THIRD NATURES

Cristina Díaz Moreno and Efrén García Grinda

INCUBATORS OF PUBLIC SPACE

AMID.cero9, 4S: Sun Sand, Sea, Sex, Bruges, Belgium, 2002
Reactivating the romantic, medieval European tourist destination of Bruges, the project
here extends the city's network of canals, introducing a series of floating artificial oases
conceived as generators of pleasures. These large heated platforms create hedonistic
micro-enclaves that serve as artificially generated replicas of Mediterranean beaches.

Cristina Díaz Moreno and Efrén García Grinda, founders of the Madrid-based office AMID.cero9, shift the notion of the urban from the classic idea of the complete or ideal city, to one which engages with essential urban phenomena: the dynamics of confrontation, dispute and agreement between individuals, social groups and subcultures. In this way, public spaces are transformed from empty spaces into a real context for social interaction; and active involvement with social exchange becomes the main purpose of a project for a new architecture of the city.

Never before has the city been the focus of so much attention, not only from anthropologists, architects and sociologists, but also as an important fixture in the agendas of politicians and economists. Modern urban development processes are usually defined as the main result of the late capitalist society, of its cycles and its logic, and they are identified with it. However, arguments about urban elements today portray these elements as a general, universal and all-enveloping condition that we inhabit, and in which it is not possible to intervene as architects, rather than as an object of a project or for discussion. Every approach to urban phenomena seems to be guided by the analysis, criticism and fascination that they produce instead of by the creation of alternative models. Are cities thus a mere scenario for our activities, or can we view them as part of our scope of action?

Let us cast our minds back almost 2,400 years: Aristotle's view of the city was established in the first two chapters of *Politics* as the meeting point for the various *oikos*, for people from different places and families. The process of creation of the first cities is defined as '*synoikismos*', literally, the process whereby different *oikos* would form a city by deciding to live together to provide mutual protection and assistance: a continuous process of living together and discussing mutual hopes and benefits. Cities then became a gathering of people that were not the same or similar, but different individuals in reciprocal equality. They accepted they had to coexist under the same system of rules in a tacit and ongoing process of negotiation and interaction, agreements and disagreements, more than a physically complete thing.

However, beyond the concept of the origin of the city and its pertinence today, modern urban environments are nowhere near being peaceful and harmonious melting pots of diversity, where social identity is supposedly built upon equal participation between different elements. Urban agglomerations are not only home for differences, but also host and provoke violence, conflicts and inequality. Consensus and equitable participation are only two of the possible scenarios that can arise from the dispute between different ways of life. Control, marginalisation and violence are others, as is the creation of elective communities, such as social groups or subcultures, which argue against mainstream cultural structures through style and the public exposure of alternative ways of life. Both direct forms of negotiation and interaction (for example, urban revolts of discontent) and mediated or indirect forms (public exposure of alternative aesthetics) are extreme examples of the range of potential manifestations of the constant public redefinition of social constructs.

Thus, urban environments can be considered a fascinating phenomenon of ongoing dispute between different groups, a hub of conflictive economic and cultural exchanges in a highly artificialised and constructed environment. The possibility of again tackling the project of the city could hinge around displacing the purpose of the project. It would shift from the complete city, which is impossible to anticipate due to its complexity and temporary and accumulative nature, to an intervention at the core of the urban phenomenon: the dynamics of confrontation, dispute and agreement between individuals, social groups and subcultures, defining the physical location where they take place and taking this scenario of relationships as a real context. The real and physical public space would become the main purpose of a project for a new architecture of the city, the aim of which is to become actively involved in contemporary urban phenomena.

