All of the ants left Paris

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«This human body and this Earthly landscape of matter are only the default settings. They are not destiny».

Benjamin Bratton

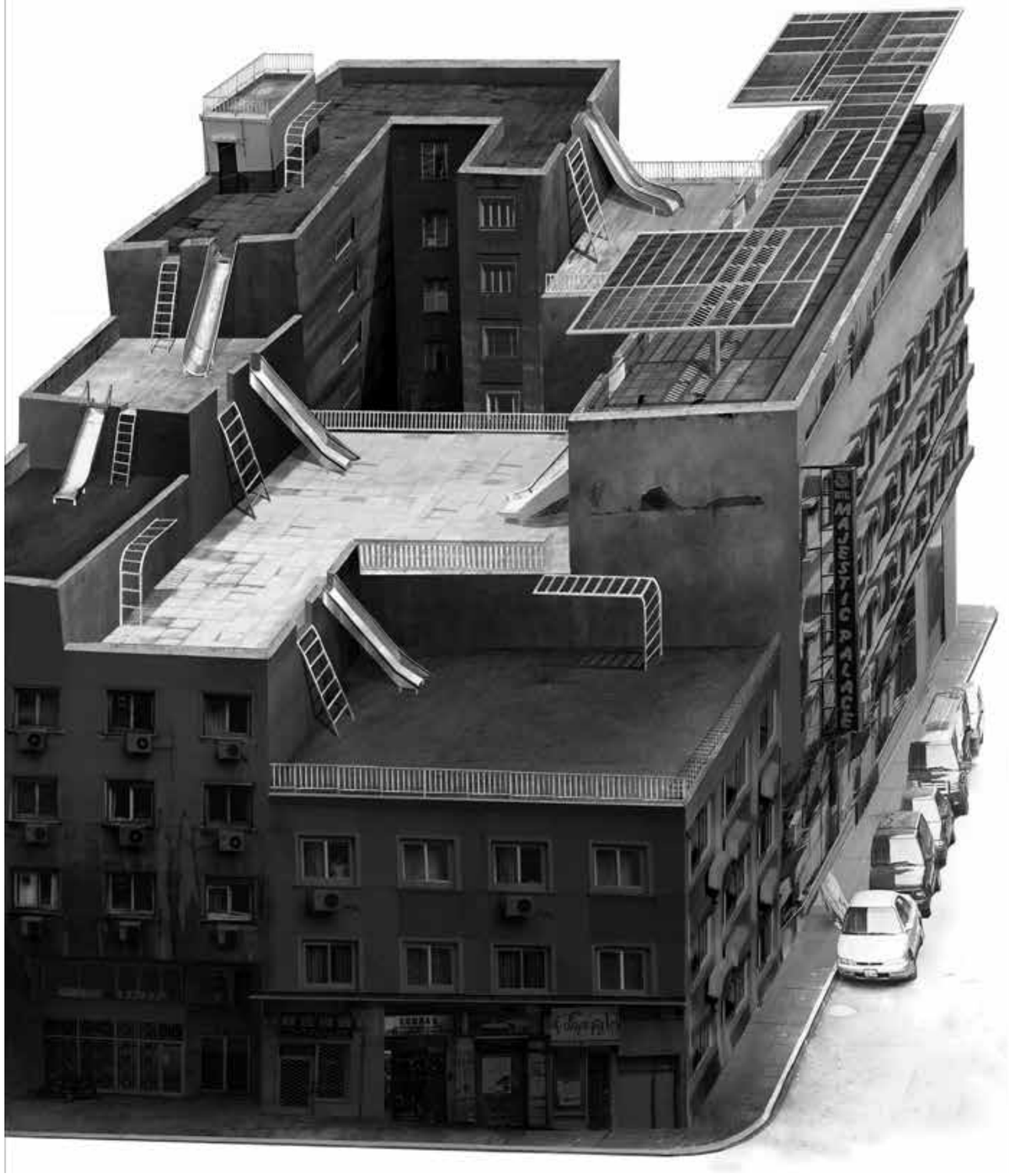
One night last summer, we were looking for Perseids stars in an urban hill, when suddenly a roar disrupted our peaceful night exploration. A wild pig emerging from the dark trotted to our position attracted by the smell of the peanuts we were impulsively eating. We secured ourselves while nervously giving away the peanuts to the hungry animal. Some days after and recovered from the scary moment, we realised that we're inhabiting a system with humans and no humans beings in constant negotiation for their agency in the system we share and that we call the city.

