

## When Routine Bites Hard

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### ABSTRACT

*In 1982, Alejandro de la Sota writes 'For a logical architecture', an undercover manifesto in which he describes the process of architectural production as a sequence of efficient reasonings in the form of precepts that almost irrevocably result in 'Architecture'. This notion, transferred to contemporary architectural production beyond the productive efficiency associated with commercial architecture, is demanded in certain current practices that advocate a sort of 'creative pragmatism' removed from the trends of the 90's of practices like those of OMA, MVRDV or Alejandro Zaera Polo. Opposed to this, a re-conceptualization of the notion of efficiency associated with the production of architecture is explored. The operative modes of Estudio Herreros, Office KGDVS and Lacaton & Vassal are examined, exploring concepts like 'creative efficiency', 'necessary efficiency' or 'behaviour efficiency', somehow connecting back to the 'Logical Architecture' argued by de la Sota in his 1982 manifesto.*

*In 1982, Alejandro de la Sota writes 'For a logical architecture', an undercover manifesto in which he describes the architectural production process as a sequence of efficient reasonings, a sort of scientific methodology that leads almost irrevocably to an 'Architecture' (written in capital letters). As de la Sota points out:*

*"The process of making logical architecture is good: a problem is posed in all its extension, all data is ordered and made thorough by taking into consideration all possible points of view in existence. All the possibilities of solving the problem in all possible manners are studied. All the material possibilities of building what is resolved in what these possibilities have already entered. As for the result obtained: if the path travelled is serious and is true, the result is Architecture" (de la Sota, 2008, p. 71).*

*The recipe hides an inherent subjectivity open to interpretation. Seriousness and truth are the arguments that mark the difference between a good and a bad result according to de la Sota. This ambiguity, which introduces multiple nuances to the notion of architecture, implies the capacity of solving a project in a clearly intentioned manner, as can in fact be confirmed in the work of this author.*

*In 1962, twenty years after the publication of the original text quoted, Alejandro de la Sota tackles the Maravillas Gymnasium through an exercise in section that responds to the*

*inherent complexity of the site, and solves without prejudices, and sometimes with contradictions, an exercise that at first glance drifts away from his own method, providing a conflictive answer to a building that, in the words of its creator, was born a su aire (at its own pace). This approach originates one of the works that we could classify as less Architecture and, at the same time, more real, in reference to which de la Sota explains the following:*

*"Concerned with the urban problems, making the best of a bad lot, economy, there was no margin to worry about any given architecture; thus, the lack of any of them. Maybe it's another one, maybe. Explaining it would lead to a controversy of Architecture yes, Architecture no" (de la Sota, 1984, p. 9).*

*The undercover manifesto describes a sort of utopian pragmatism – an oxymoron in itself – that as result generates an Architecture – or non-Architecture – removed from the conditionings of the discipline, and which accepts the conflicts of the project as part of the solution. This notion of efficiency, stripped from any excess of conceptual load, helps solving the problems without designing a priori the constructive compositional or aesthetic consequences and, at the same time, contains a deeper discourse which, mobilized in a critical manner, may widen the possibilities of the discipline.*

### PRAGMATISM IN CAPITAL LETTERS

*In 1898, William James – influenced by*

the work of Charles Sanders Pierce – becomes the first American philosopher to write about pragmatism. In a series of conferences entitled Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking, James outlines the main ideas of this current of thought and foresees some of its diverse implications. James (1907) places pragmatism in an intermediate position between soft and hard philosophies, referring to rationalism and empiricism respectively. Through this positioning, he establishes a philosophy committed to the contradictions of reality that runs away, in his own words, from purity and dignity. Instead of settling with the precepts of the past, Pragmatism centres its interests on the possibilities of action and establishes the foundations to organize future observations and experiences. This approach tells of a fundamental interest for processes of reflection that are able to foster constant change through which a society evolves. Others, like John Dewey in the 50's, or more recently Richard Rorty, build upon these ideas on the sands of contemporary thought.

