Squatting My Mind – Towards an Architectural Ecosophy

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Understanding ecology as "a widely-drawn category that encompasses objects and ideas, organic species and their habitats, inseparably linked together",[1] ecology clearly involves architecture on countless levels, by far exceeding the parameters of sustainable building technology that dominate conceptions of this field. Primarily addressing the 'mental ecology' of architecture – that is, how architecture is thought and constructed within the discipline – this article furthers an understanding of how occupancy has the power to undo central architectural concepts. Such an undoing is seen as a prerequisite for what Félix Guattari has denoted ecosophy – the ethico-political articulation between the three, interconnected ecological registers: that of the environment, of social relations and the realm of ideas. Considered within an ecological intellectual framework, notions of resistance, spatial appropriation and indeterminacy in architecture are seen to evolve as steps along the way in the urgent task of re-writing architecture's ontology. It points towards an architecture of shifts and additions, of re-uses and re-inventions; an architecture that generously permits a variety of uses and a continuous production of meaning.

[1]   Andrew Ballantyne, *Architecture Theory: a Reader in Philosophy and Culture* (London, New York: Continuum, 2005) p. 36.

Fig 1. Squatters make the headlines. Catharina Gabrielsson.

Shortly after the financial crisis struck London in the autumn of 2008, newspapers were flooded with reports on how a group of artists had invaded an empty eighteenth century property in Mayfair and had opened it to the public as a "non-hierarchical centre for knowledge and learning", called 'Temporary School of Thought.' During a few winter months, in a neighbourhood dominated by embassies and offices, the house at No. 39 Charles Street became the basis for a social, artistic and institutional experiment. The story of how a group of middle class students opt for voluntary poverty, go skipping for discarded food at night and organise activities devoted to 'a sharing of skills' might at first view seem banal; an act of resistance against mainstream society, centred on coping with self-inflicted difficulties to which a single phone call would put an end (there is always someone's father who is a lawyer). On closer reading, however, it involves a meshwork of meanings at different levels: urban, architectural, political, juridical, social, economical, artistic, institutional and medial. This complexity stands in contrast to the temporal structure of the story, beginning with the encroachment of the building on 29th November 2008 and ending with the group's eviction following a court order on 27th January 2009. Or beginning at the moment of discovery (as their Christmas tree is detected through the window) and reported in the media in late December; or perhaps with the consolidation of this particular group in a previous squat nearby; or with the one prior to that, an alternative exhibition space in Notting Hill – in which case the clear-cut story dissolves into an unfinished process, since 'DA! Collective' continues to run its practice from other sites and outsets.

Fig 2. DA! Collective on the roof. Colin Hampden-White.

2   Antonio Negri, 'On Rem Koolhaas', *Radical Philosophy*, 154 (March/April 2009) at http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel_id=2188&editorial_id=28050 Discussing the city as a site for resistance, criticizing Koolhaas for his 'postmodern' cynicism, Negri incomprehensibly scorns the various 'alternatives' mentioned here. The full quote reads: "I almost laugh when my closest comrades talk about alternatives in terms of communes, self-managed gardens and city allotments, multifunctional squats, cultural and political ateliers, enterprises of a common Bildung." Interestingly, the 'comrades' might be identified as members of Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée (aaa) – advocates for 'soft' forms of activism who challenge Negri's 'hard' confrontational position through their systematic appropriation of urban space for collective and alternative uses. See Anne Querrien, Doina Petrescu, Constantin Petcou, 'What Makes a Biopolitical Space? A Discussion with Antonio Negri' in aaa (ed.) Urban Act: a Handbook for Alternative Practice (Paris: aaa – PEPRAV, 2007), pp.290-299. I am pointing to this debate as illustrative for important conceptual differences concerning the conditions of change.

3   David Cunningham (quoting Mike Davis), 'The Concept of Metropolis: Philosophy and Urban Form', *Radical Philosophy* 135 (September/October 2005): p. 23

4   Jonathan Hill (ed.) *Occupying architecture: Between the Architect and the User* (London: Routledge, 1998)

5   Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (New York, London: Continuum, 2005) p. 28, 41
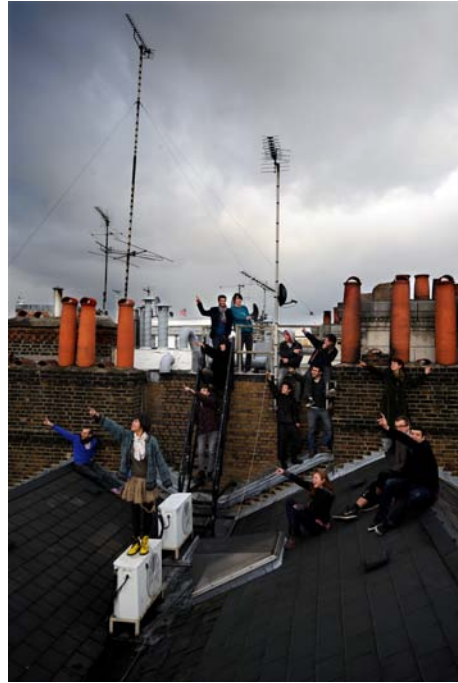
Taken as a case in point for urban activism, summed up as the creation of "alternatives in terms of communes, self-managed gardens and city allotments, multifunctional squats, cultural and political ateliers";[2] indicative for the "episodic and discontinuous" nature of these movements, "reflecting a reconfiguration of the 'local' as fugitive, transitory, and migrant … whose outcomes for emancipation are opaque and uncertain",[3] it is indeed possible to question the relevance of the Mayfair squat within a larger political context. As a theorist of architecture, however, I am not primarily asking whether it had the capacity to change society, but whether it has the capacity to change our conceptions of architecture. Of central importance here is how occupancy and the 'active user'[4] effectively undo central architectural concepts, but also how this undoing is a prerequisite for what Félix Guattari has denoted ecosophy: "the ethico-political articulation" between the three, interconnected ecological registers of the environment, social relations and the realm of ideas.[5] It is necessary to emphasise this three-folded structure, since we are used to thinking ecology as solely having to do with atmospheric, biological and geographical conditions, and even if we perceive it as the relationship between an organism and its habitat, we tend to exclude ourselves from that line of thought. For while current climatic anxieties bear token for an increasing awareness of the profound interdependency between organic and non-organic structures, the epistemological foundations for Western culture – separating subject and object, man and environment, mind and body – seem undisturbed by such concerns. I suggest that it is precisely through their insertion into an 'ecological' framework of ideas that the

discourses on resistance, spatial appropriation and indeterminacy in architecture – which is what I am addressing here – become possible to identify as steps along the way in the urgent task of re-writing architecture's ontology.

