

PUBLIC SPACE AND ELECTRONIC FLOWS

Some experiences by hackitectura.net

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Architecture is not an end in itself (1)

1/ A desire not to create joints

2/ A desire not to create beams

3/ A desire not to create walls

4/ A desire not to create rooms

5/ A desire not to create architecture (2)

While the logic of discourse proposes a thorough sifting through objects, the logic of intensities or ecological logic only takes into account movement, the intensity of processes... The object of the process is existence, while it constitutes itself, defines itself and is deterritorialised. (3)

“Architecture is media”, was the answer recently given by Julien Beller from exyzt.org to a question about the relationship of the work of a group of French architects with the media (4). I found this to be an interesting answer, not so much in the semiotic sense of the 70s but rather in the more contemporary sense, in that we are living in a media ecology. I liked this answer for its immediacy, compared with my efforts to explain to students, colleagues and municipal technicians the advisability of contemporary architecture incorporating a layer of electronic flows, as well as the hardware and software to bring this about.

In order to talk about the relationship between architecture and electronic flows it seems necessary to ask why architecture came to be. I would like to suppose that we will accept that there is currently no consensus on this matter. On one extreme we find the understanding of architecture as the profession of building shelter for human beings in an economic, useful and dignified manner; houses first and then accommodation for their different activities: schools, hospitals, meeting spaces, offices, factories, leisure centres... At the other end of the spectrum we find the most contemporary interpretation of architecture as an artistic, scientific and research activity, which manages the fact of inhabiting, of the form we take on in space, of its transformations and even of the creation of new ways of inhabiting. Between both these extremes we would be able to find multiple perspectives, such as those that see architecture as a (commercial) product that is more or less sophisticated; or those that understand architecture as formal artistic practice, comparable to paintings, installations or art cinema; or those that view architecture as a medium for the domination of space – as with Israeli architecture in Palestine. This multiplicity of perspectives can even be made compatible in some particular cases, like that of some of Rem Koolhaas’s work, for example.

Architecture, inhabiting, territory

In this text I wish to refer to architecture in the second of the meanings listed, where it is in charge of (new) habitations. The interest in habitation, an expression which was not known back in my student days (the 80s) went on to become a hot topic in the mid-nineties, to the point that a new course appeared in the architecture degree at Seville School of Architecture called “Basics of

habitation”. I suspect this interest is linked to dissatisfaction with modern architecture and with early neo-historicist postmodernism. Investigations on inhabiting propose a widening of the field of architecture which transcends, on the one hand, Bruno Zevi’s idea of architecture as (geometric) space and on the other, the Aldo Rossi and Alvaro Siza school of thought, which focuses on the contextuality and autonomy of the architectural. In its place, the study of habitations opens up to a heteronymous understanding of what architecture consists of, such as the *de-re-territorialisation* (Deleuze and Guattari), as social production, both material and mental (Heidegger, Lefebvre). Back then, we would talk about cartographies, imaginaries, narratives; it was a case of going back to thinking about architecture from the disciplinary sidelines, from the outside, from the entities, the social, cultural and technological transformations, from life.

Out of all these questions, from my point of view, the idea of territory seems crucial when trying to think of the way in which electronic flows are incorporated into our thought and ways of space production. While for architects territory is fundamentally the physical support on which life takes place – as shown by the Spanish urban planning technical expression “putting territory into order” – for other disciplines, such as anthropology or sociology, for instance, territory is the combination of physical environment and inhabitants and therefore also that of the relationships established between them. Thinking of inhabiting from the perspective of architecture would be thinking how territory comes about and not only how its physical environment is produced. It is in this sense that it is stated that architecture is not an end in itself, but is a medium for producing things, a medium for life within space.

How do we intervene on the territory? As Eduardo Serrano proposes (5), we can intervene in the classical manner of architects, through buildings or public works, but we can also intervene transforming the relationships between the physical environment and its inhabitants. The latter would also be an intervention for the greater part of society which lacks the power, the resources or the administrative capacity to carry out large public works or set up a new neighbourhood. Here we would include, as relatively new components, electronic flows capable of modulating the relationships between the physical environment and its inhabitants, and therefore of producing territory.

