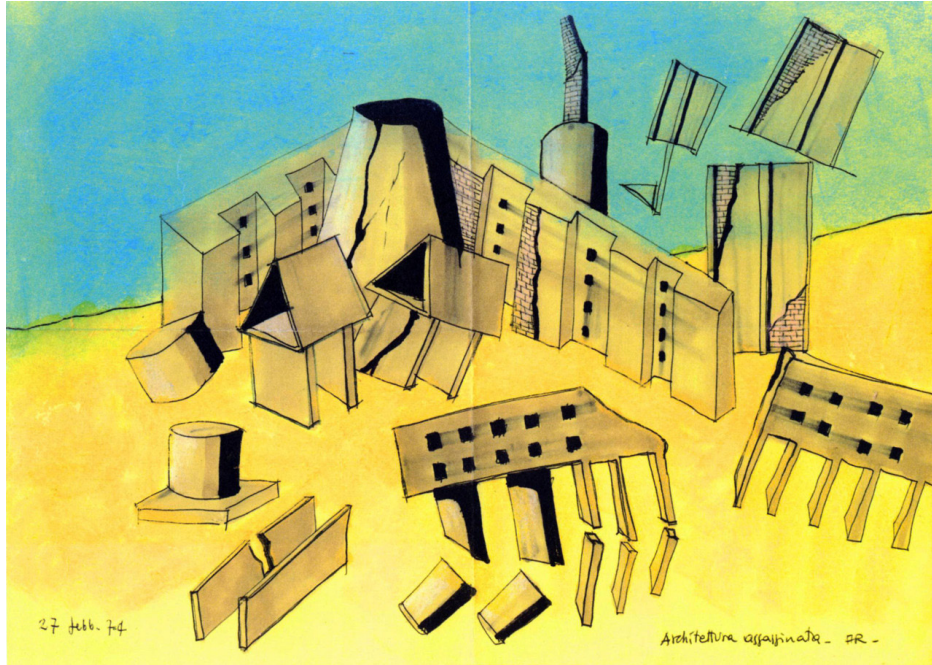


The Architecture of the City (in the Age of its Financial Reproducibility)

Pedro Levi Bismarck



Aldo Rossi, *l'Architecture Assassinée*, 1974.

Politics constitutes the problem of choices. Who ultimately chooses the image of a city if not the city itself — and always and only through its political institutions.⁰¹

Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*

It is said that, during a dustbin workers' strike that left Paris filled with rubbish, rats, and piles of putrefied matter, Samuel Beckett phoned Emil Cioran every day to take a short walk, always remarking with "youthful joy" that "Paris had never looked so beautiful."⁰² For many of us, this Beckettian Paris is something from a distant past. Nevertheless, until very recently, this was also Porto's everyday life, as we could walk through empty streets and abandoned buildings. Today, this too seems an ever-distant remembrance, as houses became hotels and old inhabitants were replaced by an army of ferocious tourists. Porto, as its mayor proudly asserts, is now a *brand*. And just some years after the 2008 financial crisis and real estate collapse, we are on the verge of unimaginable property and rent values. The buildings of the old, poor city center are by now Sotheby's valuable assets, while residents are sent further and further away. And yet, throughout the world, we are receiving similar reports.

What happened, then? If this transformation is necessarily linked to a specific set of local circumstances, what I intend to understand here is how neoliberalism and high finance shattered the fundamental conditions of an entire model of city and co-existence that defined our urban form of life since the end of the Second World War. Gentrification, touristification,

⁰¹ Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, trans. Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1982 [1966]), 162. [Originally published as *L'Architettura della città* (Padova: Marsilio, 1966)]

⁰² Félix de Azúa, "Un refugiado en casa," *El País* (June 21, 1995).

and real estate speculation exposed how cities became, slowly over recent decades, the fundamental space of capital accumulation. What I will try to argue in this article is how financial neoliberalism has been building an entirely different *city*—if we can still use this word—but also how this set of transformations has been affecting architecture itself, questioning at the same time its specific role in the political economy of neoliberalism.

LA FINANCE, C'EST LE VOL!

One should see neoliberalism not just as another expression of capitalism, but as the political and social composition of an entire process of financialization of the economy, where the accumulation of capital is made outside traditional productive processes, above all via rent and debt. As the economist Carlo Vercellone says, “Profits become rent!”⁰³ This is a process that started in the seventies, when the crisis of the Fordist model of production and the inability to generate surplus value purely from labor, led to the development of these financial systems.

