

On some dusty corners

The work of Est-ce ainsi since 2006 - ENSAPLV - 14/01/2010

« Two or three things I know about her » is a movie made by Jean Luc Godard in 1967. In this movie, the “her” in question is both a woman, who occasionally prostitutes herself to survive, but also the Parisian area, which Godard describes in its transformations, the vanishing of its popular culture, the establishment of mass consumption as well as the Americanisation of life... It is a portrait of the modern way of life.

For my little firm called “Est-ce ainsi”, “her” would be the populations neglected by architects. But “her” would also be what we call “architecture”.

For the Americans who might not know this reference, “est-ce ainsi” is the beginning of a very famous question taken from one of Aragon’s poems: “est-ce ainsi que les hommes vivent” which could be translate as “is this how humans live?”

In this movie, Godard shows us numerous examples of words taken from our environment. Words to do with clothes, objects, architecture... These words are a sort of witness to the transformations of our western societies. One of the dialogues between “her” and her son goes as follows:

THE KID: Mother, what is language?

HER: Language is the house in which man lives.

We will be looking at the evolutions of the words used in architecture to run through eight projects of Est-ce ainsi.

1/

Godard once said about Cinema that it was probably the last means of public transport. (transport en commun). Isn’t architecture a public transport? For instance the house of Mr and Mrs Nauze, in Normandy is surrounded by architectures that I would tend to consider as means of transport: A church, whose nave is a direct reference to boats, has been transporting millions of people. A factory, which if it is the place where voyage is forbidden, has still been the place of a powerful union journey.

While building in the vicinity of these two mastodons of humans gathering, it is difficult not to have in mind the absence of those grand narratives that Lyotard described as our post-modern condition.

It seems that architecture has really been marked by the large buildings that were addressed to the people. Places of power, places of worship, places of justice... and the city resembles a museum of abandoned boats.

In France, the words through which the city is administered are most of the times acronyms: ZAC, ZAD, ZEAT, ZIF, ZPIU, ZRIP, ZRR, ZRU, ZUS, ZPPAUP

If these labels weren’t referring to very abstract and dry processes we could misinterpret them as a Dadaist poem:

(sing) ZAC, ZAD, ZEAT, ZIF, ZPIU, ZRIP, ZRR, ZRU, ZUS, ZPPAUP

These terms contain an urban regulation called the “visibility field” which sets regulations how one is supposed to build in the vicinity of a building of historical interest. Within 500 meters around such buildings, particular kinds of materials, precise roof slopes etc. are prescribed.

The project for Mr and Mrs Nauze proposes an alternative relationship to history. The idea would be not to consider architectures as dead shells, or the city as an architectural cemetery as the futurist Marinetti could have said. Instead of looking at the shapes of buildings, we would consider the reasons why such buildings were built. The anthropological urge that

pushed beings to dedicate such energy and means to stack all those stones on top of each other. The church and the factory are means of transport left in dry dock. This project is the sad reflection of the flourishing individual means of transport. It is a 10 x 3 meter long individual nave covered with the slate of the church whose roof replicates the pattern of the factory sheds. A solitary little pet walking in the shadow of the huge dinosaurs that preceded it.

2/

*For architecture to be a form of public transport, people would need to simply be more in contact with “her”. They should be able to hop on. But strangely it seems that all through history, architecture hasn’t given paid much attention to the people. The history of architecture is mainly one of power. Autocratic power, monarchical power, ecclesiastic power, fascist power, bourgeois power, and lately corporate power. Get rid of the powerful and the history of architecture could probably be contained in a couple of pages. Or, when Architecture has been of service to the populations, “she” has always treated them as masses. A gesture of power towards its flocks, which perpetuates the seclusion. HBM, HLM, DAL, OPAH, PDALPD, SRU, ZUP
Wouldn’t it be possible to imagine that architects could be of service to everyone? Let’s get things straight: either architecture is something important for mankind as medicine, justice, the right to vote are, in which case “she” must then be accessible to anyone. Or architecture is a privilege for those who can afford it.*

*“Est-ce ainsi” is an architecture office that was conceived as an architectural project. Its administrative and economic structure were designed to make the fee of an architect affordable to anyone. As you can imagine, this is still a work in progress but I believe that it is through the re-appropriation of some particular words that were banned of architectural thinking that we could make architecture more accessible:
Turnover, budget, timeframe, client, fee, contractor are in architecture, forgotten words. Banned from the teaching of architecture, they are dirty words in all schools. But how can we imagine getting out of the destructive economic systems that rule our contemporary world if those words are left in the hands of money makers? if they are abandoned by those would could reinvent them into more poetic practices?
But no! Turnover is a turnover, it can’t be poetic, it is forbidden! It is by reinventing those words that we will reopen some horizons.*

