

Architecture: place, atmosphere and agency.

“What is of interest here is the precise identification of those tasks which capitalist development has taken away from architecture”¹
Manfredo Tafuri,

Our living world, or more precise our immediate environment is a - sometimes unintended - composition of natural and artificial materials and active connections; the artificial often defined as ‘architecture’ where at the same time it is often confused with ‘building’. The latter is static, the first is not. Both organize and shape space; space however does not exist within itself, it is the individual human who experiences space. At the same time the level of agency and interaction with this space is limited - sometimes even restricted - while increasing technology serves primarily the built environment as such, not the one who uses or experiences. Consequence is that we encounter problematic situations where this unilateral ‘agency’ meets users that experience the absence of a sense of (spatial) privacy or the option to protect one’s identity.

Architecture does not imply building *per se.*; the following text starts to define ‘architecture’ as the adaptation of space to human needs; i.e. the ways and means to modify and design our immediate - artificial/built - environment. Or, as phrased by Peter Sloterdijk: “Architecture of modernity is the medium in which the explanation of human habitation in man-made interiors is expressed in a processual manner”². (trans.mp) For now; note the term ‘processual’. For a small number of years now the discussion on the basics of architecture - in particular its limits and periphery - seem to intensify in a broader direction, incorporating some involved disciplines that have not been subject for discussion in this before. Increasingly it seems acknowledged that not only architecture shapes our environment; it should incorporate the developing digital/analogue technologies and changing social frameworks. This is all the more significant since this touches on societal - or maybe primarily philosophical - issues, in particular focused on our dwelling that for the last decades have caused confusion where it meets the role/ position of the architect. Only recently several scholars in the Netherlands referred to this dilemma by signaling two ‘visions’ at Dutch Universities of Architecture; one that emphasizes the social questions where the other focuses on the more fundamental disciplinary issues. Should we qualify architecture as the adaptation of space to human needs both ‘visions’ may hardly be considered a contradiction.

Architecture is often qualified as ‘the mother of all arts’; at the same time there is an important difference between the ‘free’ artist (the painter, the sculptor) and the architect as artist; the first has the freedom to create from a ‘*tabula rasa*’, the latter has a client who needs (modified) space to dwell. Architecture creates atmospheres, art creates ‘nothing’ but itself. Where art embraces or encourages doubt, coincidence and uncertainty, architecture makes the opposite manifest, visible and tactile. Architecture - again in particular where it concerns our dwelling - needs the possibilities to adapt over time; simply because our circumstances, demands and needs change over time. Therefore also, in the words of Alberto Perez-Gomez: ‘It is important to emphasize that atmospheres are spatial phenomena, but always intertwined with temporality; they are never “outside” time. Thus they challenge the present-day ubiquity of telecommunications and its supposedly public spaces by focusing attention on locality and physical presence.’³

The confusion this often generates seems primarily one of values; do we consider the modern city and its often anonymous architecture as an artificial environment envisioned and created by third parties, lacking human values; is the modern city the appropriate place to create

¹Tafuri, M. (1970). *Architecture and Utopia*. MIT Press.

²Sloterdijk, P. (2009). *Sferen II / Schuim*. Boom Onderwijs.

³Perez-Gomez, A. (2016). *Atunement*. MIT Press.

one's personal space, valuing the option to be(come) anonymous? Rephrased: to what extent is our built environment the neutral, facilitating structure/sphere that serves as the continuous membrane that separates us from the natural environment. Constant Nieuwenhuys 'regarded the configuration of appropriate atmospheres' in his 'New Babylon' as 'a project of a revolutionary society' (A.Perez-Gomez); in his 1970-book 'Experimental Architecture' Archigram's Peter Cook, while referring to e.g. his 'Fun City', contemplates: 'Architecture can be much more related to the ambiguity of life. It can be throw-away or additive; it can be ad-hoc; it can be more allied to the personality and personal situation of the people who may have to use it'.⁴

I have written before about the assumed utopian character of both (and other parallel) plans; but with a reference to the first few lines: if there are characteristics we need to re-think in our current situation and above all prepare for what comes next, it is the - both much needed - curiosity and imagination. It is precisely within the domain of our dwelling that architecture lacks both: we keep envisioning and designing spaces for people from an abstract, exterior point of view, from a position outside the agency of citizens. We build houses, we do not facilitate dwelling; we create enclosed spaces that serve as secluded cells instead of providing the frameworks - analogue as well as digital - for a shared responsibility about 'locality and physical presence'. The Dutch social research platform SCP concludes in a recent report⁵ that citizens in the Netherlands experience an abstract 'system' of housing that excludes them from playing a proper role; they simply lack the level playing-field that facilitates real participation. That does not immediately imply 'a project of a revolutionary society', but the overall framework is broader and touches upon more fundamental - philosophical, societal and technological - questions.

