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The (in)operative power: architecture and the reclaim of social relevance

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Introduction

The following contribution sits in the complex debate around power and architecture and wishes to confront architecture's comfort zone, bringing 'uncertainty in place of purity' (Till, 2006). Acknowledging a new 'social' call to arms – reconfiguring architecture's ethical shift and revitalising participatory neologisms and design activisms (DiSalvo, 2010; Fuad-Luke, 2009) – and the expansion of the role of architect (Aquilino 2011), the paper wishes to offer a renewed perspective on design, suggesting a reorientation between politics and aesthetics that would not simply reorder power relations, but create new political subjects too. What follows reflect on the direct experiences of the authors in a research by design activity undertaken in South East Asia and it briefly touch on the experience of Community Architects Network (CAN), a programme established and funded by the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) in 2010 and by now operating in 19 countries, networking with governmental and non-governmental organisations, architectural and engineering practices, grassroots organisations and local universities.

Central in our reflection on a critical practice of architecture is the acknowledgment of CAN's role in contributing to changing the paradigm of working with urban poor populations, toward a shared production of space and knowledge in contexts of informality.[1] What is being

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[1] The pictures illustrating this essay were taken by the authors during the CAN Regional Meeting held in Quezon City (Manila, Philippines) in May 2013. The aim of the meeting was to exchange knowledge amongst the groups of community architects coming from different spots of Asia and the Pacific, and to come up with the a city-wide

directly challenged, we argue in this paper, is the paradigm of participation itself, and therefore the way power 'circulates' (Foucault, 1980) in processes of transformation and upgrading as "*[p]ower is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation*" (Foucault, 1980).

The critical dimensions in this debate appear to be the reconfiguration of the role of the professional, the meaning of community, and the political potential of architecture which are all three directly interconnected in *diagrams* of forces (the topologies where the interactions happen) which are intrinsically unstable, agitated, mixed (Deleuze, 2013) – forces, power, resistances are constantly changing, exactly as in the reality of contested spaces and informal urbanisms where the Community Architects operate.

Grounding these reflections in the works of Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Rancière, we will offer a theoretical reconfiguration of design (architectural and urban), contributing to the debate around power and spatial agencies, and setting architecture in the light of this possible 'transgressing' and 'resistant' lens. Two mutually reinforcing notions will be put forward: *potentiality*, drawing from Agamben reflections on (in)operative power, and *dissensus*, drawing from Rancière's spatialities of equality.[2] Far from being a definitive quest, the paper will introduce an inoperative notion of architecture and urbanism as not simply contested and resistant force of urban transformations but as part of a manifold paradoxical dance with uncertain results.

The essence of architecture: power, *police* and *dispositif*

Participation (and participatory design) can often be understood as what Agamben (1998)

upgrading proposal for a few municipalities of the Metro Manila Region. The pictures are all shot in the Del Rosario Community, Barangay Coloong, Valenzuela City.

[2] The idea of using two theorists, Agamben and Rancière, requires some reflection and some justification that goes beyond the space of the paper. Besides having contributed hugely to a political debate and having been studied by the authors elsewhere (Boano & Floris, 2005; Boano, 2011; Boano and Martén, 2012, Boano and Kelling, 2013; Boano and Talocci, 2014), both Agamben and Ranciere did not discuss architecture per se, but they were greatly inspired by Aristotle and Plato reflection on the polis as spatial reference. Agamben's voluminous body of works reveals a transversal spatial reading, his philosophy cultivates thoughts concerned with the deactivation of devices of power in the interest of a coming community that is present but still unrealized. His philosophical enquiries contribute to the evolution of topological studies and yield an optimistic rediscovery of potentiality in relation to architecture and design. Ranciere's presupposition of inclusion and equality permeates all of his debates on democracy and coming-community. His central spatial reference of a political space as a reconfiguration of a space "where parties, parts or lack of parts have been defined... making visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise" (Rancière, 1999:30) remain heavily illustrative for architecture and urban design.

