Constructing the Political Image of the Everyday: Fiction and Authenticity in Participatory Architecture

The political and aesthetic implications of the notion of everyday life were exhaustively explored during the last decades of the 20th century by thinkers as different as Michel De Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord or Jacques Rancière. However, all this theoretical body becomes problematic when we approach it from a discipline like architecture, tangled in the internal tension between its active role in society and its own cultural limits.

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We might say that, precisely as a reaction to this tension, the idea of the everyday is often formulated from architectural theory merely as a critical argument against the estrangement of architects from the real life of the city. In this paper I'd like to overcome this critique by unveiling unexplored ways in which the notion of the everyday has produced relevant architectural expressions within contemporary aesthetic and political regimes. In doing so I'll attempt to challenge the typical association between authenticity, social critique and everyday, by suggesting that it is, paradoxically, through imitations of the spatial practices and the images of everyday life, how modern and contemporary architecture has achieved to embody certain political contents. For this I'll use two projects known as paradigmatic of participation in architecture, The Byker Wall by Ralph Erskine and the Maison Médicale by Lucien Kroll, that also share a moment, the end of the sixties, in which the critical notion of the everyday was probably experimenting its maximum political relevance during modernity.

The reconsideration of everyday life emerges in the contemporary discourse of architecture during the nineties as a programmatic critique to what we might call the official practice of the discipline. An automatic product of this critique is the search for alternative design tactics that shorten the gap between reality and architecture. But this is not an easy or even a new task. According to Margaret Crawford, we may pursue it by "eliminating the distance between professionals and users, specialized knowledge and daily experience"[1], forcing the architect to "address the contradictions from social life from close up."[2] This movement towards a more open and complex reality not only goes beyond the traditional notion of architectural context and, therefore, leaves us out of our comfort zone. It is also, and more importantly, a politically focused shift. If we, as architects,

stand in front of the question of contemporary everydayness, we must necessarily react to what Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord identified as the *colonization of everyday life*[3], pointing at the fact that our basic daily activities, such as cooking, driving a car, buying groceries, taking a bus or having a coffee, have been fully occupied by the dynamics of consumption and, therefore, have become simultaneously political and aesthetic. Along the same lines and openly following Lefebvre, Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross consider that "the political is hidden" within "the most banal and repetitive gestures of everyday life"[4] , which is also where we can look for its critical alternatives: "It is in the midst of the utterly ordinary, in the space where the dominant relations of production are tirelessly and relentlessly reproduced, where we must look for utopian and political aspirations to crystallize."[5] Consequently, if the desires that emerge from the repetitiveness of the daily routines could acquire a political language, they would turn into collective social demands[6] and, therefore, the practice of everyday architecture or urbanism "should inevitably lead to social change."[7]

THE POLITICAL EXPRESSION OF THE EVERYDAY
If the critique of the social reality of capitalism and the promise for its transformation are embedded within the spatial practices of everyday life, we may assume that the quotidian becomes some kind of political proof of realism for architecture and urban design. Consequently, an architecture that addresses the contingency of the everyday will inevitably become political and "resistant to the commodification/ consumption paradigm that has become dominant."[8]

Despite its complexity, the critical nature of the spaces of the everyday is usually approached merely in terms of authenticity: the quotidian as the pure expression of real life opposed to the imposture of the official city built by politicians and architects. According to the triad in which Lefebvre divides the notion of space as a social product[9] , the perceived space, defined by its physical structure, and the lived space, defined by social interaction, are the most direct translations of this authentic reality of the city. Contrarily, the conceived spaces in Lefebvre's triad, the ones designed by architects or promoted by politicians, "too easily evolve into the production of fixed ideals."[10] However, it is precisely on the overlapping of the three types of spaces of the triad, authentic or not, manipulated or not, where space is fully defined as a result of the capitalist productive organization.

As a first step for my argument I'd like to briefly analyse the form of representation of such real life in different architectures from the second half of the XX. The depiction of the action itself of occupying space constitutes the most elementary way to address the dynamics of the everyday, by images or drawings of people doing things in which the designed architectural background becomes less relevant. Significantly, these images of simple everyday actions might become the ones that reveal the hidden political discourse behind the project. In the drawings for the new village of La Martella, designed by Ludovico Quaroni in 1951, over a neo-vernacular background we find the recognizable collection of characters we have seen on the classic films of Italian neorealism. Despite the self declared Marxism professed by Quaroni, the social ideals promoted by neorealism in architecture and urbanism become evident: the reintroduction of everyday rural life on the new postwar urban neighborhoods, ideologically closer to the paternalism of Christian democracy than to the egalitarianism of social democracy[11] . Another relevant example is the competition proposal developed by Iñaki Abalos and Juan Herreros in 1991 for a park inside the natural reserve of Doñana in Southern Spain. The most explicit image regarding the alteration of

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the spatial practices in the park is a collage of a group of naked people walking on the beach. The response to the fragility of the amazing landscape of dunes is not expressed with the typically coercive environmental protection, but with an alternative model of behavior, naturism, which involves a very particular ideological discourse, and a critical rethinking of traditional leisure practices.