A multiplicity of sites and narratives

Fig 3. The Chinese Room. Photo: Colin Hampden-White

Fig 4. Detail of the Chinese wallpaper. Photo: Amanda Farah

But let us begin with the house, a Georgian terraced house on a side-street to Berkeley Square, an area with some of the highest property values in London (and thus perhaps in the world). Built on speculation c. 1750-53, without the aid of an architect, it is an anonymous token for the taste and the building techniques of its time. Today, the house carries a Grade

II listing and its assumed market value of £22.5m circulated incessantly in the press during the occupation. By present standards No. 39 Charles Street is considered 'remarkable', not least because of the so-called Chinese room with eighteenth century hand painted wallpaper – a room the squatters conscientiously kept locked. The conflicts concerning the value of this building is a text book example of the distinction between exchange and use value – an object of financial investment vis-à-vis an open free space – but is also a case in point for how shifts in use set forward alternative meanings and experiences.

Fig 5. Getting inside (re-enactment). Photo: Colin Hampden-White

Fig 6. Temporary School of Thought street sign. Photo: Catharina Gabrielsson

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Fig 7. The reception desk. Photo: Catharina Gabrielsson

The complexity arises already in the fact that the building has two addresses: there is a front and a back. The collective got in from the mews through an open window and announced its programme within days. Described as a "space where people come together to share knowledge, nondescript skills, tactic imagination, creativity and passive action",[6] the project was already running as launched through postings and fliers, several weeks before it came to the newspapers' notice. But Time Out caught on early with a series of articles; The Guardian, Times and London Evening Standard were surprisingly positive in their reports; one columnist even wrote that "Clarges Mews" reinstalled his hopes concerning alternative lifestyles and activism.[7] The tabloid press made headlines on scavengers and parasites, however, seemingly reflecting a fair part of the general opinion – at least as it appeared though comments on the internet. DA! Collective was furthermore repeatedly mixed up with another squat nearby, the so-called Dog Squat at Park Lane, populated by less scrupulous people. "Why do all squatters these days claim to be artists?", Jim wrote on his blog – he had taken part in establishing the squat in Park Lane but managed to make an escape to Clarges Mews when things went out of hand.[8] Jim's blog on the internet is one of my principle sources for this article. Combining a personal narrative on everyday life with links and uploaded clippings, it is an archive-in-process, a bio-political record of the subcultures of London. The difference in age and background set him apart from the rest of the collective; "they rose to squatting, I sunk to it", as he once told me. It might answer for the distance, at once inside and outside events, that characterizes his writings. Posted on a site for online gambling, the reader comments offer an insight into the scope between hatred and compassion that defines present-day society.

[6] Posted on http://www.temporaryschool.org/ (accessed 15th January 2009), website suspended at the time of writing.

[7] Richard Godwin, 'The Mayfair squatters', *London Evening Standard*, 13th January.2009

[8] Luckyjim, "Posh squat vs Dog squat" http://www.gutshot.com/bforum/blog.php?b=293&goto=prev (posted 24th January 2009; accessed 2nd June 2010)

The issue of time is evidently of importance here, inherent to the story itself, and thus time as indistinguishable from space and experience, merged into "a simultaneity-of-stories-so-far".[9] It goes far beyond the confinements of date and location. The reason why the squat initially went unnoticed, for instance, was because people kept to the back – the full extent of its exposed position at one of the most prestigious addresses in London was only made apparent through the media. The site was thus also a medial one, convoluting the architectural conception of 'site' as bounded by property lines and defined by topography.[10] Similarly, significations emerged through multiple channels – from headlines and blogs, articles, commentaries, photographs, drawings and reports; sources which may be interrelated in different ways, depending on the story to be told. Things evolved through dynamic spatial interactions, centred on the physical space but depending on its connections to spaces and occurrences in other media. The programme of Temporary School of Thought was continually updated on the website; countless visitors were attracted by the press and took part in activities (amongst others a chef from a nearby restaurant, who cooked dinner solely based on 'found' ingredients). Jim relates one of these visits in detail on his blog. He describes how he meets the aged relatives to the last family to live in the house, then owned by the banker and merchant Hugh Owen Smith. They tell him about their memories while being shown around. Saddened by the dry rot and general disrepair, they ask whether the squatters need help with food or books. Later, Jim receives an e-mail that adds details to their story:

> "He [Owen Smith] had two daughters, Faith and Fortune, my grandmother and great aunt. He also adopted one of his orphaned cousins, called Judy. At one of Fortune's birthday parties ponies were brought into the Ball Room and allowed to jump through hoops. Apparently Queen Elizabeth, as a dawdling toddler, was there."[11]

A quick search on the internet confirms that Owen Smith was related to royalty through marriage, and that it must have been he who commissioned the decorations on the façades toward the courtyard: a delicate wooden trellis, probably part of a garden design that never saw execution. It points to the only named architect in the history of the house, Harry Stuart Goodhart Rendel (1887-1959), who refurbished Owen Smith's country estate and designed Hay's Wharf, his warehouse on the Thames. Biographies of buildings quickly fork out into a meshwork of trails involving a multitude of places and people. Serving as a focal point for crossing trajectories, juxtaposing narratives and meanings, architecture's involvement in the construction of subjectivity is necessarily complex; a process in which the border between self and space, perception and imagination, becomes blurred.[12] But if memory plays a crucial part in the construction of identity and in forming a sense of belonging, it also borders

9 Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Dehli: Sage, 2005) p. 9.

