

Architecture of/as Protest: Action, Place and the Concern for the World

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What is the relation between political action and architectural space? How do protesters and other actors transform urban spaces into stages for envisioning and enacting political change? How do architectural places in turn support, condition or even elicit public action? How are architects and designers political actors, and how can architecture, design, and art be considered to ‘act’ within the public realm? These questions were taken as points of departure for an advanced research seminar in architectural theory taught at Louisiana State University in the fall of 2020. The course explored the role that architectural spaces and practices play in different forms and modes of political protest action, not only in light of the Black Lives Matter protests that year, but also the global urban protest movements, uprisings and events of the last decades across the spectrum of concerns from human rights to climate change. In this paper I discuss how the seminar sought to examine protest action within the ‘architectural’ perspectives of space, place, inhabitation and making, as well as the capacity of architecture and art practices to ‘act’ in the mode of protest within the political perspectives of agency, speech, the common and appearance. The seminar took as a primary framework the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt, and the intrinsic relation she posits between the places of the fabricated, common world and the very possibility of political action. I then consider how place comes to be at stake in architecture as a mode of protest in students’ research on a wide range of topics, issues, events and practices. I conclude by reflecting on how such an architecture of protest would comprehend a radical place-making, acting to help establish the conditions for political action, and to nurture, support and sustain them so that protest actors may enact and embody claims for justice in their own acting and speaking.

INTRODUCTION

The resurgence of protest as a vital mode of re-politicizing urban spaces in 2020 following the killings of George Floyd and other African American men and women has raised urgent questions for architecture and urbanism with respect to the public, political dimension of the city. What is architecture’s responsibility to the public realm in its political sense? How can architecture recognize and respond to the capacities for political action,

unpredictable and indeterminable as they are, within current modalities of practice? How can architecture comprehend itself anew as a practice capable of engaging the political dimension of human experience, and develop the means for sustaining its potential emergence in the spaces of everyday life? While not immediately answerable, these questions touch on intuitions and aspirations that have long been a part of architecture’s core disciplinary consciousness, and which in turn allow the question of the political to be examined, in principle, from the perspective of architecture. This view has been the premise of an advanced research seminar in architectural theory taught in the fall of 2020 at Louisiana State University which looked to protest in public space as an embodied and distinctly spatial practice, grounded in concrete places which are effectively transformed through political action, both materially and symbolically. The seminar posed the question of what could be understood about architecture and its potential for engaging the political by looking at protest. In effect, what could architecture learn from protest as a spatial practice, and how could the ‘architecture’ of protest, as it were, inform ways of conceiving and practicing ‘architecture’ in the mode of protest? In what follows, I discuss the approach of the seminar and how these questions were examined primarily within the critical framework of Hannah Arendt’s political philosophy, which posits an intrinsic link between the fabricated, common world and the very possibility of political action. I will show how Arendt’s notion of the common world allowed the work of the seminar to make key insights into the nature and role of place within protest action in relation to the potential for re-envisioning and re-enacting new configurations of the common. Through a discussion of student research, I will show how taking an ‘architectural’ perspective of protest action enabled students to discover and further comprehend the particular ways in which place, and the sense of the common inhering within it, comes to be at stake within a range of ‘architectural’ practices in the mode of protest in differing contexts. I close by discussing how, in taking up the questions of both an architecture of, and as protest, the seminar research indicated new directions for re-envisioning the relationship of architecture to political action as a fundamental concern for the world.

ARCHITECTURE OF PROTEST

Action | Architecture: Space, Place and the Political was an advanced, graduate-level research seminar in architectural theory that sought to understand the political and spatial dimensions of

protest events as well as the role that architectural spaces and practices play in different forms and modes of protest action. The goal was to examine protest from a broadly 'architectural' perspective that recognized the priority of protesters' embodied acting and speaking, the presence of bodies in relation to discrete places, and the constitutive role that places play for protest events that reinforce the power of concerted action. By so doing, the seminar also hoped to understand how architecture could learn from the spatial and place-based nature of protest action, and the role that architectural practices could play as modes of protest themselves to participate in opening a properly political dimension in human experience. In effect, how can architectural practice in the mode of protest itself 'act' to establish the conditions for political action, and for nurturing, supporting and sustaining them? The seminar took up these questions by looking to how architecture can grasp the nature and experience of places, and how to understand this nature and experience of places politically and philosophically in order to engage them effectively.

