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What is the Urban

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“The modern urban experiment was stopped before it even got started. We need to restore experimentation to urban thinking. We need to make a better machine, not destroy the machine. Experimentation needs to be revised.” -Albert Pope (Rice University)

“By a show of hands, how many of you think we’ve passed or will soon pass a tipping point, and that the world as we know it is doomed?” -James Scott (Yale University)

A brief stop through Iowa State University has left me compelled to reflect upon an invigorating intellectual-training-session hosted by a former professor, Ross Adams. The two day symposium 'What is the Urban? Registers of a World Interior' was organized around a simple question that underpins Adams’ research: what actually is urbanization and the urban? The 14 lectures were divided into four broad categories intended to cast light upon this condition: Urban as Interior, Urban as Factory, Urban as Strategy, and Urban as Becoming.

As the subtitle of the symposium suggests, the work of German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk provided an important entry point into the lectures and discussions through his notion of the ‘world interior’ as a metaphorical framework for understanding the spaces of global capitalism. The keynote speaker whose work was clearly structured upon Sloterdijk’s was Albert Pope (Rice University) with his lecture entitled “Airquake” – also the title of one of Sloterdijk’s shorter, ancillary texts. The primary concept drawn upon by Pope via Sloterdijk was that of ‘explication.’ In Airquake, also referred to by its alternative English title Terror from the Air, Sloterdijk outlines moments in human history where various ‘givens’ were foregrounded in a violent way – moments when latent background conditions became explicit and were henceforth no longer able to be taken for granted. The primary explication explored in the text is that of the emergence of gas warfare in WWI, namely the first instance of using mustard
gas as a means to kill an enemy not by attacking the enemies bodies' themselves, but by attacking the environment they exist within. This foregrounding of a previously safe environmental condition (in this case the 'pneumatic common', or the free breathable atmosphere that we all rely upon) is an important element in much of Sloterdijk's work, and part of the reason why it is so appealing to architects: it gives clearer terminology and gravitas to architecture as a truly 'immersive' art; designed environments as modus vivendi; spaces in which bodies have no choice but to soak in.

The concept of explication dovetails nicely with those of climate change, namely the way we come to know how limited and exclusive all of the things that we've taken for granted are, at least as humans in the developed West. Things like clean air, water, soil, food, etc. Indeed, Pope used Airquake in concert with a series of sobering statistics referring to climate change as a means to set the stage for the project he's been developing with students at Rice University in Houston.

The project was an extension of Pope's seminal work on post war housing in America, in particular his text entitled Ladders. His research looks at how the production of suburban fabrics creates a number of troubling contradictions and insidious patterns of organization; interpretations which by extension prove useful in illuminating the urban. Without doing a full on book review (and I have yet to read the book in its entirety), suffice it to say that while the 'ladder' is both an expansive and proliferating spatial logic, it also produces alienation and the effect of a closed diagram. As opposed to the grid-iron form of organization, where any individual circulating from point A to point B can be carried out in a multitude of ways, on a 'ladder' there is only one way to get from point A to point B. This places individuals in suburbia at the centre of a 'spiral' both physically and psychologically. In this way the spiral 'produces individualism'. post-war sense of individualism is directly related to how Americans find themselves “at the end of the cul-de-sac.” Rather than get into the specifics of what constitutes suburban vs. urban or rural space, one of the main points of the lecture was that many of American cities are constructed in a kind of ladder/suburban-spiral logic, and that, for Pope, we should consider returning to a hyper dense gridiron framework that has been proven to work in cities like New York, a truly 'green' city when considered in terms of efficiency and density. This simple idea was proposed in concert with a serious conviction regarding the use of sustainably forested materials and renewed considerations regarding time and the cycles of human life and domesticity. It was a sobering yet potent lecture that ultimately suggested a re-working of the modern architectural project in American cities.

