

OPEN CITY

Michael Callant:

What is the role of the city in the 21st century for you? What are the biggest threats for the open city in your opinion? Do you agree with the ideas of the open city? (everybody can coexist with everybody and should do so...) Do you believe in the open city and are you in that context rather positive or rather negative about the future?

Adam Nathaniel Furman:

Cildo Meireles -a Brazilian artist- recently had a retrospective at the Tate, in which there was an installation exhibited that consisted of a space created out of a range of boundary objects that we traditionally use to divide space up into demarcated zones that relate to an individual, activity, or group, these objects being banal units of separation ranging from wooden fences to metal grilles, bead walls, plastic shower curtains, railings and perforated walls, all united by the fact that their physical disposition would not allow you to pass over them, but would allow you to see through them: indeed the exhibit was called "Through".

The name is a telling point in that the potency of the experience to be gained from traveling through that space was not from the fact alone that these barriers guided one's movements because of their proscriptive restriction of direction, their nature as reins on free action, nor singularly from the way that they allowed the eye to travel through the various divisions, and see other people trapped in their own routes somewhere nearby, each partially veiled by the barriers; but it is precisely the interaction between these two contradictory tendencies which heightens the degree to which one experiences the voyage through his labyrinth. It is a profoundly human relationship which activates desire, enlivens the imagination, and creates an observer out of a subject, a relationship that begins with a restriction, a separation, the removal of something –a person, a space, an event, other people in a gallery, etc- from the list of things that one might meet, interact with or go into, and is followed by the form of that separation, which if transparent, or perforated, or fenestrated, allows for a curiosity which would otherwise move elsewhere to focus in on that which has been kept from it, to seize on whatever information can be glimpsed through whatever "throughs" have been offered to the excluded individual.

It is a situation which shows fragments of things which cannot be known in completeness, and are therefore transformed into formal vessels, willing shapes onto which the observer can project his speculations, speculations which occur in the first place because the lack of contact forces the imagination to cross a bridge to the 'things seen' in an attempt to understand them, an act which most probably would not have occurred if those things seen were right next to us, not kept away from our potential interaction, and thereby rendered quotidian, known through the dumb assumption of knowledge brought about by contact. We are stopped, something is shown to us, something which at any other moment we would not have noticed, but since we cannot approach it we desire to know it, we cannot know it so we observe it, speculate on it and imagine it, and in the end may get to know it better than any object that had been freely within our realm of interaction.

That is all from the viewpoint of the outsider, but Meireles also added a tank full of Transparent fish, a shocking biological inversion of the standpoint of those visiting the exhibition, willing them to see what being enclosed by such barriers, protected by them, can engender both in us humans as well as in animals: the incredibly gentle strip tease that can grow out of a position of safety, here encapsulated by these little creatures that in the act of hiding themselves –and so protecting themselves- have rendered their very structure, the essential material of their metabolic existence, open to whoever will look with more than a passing glance. The converse of these barriers, and their ramping-up of the intrigue of difference and separation, is another function of their relative transparency: the situation in which the combination of their both framing and protecting that which they divide and enclose, creates a sense of security, an assuredness on the part of those kept apart, and allows them, in their security, to reveal themselves more totally to the gaze of others, and so, like the Fish, it is their complete appearance which is also their complete defence.

Now, that particular installation is very important to me as it manages to figuratively and phenomenally set out so many of the issues which for me are relevant in an architect's, or at least my, relationship to the wider urban context, especially a supposedly "open" one.

There is a certain violence which I feel has been done, and is being done, from two directions, to the kaleidoscope of inside-outside, subject-object, them-us, you-me, relationships which fill our cities (relationships which enrich all of us by providing difference, relief from flatness, and are terribly fragile in their spatial form): one, from the standpoint of the specificity of place in relation to micro-cultures, the expansion of spatially homogenising places of consumption, mainly the supermarket in Great Britain, de-socialise daily activities, simultaneously extracting the potential for the habitual and repetitive reinforcing of shared identities for sub-groups in an area, while at the same time removing the urban and architectural equivalents of Meireles' fences from around their routines, often both forcing a hardening of attitudes to all the "others" which they are forced to have far too much contact with, as well as a retreat into a more insidious form of separation, which, in being constantly in full sight, is forced to take refuge in a total lack of openness and display, a complete hardening of public attitude, and a total lack of engagement. The same is true of our new breed of urban super-shopping malls, like the mind-bogglingly vast Westfield in Shepherd's Bush, a machine that seems precisely calibrated to unwind the complex knots of identities woven around it in the fabric of West London, reducing them to a thin and smooth surface of hidden and self-repressed depths, flattened with consent by the shoppers under the convenient, glitzy, and deceptively inclusive undulations of its proto-Fuksas roof.