More recently and in a very different context we may examine the winning project for the park on the former landfill of Grønmo in Oslo, by the German landscape architect Silke Volkert. Here, the architectural background almost disappears, and what remains is a benevolent environmentalist utopia, expressed exclusively by the image of groups of active and happy people working on urban gardens. As in many other projects we have seen published over the last years, this proposal embodies the appropriation of the critical agenda of environmentalist politics by official and corporate culture, through the representation of an ideally green everydayness.

In all of the three cases there is a recognizable ideological discourse that determines the spatial expression of the everyday, which crystallizes in fictional scenes that portray the social results of these ideologies, far beyond the mere description of the physical and programmatic structures that are actually being designed. It's not really an issue of visual communication, after all architecture is always represented as images that project a new reality towards the future. It rather seems that when the content of architecture is found within actions rather than spaces we have no choice but to build a fiction, an imitation of reality, to express them with clarity. Paradoxically, then, it seems that the architectures originated from the reality of everyday life can only be effectively incarnated by fictions, manipulations of realities transformed into images where the ideological discourse becomes transparent.

SMALL NARRATIVES AND NEGOTIATED UTOPIA

In the debates about the problems and possibilities of participatory architecture that took place during the late sixties, several of the questions that I'm dealing with here were being discussed. Obviously, the everyday life activities of the citizens involved in processes of participation naturally became an essential part of the programs and the ideological substrate of the projects. Also, the redistribution of power implicit in participation opened a critical perspective over the accepted ways of producing architecture, which effortlessly turned the everyday practices embedded in the process into political ones. Some of the most critical discussions about the problems of participation had to do with its authenticity in political terms. A massive critical response was raised regarding the reality of the democracy of the processes and, therefore, questioning the legitimacy of participation as an effective political tool.

A well-known example is the *ladder of participation*[12] proposed by Sherry Arnstein in 1969, in which eight possible levels of participation were classified on a vertical scale, from manipulation on the lowest level, to citizen control on the highest, or placation in the middle. Arnstein suggests a linear criterion of legitimacy, in which the architectural results of the project or its social success are never assessed. Only the political conditions of the process are considered, therefore assuming that redistribution of power guarantees transformative results responding to a specific set of social and spatial conditions. An illustration of this way of thinking is the critique as a process of false participation of the
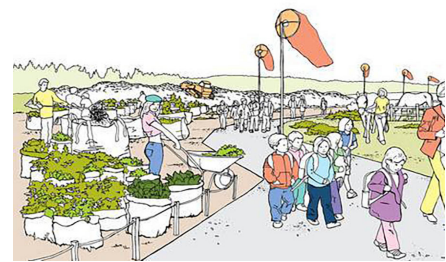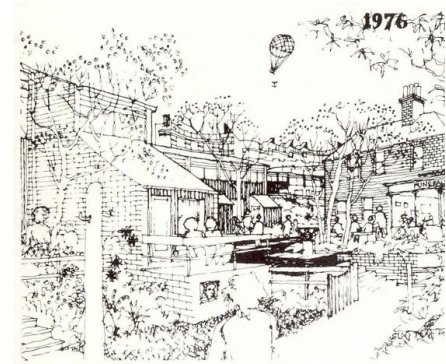
Figure 1: . Winning proposal of the competition for the park on the former landfill of Grønmo in Oslo. (Silke Volkert, 2012)

Figure 2: Sketch of one of the inner spaces in Byker (Ralph Erskine, 1976)

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large development built by Ralph Erskine in Newcastle and known as The Byker Wall (1969-1975): "Perhaps the most cynical example of the architects own ideas masquerading as the outcome of a participatory process is Byker Wall. This is clearly an 'Erskine building' and not something designed collectively by the Byker's residents. Yet an elaborate charade was gone through of setting up the architect's branch office 'in the community.'"[13]

