How Architecture Can Re-Construct Political – Theoretical Manual for Hypercapitalistic Arab Gulf States

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Abstract

This article begins with the theoretical examination of architecture's role in constructing a place where 'political' may occur. The article highlights the importance of the possibility of political and political subjectivization in the post-foundational societies. I argue, that re-introducing the central themes of political; to be able to resist, equality, possibility to political struggles, and negation, to contemporary architecture, we can overcome so-called post-political condition. This can be done with the contemporary political subjectivities and their political relation to the built environment. The article asks, can these current 'post-political subjectivities' be, or become 'political' again? I argue that they can become, and architecture has major role in this process. The conceptual triangle is placed between political, architecture, and contemporariness. The starting point is the empirical situation, where post-political attitude has conquered the place of political, also in architecture. In this situation, architecture's role has shifted to be something excluding, submissive, and beyond any political gesture. This contemporary hypercapitalistic framework, and especially the Arab (Persian) Gulf States' formulation of it, has thoroughly challenged political and architecture's political nature. The article sketches the manual how to re-construct political, together with architecture, in these post-political societies.

Introduction

Among the others, Jean Luc Nancy has underlined the importance to separate 'political' from 'politics'.[i] This division can be elaborated in a way that 'political' is something which is the most political in politics. For Nancy, 'political' is also the name of the problem, "a problem of grounding, of foundation, or, on the contrary, the laying bare of an absence of depth."[ii] Today, this quite a basic conceptual distinction between politics and political provides a starting point for this enquiry of the *architecture's* role and relation to 'political'.

Researcher of non-foundational political theory Oliver Marchant has described, that in Nancy's formulation, "the difference between politics and the political should be read as one of the main 'expressions' (albeit a non-expressive expression) of society's and community's absent ground – respectively, of the presence of ground *as absence*."[iii] Community "can only occupy a strange non-place"[iv]. Without going further with Nancy, or Marchant's theoretical apparatus, this paper follows and elaborates the previous argument, and suggests that this 'strange non-place' can be formulated with the concept of *architecture*.

My argument's starting point is that political is founded, or actually 'post-founded' *in a relation with* architecture. This means that *architecture* provides a place or non-place, built environment, where 'political' may occur. These are the architectural surroundings for political, which are both in some sense 'constructed'. Within this constructed or built environment, buildings can occur, politics can take place, and historical events can happen.

We are going to see later that in the essence of the concept of political, lay possibility to resist (among political struggles, equality, and negation). For Nancy; this is resistance to immanence, for Rancière; resistance to police order, and for Lefebvre resistance against current social order. The article argues that one of the architecture's role is the to provide that kind of environment where this resistance could take and can take place.

When adopting the idea that *possibility to resist* is in the core of the concept of political, then political architecture should be considered as something, which 'allows' this type of movement to happen. This makes architecture a kind of platform for the political subjects to interact within the level of political. Architecture should then allow not exclude political activity.

A common reader may ask how *actual* buildings or architecture reflect or interact political or possibility of political? Here we have to be careful, in this article the level of enquiry is in meta-level, architecture-political, not actual buildings-politics. We can still ask how the certain type of buildings can enable political. As Gabriel Rockhill has argued that "the history of the modern world could, in fact, be written in terms of the battle of buildings, and the urban landscape is one of the privileged sites of ideological and social struggle"[v]

I will courageously argue that the governmental level of the rich Arab States of the Persian Gulf's goal is to *support* and *maintain* the post-political condition, and non-political architecture in their societies. This kind of orientation uses architectural form and actual buildings to categorically exclude the formation of political subjectivities and singularities, and therefore possibility to resist current order. Re-constructing the political means re-constructing the architecture. I argue that the way to re-construct political has to be done with political subjects and through political subjectivization with architecture.

The article asks what happens in the situation where political and architecture's interaction is dissolved? How to re-construct this relation? And how architecture (or buildings) can re-relate to political in the so-called hypercapitalistic context. This is a kind theoretical manual, which offers a way to re-construct this relation within this post-political situation.

