BUILT COMPLEXITY AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENTS

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The enormity of urban development, the overwhelming presence of massive architectures and dense infrastructures, the irresistible utility logics that organise much investment in cities, all have produced displacement and estrangement among many individuals and whole communities. These conditions unsettle older notions and experiences of public space. While the monumentalised public spaces of European cities remain vibrant sites for various rituals and routines, the overall trend is a shift from a participatory architecture to an architecture of demonstration and display. David Adjaye's projects ask us to think about an architecture for modest public spaces in today's city, aimed at recovering the possibility of making publicness.

Today's city is not a monolith. It contains multiple under-used spaces, often marked more by memory than by current meaning. These spaces are part of the interiority of a city yet lie outside its organising, utility-driven logics and spatial frames. They are '*terrain vagues*'[1] that allow many residents to find niches within the architecture of demonstration. Subjectively, connecting to such '*terrains vagues*' allows one to bypass the massive structures that have increasingly come to dominate. But the *terrain vague* pulls individuals into their heads and away from the experience of public space.

And yet, there is a type of urban condition that dwells between the fact of massive structures and the reality of under-used spaces. I think it is central to the experience of the urban, and it makes legible transitions and unsettlements inherent in this experience. It can also reinsert the possibility of making — *poesis* — in a way that massive projects do not. The making I am interested in here is of modest public spaces, constituted through the practices of people and critical architectural interventions that are on small or medium level scales. These are not monumentalised public spaces nor are they marked by large-scale structures. They open up a question about the current urban condition in ways that take us beyond today's engagements with high-tech architecture, virtual spaces, simulacra, theme parks. All of the latter matter, but they are fragments of an incomplete puzzle.

The work of capturing this elusive quality that cities produce and make legible is not easily executed. Utility logics won't do. I can't help but think that artists are part of the answer — whether with ephemeral public performances and installations, or durable public sculpture; with site-specific/community-based art, or nomadic sculptures that circulate among localities; or indeed through architects' ability to navigate several forms of knowledge. It cannot be architecture as a hermetic dialogue between art and money. Acting on these possibilites entails architectural forms that are a kind of creative workshop open to other artistic practices and to the practices of users.

The sites for this open practice can be located in a variety of spaces, including intersections of transport and communication networks — sites where the naked eye or the engineer's imagination sees no shape, no possibility of a form, just pure infrastructure and its necessary uses. Part of the work of such an architecture and urban design lies in detecting possible architectures where now there is merely a formal silence, a non-existence. Such an architecture is thus able to navigate through more forms of expression and knowledge than an architecture of demonstration. In so doing it allows us to capture something about the elusive quality of 'urbanity' —

that compound of complexity which is missing in the theme-parking of the urban. This brings with it the possibility of making public space.

Anchoring Public Space through Difference and Complexity

I see this kind of architecture in several of the public projects by David Adjaye presented in this publication. The two Idea Stores, the Deptford and Tottenham centres, the Rivington Place in Shoreditch, and the Wakefield Market Hall, are all public buildings that make public space. They do so in specific ways, through particular formal elements and materials. These buildings don't point to an elsewhere — they are not symbolising some other idealised condition, one not present in the neighbourhood. They are of the place, but they are not subsumed by it. They stand out in the urban fabric where they are inserted, and in so doing produce a point of gravity around which practices can emerge and be shaped. These buildings are not simply in public space. They *are* public space.

A critical element in these buildings is the wall. The wall here is a space of a special sort. It reminds me of what I identify as analytic borderlands in my research. These are spaces comprising what are commonly seen as discontinuous and mutually exclusive spaces. In constituting them as analytic borderlands, discontinuities are given a terrain rather than reduced to a dividing line. In this terrain, discontinuities become an integral part, a component of a space, rather than a division between two different spaces articulated around the dualities of inside/outside, private/public.[2]

If the wall does indeed function as such a border*land* rather than border*line*, then the particular materials, the visual experience, the sensory experience, all matter because they are constituting a sort of third space. In the case of Adjaye's buildings, the walls are often stunningly beautiful in their mix of precision, complexity, and sensory engagement. Each of these three features can work as sites for engaging the passer-by or the user of the building. The wall becomes a space that constitutes or activates public space, not what divides the inside from the outside.

The precision and complexity of these buildings and their walls ensure that interactions with the surrounding space are not a form of dilution. The building, the wall — surrounding area, each maintains its specificity. And yet, there is mutual conditioning. I would use the term imbrication to capture this particular mix of specificity and interaction, and to distinguish it from hybridity. At no point do any of these buildings and walls cease being their own particular presence, no matter the dynamism that binds them visually and that is produced through the movement of people. They can thus anchor a variety of practices that entail border crossings, including crossings perhaps not foreseen by the architect.

These public buildings are being built at a time that has seen a sharp ascendance of private authority over spaces once considered public. The increasing legibility of restrictions and displacements is politicising urban space. Most familiar, perhaps, is the impact of high-income residential and commercial gentrification over the last two decades. This has generated displacements that can feed the making of political subjectivity, but do not strengthen the sense of the civic on either side of the conflict. It is a displacement of households, non-profit uses and neighbourhood firms, that makes visible a power relationship — direct control by one side over the other as expressed in evictions or intermediated through the market. In this context, public-access space is an enormous resource, and we need more of it. But let us not confuse public-access space with public space. The latter requires making —

through the practices and the subjectivities of people. The strength and clarity of Adjaye's public buildings may well mean that, through their practices, users of the space wind up making various types of publicness. This would take the project of making these buildings into the project of making public spaces in areas of urban fragmentation and conflict. It is not through mimicry of the surrounding area that these buildings can do so, but rather through their distinct presence in each of the areas and in their users' practices. Distinctiveness, precision and complexity can engage the subjectivity of users and passers by, drawing them even if for a moment into a less personal and private mental space. If engagements of this sort can partly dislodge the privatized subjectivity our cities are producing, then these buildings and their walls are themselves contributing diversity to the larger areas where they are sited.

