

Life and Institutions: Three Histories

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Catalonian Francesc Barcelona, who worked in Argentina throughout the twentieth century, is as unknown to most as Rosario, Argentina native Jorge Scrimaglio is: sometimes we know nothing about our best architects. So in Roverano, a town not far from 9 de Julio where we both made our lives, and where he is known as *El Francés* owing to the lax pronunciation his first name elicits outside of Catalonia (and even more so in Buenos Aires province), he confessed to me a decade ago that, “Now that I’m old, I’m going to live an architecture for old age.”

Live, rather than *design* or *practice*, was the term that best synthesized his vision at that late stage of the game. Of course he designed buildings, but for him architecture was not just defined in terms of the project, but as well in the process of habitation, *i.e.*, in actively produced relationships between space, environment and man. Additionally, designing and constructing buildings will never cease being the task of architects, even if a thousand years from now the nature of space has changed so profoundly that you couldn’t even access it conceptually from where we are now. Barcelona had to think spatially in relation to specific situations. The last thing he built was his own house, a perquisite he hadn’t enjoyed until then. In time he might have amassed a small fortune, but that’s a whole other story. The bad part, in any case, was not that he didn’t have his own home until the very last minute, but rather, that he died just before he could inaugurate it, even more so because in *El Francés’s* case he’d outlived a century and then some.

Four decades previously, the fledgling studio Archizoom had proclaimed that it wasn’t a house’s form, but the use made of it, that mattered. Therein lay a new freedom waiting to be enjoyed. Still, the statement can be confusing. Barcelona was no fan of the Italian collective—nor indeed even associated with it from abroad—although in the sixties and seventies he was an enthusiast for almost everything that came out of Italy and that in one way or another got to places like Argentina. He thought they were very bright kids with all the requisite ambition to imagine a great political shift, but not enough to be its protagonists. He wasn’t mistaken. At that point he was already mature enough to avoid being tempted by a radicality that—as was borne out with time—never got past a couple of felicitous experiments. While the Italians weren’t entirely utopian, they ended up being so strident, so black-and-white in their pronouncements regarding future architecture, that for uninitiated readers they could exert a more crippling than mobilizing effect.

And we won’t even go into that fact that the historical derivation of the paradigms posited by that radical Italian architecture—exemplified by Group 9999, Superstudio, Gruppo Strum, etc., as well as Archizoom—became one of the solidest bases, wittingly or not, for the

dynamic of the postindustrial marketplace and of the ways in which it would order contemporary urban space from that time forward.

What Sze Tsung Leong defined, in his paradigmatic, Rem Koolhaas-edited, Taoist-titled study *Mutaciones*, as a new, non-geometric space, based more on information than materiality, essentially flexible and ephemeral, and that, like a *yin* and *yang* purged of ethical tendencies, functions in an eternal oscillation between planned obsolescence and recycling in order to exacerbate consumer cycles and control all manner of circuits—shopping mall architecture being its ultimate image—had already been anticipated, though within '68s revolutionary code, on the part of largely French and Italian thinkers: the a.r.i. groups, but as well, within Situationalism and on the part of Franco-Hungarian thinker Yona Friedman.

Sadly, the recycling wave has been such a success that even some of the members of that former radical fringe now stand out as celebrities in the cultural/architecture marketplace. This is the case with Andrea Branzi, the former Archizoom leader, now dedicated—among other professions—to *didattica e promozione culturale*. Friedman can be placed at the opposite extreme of that dynamic.

Barcelona did have an open devotion for Friedman. From the very first, and based on life practice rather than any accumulation of brilliant, but not sufficiently polished texts, Friedman linked the production of space to ethical construction. This was already evident in *Mobile Architecture* (1958), his initial text: mobility should be understood as a parallelism between the capacity for the constant modification of inhabited space and a commitment to a subjective production of a caliber that offered the inhabitant a greater propensity for creation than for obedience. (It is symptomatic as well that he spoke of *inhabitants*, and not of *citizens* or *consumers* or even *militants*, although he did maintain a certain admiration for the figure of the militant.)

If up to the middle of the twentieth century it had become necessary to rebel against “Fordism” and Corbusian architecture—that is, against disciplinary power—that did not imply, as a corollary, flowing like an automaton, nor playing around with interactive mechanisms. It implied, rather, an appropriation of space emerging from the challenge of constant reinvention within it, and from getting as many people as possible hooked on this “adventure.” Friedman imagined a physical space determined by a permanent shared production between the inhabitant and the building. To that end he conceived of certain mega-structures that are quite well known, that would soar over preexisting cities, and in whose interior countless residences and multi-use buildings would spread out: open-plan “oligo structures” (like the megastructures) whose internal spatial mobility would be possible thanks to a system of panels that inhabitants could move around easily. In short, the parallelism was formulated thus: architectural mobility/ethical progression.