Space of electronic flows

However, this is not a marginal matter, but possibly, if we were for instance to follow Manuel Castells it might constitute one of the main transformation vectors of the present. As is well known, for Castells, the step to what he calls network society is characterised in the spatial field by the transition of location space (that of traditional architecture) to flow space (that of contemporary architecture?) (6). This flow space is supported by – partly consists of – electronic flows. Although that which flows indubitably has a material component: be it goods or people, electromagnetic waves or bits, in comparison with the heavy materiality of traditional architecture, we could provisionally assign it to the sphere of the intangible.

In the measure in which a city, neighbourhood or office are connected or form part of flow space, the life which takes place in them will possess other dimensions. According to Castells, along with many other authors, - from the Strategic Plan of Seville to the analysts of the Rand Corporation (7) —, those cities, social sectors or people which can and know how to occupy flow space will occupy a hegemonic position in comparison with those who remain exclusively anchored to location space. It therefore seems inevitable to think up these new connected habitations, even if it is to develop conflicting or counter-hegemonic approaches. I would even dare say it is not possible to think of inhabiting the present without taking into consideration this new flow space, which in actual fact is

increasingly less novel.

Becoming a territorial cyborg

William Mitchell develops other aspects of the matter which I consider to be of interest. With arguments similar to those of John MacHale, Félix Guattari or Bruno Latour (8), its *ex-dean*, MIT School of Architecture proposes that the new inhabitant for which it would be necessary to contemplate architecture must cease to be the isolated individual, centre and measure of all things (of humanism), and become a “spatially extended cyborg”. Thus expressed, it all sounds rather alarming, although the problem is not as serious as we think. This is ecological thinking. The idea is that we are part of an interconnected, interdependent world in which mediation between the physical universe and us humans, is carried out through machinic-technological networks which are deemed to be our extensions or prostheses: from modern urban networks to the more contemporary communication networks. Félix Guattari presents this idea with the concept of machinic ecology (9).

Bateson’s famous syllogism may be of use to us to better understand the cyborg metaphor, when it says:

Grass dies;
Men die;
Men are grass.

In the measure in which we can truly state that men are grass, that is to say, in the measure in which we concentrate on the predicate instead of on the subject – as is the norm from the occidental-rationalist perspective – we may say that men (and women) are spatially extended cyborgs. This is not a statement about identity or essence, but one that is related to performance, to becoming. “We will do better”, says Mitchell, “to take the unit of subjectivity, and of survival, to be the biological individual plus its extensions and interconnections”. (10)

The body of the electronic Modern Movement

Toyo Ito, whose position as one of the most important contemporary architects cannot be disputed, presents the situation as the desire for a new body. Although in the late 80s (!) he described it as the “desire for an android body” (11), he more recently suggested it should be called the “body of the electronic Modern Movement” (12). A body that floats simultaneously between natural flows and electronic ones, in search of a house that does not exist yet, as Mies van der Rohe said in another situation of historic change. A house yet to be invented. On the limits of this quest we can find his “desire not to do architecture”, which he mentions in relation with the Sendai Mediatheque. A house that would float once it had left its materiality behind “the sphere of what is living among the flows, an eddy in a river that flows uniformly” (13), pure life.

Hackitectures

In this conceptual context, hackitectura.net - Sergio Moreno, Pablo de Soto, the author and contributors - have been experimenting since the turn of the century with a series of prototypes of connected public spaces. The concept of *hackitecture* itself proposes a practice which recombines physical spaces, electronic flows and social bodies, carried out by teams of architects, programmers-technologists and citizen-activists (14). It is true that we have not reached many

certainties, although we do believe we have confirmed some suspicions and obtained some leads. We have also had a good time.

I will now comment on some of the cases or concepts we have been handling by way of an illustration of our approximation to the architecture of electronic flows.

