Trace
Notes on adaptive reuse

N°3    On Collectivity

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# Palaces of collective endeavour
## Cultural institutions as projects of using and appropriating the city
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[1]   The wooden link between old and new architecture at the SESC Pompeia cultural centre in São Paulo, Brazil.

Forging collectives – temporarily or permanently – has been a function of buildings in cities since time immemorial, probably for as long as there have been urban settlement. The form of the space in which people come together inevitably corresponds to a necessity resulting from exchanging goods, production, or symbolic order. In the political theory of the 20th century, the relationship between spatial arrangements and the concept of democracy is a frequently recurring subject of examination. For this reason, buildings devoted to cultural activities came to occupy a central position in the reconstruction of European cities in the wake of World War II and have retained this pivotal role. Following the experiences of the collapse of democracy in the 1930s, post-war cultural centres were proposed as agents of a newly democratised culture. They have become projects of renewal and re-vitalisation in the post-industrial cities of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. With this shift, houses of cultural institutions are often grass-roots projects providing a focus for the reuse of existing sites and buildings and highlighting the collective action of neighbourhood groups.

## Post-war laboratories for a democratic civil society

Historically, the temporal coincidence of the formulation of theoretical concepts of the public sphere and the flourishing of new public cultural buildings in the first three decades after World War II was striking. In the welfare state and the systems of state care established as part of the post-1945 political consensus, cultural policy played a pivotal role as culture provided an experience of equality and commonality for society. The demand for 'equality of opportunity' was one of the core tenets of the ideological concept of the welfare state.

This equality could manifest itself in access to culture and education. It found its representation in new buildings in concrete urban locations, mainly in city centres. In the architectural discourses after 1945, the question of the centre and the public character of its buildings occupied a prominent position. The closing statement of the CIAM Congress in Hoddesdon in 1951 summarised this objective



[2] The interior of the shed hall of the Samtweberei in Krefeld.

and called for cities to 'provide opportunities – in an impartial way – for spontaneous manifestations', for 'leisurely intercourse and contemplation'.[1] This emphasis on the expression of social content in use, as Adrian Forty has noted, was one of the fundamental beliefs of the pre-war European avant-garde and was retained in reconstruction approaches. Forty states that 'through what went on in works of architecture, through their use, the ideal raised by European modernism was that architecture might give expression to the collectivity of social existence, and, more instrumentally, improve the conditions of social life'.[2] From this perspective, the idea that the design of spaces, within and outside of buildings, should facilitate encounters, communication, and – ideally – public debate, became firmly integrated into the architectural and urban planning discourse. The process of making spaces for civil society is no longer organically embedded in the initiatives of private people or citizens. Instead, it has become a mission for the practice of architecture in the service of the state.

The characterisation of buildings by the German art historian Paul Frankl as 'moulded theatres of human activity', suggesting that architecture is a form of the scenography of human activities, seems to be directly related to the idea of public debate as a kind of performance.[3] The philosopher Hannah Arendt also has introduced the idea of a public space as a stage for people to appear and reveal themselves as active and communicative citizens, and she explicitly and positively associates this reading with her theory of political action.[4] Arendt is known for evoking the image of the Greek agora, the marketplace

[3] La Friche la Belle de Mai - the former tobacco factory in Marseille, France was transformed into a cultural urban site.

that provides the stage for the political sphere, for negotiations, for talking and acting. The interpretation of the public sphere of the agora as a physical place and as a 'space of appearance' invites references to theatrical performances. Therefore, it is not surprising that these references play an essential role in the discourse on democracy, society, and culture after 1945 and on architecture as a production of public spaces.

