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TO DARE

Others, specificity, benevolence, cultures

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Complicity with life

As architects, our practice began with words before taking form. Words preceded boards, stone and construction. Ever since, every day, we speak about architecture, sometimes about nothing else. About “these two or three things we know about it”.

First of all, about its benevolence: architecture “provides a service, installs life as soon as the request for it, is manifest”; secondly, its empathy: it “speaks of the solitude of the individual and his or her desire for community; it manages to transform each individual’s insufficiency into a relationship”; and then its alchemical capacity: “its scope allows a global perspective of the world, of its abstract and material data, combining them to create human situations”¹; last and above all, its wonderful complicity with life. A project of collective awareness, architecture is, in my eyes at least, “the installation of life through matter disposed with benevolence”. “Of course architecture doesn’t hold the key to the meaning of life, but” (and I still don’t know by what art) “an accomplice of life, it does hold the secret of its installation [...] to install is not to understand, but more to invest a place with a passing meaning”², that is to say: life.

The Paradigm of the Living

This eternal architecture is going through a singular period at this beginning of the 21st century. We’re experiencing a complete upheaval of the human condition. The relations we have had with nature for millennia are changing, and human establishments are evolving in their wake.

Up until 2007, I began all the conferences with a reminder of the planetary conditions that demand eco-responsible responses. I thought then that people’s consciences had been enlightened, that we knew, and felt that we were living, what had been described by the German philosopher Hans Jonas in his seminal book: *The Imperative of Responsibility*, referring to the degradation of the environment, that struck him as the latest collective fear following the cold war and the possible nuclear apocalypse. I quote: “Suddenly, what is simply a given, what is taken for granted, what is never thought about in the aim of an action: that there are people, that there is life, that there is a world made for this, is placed in the stormy light of the threat of human action”³.

¹ MADEC, Philippe, « Deux trois choses que je sais d'elle... », in *Les Cahiers de la Recherche Architecturales*, n° 5/6, november 2000.

² MADEC, Philippe, *L'En vie*, Paris, 1995, éd. de l'Épure, p. 77.

³ JONAS, Hans, *Le principe responsabilité*, Flammarion, Paris, 1998, p.265.

I also thought that what was stated in 1993 by another German philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk, had been definitely accepted. In his book *In the Same Boat*, Sloterdijk said: "While the different sectors of culture are working at highlighting a new instability, saluting chaos and celebrating fickleness... [How to forget the position so fashionable at the time among architects seeking to illustrate the Chaos theory?⁴], ... for a few years now, we have seen a new type of discussion. Stemming from ecologist circles, it's been picked up by economists and is based on sustainability. Gradually it's becoming clear that today's way of life and the long term are two mutually exclusive things."⁵

No doubt, yes, we understand; twenty-one years after Sloterdijk's words, there is an awareness. We know very well – because we're experiencing it now – that our children won't have the lives of our parents, not at all.

The need to make a clean break

We know this because it was announced so aptly, as early as 1972, by The Club of Rome – in the European Chapter to which I now belong - through the Meadows Report *The Limits to Growth*: "There cannot be infinite growth on Earth that has known limits."⁶

We are sure of this, but what's actually being done about it? The exact opposite of what's needed. The need for a clean break, of invention, innovation, is largely absent, although it's so necessary in order to overcome the current situation, to "get out of the today's prison", in the words of Janine Delaunay in her introduction to the Meadows Report⁷.

Worse still, we're seeing a retreat: while in the early years of the 21st century the desire to act was shared by our public contracting authorities, today the economic crisis is a good excuse for dropping eco-responsible considerations if there are savings to be made.

People have been heard saying: "It's not with this project that I'll save the planet!" But if we say this about every project, where are we headed?

Widespread green washing is the sad, unexpected, perverse effect of general public awareness being mixed with a lack of courage to act, and a touch of fake guilt.

Dominique Voynet, former Minister of the Environment, for whom I worked on a neighbourhood agricultural project in the *Murs-à-pêches* district, explained very aptly why she decided not to renew her candidacy as mayor of Montreuil by saying: "There is a desire for change, but no cultural majority to carry it"¹⁰.

This is very true of Montreuil and elsewhere and, at the same time, it's an understatement in view of how the aftermath of the banking and financial crisis of Autumn 2008 offers a good pretext not to change the disastrous habits that have pushed the planet to its limits.

Peace is at stake

The words of the Club de Rome, of Jonas, of Sloterdijk and of Voynet speak to us. They don't need to convince us. They ring true to me, because I've experienced what they're talking about. The son of an oysterman, in the 1960s I saw the first illnesses hit the oysters as a result of globalisation and pollution.

⁴ LI, Tien-Yien, YORKE, James A., « Period three implies chaos », in *American Mathematical Monthly*, n°82, 1975, p. 985-992.