Against this narrow mode of critique, where the difference between the good guys and the bad guys is far too obvious, I'd like to propose an alternative perspective to examine participatory processes as conflictive spaces of encounter between everyday life, politics and architecture. With that end I'll shift the discussion from the notion of authenticity, automatically related to legitimacy, to the sphere of fiction, almost its opposite. In the case of Byker, we could argue that the type of fiction that explains its political agenda and its architectural grammar belongs to the field of realism. As in Andre Bazin analysis of De Sica's *Bicycle thief* [14], despite the intricacy of the formal internal mechanisms and the intensity of the social problematic at stake, both become transparent in the final result. They remain buried within an architecture that we perceive as natural, even if it is composed of a carefully designed collection of formal gestures. A spatial narrative made of small everyday stories that artificially constructs the perception of a normal life. In similar terms, referring to the narratives of the streets, Jeremy Till explains how in design processes with citizen participation, "the role of the architect becomes that of understanding and drawing out the spatial implications of urban storytelling."[15] These small stories incorporate into the project as a form of "indeterminacy and contingency"[16] that needs to be translated by the architect who, far from reducing his responsibility as some have suggested, is more demanded as a designer than ever. Consequently, "the architect, as negotiator of hope initiated through urban storytelling, is thus much more than a mere technical facilitator."[17]

In most of the drawings developed along the years for Byker, we can notice the overlapping of the small stories of the lived space with the conceived space of architectural form. The figures of the different groups of people are represented as importantly as the built masses of buildings. The same technique, overlapping conditions of difference into a complex composite, is applied to every layer of the project staging the fiction of the complexity of a shared life: the high raise overlapped with small density cores, the old symbolic buildings with the new modern housing, a monumental gesture of the wall with a micro cosmos of semipublic spaces; all of them parts of a complex compositional equilibrium that reflects the idea of a negotiated social balance. This type of inclusiveness is, according to John Kalinski, characteristic of the everyday urban life of contemporary cities, which "accepts the new, the old, the present, the simulated, and the spectacular within a framework of everyday situations"[18]. The micro narratives of urban storytelling are interconnected in Byker by the construction of a wider political fiction: the negotiated utopia of social democracy that Erskine had experienced in Sweden since the forties, and that hardly could fit on the Newcastle that the Labor political leader Thomas Daniel Smith[19] was transforming with high speed developments.

A great effort was made by Erskine to simulate the effects of the complexity of reality, as if the development would have been implemented along decades, growing slowly and organically. This approach epitomizes one of the critical alternatives to architectural modernity, that of the architect as a craftsman,

Figure 3: Detail image of one of the bridges connecting *the Wall* with the interior buildings in the Byker Wall Development, (Ralph Erskine, 1976).

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against technical repetition or any sort of generic forms. That is why, despite the great variety and intensity of its form and materiality, the notion of time in Byker somehow denotes a slow pace. The double dialectic history/ modernity and design/ occupation is resolved, unlike most of the modern architecture of the sixties, as a balanced landscape. The physical structure of the neighborhood seems to function as a stabilized system of spontaneity, in which even if anything seems changeable through *bricolage* -many different new doors and fences have been added with time-, nothing really damages the global picture. Even the current, and unexpected, occupation of most of the pedestrian streets by cars, doesn't seem to undermine its social atmosphere or its constructed political expression as a negotiated utopia.

CONSTRUCTING THE IMAGE OF REVOLT

If, as Fredric Jameson has stated, the aesthetic expression of a political ideal has two possible forms, utopian or subversive[20], the *Maison Médicale* (1969-72) designed by Lucien Kroll, would certainly fit on the second group. Together with Erskine's project, the Mémé, as it is usually known, is one of the few examples of participatory architecture of the sixties and seventies that synthesized a political process on a consistent and innovative architectural language. In many ways, the Mémé can be interpreted as the next step after Byker. If the architect in Byker was a craftsman constructing a negotiated utopia, in the *Maison Médicale* we might say that Kroll was an activist[21] decided to invent the architectural image of political revolt. Strongly influenced by the politics of its time, the buildings that composed the Mémé were without any doubt, "a delayed product of 1968, the year of revolution and protest"[22]. Moreover, the specific circumstances that surrounded the commission for Kroll were also decisive: The project itself was born from a conflict between the students and the administration of the Catholic University of Louvain, in which Kroll was always took the side of the students: "They supported us in conflicts, took part in discussions with officialdom, and organized demonstrations against university's alternative project"[23]. In this context, the aesthetic discourse of social revolution, the radical expression of freedom and disagreement with the status quo becomes the main theme of Kroll's project. Leading to an architectural implementation of this discourse as the "disorder"[24] of the built form "which, not being institutionalized, renews itself continually, constantly reinventing images of a reality in transformation"[25]. The radical interpretation of the everyday routines of the students: "I get up, wash, it's cold, the neighbor's radio annoys me, I go to get bread..."[26] , revealed as a fertile material for an experimental approach to architectural program and as the antidote for institutionalization.

