‘...processes towards collective autonomous production ...’

‘...softening a quite radical proposal ...’

Dreams Seen Up Close
Silke Kapp

Construction work as we are used to it requires precise definitions of its products before the production process can even start: designs, specifications, permissions, budgets, schedule, and everything else. In this regard, architecture differs from visual and performing arts, for which the actual, material execution is a substantial part of creation, sometimes radically changing the initial concept. Musician-philosopher Theodor W. Adorno once wrote that the immanent process of making art has the quality of following a divining rod or following where the hand is drawn without knowing the result in advance. These kinds of creative processes – carried out with and within their material so that it concretely codetermines the outcome – cannot be equalled to creative processes that are mentally staged, followed by a later phase of material execution of a predetermined product.

This structural difference in production processes correlates with a social division of labour. In human activities historically institutionalised as fine arts, the whole process is, in principle, performed by the same people. Those who draw, paint, sculpt, photograph, film, or perform also think, create, imagine, and decide, even in works done collectively. In architecture, the agents of each part of the process belong to different social groups and in most cases even to different social classes: the so-called mental labour is done

Collégiale Saint-Pierre-le-Puellier, built in the twelfth century.
by academics with high cultural capital (and sometimes also high economic capital), while the so-called material labour is done by workers of lower social status. Depending on the geographical and historical context, the split can be more or less drastic, ranging from mega-projects with star architects and near-slave labourers, to situations of relative proximity between craftsmen and designers. Moreover, since the nineteenth century a number of intermediate agents have blurred the split. But none of this alters the fundamental social division that runs through architectural production and that we usually accept as normal, or even natural.

Common sense justifies this split with technical arguments. Construction is an expensive, difficult, and sometimes dangerous undertaking that could not be carried out without careful preparation. Such arguments, however, are disproved by the fact that countless smaller and larger buildings all over the globe were – and still are – made without splitting conception and execution, often with remarkable spatial and environmental qualities. Even the establishment of the split as a legal standard did not eradicate architects and artists challenging it, from Antonio Gaudi to Anselm Kiefer. One may argue that these are works of art that do not fit conventional criteria and whose procedures do not apply to the more ordinary buildings that our societies need to function. But what about the masses of informal constructions that today define the cityscapes on the periphery of capitalism, and were not uncommon at its centre until a few decades ago?

There is no technical argument to quash the feasibility of collective engagement in architecture far beyond popular participation in design decisions, overcoming the split between conception and execution, and its social division of labour (which does not necessarily mean absence of technical division of labour). The real argument against such architectural processes is that they cannot be structured as a profitable branch of capitalist production.

The possibility outlined above implies a radical change towards collective autonomous production – which is currently undertaken, not with great fanfare like so many pseudo-revolutions of images, but slowly and quietly, from the margins, and sometimes even in relatively conservative contexts. If it persists, it will be more important in the architectural field than the changes that modern movements have brought about – after all limited to functional and formal effects of products, leaving production unchallenged.

‘Dreams Seen Up Close’ is the first exhibition about a pioneering experience of this paradigmatic change by the collective of architects and artists Flávio Império, Rodrigo Lefèvre, and Sérgio Ferro – later called Arquitetura Nova – founded in São Paulo in 1961, and forcibly dismantled by the military regime in 1971. The group was guest of honour of the Second Biennale d’Architecture d’Orléans, held by the Frac Centre-Val de Loire from October 2019 to January 2020 under the general curatorship of Abdelkader Damani and Luca Galofaro.

The Biennale’s motto Years Of Solitude combined with the title ‘Dreams Seen Up Close’ may suggest a fantasy world of designs or buildings conceived by solitary creative geniuses and seductively represented in drawings, models, and photographs. But the dream in this case opposes such a cliché. Each piece of the amazing collection of materials that guest curator Davide Sacconi has brought together from distant countries and closed institutions points to collaboration. This is an exhibition about collective autonomous production, and shared, non-hierarchical creation.
in architecture, painting, sculpture, photography, writing, theatre, as well as theoretical and pedagogical approaches. Also worthy of mention is the setting in Collégiale Saint-Pierre-le-Puellier, a former church built in the twelfth century, when craftsmen still had a reasonable degree of autonomy, despite the upcoming ‘scholastic’ design of late gothic architecture [4]. Counterbalancing this past reference, two well-chosen contemporary productions complement the Arquitetura Nova exhibition. One shows a sample of the work done since 1990 by Usina, the São Paulo-based collective that has assisted social movements and future inhabitants to produce thousands of housing units and several urbanisation projects under a regime of self-management (autogestão) [2]. There is also a special room for the movie Butohouse, by Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine, about a Butoh dancer and his performance of self-building a house in the middle of Tokyo against all urban regulations. Although these two contemporary actions are literally antipodes, and although one of them is directly related to the Arquitetura Nova experiments, while the other comes from a totally different context, they share the current – and not at all nostalgic – protest against heteronomy in the production of space and the claim for autonomy. The tricky task in such an exhibition lies in the contradiction between showing, explaining, and strengthening unconventional processes, and doing so within an institutional framework whose spaces, objects, and agents inevitably play established roles. If architecture exhibitions are always difficult because of the impossibility of placing built products into a museum, this is exacerbated when they address production processes, and still more when these processes are emphatically open. Contemplating remnants of experiments carried out as radical actions against contemplation and the social division it entails is an aporia. Arquitetura Nova aimed at a society that would no longer require commanding agents nor their signs of privilege, such as contemplation, that is, access to the temple for those able to convince the rest that they are closer to god. Worshipping the memorabilia of this refrained revolution instead of resuming it contradicts its emancipatory intentions. And maybe that is why there has not been an Arquitetura Nova exhibition before. Sacconi’s courage and energy allows us to venture into such swampy terrain, achieving an insightful presentation.

