

THE ELEVATOR DIAGRAM

The contents of this essay are concerned with the question of how to intervene in the city of Luxembourg. The text takes for granted that the city is already shifting —although at a slower pace—, towards the generic city¹. This fact is seen rather as a given and raises a question regarding the considerations of this context in order to produce architectural artifacts.

The city is an apparatus that works to fulfill the necessities of a scope of population, this range is formed by a number of contexts (Political, social, economic religious, etc.) The assemblage of these contexts could be called an anthropological paradigm. The city and its complexities respond to this paradigm and therefore, they are submitted to the transformation of the contexts in time.

It is precisely in the contemporary city where the influence of capitalism has accelerated this shift of paradigm as a consequence of events as the rural exodus, the advances in information technology and the globalization.

In a plea to respond to this transformation rate, the city has a tendency to become *generic*. This implies that in order to be understood

as a huge systematic totality, there is no special attention in specific complexities. In short, the city runs fast enough, that jeopardises its identity to fulfill the necessities of a general anthropological paradigm.

The abovementioned suggests a question: How can we intervene within the contemporary city and its systematic tendency towards the *generic city*?

In this essay, I will introduce the concept of the *generic city* by Rem Koolhaas as an association to the status of the contemporary city understood as an assemblage². This construct is presented as the result of the failure of the postmodern city, which is rather understood as a patchwork of entities.

Taking the generic city as a given, I will then suggest the so-called *elevator diagram* as an approach to perform within the framework of the contemporary city, influenced by some aspects of the discourse of phenomenology, since it pretends to make us comprehend a complexity in a different way than the one we do in our daily activities. The diagram is then exemplified in 3 architectural

interventions, and classified by the stages that a simple elevator ride contain; *the access, the interstice, and the opening*.

The generic city

When trying to position architecture in the context of globalization we could argue that the contemporary city tends to be an assemblage of overlapped complexities that change at a very accelerated pace as a reaction to the emergence of a problematic reality, mainly due to a rising population worldwide and its necessity to perform within the rules of capitalism.

In its difficulty to fulfill the purpose of reacting fast enough to the cultural changes, the contemporary city tends to produce instead a superposition of the historic city, its memory and symbolic force with a blankness where this generalization is possible. This new urban territory has been named by Rem Koolhaas as the *generic city*³.

Koolhaas makes a parallel between the idea of a contemporary airport and the contemporary city, as 'all the same'. According to him, this imposition suggests the removal of an identity which at some point will be too narrow for the human exponential growth. 'Identity centralizes; it insists on an essence, a point. Its tragedy is given in simple geometric terms. As the sphere of influence expands, the area characterized by the center becomes larger and larger hopelessly diluting both strength and the authority of the core; inevitably the distance between center and circumference increases to the breaking point'⁴

He argues that our idealization of the city center delegitimizes the character of the periphery, which undermines its capacity of development. A city freed from this identity can grow indeterminately, and produce new identities every day. For instance, he mentions examples as north American cities as obvious representations of the generic city but finds it also in Europe Australia and Africa.

The generic city is the result of the transformation of many aspects of the urban life into the virtual space, "contrary to the classical city the generic city is sedated, usually perceived from a sedentary position. Instead of concentration—simultaneous presence—, in the generic city individual 'moments' are spaced far apart to create a trance of almost unnoticeable aesthetic experiences."⁵ In a way, it alienates us from the possibility of the perception of any identity because it is superimposed on it. It drives us rather comfortable through fast highways where the perception of specific complexities turns null.

The presence of the generic city and the anthropological reality that empowers it as a consequence of the globalization, is inevitably starting to manifest in the contemporary city. Koolhaas explains that the development of the city as the emergence of complexities is planned, not through the common bureaucratic organizations but as seeds fallen in the soil randomly that can form amazing results. He also states that 'The writing of the city may be indecipherable, flawed, but that does not mean that there is no writing; it may simply be that

we developed a new illiteracy a new blindness. Patient detection reveals the themes, particles, strands [...]⁶

