Enough room for the present time or why we should pay attention to the particular

Since universal world-time is gearing up to outstrip the time of erstwhile localities in historical importance, it is now a matter of urgency that we reform the “whole” dimension of the general history so as to make way for the “fractal” history of the limited but precisely located event.

Writing these words in 1996 in his *Un Paysage d’événements*, Paul Virilio proposed that the accumulation of events creates a relief, or landscape, by which history unfolds. While many of these events might not be related in any way, they influence, as a whole, our understanding of time and the meanings we attribute to subsequent events. Because Virilio was mostly concerned with the acceleration of time, especially in the then-emerging world of technology and media, he emphasized the implications of, and major role played by, communication technologies in our daily lives. Exploring the relations linking history to war, which is not my concern here, his insights are useful in understanding how the mediation creates—a flattened level upon which all is laid out, as though on a common surface. That is to say that, even if we seem to live in the moment, all events acquire an equal, undifferentiated importance. One could argue that we pay attention to events for their potential contribution to the making of history, rather than for their respective qualities as particular incidents. This historical perception assumes that we progressively come to a global view of the world, of humanity and history, as if all were simultaneous, comparable, and graspable. Virilio spoke of this simultaneity as the “dematerialization,” the “depersonalization”, and the “derealization” of everyday life: a building of history that both embeds and negates the singular event, removing its value as a meaningful actualization of the everyday.

This depersonalization plays a similar role as that of alienation in Marx’s discourse. The transformation of one’s labor into objects of value, or commodities, governing the activity of men and women is the source of alienation identified by Marx: a process within which a worker becomes foreign to the world he lives in. Marx showed that by selling labor power to bourgeois society, capitalism came to own the labor process and the products created by the workers, as well as their sense of fellow species-beings. In a similar sense, the words of Virilio propose that while events do happen, their reality is so far removed from us that they become their own entity, separate from our ability to engage and to participate. The reality in which we live, or in which we think we live, is in dissonance with the world that is actually unfolding around us. But in Marx’s view, everything is accompanied by its contrary: good things are inextricably linked to bad ones and, conversely, bad things contain the seeds of the

good. Marx indeed thought that the possibility of change was rooted in these contradictions, within the dialectic of incompatible elements and realities. For him, cities had this bizarre characteristic of being pregnant with their contrary: finding freedom in overwhelming situations, laughter through misery, possibilities in the impossible. In resonance with Marx’s line of thought, Henri Lefebvre claimed that everyday life possessed a dialectical nature: while it is constantly colonized by commodity, it is also the realm of self-realization; while one feels alienated in his or her everyday life, it is also the realm of meaningful social resistance. In Lefebvre’s discourse, nothing can escape everyday life, as all participate in its making: institutions, power, politics, economy. Any form of change would have to emerge and come back to everyday life. He asserts, in Cleaning the Ground, that there are moments when these “larger” categories of life, those that might be thought of as constituting the domain of history, are brought down to encounter the everyday. There they are confronted by the will of everyday people demanding the transformation of their representations:

grounded together, people declare that these institutions, these “representations” are no longer acceptable and no longer represent them. Then, united in groups, in classes, in peoples, men are no longer prepared to live as before, and are no longer able to do so. They reject whatever “represented”, maintained and chained them to their previous everyday life. These are the great moments of history: the stirrings of revolutions. At this point, the everyday and the historical come together and even coincide, but in the active and violently negative critique which history makes of the everyday.\(^8\)

It is through everyday life, and only through everyday life, that such transformations may occur, for global capitalism and its ways of managing the everyday is, as would say Lefebvre, nothing without many everyday lives. Thus, by looking into the small and apparently irrelevant details of the everyday, one might be able to understand the larger structures in play, and potentially change the lives of many.