Yet the question remains whether ‘Dreams Seen Up Close’ offers its visitors enough elements to understand or perceive what is at stake here. The structure of the exhibition does not question usual roles and attitudes of protagonists and public, which are left to the contemplation of paintings on walls and objects on tables and inside vitrines, without many clues about their connections [3]. If the processes envisaged by Arquitetura Nova, as well as by Usina, aim at overcoming the divisions between producers and consumers – between artists free to create and ordinary people who only obey and admire – then one could expect devices that at least produce some doubt about those established roles. I know that several of Sacconi’s ideas that may have disrupted this logic somewhat were finally abandoned for operational reasons, such as the intention to build a small vault inside the church nave during the exhibition. But even that does not address the underlying issue. The fact that some visitors at some point put their hands on some bricks would hardly arouse critical sense concerning ‘normal’ building sites. Another idea was to install a small library in which the group’s theoretical references would be available for consultation in several languages.

along with part of Sérgio Ferro’s later works. But again, the possibility of manipulating, leafing through, and reading a huge variety of titles would not greatly alter the structure of the exhibition (and seems incompatible with the rhythm of visitors in such a dense and extensive Biennale).

The rather conventional character of ‘Dreams Seen Up Close’ is further emphasised by the way of displaying Arquitetura Nova’s designs and buildings as small models, all in the same pattern and homogeneous material, of which only the vaults stand out [4]. At first glance for someone who has never heard about the group before, the set of models may give the impression of a mere stylistic variation, with references to Oscar Niemeyer’s curves framing a little known Brazilian architecture into the well-known one. The captions actually mention the kind of construction sites that the group tried to put into practice, describing it as ‘a jazz orchestra, a field of experimentation where different teams of builders can cooperate and negotiate the development of technical elements [...] within a common scheme’. Nevertheless, besides softening a quite radical proposal, this description does not clarify the relationship between vaults and construction labour, nor the essential difference between (Niemeyer’s) curves as a design feature, and vaults as constructive option chosen because of the production logic that they entail. The models and captions also show no signs of the numerous obstacles and mistakes that these experiments have faced, the reviews of strategies and tactics in the course of various building sites, or the often unsuccessful attempts to reinvent habits of domination and subordination in this context. Instead, the emphasis of the written and visual materials falls on the effects of finished works.

The idea of opening up construction processes towards collective autonomous production, bringing architecture back to the arts in a broad sense – not as fine arts in an institutionalised dome – was such a strong guideline for the Arquitetura Nova group that it has fostered the activity of its members ever since, and has led to a wholly original line of critical theory in architecture. Rodrigo Lefèvre developed his master’s thesis on the construction site as a school (unfortunately, he and Flávio Império died at a young age), and Sérgio Ferro has worked on the historical, theoretical, and pedagogical implications of this approach for decades, giving rise to a body of writings fundamental for production studies in art and architecture.

Although processes, as well as architectural products, cannot be replicated inside an exhibition space, perhaps a few details may have given more prominence to the change envisaged by Arquitetura Nova. The setting itself, the Collégiale Saint-Pierre-le-Puellier, contains surprising glimpses of the difference between heteronomous design and design as part of the building site’s know-how and invention, offering chances to break the usual logic of an art exhibition (showing things as if they belonged to another sphere of materiality and social production). There are, for instance, two column bases at the altar entrance (maybe remains of a rood screen demolished in 1738) that I, like most visitors, would not have noticed if Sérgio himself had not called my attention to them. These first courses of cluster piers are like early synecdoches for the contradictions at the core of architecture since Late Gothic times, showing precisely what Arquitetura Nova tried to overcome: externally shaped to suggest a distribution of loads among three semi-detached shafts, but cut in stone to
function as one structural piece with bonded joints. The stonemasons’ art, whose own logic must not appear, sustains the building. The whole church could be looked at in this manner, ‘from below’. Another detail in the same direction is the sculpture *Une Saison avec Rimbaud*, a collage of construction tools and remains, by Sérgio Ferro and José Esparza. It is placed next to large photographs of Brasilia’s construction sites, showing the labourers’ struggle with a forest of rebars required to build forms that contradict any structural principle. The contrast between these processes and the social premises and prospects behind them is clear – provided one already knows that José Esparza is not an architect or artist, but a skilled, intelligent, and experienced craftsman, a construction worker just like those in Brasilia, with whom Sérgio has been working for years.

The courage and energy to put together this exhibition deserve recognition in itself, as does its collection of materials comprising many pieces that have never been made accessible to the public before. Once something like this is done, it is easy to question and criticise, and difficult to do better. It gives hope that others will have the same boldness and find new ways of opening discussions that may seem specialised, but in fact concern us all.

‘Years of Solitude’ was held at the Frac Centre-Val de Loire as part of the second Biennale d’Architecture d’Orléans, from 11 October 2019 to 19 January 2020.

Silke Kapp is an architect and holds a PhD in Philosophy. She is a professor at the school of architecture of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (Brazil), where she co-founded the research group MoM (Morar de Outras Maneiras / Living in Other Ways), focusing on the autonomous production of urban and domestic spaces at social and spatial margins.

Notes

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*Une Saison avec Rimbaud*, a collaboration between Sérgio Ferro and José Esparza.