# THE AESTHETICS OF ARCHITECTURE
## BEYOND FORM

Edited by Miško Šuvaković and Vladimir Mako

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# THE MYTH OF FORM

## *Boško Drobnjak and Zoran Đukanović*

> "Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it."
>
> Bertolt Brecht

The myth of form contains an architectural paradox. Without form, there is no architecture. The hypothetical question of *form vs. thanatos* justifies the myth of form in architecture. The *autonomy project* of architecture is a myth that has its different fields: cognitive, practical, and, ultimately, subjective. The subjective is inseparable from the field of architecture, both in terms of creation and perception. If there is no form in architecture, architecture disappears as a field. A formal approach to architecture uses proportional analysis to find repetitiveness in intensity. The tip of the iceberg is the autonomy of architecture. In architecture, the formal has its own strict rules; by contrast, avant-garde practices questioned the rules. Nathaniel Coleman confronts the universal and individual mythology of architecture by arguing: "Couched as a form of resistance to the dominance of capitalist production, autonomy in architecture is more convincingly a symptom of the very condition it purports to resist. In point of fact, autonomy in architecture constructs an apologia for solipsism, radical individualism, self-indulgence, and a negation of the social and other external forces that shape architecture and which it shelters."[1]

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[1] Nathaniel Coleman, "The Myth of Autonomy", *Architecture Philosophy – Journal of the International Society for the Philosophy of Architecture*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2015): 167.

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That said, Coleman attacks the so-called "autonomy project in architecture", emphasizing that this vision only serves to further separate architecture from everyday life, while contributing to the transformation of cities into predetermined environments shaped by capitalist production.
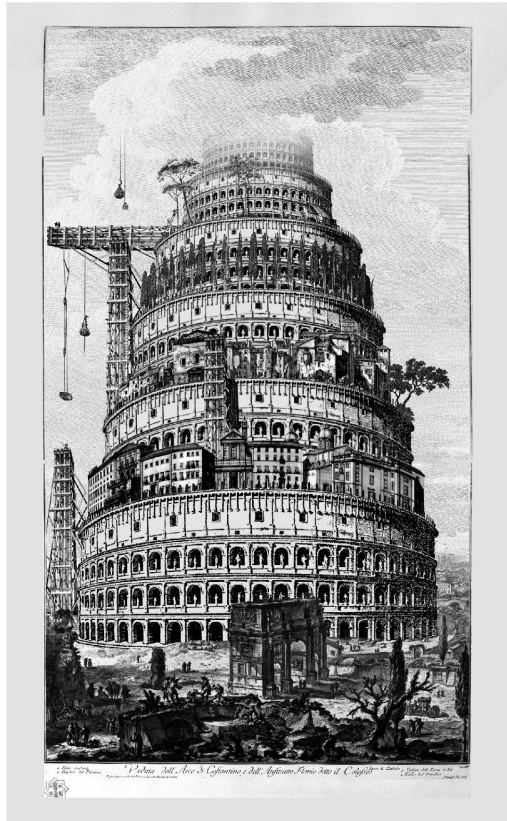


Zoran Đukanović, Torre di Babele Roma, 2020.

The following text aims to observe the city in its totality through the cracks of the narrative myth of form.

An urban environment is a direct sensuous cognition of a constructed environment as a formal practice of articulating and producing space. The urban environment belongs in the domain of social practices, connected to the relationship between social and discursive practices (according to Michel Foucault, discourse is the way in which human knowledge is transmitted through representational formats), whereby the urban appears as perceivable. However, being perceivable does not imply excluding its discursive aspects.[2] Therefore, urban poetics is a pathway to the analysis of the sensory representation of an urban environment for the sake of understanding the *form* (architecture), *landscape* (landscape architecture), *social* (sociology), *textual* (post-structuralism), and *cultural models* (cultural studies) of a city.



Bologna, Italy. Photo: authors, 2019.

Richard Wagner was among the first to use the term *Gesamtkunstwerk*, denoting his own conception of opera and the way it affects the viewer. In his operas, Wagner wanted to combine music, text, scenography, and acting into a total work of art – one able to absorb the spectator.