“Est-ce ainsi” has set its maximum turnover to 27 000 euros per year. No growth. In France, as long as you do not exceed this amount, the architect’s fee is exonerated from taxes that can range from 5,5 to 19,6 percent of the cost of the construction. This is an economy for the fragile clients. Limiting one’s turnover allows the firm to remain a very light structure that does not require a lot of money to sustain itself and allows one to work on more risky projects. Since the firm does not need to be kept afloat with a lot of income, the architect does not have to run after new clients that will allow its structure to exist throughout time. It frees more time for thinking about the projects.

Turnover, budget, timeframe, client, fee, contractor... if these words are confiscated by the world of finance, architects will be accomplices of this destructive financial system. The realm of finance will continue to make profit, and architects will keep on working for the ones that hold the profit.

There are several other tricks played by “Est-ce ainsi” to try to be affordable and to build cheaply. For instance, there is an almost constant use of a material called MFP, it is a sustainable wood particle board, that is extremely cheap (3 euros per square meter).

I do not have the time here to go into more details about this attitude. But “Est-ce ainsi” with the industrial designer Studio Lo and the architect BUROZERO have created a group called superminimum. We all share the same interest in the accessibility of architecture and industrial design as well as a strong anxiety with regard to economic logic and its destructive capacity. These attitudes and ideas were exhibited last year. And a book with a lot of contributions from thinkers of various disciplines will be reprinted shortly.

3/

How did it happen that architecture has ever had so little contact with the non-powerful? Well, again it is relevant to look at words here. If language is the house in which man dwells, this house has changed a lot since it is the architect that takes care of the production of architecture.

Before the rise of the figure of the architect of the Renaissance, the vocabulary of construction was colourful. It was metaphorical, somewhat Rabelaisian. Construction parts were named after what the builders had under their noses, stupidly, poetically: beard, one-eyed, mouth, arm, bold, hairy, ankle, heart, consciousness, rib, elbow, lap, tooth, knee, throat, hip, leg, tear, cheek, jaws, nipple... are all architecture terms (at least in French...) But when the architect arrives those terms become Listel, Astragale, Cornice, Pilaster, Scotie, Modillon... The spontaneous, the accidental, the metaphorical vanish in front of the scholar and the abstract.

Architecture chose to be on the side of eternity. The birth of the renaissance architect is a takeover, a seizure of power. The will to bring architecture into the circle of the liberal arts, the noble arts, happens through the imposition of drawing techniques, mathematics, geometry but also through a vocabulary unknown by the builders of the Middle Ages. This referenced and scholarly vocabulary has been a tool to expel some populations from the linguistic house they were living in. Words do determine architectures. If one thinks of architecture as an abstract enterprise that resonates with the cosmic order of the universe, it adds a lot of weight to architecture. The poverty of means often enables play.

Building for Caroline Lemoine allowed for some play with spontaneity and lightness. She only had 20 000 euros and three months to turn her house into something she could inhabit with her husband and child. Eternity was dropped for carnival. Once all the partition walls papered by the grandma had been destroyed, (which was not unpleasant) a skin of particle board was thrown on all the floors, walls and ceilings. This allowed us to avoid the cost of wall coating. The new electrical network spread in a maze all around the house between the boards and the existing walls. The radiators and their pipes were left floating in the air since we did not have any money to spend on this. Rooms were thrown on the ground like dice, leading to the creation of a two square meter boudoir... That was risky... But nothing was really serious or heavy since the project was potentially a temporary one. Waiting for the moment when she would have a little more money. In fact, she does not want anything to change now.

4/

Architecture has chosen to drop the lightheartedness of metaphorical language for conceptual constructions. Architecture is ordered by concepts: beauty, solidity, utility – functionalism, commodity, symmetry, taste, character, convenience, proportions and, nonetheless, order. But in the heads of human beings there are not only ordered words. Some words only label phenomena that are difficult to limit: desire, dance, drive, urge, distress, hubris. While building for a psychoanalyst, it was difficult to not think about words. To the functions they serve within our heads. Also because this apartment was up high. The head of the building.

