Act I: Dematerialize the Architectural Object

One of the ways to understand architecture, usually the first about which we hear when we begin to study at the university, is to see it as a displayed object. This definition leads to an architecture that is equivalent to a habitable sculpture rather than one which aims to realize certain requirements. Le Corbusier’s quote in which he defined architecture as “volumes brought together in light” help to clarify and exemplify this issue. In this essay, I am not interested in focusing on this idea, but instead, I will explain several different ways to dissolve the conception of architecture as an object.

One way to overcome this primary condition is to understand architecture as a second skin or an element that establishes relationships between the body and the habitat. Architecture is an apparatus to look and build connections with the outside. Therefore, firstly, architecture is used to maximize certain links while refusing others. In this case, the design acquires a presence over the body of the inhabitant. Architecture surrounds it, limits it and restricts its connection with the environment; exposing the inseparability of architecture and its violence over the body.

Another way of dematerializing architecture would be characterized by the conversion of the architecture into an ethereal element, habitat or surroundings, subsequently emphasizing the bodies that go through it as the main characters of the space. Architecture is dissolved into atmospheres or climates in which the users can freely circulate in every direction, wandering into the cloud-like space, without lineal restrictions from a building which neither strangles nor narrows one’s perception to the established limits, enabling one to get lost and relate to other bodies. At this point, architecture paradoxically achieves a holistic presence, completely involving the inhabitant bodies.

For example, the film *THX 1138* (1971) by George Lucas, shows a place without architecture nor form, where bodies float in a white and homogeneous space. However, his apparently free constitution turns
negative and we finally discover that the space limits the bodies from liberating themselves from the infinite interior. They inhabit a prison. Violence and subjugation over the body become present again. Any architecture, despite its invisibility or blurring, is no different than a prison once it becomes repressive of bodies.

The last point relative to dematerializing the object is thinking architecture as another body with which we can interact. In that case, the relationship with architecture is established through friction, the shock and the encounter. Perec said that to live was “to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump into yourself.”¹ However, I think that to live is the opposite. Life is friction with the other bodies. And these bodies can be persons, furniture or buildings; it does not matter. Architecture could represent this idea of life, and as such would be defined by the friction, by the action of the body in front of and in relation to another body. This dyad action-body (inseparable elements) would build and give meaning to the space. This architecture defined by action and friction makes up an inevitable crash between two parts. It generates a constant rubbing between the body (people) and the architectural space. As stated by Bernard Tschumi: “What must be first determined is whether this relation between action and space is symmetrical — opposing two camps (people versus space) that affect one another in a comparable way — or asymmetrical, a relation in which one camp, whether space or people, clearly dominates the other.”² The architect, or someone who works with architecture, could follow the philosophy explained by Léopold Lambert and be a funambulist who walks on the line between parts, or (s)he could choose and position themselves within one of them.

Act II: Architecture as Violence:

5+1 Actions over the Architectural Body ///

At this point, the transition from the architecture of the object to the action-body generates a tension between the parts and, by extension, makes violence appear. In the rest of this essay I won’t undertake a balancing act, and instead I will explore the possibility that one dominates over another one.

Architecture is aggressive against the territory, against the material, which it violates, handles, strengthens, twists; it is violent against existing forms, against existing types and modes. All foundational architecture is based on violence and has inside not so much construction but also inseparably destruction. There is a way of understanding architecture […] as a vehicle of peace, as a vehicle of mediation, when in fact the whole architectonic operation is an imposition or a settlement that involves violence.³

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³ Igansi De Solà-Morales in the TV Show Soy Cámara, El programa del CCCB : La ciudad desde el balcón by RTVE.
These words by Ignasi de Solà-Morales show us how even the most basic production of architecture is based on violence. I would like to focus my attention on two concepts described in the text. The quote demonstrates how this production could be described in terms of action and friction over matter, ground, landscape, territory, environment or people. Action/friction strengths and twists them. Another concept is that architecture is an imposition or a settlement. Both ideas are related with what I described before: Architecture can dominate the body, surrounding it and making it prisoner (with different levels of freedom). Architecture subjugates its inhabitant and their mobility, making possible certain connections and denying others, which it can do using visible or invisible matter. Thus, architecture forces the body to submit to its authority. In fact, architecture has been used to control the body throughout history. Prisons, hospitals, asylums, schools, etc. are just some examples of standardizing and regulating bodies. The same operation can be observed in geopolitical borders or how circulation is directed in airports or shopping centers. Architectural design encloses a specific ideology that guarantees the control of space and the body and limits, and curiously, any unwanted friction.

