Entropic Urban Plannings

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Abandoned spaces, urban expansion, and architecture

Jean Attali

Entropic urbanism and abandoned spaces
Cities in Europe are no longer undergoing indefinite expansion. The limits of urban expansion have become internal limits, moving to within cities, like indicators of their incompleteness. Urbanisation has left behind a torn fabric, with the unconsumed leftovers of its spatial production taking the form of shreds of territory. Such vacant or empty lots—abandoned spaces—are the stigmata of suburbanisation and de-industrialisation. They are waste ground left by businesses that have closed down or the ruins of projects that never got off the ground: they are relinquished futures. We know that depriving someone of their future is a greater affliction than the burden of their past, however traumatic. A negative vision of territory would see such vacant lots as one of the material figures of social neglect.

Gaps in urban or peri-urban space are a geographical, even geometric, reality. The urban form produces a discontinuous fabric across the agglomeration. Urban complexity produces dilated or even distended space. Architects and urban planners readily address the weak order observed around cities, reflecting a kind of renewed freedom in contrast to the dense, heavily regulated fabric of historic city centres. Urban planning discourse prefers to draw on that which lies outside the planner’s control, i.e. the suburbs and the lost limits of the city. Urban visions
become territorialised by the state of cities and their new roles. The question of landscape is never so relevant as when it addresses the more or less loose, malleable spaces to be found in abandoned or neglected spaces. Exploring the conditions necessary for a renewal of urban planning in the gaps in cities does not imply any desire for completion. Urban gaps are not made to be filled—at least, not always. It is possible to use land without building on it. It is possible to open it up and make it available for use without the need for major installations. Because of the movement traversing them, gaps in cities and the gaps between cities share the power to reverse our fascination with density. The city no longer stretches on outside; it dilates indefinitely within its own ramified structure, infinitely complexifying the relationship between proximity and distance, the natural and the artificial, the productive and the disused. Rich or poor, gaps connect filled spaces. Intra- and inter-urban exchanges depend on them to varying extents, depending on the harnessing power of their disharmony. Gaps in the suburbs (or urban periphery) will not be modelled on the filled spaces of dense cities: we will dream up less narrowly disciplined, domesticated futures for them. Gaps have their own culture—one of hybridisation and chance encounters—which scarcely needs encouraging and protecting.

Junkspace

In 1995, Rem Koolhaas published a text entitled Generic City in S, M, L, XL, sparking much debate. In it, he detailed a threefold ‘definition’ of urbanism in the generic city: it is both primordial and futuristic (naturalist and excessively artificial); it is essentially polymorphous; and it unites the efficiency and liberty of a self-organised urban universe in the residual space of what was the city. He wrote, ‘The great originality of the Generic City is simply to abandon what doesn’t work—what has outlived it use—to break up the blacktop of idealism with the jackhammers of realism and to accept whatever grows in this place. In that sense, the Generic City accommodates both the primordial and the futuristic—in fact, only these two. The Generic City is all that remains of what used to be the city. The Generic City is the post-city being prepared on the site of the ex-city’ (6.1); ‘The Generic City is the apotheosis of the multiple-choice concept: all boxes crossed, an anthology of all the options’ (6.8); ‘The writing of the city may be indecipherable, flawed, but that does not mean that there is no writing; it may simply be that we developed a new illiteracy, a new blindness (6.9) (…) The best definition of the aesthetic of the Generic City is “free style.”’ (6.10).

Koolhaas’s text marks a key development in the recent history of beliefs about the city. It was written at the time of the Euralille project in France and shortly before he began directing research at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Koolhaas presented his first texts on the urbanisation of the Pearl River delta at Documenta 10 in 1997. He took them up again in Great Leap Forward, a study of changes in urban development in China, in 2001. In Junkspace, a text presented in several versions (Mutations, Bordeaux/Barcelona, 2000; Content, Berlin/Rotterdam, 2004), Rem Koolhaas both radicalises and darkens the theme of the generic city. ‘Junkspace is the body-double of space, a territory of impaired vision, limited expectation, reduced earnestness. Junkspace is a Bermuda triangle of concepts, a petri dish abandoned: it cancels distinctions, undermines resolve, confuses intention with realization. It replaces hierarchy with accumulation, composition with addition. More and more, more is more. Junkspace is overripe and undernourishing at the same time, a colossal security blanket that covers the earth in a stranglehold of care (…) Junkspace is like being condemned to a perpetual Jacuzzi with millions of your best friends… A fuzzy empire of blur, it fuses high and low, public and private, straight and bent, bloated and starved to offer a seamless patchwork of the permanently disjointed. Seemingly an apotheosis, spatially grandiose, the effect of its richness is a terminal hollowness, a vicious parody of ambition that systematically erodes the credibility of building, possibly forever…’
Now, in autumn 2008, at a time of financial and economic crisis, I can but underline the text’s astonishing current relevance and even premonitory power: ‘Just as Junkspace is unstable, its actual ownership is forever being passed on in parallel disloyalty. Junkspace happens spontaneously through natural corporate exuberance—the unfettered play of the market—or is generated through the combined actions of temporary ‘Czars’ with long records of three-dimensional philanthropy, bureaucrats (often former leftists) that optimistically sell off vast tracks of waterfront, former hippodromes, military bases and abandoned airfields to developers or real estate moguls that can accommodate any deficit in futuristic balances, or through ‘default preservation’ (the maintenance of historical complexes that nobody wants but the Zeitgeist has declared sacrosanct). As its scale mushrooms—rivals and even exceeds that of the Public—its economy becomes more inscrutable. Its financing is a deliberate haze, clouding opaque deals, dubious tax breaks, unusual incentives, exemptions, tenuous legalities, transferred air rights, joined properties, special zoning districts, public-private complicities. Junkspace happens spontaneously through natural corporate exuberance—the unfettered play of the market—or is generated through the combined actions of temporary ‘Czars’ with long records of three-dimensional philanthropy, bureaucrats (often former leftists) that optimistically sell off vast tracks of waterfront, former hippodromes, military bases and abandoned airfields to developers or real estate moguls that can accommodate any deficit in futuristic balances, or through Default Preservation™ (the maintenance of historical complexes that nobody wants but the Zeitgeist has declared sacrosanct). (...) Its financing is a deliberate haze, clouding opaque deals, dubious tax breaks, unusual incentives, exemptions, tenuous legalities, transferred air rights, joined properties, special zoning districts, public-private complicities. Funded by bonds, lottery, subsidy, charity, grant: an erratic flow of yen, euros and dollars creates financial envelopes that are as fragile as their contents. Because of a structural shortfall, a fundamental deficit, a contingent bankruptcy, each square inch becomes a grasping, needy surface dependent on covert or overt support, discount, compensation and fundraising. For culture, ‘engraved donor bricks’; for everything else: cash, rentals, leases, promises, chains, the underpinning of brands. (...) Because of its tenuous viability, Junkspace has to swallow more and more program to survive; soon, we will be able to do anything anywhere.’