defines as exclusive inclusion, the process according to which the subject keeps being excluded from formal power through forms of inclusion in its order, as were women and slaves in the Greek *polis*. Looking back precisely to the Aristotelian *polis*, Rancière uses the word *police* to refer to the established social order within a process of governing where the political problem is drastically reduced to assigning individuals their place/position through the administration of the conflicts between different parties by a government funded on juridical and technical competences (Rancière, 1999): phenomena are de-politicised while being named and assigned to their *proper places* in the established order (Dikeç, 2012). Power, while circulating, partitions in space, organises in time, composes in space and time (Foucault, 1995) and ultimately homogenises forces and resistances encountered in a given scenario (Deleuze, 2013). Slums, marginal areas, low-income communities, barrios, etc. are part of the police order though being excluded from the possibility of becoming political subjects, their territories being deemed 'dangerous', 'unhealthy', 'unruly' in the rhetoric of the authorities. This legitimises and calls for (inclusive) interventions, often participatory ones, co-opted to merely replicate and strengthen the established order (Frediani & Boano, 2012). Design as well becomes part of the *police* order, or, using Foucault's (1980) words, one of the many statements forming the governmental *dispositif,* namely "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions" (Foucault, 1980:194) whose network constitutes the *dispositif* itself. A net-like organisation of powers (*ibid.*), an 'unstable diagram' (Deleuze, 2013) revealing its strategic nature and homogenising action.

Interestingly for us, Agamben traces back the notion of dispositif to what Foucault himself called *positivities*, referring to what is enforced, obligatory: a dispositif for Agamben is "literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings" (Agamben, 2009:14), which is able to exercise an action on their own *potentialities*. The action of the dispositif, therefore, separate human beings from their faculties, taking out from them the freedom to choose whether or not to do something – whether or not to belong, transposing the argument to Rancière's words, to the order of the *polis* (or *police*). Agamben (2011) explains how, although power is substantially a force that separates human beings from their *potentiality*, there is also, precisely, a more subtle form of power which acts on men's *impotentiality* – a second type of potentiality that Aristotle refers to as *existing potentiality*, a potential that already *belongs to someone*, that is already accessible. Agamben supports this concept through the example of the architect who is said to have the potential to build: "[the] architect is potential insofar as he has the potential to not-build" (1999:179). Existing potentiality contains therefore the power of negation, the freedom to resist; "potentiality is always also constitutively an impotentiality, […] the ability to do is also always

the ability to not do" (Agamben, 2011:43). Transposed to architecture, potentiality is a power that simultaneously delivers and withholds.

Disobedience and dissensus: reclaiming social significance

Reclaiming the social relevance of architecture, therefore, means to exercise a civil disobedience, to be negligent against the dispositif,[3] to disagree from the *police*. Politics proper is to question the *given* order of police that seems to be the 'natural' order of things, to question the whole and its partitioned spaces, and to verify the equality of any speaking being to any other speaking being (Rancière, 1999). Rancière, in search for this equality, advocates for what he calls the 'partition of the sensible' (*le partage du sensible*) – to describe the many procedures by which forms of experience – what can be thought, said, felt or perceived – are divided up and shared between legitimate and illegitimate persons and forms of activity. The partition of the sensible acts also as lynchpin to Rancière's interests in aesthetics when he states that "aesthetic is at the core of politics" (Rancière, 2004:13): he defines aesthetics as "a delimitation of spaces and time, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise" (*ibid.*). For him, artistic practices are forms of visibility that can serve as interruptions and rupture in the sensible realm, therefore, aesthetics is a work on politics. For Agamben as well the work of art is central to unlock new uses, new modes of politics, new worlds, new forms of life. In this context, architectural and urban design becomes the reconfiguration of a space "where parties, parts or lack of parts have been defined [...] making visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where there was once only place for noise" (Rancière, 1999:30). A new politics, will go together with the creation of new, shared sensible experiences, a new aesthetics that will also have to do with disobeying, with not-doing and so somehow non-operative dimensions of it.