On the Concept of Architecture

To begin, what can we mean by architecture? Or how should we define it precisely? For Rancière-scholar Gabriel Rockhill, new concepts are needed "to open space for a renewed interrogation into the political stakes of the built environment."[vi] To answer Rockhill's suggestion, I argue that architecture and built environment's connection to political should be made central for renewed definition of the concept of architecture.

Peter Osborne has argued, "More generally, architecture stands for a *material organization of social space in the present* at both conceptual and practical levels."[vii] Osborne continues to define that "spatial specificity of the historical present is thus best characterized as a complex *global constellation of spaces of places, non-places and flows*."[viii] To add 'political' to Osborne's definition helps to understand why 'architecture', which connects contemporariness and political to architecture, is relevant for the present day societies.

I argue that 'architecture' is an assembling concept, which should be understood within four separate, but interconnected levels. First, architecture is a theoretical construction, which represents post-foundational 'ground' for political. It works as a non-foundational base for negation to current social order. Second, architecture is a kind of narrative framework for political. It positions itself to be in the parallel with the essence of the concept of political. Third, architecture is a kind of platform, which allows political and the central themes of political to happen. And fourth, architecture works in the connection to contemporariness. It can be then translated to temporal, historical, and narrative concept.

Within the existing research literature Nahir Lahiji, who has edited two important volumes on the architecture's relation to political, highlights the importance of architecture in emancipatoric politics within the post-political condition.[ix] Also Peter Osborne has argued in his recent book[x], that it is 'architecture' that connects social production to contemporariness. For Osborne "as a signifier of the social, via the urban, architecture offers a 'privileged access' to the contemporary via technologies of social production."[xi]

I argue that architecture with contemporariness attached to it, have a possibility to formulate a non-place for political, places for equality, and surroundings for resistance and struggles. Equality, political struggles, and ability to resist are central for the concept of political. To combine these three concepts, something that can be called contemporary political architecture could occur.

On the Concept of Political – the Importance of Equality, Political Struggles, Ability to Resist

Among others, Jacques Rancière has written widely about the importance of equality, in the core of the concept of political. Nadir Lahiji's reading on Rancière states that within "the aesthetic regime of art, lies the political "promise" of equality."[xii] Rancière's description of the aesthetic regime of art relates to this enquiry of the architecture's role within this regime, and its relation to the political.

In the heart of political, according to Rancière, there are political subjects and the process how to become such in a society. Rancière calls this process *political subjectivization*. For Rancière, it is always a *process*. Lahiji has suggested that architecture would "be able to produce the "political subject," it is imperative that its discourse enters into the frame of the aesthetic regime of art."[xiii]

For Rancière, only possible subjects of politics are the people. This has been called a 'populist-democratic impulse', and it is laid on the concept of equality. Rancière's work aims at giving a voice to those who are excluded from the hierarchies of knowledge (i.e. those who cannot participate in politics). Rancière tries to "intervene in the space connecting what is called aesthetics and what is called politics in order to question forms of description and interpretation that have supposedly become self-evident."[xiv] This relates to hard essence of political; everyone should be equal to participate in politics. And through political struggle, which is a only way to enter to the field of politics.

Rancière continues, "Political *struggle* is thus always an aesthetic struggle: a fight for some new distribution or 'partition' of the sensible that would break up the existing representations of what Rancière terms the 'police order' in order to make perceptible that which such an order excludes."[xv] To create equal possibilities to participate into politics, the role of aesthetic sphere should be taken into account more closely. This can be interpreted that architecture's role should become more visible and more 'foundational'. Architecture is then a way to break existing representations and it can be used as post-foundational narrative for political.

Juliane Rebentich has stated that "aestheticization is not just a question of design, but that this question itself should be seen in a broader social context"[xvi] The official (or governmental) level (or rancièrean police order) of the societies wants to *usually* enforce certain type of architectural design to prevent political subjectivization.

