
Performing Democracy at the Hearth of the City

Re-configuring politics through architecture

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to explore some relations between architecture and politics that arise in recent urban phenomenon like the Madrid 15M or OWS. The main idea is that in these public demonstrations a new political realm appears, one closely related with the strong feeling of community that is made present in them and with the particular architectural space in which it takes place. This realm, though political in its constitution, both subverts and exceeds the established political sphere, allowing a new thought to appear. In this process, the role played by architecture, both as the space in which things happens and as the new space that is freed inside the City as a shared one, is fundamental.

This general frame established, the paper will focus on two related ideas or concepts, the concept of event and the concept of performance, that will shed some light into the general topic.

KEYWORDS. Architecture, event, performance, politics, community, agora

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1. Introduction

15 May, 2011. Puerta del Sol, Madrid, Spain. Evening.

A revolving multitude, a multiplicity of people —mostly young people (but not only)— fills the big square, infiltrates the dense network of streets that surrounds it, moves around a disappearing centre as brilliant insects encircling a shining light (but not burning themselves in). What seems a slow Brownian movement of different particles is in fact the unconscious staging of a free performance, the one of the social body manifesting itself to itself and to the other (this other being the political regime) *as* community. Not—or not only—manifesting its discontent, or the problematic way of its relationship with institutions, with the political and economic power, with regular life in global capitalism. But performing its self-recognition as the conscious presentation of an “original” lack or a debt that, nevertheless, can’t be restored. Like in a perfectly staged artistic performance. One where authors and public are, as in performances must be, the same. But only... only that this is not a staged (*designed*) one, although, of course it shows itself on stage. In fact it deploys the stage, builds the very architecture in which it happens. It was not art-designed, art-based, art-staged, but nevertheless evolved into an “artistified” one. An anonymous architecture that builds the political space thorough its setting in motion, its performance. A moving architecture that, if reminds us of something is, of course, the seminal movement through which Greek *agora* emerged (and hence Western politics). A temporary architecture that defines a new landscape where the event takes place, has *its* place, much as the political (cf. the distinction between *la politique* and *le politique* as stated in Nancy’s and Lacoue-Labarthe’s *Le retrait du politique*) emerged in the open space of the *agora*.

In a rather surprising (and strangely obscured) reenactment of the 14 April of 1931 (the day where Spanish second republic was proclaimed, after the Dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera), the square evolved into a scenery and the multitude into the elusive figures of a performance. Why is so pervasive the feeling that, if we are to understand something, to find or even confer some meaning in(to) the event, even to understand it as event (unique, unrepeatable, unforeseen) we must approach the phenomenon thorough the lens of architecture? Even *as* architecture?

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This paper will argue that the political action that makes itself present in those different but similar circumstances as the ones that happened to be in Madrid 15M, #OWS, “Yo soy 132”, or even in the manifestations of Cairo’s Tahrir Square implies a different and somehow new approach to political representation (one much distanced from traditional organized expressions through the vehicle of a Party or an articulated political association). It will also argue that this is allowed or produced through the setting in motion of a previously existing architectural space, and that the whole phenomenon can be better understood through the lens of two closely related ideas: the idea of event and the idea of performance.

These spontaneous manifestations are, of course, not devoid of some previous thinking or even organization (now net-*decentered* through the use of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter), but they do not show its belonging to a political option that existed or is articulated beforehand inside the frame of liberal democratic society (less to say in near-absolutist regimes as in Egypt and other Muslim countries), and in this sense, they are “spontaneous” or show its

apertenance to a different political frame. Somehow, in its very happening they show the possibility of politics, the real presentation and practice of politics understood as the deployment of a community that shows itself as *political* community and proposes a new relationship between its members and the social body they constitute as political subject.