In the spring of 2000, Joan Ockman organizes at GSAPP a series of conversations that sought to mobilize ideas from pragmatic philosophy in relation to the architectural practice, in an attempt to deepen the reflection over critical forms of analysing reality and its inevitable transformation. These reflections, along with a series of conferences held at MoMA in November of the same year – entitled The Pragmatism Conference – are captured in the book *The Pragmatist Imagination: Thinking About "Things in the Making"*, edited by Ockman (2000). With greater or lesser success, the question gathers relevance at a time when architectural theory finds itself excessively removed from a practice eager to conquer the 'real world'.

This almost visceral need of Architecture is made evident in a second book entitled *The New Architectural Pragmatism*. In this text, Saunders (2007) theorizes on pragmatism connected to what has been called a 'post-critical architecture', associated with a generation of architects of the 90's like Koolhaas, MVRDV or Zaera Polo that, leaving behind the paralyzing theory that until then ruled the academy, decide to explore architecture almost solely through their production. Saunders explains that "many highly intelligent young architects and architectural intellectuals were getting fed up with this detachment, theoretical abstraction, and helplessness. They wanted (and could, with and improved economy) [to] get to work on real projects, real conditions, real places" (Saunders, 2007, p. viii).

As James points out, "what really exists is not things made, but things in the making" (1909/2004 p. 60). This maxim relates with a fundamental need of architecture: to contribute to the advancement of a society's cultural production. To some extent we can agree that an intentioned materialization of an architectural idea has the intrinsic capacity of making the conflicts, contradictions and anxieties of evolving societies visible.

### THREE PRACTICES

Beyond a notion of productive efficiency associated with the commercial architecture of market systems, there are other current practices that advocate a pragmatism removed from the 90's trends and the architectural products of a specific sociocultural moment in Europe. Although they emerge from the same need to face the problems of a complex world, these practices utilize production methods that are quite different, which we may link to

alternative interpretations of the notion of productive efficiency.

Through the research work *Another Efficiency* (de Backer, 2015), carried out within the ARPA program (GSAPP, Columbia University), a series of interviews, representations and texts are conducted, exploring a reconceptualization of the notions of efficiency and pragmatism in relation to the production of architecture. This investigation examines certain practices such as Estudio Herreros, Office KGDVS or Lacaton & Vassal, as well as their operative modes, exploring provisional notions described as 'creative efficiency', 'necessary efficiency' and 'efficiency of behaviour'.

### ESTUDIO HERREROS

In the case of Juan Herreros, the influence of the architect Alejandro de la Sota is practically incontestable. This renowned Spanish architect, who started his endeavour alongside Iñaki Ábalos in 1985 in the practice Ábalos & Herreros, poses a totally network-based operative mode that conceives the architect as an editor, intentionally escaping the idea of total control once exerted by architects. This interpretation, inevitably contemporary, is made manifest in the work attitudes of the Madrid-based studio. In this sense, the operating system of the studio is clearly defined as a complex network of collaborators that blur any lineal process. This definition of architecture studio understands the functioning of the contemporary processes of formalization of a project. Both at the level of professional collaborations with other offices and specialists, as in their formative work, the notion of an open collaboration platform is made evident.

*In this sense, a notion of 'efficient logic' as a design concept, that is, a creative efficiency, refers to the ability to generate unexpected solutions at the architectural level that emerge as much from the solving of the concrete problem without letting in compositional prejudices, as from the awareness that the project cannot be totally defined and controlled by the architect. In other words, the architect acts more as a synthesizer of the idea of project rather than as author.*

Juan Herreros points out the following:

*"In the last projects carried out in my office, the notion of pragmatism has direct impact over a series of 'emerging practices' or new assignments unthought of some time ago – and that we explore as an exercise in architectural design that is becoming ever more common. I think about projects like the Panama Bank tower, where we only worked on the ideas of volume, nucleus, reassessing, structure and façade, leaving the rest to the other members of the team, questioning the ambition of 'total control'" (personal communication, November, 2014).*

*In Herreros' words, architecture is understood as an instrument to simplify the world and reduce needs, ideas that are materialized in recent projects like the Ágora Bogotá convention centre, where the solving of the architecture emerges out of mobilizing the technical problems of a building as a project tool.*

*In the abovementioned project, the design logic is born from an idea of efficiency in relation to the mechanical, the constructive and the programmatic in the building. Asked to expand on the notion of efficiency and the technical solutions in relation with design,*

*– something that normally goes beyond our capabilities –, Herreros points out the following:*