The Community Architects Network: an 'inoperative' practice

What does it mean though to do architecture, to design, not-doing and dissenting? The example of the Community Architects Network is particularly relevant for our argument, and of such a shift toward a design able to contest situations of domination and create new

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[3] Agamben (2007, 2009) defines 'profanation' as a particular form of negligence against the dispositif, achievable through the act of *play*. Due to limitation of space here is not possible here to go thoroughly over the topic of profanation. The term refers to an act that can return a 'sacred' object to the free use of mankind, after being taken away and 'separated', from it. Applying the idea of profanation to the realm architecture, it would mean to return the practice itself to the everyday user of those spaces, and to discard the neoliberal 'fenced' logic, which lately has created 'alien' environments of the contemporary urbanisms and here is to be intended as a strategy of restoring things to the common use. Such reflection has been recently desribed and adopted in an architectural discourse by Boano and Talocci (2014), Petti, Hilal and Weizman (2014) and to the recent debate emerged around the "architecture of transgression" (Mosley and Sara, 2013; Dovey 2013).

political subjects. We believe there are at least four dimensions of disagreement / disobedience, around which CAN's work revolves, that can elucidate the inoperative potential of architecture.

1. *Putting the poor at the centre.* The process does not follow the rigid procedures of the several National Housing Authorities where CAN operates, but rather puts forward a way of producing space and knowledge that starts from the poor themselves, from their community saving groups[4] and their collective endeavors: demand-driven vs supply-driven. Urban poor groups and other grassroots organisations are fundamental components of the production of the whole city: they are the ones who keep it going, and this is crucial, since it also sparks off political responsibility and a sense of ownership over the process and the results it will produce. Design' will come from many actors, though mainly from the urban poor groups themselves, and it is reconfigured not simply as another statement (although maybe a 'participatory' one) in the overall functioning of an already existing *dispositif* of government, but, rather, as a deep rupture with the former order, a new way of breaking the sensible, of sharing the experience of transformation, of becoming political subjects.

[figure 1]

2. *Architecture as not doing.* Community Architects really well embody the Agambenian dictum 'they have the potential to build but they will rather not'.[5] This one is probably also a pedagogical form of disagreement, the one that gives to the leaders of a group of architects the role of making them refraining from immediate physical transformations, from solutions that are not attentive in capitalising the many *potentials* of a place – making them *dislearn* the professional belief in the superior knowledge of the 'expert' and humbly learning to appreciate local knowledge, which is not always easy or straight-forward.[6] Architecture is taught as a 'doing' discipline, and therefore asking the young professional not-to-do is not an easy task, as well as the one When coming to informality, design has to decipher the socio-spatial context we are working in, to survey human, economic, social capitals (potentialities) that are present in a given context and the power relations and micro-dispositifs in place. Design becomes a retrospective and descriptive act, one that produces knowledge about a context – beyond the rhetoric of the informal (or illegal) thas has to be regularized, upgraded, sanitized – and that makes this knowledge conveyable toward other people.

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[4] Community savings are often the most powerful mechanism to achieve a level of organization and mobilization within the community.

[5] Agamben cites the famous Melville's short story *Bartleby the Scrivener*, where the protagonist always responds "I would prefer not to" to the requests of performing a task.

[6] Today, CAN is linking 27 groups of young community architects in 19 countries and 33 universities in 10 countries – and thus has reached out to about 1000 students and young professionals.

