PROJECTING URBAN REVOLUTION:
Civil Resistance & Space

+ Abstract

The urban revolution is vital to the continuity of the urban. There can be no urban continuity without crises, no new elements and relationships without breaking barriers that prevent the possibility of complete urbanisation[1]. Hence, the exploration on urban space and resistance can potentially shed light on the possible future, or the means to start or participate in urban change during crises.

Just as with all human actions, resistances necessarily acquire or require an urban space for its existence. Is the city a passive site for which such deep undercurrents of power struggle surface? Or, are its urban characteristics actively engaging the process and outcome of power struggle? On one hand, the city is what we make it to be. On the other, it re-makes us. The aftermaths of protests are too familiar to us – messy streets, burning buildings and infrastructures, casualties, etc. Here, the city is left scarred and abandoned, passively receiving the product of human behaviour in hope of urban change. On another level, boulevards in Paris are made to easily control any uprising populations, whereas the vastness and centrality of public spaces like *Tahrir Square* and *Tiananmen* are equally spatially strategic and symbolic in gathering strength for urban revolutions.

I would propose that understanding the urban space as playing both a passive and active role in staging urban struggles is vital to understanding how the urban continuously acts and reacts to the self-empowerment of the marginalised. Henceforth, hypothesizing possibilities for the architect to actively participate in this time of urban change.

++ Projecting Urban Revolution

: The Question: Urban Space and Resistance

The power of people to effect changes in their society cannot be underestimated. Such political act of power lies not only in the revolutionary moments of history when groups of people stand out to fight against the repression of their era, but also in the everyday, where individuals refuse to conform to political associations based on small acts of defiance, may it be consciously or subconsciously. These subversive acts shall be termed as resistances.

Momentary resistances includes organised and peaceful sit-in camps to spontaneous demonstrations that turn violent, the causes for such protests are many – think environmental activism, racial inequality, gay rights, territorial disputes, unfair electoral division, fraudulent political scandals, etc. Most notably, recent trans-national protests like the 'Occupy Movement' and 'Arab Spring' have geared towards the commonality of struggle against capitalism – too much control over the capitalist surplus have been in the hands of the few political and financial elites (Harvey, 2012). Protests mark the people's involvement in exercising their rights to shape their cities when they have reached the limit of being marginalised. Urban revolutions do not only refer to historically significant events or violent actions (Lefebvre, 1970). It also includes everyday resistances, like refusing to put a party slogan in a greengrocer's window, spraying graffiti on public property and organising concerts for forbidden forms of performance, etc (Roberts &

Ash, 2011). Choosing to live without conforming to existing power structures can be seen as a political commitment to 'living the truth' and to resist being under total control (Roberts & Ash, 2011). Hence, small acts of defiance from the everyday can also potentially undermine existing power structures and contribute to desired urban change.

Just as with all human actions, resistances necessarily acquire or require an urban space for its existence. Is the city a passive site for which such deep undercurrents of power struggle surface? Or, are its urban characteristics actively engaging the process and outcome of power struggle? On one hand, the city is what we make it to be. On the other, it re-makes us. This question has to start with the relation between space and action.

:: Relating Space and Action

To understand the passive and active role of spaces in accelerating urban revolution, literature of Henri Lefebvre and Bernard Tschumi shall be the basis for further investigation - as they have written thoroughly about dialectics of events and space while engaging the constant urban change that is taking place in our cities.

According to Lefebvre, urban space is "concrete contradiction", and owes its presence to the inherent passivity of urban space, to be used in anyway by actors in space - anything can become a home and any point in space can be central. But this centrality is not without content or meaning. By reducing a street into a passageway when it is split for automobile and sidewalks, the possibilities for it accommodating other vibrant street activities are suppressed along with the privileging of drivers over pedestrians, a preference for pseudo-efficiency that is pertinent in the capitalist city. Yet, streets are also where revolutionary events are staged, where march-ins happened, and where the

marginalised protest. Bernard Tschumi proclaimed the political neutrality of architectural space, emphasizing the disjunction between space and program or events in architecture. By extension, the form of architecture does not give meaning to architecture, but the use and meaning that were assigned to it. The separation of urban space and its possibilities are self-evident in Lefebvre and Tschumi's writings. If meaning and content is indeed what determines the course of an urban revolution and the everyday life, then this separation of form and meaning necessarily implies a certain passivity of the urban space. This passivity may imply the indiscriminate empowerment of users and clients to determine and change the meaning they desire out of the urban space; and also highlights the inherent inability of architects in hypothesising architecture as forms for urban change.

