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Chapter 9

Zero-institution culture

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For many cities around the world, intervention-based redevelopment of place reveals layers of gentrification, elitist functions, sanitised spaces and or an increase in privatised areas of the city. While some critics proclaim that a new paradigm (such as Patrik Schumacher's fierce arguments for Parametricism; an extraction of neo-liberalist design and systems) is required for the profession of architecture to address society's biggest challenges – the environment, living arrangements, technology, to name a few – the desire to redevelop cities has attracted privately backed financial investments in order to future-proof themselves against decline, thereby enabling the big-business of hiring star architects to deliver master plans or showpiece architectural projects as an appropriate design tool in city redevelopment.

The problem, however, is in delivering such schemes, cities run the risk of constructing a series of 'zero-institutions,' disorientating its residents through an architectural parallax – an effect whereby the position or direction of an object appears to differ when viewed from different positions – creating narratives that eschews the conventional quality or condition of presenting a narrative of place at odds with a city's natural rhythm or evolution.

The structural anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), developed the idea of the 'zero-institution' as an empty signifier with no determinate meaning. Later, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek (b. 1949) identified iconic multi-functioning arts complexes at the heart of our cities as

today's contemporary zero-institution. By way of extension, zero-institutions become an

ideology to synthesise the city and its inhabitants, occupying both physical and cognitive space.

Yet, these new zero-institutions, in the guise of 'high-architectural intervention,' often reject

existing identities or the semantic weight associated with an environments' history, enabling the

regeneration of place and zero-institutions to exist in plain view of dynamic urban fabrics.

Using examples from contemporary architecture and synthesising theory from Lévi-Strauss and

Žižek, this chapter argues that the blurring of semantic space and historicity of place are a

strategic motif of the zero-institution which appeals to base psychoanalytical desires of

spectators; new identities of place are formed where the idea of meaning is resigned to socio-

political motives. Urban grains consisting of parallax 'gaps' with zero-institutions at their centres

become fertile domains for architectural discourse to consider the manipulation of narrative

structure and the resultant cognitive effects upon the culture of our cities.

Zero-institutions

The notion of the zero-institution is adapted from Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropological study of

Amazonian tribespeople in *Triste Tropique* (1955). Lévi-Strauss, famous for his structuralist

approach to anthropology, posited that immutable deep structures exist in all cultures, and

consequently, all cultural practices have homologous counterparts in other cultures – in other

words, that all cultures are proportionate – and that every culture can be understood in terms of

these opposites. "From the very start," he wrote, "the process of visual perception makes use of

binary oppositions."[1] In *Do Dual Organizations Exist*? (1956), Lévi-Strauss called the "zero

-institution:"

a kind of institutional counterpart to mana [magical, religious and spiritual power inherent to tribal hierarchies], the empty signifier with no determinate meaning, since it signifies only the presence of meaning as such, in opposition to its absence: a specific institution which has no positive, determinate function – its only function (…) signalling the presence and actuality of social institution (…) in opposition to its absence, to pre-social chaos.[2]

Slavoj Žižek expands upon Lévi-Strauss's view of the "empty signifier with no determinate meaning,"[3] where the 'zero-institution' becomes central to the concept of architectural parallax, particularly, the contemporary arts centre:

Big performance-arts complexes, arguably the paragon of today's architecture, try to impose themselves as a kind of architectural zero-institutions. Their very conflictual meanings (…) is the presence of meaning as such as opposed to non-meaning…[4]

Žižek's observations feed into his theory of the architectural parallax, which is, in its ordinary sense, the apparent difference in an object or the position of an object when it is viewed from different perspectives.[5] Yet, what differentiates Žižek's perspective is in its philosophical twist that the observed difference is not simply "subjective." It is, in effect, objective,[6] where "an 'epistemological' shift in the subject's point of view always reflects an 'ontological' shift in the object itself."[7] As a result, the object, in the shifting perspective of the parallax, is both itself and not itself; the parallax view renders the object uncanny.[8]

Whilst the parallax extends into the realms of architectural uncanny of Vidler (1992),[9] which, in itself, is an extension of the uncanny in psychoanalysis first discussed by Jentsch (1906) and Freud (1919), the uncanny is an effect that emerges at the latter end of zero-institutional building (discussed later). Žižek makes clear that

the parallax gap is thus not a matter of our shifting perspective (…); things get interesting when we notice that the gap is inscribed into the 'real' building itself – as if the building, in its very material experience, bears the imprint of different and mutually exclusive perspectives.[10]

The zero-institution for Žižek, emblematic of its functionality to a myriad of concerns – contemporary art, theatre, performance, music and accompanying social spaces – is a fertile typology of architecture to other functions and forms. One can recognise such structures within cities across the globe, which are ever increasingly, central to city redevelopment or revitalisation plans. They also vary in scale; consider cultural zero-institutions to re-invigorate post-industrial towns and cities in the United Kingdom over the 1990s and 2000s or New York City's recent Hudson Yards development scheme; whilst not centred on an arts complex, it houses a divergent typology of 'zero-institutional' architecture.