The patchwork vs. the assemblage

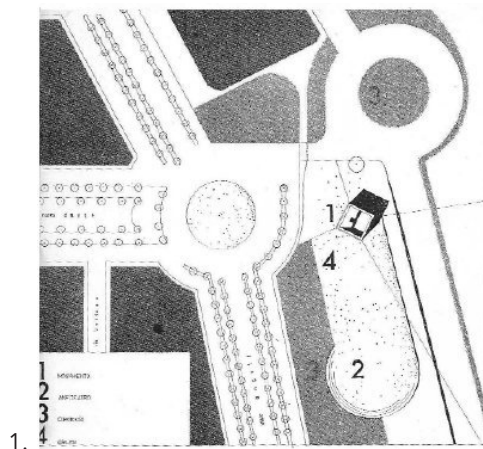
The concept of the *generic city* can be understood as an alternative to the incapability of creating a totality that embraces countless contexts simultaneously. This futility is evidenced by the failure of the post-modernism movement in architecture which Sandford Kwinter describes as '[...] a decade of submission to the cult of historical styles, and subsequently to myriad, but often hollow neo- and antimodernist intellectual postures.⁷

The post-modernism is a criticality to the 'dogmatic' ideas of the modern movement or its pursuit of an 'ideal perfection'. Starting from the rejection of a unique aesthetic imposition, this movement—in a weak intend to satisfy several contexts—, uses several complexities to form a kind of *patchwork* that is focused on specificities without thinking it as a totality. The result deceives the

value of judgment that ends up in the incomprehension of a whole.

In other words, while in the modern movement a given user was exposed to a specific complexity repeated several times as the one and only 'truth', the postmodernism approach is a miscellany or joint of unrelated items that cannot be understood as a whole.

The presence of time has proved that pretending to satisfy aesthetically several individuals from different contexts would be rather impossible. As stated before the complexities should respond to the anthropological paradigms and they are constantly changing. If we set a scenario where the shift of paradigm is faster than ever, static forms would never match the pace by which the contexts shift. Even if in a hypothetical example they were able to react according to the context — if they change shapes in real time—, the complexity would be immersed in a paradox when trying to transmit the exact same perception at the same time to all the users that experience it from different contexts.





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Given that, Koolhaas argument concentrates in understanding the city as an *assemblage* of complexities rather than a *patchwork* of them as the postmodern approach. This statement implies that the *generic city* is understood as a continuous system formed by what Gilles Deleuze would call *multiplicities*: 'neither a copy of a model nor a fragment of a higher totality, but a purely unique event. The concept helps humans conceive and appreciate the world where things creatively evolve to form new and surprising assemblages'⁸ Therefore, a given user understands the system and performs within, but only has contact with some of the multiplicities.

The qualities of a multiplicity can activate the perception of a given individual and this is what Koolhaas describes as 'patient detection'. Therefore, an individual immersed in the *generic city*, focused on the flow of the traffic lights, the train timetables, the advertising; is not aware of every architectural object (multiplicity) that surrounds him, only that one that is capable of distracting him from

the systematic flow, is the one that provokes a comprehension of a given complexity within the city by different means than the ones present in his daily life.

It is in this gap where architecture performs as a medium to produce an experience (surprising assemblage) specifically oriented to the context that deflected this multiplicity (architectural intervention).

The elevator diagram

Rather than a mere infrastructural element and its mechanisms, the elevator is understood here as a device that connects two different points by detaching the user from its *common ground*⁹, performing an *interstitial activity* where a series of signs are provided, and lastly reveal a *new ground* that will have a different interpretation by the provided tools. Is a mechanism of actualization since it takes a multiplicity, provides it with an actualization and produces a new significance for a given user.

As mentioned before the argument is

organized as a three-stage sequence. *The access, the interstice, and the opening.* To exemplify the *elevator diagram* in a pragmatic way, we could address three different architectural artifacts, Aldo Rossi's competition entry for the *monumento alla resistenza, Cuneo*, the *Virgilio Barco* library, in Bogota by Rogelio Salmona and The Chichu art museum by Tadao Ando.

In the first stage —*the access*—, the user is still conscious for a given amount of time about the characteristics and perception of a given space-time reality where one is inhabiting until the moment the 'doors' are closed. Until now, the user is only driven by the curiosity or necessity to take the elevator to the second point and still based on his *common ground*. In the project of Cuneo, the access stage would be the presence of a simple cube with 12 meters in the edges and a rather common landscape without any apparent specificity (Fig 1.), in Salmona's project, the access is immersed in the congestion of the city (Fig. 2) and in Ando's museum one can only perceive a set of

