Log

Winter/Spring 2013
Observations on
architecture and the
contemporary city

46° 33' N, 15° 39' E
Maribor, Slovenia, 2069. Speculative urban-future projects typically are compelled toward the race of progress and prediction, but the central park spanning the Drava River is a paradoxically anachronistic provocation. After 57 years, the project – a simple stitch between the river's north and south banks – is fully mature, a carpet of vegetation filling in the twisting curlicues of the flesh-structure grafted onto the old city. This gesture of pure density should hope to prevail as long as the world's oldest living vine, Maribor's more than 500-year-old Žametovka, the grapes of which produce a still undrinkable sweet wine.

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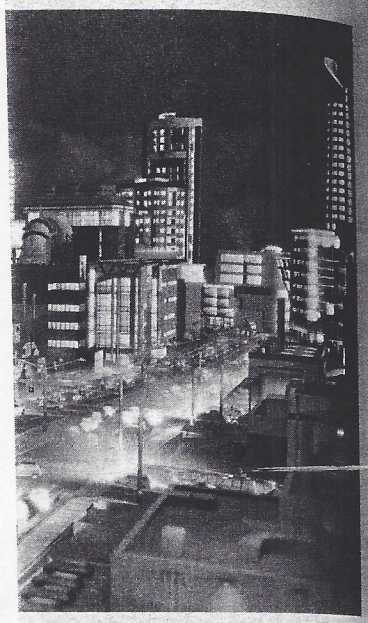

th curved roads. When the sixth es is released in March, it will be ame simulates cities. Enabled by led, the game still must be played on – and today's faster machines, probabilistic simulation models n 1989. Instead, the new proprie- ns its simulation using tens of that move resources and units nd affect the lives and total envi- hat does this mean for the typical ner? Once again, great attention ways in which the city can be , fire, tornados, even monsters – s the most Orwellian oversight of s a name (combinations of the names in the US) and a variable , employment, basic needs, hap- hich can be learned with a click. ms look for and find a job or s makes them happy). Or, if the nd amenities, individual Sims owly be starved and polluted to ght or horror, perhaps the tilt- ngs are to remind you that it's

Peter Trummer

The City as an Object: Thoughts on The Form of the City

If (as the philosophers maintain) the city is like some large house, and the house is in turn like some small city, cannot the various parts of the house – atria, xysti, dining rooms, porticoes, and so on – be considered miniature buildings?

– Leon Battista Alberti

When Alberti defined the city as a large house and the house as a small city, he created a two-fold disciplinary problem for architecture. On the one hand, he defined the relationship of the part to its whole. Since each room in the house should be seen as a miniature building, the whole house can be seen as an aggregation of various parts. On the other hand, when Alberti defined the city as a house, he implied that the city is actually a single object. But if we conflate these ideas, it follows that every house or building can be understood as an aggregated object and, in turn, that the city, as a large house, can be seen as a large "aggregated" object.

If a new "object-oriented ontology"[1] enters the discipline of architecture, what would rereading the city as an object mean to the discipline of architecture and to the form of the city itself? From this perspective, one must reread the history of cities as objects. I define four kinds of city-objects: the city as a circle, the city as a grid, the city as archipelago, and the city as a solid. If we take Alberti's assumption that every house is like a small city, then this kind of architectural object contains the potential for a fifth model: the city as an aggregated object.

IF A ○ (HOUSE) IS LIKE A  (SMALL CITY/AGGREGATE OF BUILDINGS), AND A  (THE CITY), IS LIKE A ◯ (LARGE HOUSE/OBJECT), THEN ○ (THE HOUSE) CAN BE SEEN AS A  (SMALL AGGREGATED OBJECT) AND THE  (THE CITY) AS A  (LARGE AGREGGATED OBJECT) ONE.