Narrating zero-institutionalist interventions

Today's cities are rife with messages upon the psyche. As a result, the historic transgression of place and, therefore, the historic and evolving narrative of place, raises the question of whether architecture can function independently of homogenising cultural identifications.[11] Western architecture exists in a capitalist dichotomy in which leading philosopher and Frankfurt school member Theodor Adorno claimed that functionalism in architecture – by which he meant not its practicality, but its sensuous meaning – cannot exist in an irrational society.[12] The irrationality of the built environment is therefore dictated by neoliberalist directives to construct the city's new narratives. Whilst this nudges upon the socio-political organisms within architecture, the contribution to narratives of place remains intrinsic to an identity.

Austin suggests "a successful narrative environment will prompt embodied perception, physical action and intellectual change or transformation."[13] Therefore, the city transmits a reliance on the intellectual account to yourself of who you are, and the place you are in, and your bodily schema; it is expected that stimulation is required to create desire to enter and engage with a narrative space. A "dialectical tension between the expert and amateur"[14] exists upon encountering urban fabrics that links to the existence of an incommensurability between community and audience in Žižek's Parallax, a concept we could describe as radical passivity.[15] Radical passivity builds on Walter Benjamin's encounter with architecture by either 'rapt attention' or a 'noticing in incidental fashion.'[16]

If one considers the impact of zero-institutional architecture rupturing narratives through the creation of a Žižekian parallax, and the resultant uncanny implications on conscious and interpretation of the built environment, the question emerges of how is this so? Do not zero-institutions become immutable objects?

Phenomenological to psychoanalytical

Architectural projects often contain numerous phenomenological tools, but for the zero-institution, strategic psychoanalytic methods implicate subjects to become aware of, but also affected by the new intervention. For example, the zero-institution synthesises the physical space of the city, the plastic and real assemblage of the architecture and the metaphysical spectacular across both objective and subjective dimensions, demoting "phenomenology (…) to a base concept, which constructs space from subjective experience."[17] The zero-institution eschews tradition, becoming a powerful mediator of the objective and subjective within the city experience and shares the phenomenological capacity to morph urban environments from conscious markers of being, to powerful modulators of inclusion and exclusion.

However, the zero-institution has developed a capacity to reduce itself to base psychoanalytic desires, in evoking the uncanny quality in which they "…bear the imprint of different and mutually exclusive perspectives."[18] For Anthony Vidler, "the uncanny is not a property of the space (…); it is in its aesthetic dimension, a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming.[19] Therefore, an integral qualitative tension always exists within the uncanny, where architectural responses can both marginalise and exacerbate internal anxieties.

The uncanny then begins to form dismembered states of environments, where fragmentation occurs between cultures, spatial relationships, cognitive functions and architectures. In Vidler's assessment of the uncanny, the role of architecture sought to deviate from any reconciliation but fostered a detachment from the body and modularity. As zero-institutions develop newer forms of abstraction to deal with the trauma of the past, and one's own guilt associated with nostalgia, technological and engineering advancements disassociate architecture further from its users. For example, Vidler discusses parametricism here, citing the work of Coop Himmelb(l)au, "…for the generation of a whole range of psychological responses that depend on our faculty of projecting onto objects states of mind and body.[20]

By extension, the uncanny presents a typology – or perhaps architectural methodology – inherent of zero-institutions to continually reproduce feelings of anxiety in buildings that articulate both a new territorialisation of environment but also detachment from its user's perspective. Perspective is at once visual but also embodied. Recall Žižek's zero-institution containing "…Their very conflictual meanings (…) is the presence of meaning as such as opposed to non-meaning…."[21] Where this observation relies on the postmodernist approach in architecture of a multitude of

systems, the zero-institution behaves similarly, where their contemporaneity is characterised by antinomies and asynchronies: the simultaneous and incompatible social inequalities, differences that persist.[22] The inscribed non-meaning of the zero-institution allows a hierarchical order to materialise, underlying the institutional goals of a state.