⁵ SLOTERDIJK, Peter, *Dans le même bateau*, Payot & Rivages, Paris, 1997, p.85

⁶ MEADOWS, Denis, MEADOWS, Fiona, RANDERS, Jorgens, BERHENS III, William W., *Halte à la croissance ? Le Club de Rome, Rapport Meadows*, Fayard, Paris, 1972.

⁷ *ibid.*, p.20.

They showed the limits of the faith in the *Glorious Thirties*, an economic boom in Occident, and in unlimited development, of which my family took advantage.

The anthropogenic cause of global climate change has been confirmed and is due to greenhouse gas emissions caused by human activity. Since 1860, the first year of temperature record, the thirteen hottest years have been the thirteen we've just lived through (2000-2013), the fourteenth was in 1998.

Because of this global warming, one day the surface water to a depth of 5 metres of the Sea of China reached 25 degrees Celsius, triggering a super typhoon, devastating the Philippines, and the United Nations office for refugees had to add another sad line to its long list. So many more could be added to that list. Every day brings its lot of climatic surprises. Etc.

I can hear the cynical denials of those who are proud of standing their ground in their own name, or in the name of major polluting companies.

It is of course possible to act out of benevolence towards the earth and out of humanity rather than out of fear of disaster! One can act in this way. Rather than the exploitation of the planet, which always ends up being the exploitation of humanity by humanity, it's peace that's at stake. For a loving relationship between man and matter, which is, to my eyes, one of the principal conditions for "perpetual peace", as Immanuel Kant understood it⁸.

In Consubstantiality with the Earth

Fifty years ago, the French poet René Char wrote a poem that he entitled 'La Terre', (Earth): "What is quite spontaneous in Man, concerning the earth, is an immediate familiarity, sympathy, veneration even, almost filial. Because it is matter par excellence". And he added : "What could be more worthy of the mind than veneration of matter? As for the veneration of the mind by the mind, has this been seen? All too often."⁹

Humanity, so inclined to venerate its own spirit, deliberately forgot its own physical links, its links of flesh and family that tie it to the Earth. It's sought to possess the earth by forgetting that it belonged to it. But here the Earth has laid down its limits, and thus raised awareness of our own. The fragility of the Earth is our own fragility. Its finiteness is our own.

Architecture is at the heart of the human establishment, protection of the individual and spatial structure of societies at the same time. For us all it is a question of managing what we have left of nature and humanity, to manage it for future generations, while accomplishing our project of modernity.

We now have to design this project facing a responsibility that can no longer choose between humanity and nature. We are an integral part of the Earth. Acknowledged at last, interdependency will spare no thing and no one.

Benevolence

The purpose of our profession is to combine a bit of humanity with a bit of matter that takes form. We participate in a phenomenon that gives meaning to my acts: we respond to the demand for architecture that expresses human societies.

Nobody, no society has ever requested unhappiness from me, but always good usage, solidity, well-being and beauty.

⁸ HABERMAS Jürgen, *La paix perpétuelle. Le bicentenaire d'une idée kantienne*, Paris, 1996, éd. du Cerf.

⁹ CHAR René, « La Terre », in *Pièces*, René Char.

Through matter we transform their wish into reality. We materialise the conditions for welcoming humankind on the Earth. We install, in the depth of place, the human wish to live together. We achieve by materialising. To achieve is to materialise.

Architecture remains the condition of repose, the foundation of life. In this respect, as an architect, we pursue a collective project of conscience: architecture is an installation of the everyday life by a matter settled with benevolence¹⁰.

In this reproduction of the initial act, to dispose matter for living, architecture becomes an activity of conscience, which disposes matter to install life. Architecture is there for life to take place. Architecture installs life, it finds the matter for it in the place, becomes an aspect of it, a phase.

Matters - I mean : stone, earth, wood, water, wind, heat as well as words, bodies.

Installation is what counts most of all: it's the arrival of existence. Life being at stake, installation is not only spatial, it's also temporal. It's a question of humanity, of joy and sadness, of shelter and of the organisation of relations into a significant structure. The means of installation is matter. It's a question of carrying out, of achieving, of becoming real, the creation of presence. The project exists through the placing, the positioning of matter.

Benevolence gives meaning. Benevolence in an aesthetic, as well as an ethical sense, as practical as it is plastic. There lies the difference between building and architecture, in the loving attention that governs the act of conceiving for others.

Love

When speaking of architecture, love is never far away. Regarding contemporary rereading of Spinoza's Ethics, the Italian philosopher Antonio Negri wrote: "What if philosophers didn't like the word "love", and what if post-modernists use it according to an idea of wilted desire, we who have reread the Ethics, we Spinozists, we dare talk about love without false modesty as of the strongest passion, the passion that creates common existence" (Le Magazine Littéraire, November 1998).