It is, of course, a complex phenomenon, and what we propose here are only some preliminary approaches to the main question through the lens of architecture. But, why architecture? Because the Greek link between politics and city, somehow resumed in the word "polis" seems to be originally based in the relationship between space (and time) and community that architecture both allows and enhances. This relation can be traced to the origin of the space (and concept) of Greek *agora* as an empty space open to the event, that in turns allows democratic political space to appear. Architecture, in any case, is understood here not as the frame, the build space of the contemporary city in which those manifestations take place or the planned and surveyed space of the proper square, but as the interlinked relationship between space and what happens in it, or, better saying, as the simultaneous co-originary (if it can be said in those terms) of place and opening to the event that in its very essence architecture is.

The first point, then, traces the relevance of the event in its architectonic essence as the kind of space that appears simultaneously as people gather in Puerta del Sol square. Both landscape and place, what happens in the empty space of the square is a complex phenomenon in which architecture operates as the precondition of any happening (the open space at the heart of the city is defined, limited through architecture and is given as the possibility of what happens later) and as the eventual construction of both a community and a new physical place, transformed through the use of temporary structures that populate and in fact re-define the space of the square in architectural terms and understood as a constructed landscape (mainly through the images of the media). At this point, the idea of landscape as a human construction is a key one.

The second point focuses in the new political community so created and its effectivity through the analogy with the contemporary practice of the artistic performance. Because, as the title says, democracy is performed at the hearth (the *oikos*: and it is important the transgression that implies the political appropriation of the private *oikos* through the public space of the agora) of the city: performed, formed in the dynamical movement of a changing relationship between the different participants in the demonstrations and its environment (the landscape). In so doing, in this mutable creation, a new community is constituted one that is both temporary limited and permanent, developing hence the mechanism of a new political presentation.

2. A landscape of events: the new agora

Borrowing the image of a *landscape of events* from the text by Paul Virilio a proposal of an approach to the space of the ancient Agora could be possible. In this way, it could be reinterpreted as if we were moving through a palimpsest that allowed the travel through the space next to that of the time. Space and time look like blurred parameters melting themselves through each other. Not only we could travel through a land of space and time, either that travel allows us to discover new senses of time and space through the acquiescence of the place.

Thus 'landscape' evokes more than the meaning of region. It includes the land forms but also the ones introduced by man. In some sense, it implies the presence of boundaries because finally it is perceived almost as a snapshot, something that

maybe responds to the contribution made by the artistic realm from the XVIII century onwards. Probably from the moment when this concept began to share the aesthetical question. So the word landscape, from a moment onwards, is defined to be perceived. And this perception is a comprehensive one, one that includes all senses in such a way that we must combine the sight, the smell, the touching, etc., of it but also the understanding of it, the meaning of it, the total melting of a synergistic perception. When we talk about landscape we associated what we are receiving through the perception of the natural forms but also through the physical ones, in such a way that we can say that a landscape is a good speaker about the cultural parameter of a society. Because landscape seems to be not actually the reality but an image of it. In such a way that it is not only a description of the reality as a checker or as a witness of it, but also it talks as a production. A production that, in some way, is performing the reality too.

But even we can see in the landscape term that affiliation with the derridean definition of the symptom, as something that 'any theorem could use up', 'a meaning of the event that nobody can domine'. Understood in this way a landscape shares with the concept of the event its blurred status between the possibility and the im-possibility. Thus the landscape is something exceptional. A landscape shares its condition of witness with that of producer in a very exceptional way. So a landscape is something symptomatic. It is something that nobody can domine, it exceeds all definition and all appropriation. We are not owner of any landscape because it outstrips our capacities, our senses, our feelings. In some way once it has been produced it acquires its own life. It is in this sense an architectural production. A production that performs our cultural realm.