The primary theoretical framework for exploring these questions was the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt, which allowed us to directly interrogate the interrelationship of political action and place. The space of the political for Arendt is a "space of appearance," wherein actors disclose their distinct identities as human in acting with others for the sake of a common concern.¹ Although this space only arises between actors in their acting and speaking together, its fullest reality and meaning depend upon the tangibility of the common world of objects and places, which anchors the world of the human affairs that inheres within it. The objective sense of reality in which action and speech become effective and meaningful can only be constituted out of the plural, equal, embodied perspectives on this common world, whose particularity and concreteness in turn share in the spatiality and corporeality of actors' bodies to co-constitute the discrete sense of place that emerges out of political action.² The 'actionable' sense of reality can thus be understood to arise out of actors' bodily presence, action and speech, necessarily within a place whose meaning, perception and experience has become transformed through them. The very commonness of the world is then an intersubjective, relational structuring within places for Arendt, collectively constituted out of our shared concern for the world as common, which appears through our embodied acting and speaking for its sake.

The interrelationship of appearance and place as world for Arendt helps us to understand the particularly powerful role of place in protest action, wherein the very question of our being-in-common, and thus, the commonness of the world in the fullest sense, is at stake. As J.M. Bernstein writes, protest action can be properly understood as a revolutionary reconfiguring of the world as common in the space and time of the event, out of a collective acting and speaking according to new principles which are instituted as "founding promises" for how we will live together.³ Protesters comprise a political community according

to Arendt, whose concerted action springs from a common claim for justice directed against the policies and legitimacy of the governing power, and a shared desire to "change the world."⁴ As Bernstein observes, these dissenting actors are "revolutionaries" in binding themselves together to take responsibility for the world, and through their promising, to projectively redescribe, amend and augment it.⁵ The world is thus effectively reconstituted in protest action, enacting and giving worldly reality to protesters' claims which appear most fully and effectively by virtue of place. Place, as the deeper structure of the common actualized through embodied action, can be understood not only to be crucial for the power and effectiveness of protest actions and events, but also to be implicitly at stake in them. Arendt held that "at the center of politics lies concern for the world, not for man."⁶ As evident in the long history of reclaiming and occupation of public places through protest, the world-as-place is at the center of protest action wherein the potentiality of a world truly in common can be enacted and obtain a reality in which it can appear, and be experienced. Following Arendt, I would furthermore argue that protest action is implicitly undertaken for the sake of such a shared world – specifically, for the shape and qualities it should take – whose commonness becomes tangibly manifest in place.

Within the primary framework of Arendt's thought, in dialogue with other theorists and writers on the interrelationship of space, place and the political,⁷ the seminar then considered the various ways that place came to be at center and at stake in protest events such as Occupy Wall Street in New York in 2011, the Hong Kong pro-democracy movements from 2014-2020, Istanbul's Gezi Park protests in 2013 and the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. We sought to understand the spatial and 'architectural' dimensions of these events in how acting and speaking bodies implicated the particularity of places; how tools, equipment and media acted as 'supports' for extending and securing bodily presence and action throughout different places; how places acted as platforms and stages for action and appearance; and how ephemeral, fabricative practices of occupation and encampment accommodated and manifested alternative practices of being-in-common within the places transformed by them. In nearly all these events, the practices and techniques of reconstituting the reality of places through and for the sake of action were put into effect by the actors themselves, rather than by designers. Yet within the perspective of the seminar, these practices and techniques could be understood as 'architectural' to the extent that they not only implicated, qualified and otherwise engaged place in productive ways, but also that they activated the latent place-structure of the common such that it could appear as it was re-envisioned, reconfigured and enacted anew in the place-event.