Our anthropocentric understanding of the urban phenomena leads us to perceive the world we inhabit as given to fulfil our needs. This perception remains even in the attempts to preserve it, meeting the needs of the present «without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own ones»[2]. Both the concept of needs and that of limitations allude to conditions needed to secure human permanence. We would give for granted that, if cities are human creations, then their destiny should be to secure human living conditions. We understand that the task of city managers deals with the application of technical knowledge to efficiently achieve the right liveable conditions.

In the case of architecture work, it is sublimely intended to reach the same goal, while the project rarely goes beyond the limits of the plot or construction site, except from its connections to the city grid of services. Orthodox critic in architecture is often based in such parameters to analyze the formal or spatial quality of architecture works, focusing in the creative skills of the creator while often disregarding the input of the myriad of agents who determine the characteristics of the resulting spaces. Thus architectural critics and architects in general are well trained to manage spaces, dimensions and materials, but have a scarce — if not inexistent — vocabulary to refer to change, complexity and contingency. But the complexity of actors and relations intermingled in urban systems and architecture realisations demand an upgraded terminology, a dynamic set of metrics conceived to understand and describe the scope of agents and relations giving form to the spaces we inhabit.

In his Urban Protocols, the Greek architect Aristide Antonas introduces concepts such as “indeterminate spaces”, “diagonal commonhold”, “invisible or parasitic councils”, which seem more a terrain of radical literature rather than planning; it seems that such protocols address different metrics and interactions within the cities, like social trust, which are not under the scrutiny of conventional regulations. Structured as a five chapter charter[3], they contain subversive and simple ideas to manage, through unconventional appropriation, the nooks of the city falling out of the control of city managers[4]. Naming them “protocols”, and using legislative jargon is only a way to make them readable and accepted by bureaucracy. Its main purpose is to establish cluster-like micro-legislative constructions with communal functions. Surprisingly, the suggestive architectonic outcomes of Antonas’ protocols are driven by the immaterial set of relations described, rather than urban spaces and their modifications.

In some way Antonas’ protocols suggest the possibility to expand the scope of urban conventional metrics towards an understanding of the city under the logics of complex systems and thereby, leaving



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space to indeterminacy, in favour of all kind of interactions which are at last, the main characteristic of the flows of information, energy and matter configuring any living system. While proposing strategies to manage this territory of the commons, they are addressed to humans; but humans with the availability to be affected. This naked humanity interacting within our cities constitute a different understanding of the purpose of architecture and its urban reality, aside from the preeminence of human being, posed instead as just another element of an ever changing environment.

A study that recognizes the city as a composite of layers which is the home to millions of species, from microbes to insects to vegetation to sapient mammals, has been recently developed by Benjamin Bratton in his proposal *The Stack*. Bratton understands the city as a «situated ecology of predation and symbiosis», matching a bacteriological tumult with sensing technologies, and just another layer itself within a wider system of platforms superimposed one to the other. This megastructure, literally circumscribing the planet, configures a sort of supermachine through a series of strata, composed by preexistent geological layers and new spaces, created in its own image; as networked ecologies, megacities, and weird technologies, among others. Bratton's Stack constitutes an attempt to understand the technical and geopolitical structures of planetary computation as a totality. Following this description, Bratton points that we could perceive the Earth itself as a spherical stack with several layers and we the humans and most of our dynamics occurring in two and only two of those layers.

«We the humans, while included in [the Stack], are not necessarily its essential agents, and our well-being is not its primary goal. After billions of years of evolution, complicated heaps of carbon-based molecules (that include us) have figured out some ways to subcontract intelligence to complicated heaps of silicon-based molecules (that include our computers). In the long run, this may be for the better– and maybe not»[5].


