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WITHIN THE LIMITS OF SCARCITY

RETHINKING SPACE, CITY AND PRACTICES

Edited by
Barbara Ascher
Isis Nunez Ferrera
Michael Klein

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Contested urbanism in Mumbai, India © Isis Nunez Ferrera



#Rancière
#informalities
#Agamben
#design politics
#potentialities
#dissensus

Notes around design politics: design dissensus and the poiesis of scarcity

The politics of scarcity in a post-political time

Playing with the limits of scarcity, conceived both a *topos* and a *gesture* of design, the following contribution wish to project a preliminary reflection on the uses of design onto a post-political landscape (Swyngedouw 2007, 2009). As Goodburn, Till and Iossifova (2012: 13) argument, “with architecture so often framed as a technocratic discipline, it is perhaps not surprising that responses to the perceived dangers of scarcity revolve around technical fixes. This is an approach that holds out the promise of escape while leaving the underlying conditions untouched”. As Slavoj Žižek has recently remarked: “today, we are dealing with another form of the degeneration of the political, postmodern post-political, which no longer merely ‘represses’ the political [...], but much more effectively ‘forecloses’ it” (Žižek, 1999: 35) has come to occupy the centre of contemporary political discourse by bracketing off the social from the political, and politics from aesthetics as the technical arrangement and the production of consensus of what Ranciere calls “[...] the annulment of dissensus as the end of politics” (2001: 32).

This paradigm has already entered in architectural discourse under a disguise of a suspicious “discontent with criticality” (Kenzari 2011), abandoning the project of radical critique as a blanket negation of the political (Lahiji 2011) as well as the urban discourse in a broader reflection on democracy and inclusion (Dikeç 2012; 2013, Purcell 2013). As architecture is slowly re-engaging in a new critical project that allows for reclaiming the political and the social natures of the practice, it is pretty much important to broaden the rediscovery of the inherently political nature of space, necessarily produced in contestation and dissensus which is able, in turn, to reveal the lines of power and agency that are written and rewritten in cities.

Assuming then that scarcity is an “unapologetically political issue”, of particular relevance to the argument in this paper, an in a call to *defend* architecture and design from the pessimism that has been attributed to them, but also to challenge their epistemologies in dealing with the post-political scarcity-driven condition, the present contribution aims to suggest actions, intellectual and practical, for a deeper reorientation between politics and aesthetics, not simply a reordering of power relations between groups, but the creation of new subjects and heterogeneous objects. In doing so, design, architectural and urban must take different forms, from a conscious act of not intervening physically in the built environment, to the production of spaces that explicitly challenge dominant ideological perspectives, and engage with issues at a level beyond the merely technical, aesthetic and physical.

When thinking on informality, scarcity, scarce resources and design, the practice of the urban designer requires a further deconstruction and recalibration (Boano, 2013, Boano *et al.* 2013) in order to gain a better understanding of how to deal with the urban project and more specifically in order to deal with the *not-designed* and the *un-designable*. Investigating and working in informalities should allow us to develop trans-design-research that, despite its inherent forward-looking nature, does not fixate on elements, images or forms, but on their processes and their potentialities. To meet the challenges posed by the post political configuration of urban design and cities in which “design consensus uproots the foundational political impulses that centre on disagreement [...] struggles over the real of different urban possibilities” (Swyngedouw 2011: 25). I want to offer a theoretical reconfiguration of design base on Giorgio Agamben and Jaques Rancière, which helps underpinning the inherently political nature of space, contestation and dissensus in its production, revealing the lines of power and agency that are written and rewritten in cities. More specifically, two hopefully mutually reinforcing notions are put forward: *potentiality*, drawing from Giorgio Agamben reflections on *poiesis* and the *dissensus*, drawing from Jaques Rancière spatialities of equality. Indeed a number of common concerns typify the work of these thinkers, both of whom are attempting to theorize the condition of politics today, while critically drawing on the resources of classical political thought.

An integrated theoretical approach: Agamben and Rancière

The idea of using two theorists, Agamben and Rancière, requires some reflection and some justification. Both authors are looking at specific modes of *politics*. For Rancière, politics is never static and pure as it is characterised in term of division, conflict and polemics that allow the invention of the new, the unauthorised and the disordered. Referring back to the Aristotelian *polis*, Rancière used the word *police* to refer to the established social order within a process of governing where the political problem is drastically reduced to assigning individuals their place/position through the administration of the conflicts between different parties by a government funded on juridical and technical competences. In contrast, Rancière’s *politics* is constituted by dis-agreement/*dissensus*, by disruptions of the police order through the dispute over the common space of the *polis* and the common use of language. Politics, therefore, is not about identifying the *excluded* and trying to include them, as such logic of identification belongs to the police. Politics proper is to question the *given* order of police that seems to be the *natural* order of things and to verify the equality of any speaking being to any other speaking being (Rancière 1999). Although similar in the use of ancient references, addressing conflict between Schmitt and Benjamin, Agamben argues that in contemporary politics, the *state of exception* becomes the rule. In discussing *homo sacer* paradigm, the notion of *bare life* that Agamben develops from the Ancient Greek distinction between natural life-*zoe*-and a particular form of life-*bios*, it is articulated in Aristotle’s account of the origins of the *polis*. The importance of this distinction in Aristotle is that it allows for the relegation of natural life to the domain of the household (*oikos*), while also allowing for the specificity of the good life characteristic of participation in the polis. Stemming from Aristotle’s account on the shift from voice to speech (from voice to language) as constitution of the political nature of “man” there is the founding condition of political community since speech makes possible a distinction between the just and the unjust. Agamben writes that the question of how natural *bare life* dwells in the polis corresponds exactly with the question of how a living being has language, since in the latter question “the living being has *logos* by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the polis by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it” (Agamben 1998: 8).