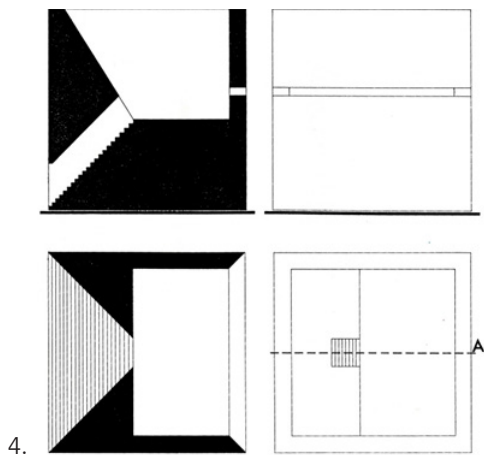
volumes inserted underground with no apparent relation to each other (Fig. 3). These hollow perceptions are empowered by the context that a user inhabits in his daily life, namely the generic city.

The second stage is *the interstice*. During this period of time, the artifact performs a distraction that we could call the *interstitial activity*. The latter, can be understood at least in two different ways: first, the *implicit interstice*, is when the doors are closed and the perception of the outside is blocked, things within the cabin as the signal fixtures, the noises, the speed or the presence of light, generate an expectation and speculation about the possible outcomes. The second one can be called the *explicit interstice*, this occurs when the elevator has a view from the inside and therefore the user is perfectly aware of what is happening outside and how the original common ground that he had contact with in the first place is progressively transforming into this new reality.

The main difference between each one of the examples presented in this



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discussion can be found in the second stage, due to the way they deal with the tension between the limits of the so-called *implicit interstice* and the *explicit interstice*. Rossi's intervention presents a volume which space in between is altered by the extraction of part of its mass in order to generate a very steep and dramatic dark ascent into the building (fig. 4). This architectural operation empowers the concept of the *implicit interstice* since it generates a route that works as a distraction in the darkness that disassociates the relation with the original landscape or stratum where the access was originally located.

However, in the second case, Salmona does the opposite. He makes the interstice explicit by emphasizing this shift of strata gradually creating a *promenade architecturale*¹⁰. During the route, he manipulates vertical and horizontal elements with variations of distance, to create visual barriers that hide the presence of the urban landscape to emphasize the surrounding nature. An example of this manipulation is the alteration of the terrain in form of artificial batter

in a plot which was originally flat, the building detaches itself from the city (fig. 5).

The Chichu art museum is located in between this dichotomy. Once the users get into the first underground volume, the surrounding landscape disappears; Ando claims that these introverted spaces have the qualities to accommodate art due to its 'spiritual character' (distraction). The route keeps revealing elements of the landscape as the sky intermittently in some intervals of the route. In short, Ando creates a tension between the explicit and implicit interstices by revealing certain characteristics of the landscape in the patios (fig. 6), but hiding other ones with the dark spaces where the *ouvres* are located (fig. 7).

The third and last stage would be *the opening*. By the end of the journey, the user is exposed to a *new ground*. By then, the exposure to the interstice have already defined limits on the mind of the user and at the moment they have contact with this new reality, they can develop their own architectural experience. These

limits are established by contact with specific *signs*, namely the Boves Mountains in the Cuneo project, the natural landscape in the library or the portions of landscape revealed in the patios of Ando's project.

The *sign* in this context is a construct that uses as a ground, the definition of the word by Deleuze. According to him, *the sign* is a device that implies a cognitive process of a given space-time reality.¹¹ In other words, is a type of *pattern language*¹² that activates the awareness of a given context offering a set of elements to build an architectural experience by means of architectural operations as, cutting, attaching, dividing, framing, distancing, deforming. It performs a critical part of an experience through matter or what Juhani Pallasmaa would call the *built metaphor*¹³

The sign, rather than transmitting exact perceptions experienced by the author as phenomenologists claim, would be rather a tool to contaminate the immersion in the generic city and drive the attention of the user to a framework which