"Is this what scares architects? Investing in common existence?"¹¹. To talk about architecture? To debate it? I'm absolutely convinced that, right now, architecture requires of whoever dedicates themselves to it not to speak of it from a position of authority, not to have a fixed agenda, but rather to adapt it to the common lot.

I sense that this benevolence, this love, this tenderness for people, for the things of the Earth that are necessary for architecture, comes from the idea of the common good, which is omnipresent in all the theoretical texts on architecture since Vitruvius.

Idiosyncrasy

Not long ago, concerning rural modernity and in order to criticise the laziness of current criticism and contemporary town planning theory, which sees the urban and metropolitan everywhere, I found a quote of the enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot. He wrote to Friedrich Melchior Grimm: "It is said that architecture is a limited art, and so it is in the minds of architects: but in itself I know of none other as capacious. If, within a project, you take into account time, place, peoples, destination, you will see an infinite variety of spaces, of voids, of forms, of ornaments, and of everything that belongs to art"¹².

¹⁰ MADEC, Philippe, *L'En vie*, éditions A Tempera/L'Epure, Paris, 1996.

¹¹ MADEC, Philippe, *EXIST*, éd. Jean-Michel Place, Paris, 2000, p. 82.

¹² DIDEROT, Denis, *Sur l'art et les artistes*, Hermann éditeur, Paris, 1967, p.69

It may seem strange, to go back to the 18th century to find an argument serving to lay the foundation of a narrative of the 21st century. And yet, at the time I was reading Diderot, I found related thinking in *History and Truth* (1954) by the French philosopher Paul Ricœur, in *In Praise of Difference* (1974), by the French geneticist Albert Jacquard, in *Achievable Utopias* (1975) by the German architect Yona Friedman, in *Genesis* (1981) by the French philosopher Michel Serres and in *Towards a Critical Regionalism* (1983) by the Anglo-American historian and critic Kenneth Frampton.

After my studies, at the end of a period of travel, I began to understand why the theory inherited by the moderns had failed in a murderous internationalism: universality had been confused with unity.

What applied to an individual was applicable to everyone. Quite a lot of barbarism emerged from this. With the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, Ricœur, Jacquard, Friedman, Serres, Frampton and also the Swedish architect and theoretician Christian Norberg-Schulz, another vision existed: as far as humanity's concerned, only idiosyncrasy¹³ can lead to the universal. Idiosyncrasy renders specificity and difference, shared values, common values rich with cultures, climates, geographies, etc. The differences are the foundation of what's shared, what's in common.

The more you are part of a culture, the more you access the universal.

On my return to France, I started to practice the exploration of each culture that unfolds in each place. Since then I've always enjoyed being a stranger, a foreigner, the one who doesn't know. A foreigner, in the face of a culture that is no longer the context of his or her acts, but their very condition, someone who dares specificity, difference, cultures.

In order to do this, the architect can profess expressiveness, according to Diderot, character, according to the enlightenment architect Etienne Louis Boullée, *Genius Loci* for Norberg-Schulz, the culture-nature relation for Kenneth Frampton in *Critical Regionalism*, or, as far as I'm concerned, the central role of culture in sustainable development.

The Role of Culture

Culture is no longer the context of our actions; it's the very condition of their accomplishment.

This situation calls for the seeking of, in every place of work, the particularity of the meeting of a society and its context. It's not a question of exploring retreat, isolation, communitarianism, but rather indeed to connect with what's actually universal on this Earth at the heart of humanity, that's to say, specificity, idiosyncrasy, difference.

In architecture and in urban development, standing up for professing culture allows among other things the rejection of the hegemony of technical responses to the environmental crisis. It isn't the rejection of technique, but the guarantee of the social aspect of projects, and protection of the equitable part of the economy.

The initial oversight of culture as a significant aspect of sustainable development comes as a surprise. And yet the Brundtland report specified that "two concepts are inherent in this notion: the concept of "needs", and more specifically of the essential needs of the most destitute, who should be given the highest priority, and the idea of the limitations that the state of our techniques and our social organisation imposes on the capacity of the environment to respond to current and future needs."¹⁴ But the notions of need, of the state of techniques and social organisations, depends on the history of peoples, of cultures, "coherent historical figures"⁸, according to the French philosopher Paul Ricœur, and their daily expressions. Even if we are seeing global awareness of the planet-wide situation, the

¹³ From ancien greek ιδίος (idios = « which (who) has a particular temperament »), σύν (syn = « with »), and κράτος (kratos = « strength, vigour »).

¹⁴ BRUNTLAND Gro Harlem, *Our Common Future*, Oxford, 1987. <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm>

means of action are contextualised and depend on cultures, in a strategy of the available spread of material for people.

