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Extended Abstract

Architecture and participation processes.

Political alternative or neoliberal trend? The case study of Elemental.

The present investigation arises from a growing concern about the relations between architecture and capitalism. Realising that a certain social activist impetus in architecture emerges from each crisis, it appears to be as if participation processes were, in these occasions, like crutches for the (re)construction of discourse, in a field of knowledge that finds itself shattered by the forces of capitalism. So, what happens when a community is called to participate? Could participation processes be a way of acting politically in architecture? Who has to gain with the encounter between architect and community?

Having this questions in mind we decided to study the complexities that connect architecture with politics and capitalism. The structure was than set:

- problematizing the main concepts (participation, politics and capitalism), according to contemporary philosophy and art theory;
- anchoring the concepts in architectural history, emphasising the role of Lina Bo Bardi and Giancarlo de Carlo;
- studying a contemporary paradigmatic case, the *do tank* Elemental.

01 Matters of Participation

The concept

Participation has been studied in relation to democratic systems for a while. We enter on the work of two female authors that at the 50s were thinking about the possibilities of participation in political systems. Both of them had the ability to systematise types of participation that remain present.

Carole Pateman (1970) defined 3 types of participation, depending on the level of engagement, information and power: pseudo-participation, partial participation and full participation. Sherry R. Arnstein (1969) puts the question in a more intricate scheme, emphasising the problems with that power agencies have in sharing that

power in communities. She explains these complexities in an eight-level diagram of participation, that goes from manipulation to citizen control.

What these authors bring to the discussion is the matter that participation is often confused with mediation - as a way to enroll the community with the object produced by those in power, only to generate acceptance and not discussion. We prefer to imagine that participation could be, as Arnstein intended, a distribution of power, that implies the rethink of the architect as an author. As Bishop (2012, p.284) puts it, participation is more like a performative act:

(...) not a privileged political medium, nor a ready-made solution to a society of the spectacle, but as uncertain and precarious as democracy itself; neither are legitimated in advance but need continually to be performed and tested in every specific context.

The political

Jacques Rancière talks about politics also as a moving concept, like a *performance*. He distinguishes the *politics* from the *police*, and for him the system where we live in is more a police than a political one. The difference is in *consensus*: a police system that imposes normative rules, that shapes our being into remaining the always the same, always in agreement. For its turn, the political is much more: "is an anarchical process of emancipation that opposes the logic of disagreement to the logic of police" (Rancière, 2010, p.37).

This interpretation of the political is the one that interests us, since architecture can indeed be political, as long as it

consists in transforming this space of 'moving-along', of circulation, into a space for the appearance of a subject: the people, the workers, the citizens. It consists in re-figuring space, that is in what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it. It is the instituting of a dispute over the distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2010, p.37)

Returning to Bishop, we can understand that is a relation between crises and politically active practices:

The clash between artistic and social critiques recurs most visibly at certain historical moments, and the reappearance of participatory art is symptomatic of this clash. It tends to occur at moments of political transition and upheaval: in the years leading to Italian Fascism, in the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution, in the widespread social dissent that led to 1968, and its aftermath in the 1970s (...) the collapse of really existing communism in 1989.

To sum up, a political project in contemporary architecture might be one that not only worries about what architecture produces (or how it is produced) but also how it

is taught, how it is institutionalised, how the critique is made and how we evaluate the *praxis*. The true challenges resides on imagining “alternativas al carácter cómplice y silenciosos de la arquitectura en la producción urbana en el capitalismo tardío” (Boano, 2017, p.39).

Power

Leopold Lambert is an important reference on this study on participative process, as he is the one that describes the ability for control that architectural objects have over people. We sees architectures as the discipline that “organizes the distribution of bodies in space” (Lambert, 2013, p.27), and this is no small matter. We must realise that design means power, because to design is to make choices - that’s why participation is so important, it shows us the reality that is to come. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) put it, if a language is closed over itself it looses all its revolutionary potencial, if the author (and here we include the architect) chooses to remain enclosed in himself we negates the revolutionary potencial of he’s creation.

So, it does not mean that participation is a kind of *death of the author* (Barthes, 1967), but instead an effort to recognise a condition of power and the responsibility that goes with it. Participation is a matter of recognising the tools and weapons available, and build new and disruptive “dispositions of bodies in the city”

Capitalism and contemporary architecture

Capitalism lives from its crisis, capitalism is a mean of crisis management, that has the extraordinary ability to creatively “domesticate” and co-op the revolutionary acts that emerge from it. Once we see architecture as an operative practice, one that focus on giving answers to problems and solving urgencies, we are indeed participating in the capitalistic machine. Many times the participation discourse arises from this ability to disguise capital, and in architecture it becomes a way to transfer what once was State responsibility to every single citizen.

