

“What political messages does the incomplete element expose?”

“It never becomes a column in absence of its negativities and minor narratives, which are the labor and the laborer.”

“What are the forces that make an element resist any sort of completion?”

“THIS IS NOT A COLUMN”!

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REVIEW



“Ceci n'est pas une colonne” - The Column by Adrian Paci- Arsenale, Venice Architecture Biennale 2014

On a corner along the canal at the Arsenale in the Venice Architecture Biennale 2014, there reclines a bright white column exiled from the ‘Elements of Architecture’. After all columns are about power and they need to be removed, for architecture to collapse and fragmented into pieces. In response to this part of the biennale, some critiques have been dedicated to search for the absent elements, wondering whether these are all, architects have at hands to rethink their practice? Column, a main element in the history of architecture, not least in modern architecture and Le Corbusier’s idea of piloti, was an obvious missing one. Whether its exclusion was intentional or not, we don’t know yet. And perhaps that is one of the characteristics of Rem Koolhaas’ curated exhibition: posing questions rather than providing answers. Yet the existing list of elements itself – as Reinhold Martin mentions in his critique – suggests an answer to the question and hints at ‘a particular way of making sense of the world, of giving order to things.’

Reinhold Martin, however, points to a paradoxically less obvious yet not an ignorable absent element. He believes ‘land’ or in our modern time ‘real estate’ is what is vanished from the collection of the ‘Elements of Architecture’. By introducing the 13th element, the ‘Lucky 13’ as what ‘bring(s) dead things to life’, Martin tries to compensate the apolitical spirit of this part of the exhibition; as ‘land’ involves a vast history of political, economical and social forces and after all it’s where material architecture stands on and it literally, is built of, on and through.

Martin’s critique hints at more silent aspect of architecture, which are concealed behind its guises. These aspects are not only parts of the politics of land but also are the shaping politics of every single element of architecture.

Maros Krivy calls these hidden parts ‘negativity’ in architecture and Jill Stoner mentions them as ‘minor’. The latter does not stand for triviality but for the aspects masked by the ‘major language of architecture’ that is a ‘product of a culture increasingly dominated by symbolic capital.’ And the former is not referring to negation of architecture but ‘expresses those aspects of architecture that have the ambiguous position of being its part and being excluded from it.’

These aspects are in fact what elevates the

elements from their instrumental monumentality to the affluents of various accounts; the accounts that render the Wall in West Bank different from the Wall in China. One part of the practice of architecture can be ‘shaking the hidden matter free’ in Stoner’s term. The question here would be how does releasing the hidden matters and forces influence and potentially change the language of architecture?

Lets go back to the recumbent white column along the canal that leads us to the Albanian Pavilion; where Adrian Paci’s video is on display. The video, ‘The Column’, of the length of around 26 minutes that is a narration of the process through which the column comes to existence, points at negativity and minor in a column as an architectural element. The story starts from a stone mine somewhere in China. The process is the transformation of nature to culture as Paci explains that remains unfinished. In the movie the Chinese labourers cut out the massive block of stone and thereafter they work on it while freighted on a factory-ship. The sea that disconnects us from land is where the column gets shape. It is supposed to become a Corinthian column. The labourers are there as the inevitable part of the process. As the work of making proceeds the white dust thickens on labourers’ faces, hairs, hands and bodies to the extent that they become part of the monument about to be.

As soon before disembarcation, labourers vanish from the scene. And in their absence the column doesn’t reach its ready monumentality but remains ‘in a state of impotence, of perpetual tension and potentiality’; neat and dustless but never a column. The recumbent column, is not only an element in architecture and urban design but carries an account that has given shape to it; the history, material, bodies and politics of its emergence all have a part in this account. Yet it is between being a monument and not being a monument. Maros Krivy, in regard to monumentality says:

“A monument is not only a statue in the middle of a square, but also a quarry which provides the necessary material for its construction.”