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[2] Miško Šuvaković, *Epistemology of Art: Critical design for procedures and platforms of contemporary art education* (Belgrade: TkH – centre for performing arts theory and practice, Belgrade, Tanzquartier Wien, PAF - Performing Arts Forum, St. Erme (France), Advance Performance Training, Antwerp, 2008), 27.

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Seventy years later, Walter Gropius, an architect, founder, and first director of the Bauhaus, wanted to establish the ideality of a new architecture in the activities of that art school, as a new architectural order whereby life would be governed by the unity of art, science, and technology. Gropius believed that the arts should all come together under the auspices of the architectural project.

He wanted to integrate and create a new unity for a new modern society through a new type of architecture.[3] Connecting the aesthetic field and architectural activity, Roger Sruton discussed the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as "aesthetically serious only if the total conception remains within the architect's control."[4] The idea of a city as a total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) can be identified in the connections between: a) different arts: architecture, sculpture, painting, theatre, performance, music and b) different phenomena: space, place, body movement, landscape, sound, atmospheric changes.

Henri Lefebvre sees the totality of the city (*œuvre*) as the ideal city of the highest degree, as an overall work of art involving social, symbolic, and material processes.[5] Lefebvre connects the idea of "œuvre" with the Greek term *poïesis*,[6] which signifies creation in the most general sense. As Martin Heidegger put it: "We must observe two things with respect to the meaning of this word. One is that *techne* is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts.

[3] Hans M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus – Weimar Desau Berlin Chicago* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1975); Walter Gropius, *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1965); for more information on ex-Yugoslav students at the Bauhaus, see: Boško Drobnjak, Marko Nikolić, "Bauhaus i njegova refleksija na formiranje umetničkih praksi na eks-jugoslovenskim kulturnim prostorima" ["The Bauhaus and its impact on the formation of artistic practices in the ex-Yugoslav cultural area"], *Arhitektura i urbanizam*, 49 (December 2019).

[4] Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (London: Methuen & co. Ltd), 211.

[5] Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 66.

[6] *Ibid*., 87.

*Techne* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poïesis*; it is something poietic."[7] Therefore, *poïesis* is the basis in the creation of art (*technē*). Here Lefebvre makes a significant point: "art can become *praxis* and *poiesis* on a social scale: the art of living in the city as work of art."[8]

Thus, Aldo Rossi's concept of "urban artifact" does not use the urban environment as a passive vessel that provides a material frame for human existence in the world, but treats the urban environment as an integral and essential part of the work of art: "We should initially state that there is *something in the nature of urban artifacts that renders them very similar – and not only metaphorically – to a work of art*."[9]



Tadao Ando, Church of the Light (full-scale model),
Tokyo, Japan, 2017. Photo: authors, 2017.

[7] Martin Heideger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper - Torchbooks, 1977), 13.
[8] Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, *op. cit.*, 173.
[9] Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1984), 32.

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For the Yugoslav architect, professor and essayist Bogdan Bogdanović (1922–2010), the concept of "small-scale urbanism" envisioned a more intimate, literal, graphic, painting-related, and even scenographic approach to designing urban environments, aiming to instill, preserve, or later discover the living values of city life, which might enable those sensory perceptions of a pleasant, exceptional, instructive, different, and exotic type of city. In this way, "small-scale urbanism" advocates a kind of direct and immediate action.[10]



Bogdan Bogdanović, Popina Memorial Park, Popina near Trstenik, Serbia, 1978-81.
Photo: authors, 2010.

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[10] Bogdan Bogdanović, *Mali urbanizam* [*Smal-scale urbanism*] (Sarajevo: Narodna prosvjeta, 1958), 7. See also: https://publicart-publicspace.org/edu/bogdan-bogda-novic-death-and-the-city

For Lefebvre, the work of art is not artistic, but *urban*.[11] Walking constitutes the realization of everyday urban life. Walking is a clash between the urban environment, art and the body performing the act of walking within a specific historical and geographical society. The urban environment is a certain material order that appears before the body. *Urban* reflects and displays the continuity of surface, volume, and space. A body walking down the street is immersed in a multitude of sounds, murmurs, different and diverse rhythms and impulses. This is a completely personal perception of the urban environment, followed by searching for concepts that will connect one's personal impression of theperceived with a vague general knowledge of architecture. The constructed environment, which is the subject of the observer's attention, becomes an aesthetically active part in the continuous process of changing the visual values of an urban environment.

