Belief in the Age of Disbelief: Form, Utopia and Assemblage

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This paper attempts to unfold the intricate relationship between architecture, the discourse around utopia, and the form of utopia itself with a specific focus on recent phenomena. Utopia intended not as illusion or as imaginary world, but as prefiguration, the realm of not yet—something that is not existing now, but that can exist in the future. Utopia not as a dream but as a project. For centuries, social and political demands have inspired the materialization of very specific episodes, both at the urban and the building scale. From Sforzinda's Ideal City to Hilberseimer's Vertical City, passing through even naïve and provocative proposals such as Superstudio's Supersurfaces, form has always represented the main medium to see beyond current models and to propose alternatives, whether those proposals had actually the ambition to question the status quo or simply to lyrically run away from it. From the late 1970s on, the dialectics between utopia and form has progressively evaporated. Today, in the so-called age of Hyperobjects—a term introduced by Timothy Morton in 2013 to describe the overwhelming impact of human activities on earth—the notion of utopia can be brought back to the table to face new challenges and new systemic issues. The form that utopia can take will gravitate around the idea of assemblage, as introduced by philosopher Manuel DeLanda. Theoretical and operative consequences of assemblages in the territory of architecture will be explored, as well as their contribution in the definition of a radical yet real project of future.

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, French artist Cyprien Gaillard presents *Belief in the Age of Disbelief*—a series of etchings where seventeenth century Dutch landscapes and post-war architectural structures coexist in the same evocative image—collages in which the manipulation of historic sources and the de-territorialisation of modernist buildings from their original context describe an apocalyptic yet picturesque panorama. By reproducing Brutalist housing blocks, Parisian Grands Ensembles, or prefabricated buildings from the Soviet Union, Gaillard investigates the legacy of modern architecture: its message, its hopes, its materialization are now but ruins, partially hidden and invaded by vegetation. Those structures, once re-situated in a bucolic scenario, document the collapse of a built utopia—intended as a collective effort to translate desires of social reform into architectural episodes. Gaillard's etchings unearth human attraction for failure and invite us to rethink the relationship between architecture and utopia—to better say, to rethink architecture as a vehicle for utopia.

Utopia. A word that reverberates throughout the history of literature and philosophy. A ghost haunting human imagination for centuries, often associated to scenarios which were not even intended to be realized—see Plato's *Republic*, Thomas More's *Utopia*, or Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun.* Opposed to this idea of utopia as illusion or as imaginary world, is what Ernst Bloch calls prefiguration, the realm of *noch nicht*[1]—not yet. Utopia as something that is not existing now, but that can exist in the future. Utopia not as a dream but as a project. Not as an abstraction but as a destiny. This paper borrows Bloch's definition of utopia and attempts to unfold the intricate relationship between architecture, the discourse around utopia, and the form of utopia itself with a specific focus on recent phenomena.

For centuries, social and political demands have inspired the materialization of very specific episodes, both at the urban and the building scale. From Sforzinda's *Ideal City* to Hilberseimer's *Vertical City*, passing through even naïve and provocative proposals such as Superstudio's *Supersurfaces*, form—even the absence of it—has always represented the main medium to see beyond current models and to propose alternatives, whether those proposals had actually the ambition to question the status quo or simply to lyrically run away from the present. From the late 1970s on, the dialectics between utopia and form has slowly evaporated, implying a progressive disinterest in form as a vehicle of societal needs.

OBJECTS, HYPEROBJECTS

Today, the notion of utopia can be brought back to the table, thanks to the simultaneous and interconnected emergence of three conditions: a new body of ideas on aesthetics—the contributions of the so-called Object-Oriented Ontology—a new interpretative framework—the age of Hyperobjects—and a new set of design techniques and formal outcomes—assemblages. A redefinition of object conditions within artistic practices along with a focus on the relationships between human and non-human agents, inform Object-Oriented