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Within the compendium outlined by Bratton which deals with political philosophy, architectural theory and software studies, it is remarkable the contingency of humans within a series of platforms where machine-to-machine communication could lead to the creation and further modification of newly created layers. This approach constitutes a slap in the face for the anthropocentric conceptions of the space we inhabit. Under a political understanding, Bratton's points recall some of the ideas contained in *The Cybernetic Hypothesis* by Tiqqun[6], who describe it as a fable that has supplanted the liberal agenda from the end of the Second World War; conceiving biological, physical and social behaviours as fully programmed and re-programmable, and that finds its commercial outburst in the emergence of "Big Data" and "Smart City" narratives.

One of the concerns raised by Bratton's system of platforms, is that of the limitations of orthodoxal critical reviews of the works of architecture, when we realise the complex emergence of phenomena

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that define the spaces we mould and occupy. From this perspective it sounds somehow futile, the intention to reduce the analysis to that of a single work. This attitude would possibly have sense in a world of fully isolated objects and spaces, but in any case in that of mutual affection. Thus, the work of architecture immersed in a dynamic process of conception through design, building through subtraction, and decay through use, seems something closer to digestive processes rather than the subject of pure design concerns.

In our opinion, we need an entropic understanding of the inputs and outputs of the works of architecture within complex systems. If there is any, this would be a relevant contribution from architectural criticism to the evolution of the discipline. The way that criticism was done along the XX century, was in total correspondence with the *status quo* of the architecture practice in those years, within a world perceived solely under human requirements, that found its paroxysm in the outcomes of capitalism. Nevertheless, that approach reveals

insufficient to meet and question the deteriorating consequences of our own development. A relevant analysis and critique derived from it, would need to consider this cycle of conception, ingestion, digestion and possible regeneration — dreamed, and poorly communicated, by the narratives of sustainability.

Alexey Buldakov from Urban Fauna Laboratory[7] points out to the fact that human self-consciousness is limited by the space and time of an individual life, and that we don't have particular organs to perceive entropy and genetic heredity. Referring to the work of Richard Dawkins[8], Buldakov highlights the capacity of mostly all living forms to modify their environment in order to perpetuate their permanence. This includes human beings and by extension our architectural manifestations. But this evolutionary task never occurs in complete isolation, as we subtract materials and conform spaces and layers that also host numerous non-human species. So, although cities are designed by humans as a shelter, and as an evolutionary way to preserve and reproduce human DNA, we as species are the minority in the city, just like cells containing human DNA are in minority in our bodies[9]. This analogy makes sense if we realise that our own body is like a small city populated by human and non-human forms of life which coexist and often parasite us in order to preserve their existence, generating an inner microecology that somehow guarantees our own existence too[10]. Perceived at the scale of urban relations, and from it to a level of geological events, we can neatly realise the small part that we humans and our architectonic masterpieces seem to play in the game of evolution. But even if it appears as something to be discouraged, the growth and flows of human population reveal ourselves as an expansive species, in need of ever expansive systems of shelter, which are also populated by alien neighbours that finally get connected with us to this planetary network of platforms.

We think it is possible and desirable to overcome the distinction between nature and artifice, the dichotomy between human and non-human interactions in the city, and the allegedly supremacy of this hu-

man centered conception which also sustains most of the analysis of architecture. In their *Manifesto of Urban Cannibalism*, Wietske Maas and Matteo Pasquinelli celebrate the digestive process occurring in the layers we inhabit, this “big stomach outside us” which we have been calling city for centuries. Considering the inorganic sediment of the city and the social metabolism of human-non human relations would led us to understand, analyse and describe the outcomes of our steps within history from a different perspective[11].

This way we would be able to extend the narrative of our realisations to the time when we become indistinguishable from our environment, when our existence resembles that of the microbiota within us. If this time finally comes, despite our current insensitiveness to the warnings of climate change, maybe we’ll become able to read the signs of non human dynamics in the urban systems. That would be a good moment to question again the utility of our criticism and of our architectures. In that moment, we will realize that we can keep moving forward until algorithms stop revealing us new spaces, and be aware and cautious of the time when wild pigs quit searching for food in the urban hills of Barcelona, or when all the ants have finally left Paris[12].

1.
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World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* , Oxford University Press 1987

3.
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10.
This microecology is also known as microbiota, a term coined by Joshua Lederberg to refer to “the ecological community of commensal, symbiotic and pathogenic microorganisms that literally share our body space”. Source: Wikipedia - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microbiota Retrieved on March 2, 2016

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