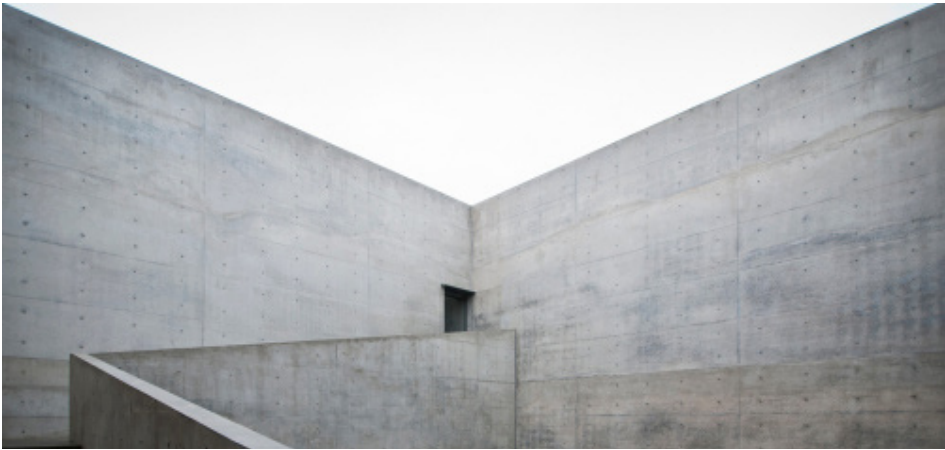
limits are imposed by the conditions of a specific context. Within this framework, the user develops its subjective perception. This means the argument of the elevator that is developed here, is based on the idea of creating an awareness through manipulation of matter as is pursued by the phenomenological discourse, but its objective is not to transmit ideological statements. Instead, it urges to create a new perception from a clearly defined complexity.

In the Cuneo project, the culmination of the ascent ends up in a surprising aesthetic experience —through calculated perforations—, towards the landscape. In this case, the elevation and position of the perforations on the volume are oriented to the Boves Mountains, which represent *the sign*. The recognition of the mountains would suggest a common framework. The acknowledgment that there was where the partisans were killed when fighting the fascists' forces. Despite the fact the understanding of this particular event in history may have different interpretations, the



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perception will be developed around that specific fact, and therefore a common framework has been created, and the reaction of the user happens within it.

In Salmona's library, the natural barrier not only obstructs the view of the city but also its noise and therefore the user ends up in perpetual visual connection with the eastern hills of the city, a landscape always present but rarely perceived from the daily activities within the congested city of Bogota. By the rooftop, the barriers are more evident and create special connections with the sky and other parts of the natural landscape of the area. The building it is fully loaded with signs to perceive this particularity (fig. 8). Lastly, Ando's building frames by the end of the museum route, a fantastic view towards the sea in the Naoshima Island (fig. 9). This creates a spatial-temporal awareness that the user could not perceive by the beginning of the route.

Conclusions

To conclude, one can say that if we

take the generic city concept as a given, the elevator diagram is a tool that can successfully perform in it to break the systematic tendency of the *generic*. To be more precise, through this approach one can contaminate and redirect the user's lethargy or the so-called blasé attitude¹⁴ towards specific complexities of the city through the experience of the architectural artifacts.

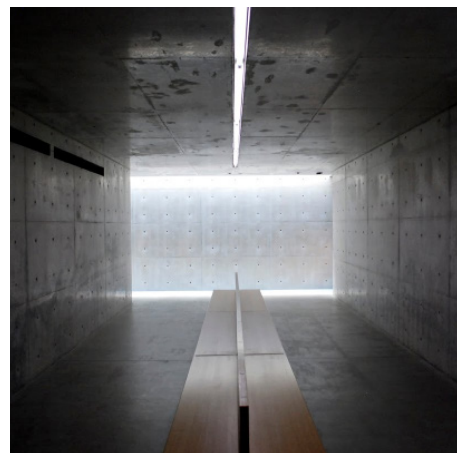
As stated before, this perception does not mean that the artifact controls how a given mind will perceive the new reality, since as claimed by the central principle of Gestalt psychology¹⁵, the mind forms a global whole with self-organizing tendencies. This argument reinforces the statement that argues a perception cannot be tracked in the architectural creative process. Therefore, the main goal of this diagram is to force a new perception in a different manner—regardless of which—, that the one we are used to by the monotony of our daily activities.

It can also be said that the main characteristic of the contemporary city is this blend of different contexts

that fluctuate constantly. The concept of the generic city by Koolhaas allows us to understand this reality in terms of a totality, but this does not mean the generic city can define a generic anthropologic paradigm. Differences will always exist while time exists, therefore there will always be a possibility to define a sign and to produce an architectural experience. The responsibility is to look carefully for this specificities, to make sure they are suggestive enough to break the cycles of the generic city, and capable of creating a common framework where the architectural experiences can be developed.

