



The Excitey as Collective Imaginary

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This article reflects on the productive potential of the unfinished city and on the capacity of photographic visualisation and architectonic imagination to act as tools of transformation of this landscape into an object of thought of alternative urban models. Based on the award-winning project *The Crystal Chain* exhibited at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2016, it moves between a reflection on the capacity of unfinished architectonic fragments to build a Mediterranean collective imaginary and a speculative activation of one of these fragments to make it a reference point for the imagination of alternative scenarios.

Exform as Political Instrument

In his interpretation of *Angelus Novus*, a painting made by Paul Klee in 1920 and bought by Walter Benjamin one year later, the German thinker identifies progress as a storm that projects history ever onwards. Incapable of folding its wings, history operates like an angel that wishes to stop for a second to revive all the rubble that progress has left in its wake and is piled up around it, but the storm is too strong and all he can do is to look at it out of the corner of his eyes. The storm makes the angel draw a linear path which implacably makes its way among the discarded materials of history, materials whose presence can only be perceived tangentially, as a ghostly entity seeking to communicate from the past (Benjamin, 1969).

For Benjamin, the task of the materialist historian is actually to establish contact with this rubble, taking it back to the territory

from which it was expelled by the winners of the historical process, those whose version strengthens the storm of progress. Through an arduous restitution process of these fragments it is possible to truly shape the historical foundations on which the social edifice of a given moment rests, and then to question its present configuration and plan other alternatives for its construction.

Continuing with Benjamin's interpretation, Nicolas Bourriaud assigns a similar task to contemporary artists. For the French thinker, one of the main objectives of art is to help us understand the reality in which we live through the generation of alternative models from which to describe the present moment (Bourriaud, 2009). This description is necessary to remind us that the present is always an uncertain construct, perverted by history and abandonment and the attachment to some of its potentials. Art embraces this uncertainty and exposes the



precariousness of a given historical moment with the aim of activating new descriptions in the viewer that lead to its transformation.

Overcoming the impotence of the angel portrayed by Klee, many contemporary artists work on the task of returning the rubble of progress to life with the aim of completing the official image of the present, particularly at a time marked by the ever increasing effects of contemporary production and consumption dynamics on the planet. These artists attach aesthetic value to those forms discarded or concealed by society, displacing them from their current situation towards other spheres of the social fabric to make their role in the construction of our present visible. In Bourriaud's words, they are *exforms* whose recovery from the world of art aims to destabilise the linearity of the prevailing historical process. Exforms, resituated in the visible half of reality, become a major policy tool when placed in other situations, configurations and spaces different from those expected. In other words, when being exploited as artistic material (Bourriaud, 2016).

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The interest in a type of artistic practice based on the reactivation and visualisation of these exforms is for Bourriaud a logical consequence of the prevalence of abstraction, the dispersion of power instruments and the increase in the complexity of the processes on which contemporary societies rest. For four decades, and in direct relation with the development of digital technology, immateriality and abstraction have become an essential condition of a social edifice that is globally constructed,

which imperceptibly enhances the economy's absorption of all these processes. The resulting growing complexity and interconnection strengthen their assessment purely in terms of efficiency, which only enhances the prevailing historical path (Bauman, 2006). As a response to this situation, the formalisation – that is, giving form to these processes by delimiting their contours and turning them into matter – is a fundamental tool to confront their apparent inevitability.

The material condition of the exforms and their display in the artistic arena open up the field of observation of these abstract dynamics to a wide public, something that allows for the articulation of new political spaces that can potentially question the configuration of our present.

Excite as Alternative Imaginary

The instrumental character of the exforms changes frequency when we approach it from the field of architecture. As Fredric Jameson recalls, of all the arts, architecture is the closest to economics, because the relation between them is not mediated (Jameson, 1991). In other words, architecture is a direct instrument of economic power and, as such, embodies its fluctuations and reproduces its statistics. It does so, moreover, materially and publicly.

This particularity makes architecture an automatic vehicle of visualisation of the intangible processes ruled by contemporary production dynamics. Silently, the buildings that make up our towns and villages operate as a tangible reflection of the economic flows underlying their materialisation, articulating a landscape of enormous political potential that formalises the excesses and defects of the social and productive model constructed by our time.

In 2008, the hitherto frenetic construction of this landscape was unexpectedly inter-



View of L'Enova (Germán Cabo).

rupted, as if in Paul Klee's painting the wind of progress had let up and the angel of history was suddenly capable of looking around with determination and clearly saw the contour of the surrounding accumulated fragments. The interconnection between the financial and real estate markets, the main driver of the unprecedented growth experienced in many Western countries in previous years, suddenly exploded dragging with it its economies. The effects of this explosion were especially virulent in the countries of the Mediterranean arch, highly exposed to these markets due to policies based on uncontrolled construction and nourished by external interest in the occupation of their coasts.¹ In Spain alone, the crisis uncovered 815,000 unsold dwellings, along with 500,000 unfinished or paralysed dwellings according to data by the Ministry for Internal Development

and Sareb (Sociedad de Gestión de Activos Procedentes de la Reestructuración Bancaria). Similar figures were given in other countries such as Greece, where in 2015, for instance, there were 300,000 empty dwellings in Athens alone (Baboulias, 2015). In Italy this phenomenon mainly concerned public works. To date, over 750 unfinished public buildings have been inventoried.²

All these figures were reflected in the configuration of an urban landscape that suddenly began presenting its rubble and shadows openly. Suspended since then, the landscape resulting from the crisis virtually unifies the contours of many Mediterranean cities despite the marked architectonic diversity that characterises them. It is a landscape made of unfinished fragments that never managed to form part of the productive circuit of the

1. According to the real estate company Engel & Völkers, the nationalities that buy most properties on the Spanish coasts as a second residence are the British, French, German and Swedish, in this order. Although in 2006 the number of foreign owners amounted to 8.97% and dropped to 4.24% in 2009, at present it is 13.25% of the total purchases of properties in Spain.