Actors of the human establishment know this. A good idea's only carried out if it's understood, adopted and appropriated by those who will experience its execution. ***What's appropriated is appropriated for people and by people, for a society and by a society.*** Architects have to place all the power of architecture at humanity's side, in the common world of humanity. This is where architecture regains vitality and is given absolute reconsideration, confronted with the stakes of the future finally taken into consideration.

The need to launch a humanist project for the multitude further engages architecture in its organisational function, in its fundamental political vocation. Over many years of citizen mediation in various contexts, at all levels of rural and urban development, truths contrary to common belief have been revealed, in contrast to confused public opinion and accepted presuppositions. ***Thus the so-called gap between popular culture and the so-called "learned" architects' culture doesn't exist.*** Architecture doesn't generate it. It's fantasized by those it serves, whatever their affiliation with one side or the other, by those who need to protect their fears and laziness. Certainly, there is ignorance, misunderstanding. Although reciprocal, they are not insurmountable. Popular culture and the so-called 'learned' culture of architects (also often ignorant of popular culture) reveal two aspects of a unanimous story wrongly divided, as are tradition and modernity, the vernacular and the metropolitan, a South African farmhouse and the Villa Savoye.

Engaging Civil Society

Every year in Western Europe, only the equivalent of one per cent of existing buildings is being built. To achieve international and national targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by four by 2050, in our fields of town planning and architecture the main lever is the renovation of existing buildings. But the contemporary conditions for this renovation are not given in France. So how to get to Factor 4? We can only do so by uniting civil society, able to evolve faster than institutional structures.

In sustainable design of human establishments, we seek less "who has the authority" than "what holds authority".

The deep strata of the Plourin-Lès-Morlaix project¹⁵, a very long (1991/2004) and share project in a village show how obvious the presence of the other is and, in order to converse with the other, the primal importance of speech. This truth's confirmed over and over in the course of discussions with elected representatives, state services, citizens, individuals or in little groups, at public meetings, in local cafés, and on the street, with local government technical service staff, office workers, neighbours, shopkeepers, etc. In the village of Plourin-Lès-Morlaix we always strive to reach an agreement. The latest decisions were the result of a powerful combination of spontaneous words and lines drawn on the ground with the tip of the shoe, at the right spot: "It's right here!" A common language was developed, a lexicon and syntax: if it's a wall, it's local granite, seventy cm. high and forty-three wide; if it's a plant, it's heather, etc. .

In today's multitudinous metropolis, this story's being rewritten. Actors are having to change their roles, and not without some anguish. The person elected by universal suffrage in the elective democracy struggles to accept the future value of a participatory democracy. The architect struggles to leave his "romantic" claim to the status of an artist, this abandonment is painful. The engineer has a hard time accepting that scientific fact should be submitted to cultural understanding. Everybody's reluctant to leave behind his or her former powers. But in this troubled world these attitudes isolate them. As for the

¹⁵ MADEC, Philippe, *Le temps à l'œuvre citoyen. Plourin-Lès-Morlaix 1991-2004*, éd. Jean-Michel Place et Sujet-Objet, Paris, 2004

inhabitants, they too struggle to envisage a change to their property and lifestyle. Yet, thanks to all these people and their joint effort, the sense of authority can change. And field experience shows that authority's gained through sharing. A real exchange, says the American philosopher Hannah Arendt, excludes not only the stress but also persuasion¹⁶.

When a project's discussed with inhabitants, owners and elected officials, when speaking in the extended contractors' team to work when the reasons for decisions are shared, when these decisions are reconsidered, when the arguments of the project being built in this to-ing and fro-ing between each and all, then it's the project that holds authority: it represents in everyone's eyes an expression of an agreement, their agreement.¹⁷

Architecture and the Earth, one and the same

Regarding the meaning of nature in architectural work, and because it's no longer a question of discussing architecture with oneself, others and the Great Other, but also with the Earth, a path's been opened: "Maybe we should learn to speak Earth, that language that does not know how to separate elements from one another any more than it does mankind from the elements? And if it had to start with a few words, I would willingly learn and teach presence, the in-person, the in-common and the living."¹⁷

Right now, here, twelve years after writing this, I wonder if I cannot also say: "Maybe we should learn to speak architecture, that language that doesn't know how to separate elements from one another any more than it does mankind from the elements? And if it had to start with a few words, I would willingly learn presence, the in-person, the in-common and the living."

Architecture and the Earth, one and the same? In my eyes, without a doubt.

¹⁶ ARENDT, Hannah, « Qu'est-ce que l'autorité ? » in *La Crise de la culture, Huit exercices de pensée politique*, Paris, 1972, éd. Gallimard, p. 123.

¹⁷ MADEC, Philippe, « *Le sens de la nature dans l'œuvre architecturale* », in YOUNES, Chris, PAQUOT, Thierry, *Philosophie, ville et architecture. La renaissance des quatre éléments*, Paris, 2002, éd. La Découverte, p. 119.