Company Town
To Provide and To Separate
An Open Letter to Giorgio Agamben
Vittorio Gregotti

Le Corbusier visits Zlín in 1935. From Vittorio Gregotti, “Company town: provvedere e separare. Lettera aperta a Giorgio Agamben,” *Rassegna* 70, (1997): 4-5.

TRANSLATOR’S NOTE

This letter, written by the architect Vittorio Gregotti to the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, was originally published in 1997 in the Italian Journal Rassegna,01 which Gregotti directed from 1979 to 1998. It is perhaps the very first time that a practicing architect and theorist discussed the concept of “biopolitics” in relation to architecture and urban planning.

Gregotti’s letter to Agamben served as the preface to the journal’s monographic issue devoted to the “Company Town” curated by Federico Bucci. Although Gregotti’s letter bears the title “Company Town,” the content is not about this type of settlement but more about what the company town implies, namely the issues of providing and separating space. The issue of Rassegna dealt with both new and old cases of such cities and unveiled the spatial, political, and ideological forces steering their development. Later, Gregotti included this letter in his book, Diciassette lettere sull’architettura (2000), which compiled seventeen of his letters addressing architecture and contemporary issues to various prominent figures of Italian culture.

In “Company Town: To Provide and to Separate,” Gregotti correlates the architectural practice with Agamben’s third thesis from Homo Sacer (1995). He draws a parallel between Agamben’s notion of the camp and the discipline of architecture, in which the modern architect becomes a key figure in “an unconscious preparation for the advent of a global bi-

01 Vittorio Gregotti, “Company town: provvedere e separare. Lettera aperta a Giorgio Agamben,” Rassegna 70, (1997): 4-5.

opolitics."[02] Gregotti discusses how architects have unconsciously translated into practice Agamben's idea of the camp, both through the concept of isolation and provision of specialized spatial domains.

Gregotti recalls that isolation is an old way of organizing the territory, through which the figure of the architect plays a distinct role by reproducing the "exception" as an ordinary design action. Such action constitutes "a tangible architectural rule" for organizing the human settlement. Here, the notion of exception is expressed in the "morphological and productive ways of organizing the city" and is oriented towards satisfying the inhabitants' biological life—what the Ancient Greeks called zoè.

Anna Karla De Almeida Santos

Le Corbusier visiting the company town of Dalmine, Italy during the CIAM of Bergamo in 1949. From Archivio Nino Zucchelli, Dono Lina Zucchelli Valsecchi, 3, 2, 16, GAMeC, Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Bergamo, Bergamo.

TO PROVIDE AND TO SEPARATE: AN OPEN LETTER TO GIORGIO AGAMBEN

First published in: *Rassegna* 70 (1997): 4–5.

Translated from the Italian by Anna Karla De Almeida Santos

Dear Giorgio Agamben,

It seems to me that for those involved with architecture there are at least two ways to interpret, and to take into account—which is a different thing—the third thesis that concludes your book Homo Sacer. In it, you state: "Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental

02. Ibid, 5.

biopolitical paradigm of the West,"02 a thesis which, as you continue a few lines later, "throws a sinister light on the models by which social sciences, sociology, urban studies and architecture today are trying to conceive and organize the public space of the world's cities."03

The first way concerns the notion of isolation, which you define as the operation of something that is included only through exclusion (but does this only concern modernism, or could we go much further in the history of architecture and find multiple examples of it?). The second concerns the tradition of modernism, which, in spite of its redistribution goal, has sought to make the satisfaction of elementary needs an ideal basis (and a justification, perhaps) for its design actions. In doing so modernism has reduced social living to biological life.

Here we face an issue that you highlight when commenting on Carl Schmitt, "the state of exception became the commonplace."04 This is because the act of tackling conditions of absolute indigence (which underlies many crucial nodes of modernism in architecture, for example the principles of Existenzminimum or the separation of territorial functions in the Athens Charter) puts forward morphological and productive ways of organizing the city which are established as rules. Of these rules, only their reductive character was transmitted, while their origin has been forgotten.

