

Regarding the architecture of the state

Intro

This short talk rises out of one question which is if the state as entity is a problem, what can be done about it, how can we expand out of it, reform it, think of it otherwise, beyond it?

So let's be honest a minute here, what I will try to do now cannot and will not work. It's been more than ten years that I've been lost in Bataille's definition of architecture so there is no way I will be pulling it off today but I'll just share some thoughts that came along the way. Hopefully this can participate to the discussion. At the worst you can just discard this as one the wanderings of a lost western soul...

Also, second disclaimer, I do not have any knowledge about the Arab world and what I will be talking about is about the reality that I know, let's say France and a good part of the west. I hope I will not offend anybody because I really have not found my marks here yet. I just hope that being in a rather different environment, what I am struggling about could benefit from and to other non-western prospectives. The idea I would like to explore would be to consider through Georges Bataille the hypothesis that architecture and the state are the exact same thing. Not that they work together, or that they can't live without one another but to speculatively consider a moment that no distinction between those two terms could occur: that they occupy the exact same anthropological function on this planet.

Bataille

In 1929, in a journal called Documents, *Documents*, the philosopher Georges Bataille wrote a too page article entitled "architecture". This article acts as a definition of architecture. But this definition is rather different from the definitions of architecture that I personally have encountered where architecture is mostly defined as "the art of building". The specificity of Bataille's definition is that it attempts to describe what is the role of architecture in the realm of human activities, what is the anthropological function of architecture? Amongst medicine, justice, cooking, I don't know sports... it somehow tries to address how is it that mankind ever came up with the idea of architecture? Why does this even exist? Reminding us somehow that we never needed architecture nor architects in order to have buildings.

Bataille starts:

Architecture is the expression of the very soul of societies, just as 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 great monuments are erected like dikes, opposing the logic and majesty of authority against all disturbing elements: it is in the form of cathedral or palace that Church or State speaks to the multitudes and imposes silence upon them. It is in fact, obvious that monuments inspire social prudence and often even real fear. The taking of the Bastille is symbolic of this state of things: it is hard to explain this crowd movement other than by the animosity of the people against the monuments that are their real masters.

In this first passage we can see already a sort of co- substance of architecture and the state in which architecture is a tool by which the state can be left somewhat unchallenged. But his definition takes a deeper anthropological turn in the following sentences:

“Moreover, each time that *architectural composition* turns up somewhere other than in monuments, whether it is in physiognomy, costume, music, or painting, one may infer a prevailing taste for divine or human *authority*. The great compositions of certain painters express the desire to force the spirit into an official ideal. The disappearance of academic construction in painting is, on the contrary, the opening of the gates to expression (...) of psychological processes that are the most incompatible with social stability.”

In this passage he starts to claim that architecture not only helps to maintain the state but it is also the imposition of a stabilized social order not only through buildings but also throughout the production of society's manufactured object.

In other words the order that imposes admiration and fear which exists in the buildings of the state is also extended in costume, music, painting... The social regulation and construction of mindsets at work in buildings runs throughout all objects a state generates, costumes, decorations, military music, police uniform...

Finally, in the this third and final part, he unveils what is for him the deep anthropological task of the concept of architecture, why such a term was invented : It is obvious, moreover, that mathematical organization imposed on stone is none other than the completion of an evolution of earthly forms, whose meaning is given, in the biological order, by the passage of the simian to the human form, (...) In morphological progress men apparently represent only an intermediate stage between monkeys and great edifices. Architecture now appears as a regulating device, the concept of architecture was for Bataille invented to put order to reality, it's goal is to transform monkeys into

buildings, monkeys being understood here as monstrous and stupid, and buildings being understood as pure and perfect objects. I know it is a lot to take on in five minutes but for Bataille, if architecture exists it is to defend and implement the ideology of the ordering of reality.

As Denis Hollier states about Bataille's "architecture", this is why anytime we see order in reality we describe it by defaulting to architectural vocabulary: god is the great architect, the cosmos is a celestial vault, every system of thinking has foundations etc... Architecture, amongst all other human practices, is the practice through which mankind attempts to apply order to reality. The antropological function of architecture isn't to produce buildings but to construct a narrative in which the world makes sense, has meaning and is well ordered accordingly I would resume it as : architecture is for mankind to have a plan...

History of architecture

So... why am I saying this? This is clearly not in defense of architecture nor architects which, and I include myself in it, are most probably an antropological disease in western thinking, but because in this understanding of architecture, the ties between what architecture does and what the state does appear to be very intimate. We are not far from instance of the function of the state as Foucault described it : the construction of confinement societies, the internalisation of power through biopolitics, the straightening of bodies... all those methods or apparatuses resonate very much with what Bataille calls Architecture.

How else should we or could we call the sum of all these states devices if we were to give them the name of a discipline of its own? Statism? I believe Bataille proposes to call this "architecture".

