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AGAINST DETERMINATION, BEYOND MEDIATION

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The idea of political agency

Our purpose here is to discuss the meaning and place of agency in three schemes of production of architecture: the Renaissance-Modern design, which we are explicitly against, the participatory-mediated design, which we accept with criticism, and the design of interfaces for autonomous production, which we propose as the central theme for discussion. Instead of depending on the architect as the agent *par excellence* or as the well-meaning mediator, agency in the last scheme happens as an interrelationship of people using interfaces to trigger social transformation. Since '(social) space is a (social) product' (Lefebvre 1991: 26) agency interests us insofar as related to society, i.e. in a political perspective. We will therefore begin by examining some common usages of the term agency and their political connotations.

In commercial law agency means someone acting on behalf of others.

Analogically, the so-called *agency theory* deals with conflicts between shareholders' interests and their executives' performances. Agency in this sense relates to an agent who acts according to someone else's instructions, motivations, desires or interests. Agents are supposed to embody the ends prescribed by their principals without questioning (even if the means to achieve them may be discussed). We are not interested in this notion of agency, because it implies agents totally determined by 'others', and thus politically annulled. As our title states, the argument here is against (heteronomous) determination.

Also quite common, especially in the current architectural debate and in the context of artificial intelligence (AI), is the usage of the term agency as inter-mediation. The premise is that the agent acts as a translator whose task is to conjoin two or more parties relating symmetrically to each of them. In architecture this means that the architect mediates between users, clients, governments, technical requirements, and the like. In AI, it means that a so-called machine agent mediates between humans and machines. But in both cases the presupposed symmetry is indeed very unlikely to be achieved, since a translator is seldom equally familiar with all the 'languages' involved. Thus, this notion of agency often disguises a condition in which one part has more power than the other(s). Furthermore, as in the first notion, the agent is still understood as an entity (human or non-human) that would not interfere in the definition of the ends to be achieved. Such an entity may be functional for the interests of others, but it is not supposed to have itself a political voice. This is still not the notion of

agency we are interested. Our focus lies beyond mediation.

Yet, in a more philosophical context, the term agency stands for the capacity to objectively initiate a causal chain. I can, for instance, decide to raise my arm and objectively do it. Agency in this sense means a practice opposed to natural determinism (although the outcome obviously fits the laws of nature) and closely linked to the concept of (free) will, something that a merely material entity does not have. The agent's main feature is the ability to decide what to do and to perform out of his or her decision. This is a quite unpolitical concept, but it introduces the important idea of self-determination or autonomy, absent from the two common usages of agency outlined before.

So, what could be an understanding of agency in a political sense, drawing from this last definition and contrasting the other two? We will focus on agency as *the capacity to objectively initiate social transformation*. Agency in this sense designates neither submission to nor mediation between others, and it is more than opposing natural determinism. Agency means a practice opposed to social determinism, which implies subjective capacities and objective conditions. It will lead to an acceptable outcome only if not restricted to a single person (as in dictatorship), government (as in totalitarianism) or small group (as in oligarchy). In an ideal social arrangement, agency would develop into a collectively created process of social transformation. To keep our argument as clear as possible, we will call this notion *political agency*.

The very existence of political agency in current architectural production cannot be taken for granted. It presupposes individuals or groups not entirely subordinated to their self-preservation in a society in which economic growth has been naturalized as an end in itself, and participation in this growth as the ultimate measure of success. Indeed, there are many 'agents' without any agency, that is to say, people who perform actions to (re)produce a given spatial order, without deciding anything. They lack the subjective capacities and/or the objective conditions for political agency.

The horror movie *Cube* (1997), written and directed by Vicenzo Natali, brings a fictional but eloquent metaphor for the anonymous and alienated mechanisms through which our current society engenders space. The movie depicts a group of strangers confined to a labyrinth full of deadly traps. These people (as well as the spectator) do not know how and why they got there, where the labyrinthine space ends, to whom it belongs, who has built it and for which purpose. After a long time of uselessly exploring a random succession of dangerous cubic rooms, they start speculating about their situation. This leads a gloomy character called David Worth, which is an architect, to realize that in fact he had worked on the design of the outer shell of the labyrinth. However, he is as ignorant of the whole as anyone else. He does not know who hired the job, or how the multiple parts of the construction relate to each other (they were designed by different professionals also unknown to him). As he argues, he just did his job and was well paid for it.