When I say deceptively inclusive, I am not referring to the illusion that these large units of urban economics are public spaces -everyone knows that they are not- and the security guards and CCTV cameras at their doors attest to it; but rather that there is a more insidious form of exclusion which is engendered by these places, an exclusion which self-generates amongst the shoppers and commuters, a form of total separation which comes from the removal of all forms of boundaries, separations, and all of the freedoms and intriguing situations that those divisions allow for. In opting into these spaces, communities, individuals, and small interest groups which may have revealed

themselves, perhaps initially only through activities and events, but later through the spatialisation, the architectural separation and framing of their presences, retreat inwards, excluding the very socialized identities and personal presences which a Meireles world would have so sensitively teased-out, and unravelled for display, through forms of enclosure that would have simultaneously described, and revealed. Places like Westfield and Sainsbury's, by their giant, indiscriminate and inclusive frames, exclude - through a contract of self-oppression demanded by any inclusion in such an agoraphobic blanket of openness- the very natures of those who pass through them, both individual and shared. All that is left is the nostalgic symbolism of clothing, covering the vacant rigidity of a suspended sociality. A more apt fish tank would be one full of a few Puffer Fish, and some Lion Fish, bristling with a nervous anxiety at their entirely Open surroundings.

The second act of generalized violence comes from the public sector, and has come to form a latter-day Dogma in that realm, a dogma which springs from the anxieties that the previously mentioned machines of economic homogenization produce, and seeks to allay them by proposing that as a contemporaneous counter to the flattening effect of these places -in which exchange occurs only on the quantitative level- a form of content-integration, a sort of integration of suppressed identities (which bristle silently, invisibly and violently against each other while standing in line at the local Tesco) can be achieved, an accomplishment which would complete, in depth, the project of uniform openness, and reductive integration, that is only partially achieved -with simmering flaws- on the level of economic exchange. This is the Dogma of Community Integration and Cultural Dialogue, a national programme in which there is finally no space left for divergence; in which 'communities' are forced to brand their identities and posit their cultural exchange and integration value, in order to be recognized as valuable members of society. This is an interior openness more pervasive and dangerous than that demanded by the market, since it is a demand posited as a precondition for participatory citizenship.

Mission Statement Taken from the UKGOV website "Communities and Local Government"

"Our aim is to build thriving places where a fear of difference is replaced by a shared set of values and a sense of purpose and belonging. We want to make sure that everyone in each community benefits from diversity, and we recognise that this means promoting similar opportunities for all. Our challenge is to build these stronger communities in times of rapid change.

We are reducing perceptions of race discrimination and leading the work on creating more cohesive communities, tackling racism, extremism, promoting inter-faith activity and a shared sense of belonging. Delivery of this agenda is dependent not just partnerships with other government departments, but with the wider communities, community organisations, public and private sector."

Currently there is little scope for the delicate calibration of routine -or the private, or group- appropriation of partially enclosed spaces folded into, and within, a fluctuating city of partially seen entities; there is only place for a flood of sublimated signals floating in complete openness, and this is only rendered more thorough and socially obligatory through the effective collusion of government in the pacification -via policies of (note the euphemisms) dialogue and community building to which much local funding is tied- of the underlying tensions that this situation brings about.

In terms of whether I am positive or negative about the future, I would have to say I am relentlessly positive, but then that is my biological predisposition. However I do believe that the situation I have just laid out is a dying one, a sort of apogee of a situation coming to a terminal point, and I am quite excited, as I sense that the “Meireles World” which I adumbrated through my experience of Through (rather than his reasons for making it) –a world of infinite degrees of calibrated separation and openness; revelation and desire; enclosure and observation- is one which will be coming about soon, with the explosion of the previous state’s monolithic machines of reduction and institutionalized dialogue. New technologies of design and rapid, ecological fabrication; technologies of individuated creative content-production; atomized market-places; Long-Tail dispersal of information; will all, perhaps, lead to an urbanism in which we can be free of either the need to bear-all in a state of constant, static openness, or the requirement that we identify with one classified cultural group whose contents are pinned and shared in a dialogue of public pacification. Perhaps there will be a place for individuals, and group entities -which last for whatever period- to build shifting narratives and non-ethnic identities, set within related spaces which navigate and transform the city in a sublime kaleidoscope of degrees which march interminable, and at every scale, in the protective and complex space between the fearful agoraphobia, and lowest common denominator, of total Openness and dialogue, and the ossified meaninglessness of complete separation and enclosure.

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