Every observer, with their creative potentials, establishes their visual communication with space by participating in what the German philosopher, cultural theorist, and aesthetician Wolfgang Welsch refers to as *active experience*.[12] Aesthetic communication becomes multidirectional, constantly providing new opportunities for developing creative thinking and action.

The focus is on the importance of individual creative games as a potential force for overcoming the established aesthetic values of a particular artistic expression. In this way, a new visual communication is established on the basis of a system of constant change, in which the observer's actions make these objects aesthetically active, or, more precisely, place them at the center of aesthetic thinking.[13] Individual distant elements of an urban environment are certainyl formed with a specific intention that one implements in the bodily act of walking

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[11] Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, op. cit., 173.

[12] Wolfgang Welsch, *Undoing Aesthetics* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd.,1997), 2–6.

[13] Vladimir Mako, *Estetika – Arhitektura: Sedam tematskih rasprava* (Beograd: Orion art, 2005).

through the urban tissue of the city, actively experiencing it. By walking, one becomes the initiated subject of a concrete corporeal-sensual and corporeal-behavioural situation inside the urban membrane of a city.

Walking is an action consisting of bodily movements, whose relationship with the urban environment can be contextual or completely capricious. It is this kind of intensive field and poetic research that may be linked to the Situationalist International (SI)[14] and their main strategy concerning the construction of situations: the *dérive*. The focus of this methodological radical experiment is the perception, recognition, identification, and exchange of different spatial expressions of the urban, for the sake of creating an emotional, intuitive and rational field of developing and evaluating creative thinking about the city and urban environment.[15]

The *dérive* is "a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances."[16] The act of walking rejects the invitation to work, in the name of working without yielding a product. The act of walking negates work in the name of working without supplyinga product. This establishes the reason for choosing urban drifting as the main method in the study of poetic attempts to capture the urban through the plurality and coexistence of urban patterns and ways of life in the urban environment. Such spatial action could be posited as a search for phenomena that shape the urban on an everyday level.[17]

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[14] The Situationist International (1957–1972) was an international group of activists, artists, and theorists rooted in Marxism and anarchism, who emphasised the connection with the avant-garde art movements of the early 20th century (particularly Dadaism and early Surrealism) and saw the construction of situations as a tool for liberating everyday life.

[15] Darko Radović, *Subjectivities in Investigation of the.Urban The Scream, the Shadow and the Mirror* (Tokyo: IKI + flic studio co., 2014), 3.

[16] Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive", iz K. Knabb (ed.), *International Situationist Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 50.

