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«Instead of denying and removing discomfort, we should queer lives who are, for the moment, still hesitant, timid, and not able to be anti-normative. We should empower them — by urging an architecture that queers.»

ARCHITECTURE THAT QUEERS

He Shen / 何琿

ARCHITECTURE THAT QUEERS

Architects have not done much yet. There are a few remarkable exceptions, but in most cases we paint a wall pink, or fill a logo with a rainbow flag as a gesture of concern and support. Not the best we can do — but what else can we do?

It matters how we phrase the question. Is the issue of queer(ness) also an issue of space making? Does the concern of queer(ness) go beyond the queer people? A hypothesis to be examined: through a highly normative approach to architecture, the space we build becomes both exclusive (of the non-normative subjects) and indifferent (to the bodily experience).

A stronger connection between architecture and queerness should be established. This can be accomplished if we (re)think architecture with the help of the following keywords:

BODY, NORM, AND COMFORT

The word «comfort» suggests well-being and satisfaction, but it also suggests ease and easiness. It is related to how our bodies work within the environment. It measures how well the body fits the world. Apart from people with schizophrenia, we generally do not share bodies — each of us owns their own, unique body. But we do need to share the world we live in. So, comfort is also a political term.

In our time, comfort with its material connotations, although occasionally criticised, is still a primary goal for many people. A spacious living room, a fauteuil designed by Le Corbusier, air conditioner — just to name some evidence. The politics of comfort arise when human beings try to modify the environment to fit their bodies in — to make each of them feel comfortable. From here onwards, a few questions emerge: «whose body to use?» «Whose comfort to prioritise?» Yet another crucial one: «who sets the norm?».

This dispute does not only occur in the realm of architecture. In the writings of the French philosopher and physician Georges Canguilhem «Le normal et le pathologique», the question was proposed: Is the pathological state only a quantitative modification of the normal state?⁽¹⁾ His writing has since then often been cited to clarify the philosophical concept of norm.

USE ARCHITECTURE TO REVERSE DESTINY

Architects use norms as instruments to achieve comfort, but the works of Madeline Gins and Shusaku Arakawa (written as 荒川 修作 in Japanese) are exceptions. In their life-long cooperation, they have traversed the fields of architecture, art, science, literature and philosophy. Architecture is both a concept of their philosophy, and a tool to interrogate the ultimate question of what it means to live, or «not to die».⁽²⁾



(fig. a) Arakawa + Gins, Reversible Destiny Lofts — Mitaka (In Memory of Helen Keller), Mitaka, Tokyo, Japan, 2005. Image: Courtesy of the Estate of Madeline Gins.

It would be too ambitious to summarise their profound thoughts and reflections about architecture. But if we start with their definition of the human body — «an organism that persons», as they wrote — we will begin to understand that body is rather a «becoming» than a «being». ⁽³⁾ Since they refuse the ontological understanding of body, they don't attach architecture space to any characteristics of it. In their concept, it would not be ethical to use norms to design space. When forced, as in a real architecture project, they will take bodies of children, the elderly, autistic people, or even that of a specific figure, like the pioneering anti-ableist activist Helen Keller. ⁽⁴⁾

Comfortable would not be the right word to describe the bodily experience of their architecture. In the famous «Reversible Destiny Lofts Mitaka», ^(fig. a) the domestic space is designed as an adventure: one's attention is drawn to reality when walking on the bumpy floor; the poles in the interior seem to be obstacles, yet they are designed so that elderly or blind people can walk with their hands taking the grip. A sunken kitchen is placed in the centre of the flat, so that one's attention will spread across the whole space while cooking. The vivid colours activate visual awareness; the spherical room stimulates the ears, the echoes performing differently. Haptic senses are involved through the use of various materials. Even in the finest details: the switches are intentionally placed at different heights to exercise less-used muscles, and one has to stretch the legs while brushing one's teeth.



(fig. b) Arakawa, Einstein Between Matter's Structure and Faintest Sound, 1958—1959.
Image: Courtesy of the Estate of Madeline Gins.

