THE COMMONPLACE

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Topic: The Commons

THE MYTH OF NORMALITY.

EDITORS

The commonplace is the extra ordinary, the spectacularly unremarkable, the trite bordering on the banal — and it is precisely this lack of notoriety that makes it so insidiously rational, so perversely acceptable. It is everything dependable, but dull. And at the very moment that we happen upon the commonplace, we no longer perceive it anymore at all — the thing itself recedes into an impenetrable superstructure of ideological representation and semiotic reductionism.

Insofar as the commonplace object is tangible, it operates as simultaneously an object in the world, and an idea about the objects in the world. The bowler hat, the organic orange, the first class stamp — all are real things; but they are also propositions about how things in general might be categorised, conceptually analysed, socially synthesised, and unthinkingly employed in a wholly anthropomorphic model of reality.

At the scale of architecture even the "traditionalist" house becomes formally invisible, its apertures and enclosures functioning purely in the realm of systems and rituals: the spatial order of operations required to make a morning coffee; the colour-coordinated shuttling of waste receptacles back and forth from the street; the impossibility of correlating the emotional worth of the home to the fiscal inevitability of its mortgage repayments. Even the mock Tudor, Revivalist Gothic or Tuscan-esque villa is nothing more than a machine for living in, a fact belied by the standardised, *commonplace* nature of the house's amenities.

It is evident that the commonplace resides in a field of negotiation somewhere in between the world of things, and the world of ideas about things. It is the interstitial domain at the confluence of the real and the conceptual.

If the rise of augmented reality is a cause for societal concern, manifest in the manifold aesthetic nostalgias of an ageing population, it is perhaps because the collapse of our technological worldview into our material worldview exposes the fact that our material worldview was never real to begin with (there was never a distinction to be drawn). The contemporary obsession with nineteen-sixtifi fcation, exemplified by Instagram, is no more real or fake than the representational flattening of reality portrayed by the original cameras Instagram now seeks to reproduce: for the commonplace, the abstract and concrete are one, united by their ideological interdependence.

Freud might have categorised the commonplace as a form of negation, the process by which psychological traits emerge as opposites (for example the appearance of self-doubt as arrogance, or existential angst as religious infallibility). The most powerful driver of negation is fear, and its most crucial instrument is normality.

As scientific instruments like the Large Hadron Collider reveal more about the structure of our universe, our unwillingness to face the cosmological conclusions of such experiments becomes increasingly obvious. Our very real fear that all of human existence may be utterly inconsequential surfaces as its opposite, the philosophical primacy of phenomenological ontology and the normality of the hypersubjectivity integral to our curated, homogenous social networks. And while we might feel an increasing sense of social inequality — and an acute awareness that the ability of international finance to bypass both democracy and national sovereignty is immoral and unjust — our outrage is only able to surface as a form of suppliant hope that growth might return to the system, and our penance of austerity be lifted. The endemic anxiety about the impossibility of contemporary social solidarity (in part brought about by the radical transformation of how information is disseminated) surfaces in the progressive fragmentation of the urban fabric: the rise of gated communities, private streets, corporately controlled public spaces (like the London Stock Exchange), the erotically violent business parks of J.G Ballard's *Super-Cannes* or the all-consuming corporate campuses of Facebook and Google — the clean-cut future promised by *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and largely realised by Apple, can only be sustained at the expense of global degeneration into the kipple, dross and dust of *Blade Runner*.

What, then, is the commonplace? It is the normal and the normalised. It is an impossible, absurd and dangerous condition. Accordingly, the four issues of this special publication are dedicated to the myth of normality, in all its guises.

Jack Self edits Fulcrum, the AA's free weekly. Reverse image: *Piazza San Marco in the Mirror (exhausting the commons)* by Graham Baldwin.

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THE TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS.

DANIEL AYAT.

