

Ten points of reflection

I was tasked by *Future Architecture Platform* to read and compare all 215 entries of the 2018 call in order to try to detect the tendencies common among them.

This is what I presented to the participants of the *2018 Creative Exchange* conference at the Museum of Architecture and Design (MAO) in Ljubljana, on Friday, 16 February 2018.

1. Can reflection be effected without a mirror?

I deliberately decided for a total absence of any representational tool – show-reels, slide-shows, power-points – that would replace pure, speculative exercise. There are surely other ways to scan and discern the common characteristics of all entries in order to grasp some major tendencies.

One may think of a cloud of the most commonly used words, others may program a certain statistics of topics to determine their frequency – but this is not how you grasp the essence. The essence is never an average, the essence is the excess – what sticks out, what hurts the eye, what makes the thought think.

So, if you expect the mirror reflection, think instead about the mirrors in vampire movies: the scariest moment is not what you see, but when you don't see yourself in the mirror where you expect to, inside the traditional frame. The absence of your image is the sign of the radical transformation of your own being. *You are not what you expected to be.*

2. How do ideas present themselves?

Speaking of representation and images, let us move half a step closer to the ideas presented. What tools did the ideas have at hand to present themselves?

- Title,
- an iconic image,
- short verbal summary,
- Vimeo-movie,
- sequence of still shots,
- CVs and contact details.

Excuse my bluntness, but the words were very often simply not enough. There was absolutely too much hype-talk, traditionally used phrases that circulate the usual routes, not really transporting any meaning, more buzzwords than passwords. It's understandable, but still regrettable.

Moving along to media, quite surprisingly the films were similarly deceiving. This time it's not so much about the content, but exactly about time, timing, length: and it seems no length is good enough. A minute-and-a-half – too short; twenty minutes – no patience to get to the end.

Not to insist too much on this point, but personally I often regarded the sequence of 3–4 still shots as the most intriguing part of the representation of the entry. Why? I feel such a sequence allows us to see the cuts between the shots – to see the way the whole is built by making visible the scars of its own construction. Promo-videos tend to hide such scars, while a sequence of still shots is (also) the story and the narration at the same time.

Why do I insist on this dimension of visible cuts? I feel architecture is always about real social conflicts, about real *rappports des forces*.

It is only by dealing with real powers, with the potentials to change social conditions that we are in a position to really encourage and empower any change, supposedly for the better.

So, although I promise you a smooth narrative point by point, I intend to use the role of conflict in architecture as a certain cut-concept. If the core purpose of your platform is the basic *need for architecture to think its relationship with the future* – and I sincerely admire that ambition! – then the conflict should constitute the core of it!

Let me introduce two of my referential thinkers that will help us think the concept of conflict a little bit deeper.

They are both Tonys. One I've met only once, the other I know quite well.

When sculptor Tony Cragg was in Ljubljana, he gave a lecture at the Faculty of Architecture. He didn't talk about his art, rather he explained to us how his father made him a huge, hand-made radio. But then, at the end, like *en passage*, he added: "*Life without art would be pure existence.*"

By analogy, we should ask ourselves where on the scale between existence and life is each of the applied architectural ideas. For which of them could we say: *Life without this architecture would be pure existence*. Such an approach is productive, because it does not limit the architectural practice exclusively to building, but leaves spaces for many architectural interventions – from theoretical discourse through curatorial selections to pedagogical and activist actions and activities – as long as it reaches beyond existence.

My second thought, my second Toni was Toni Negri, the co-author (with Michael Hardt) of the triad *Empire, Multitude* and *Commonwealth*.

I found the crucial concept of conflict in their book *Commonwealth* (2009).

The two authors distinguish between two traditions, major and minor: the majority line takes *the social contract* as the basis of institutions, while the minority line sees the basis in *social conflict*. If the majority line tried, in order to maintain a homogenous society, to chase the conflict out (once you are “under contract” your right to conflict is consummated), the minority line understands the conflict as an inherent and permanent basis of society.