10 See Carol J. Burns and Andrea Kahn (ed.), *Site Matters: Design Concepts, Histories and Strategies* (New York, London: Routledge, 2005)

11 Private e-mail 22nd January 2009

12 See Dana Arnold & Joanna Sofaer, *Biographies and Space: Placing the Subject in Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2008)

field:

a free journal for architecture

13   luckyjim, "Amongst fallen gentlefolk"
     http://www.gutshot.com/bforum/
     blog.php?b=284&goto=prev (posted
     18.01.2009; accessed 02.06.2010)

to issues concerning ownership. Jim told the visitors that they "had more right to the property than its actual owners, than any investment fund who'd bought it to sit empty and be resold as profit, since their family had actually lived here and it was part of their memories and heritage."[13] Here, the ownership authorized by personal experience is superimposed with the 'adverse possession' of the squatter, both brought into collision with the juridical and financial formulas that identify Timekeeper Ltd as the rightful owner of the house.
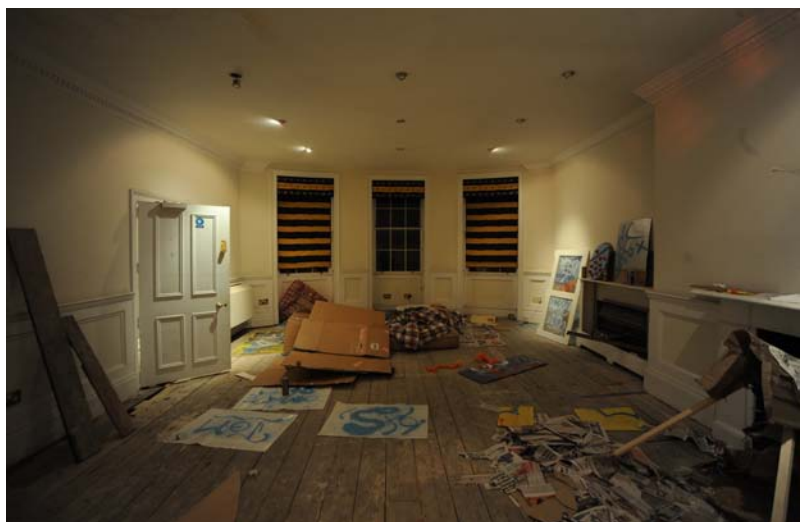

Fig. 8. The studio. Photo: Colin Hampden-White

Fig. 9. The workshop. Photo: Colin Hampden-White

14 Sophia Psarra, *Architecture and Narrative; The Formation of Space and Cultural Meaning* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), first (unnumbered) page.

15 Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, Mass, London: MIT Press, 1994)

16 Empty Houses: (2010) http://www. emptyhomes.com/ (accessed 13.01.2010)

17 According to interviews with Paul Palmer, Empty Homes Officer, Westminster Council (13th February 2009); David Ireland, Chief Executive for The Empty Homes Agency (29th April 2009) and Dr. Savvas Verdi, architect and economist, LSE (19th May 2009).

The multiplicity of stories and significations produced by this occupation instantly belie the neatness of how narrative and meaning tend to be interpreted in architecture theory. According to one writer, "narrative enters architecture through the ways in which space is structured to achieve specific effects on our perception. … The act of perceiving is linked with the sequential unfolding of information as our bodies pass through space".[14] This is a universalistic logic at work, pre-supposing that the perception and experience of a building is determined by the building's design, in line with the architect's intentions. It reflects a predominant conception within the architectural culture – narrative understood in terms of movement in space, the phenomenological experience of strolling through a building – for instance as reflected in Le Corbusier's concept of the promenade architecturale as critically analysed by Beatriz Colomina.[15] Similarly, meaning' in architecture is linked to representation, to the capacity of architecture to be 'read' or to otherwise affect the senses in a controlled and predictable way. Meaning and narrative in architecture have less to do with the reader, and more with the author: there has been no barthesian turn.

Names, causes and claims for disused space

Yet the case of the Mayfair squat is but part of a much larger political, historical and economical context. For a start, what caused the house to be empty? Empty houses are a well-known phenomenon in London, a city marked by extreme social differences with a desperate shortage of affordable housing. As a materialisation of economical forces and political ideas, empty houses are spreading across the UK, the total number now being reported as close to a million – figures related to homelessness and the impossible long waiting lists for social housing.[16] These are not all derelict or condemned houses, as is commonly presumed: financial speculation, long-drawn planning processes, legal conflicts and the not infrequent occurrence of 'double settlements' cause perfectly sound houses to stand empty. Politically determined conditions concerning mortgage rates and tax allowances are said to be decisive: according to the charity organisation Empty Homes, the present rules work to promote new constructions rather than the restoration of existing ones. In addition, the neoliberal campaign for home ownership launched by Thatcher in the 80's and the consecutive 'buy-to-let' programme (an incentive for private investments in houses and flats) has given rise to a cadre of inexperienced owners, lacking the means and know-how for property maintenance and thus causing houses' abandonment.[17] The occurrence of empty houses is a concrete example of how near and distant forces are made manifest in the street – not least bearing witness to the crisis of the US mortgage market and its repercussions across the world. It proves how the effects of global capitalism are not merely a matter of producing intensities, but a surging-out of rural lands and a creation of urban voids. Situating the empty

18   Robert Booth, 'Artists' creative use of vacant shops brings life to desolate high streets', The Guardian 19th February 2009

19   Robert Booth, 'MPs plan to let artists take over empty shops to prevent ghost towns,' *The Guardian*, 14th April.2009

20   Anselm, T., "As if by magic, a shopkeeper appeared", http://www.thebeekeepers. com/2009/04/01/as-if-by-magic/ (accessed 20th April 2010)

21   Hermione Hoby, "The artists who are hot to squat...", The Guardian 12th April 2009; http://dev.null.org/blog/ item/200904162344_slacspacb (accessed 20th April 2010); "Radical Incursions: Autonomous Occupations & the Slack Space Movement", seminar at St. Martin's School of Art 25th June.2009.

22   Cf. Empty Shops Network (2010): http:// www.artistsandmakers.com/staticpages/ index.php/emptyshops (accessed 20th April 2010);New Curator (2010): http://newcurator.com/2009/11/slack-space-handbook/ (accessed 20th April 2010);The Null Device, "Slack Space and Global Berlinisation" (2010): http://dev. null.org/blog/item/200904162344_ slacspacb (accessed 20th April 2010); Space Makers Agency (2010): http:// spacemakers.org.uk/ (accessed 14th April 2010);Slack Space Brighton, (2009) www.facebook.com. [accessed 11th November 2010]

house at Charles Street in an economical, geopolitical field thickens and lengthens its strands of interconnectivity.