They both look at *aesthetics*; Jaques Rancière's caesura with the linguistic structural Marxism towards a material, sensorial and concrete formulation of politics and political participation and emancipation are the centre on a new politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics. Rancière called this *le partage du sensible* to describe the many procedures by which forms of experience – broadly understood as the domains of what can be thought, said, felt or perceived – are divided up and shared between legitimate and illegitimate persons and forms of activity. As the concept of partition of the sensible serves to draw together Rancière's political-philosophical apparatus, it also acts as lynchpin to his interests in aesthetics when he states that "aesthetic is at the core of politics" (Rancière 2006: 13). He defines aesthetics as "a delimitation of spaces and time, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise" (Rancière 2006: 13). For him, artistic practices are forms of visibility that can themselves serve as interruptions of the given partition of the sensible and therefore, the work on aesthetics is a work on politics. On the other side Agamben's contributions to aesthetics revolves around the distinction between philosophy and poetry as a complex exercise of language and representation, experience and ethos. The urgent task of thought and criticism for Agamben is to rediscover "the unity of our own fragmented word" (Agamben 1993b: xvii). For the Italian philosopher the origin of western metaphysics lies in the conception that "original experience be always already caught in a fold [...] that presence be always already caught in a signification" (Agamben 1993b: 156). Hence, *logos* is the fold that "gathers and divides all things in the 'putting together' of presence" (*ibid.*: 156). Ultimately, then, an attempt to truly overcome metaphysics requires that the semiological algorithm must reduce to solely the barrier itself rather than one side or the other of the distinction, understood as the "topological game of putting things together and articulating" (Agamben 1993b: 156). Bringing into play various literary techniques such as the fable, the riddle, the aphorism and the short story, Agamben is practically demonstrating an exercise of criticism, in which thought is returned to a prosaic experience or awakening, in which what is known is representation itself.

Finally, both Agamben and Rancière *did not* discuss architecture *per se*, but they were greatly inspired by Aristotle and Plato reflection on the *polis* as spatial reference. Giorgio Agamben's (1942-) voluminous body of works reveals a transversal spatial reading, his philosophy cultivates thoughts concerned with the deactivation of devices of power in the interest of a coming community that is present but still unrealized. His philosophical enquiries contribute to the evolution of topological studies (Massumi 2002, Giaccaria and Minca 2011, Boano and Marten 2012) and yield an optimistic rediscovery of *potentiality* in relation to architecture and design. Rancière's presupposition of inclusion and equality permeates all of his debates on democracy and coming-community. His central spatial reference of a political space as a re-configuration of a space "where parties, parts or lack of parts have been defined... making visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise" (Rancière 1999: 30) remain heavily illustrative for architecture and urban design.

Without aiming to be comprehensive and teleological, the paper is engaging with each tinkerer adopting an integrative theoretical approach, to contribute to a debate over design and scarcity. As such, this paper builds on and further enriches the existing body of work developed around the relevance of Agamben's philosophy on space (Boano and Floris 2005, Boano 2011, Boano and Martens 2012; Boano and Leclair-Paquet 2014), and Rancière's spatialities (Boano and Kelling 2013).

Agamben's Potentiality

The work of Giorgio Agamben outlines a spatial approach to understanding the urban dynamics of contested spaces and territorial partitioning (Boano & Marten 2012), mainly through his popular *homo sacer* where the notion of 'state of exception' and his concept of 'the camp' were defined (Agamben 1998). In this part of the paper I'm concentrating on lesser-known incisive concepts that can offer a reinvented political possibility as it considers the notion of potentiality as central gesture. Potentiality is often understood in relation to actuality. Agamben reads the Aristotelian opposition between potentiality (*dynamis*) and actuality (*energeia*) and foregrounds his notion using the Latin *potere* (potency) meaning to be-able-to-do something. Potential is generally defined as something not-yet actual, but that over time and through the principle of development has the power to become. Expression, which is developed from the debate over what it means to have a faculty to do something and yet not be doing it. Agamben, who frequently draws on Aristotle in his own explorations on the notion of potentiality, connects this position with what the Greek philosopher called generic potentialities. Borrowing the same example as Aristotle to illustrate these *generic potentialities*, Agamben (1999: 179) writes that the child "is potential in the sense that he must suffer an alteration (a becoming other) through learning" in order to reach a state of actuality.