Making Great Public Buildings in Modest Public Spaces

All of Adjaye's buildings mentioned above, as well as his Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver, are sited in areas that make me think of modest public spaces. These are not monumentalised, nor are they already ritualised. This modesty itself brings to the fore the possibility of making public spaces. It allows for the details, specifics, materials of the public buildings assume a whole new meaning as sites for engagement — whether positive or confrontational. In so doing, Adjaye's buildings open up to particular ways for making public spaces through practices, movements inside and across the buildings, dispositions toward the specifics of building design and the materials of walls.

Several trends come together to recover practices and imaginaries about making, rather than merely accessing, public space. The first, as we have seen, is the fact itself of today's wider unsettlements of older notions of public space. These arise from the limits to making public space in monumentalised spaces, and also from the shifts towards politicising urban space and away from civic experiences in cities. Such unsettlements can then produce openings to the experience and the option of making — in this case, making publicness.

A second is the option of such making in modest public spaces, which may well be critical for recovering the possibility of strengthening urban public space. This type of making was historically critical in European cities, and is to be distinguished from the making of grand monumentalised spaces in the interstices of Royalty and the State.

A third trend is the delicate negotiation between the renewed valuing of diversity and the renewed challenges this poses to notions and experiences of the public. I see in Adjaye's buildings an interesting instance of such a negotiation. Their distinctive presence, the complexities of design and materials, the particularities of the walls, all embed diversity in the building itself. They do not create a neutral zone, emptied of distinct meanings or markers, in order to maximize some putative inclusion of all diverse groups. Rather, Adjaye's buildings move in the opposite direction. They embed a built distinctiveness and complexity that allows for a disaggregating of each type of social/cultural/religious diversity, in a parallel deployment of components rather than holistic, unitary presences of identities and buildings. If each of the many elements in these buildings — material, colour, embedded software, patterning, textures, volumetrics — provokes engagement, together they produce a spectrum that could have the power to disaggregate — for a moment — the claustrophobias of identity, an exiting of our private mental worlds. Can built complexity be redeployed as subjective com-plexity?

I have in mind the notion that the monolithic identities that are contributing to segment and thereby privatise the public, can be unsettled in this process and drawn into a shared temporary engagement.

Does Multi-Sited spell networked spaces?
It is worth considering the possibility that the simultaneity of ten public projects can itself make a difference under current conditions. Such a possibility moves these architectural interventions from parallel projects to a multi-sited event. A similar shift in actual and represented meaning is increasingly at work in other domains, especially core global and digital ones. It functions as a sort of scale-up. In the case of Adjaye's ten public buildings, it signals the possibility that they constitute a whole that is more than the sum of the buildings — for instance, if each site becomes part of public imaginaries that connect to other sites.

This raises the question of the meaning of the local in a context of globalization and digitally networked communities. Increasingly, a local place can begin to function as a microenvironment with a far larger span than its local boundaries. While such a span is usually thought of as the seamless space of digital networks, it can also be constituted through the lumpy geography of networks of localities. Can a set of parallel public buildings, with the capacities to activate public *making*, evolve into a multi-sited event that is a kind of networked public space making? This would still be local, but with a difference — the knowledge that such making is also happening in other localities. In my own research about various types of political making I have found this mix of local action and trans-local awareness. It constitutes a distinct political subjectivity — even though we still do not know the types of politics and practices it might yield.

What I want to capture here is a very specific feature.

It is the possibility of giving presence to multiple local actors, projects and imaginaries that are either somewhat 'silent' in the larger space of the city, or invisible to each other even though they may belong to the same general socio-urban group. It gets at the possibility of constructing forms of presence that are neither part of elite universalisms or 'high culture' nor, as in advertising images, part of corporate media or consumer firms.

These are some of the ways in which the notion of the local is reinvented and repositioned. Frankly, in my discipline we lack adequate vocabularies. The local is still the local, and predicated on physicality and proximity. Yet a growing number of instances of the local are not confined to a proximate physicality. It can be very local, but oriented and connected to other instances of the local across the world. So the category of the local also contains a particular version of the non-local — the global, the translocal. We need thicker vocabularies to capture this. It struck me that the simultaneity of Adjaye's ten public buildings constitutes precisely such a thicker voca-bulary; one that does not lose the specificities and complexities of each particular locality even as it can push each into practical and subjective types of public-making.

Notes
1. *See Ignasi Soli Morales in his recently issued volumes of Collected Papers (Editorial Gigli, Barcelona 2004).*

2. *In the case of the political economy, this produces a terrain within which these discontinuities can be reconstituted in terms of economic operations whose properties are not merely a function of the spaces on each side (i.e., a reduction to the condition of dividing line) but also, and most centrally, of the discontinuity itself. My argument is then that such discontinuities are an integral part of the economic system.*