Despite the words of Lefebvre, the question remains: why are we more interested in the general making of history than concerned with the history of events, as Virilio would put it? Why don’t everyday facts of life invoke as much genuine interest as does general history? A number of preliminary answers could be attempted: everyday life is nothing more than a repetition of banalities, while history can be a chronological set of “meaningful” events; everyday life is boring, filled with meaningless characters, while history has stories, heroes; or again, everyday life is all that is left when all things meaningful have been displaced into history. But beyond the segregation of everyday events from history, could it be possible that we ascribe more meaning to representation and mediation, to history, compared to everyday life because the present is too messy, unpredictable, and frightening? Reflecting upon a contemporary interpretation of utopia, Zygmund Bauman proposes that, left to negotiate with innumerable, unannounced, unpleasant, and uncomfortable events, our inability to defend ourselves against unpredictable adversities leaves us powerless, frightened, and fearful. As our interests in tradition and utopia demonstrate, we rather build history, i.e. comprehend how events were shaped, set anchors within tradition, or project ourselves in a world better suited to pursue our journey—toward utopia. It is in the freezing of time that utopia and tradition find their powerful attraction. In both instances, to borrow a line of Jeremy Till, “the architect

can edit the world, can appropriate the bits that are full of aesthetic or technical potential and discard those that are not, along with the scars of history [and] the fright of uncertainty." While this could also be said of other urban professionals and a large portion of the population, it is in the escape through time, past or future, in beautiful imagined realities, or in the making of history, that one avoids the true present.

Continuing with Bauman’s argument, this ever-present fear of reality has forced us to move “the land of solutions and cures from the far away into the here and now.”

Satisfying our every immediate need as an accomplishment of our projected desires, Bauman argues that we are no longer living toward imagined worlds, as did the gardener in the projection of his garden, but as hunters who seek the immediate reward of the hunt, we now live inside immediate utopias. This new form of utopia, that of the individualistic consumer society, can only be shortsighted, moving from one immediate personal utopia to the next, doomed to live in the instant away from possible alternatives grounded in the real. It is the fear of allowing our lives to be reduced to the here and now, says Lefebvre, to the ordinariness of everyday realities that drive us to flee into shortsighted alternatives and, through this process, drive us also to neglect and disregard such places as the everyday, as the derelict areas of our cities, as the haphazard and inconsequential meetings on the street.

While Bauman’s thesis can be observed around us in neoliberal culture, in fashion advertising, real estate imagery, and urban development, the “here and now” sits on a double-sided coin, as Marx might point out. Indeed, amidst the desires of immediate fulfillment—here and now—lies what is actually here and now: found situations, places, and uses, each concerned with meaningful interstices, textures, light and materials, spaces and places, practices and people which constitute the other, real, city.

In Le Droit à la ville, Henri Lefebvre called for an “experimental utopia” according to which the creation of an ideal community could only be pursued through the study of everyday life. He asserted that everydayness is not doomed to an immutable grayness but is rather filled with unaccomplished possibilities.

His proposal suggested that the creation of an ideal community could only be pursued through the study of everyday life, in everyday urban settings. Indeed, he believed that the city of tomorrow could be built from the dreams of today, if only architects and urban planners could appreciate the significations, indications, and auguries perceived and lived by those who inhabit the real: everyday life harbors within itself the possibility of its own transformation. We only ought to support what is already there and help it to emerge and grow. This proposal implies that there is, embedded within the existing context, a world to be discovered and valued. There are, therefore, some things that organize day-to-day life on their own terms, some things that resist pressures from others. In dialogue with the Situationists, Lefebvre proposed that the idea of resistance is in fact at the heart of the found situation and that it is within this resistance that possibilities are born and where the relations

between present and future are lived.\textsuperscript{13}

For the Situationists, to change everyday life implied the transformation of the spaces of the city, the transformation of their ambiances and appreciations. In order to achieve such transformations, the city would have to be thoroughly surveyed, walked, and experienced, mapped, in short, so that lesser known or misunderstood spaces such as interstices, derelict and out of the way places, could be kept from mainstream culture and used to rebuild the social space of the city.