[figure 2]

3. *The architecture of balance.* The critical reflection on design that the CAN programme is prompting also involves the role of the designer to find a productive balance of community negotiations, decision-making and actions. There are certain stages in the programme in which *consensus* is reached – as a practical benchmark to move forward – such as closing site negotiation for shared ownership or 'being ready' to start construction, based on a designed and agreed plan. In these moments, capabilities, support, and power are acquired through the strength of community members acting together. The more this includes all members, the more this could be seen as established solidarity to move forward, which is reflected when communities put mechanisms in place to support those struggling to meet the targets. The reality that communities are not homogeneous groups but within themselves necessarily defined by diversity, requires a continuous process of argumentation. Conceptualising consensus as always only temporary, based on joint visions in a particular moment of time, enables to frame conflict and move back into *dissensus* as something natural that society/groups of people need to learn to deal with and use productively, therewith opening up potentials to innovation.

[figure 3]

4. *A new Aesthetics.* According to Agamben new politics can be unlocked only through the work of art, similarly, Rancière speaks of new possibilities coming from aesthetics. A new aesthetics is put forward by the activity of CAN, one not belonging to the existing order, not an 'aesthetics of poverty', not a vernacular nor a nostalgic one. Rather, it is a pondered design grounded in the reality of the available resources, making good use of the actual potentials and using the new networks to spark off a very serious new mode of production. At the same time, it is grounded in the aspirations of the new political subjects, and the architect becomes a medium to make this appear, to decipher and portray them. *Architecture* as *dissensus* offers opportunities to manifest this emerging alternative development into society through artistic and design practice that appeals to our perception and alters our sense-making faculties, stimulating contestation over how we live and how our cities develop. If the art reflects an experience of life it can create a feeling of recognition, of finding a previously unexpressed feeling/experience finally expressed, manifested and therefore illuminate certain societal relations.

[figures 4, 5, 6]

A non conclusion: the inoperative power

The distinction between zoe and bios for Agamben (drawing from Aristotle) replicates the separation between oikos and polis in the Ancient Greece. In this way, the threshold between the apolitical and the political life was somehow the decision to take part into the civil war (Agamben, 2014), to declare to be political subjects taking part to the extreme exercise of politics rather than staying confined into the household's realm. Similarly, Ranciere's *politics* is constituted by dis-agreement/*dissensus*, by disruptions of the police order through the dispute over the common space of the *polis* and the common use of language. CAN's work, in a very peaceful sense, is about 'taking the households to the civil war', about contesting the current order of things, about creating a rupture.

What seems emerging as a fundamental debate around Agamben's research are the notion of *inoperativity* and *use* as main political register, especially true when dealing with makeshift/informality and scarce-resource-contexts. CAN's operations make use of available elements and configurations to construct new assemblages and possibilities, creating effective functionalities. Such possibilities are not part of a programme or a brief: rather, what happens exceeds the programme and contests the usual way of doing architecture, both of which were meant to contain, circumscribe, define or limit what was entitled to take place. Designing for potential is to maintain the potential in virtuality, to inscribe and embed potential in the fabric of places without explicitly manifesting it. Keeping potentiality in reserve keeps the design resilient and open for adaptations, transformation, translation and transference.

Design in CAN become an "inoperative operation" of architecture that consists in rendering inoperative, in deactivating its communicative and informative function, in order to open it to a new possible use, new possibilities. Acknowledging the complexity and the contradictions in each site of intervention community architects have to constantly negotiate meanings and positions, including where the 'expert' is located. In refusing a conventional, safer, expert-based, object-oriented, aesthetically pure design (architectural and urban) culture CAN affirm the power (latent, potential or explicit) of design to make substantial contribution to the messy vitality of everyday life in service of the promise of lives well lived, of just cities, of good places and equality. In working with CAN we suggest a reorientation of the design process between politics and aesthetics – which would not simply reorder and recalibrate power relations, but create new (political) subjects too and in where architecture take different forms: from the production of spaces that explicitly challenge dominant perspectives – engaging with issues at a level beyond the merely technical, aesthetical, physical – to the conscious act of, often, *not* intervening physically in the built environment, becoming as such truly emancipatory and socially relevant.

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