Friedman's system, understood from the prospective of its totality, tended toward maximum instability and in the worst cases, something just next door to chaos would happen (which would have had even the most moderate reactionary trembling from head to toe). This was an already present political element that was immanent to the project. Another one was taking care that social relationships did not turn abstract by means of an un-meditated use of

long-distance communications technologies. In truth, Friedman began with the observation that a society functioned properly provided it did not saturate its communicative capacities, or put another way, to the degree that it did not exceed the influence limits among its constitutive parts. Friedman called the regulating parameter of that mobile equilibrium, always different depending on the society and situation, the "critical group." These notions were developed in another book, *Feasible Utopias* (1975) very much in line with his work in general.

If the "critical group" concept is adapted in light of the present, it is not difficult to see how, for example, if relationships between men and things end up happening exclusively, as is sometimes the case, thanks to mediation on the part of virtual technologies, life would then be constituted around a swelling wave—if not a tsunami—of images that, coagulated in memory as a pure past, or a dead past, would be reproduced *ad infinitum* without the least subjective intervention, or at least without any notable ones, and from which, ultimately, the uncomfortable sensation that one has already lived what one has not yet lived, would emanate. Every possibility for action would be eliminated (something similar to which our friend and colleague Paolo Virno points out, though in a much more cogent fashion).

2

Barcelona had his reasons for thinking about the past. More precisely, he had a tendency toward it, considering his age. Nevertheless, he had meditated on Friedman's ideas for a long time, and, when the moment came, it didn't seem impossible to create a house where he could take on the challenges of a new epoch. In that sense, furthermore, he was able to align himself with his past yet not lose a projection toward the future.

Regarding old age, he had some rather original ideas. His general take, opposed to mainstream opinion, was that old people should be held responsible for their old age starting when they were young. He explained all that, among other ways, with the following: if throughout his life, a man had claimed work was what made him free, then he deserved an unending retirement in his old age; if all his life he had striven for fame above all other things, then nothing was more appropriate than an old age of praise and even media fame, but without real creative strength; if he had always believed that life was all about procreation and making money to insure the well-being of his progeny, it was just that, as an old man, he find himself discarded in a nursing home; if he had channeled all his passion into money, a fitting recompense in his last days could be, for example, the unending company of sterile luxury items; and if he had consecrated his life to protecting himself from others—like they say, there's no better defense than a good offense—then it was entirely correct that he end up confined to a bunker. Unless...at some point he decided to toss out all the crap that he had believed in during all these years.

Barcelona's old age wasn't like any of those scenarios. For example, having lived in China, he had been declared a National Living Treasure. This honor, conferred on those who become true masters of a discipline, simply and profoundly resolves the West's secular dilemma regarding the relationship of art to life. Museum curation and the avant-garde come together in concrete, living subjects who are at the same time artists and artworks, and who

in many cases produce artworks as well, artworks that are preserved in museums, which are also considered living spaces.

Barcelona's house on a street named Acha on Zapiola Plaza, both in Buenos Aires, demolished just months after the architect's death as a result of real estate speculation, consisted, essentially, in an open, semi covered lower storey, informally connected to the outside; two covered stories, also on an open plan, with a nucleus for the bathrooms and kitchen; and a terrace. It was Barcelona's version of Friedman's megastructures. Presently, we'll see why.

The architect imagined living in it with no more company than his pet parrot, but the intervening events—to which Barcelona made only a certain limited contribution—brought about that within those two or three years the house became something of an anti-nursing home. Not because it came to be inhabited by rambunctious—and in part irritating—young people, but because the old people that would meet there created their own architecture by ignoring mandates—to which they had originally consented—and that had embittered them in life.

Barcelona had some savings and built a house for himself, but, far from designing a definitive solution for overcoming capitalism and proposing, in exchange, a universalizable, neo-socialist model for self-realized old people and public-sector entities, instead, he limited himself to undoing the idea that his house was his house, and he opened it up for use by the entire neighborhood and, you could say, for the infinite that can be concentrated into a single block. Argentine Aaron Rosenblum, about whom J.R. Wilcock said "He decided to make humanity happy. The damage he did wasn't immediate," would constitute a polar opposite to Barcelona, the latter being such an utterly un-grandiloquent soul.