A paradigmatic example is how real estate, as early as the seventies, was the key to the expansion of the global capital market, testing a whole new political linkage between state, finance, and society. The rhetoric of home ownership as the dream of the middle class was a political and moral apparatus, not just to legitimize the creation of the housing financial system, but also to create a consensus about the dismantling of public housing policies and the instruments of social security, making housing the protective stronghold of the family and its savings outside of state control.

The popular capitalism of Thatcherism’s small property owners was nothing more than the popular capitalism of the indebted man. The right to buy meant the right to be indebted. As Maurizio Lazzarato argues in the book *The Making of the Indebted Man*, not only are national debts a creation of and a key mechanism for the expansion of financial capital, but neoliberalism is a “huge mechanism for managing private and public debt.”⁰⁴ It is, therefore, a “debt economy” whose paradigm is not the idyllic trade between free and equal property owners, but an entire apparatus of debt based in an asymmetrical relationship of power and in the submission of the debtor to the creditor.

For this reason, one can speak of neoliberalism as, above all, a political-institutional framework that legitimizes, operationalizes, and reproduces a machine of exploitative power whose function is to ensure the expansion of finance through the dissemination and generalization of mechanisms of rent and debt extraction: capturing new markets, assimilating new assets and, finally, binding the state—privatizing public services— and the individual—privatizing reproduction and social production—ever more tightly. As Proudhon would say today, *La finance, c'est le vol!* (*Finance is theft!*)

LA DIALECTIQUE DE L'ABSURDE

However, if we can talk about a neoliberal metropolis it is not just because neoliberalism reproduces its own spatialization—linked to its financial processes—but because it advances a whole new political economy of urbanization that breaks the link between the three key elements that produced, for more than seventy years, what one could call the social-democratic city: that is, a model of political organization (the welfare state

03 Carlo Vercellone, as cited in Christian Marazzi, *The Violence of Financial Capitalism* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 32.

04 Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 23.

and Keynesian policies), a model of production (Fordism), and a model of territorial configuration (nation-state).

First, in the social-democratic city, Keynesian policies provided a regulatory architecture that managed capitalist spatial dynamics in order to stabilize and conceal capitalism's endemic conflicts and contradictions: the "*stato-piano*" ("the state as planner" or "state as the plan"), as Antonio Negri lucidly summarizes.⁰⁵ Likewise, the processes linked to social reproduction—housing, public services, infrastructure—were an essential part of the city's expansion. The financialization of the economy had two consequences: on the one hand, it put an end to all policies that sought to promote social and spatial equity; on the other, social reproduction organized through the state ceased to be the predominant element in defining urban scale. An example of this was the suppression of public policies that defended housing as a social good and the legislative changes that made urbanization a key mechanism in the expansion of financial capital *via* ever larger real estate schemes. The state thus went from regulator to consummate agent of market interests, promoting privatization and gentrification and creating larger social and spatial inequalities.⁰⁶ Therefore, one can say that the neoliberal metropolis corresponds to the exact moment when the mechanisms of social reproduction, like housing or healthcare, are fully transferred from the welfare state to the financial systems as an essential function of their business.

Second, the development of the market, as well as new forms of value production, profoundly changed the role of cities. But if today the metropolis is the place of production rather than the factory, as Toni Negri argues, this is not only due to the multiplication of new forms of cognitive labor and immaterial production, but because the very "life of citizens is entirely absorbed into the mechanism of production," particularly in the mechanism of finance.⁰⁷ The neoliberal metropolis is thus a gigantic machine for multiplying financial capital: it is an integrated and organized spatial structure aimed at enhancing the apparatuses of surplus extraction via debt and rent.