Because the sky is just on top of our heads there. Because this apartment has seven holes, like a head.

Entering the corridor, one discovers three little rooms which will have to be reunited. Each room is a secluded world with an eye out. The fissured white walls and the black and white grid of the linoleum echoes the ambiance of a sanatorium, or a confinement cell, some kind of mental space. We are in the head of the building.

Psychoanalysis knows it. If language is the house where the human dwells, the head is a space in which we try to put some order. Psychoanalysis, psychiatry, psychology, psychopathology, psycholinguistics all try to make room for Cartesianism, Liberalism, idealism, Marxism, spiritualism, utilitarianism, hedonism... each one of these schools of thought has its philosophy of what a subject is. Each one of them puts our head in some order, each one has its architecture.

It is difficult to say if it is while ordering his mind that man orders architecture, or if it is by ordering architecture that man orders his mind.

The project for Mrs. Brun, is an attempt at a cubist portrait of our western minds interior. It is still a work in progress but several systems cross each other. As phrenology used to do, this project classifies functions into operable boxes. The bed disappears under the floor, the desk folds back, the seats pop out of the ground, the cabinets slide off the walls and ceiling.

Objects are always exterior to us whereas words seem to fully exist within our heads. This project would be successful if we felt like evolving in a world in which objects would not be things labelled by words, but words charged, stacked with objects. This is why any single architectural component is here chosen for its name more than its function. A mirror is above all a Psyché (French name for a mirror). Cartesio's stove provides the heat, the mythology of the Dogon provides the model for locks, Rosrach's figures provide the pattern for the tiling's motif. A padded cell floats under the roof...

5/

When we, westerners, look at non-western cultures, their dances, rituals and mythologies, we produce a very rich variety of literature on the subject. We decompose their habits into meaningful systems. We interpret their masks as a transposition of daunting emotions, their ceremonies as symbolic constructions through which the world is able to make some kind of sense to them.

To have a sense of the vocabulary and syntax used when we talk about the foreign, here is what Marcel Mauss wrote about the Chinook tribe and their practice of the potlatch:

“Yet, what is noteworthy about these tribes is the principle of rivalry and hostility that prevails in all these practices. They go as far as the purely sumptuary destruction of wealth that has been accumulated in order to outdo the rival chief as well as his associate. It is indeed the whole clan that contracts on behalf of all, for all that it possesses and for all that it does, through the person of its chief. But this takes on an extremely marked agonistic character. It is essentially usurious and sumptuary. It is a struggle between nobles to establish a hierarchy amongst themselves from which their clan will benefit at a later date.”

Well, if believe that if we were to look at what we call architecture in our societies as if it were some foreign culture's mode of expression, it would appear to us as a very strange ritual.

An anthropologist could have written the following words:

(QUOTE): “In western societies, there are two ways to construct buildings. One is called building, and the other one is called Architecture. Architecture seems to be given more credit than mere building. Thousands of books of theories about what architecture ought to be were written throughout history. We have to admit that some of their motivations remain to be

understood: for instance, in the 15th century, architecture's main problem was to determine the ratio between the height and the width of a portion of a column.

For the past 5 centuries, architecture is in the western world mainly produced under the supervision of an architect. According to Vitruvius, who wrote the first theory book about architecture, the architect seems to embody a kind of shaman. he says (QUOTE): "Let the architect be educated, skilful with the pencil, instructed in geometry, know much history, have followed the philosophers with attention, understand music, have some knowledge of medicine, know the opinions of jurists, and be acquainted with astronomy and the theory of heavens." (END QUOTE)

One could argue that Georges Bataille has succeeded to look at architecture, "her", as if she was a beautiful stranger. His literature can be considered as an attempt to understand the anthropological function of architecture in our societies. The question seems worth asking. Why are we so scrupulous in separating what is architecture from what building is when they both consist in providing shelter? Why this neurotic attention to detail from part of the architect? Why the elaborate theories and this never-ending literature on the matter? Is it not that architecture addresses some mythical function in our minds beyond the simple purpose of providing shelter? Bataille says:

"Architecture is the expression of the very soul of societies, just as the human physiognomy is the expression of the individual's soul. It is, however, particularly to the physiognomies of official personages (prelate, magistrates, admirals) that this comparison pertains. In fact it is only the ideal soul of society, that which has the authority to command and prohibit, that is expressed in architectural compositions properly speaking. Thus, the great monuments are erected like dikes, opposing the logic and majesty of authority against all disturbing elements".

