

THE MULTIPLICITY OF OTHER
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The Multiplicity of Other is a reality that fuels values and knowledge for a new design paradigm.

The Multiplicity of Other exists not as part of a greater whole but as a reality on its own.

The Multiplicity of Other is not to be taken into account as a group of 'others', e.g., people who are female, Black, Indigenous, of colour, queer, or differently abled that need to be managed or given space in some diversity initiative.

The Multiplicity of Other is the majority of information, practices and values that are out there, but which are not part of the dominant paradigm.

The Multiplicity of Other is a world of difference within itself.

The Multiplicity of Other identifies the spatial knowledge of the overwhelming majority of othered groups as fundamental to designing spaces in which we can live together in actual freedom.

Where can one find freedom within the spatial context of the contemporary city? Freedom to express oneself publicly and the freedom of assembly are concepts linked to the idea notion of public space as part of the public domain. What was once public (think of parks, pedestrian streets, squares and marketplaces) is becoming private with little publicity. Through privatization, public spaces are increasingly being designed for affluent and singular groups of people to engage in consumption.

The false promise of public spaces

A general definition of public space is that it is comprised of places that are open and accessible to all people, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age, ability or socio-economic level. But are spaces free when they are 'freely accessible' or is there a deeper condition they have to meet in order to be considered 'free'? In the creation of the public sphere, constitutional exclusion on the basis of gender and race was an important ideal of western enlightenment. The assumption that enlightenment thinking promotes universal humanity is central to the misunderstanding that freedom exists for all in the context of urban spaces. The actual reality of public space is one of control, where the ideal of freedom of expression and assembly is often contested and is not a given for all. The idea of public space is an ongoing practice and social struggle in which many who are not seen as normative have to make space for themselves.¹

Gentrification is difficult to avoid in today's spatial practice. It relates to almost everything that is going on in the context of the city, from social relationships to how we experience space and of course who is welcome in public spaces. Almost inconspicuously, public spaces are morphing into places centred on a homogenous concept of people, deprioritizing heterogeneity. As in many contemporary cities, the

old-school bottom-up version of gentrification has evolved into a top-down gentrification process of redevelopment bent on redefining public space. Under the guise of beautification efforts meant to enhance the quality of life, this ongoing process of limiting the usability and accessibility of public spaces leads to a decrease in the presence of people who are considered outsiders², undesirables³, or other than the norm. For those who can identify as part of the normative or dominant culture, public space might be a place of freedom, but only when abiding by its rules and the unspoken conventions of an essentially patriarchal, sexist and racist system.

Nirmal Puwar describes the socio-spatial impact of racialized and gendered bodies in places where they are not the norm⁴. Because the universal individual is exclusionary, when different bodies belonging to 'other' places enter a public space, their presence is felt as if they are 'space invaders'. Universality - a modernist ideal - informs the exclusive hierarchies that have formed the public realm and that make the right to enter and exist an issue of freedom for all who challenge the universal norm of whiteness, gender, class, or ability. Under these conditions, public space as a place of freedom can today only exist in brief moments of confrontation with the norm. Public space is therefore guaranteed neither as a civic concept nor a static physical environment. No longer permanent, it is an assemblage of intermittent actions. And freedom is found in an ongoing practice of participation and appropriation by people for whom freedom within public space is not a given.

Whose freedom do architects envision?

It is within this dynamic context that architects also seek freedom within the spatial context of the contemporary city. But the tension between architectural space and public space is ever-present because architectural space subtends the structures of gender, race, class and ability that constitute public space. For instance, in 2018 the 16th International Architecture Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia explored the theme of 'Freespace'. Its manifesto stated that: 'FREESPACE celebrates architecture's capacity to find additional and unexpected generosity in each project - even within the most private, defensive, exclusive or commercially restricted conditions.'⁶ But how can this language represent the daily reality of many whilst creating an idealized place for carefree experimentation or possibly even a comfortable place for resurrecting the architect's social agenda?

Sara Ahmed describes her concept of 'feeling fetishism': 'the availability of comfort for some bodies may depend on the labour of others, and the burden of concealment. Comfort may operate as a form of "feeling fetishism": some bodies can "have" comfort, only as an effect of the work of others, where the work itself is concealed from view.'⁷ When applied to the content of the Freespace Biennale 2018, one might consider

that this discomfort of others who are considered out of place is not part of the equation for those who are comfortable and free within public space - and who also have the privilege of designing public spaces. Furthermore, the concealment of the work of others plays an intrinsic role in the physical creation of space and is hardly ever addressed within architecture. The focus rather lies on the perception created by the Biennale of architects doing something for the greater good and feeling good about it. While an array of socially engaged architecture projects were proudly displayed to the world, what seemed to *actually* be on display was the privileged position of the architect.

