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# Architecture and Revolution

Dr. Kanishka Goonewardena

'Architecture is a hazardous mix of omnipotence and impotence', announce Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau in the first sentence of their programmatic reverie, *S,M,L,XL*. The point is well taken. As Perry Anderson notes in his prescient volume, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 'no other aesthetic practice has such immediate social impact, and-logically enough-none has therefore produced so many ambitious projects of social engineering'. On the other hand, Koolhaas and Mau assure us that architects, 'in "shaping" the world' by the power of their thought, 'depend on the provocations of others-clients, individual or institutional'. It would have been more precise to specify those clients as 'corporate or bureaucratic', as Anderson does. And, especially in a developing country like Sri Lanka, we also ought to think about the constraints on the autonomy of the architect in a different yet complementary way, in terms of the determinate absence of 'provocations of others'-of the other 'others', that is to say, the others who could indeed use some decent architecture to 'shape' their modest lifeworlds for the better, but cannot afford to own land or to build a house, let alone to pay the forbidding fees of architects who indeed can only dream of omnipotence in vain.

But it is not only in Sri Lanka that architects must be reminded of this disturbing dimension of their *involuntary* impotence. The structural position of the growing urban underclass trapped in the 'inner cities' of neoliberal North America, which rarely commissions architects, is not unlike that of our own slum and shanty dwellers. Capitalism, in other

words, makes *all* architects impotent-by commissions as well as by omissions-if only to varying degrees at various locations in the global economy. From the point of view of urban design and planning, surely, the striking difference between those American cities and ours is this: they *hide* poverty better than we do. In fact, today few cities do it better than Los Angeles and New York, by a potent mixture of socio-spatial segregation, media (mis)representation and police force-currently driven by a brand of urban (re)development known as gentrification, which is not to say that the deliberate production of a positive image of the city in order to render invisible the ugly symptoms and adverse consequences of 'free-market' capitalism is a wholly 'post-modern' phenomenon. That trick is as old as industrial capitalism itself, as Friedrich Engels usefully reminds us in one of the best books ever written on cities, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*. 'Owing to the curious lay-out of the town it is quite possible for someone to live for years in Manchester and to travel daily to and from his work without ever seeing a working-class quarter or coming into contact with an artisan. He who visits Manchester simply on business or for pleasure needs never see the slums, mainly because the working-class districts and the middle-class districts are quite distinct. This division is due partly to deliberate policy.... To such an extent has the convenience of the rich been considered in the planning of Manchester that these plutocrats can travel from their houses to their places of business in the centre of the town by the shortest routes, which run entirely through working-class dis-

tricts, without even realising how close they are to the misery and filth which lie on both sides of the road'. Engels does not mince many words on the purpose of such 'hypocritical' town planning: 'hiding from the eyes of wealthy ladies and gentlemen with strong stomachs and weak nerves the misery and squalor which are part and parcel of their own riches and luxury'.

Here we can see Engels answering with characteristic lucidity a political question of crucial importance to architects: how is space ideological? Or, to put it plainly: how does our urban experience shape the way we see the world? Throughout history, leading architects and town planners serving the interests of their ruling classes have had the occasion to explore this question with remarkable candor. It has been, after all, in their best interests to ensure that the masses saw the world in a way that somehow concealed the injustices meted out to them by the social order and the rulers; and, therefore, to find out how architecture and town planning could help produce such a hegemonic view of the world. The relationship between space and ideology spelled out by Engels clearly points to a symbiotic link between architecture and power, even if it is now sidelined in much architectural education and criticism. But it cannot be avoided by architects in practice-especially those answerable to 'clients corporate or bureaucratic'-who encounter political-economic power as routinely as they breathe. What is so utterly natural, however, can also become unconscious; what cannot be avoided can be easily ignored. Thus it is easier for us to see the connections between

architecture and power from a distance, for example, by observing the dialectical unity of urban forms and cosmologies projected by them in the ancient cities of various civilisations, as Kevin Lynch does at the outset of *Good City Form*.

Now, if we enter the modern world with the same question about space and ideology in mind, then we see the first textbook demonstration of what architecture has to do with power in Baron Haussmann's legendary reconstruction of Paris. What can we learn today from the minister of Napoleon III? The great German philosopher Walter Benjamin writes in his famous essay 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century' (*The Arcades Project*): 'Haussmann's ideal in city planning consisted of long straight streets opening onto broad perspectives', within which 'the temples of the bourgeoisie's spiritual and secular power were to find their apotheosis'.

