NOTHINGNESS

[or the Automonumentality and Insubstantiality of Contemporary Space]

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1. The quality or state of being nothing

2. Something insignificant or valueless

3. Void, emptiness[1]

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1   Merriam Webster's Onlince Dictionary - http://www.merriam-webster.com/

FROM BIGNESS TO NOTHINGNESS

"[...] Only through Bigness can architecture dissociate itself from the exhausted artistic/ideological movements of modernism and formalism to regain its instrumentality as vehicle of modernization[2] [...]"

The promises that Koolhaas' 'Delirious New York' and its culture of congestion delivered have been replaced by contemporary Nothingness. Both the retroactive manifesto and its refined version, 'Bigness' (contained on 'S, M, L, XL') celebrate the poetics of congestion by referring to its products (i.e. Manhattan). This praise of the metropolitan condition and its many scalar implications, condensed in the urban theory called Manhattanism, seem betrayed and perverted nowadays. This secret metropolitan agenda, once unveiled, has lost all its capacity to exploit all architecture's potential.

If the objective was awakening the general conscience in order to interpret and surf the waves of metropolitan dynamics, the results cannot be more devastating. By misunderstanding the challenges of the Bigness age, architects set themselves up as the masters of Nothingness. The evident state of contemporary production appears as the negation of the five theorems of the latent Bigness and their virtues:

1. *"[...] Beyond a certain critical mass, a building becomes a Big Building. Such a mass can no longer be controlled by a single architectural gesture[3] [...]"* Despite the devastating logic of this affirmation, contemporary architects struggle to assume the unsuitability of the traditional forms of the discipline and the extinction of the illuminated individual. Not only the 'automatic pilot' attitude have been dismissed but also the futility of modern architectural ideologies is still to be accepted. This fact produces a collection of pointless and distressing efforts to restore the lost 'dignity' of the architect.

2. *"[...] The elevator -with its potential to establish mechanical rather than architectural connections- and its family of related inventions render null and void the classical repertoire of architecture[4] [...]"* The elevator is not considered anymore an activator of the vertical congestion. Its role is purely functional and processional. It is usually exposed as an attraction on itself (transparent tubes offering panoramic views of the existing city) instead of exploiting its capacity to subvert the architectural form; a technological breakthrough celebrated by itself and not by the potentials that it unveils.

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2   Koolhaas, R. (Bigness, p.510)
3   Ibid (pp. 499-500)
4   Ibid (p. 500)

3. "*[…] In Bigness, the distance between the core and envelope increases to the point where the facade can no longer reveal what happens inside[5] [...]*" Bigness presupposes the end of any humanistic expectation of 'architectural honesty' although what is profoundly doomed is the expectation of an sly game of *complexity and contradiction*; Bigness does not perplexes anymore. Technical supplies and engines made virtually identical any external representation of what contemporaneity means (i.e. the curtain wall) and allow to occupy bigger spaces in even harsher environments within the same quality standards. New currents in ecology and sustainable design dispossessed technology of the capacity to twist the space perceived. What you see is exactly what you get: grayness, the chromatic expression of emptiness.

4. "*[...] Through size alone, such buildings enter an amoral domain, beyond good or bad. Their impact is independent of their quality […][6]*" Size is the only thing that matters. Quality is not important once reached the critical mass; the building acquires another set of values independent of the architectural form but based on the main asset of the metropolitan: the culture of congestion. Nowadays, even this set of values is arguable since our culture of congestion is, in most of the cases, unable to scape from the culture of boredom and repetition; the culture of specialization and categorization. The products of globalization, homogenization and the world well-mannered manual.

5. "*[…] Together, all these breaks – with scale, with architectural composition, with tradition, with transparency, with ethics – imply the final, most radical break: Bigness is no longer part of any urban tissue. It exists; at most, it coexists[7] […]*" The independence that Bigness provides is a matter of fact (its scale does not relate to anything already existing; its own logic is different). However, its side effects have been disastrous. Instead of ruling out contextual consideration, the products of Bigness look conspicuously to their neighbors trying to feign indifference but jealously competing for the title of beauty queen. The search of Bigness has evolved into a continuous challenge of architectural egos.

If the space is social and every society produces its own space[8], ours will be an space of emptiness; a dull simulacrum of what Bigness represents. We will not leave pyramids behind because our monuments are self celebrations of the glory of the stardom yet with a very close expiration date.

Automonumentality and insubstantiality, those are the products of our time.

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5   Ibid (p.500)
6   Ibid (pp. 501-502)
7   Ibid (p. 502)
8   Lefebvre, H. (Production of Space)

AUTOMONUMENTALITY

"[...] This category of monument presents a radical, morally traumatic break with the conventions of symbolism: its physical manifestation does not represent an abstract ideal, an institution of exceptional importance, a three-dimensional, readable articulation of a social hierarchy, a memorial [...] It is a solipsism, celebrating only the fact of its disproportionate existence, the shamelessness of its own process of creation[9] [...]"

