

2020-12-16

# Political Matters

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/19267>

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10.24135/ijara.vi.643

Interstices: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts

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# Political matters

This thematic issue of *Interstices*, Political Matters, approaches architecture beyond aesthetic analysis, and more than a mere branch of traditional art history or a civilisation's will to form (Kwinter, 2001). Nor do we consider it as utilitarian space to maximise particular behaviours (Bentham, 1843), or in an essentialised way whereby inhabitation and place-making are contextually and ontologically given (Heidegger, 1927), or historically predetermined. Instead architecture, and more broadly urban space, are understood as political forces in and of themselves, meaning that they can enforce sociopolitical changes. The urgency of engaging with the political significance of architecture and urban space is because we can no longer *afford* to reduce them to neutral backdrops of political realities. The ongoing and increasing global crises are explicit evidence of the inherent role of architecture and urbanism in the structural racism embedded in urban planning, the brutal treatment of asylum seekers, the desire for spaces of commerce to accumulate capital for the few rather than civic spaces to enable the agency of citizenship, the micropolitics and surveillance of social distancing during the pandemic, in addition to global warming, food scarcity, maritime territorialisation, and modern forms of slavery. As such, architecture can no longer be understood as that which is built on stable ground; economics is not static and neither is state power, the urban fabric is stretched across the globe (Lefebvre, 1970). Likewise, architecture and urbanism cannot be removed from their connections to digital technology, mass media, the military and the law. Politics is spatial. Moreover, architecture and urban space can be deployed as tools for radical and revolutionary changes, since collective awareness, resistance and social movements have a spatial dimension (Harvey, 2013). The premise of change is undeniably enveloped in the rethinking of *what* architecture is by questioning its role, influence and ethical responsibility, as well as addressing *how* architecture and the urban can help articulate global concerns, and possibly offer alternatives.

The nexus of politics and architecture is a growing topic of discussion. The recently co-edited *Political Theory and Architecture* (Bell and Zacka, 2020) tackles this nexus by showing that the political role of architecture/urban space should be sought in *how* certain changes can be implemented. They argue that the relation between politics and architecture is often understood as deterministic through these three common ways: channelling occupants' behaviours and

informing the meaning of their action (for example the arrangement of parliament seats); symbolic representation of values (for example, the Pantheon in Paris celebrating the French revolution); and fostering a social ethos (such as the modernist belief that architecture can cure all socioeconomic ills). Instead they invite us to examine how architecture and urban space shape human experience, how they develop civic consciousness and how they limit or expand social or political infrastructures. Understanding the political processes and effects of architecture—the *how*—is also taken up as an anthropological research project by Albena Yaneva in *Five Ways to Make Architecture Political: An Introduction to the Politics of Design Practice* (2017). By analysing a series of projects from OMA, AZPA to Moshe Safdie, and contexts from Birmingham, Vienna, Osaka and Singapore, she unpicks the consequences of design and through this process reinvents the sites of political action in a way that are not limited to ideology, state, nation, government, policies, and activism (2017: 4). A way out is proposed through actor-network-theory (ANT) methodology where architecture is not defined, stabilised, or fixed but rather it is a complex set of processes which all occur in a dynamic and incomplete relation to each other. Another attempt to define architecture beyond a political symbol or a physical by-product of the political economy of neoliberalism, is offered by Graham Cairns in *Reification and Representation: Architecture in the Politico-Media-Complex* (2018). He sees architecture as a “mediated political hybrid”. That architecture is a complex, interdisciplinary and multifaceted field is explored in the co-edited *Spatial Violence: Studies in Architecture* (Herscher and Siddiqi, 2018). Here, the common denominator of politics—the *what*—is violence, where the line between war and peace is blurred in themes that range from military targeting and incarceration to urban planning and refugee camps, and in contexts as wide as Sri Lanka, Serbia, Congo, Italy, France and the US.