Going a little further in the reading of what is commonly called the "history of architecture", where architecture and the state are understood as two separate things we still see numerous examples of strange deep acquaintances between them two. For instance, the **birth of the French state** is contemporary to the birth of the French architectural style, what was later called the *architecture à la française*. This is not only because there needs to be a french state so that we can have a french architecture, but because the French state needs architecture to manifest itself and differentiate itself from other forms of state. It needs architecture to actually exist. In 1664, as the French modern state rises up and comes the project of the extension of the Louvres, a kind of competition is launched, Bernini, the popes' architect is invited with much praise and admiration to come to Paris and things turn bad. Calling a foreigner for such an important commission appears in contradiction with Colbert's general policies, A debate about the quality of

French and Italian masons explode and two walls are built to see which one is the best laid. The Italian one does not resist the first ice and the French architects are ecstatic. Criticism is made on Bernini's lack of understanding of French habits, French climate, the tectonic capacities of French stones and his project ends up not being realized. It will be a French doctor, Claude Perrault who will design the Louvres and build it. And in all this period there is the urge to define a French architecture. It will lead to the competition for the design of a French order, inscribing France in the great civilisations after the Roman, Doric, Corinthian times.

There is also the necessity to find a different architectural system. France cannot promote the antique model of architecture because all its examples are in Rome, very few in France and none in Paris. So an entire esthetic system is designed in order to maintain the historical forms of buildings but change their meaning or as Bataille might say change the ordering device that generates those forms. We keep the formal system of "the orders" but we redefine its inner logic based on reason. (the Italian system of the *Bella maniera* based on proportions inherited by the ancients becomes the French system by reordering it through mathematics

But the French state also exists in its DNA by ordering the reality of the French populations: establishment of boundaries, destruction of the plurality of languages for a single highly regulated one through the regulating apparatus of an academy, the creation of order enforcement groups, national uniforms, of a national hymn, flag etc... Regarding this process of *Etatisation*, "statisation", Bataille could have written that: "the forms composing the populations on a territory now called France has become more and more static, ordered, architecturized". At some point Bataille sums up the definition of architecture as 'the imposition of mathematical order on stone'. Well, the claim here is that there are strong acquaintances if not no difference with the imposition of what a State does to a population.

Lets take the example of the first social housing building in France...

Even more intriguing is the fact that if we refine our reading of this so called "history of architecture", the figure of the architect becomes also problematic. When Bataille talks about architecture I believe he does not give a damn about architects but rather is attempting to describe an ideological general economy of the evolutions of societies... But, even in this regard we can see that the realm of occupations of architects involves the design of much stranger objects than the production of buildings to which they are usually associated. They design machines of war, on which Vitruvius wrote already one if his ten books. But also the great Andrea Palladio designed military marches.

The name Palladio itself comes from the spade and Palladio went even further in using the design tools of architecture to redesign the art of war itself (he uses symmetry,

proportions, eurythmic... etc which are all Vitruvian tools to design buildings in order to redesign warfare methods). Where would states be without war? If the state as Weber stated is the legitimate exercise of violence, it seems that architects have been effective designers of such violence.

Speculative and very debatable conclusion

As I started to say, if the state is a problem what could pragmatically be done about it? If we are, as I am, hoping for a revolution, somehow to get radically out of our state of affairs, what are we going to do as Zizek says after the revolution?

Marxist theory presupposes the definition of a state that would include in itself its own disappearance. This seems like a very complex machine to design... which might not happen on its own and for which the thousands of students of architecture schools could be applied instead of being trained to be in competition with one another to design buildings that actually are already designed by neoliberal imperatives before architects start drawing anything. Anarchists like David Graeber are very much interested by the organizing methods of the populations on what happened in Occupy for instance. How do masses coagulate and perpetuate their opposition to government policies? What tactics can be used to organize?

There are extremely scary examples of what architects are good at through the ordering of reality. Albert Speer was not only the architect of the buildings of the Nazi regime and of its extremely effective scenography, but he was also, and this is quite incredible to me, the minister of armament and of the perpetuation of war. Could the logics applied to administer and organize destruction be applied to the inventions of other forms of state? Architects are today absolutely useless, or more precisely, we are quite useful to capital but very problematic on the emancipatory, progressive take. Seriously we are a massive waste of time, intelligence and public means, we are in conflict with social progress and we are diverting a considerable part of young smart people into becoming a problem for reality. Either architecture is unredeemable, unsalvageable and we should very quickly throw it in the trash can of history, I'm totally fine with this as an intrinsically oppressive tool. Or we could try to reorient architecture schools to turn architectural thought processes against capital as well as against the dystopian forms of state designed and implemented by neoliberal policies. Stieglitz was recently describing on democracy now the TPP, transpacific partnership as a new global architecture. How else could we name such drastic reordering of the global order?

Anyway, I sincerely don't know if all these considerations regarding architecture are worth anything but what is really clear to me is that the others guys have a plan... On the

other hand, we always see architects coming after catastrophes making emergency shelters. I hope we can manage to have better than a world of emergency shelters. As Badiou says, we need an idea, a shared idea. And if the history of architecture has proven something it is that architectural thinking is good at making plans for mankind, however scary that might sound.