One could begin to view this psychoanalytically where notions of unconscious projection or the transference of feelings are projected to alleviate conflicts or social disparity. Expanding upon this, the architect Alejandro Zaera-Polo of FOA notes a social antagonism which embodies both the building and the image it presents; "Institutions cannot simply rely on performances themselves to provide a sufficient attraction; the building must create an 'experience' and a 'sense of place' for its demanding audience."[23] The zero-institution's psychical "power" and ability to territorialise an environment manages to obfuscate the reality redevelopment causes. It becomes a function of the built environment that necessitates "…observation, diagnosis, and treatment, and it is diagnosis that stands today as one of the more urgent and important interdisciplinary methodological hurdles between architecture and psychoanalysis."[24]

Exposing zero-institutional psychodynamic effects

Perhaps, the true first example was embodied by Rogers and Piano's Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, which hallmarked the cultural complex across multi-disciplinary platforms and the power to actively play a role in the regeneration of the urban fabric. Conceived soon after the student rebellion of the late 1960s, the Pompidou Centre in Paris became a privileged place where culture was offered to the masses as a proof of democratisation[25] and, in turn, delivered an uncanny blurring of boundaries for Parisians. President Pompidou's desire to create a cultural legacy, in an obverse of his conservative politics, administering the world's first openly democratic 'Pop' building:

> … to define a different relationship with culture. No longer elitist, culture was now meant to get off its pedestal and enter the flux of life. Instead of being secluded in a temple or mausoleum, it had to be spread in a new kind of public forum, in a bazaar…[26]

It was in the "Completely out-of-context (in historical Paris), but also by the application of the pop principle of 'happening'(…)," notes Marinelli,[27] "…a 'strange object' capable of (…) arousing a sense of stupefaction (…) it was nevertheless supposed to break 'the traditional barriers existing between culture and people." The first zero-institution ascended into the urban and architectural realm, through a blurring of democratic messages, a de-compartmentalisation of elitist culture, re-branding the historicity of the Marais and an uncanny inverse between a flexible monumentality and removal of substantial urban fabrics.

Over the course of the Millennium, the New Labour government (1997–2010) of Great Britain implemented fierce regenerative programs across the country, elevating cultural institutions and as a by-product, zero-institutions, to "…necessary, fixtures of a well-furnished state."[28] In 2001, the completion of Caruso St John's New Art Gallery Walsall was seen as a positive force for the town, revitalising a future desire to attract investment and tourism. Unfortunately, the institution fell victim to the 2008 financial crisis, raising concerns of the council. Nevertheless, the gallery is still open, but isolated by the idiosyncratic nature of Walsall's fabric, a reality of political inaction. Walsall proves the physical and psychological dichotomy in zero-institution architecture – it is a method of exposing different layers, which all converge upon the object as component of narrative: the new zero-institutionalist structure to provide meaning while also conveying absolutely no new meaning for place. In a successful narrative of place, the story continues and progresses; yet, for Walsall, this has halted. Instead, the zero-institution exists in a

state of passive reading – "A reading acquired more through disinterest (désinteressement) than interest, [that] has a radical potential to change the reading"[29] – of place and stagnation.

In New York City as part of the 2004 Bloomberg-Pataki Hudson Yards synthesis, created the Special Hudson Yards District, changing about 301 acres from manufacturing and commercial to mostly commercial/offices and residential.[30] Costing $25 billion, the urban restructuring project drew fierce criticism for its questionable funding through the combination of the EB-5 visa exchange private donation scheme and gerrymandering. Officials managed to re-categorise lower Manhattan and Central Park as economically distressed areas funnelling funds from low-income communities in Harlem. At the centre of the redevelopment sits Thomas Heatherwick's Vessel (completed 2019).

The Vessel has attracted staunch criticism for its use, and ableism as a structure – an Escher-esque open object made up of staircases and viewing platforms raising 46 metres, wrapped in glass and copper-coloured steels – made further news for managed access and third-party ownership of photographs of the object. It is today's purest example, and the pinnacle of the architectural zero-institution, and moves beyond an art-object or sculpture.

"Forming the heart of this new district," Heatherwick[31] writes on his studio's website, "Vessel represents the intention for Hudson Yards to create a meaningful public legacy for New York;" yet, at the same time, one can argue that there is no determinate purpose or legacy relating to the Hudson Yards development; unless a legacy is dictated by the money in one's pocket. Perhaps, subconsciously, Vessel represents fiscal dalliance bound in aesthetic spectacle or its parallax quality bordering on the uncanny. Comprehensively, *Vessel* exemplifies the empty signifier with no determinate meaning, since it signifies only the presence of meaning as such in opposition to its absence: a specific institution which has no positive, determinate function – its only function

is the purely negative one of signalling the presence and actuality of social institution as such, in opposition to its absence, to pre-social chaos.[32]

In 1980, the social urbanist William H. Whyte described "triangulation" as the mutual act of looking at something that fostered strangers to interact with each other – perhaps, the modern equivalent for architects and developers is the zero-institution; both inspire awe and appeal to desire, but ultimately become nothing more than a momentary object reduced to the exorbitant uncanny. Shifting the conscious interpretation of place by blurring the ownership of spaces, and the "meaning" attached to such interventions, only seeks to exteriorise the unequal narratives of place within urban fabrics. By consistently prescribing zero-institutions at the heart of urban fabrics does nothing more than imply the spectre of power hierarchies for place. The meaning of place is obfuscated by non-meaning; what we had is now managed by others, thereby having no meaning upon our psyche.

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