For Agamben, potentiality is not so much the ability to do as the ability to choose not to (be, say, design) or to put in other words, it is a matter of keeping one's ability in reserve and withholding its exhaustion in actuality. Potential is not "not-being", privation, absence but rather an effective faculty or capacity with the status of genuine, albeit concealed, presence.

Agamben follows Aristotle into a parallel direction as they define another source of potentiality, going beyond the binary of potential/actual. In an essay titled *Potentiality*, (1999) Agamben expresses a shared sense of concern with Aristotle for a second type of potentiality that they refer to as existing potentiality; a terminology used to describe potential that already *belongs to someone*, a potential that is already accessible.

Agamben supports this concept through the example of the architect who is said to have the potential to build, or the poet who has the potential to write poetry. While Agamben's "architect is potential insofar as he has the potential to not-build," (1999). All potentiality, he concludes, is based on a choice not to do, so that potentiality is not simply actuality to be but also the refusal to actualize one's potential. Agamben identifies the key feature in Aristotle's thoughts in this crucial notion of 'existing potentiality'; that of being capable of resisting one's own potentiality. "The greatness – and also the abyss – of human potentiality is that it is first of all [the] potential not to act" (Agamben 1999). Existing potentiality contains the power of negation, the freedom to resist; "potentiality is always also constitutively an impotentiality, [...] the ability to do is also always the ability to not do" (Agamben 2009: 43). Indeed, at every moment that the poet is not writing a poem they are in a state of potential privation: they could write but they choose not to. "What is essential is that potentiality is not simply not-being, simply a privation, but rather the existence of non-being, the presence of an absence (Agamben 1999: 179). The presence of an absence is then the very definition of potentiality for Agamben and not the assumed movement from potentiality to actuality, which we might call "creation" or "invention". In defining, then, the artist (poets and architect respectively), the actual and surprising definition of the poetic being is a possession of a faculty and not using it.



As Agamben (2009: 45) writes “nothing makes us more impoverished and less free than the estrangement from impotentiality.” Agamben (2009: 44) argues that what separates human beings from other living beings is that we are the only “animals who are capable of their own impotentiality.” Deprived from this capacity - from our impotentiality - we are forced to translate potential into actuality, thereby losing our freedom to animal instinct. Echoing the thoughts of Aristotle, Agamben (1999) explains how “human potentiality is in relation to its own privation,” and that there lies the origins of human power, “which is so violent and limitless with respect to other human beings.” Separated from its impotentiality, human power is left in a state where all potentialities must be actualized, expressing its might and superiority on whichever agencies it seeks to outdo.

What makes us human, according to Agamben, is precisely not our power of actualization, but the potential to not-be, which refers to the fact that we are capable of our own incapacity. Agamben therefore relocates freedom on the other side of the spectrum, not in actuality, but in the domain of potentiality, which, as we have seen, is the mirror of impotentiality: To be free is not simply to have the power to do this or that thing, nor is it simply to have the power to refuse to do this or that thing. To be free is, in the sense we have seen, to be capable of one’s own impotentiality, to be in relation to one’s own privation. This is why freedom is freedom for both good and evil (Agamben, 1999).

The reading of potential implies a difficult ambiguity. Potential is both an experience of privation, as sensation (*aestetsis*) of being without sensations (*anaesthesia*), or a remembrance and forgetting. It is both potential to-do and not-to-do. Transposed to architecture, it is an architecture that simultaneously delivers and withholds. The co-presence of actuality and potentiality is central to understand scarcity and non-scarcity (abundance) neither as opposed nor as complementary but potential to each other, so that the term becoming-other of the other is an interminable transactional process “becoming-scarce-becoming-abundant”. Hence the idea of the potentiality – as actualized alterity – is not annulled but retained in actuality: saved, stored and conserved or solved and dissolved.

If impotentiality is the essence of potentiality, the root of human freedom can be found in our capacity to not-be; the power of freedom and human action subsists in the capacity to not act on every potentiality. It is precisely in this non-active potentiality that fundamental passivity lays (and where passive resistance locates its *modus operandi*). What are the political consequences of defining freedom not in terms of actuality, but in terms of the potentiality to not-be? If “the greatness of human potentiality is measured by the abyss of human potentiality”, (Agamben 1999: 183) what kind of environment would a society incapable of its impotentiality produce?

Building on Aristotle’s radical work once again, Agamben (2009: 44) writes that separated from his impotentiality, deprived of the experience of what he can not do, today’s man believes himself capable of everything, and so he repeats his jovial ‘no problem,’ and his irresponsible ‘I can do it,’ precisely when he should instead realize that he has been consigned in unheard of measure to forces and processes over which he has lost all control. He has become blind not to his capacities but to his incapacities, not to what he can do but to what he cannot, or can-not, do.