Rancière's police order's aesthetic choices are always then also political choices. As Rockhill describes, "the diverse ways in the collective elaboration of a shared material and symbolic world is also the forging – and potential re-forging – of a people."[xvii] These are the moments where equality and political struggle are made it either possible or impossible. This reflects how political is used in social and narrative interpretations.

Continuing with Rockhill "architectural forms tend to both manifest and accentuate sociopolitical structures and norms, while at the same time being the site of ongoing struggles over the collective formation – and potential reconfiguration – of the social order."[xviii] Architecture's narrative power relies then on the possibility to participate in political.

Osborne reached to this from the different direction "Within this constellation, the bounded territory of the nation-state remains the primary social form of 'place'. But it is subject to both erosion and the internal transformation of its spatial structures (in particular, currently, the relationship between 'public' and 'private') through its relations to both non-places and the 'space of flows' alike."[xix]

Movements, processes and struggles highlight the essence of political. Architecture works as a platform for these entities to happen. The problem although arises when a quality of these movements and 'unpredictable subjects' should be evaluated. I suggest that the concept of contemporariness can offer a way to eliminate 'forged' options.

On the Concept of Contemporariness, Defining the 'Quality' of Architecture and Political

> *"To claim something is contemporary is to make a claim for its significance in participating in the actuality of the present – a claim over and against that of the other things, some of which themselves may make a similar claim on contemporaneity."*[xx]

For Osborne *"'Contemporary' is, at base, a critical and therefore a selective concept: it promotes and it excludes."*[xxi] What I want to argue here is that the concept of contemporariness is suitable for the evaluation of the 'quality' of political and architecture. With the concept of contemporariness, we can answer to the question how to the legitimate the nature of political struggles and resistance to police order. It can be also used to support certain type of architectural forms.

Contemporariness is a way of referring to the historical present. For Osborne "More specifically, the contemporary is an *operative* fiction: it regulates the division between the past and the present within the present."[xxii] As Osborne has argued such a notion is inherently problematic but increasingly inevitable.[xxiii] "The concept of the contemporary is thus inherently speculative, not just because it is epistemologically problematic in its application to history, but because it is structurally anticipatory, as such."[xxiv]

For Osborne, "The contemporary appears there, first, structurally, as *idea, problem, fiction* and *task*; and second, historically, in its most recent guise as *the time of the globally transnational*."[xxv] As Rancière has rephrased it: *"The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought."*[xxvi] Bringing the concept of contemporariness from the debates of contemporary art to political and architecture is important, because the historical context for political and architecture has transformed from modernistic ideals to the more speculative and non-foundational ground.

For Osborne "the contemporary is a utopian idea, with both negative and positive aspects. Negatively, it involves a disavowal; positively it is both an act of the productive imagination and the establishment of a task."[xxvii] *Contemporariness,* in historical sense, is something what comes after modernism (and also after post-modernism). This is to claim then that contemporary is something that comes after these historical entities. Following Osborne:

> *"The subject of modernity (and there is ultimately a singular one) has a 'collective' dialectical unity; the equally speculative, but differently unitary, subject of the contemporary has a 'distributive' unity. In this respect, one might suggest, the discourse of nationally or regionally specific 'multiple modernities' can achieve theoretical coherence at the level of the whole (history) only in articulation with the concept of the contemporary – despite the discrete conceptual content of modernity and contemporaneity as temporal ideas."*[xxviii]

What I want to argue here is that 'contemporariness' should be dealt as a normative concept, which defends the core concepts of political (in sense of criticality) and exclude other ideas, which are speculated in the current moment. This might be contrary to rancièrean idea of equality, but in the relation to the non-foundational ground, is relevant.

On the second part of the article, we are going to take a look on the Hypercapitalistic Arab Gulf States' (the HAGS) context. In the positive formulations or architectural imagination, we can try to overcome post-political condition by introducing political themes to architecture.