And Worth does not believe that there is any nexus or consistency at all. Indirectly opposing George Orwell's fantasy of absolute surveillance and directly opposing the female character Dr. Helen Holloway, who believes that a government is responsible, Worth says: *'The cube is a headless blunder operating under the illusion of a master plan. Can you grasp that, Holloway? Big Brother is not watching you*.'

Our interest in this episode is the idea that people do not produce things, language, social relations or spaces according to a master plan or a centralized organization, even if under strong structures of power. The critical state of our society is not due to some particular failures or bad intentions, as Dr. Holloway believes. Her conspiracy theory relies on the childish faith that there is still sense, purpose and authorship behind everything. But society is rather, as Worth says, a 'headless blunder'. Thus, the *Cube* appears as the ultimate metaphor of a production of space without any political agency.

Three architectural schemes

To oppose such practices we try to analyze political agency in three different schemes of professional architectural practices: a Renaissance-Modern scheme, a participatory-mediated scheme and a scheme for autonomy.

The first scheme, beginning in the Renaissance and persisting in Modern architecture, is emblematically inaugurated when Brunelleschi changed the

practices and hierarchy on the building site and Alberti formulated a theory for those transformations. The role of the architect in this scheme consists in articulating in space the economically and politically established power (Ferro 2006). It may include practical or symbolic functions for the general population, but it systematically contributes to suppress people's political agency.

One may argue that this is too drastic a statement, and that architects in their classical role depend on elites but also try to conciliate various social groups. Nevertheless, Garry Stevens (2002) has already noted that architects are submitted to power relations they are hardly aware of. If they were, architecture as a profession would probably not fulfill its traditional task of 'justifying the domination of the dominant' (Stevens 2002: 87). Although many architects are confident enough to impose their rather naïve imageries of social improvement into the world, they seldom operate freely towards social transformation. Instead they perpetuate dominant social relations of production, both in the building-site and in the users' lives. As Lebbeus Woods (1996: 279) argues, 'design is a means of controlling human behavior, and of maintaining this control into the future'.

The heroic phase of this scheme can be exemplified by the leftist proposal of Karl Teige for the *minimum dwelling* in the 1930s, intended as a counterpoint to what he called new versions of baroque palaces, designed by Gropius, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe for the new financial aristocracy. Hilde Heynen (2005) explains how Teige tried to conceive the minimum dwelling in a radically

different way.

> Given the fact that proletarian families did not really have a family life anyhow—because the reality of production conditions forced them to devote too much time to commuting and working hours, so that the only time they spent at home was for sleeping—he argued that this situation should be taken as an opportunity to develop a new way of collective living.
>
> (Heynen 2005: 10)

However different in intention from other architects, Teige's proposal completely disregards a possible change of conditions assuming that the workers would always be unable to use the home for anything other than sleeping. So, it seemed quite plausible to propose a design to crystallize this condition as long as it also offered something collective the architect thought of as important. Knowingly or not, his concept was very well fitted for the rising mass consumption of leisure facilities. Like the architects he criticizes, Teige puts himself in a political position deciding how people's life ought to be in the future, and the space he proposes for that merely reproduces the established order without enabling any sort of political agency of users in the production of this space.

Now, for the non-heroic part of the Renaissance-Modern scheme of architectural practice, we come back to the example of Worth in the movie *Cube*. In contrast to

Teige, who himself may have initiated a process of social transformation even if not spreading such political agency to the public, Worth replaces such agency by a practice of mere problem-solving. His job consists simply in solving a predefined problem with some technical means and a bit of fancy, but without questioning its ends, consequences or nexus. He is not aware of his role in society and is not interested in what his actions could do to other people until he comes to be a 'user' himself. In this sense, we take him as a caricature of many quite 'efficient' professionals whose practices fit in this scheme: the architect determines a design, negotiates it with patrons, in some cases justifies it *vis-à-vis* an intellectual community, and represents it in a code that guarantees domination over the building site. The general population has nothing to do but to accept and admire.