Cartuja Beta Rave (Isla de la Cartuja, 2003). On a cold January night we find ourselves at the abandoned AVE stop in the Cartuja. We were trying to apply a skin of electronic information to the ruinous canvases of the old high speed train station. The human team was formed by specialist friends from Barcelona (visuals and communication networks), Madrid (wireless networks) and Seville. With remains of the Expo we limit a space-barricade to place computers, projectors and audio equipment. When the projections on the white textiles began, the space became a new place. At a given point in time the projections start to come in via the wireless network from Holland, Argentina and El Viso del Alcor. For a few hours this *madmax-style* ruin became a global public space, a temporarily autonomous area, which could also be inhabited in cyberspace. A hybrid territory in an uncertain place between the physical-local and the digital global. (15)

Fadaiat 2004. *Medialab* distributed between Tarifa and Tangiers. Summer solstice on the border between Europe and Africa. A *medialab* in the castle that once belonged to Guzmán el Bueno, in Tarifa (Cadiz), connected by a satellite dish to internet. Two somewhat special antennas, on either coast of the Strait, establish an intercontinental wireless link. This was the first time something like this had been done. On the African shore, on a terrace beside the iconic Café Hafa, a meeting place for the *beat generation*, a second campaign *medialab* is set up. The two interlinked spaces constitute a single temporal laboratory distributed between two continents. The flow of bits, from Tangiers to Tarifa, and from there to the Astra satellite, connects the whole system to the global internet network. The territorial mechanism constitutes a distorted mirror of the SIVE (Integrated System of External Vigilance), the pioneering electronic barrier for defending Europe from African immigrants. (16)

TCS2 Extremadura, Emerging geographies (Valdecaballeros, 2007) Spring in the pastures of Extremadura: on the horizon we can spot the derelict nuclear power station of Valdecaballeros, a symbol of the failed dream-nightmare of industrial development. A geodesic dome and a truck equipped with a satellite antenna share an oak grove with some sheep. The control station has been installed in the dome to start up the nuclear power station, this time, with free software. This is an imaginary start-up, that of its recycling in a different model of development based on free culture and ecology. During the day the dome fills up with children dressed as nuclear technicians thinking up alternative futures for the region. At night, the dome is illuminated inside and out with images coming and going from Internet by satellite. The bodies let themselves go with a concert of post-nuclear noise generated using sounds recorded by an antenna abandoned by the Soviet army in Northern Europe. An architecture of blurred limits. A machinic ecology. Another economy of desire. (17)

The three previous cases were cooperative productions, prototypes of spatially extended cyborgs for the exploration of new existential territories. Architecture, in its most traditional interpretation, is relevant, but not central. Space, in the meaning Lefebvre would award the term, is constructed above all with components which we could here describe as intangible: electronic flows, interfaces, audio, projections, words, bodies, the landscape we find ourselves in. Alongside these elements, physical spaces have a digital extension in which the process is initiated, the project is gradually built, and products are filed: a productive and communication-filled public space which operates as the mind and memory of the cyborg mechanism. None of the spaces explained would have existed

in the way they did without their digital extensions.

The combination of tectonics and electronics operates in the same way as in Constant's New Babylon: a mine of elements that are assembled to construct situations in which new events of reality may take place and be continually transformed. Space-infrastructure materialises for a week, but the production process distributed on the net has been being developed for months and upon completion, continues to be alive in the memories – the carbon and silicon ones – the affective-productive networks have been reinforced and are all set to be regrouped at some other point.

Wiki-plaza (2005)

With the experiences drawn from the aforementioned interventions we have created an architectural concept to be applied to a more permanent urban space project. The concept of Wiki-plaza proposes a public space that can be constructed and transformed in a cooperative and continuous manner, as is done with a wiki on Internet (19). Wikipedia is possibly the best-known example of a digital space of this sort. As is well-known, while its quality is equivalent to that of the best encyclopaedias from the point of view of dynamism, economy or sociability generated, Wikipedia is a radical innovation and an opening to new times.