Not so distant from Lefebvre’s ideas, and surely closer to contemporary cities, at least in time, if not in ideology, David Harvey proposes a “dialectical utopianism” in which the ideal is “materially grounded in social and ecological conditions but which nevertheless emphasizes possibilities and alternatives for human action through the will to create.”\textsuperscript{14} It is in the critical engagement with the world as found that the architect can still maintain a hope against hope, says Harvey, turning away from mere utopia, from a “realm of pure fantasy that does not matter,”\textsuperscript{15} and as would add Till, “finding hope within the conflictual ground of reality.”\textsuperscript{16}

In architectural terms, the idea of resistance emerged at the period of Lefebvre’s first volume of \textit{Critique de la vie quotidienne} in the late 1940s, as a young Aldo van Eyck proposed that traffic circles, edges of street, left-over spaces, trash-filled backyards, and abandoned buildings, all of random shapes and sizes, in various states of neglect, be cleaned up and transformed into play-grounds. Liane Lefaivre thoroughly documented this near thirty-year project and counted these play areas almost to a thousand.\textsuperscript{17} While most European post-war reconstruction followed the teachings of the \textit{Congrès internationaux d’architecture moderne} (CIAM), van Eyck argued that the modernist model was overly mechanical, leading to a clear neglect of any immediate qualities found in existing conditions, and disregarding what were thought of as minor spaces. In a presentation at the CIAM Otterlo conference of 1959, van Eyck went so far as to claim that rarely had the profession been granted such an opportunity as the post-World War II reconstruction, yet never had the profession failed so miserably at its task.\textsuperscript{18}

The proposition made by van Eyck responded to local and immediate needs: no place in the city was too poor for architecture to take place. Van Eyck considered the city as a changing, temporary phenomenon, and his parks as important moments in a city under reconstruction. Organized with geometrical patterns and various arrangements of metal bars for children to climb up and hang from, these playgrounds also appealed to adults who could sit on benches, or somewhere on the edge of a sandpit, to meet and chat, strengthening social bonds. In looking carefully at the city fabric and in recognizing both the qualities and the large number of neglected spaces, van Eyck was able to insert in the city the idea of the in-between as a transformative strategy. In seeking

15. Ibid.  
18. “This was probably the most famous speech of his career, delivered at the Otterlo conference. Its impact was felt all over the world and marked a change in mood of the profession accompanied by a creative rethinking of modern architecture.” Lefaivre, Liane, Alexander Tzonis. 1999. \textit{Aldo van Eyck, Humanist Rebel}. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 13.}
to find enthusiastic possibilities hidden within the real, in-between the events and places of the ordinary, he revealed the latent potentials embedded in these derelict sites. With the discovery of situations located between adjacent buildings, in the space and time between these buildings, van Eyck proposed that the city played a direct role in providing new relationships between people.

Peter and Alison Smithson also proposed a subversion of the modernist dogma: clearly anti-utopian and in line with van Eyck’s work, with whom they collaborated in Team X, they assumed a friendly seditious attitude. As van Eyck spoke of the relational in-between of found situations, the Smithsons engaged a more direct recognition of the found. Their “as found” spoke indeed of immediacy, rawness, and material presence; it communicated an openness where prosaic environments could reenergize reality. While the Modernists gave prevalence to the “whole,” the Smithsons sought to endow “parts” with their own internal disciplines and complexities. While the Modernists spoke of architecture as a magnificent play of masses brought together under the light, the Smithsons claimed that their interest in the ordinary and the banal did not mean that architecture would lose sight of its objective: rather, ordinariness and banality were to become the source for building new perspectives, this time “real” under the light. Perceived as a place for change and transformation, the informal everyday could be thought of as a key linking past, present, and future: instead of engulfing the weakened city with grand utopian idealism, they proposed an urban vision empowered by a recognition and transformation with and within the everyday.

