SPACES OF UNCERTAINTY

Spaces of Uncertainty is our collaborative as architects, working at different institutions and locations. We do not form an office, but present a collection of ideas about architecture and spatial practice. Our collaborative work started off in Berlin in 2002, where we worked on a publication ‘Spaces of Uncertainty’. Moving between urbanism, sociology and the visual arts, this project presented urban research and a photographic essay on the life of leftover spaces in Berlin. By documenting activities such as leisure, temporary living, urban agriculture, informal trade, and social encounters, the research addressed the micro-politics of public space, thereby adding energetic realism to the overwhelming rhetoric of loss that dominates the current discourse. An international exhibition continued this investigation with three case studies in Berlin, Brussels and London.

Our recent ongoing work attempts to rethink the position from which to intervene in the spatial practices that make up urban societies today. Leaving the vertical position of the architect to roam the network of urban situations, it aims to develop research strategies geared towards spatial practice. The exploration of urban culture as a process unfolding in a multiplicity of spaces, allows the terrain of action to shift towards the multifaceted dynamics of the contemporary city.

by Kenny Cupers & Markus Miessen

BERLIN/SPACE  BRUSSELS/TIME  LONDON/ENERGY

When does the action of a few individuals start to create urban space? Demonstrating how urban space is divided, conquered, left over and occupied again, the exhibition intends to show how marginalized social processes find their distinctive spaces in different cities. The visual research on these cities shows that the urban margin does not only exist in its very physical urban condition – in spaces outside the traditional understanding of public space – but in a number of phenomena that emerge in the actual social fabric of our everyday environment, outside the hierarchical organisation of space, time and energy.

The exhibition focuses on the unforeseeable urban landscape: the continual emergence of phenomena which escape the restraints of organised public space and time. Although always manifested in space, the phenomena have been investigated according to three constituencies: space, time and energy. In Berlin, we have focused on leftover spaces, as the phenomenon occurs in the margins and vacant spaces of the urban landscape that serve as catalysts for experimentation. In Brussels we have portrayed marginal activities that don’t necessarily appear in marginal places, but at certain times in the city’s dynamic everyday texture. In London, the intense density and spatial pressure of a complex urban field, which is highly defined by economic power, challenge their existence. Nevertheless, in London, where space and time overlap and different uses interact, kinetic energy rules their appearance, as marginal phenomena are located in the small transitions of urban life, orchestrated by the individual and collective energies. This particular reading of the three cities shows how – through the marginalized social processes that constantly question the restraints of stable organisation – urban space remains fundamentally a space of uncertainty.

GROUND FOR URBAN SPACE

To think about the identity of a city is to think about the collection of sites and spaces that together signify this city. It is at the opposite end from identifying the city with big stories, architects, historic characters, or any such clearly identifiable influences. The identities of a city lie in its struggle to administer its everyday activities. It is the very moment in which the institutionalised whole is overruled by the everyday, that immediate identities are born.
Berlin demands that one thinks about the unconscious opposition between space and place, site and project. The latter is produced by the narrative practices in which architecture plays an important role. Architects like to foresee future identity. They rarely seem to look at the present nature of a site, of the city.

Focussing on identity in architectural terms does unquestionably demand talking about systems of representation. The architectural project is the storytelling practice that produces image, and more specifically an image of the site. Architectural production is based on the self-conscious construction of particular sites. By deconstructing the actually existing, it is the architectural vision that transforms grounds into sites and sites into objects. It is only this transformation that describes the becoming site of urban ground, the shift from space into place. Alternatively, with Michel De Certeau, space could be understood as a bundle of velocities and intersections of mobile elements, describing the effect produced by the procedures that place it. Like spoken language, it is dependent upon its contextual conversation. Place, in this scheme, is the order of elements, the force that determines the relationship of coexistence. It excludes the possibility of coexisting elements within the same location. It is the structured organisation of elements always situated besides one another. Whereas place equals fixity in location and identity, space is constituted by a vectorial description of dynamic forces.

This configuration of opposing entities evokes the question of how urban identity is constituted within the immediateness of the city’s ground rather than by architecture and its apparent imagery. An architectural plan or project is generally a projection of a site. It is a story about a space that thereby turns it into a place. In contrast, immediate identity is about the sense of the spaces that make up the city, not about all of the projections that try to tie its identity down for the sake of a singular story. Immediate identity seems to exist through the temporary use of ill-defined sites. Sites without projects. In this sense, Berlin’s identity is merely a shadow of architecture, despite all attempts to construct its identity through architecture and ideological urbanism. Berlin shows how the identity of a city is not in its architecture, but next to it. Aside architecture, we can hear the whispering voice of societies, the memories and predictions differing from one another without categorisation. They inhabit the vagueness of every future moment that does not exclude questions but allows for a multiplicity of immediate response.

PUBLIC SPACE AND ITS MARGINS

In contemporary society, the modern citizen seems to be free by constitution and can – within the very reasonable limits of a First World comfort – theoretically do whatever he or she likes. This naivety – supported by media and mass consumerism in their natural attempt to narrow our perspective – seems to be successful in hiding the foggy presence of control, be it personified by governments, guardians of property, or the media culture in our very living rooms. However, opposed to this naivety, there seems to be an ever-growing atmosphere of pessimism about our supposed transformation into branded consumers: “We have reached utopia – and it sucks.” Do we really need to choose between Disneyland and blacked out pessimism?

Public space – with its mechanisms of control – has its other, situated in the fragility and indefiniteness of certain spaces and activities. It is both these atmospheres that influence us in the way we live, the way we communicate, and finally the way we think. How ambiguous are our desires, dreams and projections? Is it only the sterile places with clearly defined use that we can enjoy today? Is it the designer shops, the fancy cafes, or the commercial promenades, that provide our satisfaction? What about the social public spaces in the back of our heads? Do we still consider the possibility of diverse encounters, with the non-consumer, the other? What about the young, the restless, the old, the poor, and the ones having been excluded from contemporary public space and therefore removed from society?