For example, what are gentrification and urban tourism if not processes in which at stake is the multiplication of the value of a commodity, the city or part of it, by other means, branding and marketing, producing symbolic and cultural capital that offers massive profits without major costs to the owners—since renewal programs are undertaken by the state on everyone's behalf. But the creation of the housing financial system is also an instructive example: by submitting housing rights to "mathematical risk models [...] in which the social right to housing is artificially subordinated to the private right to make a profit," as Christian Marazzi notes, a house is converted into a financial asset of real estate investment funds to generate profit in the infinite game of speculation.⁰⁸ It is worth noting that these are processes that growing deregulation sped up and the result of which—as one can see in cities like Porto or Lisbon—is to leave buildings unoccupied in areas of greatest speculation, awaiting successive increases in value—something that, far from being paradoxical, only reveals "*la dialectique de l'absurde*" of the financial processes that produce today's urban form: it is a kind of urban burnout where a building is subjected to

05 Antonio Negri, "Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State post-1929" in *Revolution Retrieved: Writings on Marx, Keynes, Capitalist Crisis and New Social Subjects (1967–83)* (London: Red Notes, 1988), 7. This is a revised and expanded version of the original Italian article published in *Contropiano* in 1968 ("La teoria capitalistica dello stato nel '29, John M. Keynes") in which the concept "Stato-piano" is not yet fully formulated. It will probably appear later in the original draft of another decisive text, "Crisi dello stato-piano, comunismo e organizzazione rivoluzionaria", published in the journal *Potere Operaio*, in 1971.

06 The work of Neil Brenner is key to understand this process. See for example: Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck, and Nick Theodore, "Urbanismo neoliberal. La ciudad y el imperio de los mercados" (2011), in *El Mercado contra la ciudad*, Observatorio Metropolitano de Madrid eds. (Traficante de Sueños, 2015): 211–244. The original English version can be found in: "Neoliberal urbanism: Cities and the Rule of Markets" in *The New Blackwell Companion to the City* (Oxford: Blackwell-Wiley, 2011), 15–25.

07 Antonio Negri, "Metropolis and Multitude," in *From the Factory to the Metropolis*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 57.

08 Christian Marazzi, *The Violence of Financial Capitalism*, 40.

a sort of intense speculative exploitation in the shortest time possible.⁰⁹

So, the “production of space”—to use a well-known concept coined by Henri Lefebvre—is not simply in the hands of the financial systems, but rather has become the key element in the reproduction of finance. But this means that the financialization of the city thus corresponds to the financialization of the form of life of the neoliberal subject. In that sense, the biological and social life of the neoliberal metropolis’s individuals is integrated and directly indexed, as never before, to the circuits of global capital and their untimely rhythms. Life is capital and capital is life. The metropolis is, thus, the *becoming-finance* of life: man in the era of its financial reproducibility.

Third, the Fordist system of economic production and the Keynesian political framework were based on a set of relationships of scale—country, region, city. In other words, they had their own territorialization, which neoliberalism disturbed. The metropolitan scale is defined more by its correlation to the global than the national. One can see how cities compete anxiously between themselves to capture foreign investment, totally assimilating corporate language and management. Cities are no longer just commodities sold on the global market as Best European destinations, they must be brands. And we, as citizens, are reduced to endless profitable assets.

But there is another fundamental factor that decisively defines the scale and structural violence of these current processes of transformation. If the bourgeoisie, as Franco “Bifo” Berardi writes, “was a heavily territorialized class—the class of the ‘bourg,’ of the city,” “connected to material assets,” and “bound to a territory and community,” on the contrary, the new “financial class [...] has no bond to the territory or material production because its power is entirely founded on the total abstraction of digital finance.”¹⁰ The financialization of capital thus marks the “end of the old bourgeoisie” and opens the door to the existence of a space whose minimum unit of production is the algorithm. It is not just the reduction of the territory to the contractual language of finance, but the fact that finance turns the territory into a virtual and accountable abstraction. And as Berardi remarks, financial abstraction is social abstraction: “the reduction of social life to the implications of financial algorithms.”¹¹

To sum up: we can’t address neoliberalism without understanding that high finance is essentially a way of obtaining profits outside the traditional productive processes. Capital accumulation is no longer reduced to labor-capital relations—that is, inside the factory gates—but extends itself to the entire space of private and social life, that is, the house and the city. Healthcare, education, housing, social security, and social life are the new battlefields of capital warfare. Consequently, the neoliberal metropolis should be defined as the coherent and strategic dispossession of life through a sophisticated network of apparatuses that integrate and capture the whole of social production and biological life in the abstract and privatizing circuits of finance.

09 “La dialectique de l’absurde” is an expression taken from Manfredo Tafuri’s essay on skyscrapers, “La dialectique de l’absurde: Europe-USA. Les avatars de l’idéologie du gratte-ciel 1918–1974” in “Vie et mort du gratte-ciel” published in *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, n. 178 (1975): 1–16.

10 Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 51.

11 *Ibid.*, 31.

