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# The Fundamental Protagonist

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The paper consists of preparatory notes for a research project on the use and the users of architecture. It tries to grasp the quite diffuse figure of the user, its different descriptions and its more or less hopeful theoretical constructions. In many cases, the figure of the user is defined in close relation to its counterpart, the architect, in others it is derived from general social or political concepts. Architecture has to deal with people—at the very least in its built-form—involving them in specific relations with each other and provoking reactions. Therefore with every architectural design, an idea is constructed as to what these relations are and who those people might be.

The projects of and reflections on participative architecture mostly assume that the participation of the future users of buildings in their planning is a form of democratic emancipation. But when we focus on the subjects of participation some questions emerge: isn't it precisely only in the process of participation that the figure of the user is constructed, defined as an ideal figure and addressed as a counterpart? Which ideas were projected onto that figure (for example, about the relation of individual and society or about the concept of public space)? And what has that figure become today?

One can only speculate what exactly the dispute is about. The photograph shows a crowd of mostly young men, gathered in a street, possibly blocking it—some of them are carrying banners. The image is taken from a position inside the crowd, where two persons are standing in the center, vis-à-vis, obviously having an argument, gesturing. One of them is Giancarlo de Carlo, one of the curators of the 14th Triennale di Milano of 1968.

Fig. 1. John McKean: *Giancarlo De Carlo: Layered Places* (Fellbach: Edition Axel Menges, 2004). Photo: John McKean.

The part of the Triennale curated by de Carlo was dedicated to the role of architecture in finding alternatives to a mass society driven by consumerism. It claimed a strong political understanding of the discipline of architecture, made evident in several contributions. The young radical group of architects, UFO, recreated a street barricade in the exhibition space, made from paving stones and the garbage of a consumer society – discarded televisions, refrigerators, bicycles—a reference to the barricades that were erected in Paris just a few weeks earlier. But not only the student generation rebelled, even a well-established architect like Aldo van Eyck linked architecture directly to the new technological potentialities and political conflicts of the time. His contribution showed photographs of U.S. military operations in Vietnam that resulted in the defoliation of entire forests.

On the day of the opening, May 30th 1968, the exhibition was squatted by a crowd of architecture students, who were protesting against the Triennale as a representative institution of the established cultural system. Soon after the press conference the access road was blocked and the building closed to the public. De Carlo suddenly finds himself in an ambiguous position, although he understands the worldwide protests of students as a necessary movement for change, and in architecture as a way of renewing the discipline, those he sympathises with criticise him heavily. He decides to confront them and puts his own role as an architect up for

public discussion; a radical democratic act, pictured in the photograph as an almost perfect, forum-like spatial setting.

## Architecture's Public

A few months later de Carlo published a text—maybe as a reaction to the Triennale conflicts—in which he formulated radically new ideas about the relation of architecture to its public, regarding architecture as an intellectual field as well as the actual building of spatial structures. The essay 'Architecture's Public', emerged from a lecture given at a congress in Liege in 1969, and was published in January 1971 in the 5th issue of the Bolognese magazine, *Parametro*. The text reformulates the relationship between architects and the public, between those who design spaces and those who use them. De Carlo introduces a new and powerful figure into architectural discourse:

> In reality, architecture has become too important to be left to architects. A real metamorphosis is necessary to develop new characteristics in the practice of architecture and new behavior patterns in its authors: therefore all barriers between builders and users must be abolished, so that building and using become two different parts of the same planning process. Therefore the intrinsic aggressiveness of architecture and the forced passivity of the user must dissolve in a condition of creative and decisional equivalence where each—with a different specific impact—is the architect, and every architectural event—regardless of who conceives it and carries it out—is considered architecture.[1]

[1] Giancarlo de Carlo, 'Architecture's Public', *Parametro* (5)(1971): 9.

The emphatic tone in which de Carlo declares the user of architecture as 'the fundamental protagonist' reveals what is at stake: nothing less than the credibility of architecture. In retrospect, after 40 years of the functionalist Modern Movement, de Carlo perceives a failure in principle even in progressive and socially responsible architectural movements such as CIAM. Architecture as a public practice can only be legitimated by its users, who are still not adequately integrated into the architectural process. Even the Modern Movement, that for the first time in history produced architecture for powerless groups in society, adhered to an authoritarian or at best patronising model of planning. Instead of planning *with* the users, the Modern Movement only involved planning *for* the users, degrading them to the level of the objects of planning.