Such an attitude uses isolation (from history, traditions, geographical context interpreted in purely climatic terms, diversity of customs and behavior) to emphasize the elements of the zoé by separating them from those of the bios. Or rather, it is believed that only by satisfying those, the life of the group can be constituted with all the ambiguity of an infinite prospect of such satisfaction, and thus of the voluntary maintenance of the collectivity in a state of need. Then, institutions of power find it much more convincing to maintain this never-ending state of need, rather than through the condition of poverty, by moving the level of need towards consumption.

The notion of "isolation" also has close kinships with the rise of scientific thinking, at least as far as architecture is concerned. In order to advance itself, this process must separate a phenomenon in order to make the study of its features possible. Only then can it question how these interact with the context and the state of things.

Isolating, moreover, is an ancient way to reorganize, recompose and make compatible again the relationship between functions, without these causing mutual damage to each other.

It should not be forgotten that the inhabitants of the working-class neighborhoods of modern European suburbs, whose concentration into "ghettos" has been endlessly and rightly criticized by sociologists and urban planners, comes into being because the state stipulates that only certain people with special legal characteristics "have the right" to inhabit and access those forms of property which the market does not allow them to own or use.

Such a right, which is the state's duty to provide housing for those citizens who are unable to do so for themselves, not only cuts out and isolates them but establishes norms and customs within the camp.

02 Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 181.
03 Ibid., 181.
04 Ibid., 11. Agamben's original quote read as "Carl Schmitt's definition of sovereignty [...] became a commonplace." However, in this letter Vittorio Gregotti replaced "definition of sovereignty" with "the state of exception."

Controversies over the aspects of social degeneration in large working-class neighborhoods are made evident by their large scale, where concentration enhances internal biopolitical differences: the young against the old, the use of free time to engage in anti-social behavior, the organizing of foreignness vis-à-vis the characters that define the place as a camp. As long as these camps were invested with proletarian pride, albeit with its baggage of false consciousness, that character of exception necessary to the social dynamic was still present. As such, they were places of resistance or points of departure for the conquest of the city. However, when these camps turn into a stable place of isolation, the degradation makes the biopolitical character of the settlement evident.

Moreover, the question of social hygiene, typical of the second half of the nineteenth century, also has a twofold development path. On the one hand, one finds a political humanitarianism that is concerned with giving stability to working-class labor in the large urban concentration. On the other hand, one finds the modern artist's claim for a radical restart: the redistribution of sunshine and greenery in Le Corbusier's thought can be seen as a combination of the two. Furthermore, the insistence of many protagonists of modernism on the "primitive needs of man" could thus be read as an unconscious preparation for the advent of a global biopolitics, in an attempt to remove people from the crust of historicism and styles, from the "false needs of the imitation of bourgeois education."

In a symmetrical way, more affluent social groups also build their own "camps" to ensure certain privileges for the group connected to services: security in the face of certain crimes and the preservation of the social homogeneity of group members. The long chapter titled, "Disney Takes Command," in Diane Ghirardo's recent book, Architecture after Modernism, paints an accurate portrait of the social importance and corrupting capacity of this phenomenon. Even the illusory reconstruction (similar to that of some temporary tourist communities) of open space as public space is mentioned in the chapter. However, it is a form of public space that is selected and policed. Moreover, the issue of the crisis of open space as public space, and public space as privatized and policed space (see, for example, its reduction in the transit spaces of large shopping malls), has often been addressed by urban planners and sociologists. An example is Richard Sennett's book The Conscience of the Eye. In it, the author lays out a thesis about the decline of public space as a fear of exposure to the other and the social. He locates the origin of this fear in Augustinian Christianity and its separation of the inner and outer experience. Our faith begins in an oppositional relationship with places: if experience is indispensable to faith, the feelings dictated by it must be progressively abandoned in order to reach the truth. The signs of collective life that were firmly visible in the Greek city are thus gradually abandoned, and our city is incapable of fully expressing the complexity and possibilities of modern life.

However, what distinguishes our mutual activities is that, for you, each discovery opens up a field of research, while, for me, each discovery poses questions in which research must become an act and a proposal. Hence, this is what it is for us both to make and present the act of being in its provisional truth.