Our cultural realm nowadays is pixelated by the events cited in the first paragraph of this article. 15M, #OWS or "Yo soy 132" are in some way pixels of our global realm, snapshots that describe our reality, events that trace the portrait of our society as pixels over a map speaking about the performing of politics. Event as symptom, event as production, event as witness, moving between the possible and the im-possible. Event as things that arise and appear to us. But in a way that they are arising 'into their own'. Things that are coming into view, things coming into themselves by belonging together, things that through its *community* arise and appear 'into their own'. Event as 'enowning'. Because the exceptionality of the event is that impossible possibility of arising that touches us, that affects us, that concerns us. That sense of concern as '*con-cernere*', that comes from the Latin as 'with + distinguish by the eye'. That sense is given by Heidegger in his use of the word *Ereignis*. *Er-aignis* talks about the eye through the concerning. *Er-aignen* as 'to distinguish or discern which one's eyes see, and is seeing calling to oneself, appropriate'. *Ereignis* as concern, opens the door to that one 'harnessing' it towards the 'service of thought'. This kind of concerning as if we were sieving through the help of the winnower, is made through the contribution of a simultaneous attention. All senses are needed but the word *ereignis* calls in itself to that of the eye. And maybe the global perception of the events that we take as leitmotiv of our article has been possible through its image in the media. Image that shows the performing action but image that itself also performs reality. Image no more innocent but in some way guilty. Image that is not more naïve or neutral but image finally produced. Images that are no more the witnessing description of what happens but a new performance of the cultural realm. The performance performed and performing. Performance that opens the event. Event that is no more in a material place but in the virtuality of the media. Place deconstructing itself through the media defragmented as a mapping of pixelated elements that at the same time are pixelating themselves, allowing the openness to arise 'into their own'.

That it is what happens with the in-between of architecture. Architecture allows the openness of the things to happen. Around the realm of architecture we emphasize

that of the possibility, where the possibility opens the event, where the sphere of the possible and the impossible finish up melting and they become almost interchangeable, nor as much as we could use one or the other anyway but because the field of each definition finally falls through a process akin to a winnowing tool in a recipient where its field of determination, of definition, become blurred and we could say that what it is possible at the same time is impossible and even that one feeds on each other, where the im-possible is made possible through the means of the im-possible, where the possible gives place to the im-possible. We enter in the realm of the 'maybe', of the openness. Something alike happens when we talk about the event, it is possible because it shows itself as impossible. Its appearance results so impossible but at the same time this appearance involves its sense of possibility.

This kind of things we realize connected with what ordinary happens in the space of the ancient agora. Through a kind of buildings that nowadays appear us almost impossible in its definition because of its natural openness. An openness that is realized not only through its use just as it has been constructed but even preceded in such a way open through the process of designing. A kind of openness that is in itself open to the event. That is for us the question. A state of openness that allows the whole life of architecture, from its creation as a conceived and designed object, crossing to its construction, its use through the experience until even its natural evolution and its ruin. And something akin this one is what we see around the events, the places, the performing and so on of the demonstrations taken as references for this writing. They as events have given place and in its exceptional performing have exceeded the realm of the politics. They have gone beyond the limits of the realm of the architecture because the places selected have allowed this kind of openness as it occurred in the ancient Greek agora. Nowadays this new agora has exceeded also the actual boundaries of the architecture allowing them to break through the ordinary limits of architecture appropriating in a very natural way the realm of the media in such a way that architecture acts as a scenery but also as a performer in the performance through the media of the image, through the means of the media. Thus architecture as new agora opens up the landscape to the event.

3. Notes on performing/community

Performance is a political art. There is a strong relationship between esthetics and politics in performance, to the point where some of its differences became blurred (though not obscured). Performance, the practice of performing as an artistic practice points to the old distinction between life and art because it erases the established differences between them. In performing its performance the author, the performer, behaves both as an artist and as a common person, as spectator, doubling its role (as in fact does every one who is involved in the performance). And in so doing a new and strong community appears between artist and layman, between art and life: it is not an "artistization" of life, and is also far from the analysis of Walter Benjamin about the relationship between esthetics and politics. It is that art appears in this very reflection upon its own substance that inevitable arises in performance as its content. Art is directly present in life as an emergence of a new state of conscience that happens to be in-between the participants.