But the effects of the financial crisis are also made manifest in language. The expression 'slack space' is picked up by a journalist, who writes an article about empty shops being used by artists as studios, workshops and exhibitions spaces.[18] Soon measures are taken to enable such processes; politicians suggest that £3 million is to be distributed to various schemes that enable a "creative reuse" of vacant shops, advocating a system whereby local planning regulations may temporarily be bypassed. Official sources claim that the number of empty shops in the UK will rise by 70 000 (in total 135 000, which is one in six) thus adding to the many boarded up window fronts that threaten to turn high streets into "ghost towns".[19] In this context, slack space is written into an economic model. It refers to properties that are empty due to bankruptcies and closedowns, supposedly providing a platform for new innovative ideas. In collaboration with local municipalities, artists take on the role as entrepreneurs when standard procedures are exhausted – "as if by magic, a new shopkeeper appears", someone commented sourly in a blog.[20] There is another side to this slack space movement, however, as networks of artists and activists increasingly use squatting as a means to confront the formal economy.[21] Loose affinity groups assemble on the internet, sharing a concern for the taking over of spaces on a collective and non-commercial basis – a movement whose critical and political ambitions are reflected by slogans such as 'Radical Incursions'. Closely aligned with other terms in circulation – such as 'meanwhile spaces' and 'pop-up restaurants', referring to the temporary use of vacant spaces within the formal economy – slack space therefore comes across as a deeply ambiguous concept, pointing to the heterogeneity of language games.[22]

Fig 10. "Radical Incursions" invitation

Nevertheless, it was due to its slackness that the house in Mayfair was possible to squat; was singled out by activists who strategically moved about in search for optimal conditions. Used to promote a fundamental compliance with economical forces, as well as anti-capitalistic resistance, the indecisive ideological status of slack space runs parallel to that of squatting. Although it is "largely absent from policy and academic debate [and] rarely conceptualised, as a problem, as a symptom, or as a social or housing movement", urban squatting in a Western context is generally seen to straddle between opposite poles – motivated by life-style choices on the one side, by material needs and 'the struggle for one's daily bread' on the other.[23] Squatting still has a remarkable strong position in the British system. Its legal foundations stretching as far back as to The Forcible Entry Act of 1381, to occupy a building without permission of the owner is not a criminal act: unlawful, but not illegal, according to the *Squatters Handbook*[24] (now in its 13th edition). Based on the ancient

[23] Kesia Reeve, 'Squatting since 1945: The enduring relevance of material need', in Peter Somerville and Nigel Sprigings (ed.) *Housing and Social Policy: Contemporary Themes and Critical Perspectives*, (London and New York : Routledge, 2005) p. 197.

[24] Advisory Service for Squatters *The Squatters Handbook* (London, Advisory Service for Squatters, 2009).

25   Colin Ward, 'The Early Squatters, in Nick Wates (ed.) *Squatting: the Real Story* (London: Bay Leaves Books, 1980) p. 104.

26   Colin Ward, 'The Early Squatters, in Nick Wates (ed.) *Squatting: the Real Story* (London: Bay Leaves Books, 1980) p. 106.

27   A decisive condition for the English garden movement, frequently overlooked in theories on the picturesque, was the massive privatization of common land made possible through the Enclosure Acts of the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Centuries.

28   Hans Pruijt, 'Is the institutionalization of urban movements inevitable? A comparison of the opportunities for sustained sqautting in New York City and Amsterdam', International *Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27(1) (2003); 133-157.

right of obtaining possession through use, thorough spatial practice sustained over time, squatting may be seen as "the oldest mode of tenure in the world".[25] Its British history is long and politicised, epitomised by the Diggers and the Levellers who in response to the intense land privatizations during the seventeenth century invaded private land and enjoyed a short-lived success by "sowing the ground with parsnips, carrots and beans, with the intention of restoring 'the ancient community of enjoying the fruits of the earth'".[26] As a mode of claiming space through occupancy, however, squatting was always a two-sided phenomenon. Not only did it allow for the medieval poor to settle on wasteland and take over deserted holdings, but it also enabled estate owners in their expansion of territory by fencing in common ground for pasture.[27] After the ideologically inspired wave of urban squatting in the 60's and 70's, and following the largely de-politicised climate since, squatting today is said to have ceased to operate as a collective mobilising force. Current research sees it as a multifaceted phenomenon fraught with ideological tensions, verging between quaint bohemian institutionalisation (in close alignment to artists' roles in gentrification processes) – and a form of anarchistic 'direct action' in confrontation to private property.[28]

Fig 11. Squatting: the Real Story. (cover)

The theory and practice of squatting disclose it as an intensely real entwinement of time, space and human agency. While the Forcible Entry Act continues to protect squatters from being evicted by force (made manifest by Section 6 of the Criminal Law Act, accessible for downloading in a friendly print-out format), by equally ancient 'common law' squatters may obtain legal ownership to a house providing their occupancy remains uncontested for 12 years.[29] But such conditions are hard to fulfil, and recent changes in the law designed for the protection of private ownership have added to the hardships of squatting. There are agencies for squatting[30] in London – places that provide legal advice and offer practical information on how to come to terms with basic amenities such as water, electricity and sanitation.[31] Squatting is, to a large extent, learnt thorough a 'sharing of skills' where experienced squatters support and initiate younger players to the game. The ethical codex to improve the house, not to destroy it (as conveyed through the Berlin expression Instandbesetzen – a combination of Instandsetzen: to put in order, and Besetzen: to possess or occupy) gives squatting a precarious position vis-à-vis the architectural discipline. Epitomising the figure of the 'active user', the squatter appropriates and transforms existing spaces according to his or her needs and ideas – a heuristic discoverer, inventor and creator of architecture through the autonomous thrust of DIY.