Perhaps less familiar is another image mentioned by Arendt, that of the table which 'is located between those who sit around it' and represents the material objects with which human beings create their world.[5] The table here is a setting that captures, in spatial form, the diversity of views and the people gathered around it. The table facilitates conversation, but it also regulates it. Its symbolism implies a set of social conventions and positions that every person in the conversation is free to adopt. These are materialised arrangements that constitute the world made by human beings, Arendt adds, 'like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time'.[6]

Jürgen Habermas, whose *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* was initially published in 1962 and discusses the emergence of the public sphere in the early modern period, provides another seminal document on post-war political philosophy, though he never mentions tables. Nevertheless, the central site of the emergence of the modern public sphere in his book is the coffee house, more specifically in 17th and 18th-century London.[7] There, precisely *one* table was always found, right in the middle of the room, and served by the only woman in the establishment. It was here that public debate was staged and conducted. The city's coffee tables were places where intellectual discourses and rivalries could be cultivated and where business relationships were established or building projects prepared. In other words, they symbolised the entire economic and cultural complex of the early capitalist metropolis, and they were a focal point of urban culture.

From the very beginning, the coffee house was a diverse space but also a place that epitomised the emancipative function of the city. For both Arendt and Habermas, action is located in urban spaces that already exist; spaces which, as it were, are part of an existing system of cities. The differentiation and identification of the agora, or the coffee house, as a marketplace of ideas, are driven by private interests and social processes and only subsequently acquire an architectural form.

In 1960, Adolf Arndt, later Senator for the Arts and Science in Berlin, gave a lecture at the Akademie

1 Jacqueline Tyrwhitt, Josep Luís Sert, and Ernesto Rogers (eds.), *The Heart of the City – Towards the Humanisation of Urban Life* (London: Lund Humphries, 1952), 165, 167.
2 Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings – A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 105.
3 Paul Frankl, *Principles of Architectural History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968), 159.
4 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]).
5 Ibid., Arendt (1998), 52.
6 Ibid., Arendt (1998), 52.
7 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 32.

[4]   La Friche went through several transformation processes to gradually adapt to the multiple needs of its users.

der Künste entitled 'Demokratie als Bauherr' (Democracy as commissioner). In his interjection, Arndt passionately pleaded for an architecture suitable to represent the values of the new democracy, asking 'should there not be a correlation between the principle of "publicness" of democracy and an outer as well as inner transparency and accessibility of public buildings?'[8] Arndt expands the concept of housing to include social spaces, which must be inhabited and habitable:

If building is to be living and if building is to be a creating and joining of mental spaces, then in a democracy, must not the accessible school-time-space become an inhabited school, which is divided up in rest and movement in such a way that it guides the student to become aware of himself as a political person and to come into balance with himself? [9]

Here, the (re)construction of the city is explicitly linked to the reconstruction of a democratic culture; in the space of the city, the inhabitants unfold – as people *and* as citizens.

Arndt's call for architecture dedicated to the unfolding of individual personalities was characteristic of the period. However, where should this 'school-time-space' develop, if not in those buildings that were explicitly dedicated to education and culture? It follows that in the 1960s, the very buildings that received considerable funding in the course of the development of the welfare state throughout Western Europe played a key role not only for the intellectual well-being of the population but also as incubators for a democratic culture and the practice of new forms of behaviour in civil society. The high expectations of new community buildings are exemplified by the project for the new Kulturhus in Stockholm (1966–74), which is both the most ambitious example of the Swedish Social Democrats' civilising project and a model for the Centre Pompidou in Paris, a house that – like no other – marks the earliest signs of a touristic reinterpretation of European cities.[10]

'Cultural dialogue', the term used to describe the public debate on the concept for the Kulturhus, consistently emphasises that this project did not just involve an isolated building but a fundamental reinterpretation of the entire city. The proposal for a building that was to house professional cultural events and informal activities, political debates, and community actions under one roof was indeed presented as a revised version of the classical agora for an urban mass society and as a utopia for civilised coexistence. The house was nothing less than the central point of crystallisation for developing a new city for 'the new man'.[11] Finally, the Kulturhus combined these notions of culture as a force for criticism, promising that the distinctions between professionals and amateurs or between producers and audiences would disappear. As museum director Pontus Hultén, the initiator of the project, put it: 'Poetry must be made by all'.[12] In the Kulturhus, the boundaries between intelligent cultural consumption and creative production were to be overcome. Nevertheless, despite the claim that the Kulturhus was to usher in an egalitarian society and provide a public living room for the entire urban population, it was from the outset a highly centralised initiative and essentially the outcome of reasonably traditional top-down planning.