But, what happens when the body dominates the architecture? If the previous examples avoid friction, now we have violence and friction over the (architectonic) matter; two bodies which crash head on. Responding to this question, my final project while studying at the University of Alicante two years ago has proved useful. To think about the violence of bodies over architecture I didn’t use any references to the architectural world. Instead of this I used several artistic practices developed in the second half of the 20th century which have a lot in common with architecture, such as the works of Lara Almarcegui, Robert Smithson, Gordon Matta-Clark, Rachel Whiteread and Pilar Quinteros. These practices call attention to the opportunities and virulence of some material transformation processes that work without the design of forms and their political control of the actions that take place in their built environments. All these artists rethink and reformulate the original object’s design by acting directly upon it. They create new relations between the body and the building. Thus, they show us how the violent act of the body on architecture becomes a legitimate and immediate act to face up to the initial impositions generated by the architecture through frictional actions that alter and rebuild it. It generates new relations and connections, negating the conception of architecture as something finished. As a result of this previous investigation, I determined five different operative capacities with which we can face the architectural body. I will now explain them according to the different degrees of conservation in which the acts leave the original architectural body. Thus, the extremes range from complete protection of the building to its erasure and replacement. In between, we have three other actions that build an architecture that is no longer, but whose presence remains — between preservation and disappearance of the original body.
CURE:
These actions aim for the maximum conservation of the original body, restoring their deterioration over time. They are usually delicate. We could think them as if we were taking care of someone who is sick. This conservation is not only to preserve materials and structures but also memories. Everything changes so that everything continues to be the same.

TRANSPLANTATION:
A new body is within the original architectural body. Essentially, this type of action involves an estrangement. It creates an unexpected landscape within the architecture that should not be there. These actions produce a new materiality and spatiality, as well as modify their previous function to adapt to new necessities.
EXTIRPATION:
When we open an incision, a cut, hollow or remove a wall, we generate a new relationship within the space. It is a simple act, but it causes new readings. With these actions, the classic dichotomies “in-out” or “yours-mine” can be perverted and redefined. A direct and violent action, seemingly simple, challenges the closed condition of architecture.

TRANSFIGURATION:
The architecture, from the tectonic standpoint is made of materials that are modified, assembled and manipulated to create the intervention. It could happen to the architecture (as a body) in this state of destruction that does not allow for its continued use, but, can some materials be reused and reassembled to have a second life?

MOLTING:
The imposition of a new dynamic economic, social, landscape denies the architecture’s preexistence to the point that it is seen as a negative aspect that should be removed and destroyed in its entirety. This is therefore the most violent action since such a form of disintegration means the complete erasure of the previous presence.

From these five points, it is necessary to add one more that we have not yet previously considered. They are actions that have been denounced “injuries,” or “death,” associated with a terrorist act that aims, above all, for the total destruction of the architecture with the maximum infliction of pain. They are destructive actions that solely
intend to destabilize the environment by using strategic violence. This action, which is originally a timely destruction, opens the possibility of other matters to enter as shockwaves: the appearance of fear (which as a topic should be explored and theoretically dealt with in other more extensive forms).

**Act III: Architectural Intervention as Political Protest ///**

If architectural design lacks neutrality, neither can these actions be defined as impartial. All of the actions described are ways of imposing in space (or on space), as evident in situations of geopolitical conflict. Photographs by Miki Kratsman of the Israeli-Palestine conflict are exemplary in this regard, as they show how the exercise of demolishing Palestinian houses creates a state of ruin which forbids adequately living in the place. Paradoxically, the large mechanical excavators have been left in the places they destroyed to become an agent for re-construction, bringing us back again to the new site as was established by Solá-Morales above. Another distinct case that can be seen is the (lack of) legislation on the coast of Spain, explained by Daniel Fernández Pascual’s Funambulist Paper. The conflict there shows two basic postures: those who want to preserve their property on the coast, and the State which seeks to recuperate the public ground for the enjoyment of all. The owners of the houses, by employing strategies of Curing, try to return dignity to their houses that have suffered wear by the hard environmental conditions. On the other hand, the State tries to demolish the houses that are built on the occupied terrain. These actions, which are apparently straightforward, reflect the reality of two totally distinct ways of exercising politics, which in certain urban areas occurs on both private and public ground in the search for a total submission of nature.

Action, as the production of friction, seeks to establish a specific politics on the architectural object — the reconfiguration of edifices to adapt them to another political reality, which, by directly colliding with others, often results in the increase of conflict and the making-visible of this inherent friction. In this regard, to live is not to avoid collision and conflict, which architecture seems to claim, but to potentiate and develop the questioning of the models we are accustomed to and to bring them to their limit. Between an architecture which intends to establish order and an action that acts politically upon that architecture itself the ground is prepared for making new forms of life possible.

Action constitutes itself as a friction and with this affords the potential for disagreement, and in this way, design is a tool to rethink the political. For that, friction is necessary.

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