Ontology (OOO), a term coined for the first time in 1999 by Graham Harman in a lecture at Brunel University, England. The speculative ground of OOO includes a broad definition of the term object, and the quest for a flat ontology—the idea that all objects deserve equal attention, whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real or fictional. The translation of these ideas into the territory of architecture is, as often happened in the past for other cases, problematic, and induces facile generalizations. Is an object a building? A place? Assimilating buildings to objects is just a starting point. Applied to architecture, OOO can indicate not only an object in its physical presence—a column, a window, etc.—but also a concept, a theory. Physical entities are objects, but so are properties, ideas and institutions. Furthermore, one of OOO's central claims is that objects have hidden qualities and realities, and that they withdraw from our understanding—the distinction between real and sensual objects. For Harman, an object has a vast number of qualities, some knowable, some unknowable. Similarly, Mark Foster Gage thinks that 'through the lens of OOO, we can recognize that a building's reality can never be fully known, or reduced to any simply diagram, metaphor or big idea. Rather, it presents a vast and complex depth that requires new forms of acknowledgement and allusion to reach.'[2] If we assume that any building is an object, continues Foster Gage, and that there are aspects of it which are impossible to access, architects can 'engage in designing qualities that allude to the existence of deeper realities lurking below the perceivable surface. This proposition represents a dramatic shift from the critical foundations of modern and contemporary architecture. An architecture not based on super-simplified ideas or relations.'[3]

While OOO can open up challenging yet intriguing possibilities for architecture, today the horizon in which the discourse around utopia can be reactivated takes the name of Hyperobjects. A term introduced by Timothy Morton in 2013 to describe the overwhelming impact of human activities on earth, Hyperobjects can be defined as 'objects deployed so massively in space and time that human beings cannot engage with them in any reciprocal way.' [4] Examples of Hyperobjects can be radioactive waste, plastic garbage, etc. But, also, to borrow Morton's words: 'a Hyperobject could be the biosphere, or the Solar System. A Hyperobject could be the sum total of all the nuclear materials on earth; or just the plutonium, or the uranium. A Hyperobject could be the very log-lasting product of direct human manufacture, such as Styrofoam or plastic bags, or the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism.'[5] The production of Hyperobjects is, therefore, a manifestation of the Anthropocene: the evidence of the so-called end of the world, in the sense of a slow yet irreversible process of transformation of our environment. Whereas Morton's work is obviously aligned and influenced by OOO, his definition of Hyperobjects can help situate architecture within the general context of the Anthropocene. The Hyperobjects displace humans as central agents, as well as anthropocentric thought, and invite to rethink an architecture that also incorporate nonhumans. Recent design explorations have attempted to cope with those processes of erosion and acceleration, by producing provocative and compelling results. Notions of type and typology can also be reinterpreted under the lens of Hyperobjects. (FIG.1) To investigate architecture's inner condition in the Age of Hyperobjects means speculating on its collective and political character—as one of the main agents of environmental destruction first and then as one of its possible remedies.

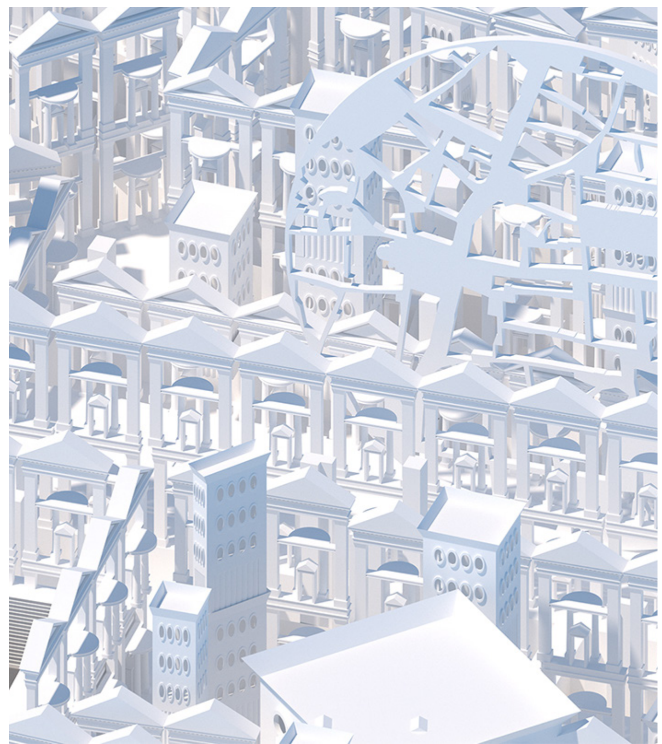

Figure 1. Stefano Corbo, Qianyu Liu. *From Geometry to Topology. The Assemblage of Six Cities*, 2020.