**Architecture, nothing but architecture?**

In another text in *S*, *M*, *L*, *XL*, entitled *What Ever Happened to Urbanism?*, Rem Koolhaas stated that ‘we are left with a world without urbanism, only architecture, ever more architecture.’ Conversely, he admitted that architecture ‘exploits and exhausts the potentials that can be generated finally only by urbanism, and that only the specific imagination of urbanism can invent and renew.’ How can this dilemma be resolved? The major issue raised by Koolhaas is that of restoring the operational capacities of urbanism and architecture, at a time when other authors are pitting ‘the reign of the urban [against] the death of the city’ (1994), to use Françoise Choay’s contentious formulation (*Pour une anthropologie de l’espace*. Paris: Le Seuil, 2006). Does the whole difficulty not lie in our inability to grasp the whole city, without nostalgia for history or excessive gullibility towards inherited models? It is tempting here to draw a parallel with Sartre’s radical formulation at the end of *Words* (1964) when he described himself as ‘A whole man, composed of all men and as good as all of them and no better than any.’ What would remain of cities today, far removed from the exceptional urban forms selected by history, if not each of them, now perceived and accepted in their greatest expansion as ‘A whole city, composed of all cities and as good as all of them and no better than any.’

Maybe what is required today is a project to build a new anthropology of space. If the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk is to be believed, this could be explained by the human propensity to build spaces of resonance or self-protection and to project oneself towards the far distance. The global urban world corresponds to the space of telecommunications and consecrates the triumph of electronics and electronic media.
Now that the twentieth century is formally over and that we’re fully into a new, and quite apocalyptic, millenium, we can look back with a certain perspective and attempt some observations, some lessons even, from a century that, traversed with as many utopian projects as dystopian failures, may be compared with that very modern invention which fills us with both excitement and terror in one split second: the roller coaster. Just like that ingenious machine, albeit without a predetermined mechanism, the twentieth century went up and down, turning around endlessly on itself in sometimes wider, sometimes narrower cycles, to then land back at the beginning and go through the whole thing all over again. The 1900s seemed marked by a frenzy of beginnings, a consistent belief in change and transformation that is perhaps the hallmark of modernization as we know it. Novelty, future, progress—these are the notions that may be said to characterize the impulse of the twentieth century, notions that were unthinkable until the early 1800s even though they are the heirs of a rational pragmatism that dates back to the Enlightenment.

Our modernity, a modernity reeking of technology—however irregularly, depending on where one sits on the globe—is only the last chapter in a long saga that started with the gradual separation between the

A previous version of this text has been presented at Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture, Columbia University, in 1999, and published in Boris Muñoz and Silvia Spitta (ed.), Más allá de la ciudad letrada: Crónicas y espacios urbanos, University of Pittsburgh, 2003.
natural and the divine in the early Renaissance. It is there, in the founding distinction between a spiritual and a material world that until then had remained indivisible, that the origin of what the West calls modernity lies. But don’t worry, I’m not going to go that far back: it is just that I can’t help but think of the whole process when I think of the modern, in the same way that I’m always prone to distinguish between modernity and modernism when thinking of the twentieth century. In my case, this is truly a Latin American legacy, for in Latin America there was in the early part of the century an avant-garde poetic movement known as ‘Modernismo,’ or Modernism, which we were always taught to distinguish from modernity as a period. Modernity, then, was always clearly separate in my mind from the ideologies or movements that it generated or that in turn helped shape it, in the same way that later I would understand postmodernity as a cultural condition, something different from the postmodern conceptualizations that attempted to grasp, explain, reproduce, project or otherwise come to terms with this phenomenon.