ARCHITECTURE AS PROTEST

Having understood something of the 'architecture of protest,' the students were challenged to learn from these events to better discern the potential role of architecture itself as a mode

of protest – as a fabricative practice capable of engaging the place-structure of the common to support, nurture, amplify and sustain protest, political appearance, and other significant action. In response, students researched events and practices concerning issues of their own interest in which making or the made took a significant role in the reconstituting of world-as-common in the specific terms of place. Topics ranged from how the consciousness of place was evoked in protests against gentrification in Miami and New Orleans, driven by climate change as well as the commodification of cities and urban experience; in the worldwide We Make Events protests against the precarity of forms of culture as part of the common world in their reduction to mere entertainment; in practices of resistance by foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong, and by women asserting their rights to publicly appear and speak in authoritarian theocratic regimes in the Middle East; in the ambivalence of social media’s role in actualizing the power of place in recent protest movements; and in the threat to planetary systems in protests against the exploitative reduction of nature to pure resource, and inaction in the face of climate change. In these studies, ‘architecture’ was conceived broadly to include a range of practices such as artworks, performances, installations, exhibitions, design interventions, and organized assemblies and occupations that conscientiously took up spatial or fabricative approaches to protest. Above all, as ‘architectural’ modalities of protest, these approaches did not displace the priority of actors’ own actions and appearance, but rather helped to establish conditions for actors themselves to actualize the latent commonness of place.

Three projects in particular serve to indicate the nature and scope of the students’ inquiries and the understanding of what might comprise ‘architecture’ as a mode of protest in which place comes forward as the center and stake of action. The first was an examination of the work of Indian artist and activist Jasmeen Patheja to reclaim public urban spaces as safe for women, and from the threat of gender-based violence.⁸ As the founder and director of the artist collective Blank Noise, Patheja stages collaborative participatory installations and experiences in public spaces in India that directly confront the threat of gender-based violence by exposing the vulnerability of women in public spaces in ways that persuasively and transformatively engage prevailing attitudes toward male dominance and predation. The student analyzed how Patheja’s work draws upon the power of ‘Action Heroes, Theyroes and Heroes’ who appear fearlessly in the very places where women are most threatened, and how the injustice of public space pervaded by sexual violence is revealed and confronted within them. In the project Meet to Sleep, women in cities across India lay down to sleep in the open on a simple mat in public parks as young men looked on, startled by their own apparent complicity in an exclusionary and predatory culture of public space. The student observed that in courageously acting collectively in public, “every single Hero, rising and acting as a being, expressing themselves consciously in this public realm, formulates the new city.”⁹ Likewise in Talk to Me, an alleyway in Bangalore notorious for the threat of rape and molestation was

transformed by Patheja’s minimal installation of tables and chairs where women sat and invited men passing by to talk together over samosas and chai. The student recognized how a simple rope line strung between wooden sawhorses architecturally articulated this radical partition of the place. Again, young men were persuasively compelled to recognize themselves publicly as equals in joining the women to re-practice the publicness of the alley, and thus to actualize it as more truly common. Finally, the student examined one of Patheja’s most powerful projects entitled I Never Ask For It, planned as a performance and installation at New Delhi’s India Gate to take place in 2023. Together with a group of ‘Action Heroes,’ Patheja is working to bring together ten thousand ‘garment testimonials,’ the very clothing in which women suffered sexual assault and other gender-based violence, and array them around the triumphal arch at the center of one of India’s most prominent and symbolic national places. As the student observes, the garments mounted together simply on long poles, carried and installed around the Gate will allow the victims of violence to appear and speak most fully in their absence and silence for the sake of a just, equal, and inclusive being-in-common. Here, at the national scale as at the local, Patheja locates this claim within the re-practicing and reconstituting of place in which it can appear, and be effective. The student concludes that Patheja’s public interventions “open up a conversation, a platform and [the] formation of a new city.” This ‘new city’ itself appears by virtue of bodies “inserting small manipulations into their surroundings,” such as mats, simple boundaries, and the bodies’ own clothing, that “help them make their appearance into the public realm.”¹⁰