In Byker Erskine combined a model of participation based first on consultation, and then on an ultra-customization of the design meant to carefully translate each of the desires of the neighbors. Consequently, the team of architects was forced to produce a disproportionately large amount of detailed variations[27] to keep the consistency and equilibrium, even within the great variety of solutions. There is an essential divergence in the way Lucien Kroll tackled the issue of difference and technology in the Mémé. Kroll constructs an architectural image to represent the idea of constant revolution, of an ever-lasting fight for freedom: there is neither possible equilibrium nor utopia. But the refutation of the "authoritarian and repressive condition"[28] of the system requires the illusion of spontaneity and flexibility when, in reality, the formal disorder of the building is a direct consequence of a very precise system of control. The design of an
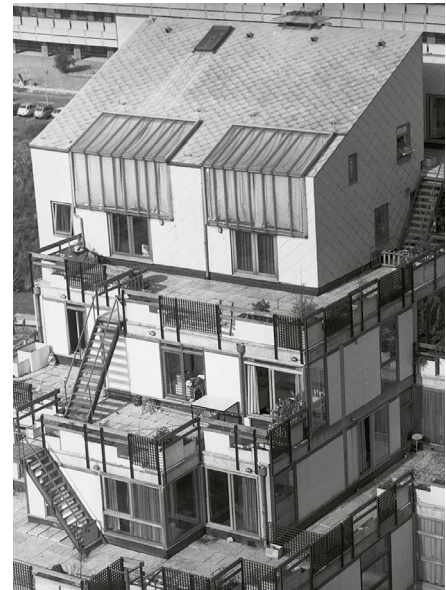
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Figure 4: Image of the terraces at the Maison Médicale (Lucien Kroll, 1972)

ENDNOTES

1. Margaret Crawford, introduction to *Everyday Urbanism: Expanded*, ed. Margaret Crawford et al. (New York: Monacelli, 2008), 12.

2. Ibid., 12.

3. Andy Merrifield, Henri Lefebvre: a Critical Introduction (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9-10.

4. Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross, introduction to Everyday Life: Yale French Studies 73 (1987): 1-4.

5. Ibid., 1-4.

6. Crawford, Everyday, 10.

7. Ibid., 10.

8. Steven Harris, "Everyday Architecture" in Architecture of the Everyday, ed. Steven Harris et al. (New York: Princeton, 1997), 3.

9. Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space (New York: Blackwell, 1991), 26.

10. John Kaliski, "The Present City and the Practice of City Design", in Everyday Urbanism, ed. Margaret Crawford et al. (New York: Monacelli, 2008), 107.

11. Peter Rowe, Civic Realism (New York: MIT, 1997), 108.

12. Sherry Arnstein, "A ladder of citizen participation", in Journal of the American Institute of Planners 35 (1969): 216.

13. Nigel Cross, "Participation", The Architects' Journal (1982): 76.

14. Andre Bazin, Que es el cine (Madrid, Riapl,1990), 330.

15. Jeremy Till, "The Negotiation of Hope" in Architecture and Participation, ed. Jeremy Till et al. (London: Taylor, 2005), 39.

16. Ibid., 39.

17. Ibid., 39.

18. Kaliski, Present City, 107.

19. Aurora Fernandez and Javier Mozas, 10 Historias sobre vivienda colectiva. (Vitoria: a+t, 2013), 379.

irregular structural scheme following what Kroll calls "the wandering columns"[29], will determine the size of every other element attached to it, making impossible a perception of order or a sense of control. The freedom to use any size of window, or even to do it yourself, is not simply a way to delegate power of design. It is, in fact, a way of securing a very well planned effect of disorder that is surprisingly similar in different scales: in the general volumetric organization designed by Kroll, and in the cloud of smaller lighter elements attached to it.