Which brings me to the matter of this talk, since what I want to discuss here today is what I consider the truly postmodern architecture: not that eclectic monumentalism that many institutions, particularly corporate ones, have eagerly embraced, and which I find performative at best and cold and authoritarian at worst, but rather that other architecture, or rather condition of urban space, which is constituted by what is left of twentieth century modernist architecture: its ruins. Now, one could spend hours debating whether this approach is appropriate and whether the term postmodernity at this point isn’t practically retro, given that we’re now in what is being called ‘hypermodernity,’ a sort of out-of-whack modernity that has gobbled up and left behind the postmodernity which enabled it in the first place. But what is really important for me here is to understand why this architecture scarcely made it through… not the century’s end, not even a generation’s length, but rather a mere thirty years! For the architecture that I am referring to, generally known as the International Style, knew its heyday between the late 30s and early 60s and then it was all but gone and forgotten. This is particularly shocking when one realizes that this was supposed to be the architecture of the future. Entire cities were built on the blueprint of the International Style, an architecture that challenged space and occupied it unashamedly, filling it with buildings that seemed to be suspended in air, whose rooms were designed to be as light and breezy as spatial travel, with wide terraces that protruded in bold angles and intergalactic motifs which spoke the language of a newly-found world that conceived itself in terms of production: fast, efficient and always new. The future was very much like the animated world of the Jetson family, a world of spiral high-rises and robotic nannies, mechanized and pre-programmed to the last detail.

Needless to say, this vision took hold in some places more than others, and I would like to concentrate my comments on how this happened in Latin America, particularly in Venezuela, since it is here that I experienced it first-hand. Not that New York City, where I lived for over sixteen years, is not modern. Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, I would say that New York is—or was—the capital of the twentieth century. Still, with a few exceptions, modernist architecture in New York City pales in comparison to the spatial extravaganzas that are common in places like Caracas, Brasilia, Havana and Mexico City. This has very much to do with the fact that for Latin America, and the same may be said of other Third World regions, modernization was a coming-of-age moment. It was the first time that there was an opportunity (or so it seemed) to be on the level with a rapidly-developing First World whose main concern was to retain the colonial empire that subsidized a good part of this development. The Third World had been too busy fighting Independence Wars and attempting some kind of economic autonomy during the nineteenth century to concentrate on or even have the means of developing an industrial platform. This panorama was quite altered in the early 1900s.
In the case of Venezuela, the discovery of oil between 1913 and 1922 meant a leap out of an agrarian economy—and the semi-feudal labor structure that often goes along with it—and into a modernity that until that moment had been all but nonexistent. Equipped with this ticket to the future, Venezuela began incorporating itself as late as the 1940s to the pace of industrialized nations. Being so behind, it had no option but to catch up as fast as possible, and in the next two decades it underwent the changes that it had taken European countries more than a century to process, and which the United States quite effortlessly achieved in about half that time. It very much helped that there were several dictators at hand: I don’t think it is a coincidence that many of the more ambitious urban overhauls take place under authoritarian conditions, where there is one staunch determination to go in a certain direction and all challenges are swiftly taken care of. One can think, of course, of the Roman model of urban imposition, but more recently this was the case of the Haussmannian renovation of Paris under the Second Empire: if a fire doesn’t burn down a whole city, as happened in London and in Chicago at different times, then the next most expeditious way of urban renewal must be blatantly undemocratic. This is particularly the case when it comes to the kind of changes sponsored by modernity, changes whose basic feature is precisely the erasure of all that came before it.

For the notion of ‘tabula rasa’ is at the core of modernization, and I mean here both modernity and all the modernisms. Tabula rasa, or the blank slate, the idea that the past is nothing but heavy baggage which must be discarded in order to start anew. There are few more dangerous notions than this one. It’s up there with the concept of ethnic cleaning: exclusive, driven and absolutely uncompromising. It’s really no wonder that the fundamentalist reaction to modernization has been almost as radical: for all their anachronisms, the fundamentalist impulses that began taking place in the second half of the twentieth century may be seen as the delayed attempt to come to terms with a condition that was violently imposed on cultures that were nowhere near ready for it. The consequence, as we saw with the destruction of the World Trade Center, is the same blind force that opened the way for industrialization, only that fundamentalism yearns for an idealized past that is quite impossible to revive, producing a kind of cultural limbo trapped between the past and the future without quite being in the present. Anyhow, to get back to my Venezuelan story and make a long story short, in Venezuela, as in Cuba and Brazil, modernization was greatly brought about by dictatorships, with urban renewal becoming the emblem of a new beginning and, most importantly, a new identity: one which participated wholesale of the modern dream. The magnitude of this ideological investment may be difficult to gage for countries where the industrial process was more gradual and therefore more smoothly incorporated into culture. Where, despite its intrinsic violence, modernization was a process that the social body eventually, even if irregularly, accepted as second nature. For Latin America, modernization was not a process but an overnight transformation, and on it rode an important part of the way Latin America saw itself: as a new continent, not only aware for the first time of the potential that the colonial powers had for so longexploited, but willing and—almost—able to take control of that potential and therefore of its own destiny.