A second project explored a series of art and architectural practices along the US-Mexico border directed against the exclusionary violence enacted on the people and land of the border zone, and “re-form the border space as something other than a divider of lands.”¹¹ The student examined how the long established, singularly rich and complex sense of place, culture and community within the borderlands has been subject to the unjust imposition of an exclusionary, national sovereignty to facilitate the flows of capital, resources and goods, and how this sovereignty is enforced through militarized apparatuses of surveillance and control extending far beyond the border fence as a physical barrier. As he observes, the people who live along the border experience this violence of economic restructuring, exploitation and control “firsthand [as] the feeling of living in a ‘divided land.’”¹² The student’s research then brings to light how practices of art and architecture in the mode of protest reveal the injustice of this divided place and people while also reasserting its original integrity, and letting it appear, by reconfiguring the operative logics in terms of place through forms of making, installation, and performance. These include the Brinco (Jump) “border-crossing” sneaker designed by artist and designer Judi Wertheim in collaboration with In_Site, which contained pockets for micro-gear and information that would be crucial to making ‘the jump’ across the border. The student writes that the shoes, which were given out to would-be migrants on the

Mexican side of the border while displayed for sale at an upscale boutique in San Diego, connects the embodied, human scale of the migrant's experience of the border zone to the abstract scale of the transnational markets that permeate it. Similarly, he observes how the installation Prada Marfa, by artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset in association with architects Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello, a whitewashed adobe storefront outside of Valentine, Texas, displaying products from the Prada 2005 fashion line, illuminates the precarity and excess produced within the borderlands that striate it visibly and invisibly as a seemingly vacant place.

The student also examined practices that directly engaged the border fence in order to invoke the original integrity and continuity of the border zone. He considered the experience and implications of Rael and San Fratello's short-lived Teeter-Totter Wall installation and performance in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua and El Paso, Texas, which deployed three pink teeter-totter across the steel border fence for children on either side to play on together. For a short thirty minutes, he writes, the meaning of the border "literally disappeared" as it was reconstituted through play into a discrete place of a recovered commonality, which disclosed the violence of the border together with the potential for overcoming it in shared practices of interdependence. The architects were able to "re-imagine the space [of the border] by re-imagining the wall itself," and thus able to "engage the borderland in a mode of protest...peacefully and joyfully."¹³ Likewise, the student looked at Estudio Teddy Cruz + FONNA Forman's Border Drain Crossing, which orchestrated the temporary transformation of a sewage drain between San Diego, California and Tijuana, Mexico into an official crossing point in 2011. The drain channeled effluent and maquiladora waste from the Tijuana side north into a natural reserve on the San Diego side, and he discussed how the parallel passage of three-hundred people across the border and back activated the border itself in a mode of protest to reveal its inherent disjunction as a place of conflicting flows, while re-practicing and reconstituting its actual integration. The student concludes that each of these practices "reappropriated the border space [to] show how social conditions can easily be created, and how occurrences of a continuous region already exist and can be brought back to be the norm."¹⁴ The exclusionary condition of the border was seen to be variously engaged in the specific terms of discrete places for the sake of the borderlands as a distinct place, whose implicit integrity and commonness must be reconstituted and re-enacted.

A third project analyzed Cairo's Tahrir Square as a historical place of often violent struggle for political and civil rights, variously embodied and effected architecturally by its buildings and spaces, which was effectively 'corporealized' as place by the protest occupation such that with the protesters, it could both suffer the tragedy and proclaim the triumph, albeit short-lived, of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution.¹⁵ The student examined how the 'architectural' dimension of the Tahrir Square occupation was precisely in the recognition that the square had to be reclaimed through