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These processes are spatial phenomena by nature: they occur within, and generate, space. Therefore the true notion of the city can only emerge within and from a new notion of the term 'space'. Space can be defined as something that occurs between entities of different origins that coexist physically in a given place. It is not a thing, not a physical reality that happens out there, but instead a set of relationships under constant definition. It thus takes place among things, among an array of different elements that are being constantly transformed and reciprocating each other. It is a typical phenomenon of physical interaction and intermediation that defies the categories between subject and object. Everything is subject and object of the (inter)action at the same time, and everything participates in their definition. The concept of space that is usually associated with modernity, that white and empty canvas where all traces of biotic activity are cancelled in a physical and conceptual process of hygienisation, is displaced by a new notion that fosters the meeting, collision and richness of cultural materials. It is a new dirty, smelly and noisy place where different agents from different origins physically clash to undertake the constant rebuilding of the ethos of a given community through their actions.

Public space would then cease to be mechanically associated with emptiness – as opposed to the built-up urban factory – or with a space for free and universal access, and would become the space for the collision between dominating cultures and the new practices that try to discuss them. Being physically together and sharing space while at the same time collectively building the scene through public interaction becomes a process of constant identity review and reformulation for a given society, and therefore for the city itself. The pieces that compound the city would work as incubators of alternative ways of approaching the world that promote public dissidence, differences and the plurality of the origins of the intervening actors, embracing and inducing alternative ways of life that would be distant from the passive models of experience consumption. As an intermediation phenomenon, public space would then become defined not only by the architecture that contains it, but also by the actions of users and of the people that inhabit it: a meeting place for people of all classes and

origins – humans, non-humans, inert objects, biotic materials, physical and virtual technologies – in constant interaction. These are what we call 'third natures'.[1]

This type of space exists in reality, but it appears surreptitiously and spontaneously in the city, in places of exchange and interaction. Despite their elusive nature, there are some situations – assemblies of people, actions and physical buildings – where the ideal of the political notion of public space materialises in physical and real spaces. The safe spaces of lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual (LGTB) communities, squatted buildings, camps, positive ghettos of elective communities, riots, demonstrations, festivals or the hostile occupation of public spaces involve the appropriation of territories whose use and identity is highly undetermined. This open and uncertain nature leads to active occupation, transformation and spatial adaptation practices, and

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usually goes hand in hand with the physical decay and ruin that elective communities or subcultures feed upon to negotiate their identity, as they constantly experiment with new lifestyles.[2] They are unaware of the deterministic forces of capital, property, standardisation and institutionalisation, and build new spatial enclaves, real outsides within the physical inside of the city, where new notions of the public scope are collectively developed.

Since there is a general lack of available space within the city, these manifestations can migrate to waste landscapes, deserts or, in the words of Bruce Sterling, 'involuntary parks'.[3] The functional decadence and obsolescence of these spaces make them alternatives for non-conventional forms of collectivity, and their conflictive and non-conventional use of cultural forms (for example, parties, flash mobs, carnivals or artistic performances, all of which oppose production and routine, that is, the counter-routine) to stage the dissensus are indirect and sophisticated forms of dissidence that replace direct political discussion and negotiation. These new ways of group participation explore and celebrate cultural particularities, they aim to make physical and aesthetic marks, and also to deal with the profound contemporary aestheticisation of experience and ways of life.

A question inevitably follows: how can architecture as a discipline contribute to the creation of physical public spaces of a political nature, and hence to the project of a city as a public space for the interrelation between various social actors, and as the physical reality that houses and induces them?

Back in the present, it is necessary to think about what new displacement of our culture of the project is needed to again tackle the issue of urban phenomena through these third natures. The way elective communities, subcultures or social groups emphatically and critically discuss the dominating culture provides some suggestions. Assembly, network, revolt, camp and festival are the new models and figures of this kind of space: a synchronised collectivity of interacting individuals within the constraints, limits and physical barriers of the city, in a horizontal and potentially equitable communicative interaction between individuals. This interaction takes the form of a transformation or physical, and sometimes

AMID.cero9 with José Quintanar and Colectivo Cuartoynitad, The Big Mech and Co: Gran Via Toxic, Madrid, 2008–10
top: This social engineering of a clinical order can be read as a brutal example of the 'creative destruction' concept developed by the Economist Joseph Alois Schumpeter in his book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942). According to his thesis, modernity is an eminently creative destructive process supported by a constant succession of innovations. Drawing by Ja Ja Ja.