Two almost parallel 'media' illustrate the above even more fundamentally, more deeply: last year Aaron Betsky's intriguing book 'the Monster Leviathan, Anarchitecture' was published; after extensively and carefully examining the (historical) alternatives for architecture as we know it he suggests that: "architecture can be the reuse, upcycling, rehabilitation, preservation, and re-imagination of what we already have".⁶ Also, last November 6th. a most interesting exhibition opened its doors at C.I.V.A.-Brussels : 'Pre-Architectures'. Its webpage encourages in the first lines: "Envision a world without architecture, a world-*ecture* without *arche*, the latter meaning not only beginning or origin, but also the authority to arrange and subordinate persons, objects, and processes into an identifiable power structure."⁷ (ital.orig.)

The text, although abstract refers to a more accepted principle of architecture: organization first; design next. At the same time it states: "Pre-architecture is not simply "not architecture" - it is what architecture could have become, but ultimately disavowed." All the more interesting is that one of the persons 'involved' in the exhibition is Frederick Kiesler, the Austrian-American architect (1890-1965) who can hardly be accused of 'disavowing' another becoming of architecture. Kiesler stated that 'Architecture was always threefold: social, tectonic, structural'⁸, after which he continues to conclude that 'in our present state of accident of handi- and machinecraft and of accidental state- and private-ownership *organic results in Buildings cannot be achieved*'. (ital.orig.) This though was 100 years ago; these days we cannot maintain that both technology as well as ownership-issues can be the cause of a lack of options for 'organic' results or structures in building; the first can be answered by technological innovation, the second is a matter of political (un)will. Likewise; Kiesler refers to e.g. le Corbusier's and v.d.Rohe's concepts of not starting with an '*unified architectural dogma*', not from 'Architecture as Biotechnique', referring to 'the interrelation of a body to its environment: spiritual, physical, social and mechanical'. Summarizing; his manifesto - published 1924 - defines the entire principle as 'Time-Space-Architecture'.

If - given this latter principle - we look deeper into 'what architecture could have become' and we think of a world 'without architecture' we seem to encounter a paradox; one that also has its origin in the definition. When we envision an architectural project the ultimate result is no longer

⁴Cook, P. (1970). Experimental Architecture. Studio Vista.

⁵Draak, M. den. (2024). Op elkaar bouwen.

⁶Betsky, A. (2023). the Monster Leviathan, Anarchitecture. MIT Press.

⁷<https://civa.brussels/en/exhibitions-events/pre-architectures>

⁸Kiesler, F. (1996). Selected Writings. (G. Gohr, S & Luyken, Ed.). Gerd Hatje.

'as such'; we have created something inert and final. An immobile object that rests on mobile grounds; but at the same time is but one subject in deeply intertwined networks that ultimately modify the entire environment into an interface.

We now live 100 years after Kiesler's manifesto; but given our ever-faster changing society and the parallel urgent need for a more democratic process where it concerns (re)thinking and designing our immediate environment we can return once more to Archigram's vision, in the words of Simon Sadler's: 'How else than through computer-based cybernetic technology could the desires of every citizen be respected, tracked and met?'⁹ Note the parallels with both Betsky's book and the CIVA exhibition: it is about architecture as a process, not as an end-result or inert product. It is also an activity, a process that scratches the earth; while building we 'only' modify the thin far outer shell of the planet on which we are born, live, act and die. We need to realize ourselves though that the earth surface is not a static environment: it is in a state of constant and permanent change. Next to that, climate change is rapidly modifying circumstances, surfaces and spheres that we used to believe we more or less solid and inert. This 'ground' therefore obviously has its limits; so far we add structure while at the same time very little is changed or removed; we need to re-think those values determining our dwelling we believed to be undisputed and eternal. We believe that our dwelling - i.e. our being at peace in a certain place, at a certain time - can only be achieved within a physical/built framework that shields us from external threats and provides us with a sense of personal space, a sense of privacy. But when every framework that determines this precondition is not static it seems as if we desperately trying to create shelter on thin ice: we think we have found solid grounds but are confronted with permanent change and disruption. The familiar basics for our dwelling, for comfort, trust and confidence are lost: we need to adapt our attitude, our philosophy. As architect Lars Spuybroek argues: "This is also the phenomenologist's view, that the world is always out there, untouched, but in fact the reverse is true: we live in technology. Or, more than that, we *want* to live in technology and *can* only live in technologically, because a separation between us and the world is unbearable"¹⁰. (ital orig.)