We have been developing research on the concept of the Wiki-plaza in relation with the project of the Plaza de las Libertades in Seville (with Morales de Giles Arquitectos and Esther Pizarro), but this is a diagram that can be applied to other situations. To offer a brief description, we propose thinking about public space as a multi-layered territory, in which a series of electronic layers are hybridised in a propositional and critical manner with the layers traditionally thought-up for architecture. This new type of space will be an urban laboratory for experimentation with matters such as connection and public access to networks, interfaces between locations and flows, open code architecture, media ecology and urban electromagnetic space or the interaction of natural and electronic flows. (20)

All these matters are indubitably of interest, but we would only be short-changed if we were to leave out the most important one... what is all this about? As Rez, a William Gibson character intent on marrying a software construct says: "It is about finding beauty in the new emerging orders". (21)

Notes:

- (1) Philip Christou, 2003, *El placer de lo inesperado (comentando el Interaction Center de Cedric Price)*, in: Oeste 16, Espacio Activado, Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Extremadura, p. 28.
- (2) Toyo Ito quoted by P.P. Arroyo and Taro Igashi, 2001, Sendai Mediatheque, in *Pasajes de Arquitectura y Crítica* núm. 32, diciembre de 2001, Madrid / p. 30.
- (3) Félix Guattari, *Las tres ecologías*, 2000, Pretextos, Valencia, p. 37.
- (4) Media-architecture symposiums, Seville. A microchip garden, a Wiki-plaza, conference by Julien Beller and Alexander Röemer (exyzt.org) in the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Sevilla (05.17.07). Exyzt.org are the authors of the France Pavilion in the last Venice Architecture Biennial (Meta-Villa, 2006).
- (5) Speech by Eduardo Serrano (Rizoma Fundación) and Luz Fernández Valderrama in IAUS 2004, (Congreso de Investigación en Arquitectura y Urbanismo Sevilla) held in the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Sevilla, entitled "Investigar(nos) e Inventar(nos)".
- (6) Manuel Castells, 1999, *La era de la información. Economía, sociedad y cultura*. Vol. 1 La

sociedad red, Alianza, Madrid, pp 455-506

(7) Strategic Plan for Seville at: <http://www.planestrategicosevilla2010.org/> and John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, 2001, *Networks and Netwar. The Future of Terror, Crime and Militancy*, Rand Corporation, at: <http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1382/>

(8) Regarding the theories of John McHale it is possible to consult: Marc WIGLEY, 2000, *Man Plus, Fisuras de la Cultura Contemporánea* núm 8, Fisuras, Madrid, pp 17-44; Félix Guattari, 2000, *ibid.*; Bruno Latour, 2003, *De la mediación técnica: filosofía, sociología, genealogía*, in Oeste 16, Espacio Activado, Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Extremadura, pp 130-139.

(9) Guattari, *ibid.*, p. 74.

(10) William Mitchell, 2003, *Me++*. *The Cyborg Self and the Networked City*, MIT Press, Cambridge, p. 39

(11) Toyo Ito, 1988, *Una arquitectura que pide un cuerpo androide*, in Toyo Ito, 2000, *Escritos*, Colegio Oficial de Aparejadores y Arquitectos Técnicos, Murcia, pp 45-80.

(12) Toyo Ito, 2006, *Arquitectura de límites difusos*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona.

(13) Toyo Ito, *ibid.*, pp 25, 29

(14) José Pérez de Lama, 2003, *Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture. City, Technology and Society in the Information Age*, Actar, Barcelona, entry: hackitecture

(15) For a more detailed explanation see: José Pérez de Lama, 2006, *Devenires cibernético*.

Arquitectura, urbanismo y redes de comunicación, Universidad de Sevilla, Sevilla, pp 91-94.

(16) It is possible to consult the book: Pablo de Soto y Pilar Monsell (editores), 2006, *Fadaiat. Libertad de movimiento, libertad del conocimiento*, Junta de Andalucía Consejería de Cultura, Málaga.

(17) For a more detailed description see: <http://tcsextremadura.org>

(18) Henri Lefebvre, 1991, *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, Londres

(19) For an explanation of wiki technology consult Wikipedia: <http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>

(20) See *Plaza de las Libertades Sevilla*, in AV Proyectos núm. 14, pp 10-13 and for the digital project: <http://mcs.hackitectura.net>

(21) William Gibson, 1997, *Idoru*, Berkeley, New York and 1999, *All Tomorrow's Parties*, Putnam, New York.