Thus, what does it mean to keep in mind "that at the very center lies the same bare life […] that defined the biopolitics of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century,"[05] for those like us who are concerned with the meaningful organization of spaces and settlement forms? Or rather, in what ways do "this hidden point of intersection between the ju-

05 Ibid., 181.

ridico-institutional and the biopolitical models of power"06 (and its eventual unraveling) organize the city and the territory? How does this hidden point represent itself within it?

One could easily respond negatively by listing not only the dysfunctions of the city and the territory, the unbridled urbanization of the countryside that renders indistinguishable the ancient categories of urban organization of settlements; but also and more profoundly, the total detachment between urbs and civitas and the impotence on the part of our disciplines to nobly represent any civic aspiration, except in the most degraded forms of architectural production as a mechanical mirror and adherent response to the mass homogeneity of behaviors and values that are the same in modern society. Besides, I do not believe in the accidentality of the process of progressive prominence in the social imagination of the "ecological question" as a direct projection of biological life of a subject into a political organization.

Here, there is an ancient crossroad for our art forms. Either it is to represent a condition and its contradictions as comprehensively as possible; or to turn critically toward these conditions with alternative imagination. However, it is necessary to realize that these two ways are nothing but faces of the same coin. This means that the acquisition of the critical consciousness of a condition—when it illuminates reality from a different point of view, or rather sheds light on some seemingly distant connections that have remained in the shadows—delivers itself, even if indirectly, new materials not only to reflect on space and on relationships but to the actual architectural construction.

This does not mean to simply construct the illusory scenography of alternative behaviors. Rather, it means to set some obstacles, and some questioning uncertainties, for the behavior that is considered natural through mass repetition and diffusion, in what you call the "post-democratic spectacular societies."07 It is clear that these societies require a twofold engagement from architecture. On the one hand, they require the concentration of all creative imagination on the singular artifact, product, and provisional monument at the same time. On the other hand, they require the constitution of a morphological calligraphy that continually shifts its characters while erasing the immediately preceding conclusions, while inducing all friction and duration to a minimum. Therefore, freeing the construction of the city and the territory from all intentionality, if not the merely productive one. It is a matter of assigning to this construction a task that oscillates between nostalgia and infraction (still the exception) by means of a futuristic technology of the needs of biological life. This can be achieved by avoiding all relational rootedness and reducing urban design to a set of singular artifacts, in a process that brings to mind those "technologies of the self by which processes of subjectivization bring the individual to bind himself to his own identity and consciousness and, at the same time, to an external power."08

In our case, what post-democratic spectacular societies demand of architecture is the connection of phone and logos, not their articulation. Bare life and norms can then enter that "threshold of indistinction"09 that is well represented by the generalized aestheticization of the everyday. This promotes the "dislocating localization"10 of the camp even where it does not present the obvious characters of separateness and exception. Indeed, exception has become so generalized that is has mutated into con-

06 Ibid., 6.
07 Ibid., 10.
08 Ibid., 5.
09 Ibid., 18.
10 Ibid., 175.

crete rules in the making of architecture, even as a necessity for clarity of the message and professional survival.

The path of confrontation between conditions and foundations of one's actions, that some of us pursue, probably has only the critical consciousness that you speak of regarding the theses of Leo Strauss and Hanna Arendt. It is a form of resistance then, rather than an alternative. Yet, it is clear that "There is no return from the camps to classical politics,"[11] even for our work. This means that it is not so much the relationship between needs, functions and forms that must be questioned for us as architects, but rather the perspective of liberation that modernism thought to pursue through this relationship.

Vittorio Gregotti

11 Ibid., 188.

AUTHOR

Vittorio Gregotti (1927-2020) was an Italian architect and theorist. His atelier, Gregotti Associati, founded in 1974 was responsible for renown urban projects such as the University of Calabria, near Cosenza and the 'Bicocca' district in Milan. He was editor-in-chief of the architectural journal *Casabella* between 1982 and 1995, and of the thematic journal *Rassegna*. Gregotti published many books among which *Il Terrirorio dell'architettura* (1966) is the most well known and influential.