02 Beyond Modern Movement

Ideological troubles

Modern Movement emerged from a new relation between architecture and politics, in the words of Le Corbusier, as “architecture or revolution”. The Architect was seen as someone able to orientate social change, the right agent to build the new city, for a new man - so that there would be no need to start a social or political revolution.

In the first decades of the XX century, architecture, guided by great master, promised to be the solution for the cities and its inhabitants, but soon after World War II, with the need for massive reconstruction of cities, it became a dehumanised movement,

more worried about producing fast and cheap, than in create new ways of life (like Le Corbusier envisioned for the *Unités D'Habitation*). This condition lead Modern Movement to a loss of its aesthetically, ethical and political foundations, also promoted by the 1932 MoMA's exhibition *International Style*, that, as the name puts it, presented the "Movement" as a "Style" available for reproduction, no matter the context.

In the mid 1950s the discussion on the death of Modern Movement took place at the IX and X CIAM, led by a young group of architects later named as Team X. Alison and Peter Smithson, Aldo Van Eyck, Giancarlo the Carlo (among others) rejected functionalism and condemned the loss of humanism in architecture, proposing a practice more cultural, contextual and human.

Rethinking practice

If the exhibition of 1932's at MoMA, represents a shift in the architectural paradigm, in the 1960s a similar phenomenon takes place: Bernard Rudofsky presents *Architecture without architects* (1964), revealing the weariness of academic formulas, proposed by bourgeois intellectuals, alienated from everyday life. As Rudofsky (1964, p.1) himself puts it:

Vernacular architecture does not go through fashion cycles. It is nearly immutable, indeed, unimprovable, since it serves its purpose to perfection. As a rule, the origin of indigenous building forms and construction methods is lost in the distant past. (Rudofsky, 1964, p.1)

This exhibition-manifesto showed us that

el conjunto de conocimientos que conforman la arquitectura - la disciplina - tiene límites flexibles que pueden ser redefinidos por medio de discursos polémicos pero bien argumentados. (Díaz, 2017, p.137)

At the same time, other architects were finding different ways to produce architecture and rethinking the figure of the architect.

Cedric Price trusted in technology and culture as means for emancipation. Refusing to build, he was more worried in disrupting the norms of the discipline with provocative manifestos and drawings. Quoting Koolhaas (2004, p.75): "if architecture is like a time bomb, with power at its core, then Cedric was deeply involved in its dismantling".

Focused on matters of direct user participation were Yona Friedman and John N. Habraken. The first with never-built projects, super-structures that could be set on top of existing towns, where individual user could build their habitation units, helped

by manuals made by the architect with accessible language and drawing. In his turn, Habraken was more focused on the possibilities of actual building these structures, where the State should be the one providing the structure with access to water, kitchen and baths (drawn by the architect) and people, with his individual funds, would fill the empty spaces at his own will.

In Portugal the matters of participative processes were taking shape in a unique way, after a revolutionary period. People and architects were working together, in a process of mutual information, sharing concerns, techniques, desires and solutions. Self-construction was not the priority in this process, since the Portuguese architects believed in their responsibility to build with the same precision that in any other project. Nuno Portas, Álvaro Siza Vieira and Alexandre Alves da Costa (to name a few) showed a striking ability to use participation without falling in populist and demagogic discourses, and never renouncing to listen and learn from people.

Lina Bo Bardi

The architect Lina Bo Bardi provided a special contribute in the debate of architecture's relation with people and culture. Despite that, her work is not quoted many times in outside Brazil (where her work was mostly developed), perhaps because the geographic and gender limits of our Architectural History, focused on European Men.

Bo Bardi understood the importance of being critical of the power structures that regulate our culture, from the school to the museum. She proposed new ways of living the museum, as a space for everyone's creativity, dismantling old narratives, democratising access to culture, through art.

Without ever referring directly to "user participation" she left us a particular way of understanding the role of the architect as someone able to promote social transformation. This could be achieved through a connection to reality - in all its complexity and conflict - as the only place from which the architect could act with fairness. The availability to receive from the context is the path to a practice focused on the other in his/hers singularity instead of his/hers difference (since difference is always manoeuvred from a center) - without any kind of complaisance, since the architect him/herself should do an exercise of rebuilding his/hers identity, overcoming old mistakes of lonely practice.