Fig 12. The Squatter's Handbook. (cover)

So while squatting provides a setting for an alternative architectural conception, politically as well as philosophically – legally, it constitutes an infringement of the property owner's rights equal to that of trespassing. Evictions may only be performed by a bailiff following a court order, provided the complainant has been able to prove rightful ownership before a judge. And this is the reason why the Temporary School of Thought

[29] The act of taking possession is crucial to squatting: the building must be entered 'peacefully' without causing damage, and the locks must be changed immediately to prevent anyone else (presumably the owner) from forcing an entry (Advisory Service for Squatters *The Squatters Handbook* (London, Advisory Service for Squatters, 2009).

[30] Neil Cobb and Lorna Fox, 'Living outside the system? The (im)morality of urban squatting after the Land Registration Act 2002', Legal Studies, 27 (2) (2007): 236-260. Reeves also notes that the extensive privatization of municipal social housing has diminished the stock of houses that traditionally have sustained squatters. Arguing against the so-called 'second modernity' and the 'identity politics' promoted by Anthony Giddens and others, Reeves claims that squatting continues to be driven by material needs and that the depolitization shrouds its significance as a symptom for the inadequacies of the welfare state. Kesia Reeve, 'Squatting since 1945: The enduring relevance of material need', in Peter Somerville and Nigel Sprigings (eds.) *Housing and Social Policy: Contemporary Themes and Critical Perspectives*, (London and New York : Routledge, 2005).

[31] Advisory Service for Squatters, Whitechapel (2010) http://www.squatter.org.uk/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1; 56A Infoshop, Elephant & Castle (2010) http://www.56a.org.uk/

could remain in Mayfair for so long; the owners' documents were initially dismissed by the civil court. Remarkably, and adding to the complexity of this case, the occupation at Charles street was carried out with the discreet support of Westminster council.[32] Lacking a formal UK address, the owners had hitherto managed to escape the authorities' attempts to track them down and put the property into use. It was only through this turn of events they made themselves known, albeit by proxy.

In-between specificity and indeterminacy

Fig. 13. Floor plan of Charles Street. Photo: Amanda Farah

In its abandoned state, the house in Mayfair was possible to claim for other purposes. Its appropriation by DA! collective brought about a blurring of categories: between exchange and use value, between different forms of ownership, between private and public – it produced a multitude of sites and narratives. The house at Charles Street proved to be exceptionally adequate for sustaining such shifts. Characterised by duality (a Front and a Back; an Upstairs and a Downstairs) and providing a choice of rooms unspecified as to their present use, it allowed for a life-style of comings-and-goings and the multi-programmed array of activities that characterised the Temporary School of Thought. Functions were mapped on plans provided by the council and distributed spatially according to logistics and physical conditions. The reception rooms on the first floor were fitted with rudimental seating and accruements for screenings and a small reception was set up by the entrance from the mews, complete with hosts welcoming visitors.

Fig. 14. Person dressed up as a mouse. Photo: Colin Hampden-White

Fig. 15. Performance in the staircase. Photo: Colin Hampden-White

Given the setting and social history of the house, however, it might be argued that the squat had more akin to restoration than to revolt. In terms of resistance, it was certainly different from, say, the riots in the suburbs of Paris in 2005. The house had been planned for a display of spectacle; the story about the ponies in the first floor reception room shows how a certain eccentricity was maintained well into the twentieth century. Wedging themselves closely to the original ethos of the house, the collective's staging of activities (which included fancy-dress parties and productions of Dorian Grey) held an evident allusion to the building's past. Play may be seen as a particular form of resistance, not one that operates is the face of power – distorting codes, values and uses in a direct and oppositional way – but working at a more insidious level, through ways of doing and forms of expression that are not 'for real' but enacted as if they were.[33] The playful and narcissistic aspects of the collective's enterprises (such as their willingness to pose for photographers), in combination with their

33   Nigel Thrift, 'The Still Point. Resistance, Expressive Embodiment and Dance', in Steve Pile and Michael Keith (eds.) *Geographies of Resistance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) pp. 145-150

dealings with the local authority, disturbs the diagram of power/resistance or tactic/strategy that forms the academic basis for readings of spatial appropriation. And while these kinds of transgressions may be considered a middle class privilege, arguably undermining the political significance of this case, it holds aesthetic and architectural implications that cannot be ignored. Rather than an open act of violation, the occupation constituted a détournement of the building's identity, shifting its significance by changing the context for its interpretation.[34]

Town houses such as this were the pied-à-terre for the "landed gentry" during the Season "while Parliament was sitting", they were designed for maintaining the social life of the ruling classes in England.[35] Space were planned for public rather than domestic use, a life of:

"continual entertaining in drawing-rooms and ante-rooms and 'eating-rooms' where conversation would not be wholly ephemeral, where a sentence might be delivered which would echo round political England, where an introduction might mean the beginning of a career or a deft criticism the dethronement of a policy."[36]

It was an architecture defined by access and entrances, sequences of spaces centred around a hall, where the display of taste and wealth in the interiors (mahogany panel doors, hand-painted wallpapers, silk hangings and marble chimneypieces) stood in contrast to the austerity of the dark brick façades. In a larger version of this architecture, planning for the efficiency and invisibility of servants are said to have been as crucially important as ensuring the lavish decorations.[37] In fact, both were informed by the same rationality. The divide between what Robin Evans calls "an architecture to look through and an architecture to hide" – dividing commodity from delight, utility from beauty, and function from form[38] – may be recognized as an expression of a capitalistic logic already in full swing. Although modelled on such architectural ideals, this kind of separation between 'serving' and 'served' could not be accomplished at No. 39 Charles Street. Restricted by the terraced house plot, 'convenience and comfort' – based on the separation between individuals and classes that Evans sees as constitutive for modern domesticity – could merely be hinted here. According to the historic building report, this particular terraced house is characterised by a dense spatial interconnectivity, dominated by the central staircase, which by only leading up to the first floor, makes a clear distinction between the public and private parts of the house. Yet this difference must once have been between visitors and dwellers, rather than masters and servants, since the generosity of the back staircase implies that it was shared by all members of the household.[39] This detail concerning the inner running of the house may be noted as reflecting a pre-modern spatial regime, based on what Evans defines as 'sociability' rather than 'socialization'. That is to say, as pre-supposing a system of

34   The English translation of 'détournement', roughly corresponding to 'diversion', lacks the nuances encoded in the French original: retouring, hijacking, embezzlement, misappropriation, corruption etc. Simon Sadler writes: "Détournement would permit anyone to take part in the raids on official culture, weakening the polarisation between 'author' and 'reader', nullifying the importance of attribution, originality and intellectual property. ... The experiments in détournement that situationists carried out in literature, political theory, and film ... were intended as just the start." Simon Sadler *The Situationist City*, (London, England, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998) p. 44.