In other words, Latin America—and I am referring here to certain countries and to a process that is mainly urban and very uneven—Latin America identified itself with modernity: both were new, young and, given their abundance of material resources, both had a whole future ahead of them. So, in that peculiar way that all Third World cultures have of adopting foreign discourses, Latin America produced its own kind of modernity: one that celebrated its newly-found identity with outright flamboyance, taking to the highest degree a modernist code that was elsewhere quite sober by comparison. I have rarely encountered the extremes of the architecture I grew up with, where everything was monumental, figurative and often pink, blue, or yellow. Perhaps the only place is Los Angeles, the city of pre-fab dreams, and even there it doesn’t reach the magnitude that modernist architecture achieved in
image: one that can best speak of itself not through its utopian project, but through what would apparently be most inimical to it, its condition as a ruin. For in ruins we find what is missing in utopian projects: their inscription in time and experience. Consistently enough, the problem is that nobody seems to think of modern ruins as such. It’s as if there was some kind of collective consensus that disabled us from admitting their perishable nature, blinding us to their reality. Modernity and ruins seem contradictory terms. As I suggested before, this is due to the fact that modernization cannot see itself as part of the past: having banished all notions of antiquity and classicism from its vocabulary, the passing of modernity cannot find a resting place. It would seem that modernist architecture pre-empted its own demise by definition, forsaking the possibility of becoming a bona fide ruin. But perhaps what is happening here is that the whole notion of what a ruin is must be put into question, and we should stop thinking of ruins in fixed polar terms (ruined as opposed to alive) to look at them, like Benjamin did, more dialectically. In this sense, thinking of modernist architecture as what Raymond Williams calls a cultural residue (an aspect of culture that has lost actuality but still circulates in fragmentary, marginal ways) might explain why we cannot fully place it in the past.

I’d like to propose that modern ruins are a new kind of ruin, that is, that they partake of a cultural sensibility which, accustomed to glorifying the monuments of a lived past, has the difficult necessity of coming to terms with those of an imaginary future. Most importantly, I believe that in this peculiar condition, this state of relative suspension between past and future, modern ruins become kitsch. Modernism kitsch? Another contradictory statement, you think. After all, there cannot be more opposed aesthetics than those of modernism, bent on originality, functionalism and open space, and kitsch, so derivative, ornamental and cluttered. It was, in fact, from a modernist position that the theoretical criticism against kitsch first surfaced, back in 1918, when Hermann Broch wrote his landmark essay, _Avant-garde and Kitsch_, where he disclaimed kitsch on the grounds that it was imitative and therefore unable to be a real

a city like Caracas, where not only all of downtown—where most government offices are still conglomeration—was entirely rebuilt, but also the national university campus (‘la Universidad Central de Venezuela,’ now a candidate for universal landmark), the network of intracity highways, hotels, clubs, residential buildings and even entire neighborhoods, were all inscribed in a futuristic language and iconography. Modernism shaped a place which until the 1930s was still mainly a bunch of coffee and sugar haciendas into a cosmopolis whose population multiplied tenfold in twenty years. All of that architecture which once represented the future is now in total decay, it is literally falling apart and being demolished as I speak. This, of course, comes as no surprise to anyone. All of us have come to live with the ruins of modernity quite naturally: boarded-up buildings, abandoned highways, overlaid facades—erosion, disrepair and even total effacement are part of our urban landscape and experience. And this is just my point: that we have come to accept, in a completely uncontested way, that the future we were raised for simply did not happen, even when the belief in that future permeated our visual field and collective imaginary for decades. And here when I say we I do mean everyone who has lived in a modern city, for the story of Latin American modernization is just a radical version (and for that reason, all the more tragic) of a cultural process that failed to accomplish what it had set out to do, or, to be more fair, achieved it only partially. What happens is that, given the breadth of the modernist project, which sought to literally recreate society from scratch, even a partial failure reads as a total one. In a way, we could say that modernism fell in its own trap: its erasure of the past led it to the mistaken assumption that only the future lay ahead of it, failing to recognize its own temporality, its own susceptibility to the passing of time. As such, it perished under the weight of its own ambitions, and now remains only as a testimony of itself.

However, it is in this sense that I find modernism most interesting. Not as a dream image, not as that nostalgic retro that we see in fashion and design magazines, but as what Walter Benjamin calls a dialectical
is as much a product of modernity as modernism. Born, so to speak, with the advent of industrialization, kitsch—seen as a cultural sensibility rather than an aesthetic—is the crystallization in an object of a memory, whether real or imaginary. This is why, when industrialization hit culture like lightning, throwing the modernization process into its final, and definitive stage, culture held on to the traditional way of life it had until then known by way of myriad objects encapsulated in glass: glass globes, snow globes, the glass bells which covered dry flowers and animal specimens, aquariums. All those objects that we inherited from the nineteenth century and which form part of a world that modernism looked down upon for too long: the world of popular culture. For the real trouble with kitsch was not that it wasn’t original or even authentic (originality is a very recent criterion and as for authenticity, one need only look at some of the early kitsch in Victorian collections to find absolutely unique pieces), nor even that kitsch eventually became serialized, plastic and massive, a sort of caricature of the experience it once sought to retain, but mainly that kitsch was linked to emotion and was, above all, an extremely popular phenomenon, and as such the antithesis of the modernist project.