By not erecting it, the column is detached from its meanings per se and is raised from its ‘readable’ monumentality to its ‘writerly’ quality in Roland Barthes’ term.² The column in this sense is not only an element but it beckons to its consisting minor elements. In other words it never becomes a column in absence of its negativities and minor narratives, which are the labour and the labourer.

As a critic on globalization and its exploitation of third world labourers, Adrian Paci’s account of the column, can be applied to every single element on display in the ‘Elements’ exhibition. It is a mapping and exposure of global political and economic relations that are finally materialized in an architectural element. The column in this context is a “fake” but powerful object that questions the “originality” of western modern

project. The Corinthian column, that has its root in ancient European culture, is being built by Chinese workers and of China stone mine; and the boat is returning to West from Far East. This is indeed a claim on unoriginality of modern project as one that is always associated with a pure western project; the sort of arguments that equals modern to western. In other words it questions the western monopoly of modern project. And it is perhaps a confirmation of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s take on modernity as a project evolved in the encounter of colonizer and colonized.³

Moreover, Adrian Paci, through this movie not only criticizes the absence of labourer and labour – especially from the so-called ThirdWorld-inthemainstream language of architecture, but also introduces an unfinished aesthetic in architectural elements that rescue them from the ready monumentality and their fixed application in architectural design. The unfinished column raises the curiosity for its hidden narratives. Could ‘unfinished’ aesthetic, then, release the minors and negativities?

This can be applied to all the elements on display in the Biennale that are represented as small monuments; monuments in the sense that connect the members of architecture society. We all know them, we transform them to signs and codes to use in the representational language of architecture; we have taken them for granted unaware of their invisible parts. The very presence of the column that never becomes a column is a critique to the exhibition ‘The Elements of Architecture’. Adrian Paci invites us to think not only about absence of the labourers as one of the main forces of shaping architecture but also to think about every single elements of architecture and their inherent potential of not becoming what they have been named.

A Home That Never Becomes A Home

In their recent project, Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti designed a public square for the Palestinian refugee camp of Fawwar near Hebron. The project took shape around the discussion of ‘the right to return’ and temporariness of the camp. The argument was that access to a high quality environment does not cancel out the right to return according to the inhabitant of the

camp. Yet a finished home could mean giving up fighting for returning to real home. From this paradoxical condition the square appeared with an unfinished aesthetics that also reflect and mirror the imposing political forces into the context. The inhabitants wanted the square to be closed to provide them with a sense of security. In respond, low walls surrounded the square and by this architects changed the square to ‘a house without roof’.⁴ A house without a roof never becomes a house. It stays incomplete. The absence of the roof semantically preserves the sense of temporariness, vulnerability and permeability and respects and maintains the right and the will to return. This example like the column exposes a political force and a deprived right of a group of people but at the same time valorises their lives and claims their rights of having access to higher quality life while waiting and fighting.

‘A home that never becomes a home’ and ‘a column that never becomes a column’, bring up a question that can be applied to every element on display at the exhibition. What are the forces that make an element unfinished or make it resist any sort of completion? What political messages does the incomplete element expose? And how does an element that has never become what it is supposed to be change its application in architectural design?

1. Reinhold Martin, Fundamental # 13: Real Estate as Infrastructure as Architecture, Places, <http://places.designobserver.com/features/real-estate-and-the-responsibility-of-architects/58490/> (Accessed 05 Sep 2014)

2. Ibid. (Martin writes: By the time the Biennale program was formally announced, the list of elements had grown from twelve to fifteen, with the evocative “birth” changed to the pedestrian “triples”, and the signature of the modern – escalator, elevator, ramp – added almost defensively, as if to fend off suspicion about the underlying slowness. Still, the question begs. So for the sake of argument, let’s imagine those added elements of vertical circulation to be assimilated into the lapidary “stair,” and stick for a moment with the original twelve.)