One can argue that by refusing the use of norms, Madeline Gins and Shusaku Arakawa have promoted anti-ableism and therefore have created more inclusive architecture. Yet their goal, as they wrote in their book «Pour ne pas mourir/To Not to Die», is to question the body that becomes too used to a comfortable environment.⁽⁵⁾ «As our bodies are conditioned by our surrounding environment and our architecture, we naturally adapt to whatever space we are given. Once you feel comfortable, your body begins to deteriorate.»⁽⁶⁾ Comfort describes a condition when the dialogue between the body and the world is turned off. Architecture should not make the body feel comfortable, but rather give it constant stimulation and activation.

«To not to die» is not only a slogan. They truly believe that through a radical recalibration of the built environment, resistance to human's ultimate flaw — death — could be promoted. Architecture is their sword to ward off death.

However, the representation of death also speaks about their idea of reversing destiny. In the early sculpture piece by Arakawa «Einstein between Matter's Structure and Faintest Sound», a mass is dormant in an extremely beautiful coffin. Although it is made of concrete, and it does not possess any identifiable form, one still recognizes that it represents a body.^(fig. b) This piece of body fits perfectly in the soft velvet cushion; inhabiting it in a comfortable death.

QUEER FEELING, NOT FEELING QUEER

Rather than questioning the norm, perhaps Madeline Gins and Shusaku Arakawa are much more interested in the philosophy of body-environment-becoming. They did not thematise norms, neither did they adopt norms in making architecture. Nevertheless, their works and practice have delivered abundant inspiration to rethink norms and comfort.

One can also find a parallel train of thought in contemporary queer theory. As Sara Ahmed, in her book «The Cultural Politics of Emotion» stated, comfort is when the body fits into a space which already takes its shape, and discomfort arises when the body fails to fit in. The notion of being comfortable suggests an ideal life, a normativity. «Normativity is comfortable for those who can inhabit it.»⁽⁷⁾

When queer subjects are confronted with heteronormativity, they feel uncomfortable. But this discomfort does not only arise from the hetero-homo opposition, but from the existence of the normativity. A queer person can also feel uncomfortable in a so-called «queer space». They might doubt that they are the ideal queer, that they are queer enough etc. Establishing a queer space also gives rise to a kind of homonormativity.

A queer theory has to be defined not only as anti-heteronormative, but also as anti-normative. As Tim Dean and Christopher Lane argue, queer theory advocates a politics based on resistance to all norms.⁽⁸⁾ Hence it is important

that queer lives do not follow the scripts of heteronormative culture: they do not become «homonormative» lives.⁽⁹⁾ The queer lives they describe would not desire access to comfort; they would maintain a discomfort with all aspects of normative culture. They can feel uncomfortable in the categories they inhabit, even categories that are shaped by their refusal of public comfort. This «not fitting» or discomfort feeling can create negative emotional experiences to queer subjects. Yet it is not just negative. Sara Ahmed argues that it can open up possibilities, an opening up which can be difficult and exciting. It is the difficulty a queer couple has in fitting into the model of a nuclear family that begins to work on what (else) family can do.⁽¹⁰⁾ Queer encounters bring disturbance to society and through this stimulate a reworking of social norms.

In the discomfort of feeling queer lies both a difficulty and possibility. The lives of those who choose to stay with their troubles, have created a firm resistance in the face of powerful social normativity. If we merely offer comfort to them, we would not acknowledge the possibility within the discomfort of their experience. Therefore, a set/series of mindset shifts must take place here: instead of denying and removing discomfort, we should queer lives who are, for the moment, still hesitant, timid, and not able to be anti-normative. We should empower them — by urging an architecture that queers.

TOWARDS AN ARCHITECTURE THAT «QUEERS»

We are in an era in which the identities of individuals are becoming more and more tentative and ambiguous. As architects, we have to ask: what do «queer feelings» have to do with the world we live in? Is architecture indulging exclusiveness? What can architecture contribute to this debate?

As stated in the introduction to the magazine «Footprint»:

«A cross-disciplinary connection between architecture, urban design and queer theory seems only logical from the point of view that architecture and urban design are instrumental in the formation of social and political identities.»⁽¹¹⁾

It has to be stated clearly that so-called «queer space» is not the solution. It tries to solve the problem by carving out a space for the people who do not fit in the dominant social normativity. In this carved-out space, according to the theory of Sarah Ahmed, a new normativity is constructed, and it leads to further inclusion and exclusion.