THE LIMITS OF ARCHITECTURE AS A POLITICAL ACTIVITY

The interpretation of the Mémé and the Byker Wall like built structures conceived as simulations doesn't diminish their relevance as political architectures. If anything, it reinforces them; it identifies them as pioneering projects in the development of alternative strategies to express the transformative potential of the spatial practices of the everyday. Examining through this same lens the very recent trend of participatory urban design and public space reclamation strategies, can be specially revealing. Successful Practices like the French collective Atelier d'architecture autogérée or the Spanish office Ecosistema Urbano, have worked consistently in rebuilding the idea of a more democratic urban citizenship through the design of temporary structures or collective urban actions. The social and economic context of the recent economic crisis, as well as the cultural influence of movements such as Occupy Wall Street have stimulated the restoration of the notion of participatory design, that had been neglected for decades. But, how politically critical are these new proposals after all? Undoubtedly they are more than just a new aesthetic trend, they contain a substantial political focus that we may easily connect to Henri Lefebvre's ideas in The Right to the City. This focus entails the disbelief in architecture as a technique that can radically transform reality by itself. Instead, it suggests its transformation into a mutable discipline that has to adapt carefully to the changing dynamics of contemporary society to be somehow influential –a statement that Erskine and Kroll probably would have supported. Therefore, the new architecture of participation doesn't really need to be formulated in formal or material terms, as the radical architects form the sixties did. It is rather characterized by a different model of
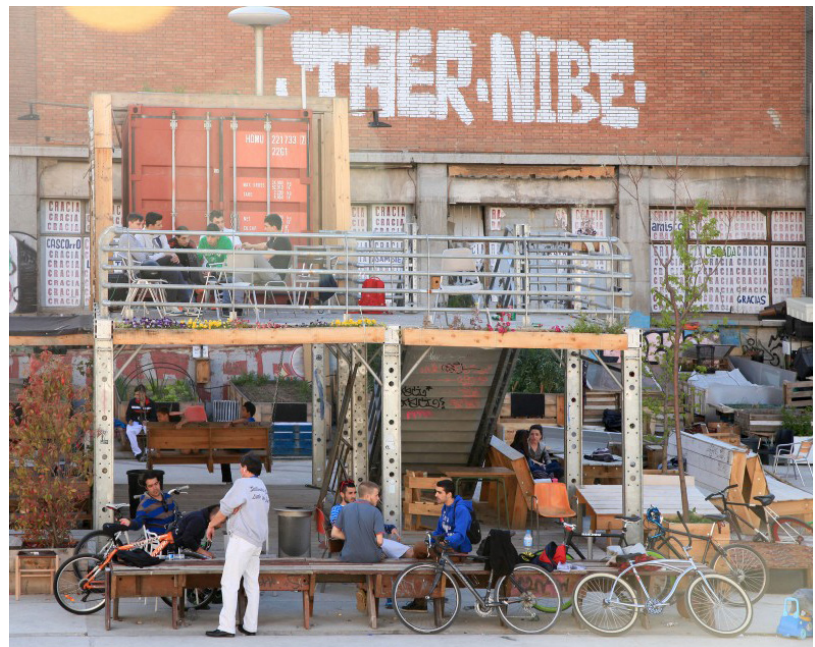

Figure 5: Temporary structures at the participatory public space *Campo de Cebada* in Madrid, 2010

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practice that opens itself to a less strict level of compartmentalization and specialization. Again, here we have the idea of the architect as an activist but, oppositely to Kroll's, without a fixed ideological agenda.

As a conclusion, I'd like to shortly describe a case of citizen participation that might raise some final questions and, maybe, enlighten the importance of the political image of architecture nowadays. In the urban experiment of El Campo de la Cebada, in Madrid, an available urban void has been spontaneously appropriated by local community groups, which in a self-organized structure are programming the space for all sorts of events and activities until the void is filled, in the near future, by a new construction. These activities, most of them part of the everyday life of the neighborhood, have naturally generated different temporary architectures that have successively occupied the space of the void. It's a model of participation without a fixed architectural image or a recognizable political narrative, beyond the redistribution of citizen power over urban space. In the ultimate phase of participation, there is no need for design. There is no fiction, no need to imitate the complexity of life. Instead of an architecture that imitates reality, it's the social reality that has invaded the city and made architecture, finally, irrelevant. Do these experiment show us the limits of architecture as a political activity? Can we still rely, as Erskine and Kroll did, on the construction of architectural image as the incarnation of political ideologies? Can we still find ways to reintroduce architecture, beyond activism, as a legitimate political medium to deal with the instability of contemporary everyday life?

20. Fredric Jameson, "History Lessons", in Architecture and Revolution, ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 71-80.

21. Till, The Negotiation of Hope, 39.

22. Peter Blundell Jones and Eamon Caniffe, Modern Architecture Through Case Studies 1945-90 (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2007), 128.

23. Lucien Kroll, Buildings and Projects (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 40.

24. Giancarlo De Carlo, "Architecture's Public" in Architecture and Participation, ed. Jeremy Till et al. (London: Taylor, 2005), 18.

25. Ibid.,18.

26. Lucien Kroll, The Soft Zone, Architectural Association Quarterly vol. 7, no. 4 (1975)

27. Fernandez and Mozas, 10 Historias, 386.

28. De Carlo, Architecture's Public, 18.

29. Lucien Kroll, An Architecture of Complexity (Cambridge: MIT, 1987), 42.