Markets, Political, and Architecture

Fredric Jameson has stated that all methods and approaches imply and presuppose a form of theory.[xxix] Within this article, architecture has been used also as a creation of narrative framework and platform for the political and political subjectivization. As for Jameson "significance of architecture today, and also its formal originality, lies in its immediacy to the social, in the 'seam it shares with economic'"[xxx]. How this *seam* can be understood in the non-European context, where economic sphere has "conquered" architecture from social and political?

It can be argued that in the rich Arab States in the Persian Gulf, economical "subjectivication" of the societies has taken over political subjectivization processes. There seems to be visible 'seam' between architecture and economic, but not with social and architecture. This context provides indeed very different context to analyze architecture's relation to possible political subjectivities. Architecture's role has transformed or reconfigured from the European (or critical theory's) context. The main reason for this is that the importance of 'political' in the core of society and politics, are not profoundly shared. This is the context what I call[xxxi] 'hypercapitalistic', and where the post-political condition prevails in *par excellence*.

In this situation, architecture and contemporariness have found a new relation in the empty place of 'political'. Within this hypercapitalistic space, 'actual architecture' works constantly against political, in negative and positive manners. This is post-political and hypercapitalistic vision of the their relationship or police order's architecture.

Before looking the actual situation in the HAGS more closely, we have to turn to Henri Lefebvre's direction to understand how architecture is connected to everyday political struggles, political, and prevailing context in general. For Lefebvre "Architecture and architectural effect and the production of space do not have enjoyment as their goal – realized mainly by signifying it through symbols – they allow it, lead to it, prepare it."[xxxii] For Lefebvre 'enjoyment' is one of the essential attributes for architecture, but not directly. The same line of argument goes with political. 'The political' cannot be the purpose of architecture *per se*, but it can prepare and lead to it.

One of Lefebvre's main concerns was, how to prevent architecture from participating in the reproduction of the cultural logic of late capitalism. Within the context of Arab States in the Persian Gulf, it has already become impossible. It is important to note here that the production of space within this specific moment and context differs radically from the situation in Europe 1970s (when Lefebvre wrote the text).

Still, as Lefebvre has noted architecture can be divided into two separate directions, "While abstract utopia is a "positive" extrapolation of the status quo, concrete utopia is "negative," that is to say it contradicts the premises of the current social order: the everyday defined by the division of labor, economy of exchange, and the state as the primary agent of economic regulation and political subjectivity."[xxxiii]

Deleuze-scholar Douglas Spencer has stated that "It is thus difficult to conceive of how any architecture which makes strategic allegiance with the market, and at the same time so vehemently disavows the practice of critique, can be 'advanced' or 'progressive' – other than to the extent that it advances or progresses the cause of the generalization of the market form itself."[xxxiv] Or disavowing political we could add. Architecture's strategic alliances should be formulated more explicitly.

Architecture as a Space Provider for Political in the HAGS

Among the others, artist Walid Raad has written about how Arab States in the Persian Gulf has tried to diversify its hydrocarbon-dominated economy by investing heavily in culture and the arts by building institutional infrastructure.[xxxv] Raad has argued that some thinks that this kind of cultivation of the citizens would be important for these societies. "We are told that this renaissance is led by Western-bred visionaries who are tired of the old ways, and who are wholeheartedly trying to first democratize the taste of their subjects via the arts, and then they will democratize all aspects of civil and political life in their intellectually thirsty but socially conservative lands."[xxxvi]

This type of infrastructure's building (or 'architecture') could be seen as positive elaboration of status quo, but for Raad it represents only post-political hypercapitalistic condition without any connection to the actual (political) subjects. Raad acknowledges that there are 'in rancierean manner' the connection between political subjectivization and the 'arts' / aesthetics, but this is not the contemporary way to elaborate or nurture it.

If the state-led culture infrastructure projects are seen post-political and hypercapitalistic, and not really participating creating political and political subjects, how the more positive elaboration might be possible? To understand architecture's (possible) role in political, we have to though turn towards positive imagination, architectural imagination, and more **'empirical way'** to deal the matter within the current (market-driven) situation. These positive formulations would challenge pure generalized market form, within its own context without **strategic allegiance**. 'Negative utopia' should be then connected to 'abstract utopia', and its possibility to evolve from the contemporary moment.