35   Carol Kennedy, *Mayfair: a Social History* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), p.55

36   John Summerson, *Georgian London* (London: Pimlico, 1988) p. 123

37   Such as in nearby Derby House, 26 Grosvenor Square, designed by the Adams brothers. Carol Kennedy, *Mayfair: a Social History* (London: Hutchinson, 1986) p. 56

38   Robin Evans, 'Figures, Doors and Passages', in *Translations from Drawing to Buildings and Other Essays* (London: Architectural Association, 1997) p. 74

39   See the historic building report for Timekeeper Ltd, made by Donald Insall Associates Ltd (March 2009), section 3.2. Accessible through http://www.westminster.gov.uk/services/environment/planning/searchapplications/.

human co-existence with mixed and incidental contacts, rather than that of isolation and separation on which a modern subjectivity is based.

Fig 16. Bed room. Photo: Amanda Farah

Fig 17. Lecture hall. Photo: Amanda Farah

Fig 18. Living room. Photo: Amanda Farah

[40] Quote from Jessica Mitford in Oliver Bradbury, *The Lost Mansions of Mayfair* (London: Historical Publications, 2008) p. 13

[41] Quoted from J M Crook, The Rise of the Nouveaux Riches (1999) in Oliver Bradbury, The Lost Mansions of Mayfair (London: Historical Publications, 2008) p. 176 According to another version, the Proudhon quote "Property is Theft" was painted on the façade, and the violence and chaos surrounding the so-called Hippydilly squat are said to have swerved the public opinion against what was then an on-going, legitimate and radical movement throughout London. Steve Platt, 'A Decade of Squatting: the Story of Squatting in Britain since 1968', in Nick Wates (ed.) Squatting: the Real Story, (London: Bay Leaf Books, 1980), p. 23.

[42] On walls, see Robin Evans, 'The Rights of Retreat and the Rights of Exclusion', in *Translations from Drawing to Buildings and Other Essays* (London: Architectural Association, 1997); Eyal Weizman, 'Walking Through Walls: Soldiers as Architects in the Israel-Palestine Conflict', Radical Philosophy 136 (March/April 2006)

The squatters' use of the building activated its potential for social merging, unhinged from the aristocratic codex ("as fixed as if it had been determined by some inimitable law of the Universe") it once used to serve.[40] The interior functioned as a specific framework for new interpretations, alternative uses and other productions of meaning. Everyday life in this self-policing community depended on a system of collaboration, hunting for food in skips and waste-bins at closing time, decision-making as to the run of the programme, assigning chores regarding 'improvements' to the house (such as rickety book shelves for the library, a workshop and storage for bicycles). The collective's refusal to speak to the tabloid press (arguably a maladroit PR strategy) was compensated by the friendliness they showed to anyone interested in the programme: workshops on automatic writing, talks on life as a bicycle courier ("with access to the whole city but without a home"), lectures on art, politics and economics, lessons in yoga and Hungarian folk dances, and so on.

So in comparison to a preceding event in 1969 – a 'sit-in' by protesting hippies at an address associated with the Rothschilds, allegedly flaunting the slogan "we are writing on your walls"[41] – there was very little outward protest at this squat. Although it was neither the first case, nor the last, of spatial re-appropriation in Mayfair (after all, a place where flows of power and money have always materialized in buildings, previously through new constructions, progressively through changes in ownership and use) it answered to a differed logic. Even as compared to other artists' take-overs in prominent places, for a time sweeping in waves across central London (frequently to exhibit very bad art), 'Clarges Mews' seemed driven by another impetus, motivated by a desire to reconfigure the nature of social relationships. For instance, the astonishing experience of being able to walk freely into a space that is normally 'obscene' was noted by several commentators. It is precisely the ordinary character of walls that answers for the power of such transgressions – in defining the limits to property and identity, in disseminating knowledge and information, in materializing concepts of sovereignty and democracy etc. walls take part in structuring self and society.[42] In this regard, the Mayfair squat was substantially different from other cases that merely involve dwelling. Not merely shifting from private to public use (or vice-versa) but in undoing such distinctions, it transformed the real and symbolic values of the house by altering its patterns of accessibility and movement.

The critical potential of slack space

Judged by how it is represented in history, maintained in education, published and awarded, architecture is defined by criteria linked to building, to a series of 'facts' presumed to be stable and permanent (names, date of completion, style, function, formal execution and so on).

Any uncertainty or change as to these conditions are seen to threaten the building's status as art, as an immaculate 'work' that ultimately depends on the architect's control over complex processes of mediation; from drawing to building, from building to photograph, from programme and designated functions to actual use and inhabitation. Yet buildings change, are given new uses and meanings over time, and even the transitory character of a subjective perception bears witness to the fundamental indeterminacy of architecture. Occupancy bears token for this fragility at the core of the architectural discipline – it situates its object in a wider context where aesthetic values are contested and criteria change.

Considering architecture within a wider framework thus evidently calls for a rethinking of the architectural object and a reconfiguration of its concepts. And while the three ecological registers proposed by Guattari – the environment, society and the realm of ideas – hold countless concerns for architecture on all three levels (as physical materiality, as structuring society, as a disciplinary mind-set, for instance), what I am primarily addressing here is the 'mental ecology' of architecture that aligns with the environmental and social ecology in constituting the Real as three interrelated fields of existence. For architecture has resisted thinking through dependency, contingency and its multifarious influences in a strikingly stubborn manner.[43] Hence ecology in architecture has largely been considered in terms of 'green technology' and carbon dioxide emission levels that leave the body of architecture untouched; as an object designed by the architect, a building whose uses and meanings ultimately depend on the intensions of its maker.

