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THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CONTEMPORARY BARRICADE

The project of a contemporary insurgent barricade, architecture that would go against the state, as part of an institutional school project, to graduate in the profession of architecture, was never going to be a straightforward task.

Firstly, I would like to clarify my use of the term “barricade” as a ‘line’ (as both “divider” and “centre” of the division) on which the battle between insurgent and state takes place in space. It is very different from the state wall or army defence lines, mainly due to its desire to destabilise order and not establish or maintain order.

As heavily explained in more and more detail throughout my ExploreLab presentations, whilst not only has architecture always faced difficulty in going against the state throughout history, too are the very material and spatial limits of ‘warfare’ changing. How can a “barricade” as such emerge today? How can insurgent space exist? How can it be a “project” in any formal sense of the word? The project looks at how the institutionalised discipline of architecture can help support an informal and anti-state politics, as both critique on how many avant-garde radical architecture practice has been recuperated into precisely the ‘untouchable’ avant garde as merely image or words, without the ability to enter a “real” // “material” political arena of possibility, and, thus, the difficulty architecture faces to serve anything other than state-induced politics. It tries to “propose” space rather than simply “destroy” space, as is so common an object during moments of insurrection (principally as direct reaction to architecture as representation of the state itself).

To begin, I had to unravel a formal essence of an architecture that was very rarely documented in an architectural manner, in order to take a step back and dismantle the spatial tactics involved with insurgent barricades in order to understand them in a way that could be “useful” to their urgent, contingent and often seemingly abstract requirements. I wrote about the barricades of the last few years that have played with material, rhetorical and virtual space, and I undertook several formal studies of barricade architectures from the 1800’s until now. They gave me concrete and theoretical avenues to move forwards, and formed not only a basis for this project but also began to open up further research questions for my future academic endeavours.

At the heart of the project is an expression of the limit of architecture whilst trying to “propose” something, to not only turn it into an architectural proposal, but also to maintain it’s inherent politics and not fall into the purely hypothetical and indulgent. With this, I found myself at a crossroads between the barricade as the “spectacular object” or posters, movies and anecdotes of revolutionaries, one to be seen and remembered as image-space of insurrection, and the very necessary secret spaces that have often been the backbone support of the barricade itself. It became essential that the project would explore not only these two aspects but also how they connect, conflict and aid each other through precisely the extremity of their difference. This is what led me to the dual-project of a “spectacular” public bathhouse, underneath which there are secret passageways for “illegal” migrants to enter Europe. The projects are joined together programmatically and spatially through the changing rooms, the place where one removes themselves of identity and emerges as equal, naked body. They use the spectacle as mask for the secret, and play each aspect off against each other spatially whilst never compromising or making “exceptions” for their dual-function.

The materialisation of the project came about in strong correlation with it’s theoretical and political concerns. A desire to collide the “solid” aspects of the project, “object”, “legitimacy” (of the project, and of bodies i.e “accepted” bodies in the space and the city of Venice i.e tourists), “materiality”, “spectacle” with the more “fluid” aspects such as “the body” (unaccepted i.e migrants), “flows// movement”, the “informal” and the “hidden” etc gave way to both the interrupting nature of the proposal in a formal sense, and in the often-brutal meeting of bare flesh and stone/brick. I believe this gives a very potent aspect to the project and takes it away from merely an intellectual expression of space, to be only “understood” through explanation, and makes the project a more physically confrontational intervention that can be felt in a very material, rough and sensual manner. It tries to break conventions of architecture as framing or composition and confronts the body with objects in a way that recalls how bodies so often must during spatial warfare.

The whole process has questioned my role as both architect and “activist” as such, and how I could perform both roles without compromise. I am pleased therefore that I feel that the programme and spatial configuration of the project addresses these issues, whilst being strengthened and highlighted in their context of Venice and the materialisation of these elements coming together. The barricade has always, and will always, be one of the most contextual interventions in space and this project exemplifies that. At the same time, self-critique has been crucial to the sincerity of the project and its limits are as explicit as its triumphs, which I also feel has developed my architectural, theoretical, and political understanding of what I’m capable of as both architect and individual.