For, underlying the struggle between kitsch and modernism is a very simple equation that places kitsch on the side of the irrational, which must be repressed, and modernism on the side of conscious control, the superego, to use an old-fashioned but appropriate term. Needless to say, not all modernisms espoused this proposal down to the letter: Surrealism, for example, sought to uncover and promote the unconscious. And it is this pragmatism that is at the core of modernist architecture and even of modernity as a whole: the belief that human beings can change the world at will.

Kitsch, on the other hand, never had such ambitions. On the contrary, rather than changing the world, kitsch has always been far more inclined to preserving it the way it is, or was. Not that kitsch isn’t modern: kitsch aesthetic, generating instead what he called an ‘aesthetic effect,’ which he considered nothing short of immoral. This duality between reality and effect underlay an important part of the modernist argument, with abstraction as the symbolic counterweight of a Romantic figurativity that was seen as sentimental and superficial. In the modernist aesthetic, then, the control of space was only one element, perhaps the most manifest one, of a discourse that sought to redefine the parameters of art. Art, which until as late as the nineteenth century was conceived in terms of emotion, became with modernism an intellectual exercise whose enjoyment required an important degree of cultural capital: namely, an education conducive to the deciphering of its complex and abstract codes. In this sense, modernist architecture was quite an exclusive phenomenon, and the fact that it was used for university campuses and low-income housing projects should not deter us from understanding its totalitarian drive: modernism sought to rewrite culture, freeing it once and for all from what it perceived as the limitations of tradition and emotion and allowing culture to become fully rational.

For, underlying the struggle between kitsch and modernism is a very simple equation that places kitsch on the side of the irrational, which must be repressed, and modernism on the side of conscious control, the superego, to use an old-fashioned but appropriate term. Needless to say, not all modernisms espoused this proposal down to the letter: Surrealism, for example, sought to uncover and promote the unconscious. And it is this pragmatism that is at the core of modernist architecture and even of modernity as a whole: the belief that human beings can change the world at will.

What I am saying here is that both kitsch and modernism belong to modernity, one as a material product of a period obsessed with transforming the world and exhilarated by its mechanical inventions, yet at the same time contradictorily yearning for what it was leaving behind; the other as an intellectual project that conceptualized the modern phenomenon and attempted to reproduce it according to its own interpretation. The problem, at least for kitsch, was that modernism sought to be the one and only representative of modernity in the twentieth century, leaving kitsch to the side, or more accurately, throwing it to the trash. For most of the century, the conflict was cast in aesthetic terms as a question of taste: kitsch, figurative, sentimental, explicit, eclectic and, God forgive, massive, was bad taste. Modernism, abstract, rational, minimalist, selective and exclusive, was good taste—the intelligent, challenging, real aesthetic of our time.

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1. I discuss this at more length in The Dark Side of Modernity’s Moon (1992), http://www.celesteolalquiaga.com/moon.html
Another is the case with modern ruins, which I see as melancholic kitsch. Here we do find a movement in time, that of decay. These ruins act as a suspended memory, but one that is not intact or glossy, but rather broken, chipped, incomplete, often covered with graffiti, littered with garbage, overrun by nature. It is this quasi-organic quality, one that represents death and not life, that I believe is so repugnant to modernist aesthetics, so prone to a sterile purity. For this very same reason modern ruins are appealing to another sector of the population, one that is more interested in dystopias. It is a jaded and disillusioned bunch: their homes are not filled with Americana but rather with rusty fragments of industrial debris, they like to explore rotten piers, abandoned cinemas and empty skyscrapers; their vision is not Technicolor but black and white. They don’t long for a future that never arrived and would never think of replicating it; instead, they identify with the gloom of its loss. This notion of kitsch as a decayed fragment of the past, a thing that was once complete and meaningful but that is now decontextualized and lacking its original signification is pretty much what Benjamin calls an allegory, thus distinguishing between symbolic and allegorical meaning. The importance of allegories lies in their ability to convey meaning from their materiality, thus shifting signification from an abstract, hierarchical symbolism, where meaning, instead of reality, becomes the primary value, to one where meaning lies more at face value: what you see is what you get. Ruins are a prime example of allegory, according to Benjamin, because they depict their inscription in temporality. This doesn’t preclude a residual symbolic meaning or even newly-added ones, as is the case with classic ruins, but what matters here is that the predominant mode of signification is relatively unmediated, presented directly to the eyes, and most importantly, that it is absolutely derivative—an unintentional side-effect, so to speak. In this sense, allegories—and kitsch, and modern ruins—are constituted by what are usually considered secondary meanings: those that emerge when the active moment of the object is past, when it is no longer productive or functional, when it has become the trash of history.

And then along came postmodernity wreaking havoc by assigning mere iconographic value to a modernist aesthetic which had relied very heavily on its symbolic import (representing the future, progress, functionalism, efficiency) for legitimation. A modernism which had not only failed to fulfill its promise of a better world, but also had visibly aged. Modernism was no longer meaningful, but rather an emblem of itself: it signified an epoch, a period, a dream, and in most places it became simply another layer of the urban landscape, one that most people chose to forget.