And this new situation that emerges through performance coheres into a social though temporary community that establishes its own rules of behavior precisely challenging the established political and cultural rules in which it takes place. The important thing now is that in the studied phenomenons of Madrid 15M etc., there are not an artist and its public, but the two categories are just one: each person

that is present in Puerta del Sol performs both roles at the same time, but nevertheless they follow the same logic that is present in artistic performances, and they do it in the middle of the city, the *polis*. From art to politics to architecture, then.

The "performance" creates in this way a new social body, one that is political in the sense that is both related with power relations (in the form of the city) and that creates a communal space, a community not dissimilar to the one that was present at the naissance of the Greek polis. In being political *and* esthetical, performance is, then, related with architecture, the art (or better saying, the practice) that links both worlds in the city.

What we are going to explore now are some of the implications the double genitive of the subtitle presents: community that performs and community that is created through performance.

The work of art, in performance, is not something that is in front of us and separated from us, separated of our own reality, but is somehow created or produced in the very event that the performance is. In this sense, a deep relation is established between what happens in any artistic performance, like the ones that became common in artistic practice from the sixties on (From Chris Burden to Marina Abramović, the Viennese actionists or the radical theatrical "performances" of radical theatre directors) and what happens in this political events such Madrid 15M, #OWS or "Yo soy 132". To the point that we can say that this "political performance" can be understood through the categories that define artistic performances, or even that they are no other thing that their ultimate state or its limit to the point that they seem to cohere into one general phenomenon. In any case, the strong relationship between both is what deserves to be explored.

In performance the sense/meaning is not something that can be known from before, it is not something fixed that implies a constant relationship between significant and signifier, but can only be recognized in the moment in which it appears. And, although being different for each of the participants, it nevertheless appears as a social meaning, one that is shared by all of the assistants, both performers and public. Sense, then, *emerges*. And is recognized as a *shared* sense by the community so created in its finitude. But it is not only sense that emerges from the substratum of the performance. Is the very social body that supports this sense which appears, which emerges as an organized body, as a kind of articulated community.

This happens in space (and in time, of course). But, again, space happens to be not (only) the physical container that acts like a frame, like a stage or a preexisting architecture. Space appears. During the act of the performance, a different space arises: one that is phenomenological (a different perceived space through sight, but also and specially through hearing and through smell) but also a social and political space, one that establishes new relationships at the level of the social and the political between the participants of the performance but also between them and the outside of them (the city).

What appears in performance is no other thing that which precisely appears. In that sense, the performance does not represent anything, it is only what it is, what shows and says in the moment in which it is staged. The social body that makes itself present, though political in its constitution, does not represent other thing that itself (and in that very moment), hence the difficulty of transforming into an organized political movement and the tensions it generates. Because, as in Greek direct democracy, this auto produced political body does not stand for other than itself. Again, architecture is which gives some stabilizing point, and makes it through the space of the *agora*, the freed space at the hearth (and hearth, *oikos*, is

a key word) of the city. Because this emptied space that architecture stages as the core of the polis is what allows this political community to be recognized as such. Framing its appearing but specially allowing the conditions of freedom to this performance to happen. Being a space devoid of any power (as imposition) other of that which derives of the community that emerges from it.

Finally, the staging of this community (and its demands), its scenic realization is not something previously thought and defined to its minor details, something written and coded. But is something *projected* (in its sense of projection to the future, to what is to come, to the radically unknown as a launching) but not *designed* (and the absence of signature is of course another precondition). It is something that appears as it is in the moment of its very emergence. More radically than in most of known artistic performances, the erasure of any original plan (because indeed there is no original sense, as Derrida taught us, but only deviation and deferral) is precisely which allows its success. Sense emerges from or in the phenomenon of appearance and does it precisely because it is not a re-enactment of nothing, a re-presentation, but the first (and only) occurrence of the event.

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Biography

José Vela Castillo is Ph.D. in Architecture, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid (ES), M. Arch/B.Arch, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid (ES), Ph.D. Candidate in Philosophy, Facultad de Filosofía, Universidad Complutense (ES), ANECA (Teaching Staff Evaluation Programme).

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