*"My interest in efficiency is centred in creating solutions through which the needs are reduced. Even though I have always been critical to the well-intended explanation that the mission of architecture is to find solutions to problems, and I've defended our creative right to 'invent problems', I oppose the notion of the freedom to make complicated things only because you have the resources, or of the need to use large quantities of energy if we can reduce the impact or get it from alternative sources" (personal communication, November, 2014).*

#### OFFICE KGDVS

*For Belgian studio KGDVS, the notion of pragmatism or efficiency is almost compositional. Although economy of means and simplicity in representation are present in their way of making architecture, the narrative intentionality is overwhelming. The projects accept the complexity and contradiction inherent to their production and mobilize it as a method. In the words of those in charge of the studio, there is a concrete interest in that which the project isn't capable of solving completely, in that which tells about the boundlessness of reality. There is, also, a concrete concern with the necessary functioning and the solving of a building which, in order to exist, must work for its inhabitants. Nevertheless, the notion of 'necessary efficiency' goes beyond the mere solving of problems and is interpreted as the need to expand the narrative capacity of architecture to introduce an ambiguity capable of questioning the project itself.*

*At an operative level, this attitude is clearly manifest in the sophisticated simplicity in all their thought processes, both for the definition of their buildings and for the setting of their studios, as is made especially evident in the book Architecture Without Content, through which Office KGDVS explores, as on many occasions, the approach to complex problems through the most absolute limitation in the means of representation. Underneath this operative efficiency, however, lies a profound process of edition and selection that in itself ends up defining the architectural product.*

*It's important to point out that both Kersten Geers as well as David Van Severen worked with Ábalos and Herreros, where they had enough time to understand the fruitful contradiction that architect de la Sota transmits in his projects, as well as the manner in which he uses the notion of appropriation of historical precedents like Mies, much in line with the pragmatist logic. In Geers words,*

*"Ábalos and Herreros, de la Sota, and even Lacaton and Vassal state that adequate answers to complex questions are simple and efficient. Supposedly they are pragmatists. But if we look at their work we realise that there's always something else in play. Lacaton and Vassal have very specific compositions which, along with the poetics, lead to a different place, beyond the simple answer to the question. (...) Again, it's related to the notion of efficiency: an efficiency of perception and effect rather than a simple efficiency of means" (personal communication, January 2015).*

This 'essentiality' in representation produces an objectual autonomy that assumes the unsolved problems as part of the architecture project. The absolute intentionality with which Office KGDVS works is evident, but at the same time it is interesting to reflect on the capacity of its architecture of being appropriate, not only at a physical or compositional level, but also, and most importantly, at a conceptual level.

At a conference, Geers argued that architecture can be reduced to detail, to a problem of structure and to the definition of a perimeter, implying that simplicity and plainness is enough. This way, there would be no need for complexity. Asked to expand further the logics of a practice that 'reduces architecture to its essence', as Office KGDVS claims in its web page, Geers points out the following:

*"In a certain way, this has to do with pragmatism of the practice. (...) We advocate under certain conditions for simplicity, but at the same time we are deeply interested in the inherent complexity of the project's unsolved issues. I'd say that I'm interested in simple projects in a complex world, and the impossibility of solving the spatial narratives of a project. You may want to follow different paths, but at a certain moment you realize that they enter into conflict. So, in their simplicity, these narratives contain the complexity that the building possesses"* (personal communication, January 2015).

There is something premeditated in the lack of control implicit in their methods of representation, something that surrenders to the interpretation on the part of the spectator. Although

this pretended lightness is present in Geers words, there is a clear aesthetic positioning, much related to his personal understanding of the history of architecture. The real beauty and architectural order present in their projects is, in many cases, the result of an intentioned assembly of personal, historical and artistic interests, evidence of this office's oriented pragmatism.

In its representations, Office KGDVS resorts to a particular dimensionality: they use no models and there are no shadows in their perspectives. These representations are flat. Asked about this, and after joking with the fact that the produced images are 'easy to make', Kersten Geers admits that in them there are references to Matt Mullican, Ed Ruscha and David Hockney: "It's true. These drawings are effective. They connect with conceptual art. But they are also simply nice [laughter]" (personal communication, January 2015).