Giancarlo de Carlo

Around the same time, in Italy, Giancarlo de Carlo was producing a body of work (written and built) focused on participation. He presented user participation as an essential condition for architectural practice, to remind us that we must work with

others and not for others. This working with others meant accepting conflict and confrontation with realities and desires opposed to ours, as architects thought in a established way. Even if this encounter with the users meant a disorder, we should keep in mind that

the pathological dregs of 'order' are the result of the exasperation of an authoritarian and repressive condition which outruns its own rules, spreading in a state of amorphous violence, the 'disorder' opposed to it has a complex branching structure of its own which, not being institutionalised, renews itself continually, constantly reinventing images of a reality in transformation (De Carlo, 1968, p.15).

De Carlo e Lina Bo Bardi agreed on the fact that life itself could be a way of knowledge, approachable not only by project but by process. Then, architecture could become a space were "all is process, where building is a verb rather than a noun" (McKean, 2006, p.149).

03 The case study Elemental

Talking about Elemental is always talking about its main architect, Alejandro Aravena. Actually, what follows, is an intricate exercise of discovering what is part of the collective (with interests on social housing) and what is the creation of an isolated author, that wins awards and recognitions always in single name.

We study this case at light of a year experience in Santiago de Chile, where we could realize de traps of neoliberalism in the everyday life of that country. In chilean architectural country there's a deep tradition of asceticism, scarcity and minimalism (that serve the richest and poorest architectures equally), perpetuated by the "golden generation", a group of 5 chilean architects were Aravena belongs.

In the logic of austerity and scarcity we recognise the moto "less is more" that, in times of capitalism, means more profit with less production costs.

Even Aravena's discourse as something of this minimalism, stepping aside from intellectualized or complex talks about architecture, Aravena prefers an approach of the diagram, the equation, a kind of "architecture for dummies" explanation. The truth is that, after listen a Ted Talk by Aravena we tend to trust all the assurances given: the "half-good house" is the only solution for his equation.

The project that got the most media exposure was also the first of Elemental, Quinta Monroy (Iquique, 2003). The project was presented as a unique and innovative scheme for rehousing families that had illegally occupied some areas of the city. By building only half-house (the one with most complex infrastructures) with the small grant conceded by the State for each family, Aravena could afford the part of the

money to buy the once illegal land and wait for the families to have the money to build the other half of the house.

Elemental claims to use participative processes, but they resemble more Pateman's pseudo participation, since the architects already know exactly what the solution is and only need to check with the families if they accept the consequences (having less rooms and not having finishings for example).

It seems that this kind of project is fit for a neoliberal system, but not a innovative or liberating one. It's more a promotion of state's ineffectiveness and encourage users to "endure reduced living standards, and (...) pushed to become micro-entrepreneurs of their own minimal economy." (Aureli, 2013, p.30)

To sum it up, we deconstruct the diagram that Aravena did for presenting the Biennale. At the center, his equation " $x=?$ ", around it a lexicon of shortage and urgency: "quality of life, inequalities, sustainability, traffic, waste, crime, pollution, communities, migration, segregation, natural disasters, informality, peripheries, housing". All of these words orbit around architecture (the equation, waiting to be solution); between words and equation there are some chaotic lines, that keep the structure, protecting what's inside from any interference of what's outside.

Maybe it is like this that Aravena sees architecture: a centrality, from which the architect obtains a panopticon vision for a trouble world waiting to be solved. The problem is that architecture is not at the center, architecture is another of the words that orbit around an unsolved (and maybe unsolved) equation, that is power and capitalism. The task for the XXI century architects might be learning to see themselves as part of the same problems they tend to see from above - what is to resolve is not how architecture can find a way out of capitalism, because that seems an impossible task, but instead focus what it can do amongst it.

Final statement

We now reach our final considerations, where we see participative processes not as a ready-to-wear solution to face politics, but as an indeterminate agency, continuously tested in each context, in a new way. We don't see a point in given up on architecture's tools or it's historical knowledge, but instead a re-position of narratives, taking on professional responsibility, mainly because architecture does not happen aside from, or despite of - architecture operates from within, provided by the same system from where, it claims, tries to escape.

Architecture is an always open, always receiving process, and we could start to think of a becoming-architects instead of being-architects, emphasising architecture as a verb.

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