The notion of queer space is to be questioned, not only because it is not as inclusive as to be expected, but also because it is a continuation of gender essentialism. It assumes that gender can be categorised scientifically and tries to solve the problem by introducing a few more categories. As Jaffer Kolb highlighted: a shift in architecture is made to move away from the 1990s attempts at «making queer things» (id est «what?») to «making things queerly» (id est «how?»).⁽¹²⁾ This quote gives us some hints how to avoid the trap of gender essentialism: instead of seeing architecture as a finished product

and queerness as a static attribute to it, we should comprehend architecture as a permanent process of space making and queerness as a fluid process of becoming.

Coming back to the writings of Madeline Gins and Shusaku Arakawa, in the book «Architectural Body», they define architecture as «a tentative constructing towards a holding in place»,⁽¹³⁾ which seems to resonate a lot with the contemporary theory of queer as «embodied becoming».⁽¹⁴⁾ A person is a process of becoming which rises in between the organism and the environment (or, the «bioscleave» as they would use).

Architecture is a hypothesis. By acknowledging and respecting that architecture is based on assumptions, Gins and Arakawa have defined a much more intimate and reciprocal relation between body and architecture.

A snail is a perfect example to explain the term «architectural body» — the flesh of a snail and its «house» are interdependent.⁽¹⁵⁾ One would never see a snail emerge from its shell not moving: the body is either resting, protected by the shell, or carrying the shell on the way. That is to say, there has to be certain dynamic between the body and the architecture.

In order to (re)establish this dynamic, we should address the proposition that an architecture that is definite seems not to be capable of engaging with the body. A body performs tentatively in a space. As nomads always constructed a rather tentative architecture to engage with the body, the body becomes aware, and «persons» during an encounter with a tentative architecture. As Gins and Arakawa state, «[tentative] architecture can help a person find herself out».⁽¹⁶⁾

There are few built precedents of tentative architecture. However, the following excerpt can serve as a teaser to start imagining it:

«Denish lives for a few months of the year in a friend's apartment and the rest of the year in a students' hall of residence, feeling at home whenever he plays the sarod in the park; Frank brought a cabin from the north of New York state and set it up in the garden of two female designer friends, looking after their garden instead of paying rent; Moody transformed the TV room of his house into a beauty salon, where people from the local neighbourhood get together, have their hair cut, look after each other's children and discuss politics; Rael is conducting research in his own house using aquaponics, a self-regulating food production system, renting out his house-laboratory for parties; Mama Gianna is the chef at one of the most famous restaurants in Queens, spending nearly all day there in the kitchen, which she views as her home, and where all the emotional ties of her life are founded. Lastly Greg, Donnie, Maja and Corentine have created a family of two couples, using their kitchen as a meeting place and a platform for developing a future LGBT library.»⁽¹⁷⁾

Taken from the performance «Ikea Disobedients», this excerpt shows how the body appropriates the space, through which it also discovers itself as well as the potential of the space. The project criticises Ikea's definition of domestic space as apolitical, happy and healthy. Here Ikea is a specific subject which delivers the norm of how domestic life should be and hence pushes comfort as the goal, and standard. By intentionally disobeying Ikea's imposition, it accomplishes a piece of tentative architecture in a gallery context, empowering non-normative subjects.

This precedent might give us architects some hints on what we can do. Indeed, architecture that queers requires consciously abandoning the instruments of social norms. It insists on replacing criteria of «comfort» with an «intimate dynamic between body and architecture» when it comes to assessing architectural qualities.

In the meantime, an architecture that queers does not require its architects to be queer; nor does it address a space iconically designed for some queers; nor is it a style or an aesthetics. It works as an ethic for architects. We need to intentionally avoid imposing certain ways of living, and create spaces that incorporate possibilities of being appropriated in widely different ways — one possible way is to define only the minimum when making architecture, because the body is then invited and requested to engage with the space. This space might seem uncomfortable, sometimes banal, even cheap or noteless, but it is capable of accommodating and empowering any person who queers.