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The Right to Architecture

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THE RIGHT TO ARCHITECTURE
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Despite the humanistic roots of their modern profession, architects are first and foremost service providers. Their output, design and building, requires large layouts of funds, labor, and resources. They thus have to work with patrons (clients or financiers in our modern usage, whether they are individuals or collective entities) who have the means to finance and implement their designs. The architecture that the patrons pay for, and about which they usually have the final say, is perforce subject to their social, political, and economic predispositions. It is thus not neutral.

However, architecture changes once it leaves the realm of design and enters the social space. There, it acquires functions and meanings that may not have been intended or anticipated at the design stage or wished for by the first patrons. History is full of such examples. Royal and princely palaces, for instance, have become museums, schools, and offices after either the old political regimes disappeared or new economic realities forced their alteration. Churches and mosques have been converted into banks, theaters, and sometimes residences, when real-estate pressures and a diminishing holiness of religious institutions provided the rationale for such action. Countless other elaborately private or sacred spaces became public or profane after a change in political or social order, or under pressure from financial imperatives.

The reverse also happens, as when private citizens endow their homes for a religious or public purpose, such as a school, shrine, or museum. In our late-capitalist times, the inflated desires of the wealthy produce new forms of architectural transformation, as when celebrities or business moguls appropriate public or monumental architecture for their personal use. They sometime take over the palaces of old nobility as their residences, signaling the shift from hereditary privilege to monetary entitlement. At other times, corporations or governments make decisions that are motivated solely by economic considerations, which alter the forms and functions of entire cities and human settlements, such as when they relocate large-scale production or when they privatize former public spaces and redevelop the sites into profit-generating properties.

Effecting these changes, by and large, has been the domain of the powerful and the rich: the social elite, wealthy individuals or corporations, and governments' high officials. These groups assume a right to architecture by virtue of their power, which is

usually, but not always, implicit. There is a long history to this practice. For thousands of years, architecture was indeed the unadulterated expression of power: temples for the gods and their priests, palaces for the living sovereigns and mausolea for the dead ones, castles for the mighty princes, and lavish repositories of knowledge for the educated elites. The poor, both rural and urban, had their vernacular: simple, self-built, rooted in its place and tradition, purportedly timeless, and essentially missing the cachet of an architect.

The right to architecture, like other exclusive rights customarily held by the nobility and the clergy (or their equivalents in other cultures), expanded over time. New classes of patrons managed to obtain it at the dawn of the modern period: merchants, financiers, industrialists, bureaucrats, professionals, and artists. After the Industrial Revolution, the new monied classes began to compete with the old aristocracy over patronizing architecture, although they did not totally displace it (note for instance the American fascination with everything pertaining to the British royalty). Despite the major social upheavals of the 19th and 20th century, entire social segments remained without the right to architecture: the poor, the working class, or the socially marginal, particularly in developing and under-developed countries. They had no access to private architecture by virtue of their inability to pay for it. And although they constituted the majority of users of public architecture, they rarely had a say in its design. In fact, most public architecture was designed to contain and control them, even when methods were devised to poll their opinions as groups and to include these results in design guidelines for large public projects.

Revolution, the demand for radical change pursued by radical means, may be seen as the final resort of those who have no right to architecture: the urban poor crowded in slums and banned from city amenities and the social and cultural misfits disenfranchised by conventional public rights. These groups erupt in revolution in moments of attenuated hardship to physically occupy the spaces in the city that they can collectively access. These are the spaces designated as public: streets and squares, state agencies, churches and mosques. In the actions of revolutionaries, there is a hunger to claim the spaces made in their collective name as their own. Occupying such spaces and filling them with their marching, shouting, graffiti, and temporary structures is indeed akin to owning them, at least temporarily (Figure 1). It is an expression of a will to seize the public space as an alternative to the missing right of legal possession. Even as the revolutionaries destroy or disfigure the public space in rioting and looting, the *act* of destruction may be seen as yet another form of possession since they otherwise have no means to owning that space.

Architecture can be revolutionary. This occurs if its established role in a social order is challenged or even overthrown by acts aimed at the functions and meanings ascribed to it. These acts come in different forms. They could be sudden incursions during a revolt, or a mass protest, such as when a street meant for vehicular circu-

Figure 1 Cairo, Tahrir Square: Graffiti against the Military Council on the walls of the Mugamma' (the Main Governmental Complex), Fall 2011.

Figure 2 Gando, Burkina Faso, School, completed 2001.

Figure 3 Rudrapur, Bangladesh, School, completed 2005, detail of bamboo trusses.

lation becomes a swarm of angry bodies marching in protest, or when a mosque meant as a calm place for prayer is hastily turned into a field clinic to help the wounded, or when a square, landscaped and arranged as traffic node becomes a sea of people with placards, flags, and raised fists asserting the people's demands. This is how revolutions transiently revolutionize public space. We all witnessed such brief but buoyant outbursts of spatial transformation in various squares around the globe in the last decade from Kiev, to Tehran, to Washington D.C., to Beirut, and, in the last year, in the various cities of the Arab Spring from Tunis to Cairo, to San'a, Manama, Benghazi, Hama and Homs and in the American cities of the Occupy Movement.