#### LACATON & VASSAL

The practice of Lacaton & Vassal embodies the pragmatic mantra in the most evident, and at the same time poetic, manner, as Kersten Geers points out. Their operational mode confronts the crudest and most essential of human problems, responding to the motto 'more with the same, not about less'. This office always advocates the same fundamental principle, *make more, build more, give more, with the same amount of resources. The spaces, programmatically undefined and always open to construction and reconstruction on the part of the user and its needs, accept the undefinable of the human condition. We could speak, in this case, of an 'efficiency of behaviour'. Although their architecture is frequently materialized as a universal architectural space, it is capable of*

*introducing the most absolute specificity through human behaviour, somehow evidencing the necessarily limited role of the architect. In other words, the space is defined in relation to its capacity to offer the user possibilities, which in turn can be understood as a humanist vision beyond the rigorousness of the usual interpretation of market efficiencies.*

*Spatial generosity, coupled with systems that are frequently standardised and on occasions coming from contexts foreign to architectural production – as can be agricultural greenhouses –, does not renounce a very particular aesthetic production. Although the interest of the office for beauty and the poetics of space is evident, this is usually generated in their projects through a very subtle undefinition open to interpretation.*

*The office, as demonstrated in numerous projects, relegates formal exercise to the background. There is a sort of disenchantment towards form as a totalizing solution. Form is placed at the same level as the program, the user, materiality or performance. For Lacaton & Vassal, economy in means is not used in a didactical manner. Instead, it responds to the notion that there isn't a differentiation between high and low culture in respect to material expression, there is a material that is more adequate to solve a problem given the limitations of the project.*

*In the attitude of the French studio, as described by Iñaki Ábalos, it is possible to recognize "a subtle taste for provocation based on the assembly of objets trouvés; for making an architecture without architecture or, at least architecture without 'Architecture'" (2011, p. 12). This lack of prejudice undoubtedly responds to an inventive notion of the concept of efficiency, be it economic, social or constructive. Without*

doubt, Lacaton & Vassal incarnates the '82 Manifesto without renouncing the beauty inherent to human development in their spaces – the poetics that emerge from limitations and daily routine – which yields as result a notion of a 'Social' architecture (written in capitals).

#### "WHEN ROUTINE BITES HARD": A CONCLUSION IN PROGRESS

"When routine bites hard and ambitions are low" is the opening verse of the song 'Love Will Tear Us Apart', with which the English band Joy Division proposes, in a certain way, a new form of making music. Although the composition is born out of the personal afflictions of its author, it refers to the universalness of the inevitable contradictions in life, where the raw material is the crudest reality. Evidently, we can only fantasize about the relation between he who was the first frontman of the group, Ian Curtis, and Alejandro de la Sota. In fact, we cannot even say if the architect ever got to hear that song, but there is undoubtedly a resonance in the way in which both face an inescapable reality.

'For a logical architecture' confronts reality without contemplations and offers solutions capable of interpreting the problems of a society in the making after the hangover of Francoism. On its part, 'Love Will Tear Us Apart', open to interpretations as Curtis himself admits, and recorded on multiple occasions until the subtlety desired by the musicians was achieved, accepts the irremediableness and contradictoriness of human feelings. These two cultural manifestos of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century resonate in a complex and contradictory way of making architecture that, from an intentionality completely open to interpretation, marks the production of the three offices analysed.

As a sort of conclusion in progress – paraphrasing one of the maxims of pragmatism – we can suggest a notion of contemporary practice that is centred on the resolution of the routine of reality through a sort of pragmatist trinity in which the notions of synthesis, representation and behaviour are mobilized to define an architecture. Somehow, their operating modes seem to converge towards a sort of contemporary tendency in which all the expressions of their cultural work seek to refine the essential concepts that provide a logical answer to physical production in a society in constant redefinition.

Both the office work, as well as the formative work and the production and editing of texts, reinforce and seek to situate their modes of production. In the end, they try to materialize their own narratives with the necessary crudeness to face the cultural realities in which they operate. Be it with a political, narrative, economic or even poetic calling, a logical way of making architecture is seen as an answer to that crushing routine that de la Sota or Curtis describe, answer that is needed to rescue a critical disciplinary discourse in a moment of needed redefinition. [m](#)

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