The grand ordinariness and banalities to which the authors I have cited refer and upon which van Eyck and the Smithsons built, is not a mere leftist fancy. Rather, the etymology of the word banal supports their claim to find purpose, value, and the coming together of a people within the all-around-us, rather than a simplistic waste of time. Indeed, in medieval France, every time a village was founded, two things would be built: a chapel and a bread oven. Central to communal life, to spirituality and survival, these two buildings, one more of a machine than the other, played a central role in establishing a community. Finding its root in the feudal system, a ban designated the “public,” that is, all of those who, together, form a people, submitted to the same law; it also meant the extent of land to which a given lord had the power to make the law, thus giving the meaning to banlieue, literally designating the land within a mile around19 and within whose limits extended the authority of a jurisdiction. A banalité was the equivalent of a tax paid by the villagers to the lord of the land so that they could make use of the things said banales, that is, those things destined for public use, such as bread ovens.20 While the ban meant that the freeman might still choose to use, or not, the banal oven, the slave, on the other hand, had to eat banal bread, or starve. The same went for wine where the lord held monopoly over its making and distribution, forcing villagers to buy from him (though it is said that monks would sometimes produce and sell ad bannum wine). If a villager chose not to drink wine, thus not buying any, “the lord shall pour a four-gallon measure over the man’s roof; if the wine runs down, the tenant must pay for it; if it runs upwards, he shall pay nothing,”21 as reports George Gordon Coulton in his account of medieval villages. Though there was a clear

19. A lieue is equivalent to the distance a man can walk within an hour, which is approximately three kilometers or one mile.
hierarchy in who benefited from the use of bans—resembling, to some extent, our various contemporary divisions—there is, in the original meaning of the word, a strong sense of building a community in which all eat the bread baked in the same oven. Carrying loaves of risen bread from their house, marked with a special stamp so as to recognize which loaf came from which house once the bread had been baked, it is easy to picture villagers gathering in the morning around the banal oven, forging a sense of community while waiting for the bread to be baked.

If in medieval French, banel meant, literally, “communal,” the word grew from open to everyone, or that which is at the disposition to all, to “commonplace,” “ordinary,” and “petty,” to finally evolve to our current understanding of banal as “of no interest.” But up to the late 18th century, things described as banal carried with them a positive sense of community, of worth, and of what made life possible. If bread ovens are no longer commonly found in contemporary villages, let alone cities, the medieval meaning of banal helps us see that the things of the everyday world are not insignificant; rather they are perhaps the site of possible signification, community, meaning, and value. Banal things, events, places, and people might very well be the stronghold of what truly characterizes our experience of the city. They might very well embed the past and future within the present. As Paul Ricoeur argued in *Temps et Récit*, analyzing the aporia of time through Saint Augustin’s *Confessions*, the present is thick with the past and future on either side of it, not as three independent times, but as a triple present: the present of the past and the present of the future are part of the present of the present.

In a thorough account of this lineage, Michael Sheringham comes to propose four principal characteristics of what constitutes the everyday. Firstly, the everyday inheres in the way things such as eating, shopping, walking down a street, are part of manifold lived experience. It is a continuity of eventless events, what Virilio might call a chronotopy, in which space and time are acted upon by use. Secondly, the everyday, as the banal, implies community: it comprises other people. Thirdly, historicity, i.e. the building of our comprehension of the world, is embodied within repeated and familiar events. Fourthly, only practice makes the everyday visible. If made the object of scrutiny, it dissolves into statistics and data and no longer holds contexts, stories, and history together: “The everyday cannot be reduced to its content...The everyday invokes something that holds these things (driving to work, getting the groceries) together, their continuity and rhythms...something that is adverbial, modal, and ultimately ethical, because it has to do with individual and collective *art de vivre*.”

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The everyday is what we never see for the first time, said Maurice Blanchot. Though it is now, within an overly familiar present, it is perhaps only what we see again, not the exceptional or the sought after, that holds our true sense of the urban environment.

So why should we pay attention to the everyday? As suggested thus far, we should pay attention to the particular, the banal, to the present, because the already-there—the experienceable—harbors within itself the space for intersubjectivities and communities to grow, for differences to come together within a space of negotiation. In order to build a promising future, one has to come to the present. We thus need to brush away the fear that the everyday is hopeless, fearful, or simply ordinary. We must admit that found situations, places, and daily events contain the imaginative requirements of a different future, if one is willing to observe and is prepared to admit the possibility that creative potential might be stored in the most unexpected places.