The first person to move into the house was a man who had spent the previous twenty years between the plaza in front of the house, hospitals, and public shelters. Next came one of Barcelona's extraordinary friend's cousins, whose two last jobs, previous to definitive unemployment, had been to drive three different taxis simultaneously and the later management of an ice cream shop. Then some other friend's nephew joined them, older than his uncle thanks to those strange twists of genealogy, who worked as an astronomer but whose personal economy was far from stellar. They were also joined by a neighbor who was doing all right, but suffered from excruciating loneliness. Then there was an actor who had always played character roles and hadn't set foot on a film—or even a television—set in ages. This kept going until suddenly, without having planned it, they were ten in all. As a result of some neighborhood irony, they ended up being called the "Ten Little Indians."

Within the house, a dozen quite versatile, discrete and interchangeable "furniture-panels" were available for use. Similarly, there were windows and openings in the stones that allowed for variation and combination when it came to sources of natural light, internal and external perspectives, the connections between stories and certain environments, etc. But in essence, each storey consisted in ample spaces without predetermined segmentations, that the old people modified according to the tasks they were undertaking in any given moment.

From this open-doored experience an idea spread to occupy the lower storey and its extension toward the garden. Urban crime was a danger to consider, especially within a

community so given to trust and easy sociability; so they decided to reconsider the idea. Therefore—in addition to a three-meter high wall—an art and crafts fair; a lending library; a friends-of-art, and —science circle; an exercise yard; a wooden athletic court; and a swimming pool—all for community fitness—plus a ridiculously cheap commissary; a mini-theatre for comedy and tragedy; a mini-circus; a small but well provisioned first-aid clinic, attended by a widowed physician, one of the Ten Little Indians; and a gazebo where any musician—or aspiring musician—could play, were installed in the building's lower level. As for valuables, there were none there (Since the gazebo was also pressed into service as an exercise area, the exercise yard and wooden athletic court were the scene of improvised recitals).

All that said, this collective experience of old age was not entirely placid. At a certain point the lower-level activities crept onto the terrace, although in this case the seniors made sure that access to the same was not open to the randomness of what might come off the streets. But all the coming and going on the part of perennial newcomers did at times negatively affect the calm that becomes increasingly necessary in old age (because of diminished capabilities, subsequent feebleness, etcetera.). But even the most acrimonious conflicts were resolved by means of “Go” board game championships and pa-kua-chang martial arts sessions—two arbitration systems that nevertheless do little, through their reliance on transcendental order, to resolve polemics.

Just a few blocks away, at the corner of Velazco and Aguirre Streets, a Jewish home for the aged was set up: a gloomy anthill fortified by thick walls like those of a soccer stadium, that spilled out over itself hermetically: a mini-Israel right there in the Chacarita neighborhood. If any of the “Ten Little Indians” were still alive, especially El Francés, who was Jewish, they might be able rescue more than one poor old soul from that uncomfortable shoebox of a house.

3

This last episode in Barcelona's life—and his entire story, in fact—reminds me of Gustave Affeulpin, the physicist who, after having lived almost ten years with a group of several thousands in catacombs located directly below Paris' Centre Pompidou, left behind an account that ought be considered—I can think of no reason not to—a true underground tunnel, both in intellectual and practical terms, between 1968 and our days.

I won't describe the place or the experiences within it in great detail, because in some ways they are an expanded—and indeed, more complex—version of Barcelona's last project. Suffice to say it consisted of 70 underground, open-plan levels, that took on all imaginable forms and achieved, in their best moments, a perfect non-form. As regards the experience—an accumulation of the physical, artistic, sexual, nutritional, familial and philosophical practices that took place underground—I'll say it unfolded in a rich array of subtle hues, and with a strength of spirit rarely seen in communities born of nothing and with a tendency to not obey the system's rules. But I do want to point out something else. The experience was

¹ Luca Frei, *The So-Called Utopia of the Centre Beaubourg. An Interpretation* (based on the book of the same name by Albert Meister), London, Book Works; Utrecht, Casco, Office for Art, Design and Theory, 2007, p. 100.

based on certain principles: community property and open access to all objects, equipment and furniture, etcetera.; the absence of circulating currency; a lack of leaders; patent collective sovereignty; a lack of intellectual or moral guidelines, nor directives regarding the center's activities and creativity; and the absence of categories such as members, users and patrons (that is, one participated without being called a member; everything was used without one being an individual user; and each participant brought whatever he or she wanted with him or her, without this affording any ascendancy over the rest).¹

And now I will try to tell a story.