To address what it means for space to be political beyond it merely being an expression of hegemonic orders, *Political Matters* call for papers drew upon specific studies in philosophy, political and cultural/critical theory by Hannah Arendt, Chantal Mouffe, Paul Virilio, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. Arendt (1955) not only suggests that political questions are far too serious to be left to politicians, she also considers *action* as the highest manifestation of *vita activa* (which designates fundamental human activities including labour, work and action) which occurs in a public sphere (Arendt, 1958). However, Arendt’s account of action in the public realm is limited, because she frames public space through ancient Greek texts, where the exercise of action is based on freedom-to-act rather than necessity-to-act. Freedom-to-act may be better framed as keeping control at a tolerable level. More so, the elimination of the necessity-to-act was foregrounded by exclusion (in Ancient Greece, that would have included the slave, woman, foreigner). Indeed, for Chantal Mouffe, Arendt’s envisioning of “public space as a space where consensus can be made” is flawed since all forms of consensus do and will exclude certain opinions (2013: 10). Thus, Mouffe proposes the notion of *agonism* and the impossibility of a final reconciliation in thinking the political. She suggests that the *political* is inherent to all human societies and can take many forms and relations, but *politics* is a set of practices that arrange people by establishing certain orders (2013: 2). Her theorisation of the difference between politics and the political has informed the ways in which we employed *politics* as a set of relations in which architecture is restricted, or used as a means of oppression or control, whereas *political* is approached as more hopeful and

constructive by giving architecture *agency*. This is not to say that oppression and agency cannot overlap. A well-placed spatial implication of this is seen in Tina Engels-Schwarzpaul's paper on contested public debates and protests on land ownership in Ihumātao, which halted the construction project of a private company from building houses on indigenous land, since no consensus was made between those involved in the debate.

Another perspective that informed this issue is the re-conceptualisation of the notion of power by Michel Foucault (1975, 1976). Simply put, we often understand power as being negative and oppressive, "a power to say no; in no condition to produce, capable of only posting limits, it is basically anti-energy" (1976: 85). Foucault dismantles the habitual link between power and domination, by suggesting that we obey not because power is oppressive, but because power is productive. Shifting from oppression towards production, one is encouraged to investigate what power relations give rise to. For example, walls are common architectural archetypes of segregation, however, Daniel Grincer's paper shows that the construction of border walls is based on creating a perception of security. By deploying Wendy Brown's thinking (2010), Grincer indicates that physical borders are often erected to perform a theatrical role by giving the perception of the government being in control even if the border wall does not perform the given role, such as the Mexico-US border.

To make sense of contemporary forms of power, Deleuze (1990) extends Foucault's notion of disciplinary society to the society of control. This is the subject of Ian Buchanan's paper. He suggests that we need to understand how our desires are captured in specific ways. If we do not identify these ways and forces, we will continue to be complicit in the production processes that maintain control societies. Here, desire is seen as social and productive, rather than the psychoanalytic stance where desire reproduces *objet petit-a*. Thus, comprehending the complex forms of surveillance and governance in the age of contemporaneity requires us to shift our attention to examine the new ways by which corporations handle money, profit, and humans in control societies (Deleuze, 1990). Buchanan shows that today, when architecture is built for software and data storage rather than people, when a human is nothing other than a code and dividual, when governing associated with the Panopticon is child's play compared to the information held by corporations which we freely give with our purchases, likes and movements, when information is the new property and data is the new oil, it may be safe to say that IT and the media permeate every pixel and second of our lives. As Buchanan observes (2008), and in line with the thinking of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1972, 1980), we need to search for different types of tools that capture human desires. Indeed, this may require a different placing and questioning of ideas, events and spaces than may be associated with the normalised identification of architecture and accepted way of living.

For Paul Virilio, speed is pivotal in the engagement with and understanding of reality. The substitution of one reality with another has been possible due to the historical focus on space rather than time, the impact being that the speed of weaponry and displacement of information drive history (1977). The shift from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment and the current period is driven by the constant acceleration of speed, and militarisation of the urban as well as our shifting perception of space (Virilio, 1977, 1984, 1989, 1996). Virilio's