As a contributor to the 1996 6th International Architecture Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, Adriaan Geuze set out on the questionable endeavour of 'Colonizing the Void'. According to Geuze, 'colonization is the ultimate expression of human culture... like the first steps in fresh snow, the process of colonization produces a sense of euphoria that demands and generates creativity'.⁸ Geuze proudly proclaims that the architectural void can be conquered. The idea of the architect as a colonizer of untouched land or space is of course highly problematic, but it also shows that the freedom of the designer is valued over anything *other* that might be uncomfortably present yet not considered irrelevant by the dominant design practice.

The idea of a place being void, of being full of nothingness, is unfortunately not only a passé colonial way of thinking, but still a common and revered way of thinking about space and place in the architectural profession. This can come as no surprise, since architecture history still considers colonialism a historical period rather than a system of domination. Modernism is not considered a system of organizing space according to colonial rationality but a paradigm of aesthetic shifts.⁹ Coupled with design paradigms in which architects are trained to identify themselves with reason and the ability to enact the universal (and by default excluding others of these same capacities), the privilege of the sovereign eye that has the right to look and judge might inhibit the actual analytical capacity of the architect. Architects may believe they 'discover' spaces where nothing 'architectural' exists.¹⁰ But what actually exists in this 'void'? The local social histories, the cultural relations and spatial practices of people who actually use the space are often confined to the space of nothingness. Rem Koolhaas, perhaps, wrote it best in his essay *Imagining Nothingness*: 'Where there's nothing, everything is possible. Where there is architecture, nothing (else) is possible.'¹¹

So how have architects envisioned freedom? Le Corbusier approached architectural freedom through the development of the open floorplan, which, together with the free façade represented a freedom of aesthetic possibilities achieved by modern technology, and consequently the ideal space for modernist universal man. But whose freedom is represented in the architectural designs of this icon of modernist architecture? Le Corbusier's

proposal for Mussolini three months after the conquest of Addis Ababa in 1936 presented massive destruction and transformation. Le Corbusier considered Ethiopia to be a tabula rasa, architectural 'virgin territory', though Addis Ababa was the Ethiopian capital since 1886.¹² By viewing the country as devoid of significant or rational architectural structures, Le Corbusier and other architects and planners propagated the freedom of colonial power to experiment at length without any consideration of what was already there.¹³

Imagination and the practice of freedom

The 2021 Biennale asks: how will we live together? But to dissect who this 'we' is, consider that architects might count themselves not as part of this great universal 'we', but as a smaller, more powerful 'we'. Architects have often placed themselves at the side of those in power - those who gave them license to push aesthetic boundaries within the profession while at the same time normalizing political ideas, morals, and certain ideals of freedom. Design is done from a paternalistic viewpoint, wherein people 'receive' design and must adjust to the vision of the architect. Rather than a neutral or universal design paradigm, architectural space and by extension public space can also be considered a 'straightening device' - an instrument to bring about conformity to a system.¹⁴ In order to actually effect instances of freedom, architects need to be in solidarity with the communities and people they serve instead of being complicit in the destruction of communities and ecological habitats in the pursuit of architectural freedom.

Paulo Freire argues that the paternalistic approach, in which people are considered devoid of knowledge and treated as mere receiving objects, is untenable.¹⁵ Freedom can thus only be the result of an ongoing practice of pursuing freedom by those not in power. Could it be that people have their best chance at freedom in a spatial context where architects have as little freedom as possible? The spatiality of freedom has existed outside the architectural canon for centuries. In the 1830s, when the US outlawed all Black churches following insurrections planned by the enslaved, the churches went underground and carved out one-room structures in the forests called bush arbours or bush harbours. 'These spaces were physical and cultural spaces where Black people not only worshipped, but also assembled for the purpose of social justice, political action and identity formation. Set apart and in secret from the patriarchal structures of slavery and white oppression.'¹⁶

The notion of freedom inherent in bush arbours, gay clubs, and other 'other' spaces is radically different from that pursued by architects. Where the architect sees freedom, others often experience unfreedom. Where the architect finds freedom in the open plan, historically marginalized people have found freedom in small or confined spaces, hiding from the visibility that comes from not being the norm. For them the hiding place constitutes a refuge, a space of freedom.

Carving out an 'other' space

Knowingly and unknowingly, architects translate their - and society's - values into architectural space. Thus the free reign given to architects to express a democratic value such as freedom or openness has created an architectural aesthetic vernacular that gives these ideals a spatial permanence without embodying spatial freedom for all at its core. This forces others to find freedom for their spatial presence in temporality.