Automonumentality has reached its most terrifying dimension in the contemporary space. We live surrounded by monuments since almost any public architectural operation has become the demiurgic act of transforming the building process in a continuous festival. The instantaneous monumentality of the architectural form was once achieved by reaching a certain size that would override any other possible consideration; the scale of the operation would acquire such an importance that any other discussion, even those dealing with the architectural quality of the product, would pass to a second plane. That was part of the ode to the congestion but what happens when all we can accumulate is boredom, the repetition of the same formulas? What if the homo ludens is starting to get bored?

The problem is knowing what do we celebrate; what is at stake.

Nowadays, the size requirement is not in force anymore: the relativity of our values make possible that anything can be celebrated if produced under certain agreed circumstances . Anything hiding everyday life; anything that can make us forget routine and banality is tagged as exceptional and, therefore, it escapes from any possible critic consideration. The praise of the exceptional has become the the praise of a certain kind of emptiness.

The general monumentalization of the architectural form has displaced the focus of the public (and the critic); it has overrided other disciplines, discussions and ultimately the usefulness of architecture. If the balance between buildings and (pseudo)monuments is altered further than a critical point, then it will be necessary to reconsider our notion of what a monument is. The modernist ideal of monumentality (as expressed by Giedion or Sert among others) relies on a bucolic and pastoral consideration of the community life and the literate capacity of only a certain kind of culture.

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9   Koolhaas, R. (Delirious p.81)

"[...] The people want buildings representing their social, ceremonial and community life. They want their buildings to be more than a functional fulfillment […] Monumentality derives from the eternal need of the people to own symbols which reveal their inner life, their actions and their social conception [..] Every period has the impulse to create symbols in the form of monuments, which according to the Latin meaning are 'things that remind' things to be transmitted to later generations[10] [...]"

This archaic definition of monumentality has prevailed despite the evident gap between theory and reality. Its misconception has been shared generation after generation, always looking back in order to understand the origins of the lost identity and imagery. What if the real meaning of our time is emptiness? What if the absence of values and ideals is the actual ideology of contemporaneity? If we have reached that point of individual independence making everything else obsolete then that must be the very essence of our time and the notion of monumentality needs to be redefined.

The instantaneous has a value in contemporary society. There must be something wrong in our work if we are able to admit obsolescence in many of our everyday objects (cars or clothes would be the most evident examples) but still conceive the space we live in according to a definition based on the strength and rectitude of the civic power. As architects, the question would be how to deal at the same time with this monumental hunger and the construction of the everyday. The contemporary space needs to absorb this additional information (instantaneous monumentality), incorporate it and make evident while resisting the temptation of adopting a patronizing attitude.

Is it possible to physically build the conceptual void that Baudrillard discusses without expressing any judgment value? Making of emptiness the material for a contemporary monumentality where the celebrated has the only value of being celebrated. Junkspace[11] becoming the ultimate monument of the XXIth century.

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10 Giedion, S. p.53
11 Koolhaas, R. (Junkspace). The notion of Junkspace is used here after a very personal interpretation of Koolhaas text. Junkspace is seen as the space that potentially can absorb any kind of semiotic information and program without altering its physical properties. It is an instantaneous pocket of emptiness, a black hole of communal ambitions and a real time drain of what culture traditionally meant. This definition is part of the scope of this essay and its application to the understanding of the production of contemporary space one of the ultimate objectives.

INSUBSTANTIALITY

"[…] There are monuments, many monuments, but where are the community centers? Neither radio nor television can replace the contact which alone can develop community life[12] […]"

"[…] Did not the architects tend to ignore the higher aspirations of the people?[13] […]"

Modern theories about community life, city centers and civic art did not believe in the dematerializing power of technological evolution. Obviously, the individualizing character of the technological promise has been too attractive and society has sold the physical representation of its communal soul in order to buy an extra amount of virtual space. With the apparition of the fetishized real-time technologies, the instantaneous and the virtual has invaded the public realm: the cloud of information (as it is called in the world wide web lexicon) is the final accelerator of the production of a new kind of space, the accelerator of alternative modes of social relation and the eventual responsible of the dissolution of the physical space of social interaction in the city.

Technically, it is not necessary anymore to travel to visit a certain city and its monuments; with a relatively fast connection to the web is easy to access an enormous amount of visual information about any world location, its inhabitants and the art collections that it hosts. The way in which this overwhelming amount of information is delivered is under continuous evolution and it is not hazardous to anticipate that it will increase exponentially on detail and quantity. Despite these advances, people still go abroad, visit foreign cities, their monuments and are eager to meet locals. The physical representation of the city (and its architecture) has become in most of the cases the agora of the virtual space: a place where validate what it can be found through the looking-glass. In spite of their brand new freedom, the inhabitants of the virtual still need a place to manifest themselves individually and reassert their independence from community. This fact would explain other curious phenomena of the contemporary everyday life: the success of coffee shops as working places (people go to use internet and work while sharing the physical space with strangers) or the so called 'Silent Parties' (a group of people that have previously agreed the content of a common playlist and go to dance together in a public place while listening to the music in their headphones) acquire a certain logic when regarded from this perspective.