Contemporaries called it 'strategic beautification'. Benjamin is quick to point out that 'the true goal of Haussmann's projects was to secure the city against civil war' by 'widening the streets' in order to 'make the erection of barricades in the streets of Paris impossible'. Here the new grand boulevard perspectives-which, 'prior to their inauguration, were screened with canvas draperies and unveiled like monuments'-were also meant to 'connect the barracks in straight lines with the workers' districts', to facilitate rapid troop movement in the event of revolution. Converging on Haussmann's megalomaniac monumentalise were not only aesthetics and politics but also economics. The enabling condition for reformatting Paris, Benjamin notes *proleptically* (in view of the role played by global finance capital in the redevelopment of 'post-modern' downtowns some hundred years later, under the aegis of US imperialism), 'is . . . Napoleonic

imperialism, which favours investment capital' as 'Haussmann's expropriations give rise to speculation that borders on fraud'. What about the *expropriated*? 'In 1864, in a speech before the National Assembly', reports Benjamin, Haussmann 'vents his hatred of the rootless urban population, which keeps increasing as a result of his projects. Rising rents drive the proletariat into the suburbs. The *quartiers* of Paris in this way lose their distinctive physiognomy. The "red belt" forms. Haussmann gave himself the title of "demolition artist", *artiste démolisseur*. He viewed his work as a 'calling'. This is the primal scene of capitalist urbanism. Haussmann, however, would not be the last to hear that clarion call. Le Corbusier heard it again in Paris, as did Robert Moses in New York City. 'When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis', Moses was fond of saying, 'you have to hack your way with a meat axe; I'm just going to keep right on building, you do the best you can to stop it'. But, for us, is it really a secret that the most ardent-and truly naïve-demolition artists of the so-called City Beautiful Movement have been spotted not in London, New York or Paris, but among contemporary Third World politicians-turned-planners attempting desperately to *catch up* with the televisual, touristic and strategic beauty of American cities?

"Strategic beautification" is the ur-form of the culture of the modern state', writes Susan Buck-Morss in *Dialectics of Seeing*. She explains how the optical and political 'illusions fostered by this "artist of demolition" [Haussmann] figured heavily in the mythic imagery of historical progress, and functioned as a monument to the state's role in achieving it'. Intrinsic to the ideological dimension of space has been, of course, the role played by the city as an advertisement for capitalism as much as an attraction for capital-speculative or otherwise.

On this point, Mohan Silva has written with admirable wit and verve about Sri Lankan urbanism in the 1980s, at a time when the whole country was being subjected inexorably to the forces of globalisation and the ideology neoliberalism. It was not long afterwards that radical American geographer Neil Smith proposed the term 'revanchism' to characterise the gentrification-displacement of poor people and neighbourhoods in central cities by upper-class districts ('Class Struggle on Avenue B' as he put it, with reference to the conflicts over redeveloping Manhattan's Lower East Side)-of New York City in the last two decades.

'The Revanchist City' concept is derived from the French word *revanche*, which means *revenge*: 'The Revanchists' were a reactionary, right-wing, monarchist tendency that emerged in France at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, seeking revenge against not only Germany but also the liberalism of the Second Republic and the revolutionary politics of the Paris Commune in 1871, which Haussmann failed to forestall. Revanchism, then, is an apt description of what has happened most paradigmatically in New York City in the 1990s-and adopted universally. 'City after city', boldly writes Smith in the prestigious pages of *Harvard Design Magazine* (winter/spring 1997), 'have passed laws against panhandling [begging], public sleeping and squeegee windshield washing', whose local equivalent would be 'informal sector' work in the streets.

Having originated in conservative cities like Miami and Atlanta in the early 1990s, this trend spread quickly to even such liberal bastions as San Francisco and Seattle. Everywhere the displacement and exclusion-not to speak of internment-of homeless and other despised

people is now executed with coercive legal and police force for the sake of a 'good business climate'. Smith is right: "Urban Policy" today is little more than an euphemism for the process by which city governments huckster for private market investments'. In this dismal state of affairs-where 'reasonable' architects and urban designers are committed (if not cynically resigned) to covering up social antagonisms rather than eliminating them, as Buck-Morss puts it, by 'changing the arrangement of buildings and streets . . . while leaving the social relationships intact'-we forget too easily that architecture and urban planning once entertained a revolutionary vocation: to radically change both space and society. Today, as the civilisation of capital roams the globe behind the sanctimonious veil of 'human rights' draped by the US State Department masquerading as

'the international community' (remember how European imperialists issued us single-entry visas to the Kingdom of God?), it is fashionable to dismiss those efforts to change architecture and the world as the cunning of reason gone mad, as so many perversions of the *laissez-faire* spirit by control freaks. Better to understand what happened. Only then can we go beyond the poignant question raised by Le Corbusier: 'architecture or revolution?' Then, for once, architecture and revolution may be one. May they be one!

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