The theoretical framework developed in this essay, can be used as a tool to intervene in Luxembourg City, because of its tendency towards the generic city. Luxembourg has a fluctuant population that forms an amalgam of many social contexts, turning it into an interesting field to test the ideas developed in this essay. The awareness of the dichotomy of the valley and the plateau in this specific city, could be the particular complexity that the elevator diagram

could solve, not only as mere infrastructural element but also as an architectural object that provides a different perception of this duality, in the eyes of the the blasé individuals of the generic city.



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NOTES

1. The generic city is a concept developed by Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau in *S,M,L,XL*, (1995), pp. 1248-1257

2. The concept of assemblage is an interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) by Manuel de Landa in *A New Philosophy of Society* (2006). 'Assemblage components are self-subsistent and retain autonomy outside of the assemblage in which they exist' (DeLanda, 2006). His interpretation is used in this essay to describe the generic city as a totality formed by specific complexities with specific conditions.

3. The generic city is a respond to the exponential growth of humans, which implies that the past will at some point become too 'small' to be inhabited and shared by those alive (Koolhaas & Mau, *S, M, L XL*, 1995).

4. (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995).

5. (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995).

6. (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995).

7. (Kwinter, 2001).

8. (Tampio, Nicholas. "Multiplicity." *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*. 2010. SAGE Publications. 30 Aug. 2010. <http://www.sage-ereference.com/politicaltheory/Article_n294.html>

9. Refers to the "mutual knowledge, mutual beliefs, and mutual assumptions" that is essential for communication between two people (Clark & Brennan 1991). Is the space that one recognize as familiar, due that the given context were one comes from has towards a given complexity.

10. "Architecture is experienced as one roams about in it and walks through it [...] So true is this that architectural works can be divided into dead and living ones depending on whether the law of 'roaming through' has not been observed or whether on the contrary it has been 'brilliantly obeyed'" (Le Corbusier, 1942).

11. "Signs are the object of a temporal apprenticeship, not of an abstract knowledge. To learn is first of all to consider a substance. An object, a being as if it emitted signs to be deciphered, interpreted" (Deleuze, 1964).

12. Patterns (a concept central to the design pattern movement in computer science and introduced by Christopher Alexander) is used by Nikos Angelos Salingaros, to conceptualize the idea of a pattern language, which is a device that 'codifies the interaction of human beings with their environment, and determines how and where we naturally prefer to walk, sit, sleep, enter and move through a building, enjoy a room or open space, and feel at ease or not in our garden' (Salingaros, 2013).

13. (Pallasmaa, 2012).

14. The "blasé attitude" employed by most city dwellers is possibly what makes them seem more intellectual, more civilized than most. It is this coping mechanism that Simmel states helps them deal with "rapidly changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves." In other words, there is so much going on in a city at one time, that people eventually shut down and begin to ignore everything that is happening around them in order to stay sane in their environment. Re-

trieved from <http://clowurbansoci.blogspot.nl/2009/02/blase-attitude.html>
15. (n.d., 2016).

Figure 1: Monument to the resistance. Aldo Rossi. 1962 retrieved from <http://architecturalogy.com/aldo-rossi-monument-for-the-resistance-for-cuneo/>

Figure 2: Virgilio Barco library, Fred Solis. Located in between the congestion of the city. Retrieved from <http://fredsolis.com/portafolio/escenarios/>

Figure 3: Aerial view of the Chichu art Museum. Retrieved from https://farm5.staticflickr.com/4020/4586466084_fbbcc49c61_b.jpg

Figure 4: Monument to the resistance. Aldo Rossi. 1962 retrieved from <http://rationalistarchitecture.tumblr.com/post/35979566597/monument-to-the-resistance-aldo-rossi-1962>

Figure 5: Virgilio Barco library, Peter Lievano. By the terrain modification the city is hidden, emphasizing the savanna. Retrieved from <http://www.peterlievano.com/biblioteca-publica-virgilio-barco/>

Figure 6: Chichu art museum, Lindsay Kunz. The patios generate a relation to the sky. Retrieved from <http://lindsaykunz.com/>

Figure 7: Chichu art museum, Tadao ando. Dark exhibition spaces. Retrieved from <http://japanroundtrip.blogspot.nl/2010/06/june-5.html>

Figure 8: Virgilio Barco library. The triangular signs and allegory to a symbol of a Colombian indigenous culture. Retrieved from <http://u-in-u.com/es/art-destinations/colombia/bogota/month-of-art/2014/teusaquillo/foto-tour/biblioteca-virgilio-barco/>

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