De Carlo instead starts from the assumption of difference rather than homogeneity, addressing the involvement of users within concrete social conditions, acknowledging that their different needs cannot be discovered through an abstraction but only through participative processes. Planning thus becomes an immanently political act, a confrontation of the value systems of the architect and the user, where the architect withdraws from

his formerly dominant position. The user achieves the right to develop and express desires, which in turn can unleash subversive energies and lead to new hierarchies. The user is transformed here into a figure endowed with revolutionary hope, a participant in the planning process as an autonomous subject.

It is not only the relation between the architect and the user that is redefined here, but also the actual use of the built environment, which becomes a part of architecture, including not only the completion of buildings but also their adoption, change and even elimination. Everyone becomes an architect, the emancipated user as well as the building expert. In fact the use of space itself is in the process of becoming an architectural practice.

## Participation Process

The project *Nuovo Villaggio Matteotti*, a housing estate for the workers of Italy's largest steel company, can be understood as a translation into practice of de Carlo's ideas on participation.[2] It is his most radical experiment in participation and it took place in a remarkable setting, based on de Carlos' ideas about an alternative, egalitarian society. De Carlo did not question the need to demolish the old workers' houses to make way for new ones, and a renovation of the existing buildings was apparently never considered. Instead de Carlo assumed and claimed a certain universal right to live in a modern house of a reasonable standard, but still within the system of company sponsored housing for workers. This position is clearly in opposition to the modernist idea of the dwelling as 'Existenzminimum', formulated in the 1929 CIAM conference.

[2] Cf. 'Arbeiterwohnungen in Terni: Interview with Giancarlo de Carlo', in: *Werk* (3)(1972): 141-145.

What seemed problematic at the time for de Carlo—a large industrial company building accommodation for its workers—was dealt with in the organisation of the planning process. As there was a clear class divide between the workers and the management of the company, the planning was perceived not only as an individual emancipation, but also as an act of class struggle. De Carlo insisted that the meetings with the workers—the future inhabitants—had to take place during working hours and had to be paid like regular work. No members of the company management were allowed to attend the meetings in order to minimise control over the workers and to establish a trusting relationship between the architect and the users, allowing them to formulate their wishes about their future homes.

## The Production of Space

At about the same time that de Carlo was celebrating the use of space, Henri Lefebvre published *The Production of Space*,[3] where he approached similar questions on the idea of urban space and the role of planning in contemporary society. Based on Marxist theories of production, he developed the idea that space might be produced like a commodity, being

[3] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

the result of many different, sometimes even opposing social forces that act upon it. On the other hand, it is precisely in that same space that social relations take place. Lefebvre describes it as a feedback process: space is produced through social conflicts while social relations are inscribed in space. This means that social groups or individual subjects can be part of the struggle around the formation of urban space. Everyone can become part of the spatial production process and everyone can take an active role in these spatial negotiations.

Lefebvre specifies this understanding of space with three categories that point at the possibility of shaping space. The categories are 'perceived space', 'conceived space', and 'lived space'. 'Perceived space' for Lefebvre is the physical environment of everyday life. 'Conceived space' is the space of the bureaucrats and planners, an abstract field where power relations are set up and transformed into physical/material space. While the first two concepts assume a rather passive relation to space, the third category of 'lived space' introduces an active role and a certain involvement through the use of space. This is the space where social relations take place and it is shaped through actual use.

With this conceptual construction Lefebvre provides a tool to describe an open space of social interactions and change, as opposed to the abstract space of planners, and the self-evident space of everyday life. This so called 'lived space' gains its full meaning only through use, which means through the active involvement and participation of people in its design. That is the point at which Lefebvre's ideas intersect with de Carlo's, the user becoming an architect and the use of space being equivalent to the designing of space.