THE PRIVATIZATION OF ARCHITECTURE

THE ARCHITECT AS *HOMME DE LETTRES*

But if neoliberalism puts at stake the key conditions that defined the social-democratic city model, one should also take in consideration that neoliberalism dismantled, in recent decades, the entire network of relations, protocols, and institutions that defined architecture as a field of research and production on the built environment and the city. We are so used to this absolute interlock between architecture and city that we forgot that it was not only architecture that produced a field of research about the city, but it was, from the very beginning, the city, the social-democratic city, that gave shape to the architectural discipline across the twentieth century. One could even say that this model of the city invented architecture as we know it, that it invented the architect as we still imagine them: the architect as a liberal professional. This figure of the architect was simultaneously a technician and an intellectual, an artist and an *homme de lettres*—not by chance is this Le Corbusier’s adopted designation—endowed with a vaguely humanistic and universal conception of architecture, but always assuring, even if in an unstable way, a bond between architectural practice and discipline, between *desenho* (drawing, design) and *desígnio* (purpose), following Nuno Portas’s perceptive formula, producing a permanent and public critical reflection about their own work.¹² One can easily remember Aldo Van Eyck, Alison and Peter Smithson, Jaap Bakema, Vittorio Gregotti, and Aldo Rossi, just to mention a few.¹³

This was a permanent state of reflection and critique that sustained the large number of public operations in which architects were involved—social housing, urban planning, infra-structures, public and civic centers, and cultural and educational facilities. Operations through which the *stato-piano* assured its role not only in the city post-war reconstruction, but in the general expansion of urbanization. But mostly, the liberal architect worked as a kind of public mediator, a public intellectual, endowed with a certain humanist vocation—as Aldo van Eyck’s rebel humanism—assuming its engagement in building housing for every human and giving shape to the city of all humans.¹⁴ ¹⁵ Nonetheless, it was a delicate position if not a paradoxical one, as it reflected the contradictory nature of the state itself and its social-democratic reformist project. That is, it was a difficult balance between the effort to dominate, control, and organize capitalistic forces through the “ideology of the plan”—through the ideology of the project—and its permanent fall into a state-disciplinary apparatus where the violent effects of capitalistic space production were not so much resolved as they were concealed.¹⁶

If the seventies signaled the critique of this production of space organized through the capitalist bourgeois state as Lefebvre denounced, and the critique of architecture’s ambivalent role in these reformistic process-

12 One can say that architect, urbanist, writer, and professor Nuno Portas is a paradigmatic example of the social-democratic architect. He produced prolific work and thought that goes from architecture to the territory. As Secretary of State for Housing and Urban Planning in the immediate aftermath of the Portuguese Democratic Revolution, he was the responsible for launching the revolutionary social housing program SAAL (1974–1976).

13 An expanded discussion on this essay’s subject can be found in: Pedro Levi Bismarck, *Architecture and “Pessimism”*: *On the Political Condition of Architecture* (Porto: Stones against diamonds, 2020).

14 See Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, *Aldo van Eyck. Humanist Rebel* (Rotterdam: Nai010 Publishers, 1999).

15 This (rebel) humanism is a condition that Aldo van Eyck regularly evokes in multiple ways in his writings and conferences. For example: “Get closer to the center of human reality and build its counterform — for each man and all men (today the architect is the ally of everyman or no man)” in Van Eck’s essay, “Beyond Visibility: About Place and Occasion, The Inbetween Realm and Labyrinthian Clarity,” in *The Situationist Times*, no. 4 (1963): 79. Aldo van Eyck would later go so far as to say, in a rather heated debate with Manfredo Tafuri in 1976, that “Humanism has just started. And an architect is either a humanist or is not an architect at all.”—a sentence that condenses Aldo van Eyck’s intense, poetical, but almost desperate, intervention in the debate, as a kind of swan song regarding an entire model of practicing architect already in crisis. See *Europa / America. Architetture urbane, alternative suburbane*, ed. Franco Raggi (Venice: Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia, 1978), 179.

16 Manfredo Tafuri, trans. Barbara La Penta, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge: MIT Press 1979). [Originally published as *Progetto e Utopia* (Bari: Laterza, 1973)]

es, as Manfredo Tafuri lucidly pointed out in *Architecture and Utopia*, the same decade also marked, as we have seen, the slow dissolution of the state as a structural element of urban life's organization.