The development of social institutions is democratic only if it remains open for the conflict that constitutes it.

The key note for us to play here is double: first, not to reduce the conflict only to the usual movement vs. institution (or author vs. majority, architect vs. corporation) but to recognize it as the internal to the multitude itself; and second, to understand that the institutionalization, the solidification is not necessary in the way as to kill every initiative but could instead consolidate the revolt without denying its original power of break.

3. Sociological naivety

Why such a long theoretical turn? Because I sensed certain social / sociological naivety in many of the rejected projects: not every “social” ambition is already “political” – but every political has social consequences. So, I took far more seriously those attempts that admitted “*architecture is able to materialize political ideas into social realities*” than I did those that dreamed of “*neo-tribes gathering in*

public spaces to celebrate people's alchemy and the inversion of hierarchical political power".

The fiction of people gathering together into structured collectives simply because certain public space is opened, reopened or occupied by them or for them (by architecture) was one of the most frequent illusions among the ideas. Not fictions, illusions.

4. An idea is not (yet) a concept

It is therefore the moment to introduce one distinction that may be necessary going all the way back to and from the beginning, the difference between an idea and a concept. Here I follow Gilles Deleuze, especially what he has written on the topic in his book *What is philosophy?*

We have too many ideas. The question is not to multiply them but how to distil from all those messy ideas a few clear concepts – which are for Deleuze the ultimate element of serious, *conceptual* thinking. Here, the problem is the same in advertising, political communication, even, I would venture, in the arts.

Real concepts are always born out of creative necessity (*la necessite creatrice*). Although always temporal and spatial, topographic, born in certain very precise and concrete contexts, they transcend both time and space.

For my understanding of the clarity and the sharpness of the role of the concept a very visual metaphor was crucial, the one Deleuze borrowed from D. H. Lawrence: there's an umbrella that protects us from chaos. We paint all kinds of stereotypes, ideas and cliches on it in order to survive from day to day. And then, suddenly, somebody cuts the umbrella, like Lucio Fontana cut the white canvas – and a breath of fresh air rushes in. We experience something radically new – but then the imitators and the plagiarists come and paint over the cut, bandage the scar, because it is very difficult to bear the chaotic wind, to stand in the *bora*.

Where I see a direct link between artistic interventions and conceptual thinking – and architectural practice that tends to be both, artistic and conceptual – is this basic insight that a cut (through) is a necessary condition to see, to experience, to remember, and so, paradoxically, to survive in a far more fundamental sense than simple day-to-day survival.

In the closer context of our Future Architecture Platform, such a cutting-edge can be played by the role of sound in the perception of space, can be a simple pedagogical idea of transcribing space into different narratives or the “doing more with less” approach in degraded suburbs. The scale is not important – it is the seriousness of the cut and the depth of the scar on the canvas of existence that matters, thus transforming it into life.

Owing to the double nature of cutting the tissue of stereotypes and clichés – and being able to construct new content – architecture maintains and even consolidates this inherent conflict. To tear down and to create anew – as a process of singular separation, *isolation*, and common re-creation of the universal – architecture is by definition a laboratory of new social trends. By insisting on inherent conflicts, by making them visible, it can move people into movements, transform singular islands into continents, create common wealth (in the Negri-Hardt sense in *Empire*).

I’ve deliberately used the singular/universal couple, because it’s not about individuals going through institutions in order to obtain an aura of identity.

No, here also I follow Negri and Hardt in distinguishing individual and singular: individuals can emancipate, but only singularities can free themselves – through the processes of interaction, through the fight for Universal.

Last year, you had Slavoj Žižek here complimenting you, suggesting architects are among the most excellent analysts of the social. When I once asked him about this, he offered me but a single sentence: *Fight for Universal!* There’s a major difference between fighting for “world peace” (“peace of the graveyard”) and fight for the Universal. The emerging emancipatory universality is the universality of those who cannot find their “proper place” within their particular world.