It was explicitly in reference to epistemology – pathological in maintaining the production of a profoundly unsustainable society – that Gregory Bateson remarked: "There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds, and it is characteristic of the system that basic error propagates itself".[44] Guattari quotes him in Les Trois Ecologies and compares the slime polluting Kaneohe Bay to the effects of Donald Trump, whose activities as a building tycoon results in thousands of homeless people in the streets of New York – thus fore-grounding the ideological implications of Bateson's critique, highlighting the connection between the production of reality as we know it and the mental sphere of ideas.[45] Countering the detrimental nature of 'bad ideas', Guattari urges us to think transversally – to make connections across the registers, to rethink subjectivity, agency and society in order to bring about political change. The theme of resistance is clearly a case for such transversal thinking, and one of urgent importance for architecture if we are follow this trail. It involves, by necessity, the spatiality of resistance and the use of material culture – and it is on this note that Lefebvre writes in the aftermath of 1968:

[43] Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends* (Cambridge, MA, London: The MIT Press, 2008)

[44] Gregory Bateson, 'Pathologies of Epistemology',in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000) p. 492

[45] Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (New York, London: Continuum, 2000) p. 43; I am indebted here to Andrew Ballantyne.

"The diversion and re-appropriation of space are of great significance, for they teach us much about the production of new spaces. During a period as difficult as the present one is for a (capitalist) mode of production which is threatened by extinction yet struggling to win a new lease on life ... it may even be that such techniques of division have greater import than attempts at creation (production)."[46]

The idea of "greater import" is left undeveloped, however, for Lefebvre is convinced that the spaces produced by a dominant order ultimately hinder new social orders to emerge. It amounts to saying that nothing new can come about within the realm of the existing, which in terms of language, ideas and artistic creation is questionable, if not absurd.[47] But Lefebvre sustains an understanding of architecture as determined (and determinate) form, disregarding how architecture is dependent on discourse; that architecture is in fact produced through experience and use – and is in that sense created continuously. It is by undoing this system of determination in how architecture is perceived – maintained through countless accounts, in political theory as well as in art, where architecture is presumed as 'stable' – a new set of possibilities arise. Understanding the indeterminacy of architecture brings down conventional distinctions between maker and user, between 'new' and 'old' – and this is where the notion of slack space again becomes interesting.

Its use in present speech appears to derive from a digital culture, where slack space is taken to denote an unused memory space delimited by a certain capacity. Its meaning in a transferred sense, in relation to abandoned or disused physical spaces, is thus an inversion of the usual metaphorical passage: if virtual reality, so far, has been identified with physical phenomena (nodes, networks, desk tops, bins, memory notes and so on), the case is now the reverse. It may be noted that the closely related term 'hacker space' – defined as "collective, organised physical spaces where people can meet and work with their projects"[48] – has maintained the connection to its technological background. Hacker space alludes to breaking and entering, to the appropriation of spaces in order to set up digital labs outside the commercial and educational system – hence being little more than a radicalisation of the mode established by Bill Gates' famous garage in California in the 70's. Slack space is much more vague and ambiguous in comparison, but it ultimately points to an understanding of space as a resource.

It is precisely in this way slack space is meaningful in a discourse on resistance. Underlining the complexity of its nuances, Steve Pile has argued that resistance cannot be encompassed in a binary diagram that sets it in opposition to power. There are always other spaces involved, he says, "spaces which are dimly lit, opaque, deliberately hidden, saturated with memories, that echo with lost words and the cracked sounds of

46   Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell 2001) p. 167-168

47   Interestingly, Sadler records a split within the Situationist movement between those who advocated the building of a brand new city (such as Constant) and others (among them Guy Debord) who believed that the future was contained through "recycling the old city and existing artistic sources", that is, through détournement. Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (London, England, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998) p. 107.

48   http://hackerspaces.org/wiki/ Hackerspaces (accessed 2nd June 2010)

49 Steve Pile, 'Introduction: opposition,
political identities and spaces
of resistance', in Steve Pile and
Michael Keith (eds.) *Geographies
of Resistance* (London and New
York: Routledge, 1997) p. 16

50 Note that this definition differs slightly
from Douglas Sheridan's "indeterminate
territories", indeterminate because
"normal forces of control have not
shaped how we perceive, use and
occupy them." Dougal Sheridan, "The
Space of Subculture in the City: Getting
Specific about Berlin's Indeterminate
Territories", Field: 1(1) 2007.

51 Georg Simmel, *Essays on Society,
Philosophy and Aesthetics* (New
York: Harper & Row, 1956) p. 266

52 Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends*
(Cambridge, MA, London:
MIT Press, 2008) p. 134

53 The Null Device, "Slack Space and
Global Berlinisation", http://dev.
null.org/blog/item/200904162344_
slacspacb (accessed 02.06.2010)

pleasure and enjoyment".[49] But if these 'other spaces' are set apart from the dominant culture, if their appropriation for alternative uses and experiences ultimately qualify them as new spaces (countering Lefebvre's thought) – it tends to be the initial slackness of these spaces that allow for such operations. Slack space is always submerged in the existing; it constitutes what is already there. Taken to signify a physical space that is not necessarily vague or informal as such, but that through an array of causes is dislodged from its original bindings; that is indeterminate because its purpose and meaning have weakened; because its original context has ceased to exert control, it provides a setting for new activities, new actions, and new productions of meaning.[50] There is a link here to Simmel's thoughts on the ruin – the idea that "a segment of existence must collapse" before a building becomes accessible for re-imaginations – except that slack space primarily concerns a collapse of values and not of physical structure.[51] It should also be noted that slackness is a temporal as well as spatial condition: it constitutes a lapse in the system of determination that allows for appropriation.