THE ARCHITECT AS ENTREPRENEUR

The absence of a significant theoretical production in architecture regarding the city clearly expresses a growing distance between these two realms. Apart from Rem Koolhaas, none of the other star-system architects contributed with any meaningful reflection to the subject. If the reason for this cannot be separated from the gradual insignificance of architects in current urban processes, the devaluation of this body of knowledge is certainly linked with the loss of any commitment regarding the public realm, whose relevance is dismissed at a time where urbanization is mostly, as we have seen, a function of high finance expansion and public democratic institutions are captured by debt and market rationale.

This is why we can say that neoliberalism *privatizes* architecture: not only because we are dealing substantially with private commissions, but because neoliberalism dispossesses architecture's own public condition. Architecture as a discipline and body of knowledge is reduced to the realm of the profession, that is, its theoretical problems concern solely professional and technical management issues. The meaning of an action performed at the service of a collective, in the transformation and construction of a common space, that is, *architecture as a project*, falls in the total capture of the architect by the fierce logic of the market.

Well, if the social-democratic city produced the architect-as-liberal-professional, one can say that the architect-as-entrepreneur is the true figure of the neoliberal metropolis: an individual for whom architecture can only be a provision of services, a *private* professional exercise. If the first corresponded to the figure of the architect-as-humanist, the second is certainly the full realization of the architect-as-nihilist. The atelier is a company or even a brand; the end point is the market, not the city. There is no time for bold experimentation, nor problematic guidelines regarding its operations, much less for public or theoretical debates on architecture and the city. The architect's intellectual care is directed to the acquisition of knowledge, or better yet, know-how, that can help him survive in the international market of private commission: branding, marketing, and networking are the new daily mottos of today's architectural practice.

THE ARCHITECTURAL OBJECT

That's the reason why one can claim that, instead of a conflict between theory and practice—*the end of theory*, as so often has been remarked—we face a conflict between project and object. That is, the real conflict that crosses the architectural discipline is between two very different ways of seeing and practicing architecture. If the project was the key formula that organized the relation between practice and knowledge inside the social-democratic set of public programs and buildings (defining the whole group of concerns that constitute its corpus and the group of skills and tasks of the architect as a public technician), the architectural object is the conceptual apparatus that articulates the relation between professional practice and discipline in the framework of the neoliberal metropolis, fully inscribing architecture and the architect in the rules of the private commission.

Architectural practice is, thus, validated and legitimized as the production of "non-referential" entities—following Valerio Olgiati's astute formula—as private isolated pieces removed from any functional, economic,

or social context.¹⁷ The architectural object occupies, thus, an ambiguous and truly surreal position as it seems to belong to the city only on the condition of remaining outside of it. Or, rather, it is included in the city through its own exclusion.¹⁸ The object is, therefore and precisely, the apparatus that territorializes the neoliberal market organization model throughout the city. Recalling Georg Simmel's essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life," we can say that like all the other "things" in the metropolis, the architectural object seems also to "float with the same specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money."¹⁹

The neoliberal metropolis is, hence, an open composition of isolated pieces that are mutually exclusive, configuring a continuous, undifferentiated, and abstract space of exchange equivalence. In some ways, the current formalistic architectural speech that reduces the city into an abstract group of formal relations reflects the material condition of a co-existence between entities that can only be formal. As the inhabitants of the metropolis depicted by Simmel were in the peculiar position, for the first time ever, of passing long minutes or even hours with strangers during their daily commutes, the architectural objects also live together in so far as they share their own isolation, strangeness, and indifference towards each other.²⁰ Following Simmel, we could identify those objects as *blasé*, as their relationship with the metropolis is one of absolute indifference towards the common world that they share.²¹ This multitude of solitary non-referential entities, in co-isolation and mutual exclusion, constitutes the social and political environment of the metropolitan objects and their inhabitants.

As non-referential entities, without exterior, purely private, dispossessed of any public attribute, these objects create a space radically different from the city. The "space between"—to evoke again Alison & Peter Smithson—the "charged social space" of the city, is converted into the empty and abstract space of the moving stream of money.²² The object doesn't establish any relation with anything other than itself. More than non-referential, it is indeed self-referential. There is no project, not only because there is no planning—as a way to control capitalist production as well its antagonistic forces—but because the form becomes an end in itself and not a means to bond urban and domestic realms.