It’s hardly surprising that the most frequently referenced social groups in this year’s applications were exactly those “who cannot find their proper place” – whether it was burned down in a war, chased away under economic pressure or simply gentrified.

Refugees, walls, re-appropriation of public space, escape from commodification into “free space” ... – all of these ideas seem pretty simplified, sometimes almost at

the level of Miss Universe claims. You do not change the conditions of refugees' destinies by creating adaptable mobile units to facilitate easier living conditions in their concentration camps – nor do you really express your understanding for contemporary religions and beliefs by assembling a “portable, cheap and multi-purpose prayer box.”

5. From solitary to solidarity

So, how can we here cut to the pain (or joy) of concept, how can solitary ideas be elevated to the level of a concept of solidarity?

Some of the most brilliant minds of our time meet at this point: Žižek talks about “*the lateral link of excluded in each life-world*”, Alain Badiou lends the same name, *les exclus*, to all those who *are not* in the world of things and signs, and Susan Buck-Morss, the author of *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* (2009) elaborates it in a way that would allow us to include into our debate the concept of “subterranean solidarities”:

“rather than giving multiple, distinct cultures equal due, whereby people are recognized as part of humanity indirectly through the mediation of collective cultural identities, human universality emerges in the historical event at the point of rupture. It is in the discontinuities of history that people whose culture has been strained to the breaking point give expression to a humanity that goes beyond cultural limits. And it is our emphatic identification with this raw, free, and vulnerable state that we have a chance of understanding what they say. Common humanity exists in spite of culture and its differences. A person’s non-identity with the collective allows for subterranean solidarities that have a chance of appealing to universal, moral sentiment, the source today of enthusiasm and hope.”

6. Search for the Universal

In this search for the Universal, we have to ask ourselves how do we approach “future” in Future Architecture? Is it more as science fiction, exaggerating current tendencies in order to try and predict the future – or rather utopian in trying to avoid those tendencies by depicting a radical alternative? Enthusiasm or hope?

Is the future in this sense really radical enough, or better, is our thought radical enough? Not really! It might be useful to take a few steps backwards – to avoid

current jargon – and to see that future can be more radically grasped: as social change, as political revolution...

But this is simply not possible without the notion of class and the class struggle: many of the authors would like to change the world without tearing it apart. Our image/imagination of the future is so limited by our over-saturated present that – as Žižek would say – it's easier to imagine a global apocalypse than a simple social change. That is why social ambitions (egalitarianism, equality) appear so naive and are much too often not political, but only politically correct – even though they are meant precisely to break such correctness.

7. Creative commons as splendid fictions

Alain Badiou writes:

“Quand le monde est sombre et confus, comme il l'est aujourd'hui, nous avons a soutenir notre croyance ultime par une fiction splendide.”

(When the world is dark and confused, like it is today, we have to support our ultimate faith with a splendid fiction).

In my search through 215 entries I was searching for such *fictions splendides*.

We live by fictions and through them. In so doing we permanently learn that there's *a space in-between*, between individual acts and collective action, between private and public.

It is the space that Toni Negri, together with Michael Hardt, so simply refers to as “common” – and what is created by the shared action of singular persons in their interaction and communication is therefore *common wealth*.

This is what creativity really means: the fiction is creative because it is so deeply meshed with reality – political reality, class struggle, domination and liberation, gender and minority – that there is absolutely no space for *l'art-pour-l'artisme*. But architecture, on the contrary, calls for direct action – sometimes deeply individual, sometimes clearly political.

In order to create new collective fictions that will help us survive these tumultuous times we need to insist on a short but efficient list of common programs or projects, without forgetting that the best collaborations are project-based

partnerships. The projects on the Top 25 list of chosen projects are just such programs.