There has always been - and should be - a close connection between architecture and philosophy; both are intertwined. In the words of philosopher Gernot Böhme: "... what matters today is to strengthen the position of the experiencing subject and to foreground what it means to be bodily present in spaces. This aspect will take architecture to a new level of design potential".¹¹ A new 'design potential' - within the realm of architecture and in particular dwelling - implies a substantially larger participating role for citizens/inhabitants; where their position for decades is one of accepting (built frames for private) environments that are designed and built by third parties, a 'strengthened position' requires conscience, involvement and decisive action, hence agency. Given the above this agency nevertheless should also be framed by a position based on uncertainty, by the acknowledgment that the physical basics of our dwelling is no longer guaranteed by an static environment but by analog and digital structures that provide the basics for personalized, adaptable/flexible environments. This is far from new: I already referred to e.g. Archigram's work but should also mention the works of several de-constructivist's; as philosopher Eric Bolle in 1992 concluded: "De-constructivism ultimately expects architecture to respond in terms of a design to the dissolution and dissolution of place, and aims to give a concrete and valid form to the placelessness and wandering of modern man'.(..) it does away with the notion of the original place and of one's own place, in its eyes humanity is no longer divided into natives and foreigners, but it is recognized that everyone is an exile." ¹² (transl.mp)

In particular on the latter: when we consider everyone an exile we un-deliberately qualify man as a nomad; with the additional illustrative note: we could conclude that, after e.g. Constant's 'New Babylon' where in the end man - represented as abstract, blood-red stains - is desperately looking

⁹Cook, P. (1970). Experimental Architecture. Studio Vista.

¹⁰Spuybroek, L. (2009). The Architecture of Continuity. NAI Publishers.

¹¹Bohme, G. (2020). Atmospheric Architectures. (A.-Chr.Engels-Schwarzpaul, Ed.). Bloomsbury.

¹²Bolle, E. (1992). Tussen Architectuur en filosofie. VUB Press.

for shelter in a somewhat alien environment without spatial borders, we may agree with Hilde Heijnen's conclusion: in New Babylon man cannot dwell.

We should also be permanently aware of the fact that for centuries a still increasing number of people *are* nomads, and more than often not out of their free will. According to the UNHCR¹³ in June 2024 122,6 million people were 'forcibly displaced', i.e., forced to flee from their homes where in many cases the word 'home' was already a rather poor and inadequate definition when we look into circumstances and quality of housing. The next temporary place to stay is more than often not much of an improvement.

If, however we assume that (de-constructivist) architecture is able 'to respond in terms of design' the inescapable question arises as to what extent a physical form/shape for facilitating placelessness should lead. The wandering man - the nomad - who acknowledges that 'one's own place' in a hybrid world is nothing but a wishful thought, may well be served with the basic structure that facilitates some form of dwelling, shelter and connectivity.

Dwelling involves man and space; man, increasingly linked to a variety of online sources, and space, more and more becoming the interface through which we experience and connect with our environment. This raises the question of how to define and deal with our privacy, be it spatial and/or digital. Our traditional house is no longer the adequate entity to ensure a privacy; while - legally - qualified/protected as a private space we become increasingly aware of the fact that also beyond the realm of the home we are in need of privacies and (temporary) identities. Traditionally private space is bound by its private walls; but when physical walls no longer represent the separation between public and private space we have to rethink and redesign the appropriate methods for ensuring privacy, when and where desired. As Beatriz Colomina phrased it: 'The wall is a limit, but not simply the limit of a place'.¹⁴

The belief that - a 'new level' of design/technological - developments, together with real methods of agency can become but one source of the direction to something positive and constructive, can also become the escape for the often aired individualism and (negative) nihilism that threatens our society. The more we acknowledge that our dwelling is to a large extent dependent on the larger picture and scale in which its framework is created, the more we can become aware that in fact the latter is common and its infill-part is individual: it is the structure that facilitates the pre-conditions for a private space. If we can subscribe to the fact that we live in a society - i.e. we live together - we can create the circumstances to live and dwell in peace, at a certain place, at a certain time. In the words of sociologist Richard Sennett: 'we need an open, active way of building the environment'.¹⁵

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¹³<https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-are/figures-glance>

¹⁴Colomina, B. (1996). Privacy and Publicity. MIT Press.

¹⁵Sennett, R. (2018). Building and Dwelling. Allen Lane.