## Dwelling Education

In 1979 the German Werkbund, the former spearhead of the Modern Movement, published the guidebook *Lernbereich Wohnen* (the title is probably best translated as *Habitation Studies*). It was introduced by Lucius Burckhardt, then president of the Werkbund and a lucid critic of the social housing system, in a somewhat ambiguous way:

> This book gives advice and doesn't want to sell anything. It sustains the right to reasonable habitation. But it also sustains the right and the ability of everyone to define for him/herself what this reasonable, appropriate and proper habitation might be.[4]

[4] Michael Andritzky and Gert Selle (eds.), *Lernbereich Wohnen*, (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1979), I, p. 5, [my translation].

Although the book's title refers to a schoolbook, it contains no teaching units but is something between a sourcebook of examples of how people lived in history and a guidebook for contemporary city dwellers. Its chapters deal with the social conditions and history of dwelling, but also include practical advice for the furnishing of an apartment or the

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renovation of old buildings. The last chapter presents a photo series with a variety of 'alternative homes'.

What today appears so strange about this book is its inherent statement that dwelling as an act can be learnt. Though it immediately takes back this claim in the foreword, stating that everyone has the right and the ability to define his/her own form of dwelling. But the rest of the book's 370 pages present most contemporary concepts of dwelling as deeply affected by conventions, mediatised ideals, fashions or unreflected wishes. To avoid such an alienated living situation it is necessary to get to know other possibilities and to be able to reflect on one's own dwelling situation. According to the Werkbund it is the private sphere of habitation where this kind of aesthetic training of the users could initiate an emancipative process.

## Democratised Aesthetics

Whereas the Werkbund developed its almost a century old idea of an 'education in taste', towards a less authoritarian aesthetic training, the Viennese architect Ottokar Uhl propagated a radical 'democratisation of aesthetics'.[5] In several texts, written during the 1970s, he developed an idea of a popularised aesthetics of the many. His approach is based on the assumption that the user of architecture should also become a producer of space and thereby develop his/her own aesthetic concepts, instead of accepting the aesthetic standards of others. As a consequence, a democratised aesthetic will be poor in comparison to those of professional aesthetic producers like architects, but they will be the result of self-determined democratic processes. In this point Ottokar Uhl goes further than most of his colleagues. While many architects understand the process of participation as one phase in the design process, which stops at a certain point to be taken over by the expert planner, Uhl tries to open up the process as much as possible. He withdraws from the actual design and leaves far reaching decisions to the users, which include decisions on the programme of a building, its function and even technical solutions.

## Politics of Aesthetics

The subject of the above mentioned practices could generally be considered to be the worker within Fordist labour conditions, secured by the welfare state, who would eventually be provided with communal social housing. Today the situation is very different. The predominant subject of today's planning is the flexible and mobile creative worker, who will satisfy his/her demand for housing on the market. A remarkable reassessment has occurred since the early days of participative planning and many of the former claims have been realised. The old figure of the user corresponds to a certain extent with today's ideal of the autonomous subject who acts creatively and self-responsibly. The promising potentials of participation—

5 Ottokar Uhl, 'Demokratisierte Ästhetik', in Ottokar Uhl, *Gegen-Sätze, Architektur als Dialog*, (Vienna: Picus, 2003).

self-responsibility, individuality, creativity, etc.—have lost much of their liberating impact, and instead almost turned into demands that are enforced upon today's consumers of architecture. The desire to oppose the homogenising and patronising care of the welfare state with one's own creativity has rather turned into a demand for creativity as an extra value in an increasingly competitive society.

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière, recently developed a contemporary understanding of the relation of aesthetics and politics. In his book, T*he Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*,[6] Rancière assumes that the field of politics cannot be considered apart from the field of aesthetics, as the political is always centered around questions of the appearance of the so far un-represented. The aesthetical, on the other hand, deals with the articulation of the so far inexpressible. Both concepts aim at what could be called a radical democratic society, where the hegemonic order is challenged by social groups that are not, or are not adequately, represented.

Whereas in the 1970s the project of a 'democratised aesthetics' in architecture was aimed at individual emancipation from authoritarian or patronising environments, the radical democratic project is broader. It aims at a general transformation of democratic politics into a field of negotiations. Here the notion of space being a result of constant negotiations of conflicts between different political forces becomes important again. In this constellation the figure of the user of space—seen as a radical democratic subject—could help to redefine the relationship between architects and architecture's public once more. The photograph at least looks beautiful.

[6] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, (London: Continuum, 2006).

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