### Re-building the city

The idea that a new city might be possible, or even necessary, for 'new' men and women has gone missing at the beginning of the 21st century. On the one hand, this is because the historical experiences with the *grands recits* of the 19th and 20th centuries hardly invite repetition; on the other hand, the real changes in urban societies affected by globalised networks and the diversification of patterns of life require other, possibly more modest – and in any case more concrete – concepts. All this became apparent as early as the mid-1970s, when the Kulturhus in Stockholm and other major urban projects were completed. Some of the artists and activists who were supposed to have infused these venues with their ideas now preferred to explore other places: former tram depots, gas works, abattoirs, factory buildings, warehouses – and also, increasingly, empty churches.

To the same extent that the social formations that emerged from the conflict between capital and labour, the old workers' parties, lost their position within cultural hegemony to new social movements such as the environmental, women's, or gay movements, new urban publics and counter-publics began to gather in places threatened by modern urban planning. The experiments of squatters in West Berlin or the *Krakers* in Amsterdam – combining living, working, and culture – challenged the instruments of the welfare state, but they also aimed at taking the city into their own hands and offering an alter-native to traditional urban planning.[13] The ancient promise of the city, where the air is free, manifested itself in the demand for autonomy, new collective forms of organisation, and forms of self-directed working. It found its natural milieu in the abandoned buildings from the period of the Industrial Revolution. Those who saved these buildings from demolition were pioneers, not just in their quest for new forms of housing or organised labour but also in the practice of repairing the city.

Lina Bo Bardi's SESC Pompeia community centre in São Paulo, built between 1977 and 1986 and comprising cultural spaces and sports facilities, rightly has acquired the status of an exemplary project for the realisation of a collective programme for culture and the reuse of the city and its buildings. Here the architect first had to persuade her clients that the disused factory halls, which had served to manufacture refrigerators not long before, were suitable for sociocultural purposes in the long term and that their consolidation could be part of a new strategy promoting the cultural institution's future development.[14] Having immigrated to Brazil from Italy in the late 1940s, Bo Bardi had carried out a range of smaller conversion projects in Brazil's impoverished north-eastern region involving local residents as future users of the adapted buildings. This activity was in part motivated by political resistance to the brutal military dictatorship that came into power in 1967.

When she was commissioned to design the SESC Pompeia cultural centre, Bo Bardi proposed to use the factory halls with their sawtooth roof as a venue for exhibitions, a library, and other social spaces (including a community restaurant). Her interventions in the existing sheds were minimal but highly precise and effective: a level floor without thresholds that is a nod to the building's industrial past; an interior landscape made up of abstract furniture produced with very simple means; and a reflective watercourse that widens into a lake, offering a cool and tranquil indoor area for rest and relaxation. Adjacent to the factory are three new structures placed very close to each other, which are made from exposed concrete cast in situ. Towering high above the single-storey buildings in the neighbourhood, these symbols of the post-industrial cityscape are widely visible. Appearing like an unfinished carcass perforated by free-form window openings that seem deliberately random, the new complex has become a natural part of its surroundings and looks as if it had always been there. A boardwalk connects the two sections of the ensemble, serving as a wooden link between the old and new architecture and a public space. The aesthetics are part of a strategy that aims to demonstrate that it does not take much