But revolutionary architecture can also be designed. Architects of the heroic modern age between the two world wars tried to do just that. They wanted their architecture to disrupt all established orders: spatial, aesthetic, formal, historical, political, and social. Having theoretically argued their case, the modernists plunged into their architectural revolution armed with modern technology and materials, an optimistic spirit of rehabilitation after the devastating First World War, and a renewed, and in hindsight, naive, trust in the weight of creativity and design. They largely succeeded in the architectural categories they aimed to reform, and we still live with the vestiges of their innovations even after the overlays of postmodernism, deconstructivism, and a host of other (superficially) revisionist movements masked huge swathes of modern architecture. However, although they had all the good intentions, the modernists were much less successful in revolutionizing the crucial socio-political role of architecture. This was due, to a great extent, to the profession's ever-present need of considerable funding to fulfill its purpose. Indeed, hardly any of the renowned modernists broke away from the clutches of the patronage system, whether their patrons were individuals, corporations, or governments, or looked for financing measures that bypassed the system and ensured their independence. Even when they built large housing projects for the masses after the great displacements of the First World War, the modernists were unable to engage directly with these clients who had no means of funding and therefore lacked the right to architecture. The architects still had to work through large corporations or governmental authorities, which commissioned the projects, financed them, and provided the architects' fees. Not even the eminent architect for the poor, the Egyptian Hassan Fathy, sought a different way to involve his real clients, the poor peasants of New Gourna, than through the commission ordered and paid for by the Egyptian government.

It is only in the last few decades that a truly revolutionary architecture became a possibility, as many architects recognized the right to architecture as a fundamental right that should be extended to all people, those who can pay for it and those who cannot, just like other more familiar universal rights such as health care and education. These architects began to search for new methods of professional engagement with clients who could not pay for architecture. Their solutions vary. Yet they all share

an awareness of the heavy burden that the framing of their profession as service-for-hire exacts. They all also actively immerse themselves in searching for alternative ways to finance architectural projects for "clients" who do not enjoy the right to architecture, i.e., who cannot pay themselves. This funding component, added to the many other aspects of community involvement in designing, building, and promoting architecture, suggest that these architects believe in the universality of the right to architecture. It should be distinguished from other methods of mass funding of design that emerged in the last few years, such as crowdsourcing à la Kickstarter, since it is consciously focused on those who cannot afford architecture but have a right to it. It should also be distinguished from the so-called Humanitarian Design, even though the two share the impulse of doing good and the concentration on designing projects in impoverished nations in Asia and Africa. The architects I describe fundamentally believe in their "clients'" right to architecture rather than in their own humanitarian aspiration to provide that architecture. Choosing to work with impoverished communities in poorly served and remote places is their way to insist on the universality of that right.

Two recent examples illustrate this new trend. The first is a school in the village of Gando in Burkina Faso in West Africa. Completed in 2001 and designed by architect Francis Diebedo Kéré, this primary school was built cooperatively by the entire village community. Among other environmentally responsive details, the designer invented a double roof structure of adobe and tin that reduces the heating effect of the sun and passively provides for a substantially cooler interior (Figure 2). The most original aspect of the project is its financing: the architect, who is a native of the village and the first of its inhabitants to study abroad, initiated the idea for the school and became its principal fundraiser. He established an NGO and collected the entire school's cost from community members living abroad while he was completing his architectural education in Berlin.

The second example takes the model of the architect's commitment to working for the disenfranchised a step further. For a new school building in the village of Rudrapur in Bangladesh, architect Anna Heringer, who is not a native of the place, fully identified with the project and the community and took on the multiple tasks of conceptual planner, architect, fundraiser, and recruiter. The school, commissioned by a Bangladeshi NGO and completed in 2005, was funded by donations raised by another NGO in the architect's hometown in Germany, in which Heringer played a major role. But the most important role that the architect played in the fundraising scheme was to convert the charity of her hometown denizens into a capital managed by the Bangladeshi NGO so as to lessen the humanitarian form a direct transfer of the funds might have assumed. This was a good indication of her sensitivity to treating her clients as partners rather than as recipients of benefaction. Heringer enlisted the help of the community and of German and Austrian engineers to develop a construction and structural system that uses but improves on the performance and

durability of the traditional materials of bamboo and adobe (Figure 3). The result is a stunning and simple structure that not only fits in its environment but also embellishes it, while providing clean, beautiful, and climatically comfortable spaces for the young students of the village. But most importantly, this project, like the school in Burkina Faso and other recent projects, proves that architects can practice their profession outside the traditional financial paradigm.

The two schools received the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Gando in the 2004 cycle, and Rudrapur in the 2007 cycle. This may be a sign of a changing attitude in some professional circles toward this new form of architectural commitment. It is, however, difficult to deduce from the award reports whether the redefinition of the architect's mission to include participation in the funding process played a role in the decision to award these projects or not. Both projects, after all, deserve recognition for their environmental and structural ingenuity and community involvement. Nevertheless, the award brought these projects to the attention of the world architectural community and raised awareness of this creative and yes, revolutionary, form of practicing architecture. Emerging architects now have access to a number of models to learn that architecture can and should become a right for all, even those who cannot afford it.