AMID.cero9, The Magic Mountain, Ames, Iowa, 2002
bottom: A former power station is wrapped in an ecosystem mask that converts energy infrastructures and architecture into a living system to be inserted within the city. The membrane attracts the most important butterfly and bird species in the northern US like a real mountain, and the building is converted into the laboratory of a genetic engineer, where different species and varieties of roses can be researched and developed, challenging the common tools and concepts of architecture, gardening, species breeding and the ecology of living.

violent, occupation of the city. It ultimately combines pleasure, creativity and political resistance in a temporary explosion of collective cultural and social impatience.[4]

Projecting a city through the definition of its public spaces also involves tackling and overcoming the schism and dilemma between belonging to the urban logic or assertion as an individual element. This conflict is the main source of frustration when faced with the challenge of the project of the city, but it could be neutralised by considering that the specific conditions of the independent elements that make it up can be defined with an implicit city logic, thus discussing the role of buildings as discrete and finite elements. If cities can be considered a synchronised collectivity of independent elements, architecture should yield in some of its performative properties due to its belonging to an urban whole. In any case, not all the spatial formal and organisational characteristics need to be relinquished to the city, recovering the typological discourse and limiting the task of design to an abstract adaptation, to the specific contingencies of a context. Instead, the hyper-specificity of the elements needs to be exacerbated. All formal, geometrical, spatial and organisational decisions need to be linked to their cultural milieu, as established by the appearance of alternative cultural models, and they should only partially be subjected to the common urban condition. The level of permeability, accessibility, indetermination, connection with the city or the languages used is a matter of concern for this new architecture of the city. The capability of establishing culturally backed bonds with the cultural context through each decision would again grant architecture the ability to materialise as a highly specific object that reaffirms its identity as a unique and once-in-a-lifetime experiment. The project of the city can then find its place within the natural habitat of architecture and can be conceived as the definition of independent and finite pieces from an ocean of entities that act like a synchronised multitude.

The first of the complex interdependences between city and architecture where work can be done involves the continuity, connection and physical segregation of the built object with respect to its urban surroundings. Analysing ghettos as positive spatial models helps us
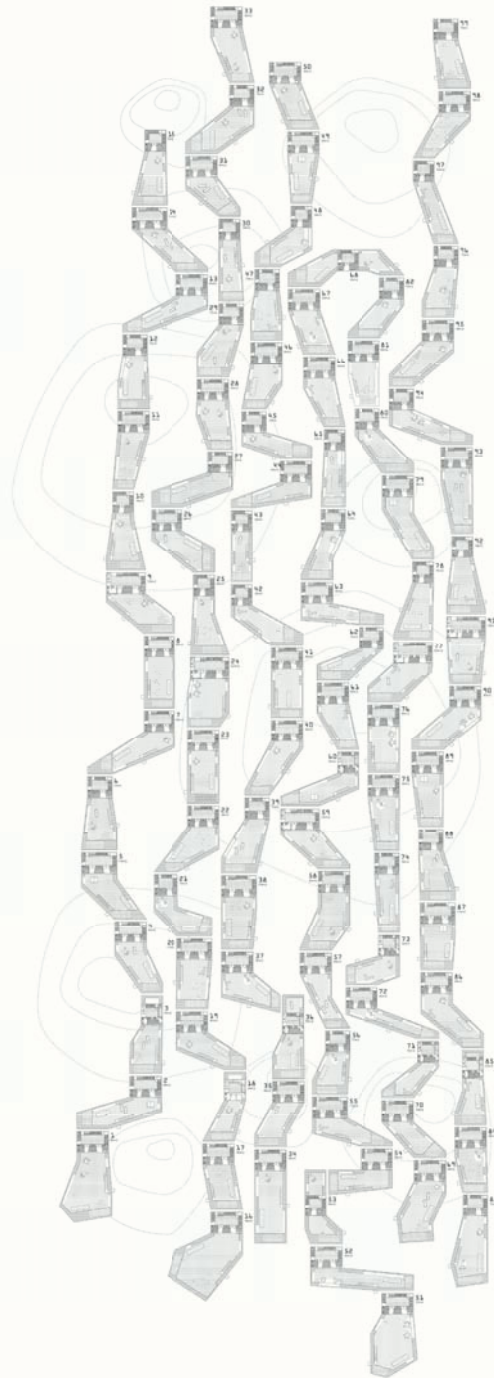
AMID.cero9, Southern Exposure, Jyväskylä, Finland, 2001
This organisation system of north–south strips of single housing units all facing onto a private courtyard and looking south produces spatial compressions and expansions that subdivide the continuous public space into small areas in such a way that the whole is characterised as a piece of the city and understood as a synchronised multitude of independent buildings.