While a traditional sense of utopia tells us to invent something entirely new, out of time, out of place, an imaginative future that will never be, tradition tells us there is much to learn from the past; it keeps us also, to some extent, in a time out of time, in a past that lingers for becoming. If both ends of the spatiotemporal spectrum are complicit in the building of history, they also share a healthy distance from the present and constitute the two sides of an everyday coin. It thus becomes possible to think of the present as the real unattainable time and space, suggesting that something can be learned from the “here” and that the city as found is something we need to imagine. I will even argue further: not only is the city “as found” something we need to imagine, the city as a site of the present can provide, in all its originality and potentialities, the means to resist what Bauman called “the shortsightedness of the here and now” and become a vision we can aspire to reach.

The unselfconscious tradition

At 3 o’clock on March 16, 1972, a first building of the infamous housing project Pruitt-Igoe, built in 1954 by Minoru Yamasaki in St. Louis, Missouri, was demolished. The story of Pruitt-Igoe is quite dramatic and has served as a cautionary tale of public housing in North America. The 33 buildings, comprising a total of 2,780 apartments, arranged amidst a large area in which parks, playgrounds, and parking were meant to be integrated, was a wonderful demonstration of the modernist dogma. But this demonstration was soon to turn nightmarish, a place for crime to flourish, for racial segregation to be exacerbated; it would also bring Charles Jencks to declare the death of Modernism.

Following steady population growth since the 1870s, the center of St. Louis had become a crowded place by the 1940s: housing stock was deteriorating, families still lived in 19th century apartments, sometimes with shared amenities. As Missouri was still very much segregated, white families were fleeing the center for the newly built suburban areas, leaving their houses and apartments to be taken by low-income, mostly black, families. The city’s central administration thought the inner city had to be redeveloped to entice businesses to open and white middle-class families to stay. Though an early plan had called for two to three stories of residential blocks and public parks to be built as a replacement for the rundown neighborhood, high-density public housing was the

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Whitechapel & MIT Press, 142.

city's final decision. They argued that the denser population would raise value and revenues, increase places for shopping, and make more sense for investing in parks and playgrounds.

Harry Truman's Housing Act of 1949 allowed for this vision to take shape: the city administration could acquire the land, take buildings down, and sell the land back to private developers who could then build public housing with the financial help of the US government.25 A strategy Lewis Mumford thought well-suited to build the new slums of the future. Yamasaki's firm was hired in 1950.

The initial project, like the initial city plan, proposed a mixture of high-rise and low-rise buildings, walk-ups, parks, and playgrounds; but it was soon replaced by a more economical version in which apartments were deliberately small, and density high. While the large buildings tried a number of strategies to encourage social interaction and community building—with anchor floors on which more amenities were available and elevators that would only stop every other floor so that residents would have to walk up and down in the building—most buildings remained vacant for many years and were eventually boarded up. The demolition took place incrementally until 1976. The reasons behind the project's failures are many and cannot be blamed solely to the architecture of the buildings: of course white middle-class flight to suburbia, unemployment, politics, and segregation all had a role to play. But one has to wonder about the wisdom of such a heavy-handed replacement of an urban fabric, as rundown as it might be.

While this dramatic failure must certainly have weighed heavily on residents' lives, it confirmed, to some extent, one of Jencks' predictions. In his Architecture 2000 & Beyond, Jencks made a series of predictions about the future of architecture and cities as the turn of the century was approaching. If the rate of successes or failures of these predictions is somewhat irrelevant to the present study, it is important to look into the distinctions Jencks made between the various ways, or traditions, architecture was organized in the 20th century, bearers of his now famous Evolutionary tree of the year 2000. At a glance, Jencks argues that the sphere of architectural practices is divided into six major traditions. Opposed to the intuitive—which comprises the natural, the organic, metabolic, and biomorphic—is the logical tradition, that of the engineer, the mathematician and includes the parametric and geometric. The activist and idealist traditions follow, with the former being the tradition of the utopian, the futurist, and the revolutionist, and the latter linked to the rational, the purist, and the metaphysical. Come finally the self-conscious and unselfconscious traditions. Put simply, the self-conscious tradition pertains to the realm of the architect, of the urban designer, of those who make decisions about the well-being of the city with a full understanding of the urban issues at
stake, while the unselfconscious is, well, the opposite. The unselfconscious tradition can be defined as the spheres of action and decision which, “while purposeful on a small scale, are made without regard or reference to the whole or centralized control system which exists” 26 in a given location. Understood as such, the land of the unselfconscious becomes wide and large: any slum, any illegal settlement in any developing country or city; in North America, any self-proclaimed architect who builds a house in the forest, who carves a road and improvises other infrastructures; or in Jonathan Hill’s words, any illegal architect at work. 27 The novelty of Jencks’s tree is that, while still divided into time lapses of 10-year increments, the understanding of history is very fluid across time and categories, finding possible connections between most.