Agamben finds the “root of freedom” within the “abyss of potentiality” (Agamben 1999: 183). In thinking design as potential and not simply actual we tried to offer an

alternative reading, a more positive one that carves out possible spaces of agency. In doing so, Agamben's political praxis became one of radical desubjectivation that refuses to be captured in a topological state of exception. He writes, "We can say that between immanence and a life there is a kind of crossing with neither distance nor identification, something like a passage without spatial movement" (Agamben 1999 : 223). Our understanding of the exception as topological, emergent, and potential does, however, point towards a way to propose, to seize the potential of emergence, the potential of topological transformation, to undermine the apparent fixity of current geometries of power. Agamben's perspective can hence be made fruitful in critical research on urban policies and critical architecture.

Rancière's dissensus and the politics of aesthetics

After the French strikes of 1968, Rancière broke with Althusser and structuralist Marxism as well as his philosophy due to its elitism. He rejected the rigid and hierarchical distinction between science and ideology, which Althusser's philosophy presupposed, accusing it of distrusting spontaneous popular movements and supporting a 'politics of order'. He began to develop an oppositional and radical political philosophy, aiming to give voice to an egalitarian politics of democratic emancipation.

In refusing the Althusserian approach, he turned instead to the archive in the form of an intellectual history of labour. This was an attempt to recover the virtue of *the worker* by showing that he resists not merely the hardship of the work but the very system that confines him to the role of the worker in the first place (Chambers 2010). In this, he discovered the *disorder* of the nineteenth-century French workers and their refusal to play the part they have been given, breaking down the Platonic legacy and centrality of 'order.' In that respect, Rancière's belief that the role of the philosopher is not to give his/her voice to the silent aspirations of the dominated, but to add his/her voice to theirs, therefore, to hear their voices, rather than interpret them. Rancière's fundamental political concern is the denial of recognition experienced by the dominated.

Such interests and intellectual processes were more developed in works like *The Philosopher and his Poor* (2004) and *The Order of the City* (2004) and secured the foundation for his later works constructing themselves around the relationship between *order of the city* and *order of discourses*. Rancière's innovative thoughts could be understood as a redefinition or recalibration of politics, moving forward concepts developed from Arendt and Foucault: "Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, [it denotes] the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles and the system of legitimizing this distribution" (Rancière 1999: 28).

Rejecting the Habermasian liberal idea that politics consists of a rational debate between diverse interests, in the 1980's Rancière truly defined what constitutes the essential aspect of politics: the affirmation of the principle of equality in the speech of people who are supposed to be equal but not counted as such by the established policing of the democratic community (Mecchia 2009: 71). Thus, political struggle occurs when the excluded seek to establish their identity, by speaking for themselves and striving to get their voices heard and recognised as legitimate. Politics is thus a struggle between the established social order and its excluded part, which has no voice. Critical then are the political consequences of this exclusive focus that signalled the history and the practice of participation. Reframed spatially, we must unco-



ver the political implications of such a focus on deprived and marginalised (scarce) areas that legitimise a participatory intervention.

What is important for Rancière and this argument on the constructed political scarcity, what he called *police*, not to refer to repressive forces but rather to refer to the order of things, of the *polis*. Therefore, police refers to the established social order within a process of governing. A process we can call the *scarcity-police*. Since the *dem* is included by nature in the *polis*, the political problem is drastically reduced by assigning each his own place through the administration of the conflicts between different parties by a government funded on juridical and technical competences (Mecchia 2009: 77). In other words, a “society is represented as being divided into functions, into places where these functions are exercised, into groups which are, by virtue of their places, bound exercising this or that function” (Rancière 2001). In contrast, *politics* in its very essence is constituted by dis-agreement/*dissensus*, by disruptions of the police order through the dispute over the common space of the *polis* and the common use of language.

For Rancière, genuine political (or artistic) activities always involve forms of innovation that tear bodies from their assigned places and prevent free speech and right of expression from being reduced to mere functionality (Rancière and Corcoran 2010). One of the ways in which the police avoid the disturbance of politics is to name phenomena and assign them to their *proper places* in the established order, thereby de-politicising them (Dikeç 2012). This is exactly the detrimental but interesting use of Rancière’s thought in the debate over urban poverty, marginalisation and the inclusive practices on which different participatory experiences lie. Slums, marginal areas, low-income communities, barrios, etc. are included in the police order by their exclusion.