As Denis Hollier explains it, for Bataille, architecture is the keeper of the meaning of the world. It is through architecture that the world acquires a signification because it rebuilds it according to order. Architecture is an image of the world in which everything is systemic, logical and necessary. This is where this sick attention to detail, proportion and control of the architects come from.

A couple of disturbing elements of architecture exist in the territory of M. and Mrs Silly. Two artists who created their own architecture without architects, using found objects and thinking

that it their constructions would hold long enough. No symmetry but games.

Building on this territory was difficult. Being myself an heir of architectural systematicity, it seemed hard to compete with the freedom that the clients had displayed in the construction of their architectures. The project became then a game: playing the architect. Trying to embody the systematicities and permanencies of architectural thinking. Purity, symmetry in plan as well as in section, the grid, the system, the columns... There is now on their iconoclastic territory a little temple dedicated to the mythologies that work within architectural thinking.

6/

The power of orders allows to magnify the built environment. But it seems that its main goal is to weave unbreakable links between intellectual constructions and the understanding of reality. This is why the vocabulary of architecture is constantly referred to when one tries to give an explanation of the cosmos: the universe is a celestial vault, god is the great architect, each theory has foundations and a keystone.

One very persistent myth, a durable word that goes along with architectural thinking is rationalism. Woooo. Technicality, efficiency, scientific accuracy... Woوو.

Lets take the example of the Frankfurter kitchen. This aim of this kitchen, which was installed

in more than 10 000 housing units in the 20's, was to simplify kitchen tasks. Movements were studied in diagrams, each drawer had a name, a tag of which utensil was to be put in which very specific spot. The kitchen typology was born and its massive production could be launched.

This kitchen was very much criticized for its lack of flexibility but also for the fact that it was an antisocial space. It was designed for one single user, a woman, who was then secluded from the rest of the domestic life. However, our kitchens are still very much influenced by this model. All contemporary kitchens, including architects' ones, are slick. Every function stacked is back to the wall with military precision. It is as if functionality had only one mode of existence: lining up functions against the wall.

The Kitchen for Mr and Mrs L is an attempt to escape this determinism. It proposes a "gay functionalism". This kitchen is only a bunch of boxes whose dimensions were taken from the household appliances of the client. It is a game of "cheap pedestals" thrown on the floor and adjusted to the inhabitants' arm length.

Beyond the fact that this kitchen was very cheap to produce, (the wood is pre-cut by the wood seller and not the cabinet maker, very simple assemblies, no problems of adjusting to the walls that are always uneven) it allows for shortcuts, and a hide and seek game for their child.

This loosened spatiality is inspired and nourished by the spatiality of the suburbs that are perpetually and unfairly beat up by the lovers of old stones and medieval cities. The use of a single material gives to the ensemble a sculptural dimension to these manufactured objects who dream of entering a museum. And most of all, it is less the body that has to adjust to the architecture than the architecture that has to adapt to the human body.

7/

These considerations were also addressed in a second kitchen and bath project I had to do. Total budget of 15 000 euros. In this one I tried to reverse the process. Instead of starting with the functions, the « serious » need to address these two technical spaces (kitchen and bathroom are considered technical spaces). The idea was to attempt to start with a non functional statement. Can we do a technical space based on a comment on society or do we have to start of thinking that these spaces need to be thought as if humans were laboratory mice? One guiding reference was Clemente Susini's wax anatomic Venuses. This XVIIIth century sculptor created what is called scientific unmountable Venuses which as Georges Didi Huberman explains it "allowed the researcher or the medicine student to methodically, calmly overcome the limits of its flesh, to open it until the heart, and reach the secret of its matrix". If the anatomic function of these medical models is totally met, this "scientific" object isn't deprived from the drama of opening a women's body. In total opposition with the anonymity of the flayed alive corpses of our natural sciences classrooms, these wax anatomies are charged with a daunting sensuality. The suspended expression of the subject, the suave materiality, the attention to the pubic hair, the flourishing and disordered hair forbids us to only see a physiological mechanic. It is the opening of love's goddess more than a dissected anatomy. Could we see here the possibility for a carnal functionalism? Despite accomplishing the function of medical research, Susini expresses the tragic relationship between beauty and its organs, he confronts the viewer with the consubstantiality of beauty and plumbing.