The second scheme is here called participatory-mediated. It means that, on the one hand, users participate in the design decisions of the architect, and, on the other hand, the architect mediates people, space and specialized knowledge of technical, aesthetic or theoretical kind. In historical terms, this scheme is related to the failure of the previous one in dealing with the production of mass housing—a failure that became evident in the mid 20th century. Its nature can vary from mere manipulation to consultation, partnership or even real citizen control, as has been extensively discussed (Jones *et al*. 2005). Keeping up our argument, we will examine this scheme in the perspective of political agency, and not in the more usual perspective of agency as the very process of mediation.

Against the background of the Renaissance-Modern practice, the participatory-mediated practice seems a real advance. Instead of just being imposed, decisions are more or less informed and discussed by the users. Architects' expertise serves not only patrons but also the population involved. However, the participatory-mediated scheme is a perfect example of what we may call the 'dialectics of minor evil': a minor evil is better than the major evil, but it may still contradict the good. 'Good' in this case is not the corollary of an intricate moral doctrine; it simply means *increasing political agency by increasing the autonomy of others*. The participatory-mediated scheme is better than mere heteronomous determination, but it also perpetuates institutions based on heteronomy, such as the institution of centralized planning. Agency might be shared by more people than in the previous scheme only if institutions and architects in charge allow it to be.

As Bill Cooke (2004) indicates, the World Bank introduced participation in its development projects to overcome the resistance of people, not to substantially change the projects themselves. In many cases it is used just as another strategy of imposition. But even when real discussion is intended by architects or urban designers, they still are in a position of power: they determine the framework of discussion, provide specialized information, judge what would be acceptable solutions, make the ultimate design decisions and finally translate them into technical codes. The participatory outcome is not given by the structure of the

process, but depends to a large extend on the personality of each professional. On the other hand, there are many situations in which it seems impossible to go beyond the participatory-mediated scheme for a better approach. What we are advocating is not the utter refusal of participation and correspondent mediation, but the consciousness of their dialectical feature. This means not to turn the minor evil into an ideal.

In our view, a bad scenario of the participatory-mediated scheme is the current urbanization of the biggest *favela* of Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The municipal department in charge of the development regards its methods as democratic, but they indeed mislead inhabitants to accept standard solutions imposed by architects and planners. Local dynamics of small-scale and continuous negotiation of space are overwhelmed by an all-embracing design of rigid buildings and controlled exterior areas. In the name of infrastructural improvement and inclusion of the favela in the formal city, the municipal department applies a participatory-mediated scheme to put the favela under government tutelage.

A better scenario of participation is the method developed by Rodolfo Livingston (2004), who has helped more than 3,000 families in his own architectural office in Argentina and, since 1994, took part in a Cuban program, helping another 50,000 families. The method starts by really listening to people, then preparing 'variables' to be discussed and turned into design, and, finally, delivering a manual of flexible building instructions. In our view, the main point of this

method is to give up the ideas of authorship and control in favor of the users' engagement in the whole process. In our research group MOM (UFMG) Priscilla Nogueira is adapting Livingston's method to our local context. The experiment, so far involving about 30 families, leads us to believe that the more open (interface-like) the variables for discussion and the way they are presented, the more people actually engage in the design. Even mediating, we are shifting the focus towards interfaces instead of problem-solving proposals for finished spaces. This also implies that people can continue the process when we are absent, just making use of the variables and open manual. In other words, we are trying to make the political agency in the participatory-mediated scheme independent of the good will of the professionals involved.

The third scheme, which we describe as the design of interfaces for autonomous production, is based on spreading the possibility of political agency. In this scheme mediation is no longer the role of architects, but of sets of interfaces. They obviously are not intended to do the same job as human beings or to simulate them (we will come back to this point later). Their purpose is indeed to open up creative potential without prefiguring solutions. Thus interfaces are analogous to architects as far as they enhance access to information and imagination, but they are also antithetical to architects because they lack judgment over other people's decisions and predefined ideas about how a space should be. In this sense the possibility of political agency increases due to the increase of autonomy of users and builders using interfaces.