Interestingly, the anecdote from Sloterdijk's Airquake that Pope didn't address, or perhaps didn't find relevant, warns of the peril that is at the heart of operating in the same modern way Pope endorsed. In a later chapter in the text, Sloterdijk explores another form of 'explication', this time in regards to Dada, Surrealism, and the work of Salvador Dali. These artistic movements were engaging in psychological explication, using art to foreground or bring to the foreground the subconscious in jarring and violent ways. Sloterdijk tells the story of Dali nearly killing himself in one of his surrealist performances: literally in one of his performative explications. This warning of performing an explication is akin to establishing a design project based on the new challenges humanity encounters with climate change. Design is always a performance, in the sense of it consisting of certain codes, rituals and conducts, and if we play too closely to the tenets of modernity we will inevitably exacerbate that which we seek to fix. This kind of modern thinking was found in many different forms throughout the symposium and is practiced by many designers and...
thinkers throughout the world. One of the guest speakers, James Scott, a political scientist and anthropologist from Yale, talked about humanity’s responsibility to fix climate change, as we are “the custodians of the earth”. This rhetoric is never far from discussions surrounding activism and climate change. As good as this sounds, and as responsible as certain parts of humanity should be held for destroying the ‘free gift’ that we today refer to as the Earth, it is this kind of thinking that reasserts the ecological sovereignty so foundational to the engineered crisis we now face. If we are truly humans who have domesticated the earth, have become its custodians, then we fail to recognize that we are embedded in the world as a process. Far from roaming on top of this noun-called-planet-Earth, humans are in fact what that very noun is doing. At least this is what I gathered from Heidegger when he said (and when Ross cited) “the world worlds…” The world is a verb - an old one at that - and in humanity’s meagre 200,000 years of existence, it is only recently that we’ve felt compelled to re-engineer or domesticate this process as we see fit. One of the questions that hovered over the round table discussion led by Pope was: how then do we act as architects if we can’t make a project out of the earth? The only reason we can speak of modernity as a clearly articulated attitude is because modernity had/has a project. The discussions at the symposium tripped up on this more than a few times, as the divide between modern and other attitudes were made known through a conceptual ‘flipping of the coin’: between rallying behind a design project and recognizing the flawed thinking embedded in that same project. Albert Pope preceded his lecture by saying we all need to change the way we live; that the coal companies are too quickly demonized and that there is actually a lot we can do from the get-go as humans. While this may be true, I can’t help but feel that a way forward in the Anthropocene as a project is precisely in seeing through the personal burden that we supposedly all share as ‘custodians of the earth’. It seems far more productive to blame Iowans, Houstonians and the coal companies (let off the hook by Pope) for the conditions they/we’ve produced, than all of humanity; if we all are responsible, then no one is. Only paralysis ensues. For me it was the notion of time as being thick, as requiring that buildings and building cycles be considered in duration longer than any handful of generations currently inhabiting the urban, which was the most promising aspect of Pope’s project and lecture. There is a long history of architects concerned with ‘cycles’ that would have provided an interesting supplement here. I immediately thought of the work of Herman Hertzberger, less so in the buildings he produced than in the ways he’s written about the life cycles of buildings versus the cycles of tenants, familial generations, seasons and rhythmic intervals more generally. Many of Pope’s diagrams echoed Hertzberger’s sketches, and some of his ideas about architects not just designing buildings but ‘designing cycles’ is exactly in the same mental space Hertzberger must have been in. Upon completing his lecture, Albert Pope led a brilliant question and answer session, one of the highlights of which was an answer to the questions about why architects, in all of their visual prowess and technical brilliance, didn’t show more experiential views of their proposals. Pope’s response was quite generous in the context of the talk, and it basically gravitated around the obvious ‘limits of the human sensorium’ (gesturing towards Sloterdijk’s notion of the microsphere or autogenous ‘bubble’ of every individual) implying that a concern with human experience in the construction of the urban is also integral to the production of suburbia, of ‘ladder’ configurations; that the scale of the human, when paired with the technologies of infrastructure, aids in the proliferation of the urban. For Pope, as for most architects, there is a professional obligation towards thinking beyond the individual experience toward the loose organization of multitudinous experiences. In many ways Albert Pope’s lecture
was indicative of the symposium as a whole. The event generated insightful discussions and exchanges between internationally renowned scholars in an often overlooked yet undeniably urban locale. Presentations were performed with tremendous oral and visual finesse, and the diversity of both content and forms of research was invigorating.