Ironically, with postmodernity modernism found a new life, one that is not so predominant as it once was, but that in its marginality, its residual capacity, can speak volumes about the role it played in culture and history. And it is in this sense that modernist architecture comes close to kitsch, for like kitsch, this architecture is not only a suspended memory of the past, but it is mainly a decayed fragment of its previous existence. Now let me explain the difference between what I’ve distinguished elsewhere as nostalgic and melancholic kitsch, for there are correspondingly two ways in which modernism can be kitsch. There is, first, a modernist kitsch that we probably all agree is such: it is the one we can find in Los Angeles, where 50s architecture has become a sort of theme park of intergalactic billboards, diners, car washes, and so on. People love it, collect it and even recreate it in clothing, music and design: it is one of the most popular iconographies of retro nostalgia. This is nostalgic kitsch, for what it revels in is not modernism as a ruin, but rather modernism in its intact or revamped version. It is a glossy vision of modernist architecture at its most utopian, one that does not question it, using it mainly as a playground for entertainment. No critical distance can be garnered from this type of kitsch—it avoids historical experience in favor of spatial atmosphere. As such it is absolutely static and interchangeable with other iconographies.

To avoid the brutal juxtaposition into which the technological revolution seems to be leading us, I think we should take the lessons from the twentieth century and what already happened with that first imagined future, and before discarding what now seems dated or useless, rescue and preserve it as a testimony and reminder of both our aspirations and our shortcomings.

This residual meaning, however, is far from being merely latent: it exercises a weight in the economy of culture that is worth pointing out, as it surpasses, I believe, even the role kitsch and modern ruins have as purveyors of a certain sensibility. In their allegorical capacity, kitsch and modern ruins play the role of what Georges Bataille called ‘the accursed share,’ that non-productive excess through which Bataille believed cultures channel their surplus energy. All creatures and societies, he claimed, generate more energy than they need, and it must be disposed of or oriented so that it doesn’t bog down or turn against the society that produced it. Bataille refers to pre-Colombian sacrifice, where life itself is ritualistically offered, and also to the consumer excess of capitalist societies, an excess preferable to destructive disposal such as warfare. This share, then, that is apparently negative, is switched to a positive sign when seen as the necessary counterbalance to useful production, not only in terms of energy, but also in the sense of relegitimizing attitudes and things usually considered wasteful, ornamental or leisurely. Western culture contradicts itself when, on one hand, it establishes a polarity between pragmatism and waste, while, on the other, it not only produces since the nineteenth century an unprecedented amount of objects and leisure time, but also assigns an extremely short life-span to its products. Kitsch and modern ruins are an obvious consequence of this situation, what is not so obvious is why they should carry the negative imprint of being trash.

I believe this kind of approach is particularly important at a time like now, when even after the irregular and sometimes disastrous results of a modernization that proceeded too fast for anyone’s good, we are embarking on an era marked by its desire to move even faster, an era that seeks to erase all difference and cover the whole world with a cloak of technological homogeneity and laboral invisibility, transforming palpable reality into that dark and dirty underworld depicted in a film which, despite Keanu Reeves, was quite interesting, The Matrix. Here, the world of live, organic beings has become the ‘ruins of reality,’ as one of its characters calls it: a jumble of sewers, refuse and debris.
After Architecture. Typologies of Afterwards

Martí Peran

It has been acknowledged time and again that modernity took shape as a culture of promise. Its notions of value were set in a more or less distant future as a way of endowing them with sufficient historical credence and, by extension, of encouraging modern subjects to accept their lot as patient sufferers. That, after all, is the logic of Utopia: the commitment not to reconcile oneself with the given in exchange for a perpetually improving tomorrow. So the narrative of modernity was arranged within a time-frame that was abstract, deferred, and planned. In spatial terms, modern urban design and architecture were the tools in charge of this planning of history; they were to draw cities and buildings to shelter life in accordance with the logic of well-being. Thus modern architecture identified itself with a clear objective: that of constructing space so that time would progress towards the future. But space, in any event, had to be governed—by imposing a single direction leading through the very idea of progress—in order to attain a life designed in advance.

The upshot of this planning, which is inscribed in the progressive logic of linear time, is that we are now witnessing a revenge spearheaded by real time. In keeping with the laws of entropy, whereby any structure of great cultural complexity gives rise to the multiplication of its own processes of degradation and disintegration, the project of modernity has collapsed into an infinity of repercussions set in motion by its own (dis)solution. Architecture, seen as the spatial planning of a Great Hegemonic Dream, has given way to countless entropic movements,
which dissolve its plans, parasitize its body, balk its intentions and recycle its remains. All these dynamics are merely the consequence of the injection of real time into the architectural container, which is unable to contain the plurality of needs and possibilities deployed by the real life that shelters beneath it. Modern architecture, in a way, claimed to suspend time and offer a launching pad for dreams of the future; but time can not be suspended, only lived, and this generates a proliferation of experiences, some acting in conjunction, many others in an undisciplined, unpredictable fashion, in the face of doctrine. Modern architecture reared up like a huge, unpolluted body from which a Great Plan for the future could be shouted; but these kindly intentions have proved highly vulnerable to the immediate aftermath of their appearance and their first skirmishes with real life. This, precisely, is the context in which we wish to situate our reflection, in that minute shift that separates architecture, as premeditated planning based on a single intention, from what happens afterwards when architecture has entered the plurality of real time: After architecture. We propose to expand upon the headline by distinguishing up to four possible typologies of afterwards. The notion of a typology is not an arbitrary choice: our aim is not merely to use a concept that is widespread in architectural terminology, but to reinforce the paradox by temporalizing—through the diversifying effect of afterwards—a concept which initially designates types and solutions with categorical aspirations. Thus the typologies of afterwards could be said to make up a sort of heterotopia of architecture, a place where architecture will always be a replica of itself, beyond its static determinations.