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12   Giedion, S. (p.55)
13   Ibid

Assuming that public space is what rests of the city when unpredictability is removed[14], cyberspace appears as a new type of public realm. It is the starting point of a poetic based on an accelerated version of metropolitan congestion; a place of diminished struggle between high and lower classes. The instantaneous form of social interaction: a reflection of the oscillating condition of our contemporary society. The question is how unpredictable remains this space today, specially when more and more restrictions and functioning protocols start to be applied[15].

If we are not going to leave behind pyramids it is not due to our cultural incapacity and immaturity (as Giedion could argue) but because of the time that this communal constructions demand (both intellectually and physically). It is impossible to feel the *horizon of meaning[16]* that a monument should contain, specially when this generally agreed layer of knowledge is not adapted to the tempo of a contemporary production based on the instantaneous.

The only way out is a perfectly calculated strategy of simulation. The sublimation of five thousand years of architecture history and the instantaneous. The art of shaping reality to maintain a certain position of prestige; the art of reducing everything to nothingness.

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14 Koolhaas, R. (Generic p.1250)
15 This process tends to shape the web in the form of Foucault's 'Panoptical Space'. The deviation from the concept of 'space of unpredictibility' (a cloud in definitve) is evident. However, due to the global condition of the web and its capacity to easily mobilize and assemble critical masses of people, it is not difficult to imagine that its original ambition will soon find another outlet that bypasses any attempt of control.
16 Lefebvre, H. (Production)

NOTHINGNESS: AN AGENDA FOR CONTEMPORARY MONUMENTALITY

> *"[...] Programmatic instability is a characteristic to be cultivated, and that cultivation often implies the neutrality if not erasure of architecture, as well as a priority placed on its free reign in a 'post-architectural' void[17] [...]"*

Since the physical representation of our cities has become the place where validate its virtual representation, the production of contemporary space appears as a double bind dilemma. The only way out is to operate by *reductio ad absurdum,* taking the proposition to its logical extremes and examining the veracity of the conclusions. Assuming that both real and virtual are coincident (presenting and representing the same qualities) implies that the agents operating on both sides must coexist somehow. Virtual and physical become two sides of the same potential reality: the celebration of the substance of Bigness transformed into the praise of the virtual Emptiness by extending the limits of the building until coinciding with the whole city. Thus, the illusion of Borges' map in 'El Hacedor' is realized: the building is the whole city and the city is the building[18]. The scale of Emptiness is whether reduced or amplified depending on the point of view. The celebrated automonuments are both physical and virtual at the same time.

The main consequence of the sublimation of the inner values of Bigness in this context of insubstantiality is the production of enormous quantities of virtual space that we do not know how to handle; that architecture still does not know how to interpret. Monumental junkspace absorbing a huge amount of additional information not controlled by the initial architectural process that generated it. The only possible (and the most architectural) deed is the programing of this critical mass, the materialization of its insubstantiality: the real domain of architectural invention that still remains.

This would be the veritable monument of our contemporary society.

Therefore, autonumentality will not be only associated to a matter of size but also to the formulation of new states of programmatic indefinition that need to be precised. Emptiness would be the our only possible contribution to the *complexity and contradiction game* that can escape from the humanistic honesty still imbuing architecture and technology.

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17 Pope, A (p.20)
18 Baudrillard seems to refer to the same fable when writing the following: "[...] Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: A hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory [...]" Baudrillard, J. (Simulacra p.1)

The ambition of this new monumentality of the nothingness is double: on one hand it tries to recover the coherent capacity of architecture to *"[...] fuse the popular with the metaphysical, the commercial with the sublime, the refined with the primitive[19] [...]"* while at the same time elaborate new forms of metropolitan intervention that could overcome the fossil of modernity surrounding us (blurry mirages of the dismissed potential of architecture). In order to achieve this, the only possibility is reconsider the opinion that we, as architects, have about what we do and the way in which we look to the world. Reconsidering our position; our disconnection.

It is necessary some dose of humor to accept that we are as naked as the king with his splendid new clothes[20]. It is necessary adopting a disturbing attitude, irreverent and uncomfortable, assuming any manifesto as ephemeral; with an expiration date that will arrive along with its own success.

The king is dead. Long live the King[21]!

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19 Koolhaas, R. (Delirious p.300)
20   The king mentioned here refers to the main character of the traditional short-tale by Hans-Christian Andersen: "The Emperor's New Clothes", widely published and adapted for children.
21 This is a traditional proclamation, first used in Xvth century France. It was hailed during the ceremony of ascension of Charles VII as an announcement of the death of the previous and a praise of the glories of the new king *('Le roi est mort. Vive le roi!')*

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