bodily presence, action and speech as a place, for the sake of re-joining, re-engaging and re-activating the latent struggle for the common that had long taken place there, and whose ambivalence it had long embodied. He writes that the square's singular importance as a political place was demonstrated when tens to hundreds of thousands of protesters descended upon it after the Mubarak regime shut down the country's Internet and communication networks early in the uprising, in an attempt to quell the spread of the protest which had begun on social media. As the occupation grew and organized into a radically inclusive, egalitarian and free space of exchange and support to counter the brutality and abuses of the regime, the square as a place became identified with the protesters' bodily presence, action and speech. He writes that the protesters' shared reality was "the collective desire to achieve...the goal of freedom from violence from those sworn to protect [them]," but that this very "shared sense of exclusion and deprivation or rights and freedoms was the catalyst" for the violence that was inflicted on them.¹⁶ The brutal attacks against the protesters by security forces and paramilitary gangs could be understood to be implicitly directed against the power the protesters had invested in the square as a place through their shared presence, reality, desire and action, and in this sense, against the capacity of the square to sustain the reconfiguration of the common latent within it. After access to the Internet was regained, this embodied and imperiled sense of place was projected globally through social media, as well as mainstream news media, and was powerful enough to in turn catalyze the developing movements of the Arab Spring, as well as subsequent protest-occupations across the world such as Occupy Wall Street later in 2011 and the Gezi Park protests of 2013. The student's analysis of Tahrir Square as a place invested with and shaped by its long political history, and of the continuities of this history in the occupation of the square during the 2011 Revolution, attests to the power inherent within the place-structure of the common when engaged and activated through action, and that of radical place-making as a distinctly 'architectural' practice within protest movements and events.

CONCERN FOR THE WORLD

Through the work of the seminar, students were able to recognize the integral role of place in some of the most powerful protest events and practices over the past decade, and how in them the enactment and appearance of a reconfigured common world becomes possible by virtue of the place-structure of being-in-common itself. Place was seen to be both at the center of protest action in assembling or occupying both urban and non-urban spaces, as well as the stake of protest in reclaiming these spaces for embodying claims for justice and enacting egalitarian and inclusive forms of being-in-common. In reflecting on place as the inherently 'architectural' dimension of protest, students were able to pose the question of architectural practice as a mode of protest – how architecture itself might 'act' to help establish the conditions for political action, and nurture, support and sustain them out of a shared concern for the world. In students' research, 'architecture' was revealed less as a form of

action itself than as the means of grasping, engaging and activating the latent place-structure of the common in the ways that political actors might reconfigure and embody it in their own acting and speaking. In this sense, ‘architecture’ could be understood to broadly comprehend a radical place-making, as it were, for the sake of reconfiguring the common, through any number of practices or artifacts stemming from architecture’s relational, organizational and fabricative capacities. In light of the seminar work, such a performative view of architecture shows great promise for expanding the role of the discipline in sustaining the political dimension of cities, and of human experience.

ENDNOTES

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), passim.
2. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 57-8.
3. J.M. Bernstein, “Promising and Civil Disobedience: Arendt’s Political Modernism,” in *Thinking in Dark Times*, ed. Roger Berkowitz, et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 115-27.
4. Hannah Arendt, “Civil Disobedience,” in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 77.
5. Bernstein, “Promising and Civil Disobedience,” 125.
6. Hannah Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” in *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 106.
7. These included Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, among others. Much of the scholarship in architectural theory and criticism drawing on Arendt’s thought, notably that of Kenneth Frampton and George Baird, do not expressly consider the relationship between protest action and architectural spaces. Likewise, although Arendt is widely cited in urban theory and analysis, it all but exclusively for her conception of action and politics more generally. Among contemporary writers on architecture and urbanism, Hans Teerds has engaged Arendt’s thought the most thoroughly from the perspective of architecture, public space and cities, including the interrelationship of public spaces and political protest. See especially “At Home in the World: Architecture, the Public and the Writings of Hannah Arendt (PhD Diss., TU Delft, 2017), DOI: 10.4233/uuid:f0ab3483-7932-43e5-8557-7253cd2d58af.
8. Sukirti Sharma, “A Voice to the Women of India,” (research paper, Louisiana State University, 2020).
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Nathan McConnell, “Into the Borderlands,” (research paper, Louisiana State University, 2020).
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Christopher Lebeuf, “Egypt’s Place of Protest, Tahrir Square: Voice to Violence,” (research paper, Louisiana State University, 2020).
16. Ibid.