Their territories, their histories and their societal features, although neither homogeneous nor reducible to the same categories, legitimise interventions, namely participatory ones. Such co-option of the participatory process to merely replicate and strengthen the established order is made easier with such marginal communities that significantly differ from formal areas of the city (Frediani and Boano 2012). In Rancière’s approach, this is not a question of politics; it is about alterations in a police order. *The inclusion of the excluded* is the wrong way of thinking politically about the issue; even exclusion from formal power is a form of inclusion in the police order (e.g. women and slaves in the Greek *polis*). Politics, therefore, is not about identifying the *excluded* and trying to include them. The logic of identification belongs to the police. Politics proper is to question the *given* order of police that seems to be the ‘natural’ order of things, to question the whole and its partitioned spaces, and to verify the equality of any speaking being to any other speaking being (Rancière 1999). The idea of inclusion plays a central role in the debate on democracy and participation, although the process of inclusion appears to be conceptualised as one in which those who stand within the sphere of democracy selectively invite in those who do not. The rendering of this process as one that works from the inside-out, which emanates from the position of those who are already considered to be democratic, reveals the underlying assumption that democracy can and should become a de facto political reality. As such, using Rancière’s vocabulary, we begin to see this trajectory as the construction of a particular police order, becoming then a teleological trajectory toward an already known end-state in which inclusion becomes an entirely numerical operation. In contrast, “a political moment would not merely entail the inclusion of excluded groups, but rather an inclusion that, through such including, reconfigures the landscape in such a way as to change the conditions under which arguments can be understood, speakers can be acknowledged, claims can be made,

and rights can be exercised” (Ruez 2012: 15).

Democratisation in general, and specifically in more democratically produced cities, appears to be a practical test of the assumption of equality between any and every speaking being (Rancière 1999: 30). Equality, for Rancière, is not an end-state, but a starting point that requires constant verification in an open, experimental and non-teleological logic operating from the outside-in. If the concept of police is a set of implicit rules and conventions which determine the distribution of roles in a community and the forms of exclusion which operate within it, then genuine political acts do not simply reorder relations of power (a different order, but an order per se) but disrupt this order, tearing bodies from their assigned places. This happens when “the traditional mechanism of what are usually called politics are put into questions” (Rancière and Corcoran 2010: 22), which takes the form of what he calls *dissensus*. *Dissensus* then introduces new subjects and heterogeneous objects into the fields of perception.

One of Rancière’s most suggestive and fruitful concepts is *le partage du sensible*. It refers to the way in which roles and modes of participation in a social world are determined by establishing possible modes of perception referring back to Aristotle’s difference between the *phōnē* and *logos*, which can only be determined by politics. The partition of the sensible sets the divisions between what is visible and invisible, speakable and unspeakable, in Rancière’s words - audible and inaudible. It functions like a Kantian categorical framework that determines what can be thought, made or done (Porter 2007). As Rancière explains, such a partition is what “define[s] the ‘modes of perception’ that make that order visible and sayable in the first place” (Rancière 2001: 20).

Such a definition is useful for our discourse as distribution implies both inclusion and exclusion. The current social order is conceived here as an anti-democratic, anti-political/de-politicised order, which attempts to maintain the existing pattern of inclusions and exclusions. In this sense, “[p]olitical activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogeneous assumption, that of a part of those who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the sheer contingency of the other, the equality of any other speaking being” (Rancière 1999: 30).

Since the early 1990’s, Rancière’s work has increasingly focused on aesthetics. He has written a series of works on film and literature in which he stresses the political dimension of aesthetics, and a number of works of political theory in which he argues that an aesthetic dimension is inherent in politics. As the concept of partition of the sensible serves to draw together Rancière’s political-philosophical apparatus, it also acts as lynchpin to his interests in aesthetics when he states that “aesthetic is at the core of politics” (Rancière 2006: 13), especially for him, aesthetics is another name for the partition of the sensible. He defines aesthetics as “a delimitation of spaces and time, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise” (Rancière 2006: 13). For him, artistic practices (despite his direct reference to literature, film and fine art, we can extend it to architecture) are forms of visibility that can themselves serve as interruptions of the given partition of the sensible (Chambers 2010). Therefore, work on aesthetics is work on politics. Rancière’s work is illuminating in our discourse as it clarifies the call to see aesthetics as political and politics in aesthetic terms, as a form of the ‘distribution of the sensible.’ Importantly though, this approach is not anti-materialist, in contrast, it is essential to see that aesthetic transformation involves not only a change of consciousness but also material social changes. Central to this is the *process* of becoming a political subject, in which those who have not recognised part in the social order, who are invisible or inaudible in political terms, assert their egalitarian claim – a collective claim to exist as political



subject. Such a process has three different dimensions. First, it is an *argumentative demonstration*, second, it is a *heterologic disidentification*, and third, most relevant to this paper, it is a *theatrical and spectacular dramatisation*. Space is crucial to this, as it becomes the creative and dramatic stage for visibility. In the words of Holloway (2005) this process is ‘theatocratic’ as it is creative and constructive and involves not only the manifestation of a new subject but also the construction of common space or ‘scenes’ of relationality which did not exist previously. This dimension of theatrical dramatisation goes thus beyond the single perception of visibility/audibility in that it constructs new ways in which parts of society relate to each other, and reconfigures the way in which subjects are heard and seen. “[S]pace...becomes an integral element of the interruption of the ‘natural’ (or, better yet, naturalized) order of domination through the constitution of a place of encounter by those that have no part in that order” (Dikeç 2002: 172).