3. Jill Stoner (2012), *Toward A Minor Architecture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, P.41

4. Maros Krivy, Industrial architecture and negativity: the aesthetics of architecture in the work of Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Smithson and Bernd and Hilla Becher, *The Journal of Architecture*, 15(6), 827-832, p. 834

5. Jill Stoner (2012), *Toward A Minor Architecture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, P.47

6. ‘Potential Monument’, *desim*, http://www.damianwebb.it/news/2014/06/21/potential_monument.html (Accessed 05 Sep 2014, 16:10)

7. Maros Krivy, Industrial architecture and negativity: the aesthetics of architecture in the work of Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Smithson and Bernd and Hilla Becher, *The Journal of Architecture*, 15(6), 827-832, p. 840

8. In Roland Barthes’ term the ‘readable’ text refers to the condition in which reader is able to produce meanings in conformation with the text rather than only consuming it when it is characterized as ‘writerly’.

9. Adrian Paci, *The Story Of A Stone*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9p9y5S8iE> (Accessed 20 June 2014, 20:00)

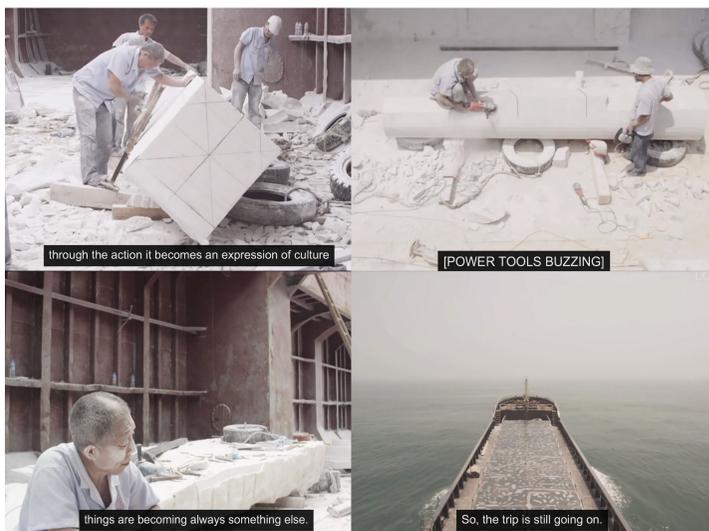
10. Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt-Commonwealth, p.68

11. Nolia Hammo, *Spot of Turban*, ‘The square, Learning in the common space’, p. 43

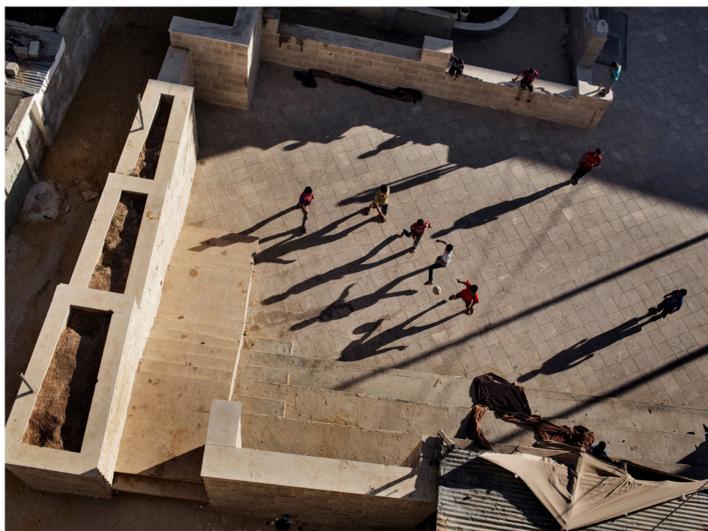
The question would be how does releasing the hidden matters and forces influence and potentially change the language of architecture?

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SEPIDEH KARAMI



STILLS FROM THE VIDEO: THE COLUMN BY ADRIAN PACI



A HOME THAT NEVER BECOMES A HOME - SQUARE DESIGNED BY Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti IN THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMP OF FAWWAR.