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The idea of an instrument (be it physical, digital, hybrid or even abstract) as something not created to dominate human actions may be quite puzzling.[1] Since industrial revolution, we are used to instruments more likely to control what we do than to let us free choice. The extreme case of such apparatuses is the industrial machine: its power over the worker's actions is much bigger than the power of the worker over the machine's movement. But there are also instruments that operate in another manner, and not only pre-industrial ones. The telephone is an interesting example of this kind, as already pointed out by Ivan Illich (1973), who calls it a 'tool for conviviality'. It opens a whole new field of connection and communication, without defining any direction, sequence, purpose or content. The same is true for the Internet, as long as the attempts to control it do not fully succeed.[2]

One may argue that laymen or laywomen would never reach complex or sensitive spatial solutions, but tend to reproduce always the same, even with a good tool. However, any spontaneous settlement, such as old European cities or new Brazilian favelas, shows an immense variety of particular spaces, even if the overall scenery looks quite homogeneous from a distance. On the other hand, many architects do not indeed reach spatial complexity or sensitivity. They have designed plenty of monotonous spaces in the last hundred years. Therefore we should not presume that architects are always creative people, whereas other people are boringly normal. There is only a 'difference between the differences',

that is to say, between the kinds of differentiation aspired in architectural design and in spontaneous production. Architects designing extra-ordinary spaces usually search for something that has to be sold directly (returning economic capital) or indirectly (amplifying cultural capital). The differentiation is supposed to be remarkable or at least evident. Laypeople producing everyday spaces, on the contrary, bring about much more subtle differences, usually related to use values.

Agency in interface design

Once we assume that the design of interfaces may turn into a new task for architects intending an increase of people's autonomy, we should also ask if and how interfaces can actually function as mediators, and not as new instruments of manipulation, i.e., a new monopoly of agency. In the 1980s and 1990s most people from different backgrounds working with ICT agreed that agents (and thus agency) was the big issue for future developments of interface design.[3]

The debate, at first, regarded mainly how interfaces would 'become more intelligent to be able to guide users in the tapping of computer resources' (De Landa 1998: 281). That is, whether machines become intelligent by means of a set of rules and symbols (which is called symbolic AI) or by means of simple task-specific modules able to interact with the environment and learn from it (which is called behavioral AI). In both cases the key seemed to be the so-called agent: a sort of anthropomorphized helper, 'a "soft robot" living and doing its business within the computer's world' (Laurel 1999: 359).

This attempt to reproduce human features by means of machine intelligence, trying to create symmetry where in fact there is none, was systematically questioned by Hubert Dreyfus (1993) and Lucy Suchman (1999). Dreyfus was critical of the inability of computers to mimic the human mind already in 1972 with his *What computers can't do*.

Suchman, on her side, seems to be the first to reconsider the boundaries between humans and machines; boundaries that have been taken for granted assuming a symmetrical balance between human and machine agency. She expresses two main concerns regarding the assumptions of symmetry blurring the boundaries between humans and machines. First that 'contemporary discourses of machine agency simply shift the site of agency from people to their machine progeny'. This serves only to obscure human authorship and reproduce the 'regulatory practices aimed at producing certain kinds of humans (employers, workers, consumers) and excluding others'. So, the need to reconsider the borders and assume human authorship, which might not be necessarily imposing or manipulating, i.e., to envisage political agency instead of mere mediation.

Her second concern is with the ontological difference of humans and machines. She observed people using a prototype of an intelligent-interactive computer-based interface that was supposed to advise users on how to operate a complex photocopy machine. The expert agent within the machine was only able to

perceive a very limited range of actions of the users. It failed because human interaction works due to dialogue; it has an intersubjective character. Even if the machine reproduces human behavior, it does so in an objective way, lacking subjective 'presence to the unfolding situation of interaction not available to the machine'. Thus, machines are good at storing data and people are good at establishing dialogue. There is no point in trying to mimic human abilities in the machine to make it responsible for agency. For Suchman, as also for Bruno Latour (1999), agency happens in the 'intra-actions' of everyone and everything involved, and is not an attribute located in the machine. However, it is neither an attribute located in people. Agency is not a practice separate from the whole interactive process, it always emerges as a hybrid process. This summarizes a central problem we see in the ICT debate, which regards the location of agency. The usual assumption is that responsibility for agency might be located somewhere prior to action, and agency, in this case, is synonymous with control and mastery. De Landa (1998: 276) argues that in this debate of intelligent agents, what is at stake is a 'migration of control from the human body first to the hardware of the machine, then to the software, then to the data, and finally to the world outside the machine'. In all cases, responsibility for control (agency) is prescribed prior to the events.