But what is most relevant is grasping the scale of the unselfconscious tradition. While most of us architects, urban designers, and the like are concerned with five of the traditions, it is the unselfconscious one that occupies most of our environment. Though Jencks does not reference his numbers, it is not farfetched to believe that his claim of 80% unselfconscious building must be close enough to reality. In any case, to borrow the words of Bruce Mau: “architecture is largely irrelevant to the great mass of the world’s population.” 28 The example of large, crowded urbanized areas with minimal infrastructure, commonly identified as slums, is by any measure the most obvious example of the unselfconscious. While they may represent, to some, an opportunity for creativity, for humanitarian work and so forth, they may also be, for others, a wasteland to be dealt with, pushed away, erased, negated. Whether one stands on one side of the fence or the other, unselfconscious areas unquestionably generate countless statistics and are laden with all sorts of intentions:

Before the 19th century, it would have been conceived, if at all, as background—as man’s biological condition from which he distinguished himself through action. But after this point, because of egalitarian ideas and slum conditions, it was both romanticized as “vernacular” and debased as “mass culture” produced by the “masses”. In our own time, the revolutionists eye it with expectation, hoping to lead it out of exploitation; the organization of men and large firms hope to sell it their services; the dictators approach it with the desire for order and control; the reformers hope to ameliorate its conditions through piecemeal legislation. Each group in turn projects its image of humanity in the abstract and then hopes to shape it. 29

Independently of their true intentions, such hopes are for the most part in vain because, as Jencks continues, the “unselfconscious tradition is continually intractable.” 30 As would a soft or malleable material, it finds its own ways of building, shaping, and distancing itself from the powers at play. In their ability to invent themselves, grow and sometimes even become relatively prosperous, the makers of the unselfconscious demonstrate extraordinary creativity and resilience.

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30. Ibid.
Jencks’s unselfconscious tradition is also very pertinent for our understanding of the dynamics of contexts in transformation: where pockets of the urban fabric have not yet been razed, but where complete transformation is imminent. It teaches us that the context in which we live has been built through time, across movements and know-how, and that slowly, incrementally, cities have built themselves with their own inner logic.

It also makes us consider the unselfconscious as the true context within which we live and teaches us that in the midst of the planned city are spaces, buildings, lots, areas, neighborhoods, that have come to be what they are primarily because they make sense to those who inhabit them. Looking at these areas thus becomes essential for understanding urban practices and learning from their ingenuity, integration, and use of public space before all is taken down.

While St. Louis came as an opportunity for Jencks to proclaim his most famous statement, the drastic transformations that took place—first from an inner-city slum to a modernist city, and then into what has become a large empty area, where a growing urban forest is home to chain link fences, abandoned roads, warehouses, and few community buildings—couldn’t be a more perfect lesson for anyone driving a bulldozer. In his predictions, Jencks supposed that the unselfconscious tradition would continue to grow and would extend to other areas such as health and education. He was right in thinking so, as we now see a growing number of grassroots initiatives all over the developing world, community and neighborhood initiatives around North America and Europe, etc. What was not mentioned in his prediction—and perhaps he did not foresee this challenge—is that the unselfconscious would need to fight very hard, often losing the battle, against real-estate speculation and a neoliberalist economy.
façade on Tyan Street