Ecology has for too long depended on a false opposition between agriculture and the city. Since early 19th century England, the cultural trope of the commons has sought to demonstrate how common land outgrows its carrying capacities due to overgrazing by rightsholders with individual interests. Steeped in Western cultural assumptions of the value of the country, the argument upholds a Malthusian belief that posited the necessity of a balanced territorial relationship between a city and a geographically adjacent productive hinterland.

The advent of steam, rail, and large-scale coal distribution exploded the notion of a geographically-bound city. Since Britain repealed the Corn Laws in 1846, cities and nations have become increasingly independent of the notion of a hinterland as necessary to their nutritional and economic requirements. This was strengthened by the "Green Revolution" of the mid-twentieth century. Driven by USAID, this period saw food production expand and entwine globally. Yet precisely as this agricultural revolution swept across the globe, a backlash against such practices arose. Relevantly, the environmentalists continued to frame their arguments within socio-cultural constructions of landscape. Based in pre-19th century realities (even then out of date) the commons were taken up as a *cause célèbre* of the environmental school of thought. And though more symbolic than practical, the dichotomously framed commons has served to misrepresent the fundamentally technological deterritorialisation of production from the landscape.

These biases of sustainable practice have stymied recent architectural history at an impasse between an outdated and usually saccharine "green" utopian communitarianism, bent on preserving sacred woods, and blatantly irresponsible developments that espouse a technological denaturalisation. At best, ecological architecture accretes *a posteriori* greenwashing, in an attempt to balance resources a territory needs and uses.

Laudable in their origins, "green" practices have been left out of the political-economic systems responsible for deterritorialising the processes of urbanisation. Conversely, architecture has relied too heavily on inhabiting the territorial organisations that resulted from these technologies of urbanisation, rather than fully adapting itself as one of them.

Even in the classical example, grazing was a technological mechanism responsible for shaping the territorial and political organisation of the commons.

Likewise, the conurbation's post-geographical evolution was a result of post-Colonial, Cold War organisations of the agrarian, infrastructural, and communication technologies of the First Machine Age. In each case, the landscape was transformed by the architect's direct involvement.

Restructuring architecture as the negotiation of these territorialising technologies would allow for a radically ecological mindframe to be adopted into architectural practice, by redefining its operational field. The concept of territory would need to shift away from the material landscape, as consequential to socio-cultural ethos, into a far more open discourse between the convergent scales and temporalities of the historical, political and fiscal variables that constitute the processes of urbanisation.

Reframing architecture as the technology of territory would represent a shift away from the creation of a balanced spatial entity and towards a process of negotiating the existing and imposed elements of the environment. Akin to Gregotti's *anthropogeographic* approach, the concept of territory becomes recognised as a separate and radically ecological discipline from that of the "natural" landscape.

Gregotti's approach to territory stands out in its refusal to rely solely on the values of a theoretical nature. It recognises the multiplicity of environmental variables that enter into the field of urbanisation, and demonstrates a far more useful definition of ecology as a reactionary practice to biologically incorporate the cultural values of nature and landscape into urbanisation.

Architecture's privileged field is located at the cross-section of technology and territory. To become fundamentally politically active, it must go further and embrace its necessary function as the technology of territory. This would not only transcend the impasse the discipline now faces, but transform the role of architecture as a driving *political* force of territory, in its abilities to organise the functional commonalities of its human and non-human actants. In contrast to the conventional view, the conceptual ontology of territory is transformed, revealed in its flexibility, multivocality and political activity as functioning too as a technology, inasmuch as it performatively shapes the processes of urbanisation.

Architecture is altered from a delusional practice of the pseudo-demiurge into an open process of negotiating the territorial ensembles of the environment. Thus no longer dependent on the ecological tragicomedy, but reanimated as something like a territorial and political creative commons.

Daniel Ayat is an American-Lebanese writer based in London. He is reading the History of Science, Technology and Medicine at Oxford.

THE CORPORATE COMMONS.