thinking differs from Mouffe's, for whom the current society, including the very association with democracy, is correlational to the exchange processes of neoliberalism. For Virilio, land, things, information, perception—and democracy and citizenship, although not directly stated—are connected to, and driven by, militarisation. For him, time rather than space is the driving factor. Our perception is indeed framed by, and dependent upon, the military-information-media-entertainment complex—MIME (Der Derian, 2009), since the conflation of the media and technology can help disguise possible acts of crime, and also because such iterations of violence are operationalised in the name of “security and peace”, “civil values” and “humanitarianism”. That our cities have become the new battleground of borders, wars, surveillance, and terrorism is explored in *Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism* (Graham, 2011), a topic of discussion in Daniel Grincer's paper. The significance of 9/11 is that it was the first internecine war and the first war of globalisation (Virilio and Lotringer, 2002). The dismantled and reconstructed media frame of 9/11 was relentlessly replayed in order to perform the politics of MIME. For *Political Matters*, engaging with the contemporary world is enmeshed in the complexities of politics engulfed in corporate capitalism, normalised archaeologies of knowledge, repression of urban struggles, and militarisation of information. It yields the investigation of the regimes for which architecture is a necessary tool, whether this be for civil ordering, or the way in which control is enabled through mining personal data, manipulation of data, producing ignorance through media entertainment, and affecting memory and perception. In our age of mass media, not only the distinction between fake/real news and true/false information is ever-more blurred, but more importantly, the revelation of truth does not change anything (such as the scandals of Donald Trump); the political is hijacked.

However, it is not that the media image has replaced the real image of truth. For Baudrillard, reality is obliterated; copy precedes and determines the real (1981, 1991). The interplay between war, media, truth, and architectural representation is investigated by Endriana Audisho in “Liveness, mediation and the simulated: Effects of the digital screen on architectural representation post 1990.” The underlying theme of this paper pertinent to politics is that digital technology has not only had a significant impact on pedagogy and the design processes in architecture, but also on the globally instantaneous circulation of images of featured buildings. Audisho specifically engages with the digital turn by examining three case studies: the tension between the simulated and the real in CNN's 1991 coverage of the Gulf War as the first live reporting of a conflict in the world; experimental Paperless Studio and Media City at GSAPP (Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation), Columbia University' in 1994 using computers in studios; and finally, the United Architects' 2002 World Trade Centre (WTC) design competition proposal. Audisho links these three moments together by suggesting that architects were following how the Gulf War was mediated, and that these techniques were deployed in their teaching and practice. The adoption of the digital screen for purposes of experimentation by Greg Lynn, Bernard Tschumi and Hani Rashid happened when the architectural discipline was experiencing a crisis of representation. By drawing upon the WTC design competition entry of United Architects, Audisho suggests that the screen was reduced to a fetishised image dissociated from sociopolitical reality of architecture. Consequently, what we are now left with are simulated images solely concerned with aesthetics and market economies.

With the increasing death of refugees trying to reach the fortress of Europe, or asylum seekers imprisoned in Australia's offshore detention centres, or detained children at United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), it seems to be more important than ever to theorise the critical nexus between politics and space. Daniel Grincer's "Tracing the border: Excursus on the wall" specifically engages with wall borders from a theoretical point of view. By drawing upon the works of Wendy Brown, Zygmunt Bauman, Giorgio Agamben and Saskia Sassen among others, Grincer argues that the proliferation of walls worldwide highlights the declining authority of nation-states, which in itself is a consequence of ever-increasing economic control of multi-national corporations under capitalism. Border walls, he suggests, do not create a more secure and safer environment. They are instead a means of controlling who can benefit from the free deregulated market and territorial mobility, and who should not. This paper also extends the discussion of physical walled borders into contemporary digital surveillance and opens up a debate around the current state of pandemic and the state's role in managing the health of the population which requires some levels of state-sanctioned surveillance and control. However, Grincer shows that even during a pandemic and lock-down in Melbourne, Australia, policing the population does not solely operate for health protection, but is implicated in the segregation and stigmatisation of immigrants. Despite the pandemic evading the conventional understanding of territorial borders, new ones are being created by using the pandemic to stigmatise and separate those who are contagious and ill (migrants and impoverished) from violating the safe zones of the wealthy and privileged. Undeniably, the pandemic is used to mark wealth, race, and the Other.