[If I had to summarize the other 13 lectures into concepts that had my antenna buzzing, it would read as follows (as regurgitated from my furious note taking):
It was clear from the symposium – in the lectures, coffee breaks, dinners and roundtables – that when we were talking about the urban we were also in part talking about power, space and colonialism, a seemingly seamless space (naturally filled with holes); and when we were talking about urbanization, we were often discussing the folding of a given world into new institutional structures, into pre-existing taxonomies; restructuring forms of government; rearrangement; diagrams of automata; a decontextualizing affective force, de- and re-territorializing land into machines of circulation and domesticity; a kind of ‘underlying reverberation’, a continuous ‘proliferation of non-subsumable details’; a theft, in the form of auto-construction; a thick, slippery force, made known through its violent inscription…In a manner characteristic of all shifting signifiers, the urban became a distorted reflection of every topic into one another, producing an impossible polyphonic unity.

A huge kudos to Ross, Ali, and the department for pulling it all off. What is the Urban? will undoubtedly form an important reference for future, albeit dizzying explications.
Eco-pragmatics and morality in architecture.
Sloterdijk’s anecdote raises an interesting relationship: that between ecological crises and surrealism.
Certainly we see a lot of defiance today in the face of overwhelming evidence surrounding climate change (or perhaps more accurately, climate weirding).

The eco-pragmatic architect, technological emancipator, hinges upon a particular defiance regarding notions of scale. It is easy for an ecological imbalance to be corrected at the scale of an aquarium or building, but to assume that its application at larger scales, its capacity to ‘scale-up’ (in business terms), will happen in a smooth, frictionless manner is simply false.

Nikos Katsikis’ depiction of broad patterns of uneven development and the question of history in the Planetary Urbanization agenda; Charles Rice and his reading of ‘new spatial correlates’, using Portman to craft a genealogy of the street, the unnerving sensation everyone felt with the question “why do we still imagine that what are being created are still streets?”; Antonio Petrov’s retelling of Bruno Taut and his adolescent Nietzsche notations, ‘irregular landscapes of empathy’, of Zarathustra and the morality of transparency, of Sorgel and Atlantropa, Ernst and Europe; Max Viatori’s talk on ocean mapping in Peru, on double internalities/externalities and the class politics associated with seemingly simple coastal ‘offsets’ (which makes one think of the political potentialities of every banal AutoCAD command: OFFSET, FILLET, HATCH); the use of classical forms deployed by Design Earth, the way complex forms merely engender complex and less useful discussions, of designing ‘strategies of care’; Jane Ronerude and the politics of empathy in affordable housing in Des Moines; Kenny Cupers analysis of the ‘internal colonization’ of post WWI German South Africa, the coupling of energy and territory in the production of hinterlands; Ayala Levin’s unveiling of the false depiction of linear rationales in otherwise circular logics, cybernetics and the invention of the region in the 1965 plan for Sierra Leone; Marwan Ghandour’s history of Iowan landscapes, intimations of productive atomization and a disconcerting inability to visually identify ‘the rural’ (anticipating the title of the next symposium?); Abdul Maliq Simone’s performative description of autoconstruction, making ways of life, inscription and inoperability in the black city; Alice Randall’s brilliant production of urban imaginaries through Ziggy Johnson, being imagined into a city, the erotic freedom of hotels as a counterpoint to contemporary domesticity; Barbara Ching and the fine line between advertisement and anarchy at Iowa State and american campuses.]