At this point, I would like to reintroduce a concept that disappeared from public debate with almost the same enthusiasm with which it created hope when first launched: *the creative commons*.

Can something that is usually said about art be used also about architecture: experiencing something new and creating new experiences, isolating and re-creating, resisting by creating cuts in the continuity and then filling them with new expressions, forms of life or political actions, with the endurance to resist inside this break?

To be able to survive there, in the breaks, we need not only to be multiple, but many: we need to be multitude; and we need to be creative. Put those two things together, and you get creative commons. Thus, we move from aesthetics to ethics.

8. The practice of theory

And in this landscape, paradoxically, the most serious practice is again very often the theory: platforms, publishers, lectures – they were among the most inspiring entries. On the contrary, when going through all 215 entries, I developed a certain allergy to workshops – almost to the point that I would be able to repeat the politically incorrect joke from Lubitsch's film *To be or not be* about concentration camps. Just as a Nazi officer says “*We do the concentrating and the Poles do the camping*”, far too often it seemed to me that workshops mean that some would be doing all the work, and the others would simply shop in the meantime: shopping the clients, shopping the publications, shopping the celebrity-status.

9. In our daily lives

Let me try to close this reflection with a triad that is not Vitruvian (stability, function, beauty), but more tragic. Here is a longer quote that I will let you wait to guess the author till the end (of the quote):

*Much greater evil than a lack of leadership
is an unjust leader who creates chaos in his city
by the very false order he tries to impose. Such an order*

*is the obscene travesty of the worst anarchy.
The people feel this and resist the leader. A true order,
on the contrary, creates the space of freedom
for all citizens. A really good master
doesn't just limit the freedom of his subjects,
he gives freedom. In our daily lives,
we are caught in our customs and cannot see beyond.
When you encounter a true master, he makes you aware
of things you didn't know you can do. His message is not
"You cannot!" or "You have to...!", but "You can!".
You can do the impossible, you can rebel. A true master
does not stand above us, people, he is a mediator
who vanishes while giving our freedom back to ourselves.*

It comes from a recent play by Slavoj Žižek, *Three Lives of Antigona*.

Adding two more endings to the original Sophoclean plot (Antigone is so keen to bury her brother that she rebels against Creon and sacrifices her life to this end), Žižek touched our possible imagining of the future social to the core: in the second version she does not commit suicide, but incites an unstructured rebellion of the people, which ends in the complete destruction not only of the city, but of the social order as such.

In the third version, it is a chorus of the wise (something like *Comité de salut public* after the French Revolution or, if you wish, like the Central Committee in the time of Communism) that takes upon itself the demanding task of punishing both the rebellious teenager and the incompetent leader.

*Such is our ultimate reality. Some heroic men
attempt to introduce some harmony and order
into this chaos, but they miserably fail, their acts
only destabilizing further the cosmic order.
Our life's a broken vessel, its fragments scattered.
It's as if gods are playing dice with us –
when a life story is told, we note how at many points
it may have taken another turn. While there's no way*

*to bring the fragments together and restore the vessel
in its harmony, we can do another thing. We can tell
a hero's life so that, at the point of bifurcation
when gods threw their dice, we narrate
all possible throws of the dice. In this way,
we get many stories in parallel, one over the other,
and while they do not form a harmonious Whole,
they do confront us with a complete picture.
From it we learn how things might have taken
a much better turn, but sometimes also how
what appears to us a bad turn was luck in disguise
since other turns would have been much worse.*

10. FAP as well-structured collective

Let's ask ourselves how we want to conceive our ideal ego of future architecture:

-
- As the rebellious youngster, defying any social order at the risk of completely destroying it?
 - As the master-position with which we must first identify in order to understand all the troubles involved in ruling a kingdom (of social tissue)?
 - Or as the structured collective that is able to decide and implement socially beneficial measures (even if they sometimes need to bury someone "*with a good shovel in the good earth*")?

It's up to you to decide.

Stojan Pelko