It's the story of old Jacques, a former worker for the gas company with a fairly miserable past, since he had put up with years of loneliness before joining the collective life beneath Beaubourg. One afternoon, Jacques spoke for the first time before the governing assembly that was convoked whenever matters of self-governance needed attending to. The old man thanked those present for his having shared time recently with such fine companions—who amongst themselves called each other "creators," since that's what they definitely were—and he confessed his happiness at having found a family in them. He was particularly thankful for having merely been taken into account, for having been cared for and loved, when previously no one had ever spoken a word to him and he had even been abused. Finally—since doctors had recently told him he was terminally ill—he asked if he might be allowed to die there.

The uneasiness, emotions and silence among those present were completely redirected when a young woman suddenly suggested they throw a party in his honor. No one thought to debate the proposal; it was simply acclaimed by a show of hands. Afeulpin recounts "we all felt the need to do something, to express our amity, not only toward Jacques, but toward everyone else; to express our joy and our pride that the assembly had in that way become a kind of communion, and without any unnecessary palaver."²

So Jacques enthusiastically prepared for the party. Supplies of flowers, food and wine animated that big night on level 53 that, like all the center's activities, unfolded as an improvisation without any agenda, productions, or organization. Since Jacques played the coronet in the "Hyper-Maxi Brass Band," music and dance abounded, until the guest of honor announced, amid smiles and embraces, he was going to bed. With his closest friends, he ascended to level 72, and at certain moment, as he confided to them how fulfilled he was, and desired a long life for the "new culture" that was germinating there underground. Afeulpin speaks of how he saw Jacques slip some pills into a glass of water and that a few minutes later, stretched out in an armchair, he fell asleep.

Now ladies and gentlemen, I wonder: What kind of death was this, preceded by a party and free of the funereal feel of a last farewell? And what kind of life corresponded to this death? How is a happy, fearless death possible? How, ultimately, can death become an act of life? "He allowed us to discover death," Afeulpin states, "about which no one knows

¹ Ibid., p. 73.

² Ibid., p. 108.

how to speak of in all its greatness, nor dares to.”³ In that final act of affective proliferation, that outlived death, a problem left everyone thinking happy thoughts. Affeulpin concludes that Jacques “had shown us our lives.”

Just imagine what kind of institution could become that rare kind of underground cultural center, not so much given to attacking the system as focused on the challenges its own inhabitants’ creativity posited in relation to that system. Affeulpin talks about how people there carried the possibilities of creative capacity, the collective capacity for invention, to such an extreme that they ended up founding a new culture. But why, he asks, is it necessary in the creation of a new culture to imagine starting from scratch, from some radical point of departure, above all given that every aspect of our lives will be at some time and to some degree revised, questioned and tested to see what new tasks and adventures it will lead to.

It would be naive, nevertheless, to maintain that this “enterprising theft”, to use one of Paolo Virno’s phrases, avoids conflict or leaves aside power indifferently. There can be no such indifference when power finds within its creative capacity a potential that can both be co-opted and reduced to mere capital. Conflicts arise from this and nothing can free us from them if we continue in our propensity for battle. But what kind of battle are we talking about? That can’t really be decided *a priori*, but at least there is a principle that could serve as a guide: to not confront, to not destroy but rather withdraw, and to defend that withdrawal.

What’s more, strength in itself, and the spreading of ideas and influences, are a means of defense as well. When power seeks to capture these, a vacuum must be created, one must flee from that spot, change perspectives, change paths or even relationships. Flow more rapidly than capital. Or better said, flow in a really true sense—and not crammed onto the exploitation and money superhighway. Yet sometimes power never lets up. It hides out, surrounds, claws at you and kills you.

And with regard to the creation of a remarkably new sort of community, isn’t this the case with the Zapatistas during the last twenty or so years? Concretely, isn’t all this happening even as we gather here?

Affeulpin’s document, entitled *The So-Called Utopia of the Beaubourg Center* was written in 1976. On the one hand that was the same year in Argentina that saw a military coup that quashed the last urban guerrilla revolutionaries of the seventies and installed the bloodiest dictatorship in the nation’s modern history. On the other hand, one year later witnessed the emergence of Italian autonomist movements in Bologna and Rome as well as the birth of a new kind of militancy with the advent of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

The change that the West has suffered since 1968, which has passed through numerous phases between then and now, is a change from the capitalism of authority to the capitalism of imagination. The best images from 1968, the most audacious and innovative ones and the ones most closely linked to ideas and practices of creation, justice and love, have fallen into the hands of transnational capital brokers. But at the same time that revolutionary struggles from the ‘60s and the ‘70s were defeated, other voices, like Affeulpin’s, marginalized by force of arms, started to say things like “we don’t want power.”