Public space and urbanity have always been connected to disorder, functional heterogeneity, and diversity. The most meaningful character of the metropolis lies in this multiplicity beyond physical borders. The urban public sphere can therefore be based on a model of confrontation and instability, as it is characterised by encounters and confrontations between people. Public spaces are – or at least should be – places where the individual and the community can, openly, and insecurely, meet. The functional units, the highly structured, programmed, and controlled spaces
in the contemporary city, mean to threaten the city’s crucial characteristics, namely openness and unpredictability. The margin is an essential aspect of public space conserving all these crucial characteristics, as it is the preferred space of uncertainty in the contemporary city.

THE TRANSITORY OTHER

Architects dream to build; the confident lines on the drawing board signify their plans directed towards a bright and shining future.

Traditionally, architects have always been standing on the frontline of modern society's warfare against the existing. They have been the ones to direct and design the city of tomorrow. The driving force of such encounter is carried by a genuine faith in progress. However, the projections of their desire not only describe sensitivity towards society, but also show a distorted hidden pleasure: the desire to build is supported by the desire for power. In their attempt to sell their subjective dreams for tangible vehicles of progress, architects luxuriate in the power handed over to them by society. Legitimising their social position though means hiding this pleasure. Ethics are in this sense the means of doing so: architects understand their power as a positive tool in making the world into a better place. Patronising, ironic, dogmatic, or cynical, the different modes of communicating the ethical message are all directed to support the architect's legitimacy.

In the architect’s head however, there is a fundamental misconception concerning this desire. As opposed to their expectation – the illusion that their child made from stone will enhance environmental quality – reality offers no guarantee for a better future. This is partly connected to the specificity of architectural production in general: as architecture is bound to focus its energy on a limited location, it always leaves things behind. These leftovers constitute a marginal position, the ultimately transitory attitude that connotes powerlessness, or a refusal to intervene in the world. As opposed to architectural structures and programmes it does not do anything towards a nearby or faraway future. It is simply there.

This margin is the place where architecture reaches the border of intentional intervention. It is the very space in which the architect loses his power, where we are being confronted with the impossibility of designing an environment. While the negative aspects of the margin show architecture's limits, its positive characteristics prove the redundancy of the architect. We do not seem to need architects to create our own markets, meeting places, or parties. Playing grounds are preferably not defined by architects, they are naturally being moulded around the action taking place.

The margin strongly demystifies often-used terms such as development and process. Traditionally, architecture is involved with the development of empty sites into well-defined developed places. This is supposed to constitute the continual process of developing a city. And indeed, there will be nobody claiming that there is an end point to this process: there is no final product, no perfect city. The city is a never-ending cycle of growth and decay. But does that equally count for our everyday environment itself, being the action field of architecture? The architectural project is being developed in its design phase, but once built, it is immovable. As a result, the city consists of fixed frozen moments of solidified architecture. It is architecture’s sloth that is bound to freeze the city’s dynamism.

The margin – as the immediate stage of architecture’s side effects – offers a second perspective to this specific nature of the architectural production. In opposition to architecture, the space of the margin allows for a more direct idea of process, a continual one. The physical leftover is a ground of ephemeral traces, and offers simultaneity of difference, stratified information that the places of architectural development are lacking in their exclusiveness. In this respect, the margin functions as the delayed catalyst of urban culture. This extra dimension to architecture's instrumentality enables us to understand the margin as a local recollection of the other, a memorial testimony of tactical space. Occupied by whispering narratives rather than visual representation, this continuity in space and time is the enormous resource that marginal territories present today as the ultimate buffer zone in the contemporary city.
The margin evokes an architectural understanding, which lies far beyond its own discipline. The question remains however, how to deal with the ever-present desire of implementation. It is the practice of annihilation that tends to support and satisfy the desire to fill up the in-between, to diminish its possibilities, to replace uncertainty with definition.

If we, in the end, are to make up a final balance, this is the ultimate goal that has directed our energy: an increased sensitivity of the professionals involved in our urban environments towards the hidden possibilities that lie within the margin and its practice. And although the step from this marginal urban research into consistent design practice is self-evident, the underlying motives between the lines can instigate thinking about a different urban practice: one of a realistic understanding of the existing, towards a more open and potent future: “(...) concerned with the correlation between a street scene, a poem, a thought, with the hidden line which holds them together (...) it was the attempt to capture the portrait of history in the most insignificant representations of reality, its scraps, as it were.” (ARENDT, H., in: BENJAMIN, W., Illuminations, Pimlico, 1999, p.17)

The existence of these spaces of uncertainty is both a relief and a promise. While breathing our eternal desire for a humane homecoming on inhume territory, it is as undefined as we are. In our attempt to structure the chaos that space initially is, the margins have become the last reminders that can possibly tell us who we are. They are inhabited by the other and inhabit the opposites from, which our phoney worlds are put together. The margins are ugly and beautiful. They laugh and they cry. They are full of energy and still remain calm. They are without sound while they speak. They stabilise, and still, exist through instability. They catch our dreams, and still, they are sleeping themselves. They give birth and they kill at the same time. The margins are us.

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This text is based on extracts from the exhibition and publication SPACES OF UNCERTAINTY, Verlag Müller + Busmann, 2002. The international exhibition took place in Berlin (Gallery Framework/Urban Drift), London (Architectural Association), Brussels (Recyclart) and Amsterdam (66East). For more information, see: www.spacesofuncertainty.org www.mueller-busmann.de