That segregation imposed by borders should be also examined against the right to territory and ownership is addressed by Tina Engels-Schwarzpaul in "Peripheral territories: Imagining common worlds differently". She argues that questions of territory are undeniably tied to formulating identity as fixed, central and concrete. More so, her thinking is aligned with our focus on thinking of the periphery not as that which is oppressed or backward, but rather opportunistically situated as a frontier that can offer alternatives. For Engels-Schwarzpaul, we can no longer afford to perpetuate assumptions of Western superiority in terms of centre/periphery, individualism perpetuated by neoliberalism, nor national identities bounded to territories by sovereign borders. As such she calls for the concepts that can allow us to engage with a multi-centred world. The spatial conflicts caused by inadequate and dangerous colonial concepts of identity are examined through two scenes in her paper, CARA di Mineo, a refugee camp in Italy keeping refugees out of Europe, and occupation of Ihumātao, a Māori ancestral landscape Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Disputes over land-ownership led to the closure of the camp and brought a halt to the construction of a housing project by a private company on ancestral land. Two different conceptualisations of relation-to-land in western imagination and the Māori world are compared with each other; the former presumes unambiguous/unequal relationships through inflexible boundaries, whereas the latter is reciprocal and holders of the power over land are to care for the well-being of everything there. Simply put, one is based on exclusivity and the other on association. By drawing mainly on the works of Hannah Arendt and Edward Said, the paper addresses these differing positions of territorial conceptualisation and examines the protest in Ihumātao by suggesting that a common world based on plural perspectives is not

only possible, but an urgent necessity.

Incorporating plural perspectives requires a different methodology that can go beyond the *business-as-usual* politics. Methods that offer real alternatives can be found in the independent spatial practice of Forensic Architecture (FA). Led by Eyal Weizman, FA is a research-architecture practice based at Goldsmiths, University of London. Comprised of architects, journalists, film makers and software/game developers, FA cross-cuts architecture, art, journalism, law and science in an investigative way to provide evidence for new types of public truths. FA unpicks the ways in which state or government-initiated violence has attained a new level of acceptability and legality. The research uses the trace (ranging from witness accounts and image-based footage to bullet holes) to reconstruct the event in reverse. Their work advocates for progressive egalitarian causes including transparent access to information, whilst also reflecting Alain Badiou's position that the ethics of human rights and humanitarian interventions conceals an ideology of imperialism and invariably control (1993). In this issue of *Interstices*, Anthony Brand interviews software developer Lachlan Kermode of FA. We learn about their design methodology and the dynamic of the practice itself. For example, the investigation into the Saydnaya prison in Syria by reconstructing places of tortures through sound and sensory experiences of the interviewed detainees.

Addressing the political in relation to architecture and urban space is incomplete without noting the right of the public to the city, both in design processes and in decision making. The necessity and complexity of social participation is addressed by Christina Deluchi in "The politics of social architecture in Medellín: A reading of the Parque Biblioteca España". She examines the construction of a library to highlight two important aspects pertinent to *Political Matters*. The first shows how buildings are used as tools to represent certain ideologies, and the second highlights how the emergence of buildings is intertwined with complex socioeconomic forces and politics. This paper offers an engaging history of the transformation of Medellín in Colombia, from a city known for violence, corruption and drugs, to what has been globally presented as a successful case of urban renaissance. Deluchi lays out how socio-geographic planning schemes, decentralised politics, participatory mechanisms, educational reform, economic partnerships and public works projects created the structural changes necessary for the emergence of social urbanism. More importantly, she further demonstrates that the language of social inclusion for the construction of this library was entangled in contradictions. Ultimately the library was deployed as a symbol for the city's renewal project, yet not only were the protocols for increased local participation and civic trust undermined, but the source of economic support and motives behind this project remain questionable. Construing a new global image for Medellín, and invariably Colombia, was an attempt to disguise economic and softer versions of corruption, despite it being hailed as an example of a renewed sense of identity and belonging in the local community. That its image of success was short-lived is also evidenced by the fact that the building which officially opened in 2007 was closed indefinitely in 2017 for repair.