The Reverse

The messianic aspirations architecture displays in planning and designing its governance over life is perfectly reflected in one familiar image: that of the architect and his scale models. Before any urban or architectural project is carried out, it is presented by its creator (usually in the presence of his bemused political and economic sponsors) at an ostentatious showing of a model that proclaims the aesthetic and functional merits of his work. The architect and his model are a sort of perfect announcement of the effectiveness of the plan he has conceived and the confidence it should inspire in us. Melvin Charney (UN DICTIONNAIRE…,1970–2001) presents numerous snapshots showing how the political and economic powers boast of their projects at the public launchings of grandiose models that announce the joys the immediate future holds in store. But it is also possible to build models of afterwards and these, instead of offering us the image of façades that prefigure the fulfilment of intentions, reproduce their practical effects and, by extension, their possible failures. Such models show the Reverse of these same façades, once earlier ideas have been winnowed and belied by pragmatics. Many contemporary artists have tackled this task in a bid to make a critical reading of the ideological and Utopian dimension of modern architecture. The works of Vangelis Vlahos are one specific example of the possibility of presenting models that reverse traditional logic in order to show right now what follows after the intentions of architecture. In Buildings that proclaim a nation’s identity to the world should not be misunderstood (2003), the emblematic United States Embassy in Athens—built in 1960 by Walter Gropius as the embodiment of all the democratic ideals that the West aimed to export throughout the world—is depicted by a new model that includes the attacks made on the building in 1996 by anti-American activists. Vlahos’s works impose a painstaking the documentary record, a sort of explicit account of events that requires no additional commentary. However, the gesture underpinning his work is not devoid of a certain ironical dimension (the flight path of the projectile launched against the embassy is in the shape of a ‘triumphal arch’) which it shares, in some respects, with this first typology of afterwards. Irony, as a device that causes a single discourse to shatter into numerous, paradoxical directions, is the ideal narrative technique for exposing the Reverse of architecture. Through the use of irony, the typology of the Reverse combats the appearance of the façade by producing a sort of negative of the official account offered by architecture, an account contradicting
the one advertised in the conventional model which is now subverted in a new presentation of the building under the effect of its own contradictions.

The Interior
When modern architects and urban designers plan their output, they are sufficiently naive to postulate an economy of uses that will be faithful to the dictates. For some time social anthropologists have been proclaiming the need to understand the city on the basis of the plural practices that go on beneath the tectonic body of the buildings. Thus the city as practised, with all its unpredictability, is opposed to the city as planned. At a more molecular level, the same equation occurs in the buildings’ interiors, which are animated by singular life forms that prey on its structure until they alter it to suit its changing users and their interests. The Interior of modern architecture was conceived as content whose profiles are guaranteed in advance in accordance with the patterns determined by the very form of the container. Thus interiors had to turn into actual representations of pre-established life models which were always akin to the narrow class paradigm (the white, well-to-do, heterosexual family unit). Nonetheless, just as the most meaningful split in modern idealism has been caused by the return of a subjectivity that is wary of the protocols of representation, so interiors nowadays take shape à la carte in countless, undisciplined ways that challenge the forecasts. It is almost as though the traditional notion of a house had been replaced by the tiny category of a room. At least in so far as an ordinary dwelling unit consisted of a perfectly arranged set of rooms with specific functions, whereas the specific (decorative) solution for each room permitted a certain leeway. Today the house itself has mutated into a room that is arranged in a personal, subjective manner. Even the market—by means of phenomena such as Ikea’s invitation to continually rebuild a place of one’s own—has become aware of this. Thus it may well be in the Interior that the afterwards of architecture grows most explicitly, modifying and questioning it. Specialized architectural journals usually show buildings without inhabitants, so when real time rescues the latter and allows them to speak, they have no choice but to deploy all their skills to enable private, domestic, everyday matters to correct the programme. Many artists have conducted a variety of research projects into the afterwards of architecture by examining the distinctive, recycled, individualized profiles of interiors. That was what Stalker did to Corviale’s building, in the outskirts of Rome, and a more recent example is Heidrun Holzfeind, who reported on the same phenomenon in blocks from the Communist period on the outskirts of Warsaw. More examples could be given, but they all coincide in one fundamental point: the need to recapture for architecture the breach of an effective, licit value of use—beyond modern ideological functionalism and the symbolic value of architecture in the power rhetoric—, a value capable of modifying its structure and, in so doing, of challenging its forecasts.