8   Adolf Arndt, *Demokratie als Bauherr*, Berlin, 1961, S.20
9   Ibid., Arndt (1961) p. 20
10  For a detailed examination of the Kulturhus, cf. Christoph Grafe, *People's Palaces - Architecture, Culture and Democracy in Post-War Europe*, with a photo essay by
11  Heidi Specker, Amsterdam, 2014 The image of the 'new man' was often invoked in Sweden in the 1960s, among

other things in a poem by the successful writer Göran Palm, which celebrates the 'new man...in all his undiminished greatness...' Göran Palm, *Vad kan man göra*, Stockholm, 1969, 108.
12  'Poesin måste göras av alla' was the title of an exhibition by Pontus Hultén at Stockholm's Moderna Museet in 1968.
13  Virginie Mamadouh, *De stad in eigen hand, Provo's, kabouters en krakers als*

stedelijke sociale beweging, (Amsterdam: SUA, 1992), 229.
14  The first feasibility study drawn up by the architect Júlio Neves proposed to pull down the factory halls. Citing the example of a conversion project in San Francisco, Bo Bardi demonstrated that the existing interim use of the structures in São Paulo was beneficial. Cf. Zeuler Lima, *Lina Bo Bardi* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2013), 158.

to facilitate social progress in significant ways, while also affirming the relevance of culture in a city where social injustice regularly impedes efforts to establish shared community spaces.

Almost half a century later, what was considered 'alternative' in the 1980s has become self-evident. Our awareness of the finite nature of resources and the massive consumption of energy that is inherent in building itself requires a radical reconsideration of the development of the city (and the landscape). There is simply no 'energy-neutral' new building. The city is hence essentially the city as we find it and inhabit it anew. Whereas the manifestations of the welfare state usually inserted themselves uncritically into the narrative of a new, 'modern' city and thereby generally accepted the destruction of existing urban structures, it is now rather the city 'as found' that offers the key to the creation of new concepts of coexistence. Many initiatives now testify that it is precisely the (in the best sense) compromised realities of the repair of our cities, of neighbourhoods and the houses in them, that political action – which, as a rule, is also a matter of negotiation – takes place. This negotiation may take the form of the balance between parked cars, children playing, and second-hand goods sharing platforms in the shed hall of the Samtweberei in Krefeld; or the coexistence of street soccer and artistically highbrow open-air cinema in the tobacco factory in Marseille, now converted into the *Friche la Belle de Mai* cultural centre; or in a former suburban railway station in Wuppertal, which now houses the *Utopiastadt* collective, a laboratory for the transformation of the city and a cultural centre for the neighbourhood. The network Trans Europe Halls is an umbrella network for 127 organisations across the continent, developing existing buildings for a variety of constituencies and communities from Sicily to Scandinavia.

All these projects involve combinations that contain the potential for conflict, implying the question of how the different, often diametrically-opposed concepts of living in a shared space are located and relate to one another. The city of the future, which is a city of permanent conversion, emerges from compromises. Opportunism, working with architectural realities, is part of this, but also an understanding of its characteristics and atmospheres (which in turn might perhaps miraculously allow the irresolvable issues of identity to evaporate). Moreover, the tactics of *bricolage*, which are inevitably deployed in the repair and adaptation of the city, provide a source of architectural invention, avoiding the tired language of cheerfully painted or otherwise adorned late modernism that contemporary architecture mostly has on offer these days. As Patrick Bouchain, a veteran of politically charged collaborative building and also one of the designers involved in the re-development of the *Friche la Belle de Mai*, explains: 'Construction is also a collaboration: it is part of the ingredients that produce an aesthetic'.[15] Collaboration in the creation of spaces blurs the boundaries between work, labour, and action: the city and its inhabitants are the best resources from which to sustain the transformation of our life-world.

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[5]   The site offers spaces for a rich cultural programme including concerts, exhibitions and theatre.

15    Pauline Fockedey, Christoph Grafe, and Véronique Patteeuw, 'A conversation with Patrick Bouchain and Nicola Delon', *OASE*

# Colofon

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KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION