhere in the folds of the pages of the countless closed books. The difficulty of accessing information during the '80s, associated with the critical distrust towards scientific and technical knowledge, explains the weakness of knowledge. There were limited easily accessible references, so information sources were cinema, rock and the comic strip – a unique reservoir of images and atmospheres from which an architect could draw analogue references. Today, databases such as Wikipedia, Google Books, Gallica, Google Scholar and Perseus provide us immediate access to all past and present academic and scientific knowledge, allowing us to no longer define the world of things only by the practice of association of ideas, intuition or psychoanalysis. We no longer need to project our feelings on things as the only way to qualify them, but rather we can learn and understand their objective nature, the physical, electromagnetic and chemical qualities that are independent of our subjectivity.

Let me give a single example here, that of the colour red, to explain the difference in apprehension between the

critical postmodern perspective of the '80s and today's neutral, post-critical point of view that we are defending.

For the postmodern, the choice to give a building a red colour is a visual narrative of architecture. In the early '70s, Robert Venturi chose red for the facade of his fire station (Dixwell Fire Station, New Haven, Connecticut, 1972) to visually signify its function, evoking popular memory of the colour of fire trucks. Of course, there is nothing functional or modern in Venturi's choice, it is merely a slightly ironic psychological analogy since fire stations have never traditionally been red, but their trucks, and even more the miniature trucks we played with as children, are represented by this colour. The colour red appears in French Architecture with Jean Nouvel, referring to contemporary '80s culture, the red diodes embedded in black metal stereo channels or in the bitumen of airstrips. Deprived of its basic status as a thing, of its objective nature, the colour is here subjectively determined by the author, committed to a narrative; to 'a History that does not belong to him'. Its appearance must refer to something other than itself, to the memory that one has of it. The object has a purpose in postmodern thought only by making sense, outside its nature, by metaphor, allusion or reference to precise codified meanings created by our popular or historical culture.

But what about today's red? It takes just a few clicks on Wikipedia and Google Scholar to understand that red is an electromagnetic wavelength of around 800 nanometres, the largest of the visible spectrum, having relatively low energy within the solar spectrum. The facade of a red building will therefore tend to heat up more than a blue building, because wavelengths with

stronger energy, such as blue or green, will be absorbed by the wall and turned into heat. This is what is expected today of the colour red, finally freed of its analogue meanings, of its narrative and memory load, fully accepted as a thing with specific electromagnetic properties. It is not a coincidence that the addressed examples explore the issue of energy, climate and the heat.

It is actually because of the climate that the crisis of postmodern critical thinking arose, as exemplified by Bruno Latour's essay "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" (2004). In this essay the French anthropologist suggests that the methodology of critical thinking – that of seeking the meaning of something outside the thing itself as to reduce all scientific knowledge to a simple narrative – is now in the hands of revisionists and Holocaust deniers, including those who deny the reality of global warming or the scientific experimental method. Latour notes that there has been an extension of criticism beyond the reasonable, and that the critical method – which he himself was spearheading in the '80s and '90s – has now been seized upon by conspiracy theorists and populist policies. Bruno Latour made his mea culpa by accusing his fatigue towards language games and participating in the evolution of critical thinking towards what authors like Hal Foster or Jeff Pruchnic describe as 'post-critical'. With Bruno Latour, the current ecological crisis brings back the archaism of the earth, the neutrality of the object, which continually remained outside discourse, as well as human subjectivity and its vague desires of emancipation, which never acquired the status of a fully detached object from our subject. The object unveils itself today, as described by Peter Sloterdijk (2014), as an atmosphere where the former

subject is actually inside the object and not in front of it. To define space as a thing, without meaning as described by language, or to estimate the neutrality of the object is to abandon games of semantic analogy in favour of a physical, chemical, electromagnetic analysis that will become the new field of architecture.

