FOR ME, MYSELF AND I: ARCHITECTURE IN THE AGE OF SELF-REFLEXIVITY

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Recent years have seen widespread and far-reaching changes in western governments' approaches to housing and infrastructure. Formerly considered a valuable public good, the neoliberal turn of the 1980s has shifted both domains distinctly towards privatisation; either through the direct sale of council property (housing) or through the introduction of public-private partnership schemes (infrastructure).

There have been two great moments of 'crisification' in which the demise of public housing has been confronted by a labour crisis in architecture – one in the early 1980s and one today. Both eras reveal a story of the increasing integration of the architect into the hordes of precarious service workers – a 'proletarianisation' of the architect that creates the conditions for a political reconsideration of architectural practice (*building*) as essentially connected to *dwelling*.

With the rise of Thatcherism in 1980s Britain, the ideal of affordable public housing that had been a primary political concern of post-war governments came to a radical end. The early 1950s had seen architects appointed *en masse* to design large-scale projects – projects intended to house exponentially growing urban populations in clean and healthy conditions. However, Thatcher's privatisation of social housing sounded the death knell for such citywide schemes and led to a generalisation of private debt through the extension of mortgages. It also inadvertently reformulated the social role of the architect. Once employed as an informed planner who carried out expert operations in an objective and knowledgeable way, the architect as socio-political designer became increasingly obsolete. The neoliberal turn inscribed architecture in a genealogy of menial design labours that, disconnected from their social context, perform an endless variation on style. Today, architects are expected to inexpensively provide aesthetic form while the building and planning process is relegated to the developer. In this context, 'the architect – often no longer needed – has been reduced to the one who places ornamental cherries on a finished cake.'[1]

In this regard, architects suffer as much from the neoliberal restructuring of the creative industries as designers, academics and artists. Grossly indebted upon graduation from increasingly expensive art schools, they start as unpaid interns, working for free in exchange for a big architect's name on their CV. Later, work is often freelance or project-based and without regular income. Even if contractually employed in an office, working overtime without remuneration and having little or no job protection is customary. In this context, individual workers appear as the atomised individuals Franco Berardi has classified as the 'cognitariat'.[2]

Cognitarians encounter each other as competitors on a fierce market and hence rarely unionise or form alliances to campaign for better working conditions. In the absence of this struggle for recognition, the relation between employer and worker increasingly appears like Hegel's master-slave dialectic, only without the dialectic. What remains is simply the lordship of the master-architect and the bondage of the employee.

In this generalised state of precarity, the distance that once separated the architect (as provider of social housing) from the industrial worker (as patron of social housing) disappears. It is now the architect herself who, under constant threat of pauperisation, will most likely qualify for social

housing at some point in her career. This is where our present perversely concludes the neoliberal restructuring of the 1980s. However, the fact that architects are today building council blocks they might inhabit themselves adds a crucial element of self-reflexivity to the design process. To stick with the Hegelian register; doesn't this equation of the architect and the 'common worker' offer the potential for self-consciousness to occur? If in the question of social housing, today's architects are themselves put at stake, they must encounter building as fundamentally related to dwelling. This opens up an avenue for rethinking the entire field of architecture.

Already in the 1951 essay 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking', Martin Heidegger had critiqued the division of labour pertaining to contemporary construction, claiming that in the differentiation of the architectural field into client, developer, architect and builder, the original meaning of building-as-dwelling had been lost. Rather than an activity among others, dwelling for Heidegger designates our primary ontological embeddedness in the world or 'the manner in which we humans are on the earth.'[3]

Thus dwelling is not a result of building as we customarily understand it. Dwelling is not enabled by architecture. Rather, building and dwelling are coextensive, which means that the notion of building-as-constructing must be completely relativised. Rather than the instrumental execution of a prior plan, building has to be thought of as both enabled by our primary spatial embeddedness, and at the same time enabling new spaces and spatial uses. Heidegger's example here is the bridge that, rather than connecting two predefined shores, is the device that enables them to be understood as shores in the first place. For Heidegger, the good architect is someone fundamentally attuned to the space in which we find ourselves, and to the uses and connections its inhabitants have established with it. Rather than detached and objective, she is essentially self-reflexive, and conceptualises her activity starting from her relation to the spatial world.

If Heidegger saw the nightmarish dimension in the modern process of rationalisation, today we have gone even further. Our world-relation appears to us as commodified and without a pure ontological opening from which proper dwelling would still be conceivable. Relating Heidegger's equation of building and dwelling to Marx's account of the class relation, we could argue however that dwelling becomes thinkable again at the point of the complete subsumption of life under capital. When architects are forced to abandon their abstract position as planners, and enter the brute conditions of urban survival, there is a chance for a *prise de conscience*; rather than executing client orders, the architect could start questioning her relation to building and dwelling.

In a lecture on human freedom, Heidegger had claimed that only existential danger could trigger the *Angriffscharakter* (challenging character) necessary for a fundamental critique.[4] In this sense, the sudden existential stake of the architect in relation to housing, the very material risk of impoverishment could function as the beginning of a struggle for emancipation.

The fact that the 2008 financial crisis was a housing crisis points to the acuteness of addressing capitalism's systemic incapacity to provide decent living conditions in the world. At times when, as Owen Hatherley has remarked, 'council housing is used as shorthand for general lumpenproletarian venality and violence,'[5] the invention of a political imaginary rooted in a new form of public dwelling becomes increasingly pressing. Today's architectural labour crisis might sow the seeds for such a collective emancipation precisely where building is taught and takes place, in the profession of architecture itself.

1 Marcus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009) 29.

2 Franco 'Biffo' Berardi, *The Soul at Work* (Los Angeles, ca: Semiotext(e), 2009) 85.

3 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York, ny: Harper Perennial 1971) 145.

4 Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Human Freedom* (London: Continuum, 2005) 91.

5 Owen Hatherley, *Militant Modernism* (Hampshire: Zero Books, 2005) 8.