Yet, we know that such passivity can never be conclusive for the future of the urban to be imagined. Tschumi acknowledged that architecture and its spaces do not change society, but if we understand its effects, we can use it as a tool to actively trigger the process of urban change. Refusing to take the deterministic position of behaviorism[2] and social engineering, Tschumi turned to other ways to show how architects can actively participate in the process of urban change, which is not necessarily limited to being architectural practitioners, but actors with architectural knowledge. He termed two ways of actively participating in urban change – by exemplary actions and by counterdesign. Exemplary actions include the resistances from students of Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1968. By constructing their own 'Maison du Peuple', a three-day construction of a mythical guerrilla building on private property, the value of such building does not lie in its urban form, but more in the symbolic action of the students who refuse to conform to existing power structures. Hence, urban form still remains largely passive, though not totally so. Counterdesign is a more architectural way of defiance, but Tschumi considered it to be an even weaker form of resistance.

Described as a "desperate attempt to use 'the plan', the weakest of all architectural means" to counteract the undesired (Tschumi, 1996), the possibly active way for the urban form to contribute is thus discredited. Though Tschumi continues to cite the works of archizoom's 'no-stop city' and superstudio's 'continuous movement' in 1970 to illustrate the point, he also criticised the nihilistic nature of these plans. The temporal nature of these two methods are evident in the painting over of revolutionary slogans of the 1968 Parisian walls, and the lost of context of Duchamp's urinal, as it is being reduced to a mere artefact in a museum (Tschumi, 1996). However, the evaluation of the relevance of the action and urban spaces of these two methods after decades is perhaps unnecessary in the first place, because it is precisely its spontaneous and temporal nature that culminates at that point of urban time-space that matters most and only. While it may be doubtful that a new formal language can truly impact the structure of society, it is clear that the destruction had (Tschumi, 1996). This eventual refusal to acknowledge the potential of urban form (not emphasis on human actions) continues to be problematic in hypothesising how architecture can actively contribute.

::: Operative Resistance in Warfare

I would use a case of extracting architectural theories into operational urban space to extend the passive and active roles urban space have on urban resistances. In Lethal Theory, Eyal Weizman interviewed two Israeli generals of the Isreali Defence Army (IDA) in the fight against Palestinians, shedding light on how architectural theories are used in urban warfare strategies and tactics. IDA established a school and developed a curriculum that trains 'operational architects', reading and transferring knowledge from theorists like Christopher Alexander, John Forester, and other architects. In particular, Tschumi's idea of creating different viewpoints to look at space-action-time in Manhattan Transcripts has inspired them to

use operational plans in a manner other than drawing simple lines on maps. (Weizman, 2006) This is an instance of transforming architectural representation into operational representations. Though not reaching the level of it engaging urban form as active strategies for change, it shows the potential of architecture and the importance of urban space in deciding the outcome of battles.

The Israeli general also cited Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus, saying that the ideas of 'smooth' and 'striated' space are critical concepts that inspire them. As a result, they imagine operational space such that borders do not hinder their movement towards their goal. This is exemplified by a military operation carried out by Israeli soldiers moving over 100m internally from house to house by drilling and knocking down walls so that enemies on the streets and alleys will not notice them (Weizman, 2006). This is a total reversal of the classical urban space in the city in a manner that is more lethal – to smooth out whatever border that comes as an obstacle, in a way that is out of sight for the enemies. The act of knocking down the walls symbolises the reversal of private-public domain. When the street is treated as an active space that limits the movement of resistance, the resistance moves through it passively, determined by its direction and flow. If we reverse this relationship by turning the street into a passive element, then resistance becomes active. How do we do that? By not stubbornly attacking from the street in the first place, but identifying and choosing its complementary - the private domain, to activate resistance. These operational architects are not deciding their strategies with open-endedness in mind, but with thorough and context-specific understanding of the conditions they are facing before its execution, and hence, victory. If architects are to adopt a similar attitude in making architecture for urban change, then they have to investigate into the specific condition with certain extent of deliberateness on how resistance can be made active.

:::: Civil Resistance and Space

Strategies and tactics are especially important in military and non-violent struggles, as they a pivotal in the outcome of the struggles. For example, Gandhi chooses his place and time of protest very carefully so that great sympathy can be gained from fellow Indians to join in his quest for change. (Sharp, 1973) But the discussion about the role of space seems to be limited to the idea of possession when it comes to warfare or non-violent struggle. Gene Sharp commented that possession of spaces are not crucial in the advancement of a battle even in military warfare, and much less so in non-violent struggle – simply because human will plays a much crucial role than physical occupation. Having symbolic places to possess are not to be underestimated though, Sharp added, as it conveys important messages as well. Hence, looking at space in its symbolic form is but a small part of the whole story on non-violent struggle, for the will of people indeed plays a more important role in staging urban revolutions. But, the relative unimportance of possessing spaces as said by Sharp should not end here pertaining to the context of architectural discussion, also because civil resistances include everyday practices as well.