Two of our recent projects can illustrate this. On the one hand is the 70-hectare park project for the city of Taichung in Taiwan currently under construction. The project, a joint venture between the landscape architect Catherine Mosbach and the architect Ricky Liu, aims to reduce extremes experienced locally in the hot and humid subtropical climate. Basing ourselves on a scientific analysis of the distribution of winds on the site, the project mapped places that were potentially colder, drier and less polluted. It reinforced comfort by multiplying the existing number of trees, thereby creating more shade, absorbing moisture, dust and polluting particles from the air, and as well by using climate devices that refresh the air by convection, conduction, evaporation or radiation. Nevertheless, the scientific and objective processes of the project do not aspire to create only a single homogeneous and comfortable climate. Working with the three layers of heat, humidity and pollution separately, the project created multiple randomly superimposed combinations of micro-climates, such as hot-humid-decontaminated, cold-dry-polluted, cold-moist-dirty. The goal is to get a diversity of microclimates, from the most comfortable to the least comfortable, leaving everyone free to choose where to go, according to his own desires, depending on the time of the day or of the season. To establish these three maps, we rely on existing climatic data.


The first map shows the implementation of climatic devices that reduce the heat from air and solar radiation based on the punctual presence of fresh winds from the northeast. These winds generate cooler areas in the park, which we supplement by implanting more devices reducing heat. On the opposite end of the intervention spectrum, the areas least affected by the cool winds are those in which we place fewer devices resulting these areas remaining the warmest. The second map, the one of water vapour content in the air, is based on the presence or absence of moisture in the soil depending on the topography of the park that we create in order to manage runoff waters from the site. Thus, the lowest parts of the park are more likely to contain water and thus to generate water vapour in the vicinity. In these parts, the air is more humid. On the contrary, in the highest parts of the site, at the hilltops, the air will be drier because there is a greater distance from the water present in the soil. We amplify this existing condition by implanting a maximum density of climatic devices that dehumidify the air in these moister locations. To establish the third map of pollution, we naturally started by mapping the roads used for motorized transport to determine the most polluted places. The further away the roads, the more we can consider that the air is less contaminated. We reinforce the improved air quality in these places away from the roads by installing more purifying devices.

A second project is the 2,700 m² set design for the opening exhibition "Systemically Open?" at the Luma Foundation in Arles. By analysing the distribution of sunlight in the exhibition space, we can map the naturally darker and lighter areas. Then, these differences of natural brightness are amplified

by reflecting or absorbing incidental light through the implementation of backgrounds grading from white to black. Some 'light atmospheres' are created, giving the same freedom of use and ownership as a natural landscape, with its sunny meadows, shaded forests or dark caves which suggest, qualify or make possible certain actions and desires. The artwork then naturally finds its position in these light variations: video in the dark, delicate photographs in darker areas, contemporary prints in brightly lit environments. Our set design is neutral and objective: a backdrop on which the artworks, characterized and subjective, stands in the forefront and are highlighted as figures. We propose to reflect or absorb the incidental light coming from the roof skylights to better distribute light in space, and to soften shadows and vertical dramatic effects, by reflecting or absorbing light on the ground and the walls. Their coverings will vary from white in the bright areas (equatorial climate), to light grey in slightly less bright areas (Mediterranean climate), to dark grey in the darker areas (continental climate) to black in the very dark areas (polar climate). To achieve this effect, we propose to cover the ground following the natural lines of sunlight with different shades, either with white, light grey, dark grey and black carpeting, or with stickers of different sizes and shades. In order to emphasize the light for the equatorial climate, the light will be reflected completely, at 100%, by a using a white floor; partially, at 66% for the Mediterranean climate by using a light grey floor; slightly, at 33% by using a dark grey floor for the continental climate; and by not reflecting light at all with a black floor, for the polar climate. The walls of each climate area are painted with the same values, in white for the equatorial climate, in light grey

for the Mediterranean climates, in dark grey for the continental climate. The height of the coverings varies depending on the climate; lower in the equatorial climate to let in more light, gradually rising in darker climates in order to decrease the incidental light.

Following the mapping of natural light in the exhibition space, our scenography proposes to build four climate areas with four different brightness levels: an extremely bright white space, a light space, a dark space and a black space.

Our post-critical inclination tends to empty architecture from its narrative superstructures by erasing subjectivities in order to rediscover a certain whiteness of things, their psychological neutrality. It is also specifically in the absolute and exhilarating submersion of objects by the true knowledge of their intrinsic, physical, chemical and electromagnetic qualities that, like in a paradigm shift, space becomes meaningless but has a quantified physical presence; semantics give way to the somatic; cinematographic references, storytelling, fiction and narratives give way to measured properties of the world, to a new objectivity of things. The movement is there, in the objective fiction of Aurélien Bellanger, in the spatial analytical prose of Thomas Clerc, and in the multiplied imagination of today's knowledge. 

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