If it is appalling to open beauty and discover the formlessness of internal organs, it is also disturbing to think about how ingesting and digesting are the engine of humans skins, however soft they might be. The quite obsessional desire of cleanliness westerners have towards their body cannot be applied to the organs packed in our interiors... This confrontation of a kitchen and a bathroom were very much relevant in this issue. Two

symmetrical spaces, separated by a partition wall that splits a window in two. The bathroom was in fact recently added to the appartement. This Haussmanian building, filled with order, did not have a bathroom. The kitchen had to be split in two in order to accommodate the bathroom. This thin partition separates spaces that are in cultural opposition : space of perfume, nakedness, care and intimacy on the left side. Boiling, cutting, frying on the right. Hygiene separates these two spaces, but also does eroticism. The skin is soft, clear, desirable whereas its interior is cavernous, exuding, unknown. On this opposition, two architectures are built : a milky, soft and smooth one and another disturbed by organicity. This « metaphorical » point of departure led to economical, structural and functional discoveries. The bath is a discontinuous skin of tile in which even the toilet flush does not shut itself into a dark box but becomes an open air pound in which one can pour used water. The kitchen, tinted of blood and bones is an accumulation of operable organs. The sinks vanish under cutting and drying plates of massive wood. The electrical veins reappear to save on plaster, coating... their path becomes handrails, suspending bars for objects... Below the sink, an insulation thickened drawer is hooked up on the abandoned haussmanian façade fridge. The exterior steps into the apartment to provide a « natural » fridge.. a pile of little inventions that would not have been found along the path of a purely rational process.

8/

To the pure logic of architecture, Bataille opposes the one word: formless. Monstruosity, orgasm, transgression are all notions that cannot be contained in words or dissected scientifically.

The attack that Bataille perpetrates on the word architecture does not necessarily aim at architects or architectural production. Or not only. Instead he is addressing his criticism to the necessity for westerners to be able to find a meaning in any single corner of reality. Towards their incapacity to accept the idea that the world could be accidental instead of the result of a well-laid plan. This architecture he describes is a pervasive concept that is not confined to the production of buildings. It exists everywhere, in painting, language, (this is why his main enemy is the dictionary, which kills words) or costume.

Costume holds a particularly interesting place in Bataille's writings. Costume transforms the impure body, the one that does not fit within the Alberti's circle, into a very controlled and mastered shape. The juxtaposition of two images in the journal Documents that he edited in 1929 is very clear on the matter. On one side we see a western family, all dressed up, and on the other we see a Nandi tribe from Tanganyika in celebration costumes. We are now confronted with two rituals. The first one is the consequence of Westerner's inability to deal with formlessness and love of rigor. The second one displays the familiarity of non-Westerners to play with such issues. In his definition of the formless he explains:

“Whatever formless designates lacks entitlement in every sense and is crushed on the spot, like a spider or an earthworm. For academics to be content, the universe would have to assume a form. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of fitting what is there into a formal coat, a mathematical overcoat.”

Formless, is totally part of Bataille's criticism of architecture, of the anthropological job that it accomplishes in western minds. There is an explicit reference to costume in this definition. Part of the work done by Est-ce ainsi happens in architecture school. This articulation between praxis and school is extremely important. Studio is a place where the problems encountered in practice are discussed and problematized with students. For instance, last year's studio was dedicated to architectural costumes and Bataille's idea of the “formal coat”.

Trying to deal with the words turnover, budget, timeframe, client, honorary, contractor that we encountered earlier, students were asked, out of a 40 euro budget, to design and build

with their own hands an wearable architecture that would shout out the refusal of each student towards some contemporary issue. The first costume we see here was designed by Alison Chase. It was a criticism of modern slavery and sweat shops. She burdened herself with a complex volume of sewing patterns that were expressing both the sharp violence and the imprisonment of the body of this modern phenomenon.

The second costume was designed by Bethany Mare. It was an attempt to propose a sustainable dress/tent. The collar would collect rain water and allow seeds to grow, and the structure of the dress provides shelter.

The third and last costume that I'll show here was designed by Moira Schneider to reflect the heedlessness which mankind has been plowing through the earth with no regard to whom or what they smash along the way. Half tent and half cage, it traps the body and is a costume of the inflated ego of the individualist mindset.

Well, clients, fee, eternity, order, formless... the vocabulary seems understated when we talk about architecture. Words seem to be dusty corners which nobody cares much about whereas it seems that they have strong consequences on architecture and especially on the possibility for architecture to escape being a privilege. That is what "Est-ce ainsi" is trying to do.