ASSEMBLAGES

Once acknowledged the influence that OOO can exert on the architecture debate, and once contextualized the idea of Hyperobjects as a background for theoretical and operative strategies, it's possible to finally introduce the notion of assemblage—'a multiplicity which is made of many heterogeneous terms and which established liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns—different natures.'[6] In his attempt to build an assemblage theory, by integrating Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's contributions with Fernand Braudel's focus on economic organizations, American philosopher Manuel DeLanda offers a suggestive interpretation on what assemblages are, whose consequences pertain to the territory of architecture too. Assemblages, for DeLanda, are multiple and unique at the same time: each assemblage is an individual identity –'an individual person, an individual community, an individual organization, an individual city.'[7]

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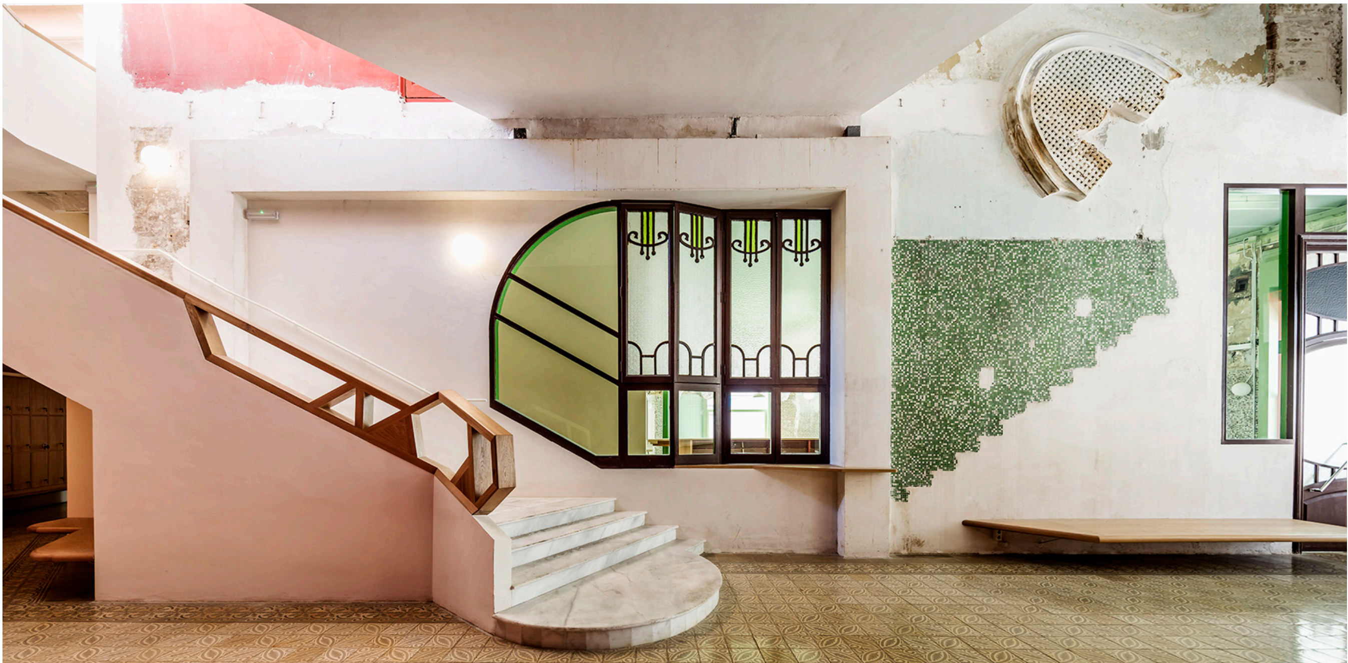

Figure 2. Flores & Prats, *Sala Beckett*, Barcelona, 2014. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Assemblages can become part of other larger assemblages, as 'communities, in addition to persons, include the material and symbolic artifacts: the architecture of the buildings that house them; the myriad different tools and machines used in offices, factories, and kitchens; the various sources of food, water, and electricity.'[8]

Intuitively, the word assemblage has an immediate translation into the territory of architecture; it can even evoke post-modernist operations of fragmentation, bricolage, historical pastiche, irony, etc. In opposition to those postmodern techniques, the here proposed notion of assemblage recognizes complexity, and entails the possibility to preserve singularity and multiplicity. It has to do with the definition of composite objects, that are macro and micro at the same time, compact and finite in their conglomeration. Assemblages are meta-scalar; they don't operate through subtraction or synthesis, but through collision and agglomeration.