The critical potential of slack space is amplified by Jeremy Till, who has recently characterised it as a space "open to changing use … providing a frame for life to unfold within … a space that something will happen in, but exactly what that something might be is not determinedly programmed".[52] Underpinning the argument made throughout his book, Till stresses the need for architecture to encompass the realities of time, society and the human body. He specifically attributes the idea of slack space to the philosophy of Cedric Price, hence making a connection to the reformulations of architecture – bordering to art, technology and environment – during the 60-70's. Indeed, slack space carries a different energy than other terms used in reference to abandoned or disused spaces – 'non-places' for instance that are defined by negation. In implying a momentary loss of control, a slackening of the rigidity of optimizing social forces, slack space therefore holds wider-reaching implications than merely alluding to the re-use of properties for more economically viable purposes. But given that the transformation of closed-down factories and warehouses is an established urban strategy in post-industrial society, the critical potential of slack space ultimately depends on what it inspires and makes possible. Bearing in mind that political struggles are also acted out in language – that 'occupation' is not merely a matter of appropriating space – any conclusive definition of slack space is itself politically charged. So when slack space is used in reference to a 'global movement' evolving from London, Berlin and Amsterdam, soon expected to strike all post-industrial cities by taking over disused buildings, its use as a slogan is also what enables and empowers such moves.[53] Of utmost importance, it seems, are the real and symbolical values produced through the transformation of a building's use; the appropriation of military bastions for peaceful purposes, the take-over of palaces for communitarian ends etc. Such radical reversals go far beyond the efforts of the architect to

design spaces with general or unspecific uses, allocated for the unexpected. Hence the critical potential of slack space goes far beyond the field of the architect's control – it upsets the architectural project to a greater extent than Till is willing to admit.

Some notes towards an architectural *ecosophy*

Fig. 20. Piano lesson. Photo: Amanda Farah

Fig 21. Freegan food. Photo: Amanda Farah

Fig. 19. Foyer chess. Photo: Amanda Farah

Fig. 22. Hung teddy (eviction). Photo: Amanda Farah

Clearly, the appropriation of a building built for other purposes is imbued with notions of freedom. Jim wrote:

> "The value of what we've done seems clear to me. We've turned a private space into a public one, bringing a long-dead building back to life, whilst respecting its heritage. We've introduced a free community space to an area which didn't have one, inviting in and seeking the respect of the neighbourhood. We've made people think about communal living and alternatives to wage slavery by showing them it's possible to live off the city's discards. ... Giving people a space to think, learn and perform, we've provided something positive to several hundred people, against an imperceptibly small inconvenience caused to a super-wealthy few."[54]

This form of creation makes use of the existing – it is not a creation out of nothing. In much the same way that freeganism depends on debris and excess, using the surplus of an exceedingly wasteful society,[55] the freedom made manifest by occupation is relative and conditional – and one such condition is architecture. In order to draw the outlines for a theory of architectural ecosophy– striving to connect physical reality, society and the realm of ideas – it is necessary to shift the focus from what buildings supposedly delimit and represent, to what they generate and make possible. It entails a widening of context, transgressing the borders of the architect's field of control – yet dealing with factors that paradoxically arise from architecturally (in)formed decisions. The main contribution that slack space makes to this discussion is that buildings (much like works of art) are merely handed over to the world, and that it is their ability to sustain life in unforeseen ways, to allow for a continuous production of meaning, that is the ultimate proof of their value. The

[54] luckyjim, "So we go to court today" http://www.gutshot.com/bforum/blog.php?b=300&goto=next (posted 27th January 2009; accessed 2nd June 2010)

[55] For an empirical account of freeganism, see Jake Halpern, "The Freegan Establishment", New York Times http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/06/magazine/06Squatters-t.html?pagewanted=2 (31st May 2010, accessed 11th June 2010)

way architecture conditions subjectivity and society – whether as a form of practice, knowledge or material form – is evidently central to this discussion and involves issues of power. But in pointing to space as a resource, to the practice of making do with the means available, and to creation as a continuous process, slack space constitutes one of several possible outsets for more nuanced architectural inquiries.[56] It points to a participatory architecture based on additions and extensions, rather than one residing on authorship and the production of new forms. It points to the re-use and re-cycling of the existing material culture; to 'sustainability' not being restricted to a building's interaction with biological processes, nor to its capacity to adapt to changing needs, but to its power to feed the imagination and become meaningful in new ways.

Throughout there is a link to flexibility and its importance for what Gregory Bateson calls "ecological health". Describing it as an "ongoing complex system, open-ended for slow change of even basic (hard-programmed) characteristics", a "'preadaptation' necessary for unpredictable change", he finally opts for a definition as *"uncommitted potentiality for change".*[57] Mainly addressing an urban level (exemplifying in terms of "food, new roads, more houses etc.") his wonderful comparison to a man on wire brings the figure of the architect to mind:

"To maintain the ongoing truth of his basic premise ('I am on the Wire'), he must be free to move from one point of instability to he other, i.e. e. certain variables such as the position of his arms and the rate of movement to his arms must have great flexibility, which he uses to maintain the other more fundamental and general characteristics. If his arms are fixed or paralyzed (isolated from communication), he must fall".[58]

Flexibility, here, is not restricted to space or physicality but involves how one thinks. In view of the current crisis, one whose outcomes for society are uncertain, the shaky identity and legitimacy of architecture is perhaps a minor worry. Nevertheless, the flexibility in how the architect thinks, acts and moves has social and spatial repercussions: hence the definition of 'the wire' comes across as an important one. It foregrounds the necessity of disciplinary interrogations; of questioning the basic premises on which the profession resides. Whether architecture continues to be promoted as the construction of 'new form' within the confinements of capitalism, or whether it is re-configured into something else – more sophisticated in an aesthetic sense, more aligned with critical insights – we cannot be sure, but it certainly marks a division line between 'old' and 'new' and is decisive for the wire's capacity to support the architectural profession. For ultimately ecosophy has to do with change, with confronting – not maintaining – the status quo and the stability of values. It constitutes a ground for an open-ended questioning and new experimentation, for making new connections between materiality, agency and ideas. Ecosophy

[56] Another such outset in a similar vein is the concept of 'holey space' in Deleuze's and Guattari's philosophy, used to describe the translations between 'smooth' and 'striated' spaces and pointing to the emergence of a sudden freedom within systems of determination. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009) p. 456-458, 528-532.

[57] Gregory Bateson, 'Ecology and Flexibility in Urban Civilization', *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000) p. 502- 505

[58] Gregory Bateson, "Ecology and Flexibility in Urban Civilization", *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000) p. 506

differs from the closure that characterises environmental processes, but is similar in its pronunciation of the profound interconnectivity of all things. It forces us forward, urges us to consider how architecture really deals with change.