Architecture's more positive elaboration is connected to defining architecture within the concept contemporariness. Critical and positive imagination that would differ from pure market form has to be empirically elaborated. If we agree that the built environment provides the certain type of order (as Lefebvre did), and want to underline the importance how this order can be confronted (as Rancière did)? How architecture or built environment can affect on political more directly or 'in positive manner'?

On the more Positive Elaboration of Architecture

Returning to Marchant's reading on Nancy, where he states "that it is difficult to ascribe any positive content to community in this radical sense: it is nothing but resistance to immanence, and in its resistance towards the logic of immanence and communal fusion it is transcendence:"[xxxvii] Here we have to at least give a try, following the example of Lebfevre's positive elaboration on architecture.

If positive elaboration through architectural imagination can happen within existing status quo**,** or in this case within so called hypercapitalistic context, which 'aspects' of architecture can be seen leading possibly towards political, and political subjectivization?

It is easy to state that these aspects are not about style, which can be though contemporary *per se*. But more related to how architecture can participate in re-creating political subjects? Architecture is then more a tool than an object. It participates political *subjectivization* processes. This means bringing architecture to political through contemporariness. And this should be the main concern of the concept of architecture and built environment.

In the end, the question of architecture is, how to bring architecture back from the sphere of market to the sphere of political (concrete utopia). I suggest the most important aspects within positive elaboration of architecture are then the same than the hard essence of political. This means, that architecture should enable equality and provide platform for political subjectivization.

Agreeing with Claire Bishop's reading on Rancière, genuine participation in the society is something unknown, this means "the invention of an 'unpredictable subject' who momentarily occupies the street, the factory, or the museum – rather than a fixed space of allocated participation whose counter-power is dependent on the dominant order."[xxxviii]

Positive elaboration of architecture is then the certain type of non-place for political struggles, equality, and emancipatoric politics. It is not about filling up the spaces left empty (or full) by police order. Subjectivities will be formed, when citizens or residents will become 'producers of space'. Architecture's positive elaboration is then to guarantee that these spaces are inclusive and they are based on the equality.

To define architecture in this way we are relying on Lefebvre's theory that social space is produced in social interaction. How this movement can be made possible? And is this an exercise of architectural imagination?

For Lefebvre, the *jouissance* (or enjoyment) is central theme in the social production of space. "There is no pleasure without movement, without activity, and therefore, without effort."[xxxix] Then the conclusion is that political 'singularities' or subjectivities and political subjectivization formed with the movements, within the unpredictable moments and with enjoyment.

Conclusion / Towards the Manual

The importance to be able to resist existing (police) order, possibility to political struggles, and equality are the key concepts when defining *political*. As I have argued in this paper, these attributes should also be connected to the concept of *architecture*.

Architecture should be understood as a topological framework for political. It should provide both place and non-place for political to happen. Architecture supports the political both in negative and in positive manners.

This article has operated within the conceptual triangle of political, architecture, and contemporariness to describe the current (non-existing) situation of 'political' within the hypercapitalistic Arab Gulf States' context.

The possibility of political and architecture in these societies is connected to re-constructing political and political subjectivization processes. I have argued that this current order has successfully disabled political and political subjectivization processes in the levels of architecture and political.

It seems that theoretical formulation of architecture's relation to political, in the context of post-political and hypercapitalistic society, does not work. This article should be then read as the manual, how to re-create this link.

Built environment can become proxy for the political, which create at the same political singularities and subjectivities. Designing and constructing places can become 'architecture'. As I have argued contemporariness can work as qualitative category to evaluate both political and architecture.

As I have argued following Lefebvre, architecture has affect on political subjectivities, but not directly. As we have seen, built environment provide, on the one hand, *a sense of order*, but on the other hand, possible spaces to oppose this (imagined) order. Architecture should allow this negation. Actual buildings and built environment should allow this negation. The quest for the contemporary political architecture should provide places where the resistance to the current order could occur. This would make architecture political again.

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