The power of the powerless is also accumulated through small acts of defiance, such as refusing to put a party slogan in a greengrocer's window, to undermine the system based on ideological lies (Roberts, 2011). The refusal to 'live in lie' is a significant attitude of resistance. Living in truth becomes both a moral commitment and a political act, manifested in space. People can organise concerts for banned music, use an empty state land as dumping grounds due to lack of proper waste disposal system, etc. The urban space contains all these numerous resistances across different scales and contexts, from a wall of graffiti, to an illegal extension of an apartment, or even an informal area that self-organises. The city actively becomes a canvas for these resistances. Moreover, when these everyday resistances reach a point of accumula-

tion in time, it will actively re-make the city.

::::: Architecture towards Urban Revolution

When architects build, they participate in the making of the canvas, for which resistances will be reacting upon. Should we be building in a passive way to allow for resistances to grow by chance, or in a more active way that responds directly to them, but at the risk of the architecture's shelf life in the ever-changing context of power?

When faced with the task of designing an urban project, the architect can respond with any of these methodologies: composition, complement, palimpsest, or abstract mediation (Tschumi, 1996). The first two methods are too harmonious for subversive intentions[3]. The third method, palimpsest, rewrites the context of a city upon an intense investigation of it with added layers from elsewhere. This method can be read as an active method that is to tackle the situation head-on and respond with much deliberateness. I would relate palimpsest to the previously discussed case on the smoothening of private domain as a warfare strategy by the operational architects. Though not exactly architectural, it aptly rewrites the existing condition upon critical consideration of the classical private-public domain and reversing it to achieve victory. The temporal nature of this method lies in its direct relation to the surrounding context. The traces of holes in the walls would no longer serve any active purpose of resistance after being filled up and reinforced. Hence, this method is not without risks, especially in current changing contexts. Tschumi specifically rejected the use of this method in the case of Parc de la Villette, because of the 'inevitably figurative or representational components' that cannot be dealt with in this complex realm of technical, programmatic and political constraints, which is still an unknown over the next decades. The final design follows the fourth option, abstract mediation. It works by finding an abstract system to mediate the site

and something beyond the city or program. In other words, the complexity of now and future is resolved by a strong neutral framework made up of differences, accommodating intentions of any changed party or further interventions. The result is an architecture that seems to be a passive framework for many possibilities to emerge or adapt to. The only explicit resistance was perhaps against that of traditional methods of designing with composition, hierarchy and order in mind. Given the influence of his writings and this project, it was a feat over traditional methods of architectural thinking indeed. Moreover, the potential of the last two methods towards urban revolution still remains. I would argue that it is irrelevant and impos-

+++ Conclusion

The urban revolution is vital to the continuity of the urban. There can be no urban continuity without crises, no new elements and relationships without breaking barriers that prevent the possibility of complete urbanisation . Hence, the exploration on urban space and resistance can potentially shed light on the possible future, or the means to start or participate in urban change during crises.

This essay has attempted to address the relationship between action and space with relation to the architectural writings of Lefebvre and Tschumi, which then leads to the potential architectural theories have on strategies and tactics relating to urban revolution, exemplified by the case of the operational architects. The symbolic importance of space have on momentous civil resistance are less important than the will of the people. In contrary, everyday civil resistances that grow out of existing conditions of the city require architectural interventions to be re-thought if architects want to be part of the urban change. Should we be building in a passive way to allow for resistances to grow by chance, or in a more active way that responds directly to them, but at the risk of the architecture's shelf life in the ever-changing context of power? Both the passive and active ways have been discussed and there can never be a straightforward answer, because the road to urban revolution is never in control by architects in the first place.

However, anybody with will and agenda can be capable of being part of the creation of the action of resistance and contribute to the urban revolution in their own ways. Tschumi contended the independent but interdependent relationship between space and events, actively acknowledging the potential of architects in accelerating the process of social and political change. Having the means of hypothesising, representing and creating urban space endows architects with the role of addressing both action and space, and that should not be avoided in the endeavour towards urban change. After all, architectural theory and its translation to the methodology of making architecture can still potentially relate architecture to the projection of urban revolution.

++++Endnotes

[1] [4] Complete urbanisation lies in the critical zone – a hundred percent urbanisation. This critical zone is a projection to the future, away from the industrial city, which is descriptive of our cities now (Lefebvre, 2003).

[2] Tschumi put down the ideals of behaviorism for which individual behavior can be influenced, even rationalised, by the organisation of space.

[3] Tschumi rejected the method of composition as a 'subscription to old architectural myths' and complement as a 'limiting pragmatism' (Tschumi, 1996).

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