On the other hand, by giving property a perfectly well-defined, circumscribed, and accountable geometric space and, of course, a fashionable representation, the object attaches to it a directly accountable exchange value. In this way, one could say that the architectural object functions as a veritable apparatus for the privatization of life: a privatization that doesn't entail giving the individual control over their life, but precisely the opposite, as a way of dispossessing them of their own domestic life, assimilating the household more and more deeply into the abstract moving stream of money. As a *machine-à-privatizer*, the architectural object converts property into asset, extends the space of domestic and social reproduction throughout the city and, simultaneously, inscribes it as a fundamental unity of endless financial expansion. That is, it converts housing-as-social-right to housing-as-eternal-debt. Following Maurizio Lazzarato,

17 Valerio Olgiati and Markus Breitschmid, *Non-Referential Architecture* (Simonett & Baer, 2018).

18 If something like a history of this "architectural object" could be made, one would have to take into consideration the decisive contribution of Manfredo Tafuri in "*L'Architecture dans le Boudoir: The Language of Criticism and the Criticism of Language*." As Tafuri writes, as early as 1974, "there is little doubt that there exists a widespread attitude that is intent on repossessing the unique character of the object by removing it from its economic and functional contexts and highlighting it as an exceptional event—and hence a surrealistic one—by placing it in parentheses with the flux of objects generated by the production system. It is possible to speak of these acts as an *architecture dans le boudoir*." Manfredo Tafuri, "*L'Architecture dans le Boudoir: The Language of Criticism and the Criticism of Language*," *Oppositions*, 3 (1974): 53.

19 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" in ed. Neil Leach, *Rethinking Architecture* (London: Routledge, 1997), 73 [original version: *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben* (1903)].

20 Georg Simmel as quoted in Walter Benjamin, "On some motifs in Baudelaire" in *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections* (Schocken Books, New York, 1969), 191. [Walter Benjamin, *Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire* (1939)].

21 The *blasé* character is one of the essential features of the metropolis *geistleben* depicted by Simmel: an *indifference* toward the *differences* between things under the absolute realm of the exchange abstraction of money. Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," 73.

22 "The Space Between" and "The Charged Void" were not only decisive terms, but also the titles of the three publications that, according to Alison and Peter Smithson, summarize their work and thought. See Max Risselada, "The Space Between," in *The Space Between: Alison and Peter Smithson* (Cologne: Walther König, 2017), 257–262.

we can say that the architectural object is the fundamental apparatus for the making of the indebted man.

So, by offering a form to abstract flows of capital—and perhaps this also explains the obsession with form in today's architecture—the object creates a machine where the different mechanisms of financial exploitation at play in social reproduction are articulated and operationalized, capturing and integrating life as a function, or better yet, as an asset of high finance. If the public was, in the social-democratic city, the sphere that articulated the biopolitical control of the citizens, the private—through the privatization of domestic and public life—is now the sphere where the biopolitical control of individuals is achieved, indexing them directly to the stream of money of global markets. In the metropolis all life is private, or better yet, all life has been privatized.

So, the architectural object becomes a fundamental apparatus of neoliberalism as it gives shape to the idea of the house as the protective stronghold of individual security in an unstable world, but also as the true locus of life's aspirations and fulfillments. And by doing so, the object is also the way to legitimize and mostly dissimulate the conversion of the domestic realm as the main space of capital dispossession and accumulation, where life has become a function of financial reproduction.

DISINVENTING OBJECTS

We face an impasse: as architects we still cultivate an idea of the project that seems historically impossible. At the same time, we find ourselves in the position of refusing architecture's dissolution in the realm of the object. We cultivate the idea of the architect as an *homme de lettres* but, in the end, we are irrevocably condemned to be entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, the emergence of a pastoral idyllic discourse seems to be the way to overcome the death of the project, praising essential and universal values of architecture and intensifying the immaterial qualities and the poetical experience of the object. Architects such as Peter Zumthor and Valerio Olgiati have been successful in endowing the architectural act with a certain transcendental atmosphere. If this has been crucial to redeem the technocratization and precariousness of an entire army of architects, this is also an attempt to give meaning to an architecture that has been dispossessed of all public condition.

It became impossible to rebuild a discourse about the city following the framework of the old social democratic model because, as we have seen, the conditions defining the role of the state have dramatically changed. But one should not forget that the abstract and humanistic conceptual devices that organized architecture's rhetoric have also lost their strength and legitimacy. Can anyone today still believe in public space as the locus of social co-existence and equality among politically emancipated citizens—now that history has taught us how it served to mask and reproduce social inequalities through gentrification and real estate?