2. Research conducted by the Italian group Incompiutosiciliano [last accessed: 28 July 2017]. Available at <http://incompiutosiciliano.org/index>

city: development projects never colonised by buildings, bare structures waiting to be closed and repetitive developments without residents to occupy them. For one decade, their ghostly presence has acted as a direct witness of an urban and social model – the neoliberal – responsible to a great extent for the imaginary today associated with multiple Mediterranean regions, an imaginary built around terms such as squandering, institutional corruption and development of economically-unsustainable projects.

Paradoxically, this imaginary often stands on the rubble of a political project that, still today, is promoted as responsible for reactivating the system machinery after several years of inactivity. Thus, rather than an underlying problem, these fragments of unfinished city are ignored and accepted as the result of occasional excesses. Although the city itself reveals its exforms, these are not treated as such; that is, as instigators of political spaces and alternative models.

However, their unfinished condition invites a different approach, capable of exploiting this landscape to build another type of imaginary that claims the city as a political and non-financial space. The formal and aesthetic uniformity of these fragments makes them an element that can potentially articulate gazes and interests beyond borders and languages, acting as a basis for a conversation that, because of its scale, is capable of mobilising new ways of promoting the construction of the city following criteria different from those prevailing at present. To this end, it is necessary to turn the architectonic rubble of the contemporary metropolis into an “excite”. In other words, it is necessary to extract it from the current productive circuit and enhance its divergent condition through its collective articulation.

Just as happens in the artistic practice described by Bourriaud, this task involves re-contextualising the discarded forms of the

Mediterranean cities, arranging them in fields and surfaces distant from their location. As they are architectonic fragments, they must be formalised at the level of the built reality – where they are already formalised –, but on surfaces of floating materiality where the true dimensions of the “excite” can be perceived. In the end, the main task of architecture is to build limits, define spaces and assign functions, dissolve the magic of the obsolete into the realism of efficacy (De Solà-Morales, 2009). In other words, the main objective of architecture is to tame the emptiness in order to introduce it into the productive circle of the urban. Thus, the excite must escape the traditional mechanisms of architectonic intervention to become an alternative way of understanding the city.

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In this respect, the space of photography becomes the ideal ground for the articulation of this latent landscape, because its surface admits the arrangement in parallel to all its fragments without losing its realism. In the space of photography, it is possible to re-contextualise the fragments of the excite, showing its transnational scale and its autonomy as a territory that, rather than waiting to form part of the contemporary metropolis, is willing to take on alternative political models.

We should not forget that, in fact, for over one century, photography and its circulation in the mass media has built the collective imaginary of modern cities. In motion, printed or in the parameters of the art galleries, the mediation of the photographic image consolidates all



Digital Collage. Proposition from every participant in The Crystal Chain.

the myths, events and symbols that shape the collective identity linked to each of the cities where we live. This is why an imaginary built with the fragments discarded by the metropolis, the imaginary of the excity, has the power to promote political spaces and collective identities that are not necessarily defined by their geographical closeness.

The imaginary of the excity is, moreover, an imaginary of the emptiness, the absence of use, the lack of activity, the non-urban. It is, therefore, an imaginary of the possible, of expectation, of promise (De Solà-Morales, 2009). An imaginary that suspends time in a stretched present whose future lives in the uncertainty of multiple possible versions. The imaginary of the excity is, in short, a space capable of activating creative speculation and, more importantly, thought and conversation about other ways of conceiving the contemporary city.

The Crystal Chain

The Crystal Chain is a project that explores the potential of this imaginary. Exhibited in the Spanish Pavilion in the Venice Architecture Biennale 2016, it is a work that uses the excity to generate new spaces of debate from architectural speculation. In this case, the debate revolves around the fundamental characteristics of the unfinished landscape resulting from the crisis: the exploitation of the single dwelling as an element of standardisation of the contemporary city.

With the aim of generating a reality parallel to the unification of the urban fabric that appears in the multiplication of single-family and terraced houses – a fabric paradoxically rooted in exclusivity and lack of community interaction –, the project was based on the collective exploitation of an unfinished develop-

ment of 75 identical dwellings in L'Énova, a small town close to Valencia. Each one of the 12 participants in the conversation acted upon a photograph of interrupted dwellings with the sole restriction of using the same format and the same graphic ingredients for its activation through a digital collage. Thereafter, there were no more limitations than those of each gaze: the resulting fabric is the reflection of an urban model rooted in collective difference and diversity of opinions.

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The most interesting part of this sum of different gazes is that, once archived and placed in parallel, the fragments generated in the conversation reveal the creative potential of the work on the excite. The colonised photographs do not appear as a melancholic witness of what could have been but rather as a document that materialises a possible model, a model that understands the dwelling as an individual object founded on a common basis, developed contingently and unequally to produce a diverse landscape impossible to define broadly. Apart from serving as a first trial of the articulation of the excite in the territory of photography, The Crystal Chain is

an experiment that shows how the rubble of an exhausted productive model can be exploited as the foundation of an alternative project, a project that acts upon the re-contextualisation of the present to build the imaginary.³

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3. The Crystal Chain is a project conceived by Andrea Gimeno, Lluís J. Liñán and Xevi Lluch and developed together with Mayte Gómez, Jesús Vassallo, Ángel Gallego, Enrique Bayarri, Beatriz Martínez, José Mato, Sálvora Feliz, Marta Jarabo and Germán Cabo.