This is where design becomes relevant, as this conception of politics ascribes to design the potential of instigating “the invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come” (Rancière 1999: 29). Aesthetics such rethought as ‘the invention of new forms of life’ – as a critical break with common sense – opens up possibilities of new commonalities of sense. Politics change the fundament on which judgements about what makes sense are based and thus destabilises the ‘aesthetic regime’ that renders occurrences sensible or not. In *The Critique of the Judgement* (1952), Kant asserts that what we define as beautiful has nothing to do with objectivity (e.g. the beauty does not belong to the object which is under scrutiny), but rather is a subjective condition. We are used to attributing the quality of beauty to something only if there is an agreement among our cognitive faculties. On the contrary, we experience the sublime when a disagreement among those faculties takes the place of that agreeable condition.

The same assumption plays into Rancière’s distinction between a ‘mimetic regime’ and an ‘aesthetic regime’ of the arts. The former is founded on the agreement between ‘content’ and the way we represent that ‘content,’ that is, the way we deal with a given subject and the perceptible general data, organised by a certain taste of the audience. The latter, instead, is based on the lack of agreement. The emergence of an event takes shape as a dissension (or a disagreement) because it makes it necessary to think *ex novo* about the rules of a judgment “in order to reconfigure the identities, relations, and arrangements through which positions and arguments make sense” (Ruez 2012: 2). With this theoretical frame for the contribution of design to socio-political change, it is illuminating to examine architecture and design acts and the ways in which they have the potential to promote the creation of new commonalities of sense in the name of equality.

Design poiesis: actually making processes

The Greek word *poiesis*, is the origin of the term poetry, which explains why poetry came to be the archetype of all the arts, but in its wider meaning we can use it as *creation*. Plato says in the *Symposium* “any cause that brings into existence some something that was not there before is *poiesis*” (2001). The dictum since the Romanticisms has been reduced to simply mean the making of something: creation, vision that confirm the onto-theological and masculine activity of god-like invention as creation *ex nihilo* that dominate the modern and contemporary idea of the artist-creator and the architect-god. It is a closer look to Plato’s incipit, “any cause” that can contribute to our thoughts. Sure “any cause” seems to include much more than a willed creative agency. At the same time, creation does not simply indicate the god-like making of a new object in the world, but could be easily an observation or a thought. Finally the process of actually-making can be less glamorous, as the various Frankenstein

filmic experiences are portraying. On the contrary, bringing something into presence can be, to say, the least timorous. For Heidegger, *poiesis* makes something manifest to appearance that was not manifested before through a process of *unconcealment* which, following the four causes theory of philosophy (matter, form, purpose and efficient cause), he considers *poiesis* in terms of that which brings all these elements together into his chosen art object: a silver chalice. Such example of *poiesis* makes emphasis on the object's availability for use.

According to Agamben, *poiesis* was opposed to *praxis* for the Greeks and he explained that “the essential character of *poiesis* was not its aspect as practical and voluntary process but its being a mode of truth as unveiling” (Agamben 1999b: 69). Thus, *poiesis* does not share with *praxis* the element of practical, voluntary willful action – that's why we often call the creative production practice and the creator, a practitioner. This slippage confines creation into the realm of *praxis* rather to the natural one of *poiesis* and therefore confusing the bringing into being as act of *praxis*. “The central experience of *poiesis* – the production into presence – is replaced by the question on the how, that is on the process through which the object is produced” (*ibid.*: 70). Such production into presence is not referring to a production of *meaning* but as a production of *sense*, which can be read in architecture as a performative act, not in the sense of performing a specific plan but in the sense of producing a plan. Consequently architecture would reveal and perform in at least two ways: in being designed and in being experienced as designed. In this way, designing architecture would not be prefiguration, organization and prediction nor manufacturing of a formal outcome using scarcity as calculative device, rather design would be about attention and potential: working out an emergence of potentials allowing for the capacity of a potential to actualize itself. Such potentiality of what cannot-not or cannot do is not exhausted or erased but presented and maintained in actuality. This is what gives the actual an enduring capacity to become. Likewise, experiencing architecture is not experiencing a design intention translated into a product, so matching prefiguration with outcome but making sense of the making of sense or creating a *poietic* of place, which in reality is an act of emancipatory sense.

Every art (*techné*) is concerned with bringing something into being (not mimetical as the original Platonic version but in Heideggerian sense), and looks for technical and theoretical means of producing a thing which belongs to the category of possibility and the cause lies in the producer, not in what is being produced. *Techné* becomes then instrumental. The complex relation of *poiesis* and the human doing is, for Agamben, central to the notion of potentiality. He declared: “Poiesis, poetry, does not designate here an art among others, but is the vey name of man's doing, of that productive action of which artistic doing is only a privilege example” (Agamben 1999b: 59). The two key issues in Agamben philosophy: poetry and potentiality, he says that every act of production into presence, natural or atrophic, has the character of what is usually transited as actual reality defined in contrast with potentiality. *Poiesis*, as a creation, is made up therefore by three elements: the first is potential, the availability-for of a material and a skill that, however, without *techné*, cannot come into actuality. The second is actuality, which is potentiality realized in the form of being-at-work, in process, in a form of work. And the third is entelechy, which here cannot be developed in detail.