As optimistic as they intend to be, most of the recent initiatives aiming to rethink the architecture of the city face a deadlock. The Portuguese delegation to the 16th Venice Architecture Biennale was a paradigmatic example of this. If the purpose of the project *Public without Rhetoric* was courageously aimed at the “public revalorization of the discipline” and to “the primordial importance of the architect in urban space evolution,” its defense of the “public building” as such seems to be unaware that the political conditions that made it possible are, in fact, exhausted. By inscribing the “public building” in an abstract “idea of civilizational evolution” and as an element of rehabilitation of the narrow dimension of “the form of the city,” the exhibition reflects an entirely idealistic and a-historical

understanding of the city.²³

Going through the exhibition catalog's pages, the defense of the architect as "a fundamental element in the definition of the urban form" seems to be dissolved in the absolute autonomization of the building with regard to the city.²⁴ Praised for their aesthetic quality as exceptional formalistic entities, these public buildings become no more than objects without public. Here too, these buildings belong to the city as much as they remain outside of it.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this idyllic and poetical atmosphere, where the city is described as a "magnificent" landscape and reduced to a set of formal relations, is the Lisbon Cruise Terminal, designed by Carrilho da Graça.²⁵ Praised as a masterpiece of Portuguese architecture, carefully respecting Lisbon's urban scale, it's symptomatic that the building is never depicted with its large nine-story-high cruises parked there for days—ships that destroy the same relations of scale that the building is said to promote. But one could say, ironically, that the absence of the cruises makes fully present the architectural object's ideology: the secret will to give the building a space of its own outside the city; the secret will to give architecture a space of its own outside the political and economic dynamics where it is unavoidably inscribed. At a time of deep and violent transformations in Lisbon's urban life, caused by tourism and disproportional massive growth, the inability to address the building beyond the realm of an aestheticized form exposes the inability to discuss the city transformations provoked by the neoliberal economy. Simultaneously, it reveals an uneasiness with discussing architecture's ambiguous role in today's urban form.

Therefore, one should understand the architectural object as the conceptual apparatus that inscribes architecture deeply in the neoliberal urban privatization machine by excluding the architect from it; that is, by offering architects an imaginary representation of themselves and of the city: a *fabula*. But one cannot contest the fierce consequences of neoliberal political urbanization with the old social-democratic dreams nor the cynical *blasé* objects of neoliberalism. Perhaps the first gesture should be to disinvent the object, as the Brazilian poet Manoel de Barros writes in a poem called "A didactic of invention."²⁶ That is, to disinvent the current theoretical framework that tends to define architecture as the mere production of neutral and innocent objects living in the moving stream of the "End of History."²⁷ But also to unveil the true biopolitical condition of architecture in modernity as a fundamental tool for the administration of life.

But if the question that the city puts before us is the form of our co-existence, what is at stake today, with the endless neoliberal dispossessing machine, is how to think and defend the production of a commons—the commons of the city—that would not be subordinated to the privatized form of the object, nor to the public rhetorical form of the project. As Paul Virilio once warned: "Losing the city, we lose everything. Finding the city once more, we will gain everything."²⁸

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23 Nuno Brandão Costa and Sérgio Mah, *Public Without Rhetoric* (Lisbon: Monade, 2018), 13–15. The title echoes not by chance another book by Alison and Peter Smithson: *Without Rhetoric: An Architectural Aesthetic 1955–1972* (Latimer New Dimensions, 1973).

24 *Ibid.*, 13.

25 *Ibid.*, 164–167.

26 Manoel de Barros, "Uma didáctica da invenção," in *Poesia Completa*, (Lisbon: Relógio d' Água, 2016), 282.

27 See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

28 Paul Virilio, *Cibermundo: A Política do Pior*, (Lisbon: Teorema, 2000), 56. Originally published as Paul Virilio, *Cibermonde. La Politique du Pire* (1996).

AUTHOR

Pedro Levi Bismarck is an architect, critic, and researcher in the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto (CEAU-FAUP). He is the editor of the un-disciplined journal *Punkto* and co-editor of the editorial project *Stones against Diamonds*. He writes regularly about architecture, cities, culture, and politics. In 2020, he published *Architecture and 'Pessimism': On the Political Condition of Architecture*.