



- VOID CAPITAL -



THE CITY OF PERPETUAL MODERNITY

VOID CAPITAL

PROPOSES A NEW MODEL OF DENSIFICATION
FOR THE WESTERN METROPOLIS.

VOID CAPITAL

IS A PROCESS WHICH INTERVENES IN THE UNBUILT
TO GENERATE ARCHITECTURE FOR THE CITY.

VOID CAPITAL

RECOGNIZES THE FUNDAMENTALS AS TOOLS
IN ARCHITECTURE'S LONG-TERM OBJECTIVE
TO HOUSE NOVEL DESIRES

VOID CAPITAL

QUESTIONS THE EXISTING GRADIENTS OF OWNERSHIP
AMONGST WORKSPACE, DOMESTIC AND PUBLIC SPHERES
IN THE EMERGING PEDESTRIAN-FRIENDLY URBAN CORE.

VOID CAPITAL

CHALLENGES MUSÉIFICATION, BANAL URBAN REMOVAL,
THE INVENTION OF NEW FORMS PER SE,
PERIPHERY'S SOCIAL ISOLATION,
THE COMMODIFICATION OF LEISURE.

VOID CAPITAL

CLAIMS THAT THE ACCOMMODATION OF THE SWIFTING
CAPITALIST PROGRAM TO THE BUILT INFRASTRUCTURE
IS A PROCESS IN WHICH THE VOID HOLDS AN ESSENTIAL ROLE.

I

Void Capital claims that the accommodation of the swift capitalist program to the built infrastructure is a process in which the void holds an essential role.

To define this mechanism, the project develops a double reading:

- i. An autonomous/introvert one, which sees the unbuilt as an element proper to the architectural language itself, proceeding by using the notion of the type.
- ii. A heteronomous/extrovert one, where the unbuilt is read within a wider public realm, studying the constant interactions between them.

I.I

Formal tensions of generic urban structures and “in-between” space are initially discussed in a cross-scale (Rooms, Clusters, Networks) and binary analysis. By comparing the selected case studies, the different formal patterns which intended to internally shape the Parisian and other relevant urban blocks are better explained. Here, the systems are evaluated according to their capacity to gradually change the built/unbuilt equilibrium, and thus to make the city’s fabric evolve in general. For example, a model documented by *Micrographia* (1665) was found to perform in such a way. Hooke, by studying the ways according to which matter is distributed in living organisms, proposed the dynamic block: an urban entity which has the capacity to organically reconfigure itself, from within. To replace the old city (non-hierarchical accumulation of individual desires) with this market-driving, measurable tool, Hooke makes use of the enabling force of a superimposed cartesian grid.

I.II

The larger territorial condition which the intervention is going to encounter is investigated in the second part of the research. The *Cabinet of Curiosities: An Account of Bourgeois Rituals* accumulates, in graphic and textual form, testimonies on the potential of the Parisian unbuilt to give place to diverse practices of social life. This catalogue is intertemporal, since the memory of past public “functions” is also taken into account. This historical study is meant to challenge the normalized image of today’s desired public program (usually associated to main-stream leisure), by presenting a repertoire of common “functions”, or rituals, repeating past events with a strong correlation with their surrounding infrastructural layout and a class-consolidating role. The presented specimens were selected “by chance”; located thanks to the cartesian grid reference of the Plan Verniquet.

The theoretical approaches mentioned above do operate from the micro to the macro-scale. But this method can also be reduced to the study of a single existing object. Both researches are developed presenting a physical component within this object, the department store. However, no self-contained architectural project is possible to be produced without creating the necessary relations of complementarity. The two parts are cross-fertilized, while keeping their independent characters: On one hand, the market-driven economical context puts an essentially typological approach into motion; while on the other hand, an ensemble of momentary events is inserted into an appropriable built environment. Those are the two districts of the Department City (two fundamental icons of modernity):

II.1 LE QUARTIER D' AFFAIRES

Above the ground level, the value of the historical stock of typological and material information of the object is acknowledged. A detailed formal study of the block has identified some recurring, basic patterns of changes amongst the post-medieval, the post-industrial and the post-modern layers of the city. Those were called “Typical Operations”: Each one consists of a banal or obvious structural system (the Free Plan, the Planes, the Box), plus the way of its implementation (demolition or preservation of the previous condition). In order to map those historical transformations through time, a compartmentalization of the existing assemblage into comparable and measurable entities was necessary. To do so, a generic orthogonal grid was used, suggesting that an identical process can be followed for every other building in the city. When the typological evolution of each part of the building is put into perspective, only a limited number of possible futures seems to be probable to occur. The architect now performs on a normative level: Rather than a pursuit of the invention of new forms per se, design operates by simply accelerating or hindering already ongoing processes. A critical relation with the strictly corporate scheme proposed by Sanaa (where formal richness is openly considered as a mere obstacle and a total hygienic whitewashing remains as the last hint of modernity of an office box) is attempted here.