Coming back to scarcity and informality, potentiality is correlated to the notion of scarcity, informality and makeshift in several ways. Makeshift/informality and scarce-resource-contexts foreground possibilities embedded in designed environments that were not explicitly designed. It made use of available elements and configura-



tions to construct new assemblages that created effective functionalities. Such possibilities are not part of a program or a brief. In addition to such unprogrammed possibilities that were not, but could have been predicted, are some possibilities that remain radically unpredictable since they arise out of uncontrolled and imprevisible actions. Making design needs to respond to the programmed, the un-programmed and the un-programmable.

In informality and scarcity, it is the un-programmable that took place at the edges, at the boundaries and in the thresholds. What happened exceeded the program and contested the architecture, both of which were meant to contain, circumscribe, define or limit what was entitled to take place. Designing for potential is designing for potential to be bound to, but not actually to take place. It is to maintain the potential in virtuality, not to actualize it, to inscribe and embed potential in the fabric of places without explicitly manifesting it. Keeping potentiality in reserve keeps the design resilient and open for adaptations, transformation, translation and transference.

Agamben's potentiality forms the key concept of his specific mode of politics, for which we should not simply accept what is, but look at how the world where we live comes into being. Agamben's meditation on the history of aesthetics suggests that humans are in essence, poetical, the points from which both facticity (*bare life*) and the political (historical, relational etc), spring forth: "that art is architectonic means, etymologically: art, *poiesis*, is production of origin, art is the gift of the original space of man, architectonics par excellence" (Agamben 1999b: 100). Space, like art and the polity, must spring from potentiality in general and not just be the space across from which this or that actual body is placed. Agamben refuses an aesthetic of *praxis*, which would merely negotiate a field of force where one is already within productive relations, and insist on an aesthetic of *poiesis*, where space and relations are produced from one non relational potentiality.

Referring back to Rancière, design can then become an act of decomposition and re-composition of the relationship between ways of doing, being and speaking. This *becoming central* to the urban development of a city is a political act as it "perturbs the order of things... creating new political identity that did not exist in the existing order" (Rancière 1999: 30). The becoming present, in the agenda and in the reality of urban development positions the urban poor – individually and collectively – in a different place than the one assigned to them by mainstream development practice and the scarcity-police. Such emancipatory logic of design repositions space from an instrumental way of urban upgrading to a process that gives renewed capacity to speak, have an audience and overcome social barriers. What clearly emerges is the presupposition of inclusion as central in any design and architectural attempt to deal with scarcity, as is a critique of numerical teleology, offering a political space, or a re-configuration of a space "where parties, parts or lack of parts have been defined... making visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise" (Rancière 1999: 30). Moreover, the underlying logic of *unlocking people's energy*, often expressed in the literature on scarcity and adaptation to such condition, is achieved through strategic reconfiguration. This takes up existing identities and subjects and presupposes their equality, which drastically changes the status quo of individuals and communities, who are no longer simply invited to participate (quantitative) but whose power and agency are redistributed (qualitative), thereby impeding the simple reproduction of police order that contributed to their marginalisation in the production of cities.

A possible design framework

Far from being the only specific conditions in the global South informal urbanisms and the urbanism of scarcity as sites of engagement, are taken in their “power” to reconfigure design from the pessimism that has been attributed to it and to the romanticisation that emerges from their everyday spatiality, to challenge their epistemologies with its contingent and immanent condition where design, architectural and urban must take different forms, from a conscious act of not intervening physically in the built environment, to the production of spaces that explicitly challenge dominant ideological perspectives, and engage with issues at a level beyond the merely technical, aesthetical and physical. When thinking on informality, the practice of the urban designer requires a further deconstruction and recalibration in order to gain a better understanding of how to deal with the urban project and more specifically in order to deal with the not-designed and the un-designable.

Architecture and design in informality and in marginality is to engage in a less-than-ideal-world that determines the point of entry in the time when speculation could begin. It starts with the current state of affairs, with the current modes of productions of spaces and its material manifestations and is not a claim for revolution! It is a quest and a continuous investigation to rethink the problem of political subjectivity and its material/spatial coordinates from a different perspective. Is becoming a different engagement with multiple references, codes, experiences and languages all trans-gressed in a dialectical productivity.