understand how the project of the limit and the degree of exclusion of architecture can foster the appearance of new and alternative cultural lifestyles, and hence the extension of the public domain. 'Auto-inclusivity', that is, the selective physical isolation of a community, encourages the construction of the distinguishing features of that community's identity. It makes them aware of their own characteristics while at the same time constructing a safe haven for the collective reaffirmation of the group. This includes a discussion about their level of autonomy and the edge effect of the separating 'ecotone', that is, the physical barrier, the transition area between the inside and the city, the conflict area for two or more communities. These 'other' spaces are the breeding ground for new dissident cultural forms and alternative lifestyles. Understanding architecture as a spatial enclave, as an autonomous area with distinguishing features, which precisely defines its degree of inclusivity and continuity with the urban factory, is not in conflict with the public sphere. Instead, paradoxically, it reinforces it.

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AMID.cero9, The Gay Vatican, Mojave Desert, California, 2010
The Gay Vatican is an autonomous enclave with a distinct identity in the Mojave Desert for the lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual (LGTB) community. It is a public space experiment that examines the development over time of the construction of the community and their seasonal behaviour. Drawing by Ja Ja Ja.

On the other hand, work on the level of interiorisation helps in the definition of the physical conditions of space and the programmes it houses, understood as the physical and temporary organisation of activities that can generate the necessary publicness. More than a behaviourist approach, the goal is to work on the space where various agents interact, firstly to summon the different actors and secondly to foster and house the active construction of public spaces. It would therefore be possible to present alternatives to the dominating forms of urbanisation and production of space, developing assemblies that critically argue about their level of exclusion and their distinctive spatial characteristics, which are based on the distinct cultures of the elective communities that inhabit the city and defined through the connections established with different cultural capitals and materials.

Bearing this in mind, it makes sense to abandon the languages normally associated with the architecture of the city.[5] Simplification, the anonymity of the elements or the zero degree of languages, were related to the subordination of the general standard because of their urban status, as a direct answer to the constant demand for differences and novelty. However, the wealth and variety of cultural and subcultural forms in our city environment allow us to contemplate the possibility of reintroducing language as a necessary link with cultural specificity. The result would be a type of 'afterpop' language,[6] where no distinction would be made between high-brow and popular culture, where the source for cultural materials would be consciously modulated to establish a biunivocal relationship between language, social groups, their rituals and activities and the built-up space. Instead of proposing a generic, anonymous and standard mass of urbanisation where language singularities or particular cultural connections are

AMID.cero9, Cherry Blossom Pavilion, Jerte Valley, Extremadura, Spain, 2008–
For the area's annual spring Cherry Blossom Festival, AMID.cero9 proposed the construction of a contemporary chapel that establishes a close bond with the surrounding landscape through its presence, position, volume and materials. The chapel will act as a future assembly of both natural and artificial elements: cherry trees, wildlife, tourists and inhabitants.

not required, the focus would shift to highly specific prototypes that are defined through their connections to a vast array of cultural materials.