The act of 'hanging out' has had a long tradition as a way of appropriating and participating in public space. Appropriating or claiming space, especially when performed by groups or individuals who are considered to be 'inappropriate', changes the rules. When viewed in this context the act of hanging out in public is a spatio-cultural practice in which the seemingly insignificant place where one hangs out, is the place where one can loose one's imagination and, by claiming space, be free of mind for a moment. Many mainstream contemporary cultural innovations such as skateboarding, breakdancing, and street art have originated from this place of imagination coupled with hanging out. The vernacular nature of this practice and its inherent temporariness becomes even more significant considering the exclusion of, violence against, and displacement of certain individuals and communities in city public spaces. These predatory practices are often nonparticipatory in the common understanding of inviting others in, but they spark participation that acts without mandate. The places that are created in the process are conflictual, as they physically represent certain social and political issues put forth by ordinary people, not design professionals.

Hanging around is often misrecognized as criminal or criminalized. But when viewed through a different lens, i.e., not as a nuisance, it becomes vital that these kinds of practices actually inform spatial design. Not as an argument to design defensive architecture, but as an invitation to a spatial design that offers freedom to all people, and which has the potential to improve the overall culture of design. Here, the realization that the link between freedom and spatiality are inextricably linked but not a natural given for all has to alter the privileged way in which architects view the world. The structures of our society have been intrinsically spatialized by architectural paradigms resulting in the socio-cultural practices of claiming space by those the non-normative, the outsiders, the 'others'.

Freedom emerges as the construction of an 'other' space as a space of liberation within the context of the city. Spaces of otherness are places of shared experience that enable reflection, representation and imagination. Identities, like spaces, are constructed. Here, reflection on identity and the creation of agency and actual presence takes place. Their existence represents another spatio-cultural practice in which freedom is a goal in a liberation process pursued by communities connected by their identity of otherness. These spaces

give voice and in doing so create an imagination of possible futures; this freedom to imagine through spatial practice is an actual spatial language of its own.

Foucault's concept of heterotopia highlights the co-dependency of freedom and unfreedom, wherein only the collective or the normative individual can experience the city as free, because there are spaces of unfreedom. The one cannot exist without the other. Spaces of freedom need a parallel space (such as prisons, detention centres, etc.) which contains undesirable bodies - this makes the utopian space possible.¹⁷ The 'other' spaces as described before can be considered heterotopias of ritual, i.e., spaces that are not freely accessible, such as a public place where entry requires special rituals or gestures. Spaces of liberation - e.g., the bush arbour or the temporary encampments of Occupy Wall Street have a function in relation to all of the opposing spaces. They create an alternative reality that exposes every 'normal' space; in doing so they create a real, 'other' space. But one can also consider Foucault's heterotopia as a place where otherness not only exists but is an active agent of liberation where imagination is an important tool. bell hooks defines this space as the margin, where one is confined when 'othered'. It is not a site of deprivation but a site of radical possibility, a place of resistance. She makes the distinction between marginality that is imposed by an oppressive structure and the marginality one chooses as a site of resistance. The space of the other becomes a space of liberation, a space of potential freedom, different from the space of the 'exotic' or the terrifying other that is a place of segregation.

Arriving at a space of freedom

As a cultural practice, architecture must interpret and translate the historical, social and political contexts of a place and how one comes to terms with that place. Architecture as both a professional and cultural practice is central to our imaginative and concrete relationship to space.¹⁸ But how can architecture be all of the above - and work towards creating spaces of freedom for all - in a landscape of top-down gentrification and speculation, where architecture is often merely a tool for profit and unavailable to people of all walks of life? Can the myths and reality of freedom in the city even be addressed by the profession of architecture when it hardly acknowledges its gender and racial inequality and dependence on unfair labour practices? Can architects still be considered spatial specialists adept at designing for contemporary society and its highly diverse reality when the architectural discussion is often disconnected from many of the social struggles and spatio-cultural practices that are out there?

The ability for architects to affect change is limited while their educations are still rooted in a highly paternalistic viewpoint. Even though spaces often seem neutral or given, people's movements, activities and life are always dictated by the way space is produced. More often than

not, the spaces we inhabit have been and still are designed by white men and are idealized, rational, clean and (white) as a silent but very present way to repress otherness. In 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' Audre Lorde drafts an ethical principle of how to disrupt the status quo. When applied to the field of architecture, the embrace of voices, bodies and practices that have been left out is essential to the depatriarchalization of not only the profession but space and the city itself.¹⁹

For architecture to arrive at a place of freedom and to design spaces of freedom, a movement will have to form that looks outward - towards liberation of itself and towards *The Multiplicity of Other* - a concrete presence in the city that challenges the façade of universal thought, theory and reason. This presence of highly particular voices from every gender, race, class, and ability can no longer be seen as the confirmation of the premises and prejudices of the past but exists as a reality of its own. This *Multiplicity of Other* is where new spatial languages will drive the content to redefine and liberate the dominant architectural paradigms from its own dystopia.

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