That buildings can no longer be seen as autonomous objects, or that they are not only shaped by economic or ecological forces, is the main trajectory of investigation for Gerard Reinmuth and Andrew Benjamin in "Autonomy-within-Rationality." They argue that the political in architectural discourse has been

wrongly sought within the object itself or in the context in which the object was conceived. Instead, architecture should be sought in the relations that produce the object. The notions of object and relation are discussed by drawing upon Pier Vittorio Aureli's idea of *autonomy* and Nishat Awan, Tatiana Schneider and Jeremy Till's work on *agency*. Embedding the theoretical framework is done through the evolution of Coop Himmelblau's projects since 1960s, Zaha Hadid's and Patrick Schumacher's projects, and Alejandro Zaera-Polo's consideration of the politics of the building envelope in architectural practice. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, Reinmuth and Benjamin argue that the profession and practice started to rethink their relations with each other, that is, to identify the parameters of architecture in a deregulated neoliberal economy in which the autonomy of architecture is reduced to the minimum layer of a façade or eye-catching forms for a consumer society. Their response to this crisis is to acknowledge autonomy-within-relationality, through which architectural autonomy cannot be understood without the wider ever-changing relations in which it is embedded .

That architecture should be ethical and deliver what it promises is addressed by Sandra Kaji-O'Grady in a review of *Critical Care: Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet* (eds. Fitz and Krasny, 2019). Whilst Kaji-O'Grady acknowledges the showcasing of 21 successful projects as examples of care in resisting the exploitation of global labour and resources in this book, she indicates that none of the examined projects can live up to their promise when analysed in detail, because the forces of capitalism are extremely pervasive in architecture and urbanism. She likewise asserts, that questions of *care* need to be understood beyond programme and tectonics. One of the projects examined in greater detail is the Psychiatric Center Caritas in Melle, Belgium. The argument is that the project holds to the value of care due to its preservation of an existing building, however, Kaji-O'Grady suggests that care needs to extend to questions of *who* funded the project, and *how* the project came about. That the centre was funded by PC Caritas, the so-called "care" arm of the Catholic Church, brings into question the historical role that the church has played in global conflicts and questions of colonisation.

From a slightly different perspective, Stephen Walker's review of the encyclopaedic *Routledge Companion to Critical Approaches to Contemporary Architecture* (eds. Chattopadhyay and White, 2019), argues that contemporary global approaches in architecture need a greater level of criticality and careful consideration of the world in which we live and how we intend to shape it, rather than simply providing a collection of examples from various locations around the globe.

A more connected global thread is present in Sarah Breen Lovett's review of a documentary *Human Shelter* (Bertram, 2018), in which shelter is understood and dwelled in around different contexts, from the NASA camp on the edge of a volcano in Hawaii, to the tree house in Uganda, the refugee camp in Iraq and how a MOMA curator lives in New York City. Whilst the film traverses many different climatic, social and political contexts, it looks at everyday rituals shared by all humans.

That sense of commonality finds presence in Cameron Logan's review of the public Green Square Library and Plaza, Sydney (designed by Hollenstein Stewart in association with Steward Architects), which celebrates the civic nature of this



building at a time of continuing privatisation. For Logan, this library offers moments for solitary thought and scholarship amidst books, as well as opportunities for collective play and learning due to its adaptable programme.

This thematic issue of *Interstices* originates from the international conference *Political Matters: Spatial Thinking of the Alternative* that was held in 18-19 July 2019 at the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of Auckland, in collaboration with Auckland University of Technology and the University of Plymouth, UK. Conference participants were selected from fifty double-blind peer-reviewed submitted abstracts, with participants from many different parts of the world (Australia, Canada, China, Iran, South Africa, United Kingdom and the United States). The invited keynote lecture by Professor Ian Buchanan from the Wollongong University, Australia, introduced the conference by questioning how our contemporary society of control operates, whilst Professor Felicity Scott from GSAPP, Columbia University, US, presented the relationship between alternative and counter practices of 1960s-70s architecture in the US. The conference yielded rich and plentiful discussion among many scholars, practitioners and students, which also informed the international call for this issue. Scholarly papers submitted for consideration came from Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Spain, Iran, UK, and the US. This issue also includes peer-reviewed, postgraduate, creative design projects by Frank Liu (with Susan Hedges) and Xavier Ellah (with Carl Douglas). Their selection occurred in parallel with the main issue.

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