The indirect understanding of the city project would therefore require each of the elements that make it up to be viewed as a prototype adapted to a specific scenario that defines a renewed model of the relationship with the city, and therefore that could potentially contain seeds for new and alternative models for the current process of global urbanisation. Working with urban elements does not mean submitting yet another new universal city model, with ideal projections of the future or negative visions presenting the consequences of the global urbanisation process. Instead, it means re-examining the capability of purely architectural decisions for each of the elements to indirectly put forward alternatives to institutionalised, regulated and standard urbanisation processes. These would thus be transformed into real spaces for discussion and become the breeding ground for alternative ways of life. In short, this new architecture of the city would be a constructed version of the interaction and dynamics of subcultural forms. ∆
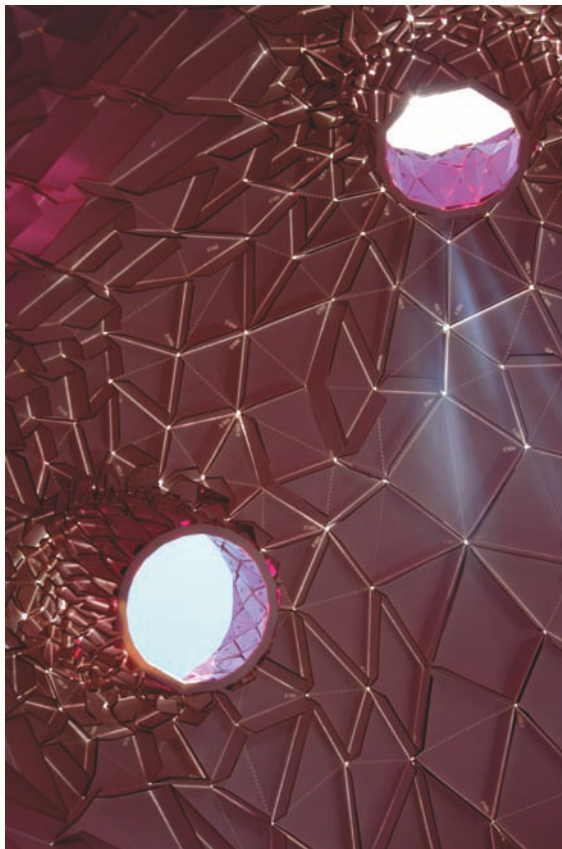
Notes
1. The philosophy of the 'terza natura' (third nature) was introduced by Jacopo Bonfadio in the early 16th century to define the characteristics of the new kinds of garden spaces that were both natural and man-made, and in which historical references and mythology were essential features. These new entities were portrayed in *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, attributed to Leon Battista Alberti and written under the pen name of Francesco Colonna in 1499. See John Dixon Hunt, *Greater Perfections: The Practice of Garden Theory*, University of Pennsylvania Press (Philadelphia, PA), 2000.
2. Dougal Sheridan, 'The Space of Subculture in the City: Getting Specific about Berlin's Indeterminate Territories', *Field*, Vol 1, No 1, September 2007.
3. Bruce Sterling, 'The World is Becoming Uninsurable, Part 3', Viridian Note 00023: see www.viridiandesign.org/notes/1-25/Note%20 00023.txt.
4. Manuel Delgado, *El espacio Público como Ideología*, Los libros de la Catarata (Madrid), 2011.
5. Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, MIT Press (Cambridge, MA), 2011.
6. Eloy Fernández Porta, *Afterpop, La literatura de la implosión mediática*, Editorial Berenice (Córdoba), 2007, and *Homo Sampler, Tiempo y consumo en la Era Afterpop*, Editorial Anagrama (Barcelona), 2008.

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As a building that can remain closed for months and open just for a few days for the spring festival or autumn season, in the same way as does a church on pilgrimage days, the Cherry Blossom Pavilion is a strange typology – a rare new species.