The void as a catalyst. While the project-machine functions by orchestrating the parallel shifting of independent structures, their re-articulation seems possible only by intervening in the transitory thresholds: By not building them. The historical trajectory of the unbuilt as a typological component (light well, courtyard etc.) has shown that since the time that minimal entities of void were fully crystallized within each medieval plot, no particular functional changes (from the absolutely necessary qualities for survival: Air, Light, Circulation) occurred. However, their disposition and size did change. Similarly, the new enlarged thresholds (yet compositionally disconnected from the surrounding typologies) continue to have the same *raison d'être*, while they simply isolate the three functions with the use of three gradients of transparency. Those absences of building do not evolve along with the building itself. That happens because their role is simply to facilitate: They are the only spatial devices that -exactly in the way the interior halls did for the Grand Magasin- and thanks to their fundamental benefits, legitimize the outrageous size of this building, whatsoever its ephemeral form. Here, architecture is enacted by the void.

The form of the “Quartier d' Affaires” is market driven and programmatically instable. Thanks to its spatial flexibility, whole “departments” (meaning the typologically homogenous parts) to single floors have the capacity to host a practically infinite number of generic functions: industry, offices, leisure, retail, cultural... Following the current economic model, a more fragmented configuration is presented here. However, this doesn't prevent the building from being able to adopt a more unified image (for example of a mega-public institution) upon request. It would be reasonable to think that the “buildings within the building” could be subjected to change on an average pace of twenty years.

II.II GRAND ENSEMBLE

Below the ground level, the cause-effect relation is reversed: architecture is charged of “constructing” the void. This will be attempted by proceeding similarly to the previous modernization processes that shared urban space was subjected to; the time when, within the French context, the unbuilt became a project in itself. Both the 1600-1900 and the 20th century reforms shared this common departure point: they attempted to redefine the architecture of the city by intervening in its very building “bricks”: the private cellule. Perhaps this never became clearer than in the drawing of the minimal individual room in the work of Pierre Le Muet *Art of building for all Kinds of People* (1623) and in the notion of *Existenzminimum* put forward by CIAM II (1929). Here, an array of generic rooms (25m²) redefines a more legible peripheral geometry inside the already existing basement. The domestic function is only reintroduced in situ, since the time the grand magasin absorbed the preexisting housing blocks. Thus, the limits of a zone exclusively dedicated to labor are defined to keep the zone of work (as Hanna Arendt would put it) at a physical distance. However, it is by the act of superimposing workspace and domestic space (and not by challenging zoning) that the project renegotiates the boundary that was placed by modernity between the two spheres.

The void as a common. Within the lower zone, the ideal of the bourgeois domestic interior is dissected. The peripheral rooms for the private individuals, exclusively devoted to the daily necessities of labor, become reduced in size, while the need for a hedonistic retreat from the workspace finds its place in the central empty space. Besides, the historical processes mentioned above have seen tidy public space as a scene where a new social milieu could be constructed. Now, a similar potential, addressed to a group representative of social stratification (an existing feature in banlieues’ early housing blocks) can be recognized in this outdoor -but still interior- communal place of encounter. The extended blank surfaces do not suggest that interaction will come “naturally”. On the contrary, not rigidly defined, multifunctional planes and space left empty for future “rituals” are suggested as concrete binding elements of a community shaped within a completely artificial landscape. By placing an urban Grand Ensemble in the limit between the older bourgeois and working-class city, and in the heart of a rapidly changing neighborhood, a critical discourse on the continuous process of gentrification of Paris, on the detriment of its periphery, is constructed.

The form of the “Grand Ensemble” remains rather stable through time. A much slower series of typological transformations is observed here since the means of domestic labor production do not necessarily follow the rapid advances of the market. An average time increment of a century is considered to be appropriate for a substantial reconfiguration of this district. At the moment, the monadic system is considered to present an adequate capacity of adaptation to new communal needs (e.g. regrouping of cells). Despite that, there is no intention to create a utopian image of a fourierist autarchic community. Beyond the historical heteronomous study that feeds the district’s communal “rituals”, according to our scenario, the inhabitants are also employees working at the “Quartier d’Affaires”. As a consequence, the laws of the outside world do effect indirectly what is initially seen as a closed system.

II.III URBAN PLATFORM

At the ground level, workspace and domestic interior form a continuum with the surrounding metropolitan condition. The *Urban Platform* is a strictly unprogrammed horizontal surface, formed by the backbone of the proposed model, a bidirectional Vierendeel truss system. This is the first structural element of the project's construction site, and also the minimal infrastructure required in case this model is expanded within the city. The only aesthetics of the *Urban Platform* are the resulting aesthetics of the three generic grids used in the project and the multiple entrances of the departments. They all merge to form a constellation. As it is strategically placed at the epicenter of the flows (underground, tramway, pedestrian networks etc.), the *platform's* primal function is connecting; thus it conditions a common ground of internal and external users.