In an opposite direction Latour (1999: 298) asserts that instead of replacing one commander by another the reader should recognize 'that in the realm of techniques, no one is in command—not because technology is in command, but

because, truly, *no one*, and *nothing* at all, is in command, not even an anonymous field of force'. In order to demonstrate 'the impossibility of speaking of any sort of mastery in our relations with nonhumans, *including* their supposed mastery over us' (Latour 1999: 176), as Heidegger claims, he caricaturizes two extreme positions regarding people and guns. Latour (1999: 176-80) develops his argument opposing the slogan 'guns kill people', used by people willing to control, restrict or ban the sale of guns, and the slogan 'guns don't kill people; people kill people', used by the National Rifle Association (NRA) as a reply to the first. He argues that 'the first slogan is materialistic: the gun acts by virtue of material components irreducible to the social qualities of the gunman' (Latour 1999: 176). In this view, the good citizen becomes dangerous due to the presence of the gun. The gun is in control, it masters people. 'The NRA, meanwhile, offers a *sociological* version more often associated with the left: that the gun does nothing in itself or by virtue of its material components' (Latour 1999: 177). In this case the gun is neutral and is mastered by the citizen. Latour (1999: 180) concludes that 'it is neither people nor guns that kill. Responsibility for action must be shared among the various actants'. He demonstrates that regardless of what is at stake, responsibility for action always concerns the interrelationship of everything involved, and nothing has the sole power of premeditated mastery, though we must not ignore the features of each actant involved, which might turn out as a strong structural determinism.[4] For Vilém Flusser (1999: 60) such structural determinism has been almost inevitable since the Renaissance, as since that time there is a need to master everything.

In architecture to acknowledge agency as a hybrid process that emerges in the event means that regardless of the intent of designers to master their plans and to predict the use of the spaces they design, the final use of spaces will always happen according to the interrelationship of every actant involved, including the very space itself. Of course that the more structurally determined, closed, finished and restrictive the space is, the more difficult for people to use it differently from the intended plan and initiate social transformation. So, the need to emphasize political agency, in which the power of those directly involved (users and workers) is potentialized over that of patrons and architects.

Our hope is that architects start to develop interfaces open enough not to obstruct people using them (for that architects must avoid the reproduction of the capitalist process of production and its implications), and in abundance to broadening the range of unanticipated combinations. This means that architects must acknowledge their role in initiating social transformation without the urge to prescribe and control the outcomes of their design.[5] In other words, they must acknowledge that agency happens as a joint interrelationship and not as the sole responsibility of people (either architects or users), interfaces or finished spaces, and also that the boundaries between those actants need to be clear not to lead to manipulation. Having this in mind might help to design more generous and open interfaces to engage people in their anarchic everyday production of space, when political agency can actually manifest.

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[1] We have already discussed it further in Kapp, Baltazar and Morado (2008) drawing from Ivan Illich (1973), John Chris Jones (1991; 1992) and Vilém Flusser (1999).

[2] Microsoft® is probably the most powerful institution trying to control it. As Barlow explains, 'any time you engage with information, the reality that you extract from that information is shaped by the tools that deliver it. Microsoft's information presentation is such a monoculture that it edits out a lot of other realities. So you have a new kind of monopoly that affects the way people think in ways that are invisible to them. It's a very dangerous form of monopoly, especially now that they are talking about the "trusted computing" model, where it will be very difficult for you to save and then pass on documents on systems without identifying yourself'. (Doherty 2004)

[3] These people ranged from Alan Kay (1999) (a computer scientist who developed and coined Object Oriented Programming and took part in the design

of windowing graphical user interface), to Brenda Laurel (1999) (a pioneer in human-computer interaction and interactive narrative), to Manuel de Landa (1998) (a Deleuzian philosopher quite familiar to architects interested in new media).

[4] Here we draw from Maturana's structural determinism as a condition for autopoietic systems such as second order cybernetics (Maturana and Poerksen 2004). This also refers to the dialectics of structure and agency in sociology.

[5] Our research group MOM has already developed two attempts in this direction: the interface of spatiality (an assembling kit to create ephemeral spaces and test spaces before building) and IDA—Digital interface to support the autonomous production of dwellings (an open source application to be available online, composed of a graphic interface and an open database in which information regarding building processes and components might be input, visualised and tested by anyone). http://www.mom.arq.ufmg.br