The notion of assemblage can take on at least two different orientations. One possible direction is merely speculative, disruptive in its premises and in its outcomes. Peter Trummer, for example, in his pedagogic activity, uses drawings and texts to propose new forms of architecture for contemporary cities. His *City in the Age of Hyperobjects I* is a critical reaction to the low-density manifestations of urban sprawl that characterize different areas of the world. In opposition to the incessant horizontal expansion provoked by such models, what Trummer proposes is not a machine, nor an organism. In *City in the Age of Hyperobjects I* objects present themselves in a finite yet composite assemblage, which incorporates in its interiors / exteriors infrastructures, means of transport, ordinary buildings and extraordinary prototypes. The city becomes an enclave of experimentation, isolated by the traditional figure/ground association of the surroundings.

Clearly inspired by OOO, the speculative work of Mark Foster Gage focuses on the political character of aesthetic conditions, rejecting the stereotypical association of the word aesthetics with superficial, banal and innocent exercises, and considering it as an essential framework for human activity. Foster Gage's proposal for the *Guggenheim Museum* in Helsinki (2014) is a catalogue of objects that have been randomly downloaded from the internet—the author calls them recycled digital materials; these objects have been reassembled in a composite form whose complexity derives not only by the collision of their different geometries, but also by the inaccessible meaning that their association conveys. Each individual object loses its own content to become part of a larger assemblage.

The other direction deriving by the application of an assemblage theory to the territory of architecture is, in turn, essentially operative: it utilizes assemblages to transform existing artifacts, and manifests in a series of concrete proposals aimed to rethink the relationship between old and new vocabularies, by working on ideas of reuse, retrofitting, and recycle. Exemplificative can be the case of the *Lleialtat Santsenca Civic Center*, designed in Barcelona by H Architectes in 2017. Based on the transformation of a 1928 working class cooperative building, the project develops across the definition of an interior urban void—an atrium that allows the encounter between the old decayed structures and the new

intervention. This empty space not only unifies the three different bodies constituting the existing building. In the atrium, the progression of the spaces designed as well as the overall process of mending permits that overlap of textures, patterns and lexicons take place. One may say that the whole project is therefore fueled by a process of assemblage—it is fragmented and unified at the same time.

A few years earlier, in the same city, Catalan architects Flores & Prats work on an analogous project of adaptive reuse: *Sala Beckett* (2014). The building—a former social club—is transformed into a theatre and a dramaturgy school. Rather than containing the new program in a well-defined area, the architects re-articulate the program and diffuse it over every corner of the building. The building itself, therefore, becomes the theatre: materials, decorations, *objet trouvé*, and interior vistas shape the main theatrical activity. The intervention on the old building reveals itself as a process of *anastylosis* where existing and new fragments are re-composed in a novel fashion. Notions of legibility and atmosphere regulate the relation between old and new, and connect the interiors to the history of the surrounding neighbourhood.

Both Flores & Prats and H Architectes produce architectural assemblages. Those two projects of adaptive reuse are informed by a set of design principles one can call meta-collage. Meta-collage distinguishes from collage because it's not only a representation technique, nor the juxtaposition or a mosaic of materials. Meta-collage, in these two projects, is an ad-hoc design strategy producing assemblages—a comprehensive operation that applies to every moment of the project, either in its tridimensional and in two-dimensional conformation, and generates new strategical and formal opportunities. The final result of an assemblage process, *Sala Beckett* as well as the *Lleialtat Santsenca Civic Center* are not questioning ideas of image and function. They constitute a composite artifact: a multiplicity that regards architecture as a combination of old and new patterns, entropic relations, interior and urban components. Hopefully this multiplicity will allow to build an integrated and holistic perspective on the future, where form is not only a fetish but becomes (again) an intellectual and practical vector of change.

ENDNOTES

1. Ernst Bloch, The Spirit of Utopia (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000)
2. Mark Foster Gage, Designing Social Equity (New York: Routledge, 2019), 77.
3. Ibid., 78.
4. Timothy Morton, Hyperobjects (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1.
5. Ibid., 2.
6. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, Dialogues II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 69.
7. Manuel DeLanda, Assemblage Theory (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 19.
8. Ibid., 20.

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