[17] Darko Radović ed., *Tokyo Dérive – In Search of Urban Intensities* (Tokyo: IKI + flic studio co., 2013).
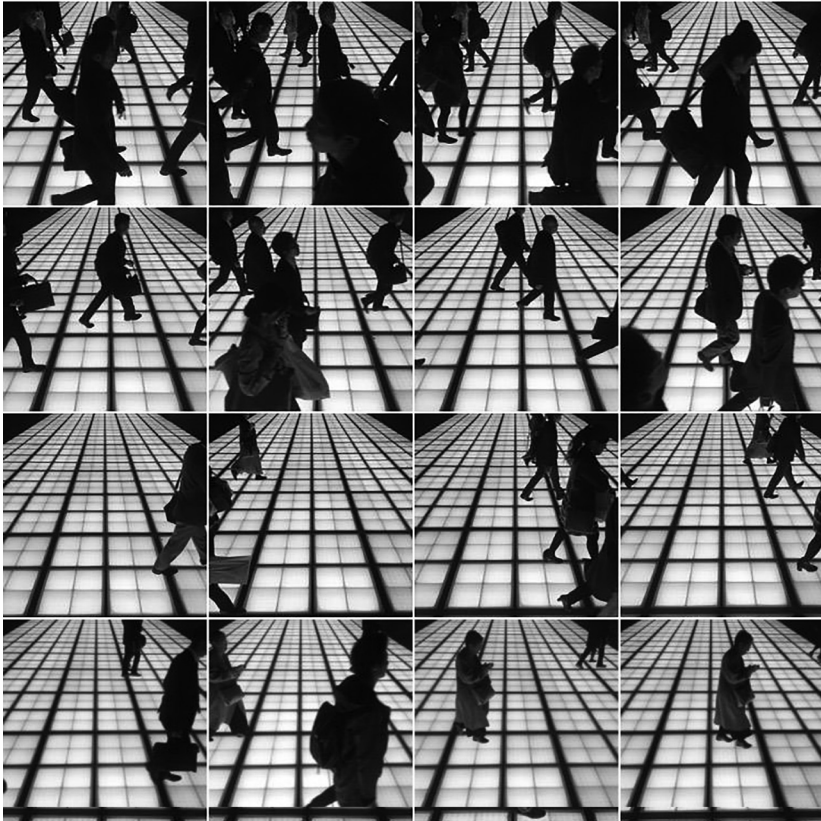
Tokyo International Forum, Tokyo, Japan, built in 1996.
Photo: authors, 2017.

Situationist urban practices relate to Ludwig Wittgenstein's language-game (*Sprachspiel*), which means that the "game" is determined by a set of rules. This concept hinges on an unpredicted situation that would require changes in its comprehension. Changing some of the rules also changes the nature of the language game. This means creating ephemeral situations that explore the quality of every moment of life and are organized according to the principles of a poetic game, which is distinguished

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from the usual notion of "game" in its negation of any element of competition and of separating the game itself from everyday life.[18] That said, different games are not connected by any shared rules, but by the "rule" that the rules are subject to change, even during the game itself. In 1957, Guy Debord (a founding member of the Situationist International) and Asger Jorn created several psychogeographic maps. These maps were made by cutting up a map of Paris and re-assembling the pieces based on their drifts through the city; in another example, they used a map of London to explore a part of Germany. That said, the question isn't whether the urban practices of the Situationists belong to the domain of urbanism, but how to change the rules of the language game (Wittgenstein) of urban design and urban planning so as to acknowledge Situationist spatial practices as urbanistic. Using their urban conceptions, the SI tried to synthesize the need for absolute creation in a spectacle-infused urban space with the need to *play* with architecture, time, and space.[19]

The practice creating situations gives rise to an effective political battle in which art, creativity, play, and politics combine into one. For this reason, SI practices can be called "artivism",[20] whereby artistic practices shift from the field of authentic creation to activism in the specific living conditions of a given culture and society. In this regard, Rancière speaks of the "distribution of the sensible", which "reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this acitvity is performed."[21]

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[18] Nikola Dedić, *Utopijski prostori umetnosti i teorije posle 1960.* (Beograd: Vujičić kolekcija, 2009), 140.

[19] Gerald Raunig, *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 173.

[20] The Slovenian sociologist and theatre scholar Aldo Milohnić has put forward the notion of "artivism" to indicate when activism as a socio-political activity overlaps with artistic activity. See: Aldo Milohnić: "Artivism" in: *transversal / EIPCP multilingual webjournal* (2005), accessed August 30, 2020, http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1203/milohnic/en

[21] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004), 12.

The Situationists are close to this, because according to them, the dynamics of the urban environment easily leads to recognizable games arising from human activities that take place in everyday environments. In other words, the city is understood as an environment that is subject to change and that involves interaction between people and other elements in various forms of creating situations wherein the *dérive* privileges the intuitive capacity of the participants; in that way, the process of creative research is established as a tool of knowledge, namely the "complex array moving from one transformation to another."[22]

Let us end here with a quote from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*:

> "Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else."

To conclude: great art is by definition universal, with emancipatory potential addressing all of us. As with all great works of art, cities are not only for thinking about them, but also for thinking with them.

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[22] Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Peterborough: Broadview Press 2007), 110.