The Surrounds
Modern architecture was conceived as the design of an object and clearly had some whimsical aspirations of a sculptural nature. This does not mean it lacked the awareness of exteriority. Quite the contrary, for the exterior was fundamental, from the traditional logic of sculpture itself, as the place where the work is set up, the coordinate that defines the viewpoint. But aside from this, exteriority had to be annulled, so to speak, to prevent its inclemency from upsetting what had been achieved. This was the sole purpose of the well-known poetics of modern transparency: that of absorbing exteriority, metaphorized into light and brightness, to make it part and parcel of the building. The project of modernity, in its management of architecture, ignores to some extent the irregularities of what actually happens in public space which, though tamed by the whiplash of urban design, has always been prone to infection by all sorts of germs, both moral (because of the emergence of variable survival tactics) and political (as the arena of disorder and demand). Thus the impurity of the Surrounds could taint the modern purity in which architecture takes pride and has only a pejorative sense
Ruins

Modernity’s decision to commit itself to the Utopian spirit put an end to the Romantic fascination with ruins. The horizon of modern dreams was defined without nostalgia. The aim was no longer to revive some lost age conjured up by relics from the past, but to build a new future that could elude the avatars of history and nature. Georg Simmel, in this respect, was the last to voice praise for ruins; from then on the new world was to rise up as an absolute construction, without archeology or remains. However, not only has the modern project itself declined into a junkspace (Rem Koolhaas) in which Architecture gives way to the spectacular banalization of all places, but the formats of junk have multiplied. After modern architecture come Ruins, once more.

Demolition occupies an essential place in the very construction process fostered by modern ideals. From Haussmann’s Paris to the current transformation of the urban landscape in emerging Asian economies, the physical destruction of old buildings is an essential chapter in official plans. The implosion of the architectural and urban body of modernity cannot be accomplished aseptically, guaranteeing a pristine base on which to erect something new: on the contrary, it generates a first type of refuse, in the form of the remains and dust of what has been demolished by economic growth or the geopolitical agenda. Alongside the bodies of the new architecture, the traces and remnants of the demolitions subist. The modern dream was to design a regulated, homogeneous space, but its own ruinous fragmentation is heralded, in the first instance, by the scraps that emerge from beneath its own foundations. Indeed the very dynamics of the hegemonic conquest of space merely multiplies the number of damaged, surplus, residual spaces that appear, the stretches of waste ground on which what Robert Smithson recognized as new monuments without a past accumulate as the phantasmagorical presences of a Utopia minus a bottom. It makes no difference now whether the ruins are the consequence of a demolition planned by the forces of capital or of occupation, or merely the abandonment of some previous construction. The equation was foreseeable. Forgotten spaces, vestiges until, at best, the modern building’s own patriarchal presence submits its exteriority to the domination of its dense shadow, as occurs, for instance, in processes of gentrification. To combat this arrogance which can be annihilated by possible external effects, any essay on the afterwards of architecture must of necessity allude to all these dynamics which surround and contextualize architecture and, by extension, can even ride roughshod over its initial forecasts. Hence the typology of the Surrounds explores the consequences of dirty transparency, a term which describes all these interactions between architecture and its own setting, despite the fact that the clarity of the programmatic discourse which architecture itself claimed to embody in a stable and lasting manner is thereby contaminated and modified.

It is the surrounds, for instance, that instill a narrative dimension with an unpredictable outcome into the buildings in Barcelona or Bucharest which Jordi Colomer, in Anarchitekton (2002–2004), transforms into the props of a festive parade. And the whole rogues’ gallery of characters who, as recounted by Alexander Apostol, prowl round the emblematic modern building República de Venezuela (2005) in the Colombian city of Cali, subverting it by their presence, are also surrounds. While modernity, forgetful of exteriority, seeks to reduce the Surrounds to a tame, humdrum space, various contemporary artists have concentrated on retrieving the concept of the city as an effective force field in which architectural forms interact with the disparate processes that flow between them. Modern urban design tried to organize the whole city space through the imposition of architectural forms that hierarchized and homogenized the territory in the light of the interests of each particular occasion; today, in contrast, we are witnessing the necessary recovery of all the (documentary or fictitious) narratives which spring up around architecture, turning it into something different from what was planned.
of space that are alien to the logic of production or have not yet been recycled beneath its control, proliferate in proportion to the emergence of urban dynamics that seek to domesticate and organize the territory. In the very availability of vacant space lies its poetic potential, but at the price of relinquishing all claim to raise a single, stable narrative on it. In the disorder that derives from over-planning itself lies the possibility of new energy for trying out different things. After architecture, the potential of Ruins.

For the dream of a single space nurtures its own destruction and fragmentation, in step with the economic and political conflicts that rock the territory. Where some crystalline, enduring scenario was meant to arise, waste caused by destruction and abandonment builds up; and in the wake of the impossibility of holding together a territory that has broken into an archipelago, the awareness of vulnerability to change and mutation is reinforced. For change can overturn any forecast at cataclysmic speed. Ruins unexpectedly reappear in the contemporary landscape, but they can still be distinguished from ancient ruins because they bear no trace of past times; amid accidental, catastrophic events, however, ruins reappear as a product of time subjected to force, a time when the present no longer cancels out history but remains contingent upon the unpredictable dictates of real time. From the Twin Towers to the aftermath of Katrina, ruins are also the explicit outcome of the demolition of what was assumed to be immortal but has now been turned into a mere collection of the fragments and remains of dethroned modernity.

Translated from Spanish by Jacqueline Hall.