For our purpose, we hold that the process of design can be conceived and organized along four distinct, though not mutually exclusive sequential parts (Boano, Hunter, Newton 2013):

Retrospective: where efforts focus on identifying and analyzing discursive and non-discursive elements in order to decipher/depict the implicit nature and production of space (rhetoric, policies, actors);

Descriptive: where efforts focus on representing physical and non-physical elements that are present- ‘mapping’ the visible and latent with the intention of uncovering windows and opportunities for strategic design capitalization;

Possibility: exploration that hinges on present potentials, social practices, and material/immaterial spaces in a feasible, yet strategically future-adaptive manner;

Alternative: the obligatory action, especially in extreme cases of polarized visions that threaten local contingents, to challenge through a continuous dialogue with the conflictive nature and dynamism of the (re)production of space(s).

Naturally the thresholds between these four parts are not always as straightforward as the distinctions suggest. Without doubt, during a design process we continuously backtrack as well as fast-forward, manoeuvres brought on by internal or external cause. Micro processes and resurrection of information are inherent in what we do and these parts are exactly sequential in that they have the capacity to build on one another. Though this breakdown suggests that if we critically slow down our action by way of thinking more strategically about where our actions stem from and where they are meant to lead, we might better understand and uncover greater possibilities for identifying our intention of intervention. More specifically, an operational mode of design begins with:

- *No-Design* recalls the radical alternatives refrains. Stemming from inappropriate design implementation, the idea cautions against assumptions and immediately jumping to object-driven design responses while hoping to avoid being complicit of dominant systems (economic, political, professional). This calls for *abandoning* craftsmanship and imaginative skills, forcing one to consider and prioritize the dynamics and processes of collective claims. This could be seen as the



ultra-preliminary aspect of a process or a consistent convicted humility.

- *Research* stresses that without completely abandoning creativity, imagination, and craftsmanship skills, agents (students) can render the invisible, visible by employing a particular way of thinking, communicating, and reflecting that articulates and explores windows of opportunity. These can expose potential catalyst interventions and collectively-derived design proposals within situations of uncertainty, instability, and uniqueness.
- *Critique* calls for the critical deployment of imagination and craftsmanship skills in order to question and understand complexities of contested situations. This highly convicted and reflective positioning offers options of speculating, mobilizing, and demonstrating the potential of informed spatial alternatives that contribute to inclusive transformation.
- *Resistance* directly responds with the intent of reducing unjust domination. Here, there exists a condition of possibility in which design becomes a convicted emancipator using craftsmanship and imagination to promote opposition through feasible alternatives. It collectively questions spatial production not as objective provision, but as a strategic arena for accommodating the convergence of policy, aspirations, struggles and the future.

Such design gestures seem appropriate to illustrate a newly framed perspective on scarcity and its challenges. As such we position in the field of architecture organized around the refusal, disagreement to professional conventions and the creation of an autonomous field of creativity. Again it locate in the variety of experiences and practices that continue question the relationship between architect and political power, between client and service, between ideology and built form doing it as refusal (to engage in what is deemed unjust), subversion (of forms and languages) and retreat (in words, paper and pedagogy).

A coda

Poetry and philosophy, for Agamben have a common history and destiny that for the Italian philosopher can be related to the notion of *gesture*. Agamben came to define gesture via an alternative reading of the two sides of Aristotle's famous distinction between action (*praxis*) and production (*poiesis*), in which gesture is neither a production nor an enactment but is "undertaking and supporting [...] breaking the false alternative between means and ends" (Agamben 1993c: 155). Positioning scarcity as architectural and design gesture is stressing it as the display of mediation, the making visible of means as such and its potentiality of making something other-than-itself. Central to a design argument here will be potentiality as the choice of 'not to do', which is the deliberate refusal to activate one's potential - a feature that is central to the nature of what Agamben defines as the 'the presence of an absence': the scarcity.

On the other side choosing to use and develop Jaques Ranciere's spatiality of *equality*, signifies adopting a caesura with the linguistic structural Marxism towards a material, sensorial and concrete formulation of politics and political participation and emancipation along with earlier design and architectural political reflections, such as those elaborated by Tony Fry in *Design as Politics* (2011), Nadir Lahiji in *The Political Unconscious of Architecture* (2011) and Micheal Tawa *Theorising the Project* (2011). What is central in Ranciere's most basic assumption is very simple: everyone-thinks, everyone-speaks. Like many of his philosophical contemporaries, thinking evades regulation and it contests classification. To think is to subvert any rigid distribution of classes, place or norms. Such context, dissensual, opens an alternative way of debating the intersections between aesthetics and politics, detaching from "political art or aestheticized politics" to elaborate ways in which the activity of the two sepa-

rate domains can, in parallel at an abstract level, operate a distribution or sharing of the common. Rancière's approach becomes even more powerful once we add to it recognition that the production of the common is becoming increasingly central in today's biopolitical and post-political order.

Recalling an early quotation that states, "design consensus uproots the foundational political impulses that centre on disagreement [...] struggles over the real of different urban possibilities" (Swyngedouw 2011: 25) Giorgio Agamben and Jaques Rancière's reflections offer a theoretical reconfiguration of design with the inherently political nature of scarcity, as contestation and *dissensus* in its production, revealing the lines of power and agency that are written and rewritten in cities as well as *potentiality*.

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