ANTONY GORMLEY

I am interested in the idea of a contemporary agora, where people can speak about their own experience to each other and not feel beholden to the controllers of that space. The notion of the agora has collapsed, through the privatisation of collective space. This is a by-product of late-capitalism and modernity. The profligate increase of street signs, traffic control and ubiquitous advertising has compromised our feeling about built space. In the dominance of these forces on the street few people talk to each other, let alone share experience.

Jack Self: *It's not only administrative, in the sense of signage, but it also seems behavioural and moral. In works like 'One and Other' you've attempted to democratise art and also occupy a public place...*

AG: My most recent safari into this area is *Horizon Field* in Hamburg, a raised platform where 100 people at a time can be in the middle of a city, but also somehow removed from it. It's a 72 ton 1200m² platform, with 5 tons of polyurethane lacquer that makes a black mirror, on which the participants, along with the environment, are perfectly reflected. The field is suspended on eight cables, and has an oscillation of 0.18 Hz. It can swing in any direction, and anybody can initiate the movement. It is a physical mediator between self and other, or individual and group. The idea is that this is a non-verbal communication of personal experience. This happens simply by the way in which one person's movement affects the collective and vise-versa. For me the platform also performs the function of being a collective monument, just like *One and Other* (the 4th Plinth project for Trafalgar Square). It is a look-out; we removed all the obscured glass from the level of the platform so that from its raised vantage-point people can look back at the world they have just left. In so doing they themselves become representations for viewers on the ground. Horizon Field Hamburg asks what a human community might be today. You could say there's a dystopian subtext which proposes that the only way we can have a community is by abstracting a 100 people from a web of obligation by allowing them to be in the world, but also not of it.

JS: *Heidegger describes "the clearing" as a location for the possibility of awareness of being; the duality in this function is interesting, primarily it's not about the ontology of the world, it's about the relationship of beings...*

AG: I think it's about the fact that all architecture is a proposition and indeed a representation. The built world is, in Heideggerian terms, something that has been made out of the earth, and has within it basic propositions to make about a human need for order, shelter, affection, etc. But Horizon Field employs the language of the uncanny, the *unheimlich*, the threshold of terror (in a Burkian sense). You know there are no barriers, you know you can fall, this is unstable, it is disorientating. The surface feels like water but in fact its solid, it feels like being outside, but in fact it's inside, it asks you not to attend to an object, but to an experience. It invites you to auto-observe your own experience and to read that of others as the context of your own. That issue of a moral order is implicitly raised by Horizon Field Hamburg because it produces a self regulating field of experience... I've tried to talk about this in public with David [Chipperfiled]. It's very difficult for architects. I can decide to do something, there is no client in mind at all, and I make it from the dictates of my heart or mind, however perverse that may be. I pay for that with a certain isolation. I'm interested in asking; who is art for, how can it be made, can it be made into a common good, can it be liberated from its status as a commodity, can it be commonly owned and commonly experienced, can it be indeed more of a place than a thing, a place of wonder, of extension, of inquiry, of sharing? But reflexivity built into the nature of architectural experience is perhaps more difficult. Art has become an important and fertile ground for ideological critique, the making of resistances to the dominance of a consumer society that wants to make us all into dumb recipients of spectacle or stuff.

Architects are bound by the opportunities which are in the hands of their clients, and therefore they are victims of an economic system of patronage that obliges them to be more accommodating than the artist.

JS: *Yet, you feel that there's a potential for subversion?*

AG: Well yes, and I think there are a lot of architects of your age, who see the loss of social critique in the work of starchitects. This whole issue of re-establishing the rights of the citizen to shared space is critical. In your generation of architects there is a strong movement to link architecture with social activism that is really refreshing. We are relying on you to make the architecture of housing, schools, open spaces and public buildings the engines of effective citizenship and give people back their agency!

Antony Gormley is a British sculptor whose work explores the relation of the human body to space at large. He is an Honorary Fellow of RIBA.