In his text, Affeulpin describes dozens of situations with which we could identify today. But he ponders them in a moment when, above the din of a repressive and disciplinary society, the unilateral rule of the neoliberal marketplace was progressively being constructed. And while indeed what we are currently living is a situation in which much of what Affeulpin imagined will soon be realized, it's about to happen under conditions of disintegration, where the failures of corporate capitalism's every authority have given way to the exploitation of the soul by means of semiotic capitalism and its virtual paraphernalia. It has impoverished human relationships and humanity's relationship with the world to such a point—it has made them so fleeting and inconsistent—that we can no longer sympathize with the other, nor feel things or the bodies of those things.

The global art circuit, in spite of its most creative new endeavors and a handful of tentative critiques, is not exempt from decomposition. Rather it embodies it, and even leads it, by subordinating artistic practices to the prestige of corporations and governments and offering itself up as a resource for publicity, productive system of the markets imaginary. A few days ago, in a press release, a gallery referred to its artists thus: "Seven masterful subjectivities currently enjoying great success with European and U.S. critics and collectors." This was not a satire. Seven subjectivities at this or that price is the message being expressed. Subjectivities presenting human acts, reduced to mere lucre, and made visible under that ultimate guarantee of existence conferred by money.

4

So let me tell you the very last story—an invisibility story. It was about 1740. Neapolitan composer Lionello Venutti has written mountains of musical dreck for European court theatres and in recent times has accompanied the heavenly Micchino, finest of all the *castrati*, on a tour throughout the Continent. In the meantime, a courtly craze has fascinated the denizens of the opera world: espionage. Messages in code, only comprehensible to the highest-level power players, are being communicated through song in theatres, miniature worlds where public policy is a private matter. Venutti doesn't even understand the phrases he's been asked to intercalate into his *libretti*, but he loves being part of the game, and he finds a reinforcement of fame through the position being in the game affords him.

Like everyone else in those days, he admires Micchino as he might an angel, and since he has the good fortune to work with him, he does everything in his power to please him. But nothing seems to work. Micchino is the very essence of illegibility: a completely different nature separates him from every other man.

If that were not enough, it hasn't been long since Micchino first tried a very heady brew: life off the stage—the negation of his personal apotheosis. He has discovered a world in which he, along with his wandering band of freaks—how could they not be freaks, if he himself is one—are able to create and recreate without the music degenerating or losing its vital organizing force.

So in that year in the middle of the eighteenth century, escaping from St. Petersburg through desolate parts of Finland, Estonia and Denmark, Venutti makes a decision. Numerous

circumstances have caused love to spring up between young Micchino and Amanda, and the composer, although he may not know why, feels liberated.

One night, at some stopping place along the way, he dispatches a letter to Herr Klette, Amanda's father and Micchino's musical director. In that letter, which will be his last, he tries to explain why each of the members of the *castrato's* small entourage is inexplicable to him. "Mystery was what we were made of, from head to toe," he declares. Further down he describes the turn his fate has taken:

(...) there's something intriguing about Lionello as well. And not because of that musical cipher game in which I placed so many puerile expectations. Maybe there is something more enigmatic in me than even I suspected up till now. For the time being I am an artist: my *persona* is a hieroglyph. I have lived in a moment of this passion and that, believing in the truth of the true and in the reality of the real; when in fact an artist should exhaust every passion at the same time and enter into dreams while wearing a mask of subtle indifference. I ought to have observed Micchino better.

For now I have decided to follow the advice he gave me a few weeks ago, in St. Petersburg. I shall change my name and invent a new past (...) I shall begin a new musical career, perhaps in Paris. But I will not promote myself, even though I do have some ideas. I will tell no one my new name—not even you! Hereafter no one will know anything of my past. If we should happen to see one another some day, we will pretend not to know each other. For your kindness I will recognize the memory of our little pact.

In fact there will be but one sign of me (...) In Vienna I was able to note you have a perfect ear for music: will you be able to recognize the music of someone who was once someone else? What subtle clues will remain in my compositions? I cannot imagine, and when I try to, I laugh, with a great cackle quite fitting for this crystalline Danish air. The transparency that laughter cuts across is the complete liberation for which I'm striving and from which I expect unprecedented musical marvels.

And in effect, from that year forward, nothing was ever heard of again from Venutti. In the event Herr Klette heard one of his later compositions, it's likely he recognized it. But it's no less likely he kept the secret, so as not to betray a gentlemen's agreement.

Translated by Michael Parker Stainback.