Undermining the City as an Object

In *The Quadruple Object,* philosopher Graham Harman states that the way we looked at objects, especially in the last century, was dualistic: either we were undermining objects or we were overmining objects.[2]

By undermining objects, Harman argues, we "assume that a dog, candle, or army," or in our case, a city, "is built

1. Graham Harman, "Object-Oriented Philosophy," in *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010), 93.
2. Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011).

of some basic physical or historical element whose permutations give rise to these objects as a sort of derivative product."[3] An undermining position toward the city either reduces the city to its smallest material parts or sees the city as a "play of difference," "a primordial flux of becoming . . . derived from a vital inner dynamism."[4] When we undermine objects, the objects themselves are not fundamental, but rather their atoms and molecules give us a deeper understanding of the objects.[5]

The Modern Movement can be seen as the first variation of an undermining position toward the city. In describing the functionalist city as analogous to the organs of a body, in which the circulation system supports the bodily functions through a network of veins, Le Corbusier reduced the city to its basic element by representing the space of habitation as a biological cell. The degree to which the modernists undermined the city as an object becomes clear in Manfredo Tafuri's analysis of Ludwig Hilberseimer. Hilberseimer, in his book *Groszstadtarchitektur*, proposed that "the architecture of the large city depends essentially on the solution given to two factors: the elementary cell and the urban organism as a whole. The single room as the constituent element of habitation will determine the aspect of habitation, and since the habitations in turn form blocks, the room will become a factor of urban configuration, which is architecture's true goal."[6] Tafuri adds: "The single building is no longer an 'object.' It is only the place in which the elementary assemblage of single cells assumes physical form."[7]

A second undermining position on the city can be seen in the modernist housing projects in Frankfurt. For Ernst May, the idea of the *Siedlung* was based on a Taylorized building process executed by the identical reproduction of prefabricated standardized products. This position, in which a flux of vital dynamism, as Harman calls it, undermines the city as an object, has become particularly evident over the last two decades, during which Deleuzian theories of matter and its emergence capacity have served as a model for understanding the city. In this period of globalization and neoliberal capitalism, architecture has attempted to understand the city through the fluxes, flows, and energies that go in, out, or circulate within it. The city is understood as a dynamic environment, with far-from-equilibrium properties; its form is understood as a crystallization of matter and its structure defined as a rhizomatic network.

3. Ibid., 8.
4. Ibid., 9.
5. Harman defines objects at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77peIcMXp58, uploaded by almafarag on June 28, 2011.
6. Quoted in Manfredo Tafuri, "'Radical' Architecture and the City," in *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, trans. Barbara Luigi La Penta (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976), 104–05. Original text in German: Ludwig Hilberseimer, *Groszstadtarchitektur* (Stuttgart: Verlag Julius Hoffmann, 1927), 100.
7. Tafuri, "'Radical' Architecture and the City," 104.

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8. Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 11.
9. Harman on objects, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77peIcMXp58.
10. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), 142.
11. See Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984).
12. Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 47.

Overmining the City as an Object

The antithesis to undermining is overmining, which Harman defines as looking at objects from above. "Objects are important only insofar as they are manifested to the mind, or are part of some concrete event that affects other objects as well," he writes.[8] An overmining position on objects means to see "objects like ghosts that are not necessary, since what is necessary is our experience of the object, its construct as a language,"[9] or, I would add, the essence of an object that explains all its appearances.

An overmining position can be seen in the phenomenological approach to the city. Christian Norberg-Schulz argues that all our material organization foreshadows experiences. Such experiences, called phenomena, are the fundamentals through which we preserve or judge objects. In an analysis of Rome, Norberg-Schulz argues that the landscape of the Roman *campagna*, with its "violent contrast in forms,"[10] the sharply carved voids in solid rock, provides the forecasting experience, the genius loci, that forms the figurative urban space and solid mass built in Ancient Rome.

Another overmining position of the city as an object can be seen in Aldo Rossi's *The Architecture of the City*. Rossi defines the city as a man-made object, an urban artifact that, as a work of art, goes beyond the individual's experience of a building, street, or district. What lies behind any urban or architectural artifact, he writes, is a constant: something permanent or typical, something much deeper, namely, a *type* that explains the essence of the object.[11]

I would argue that the undermining position taken by the modernists and materialists over the last two decades has been the primary influence on practice in the city, while the overmining position has been used to theorize our cities. Neither position, as Harman argues, has considered the object – here, the city – as real.

The City as an Object

For Harman, objects are unified and cannot be defined through a system of interrelationships nor reduced to caricatured images. An object, for him, is an autonomous unit, "a dark crystal veiled in a private vacuum: irreducible to its own pieces, and equally irreducible to its outward relations with other things."[12] If the city is an object, what kind of autonomous forms of the city exist, and what is the role of the architectural object as a part that makes up the city?

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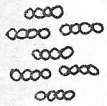

THE ARCHIPELAGO AS AGGREGATES.

THE CITY AS A SOLID.

THE SOLID AS AN AGGREGATE.

Defined by its formal diagram, the mesh of circulation is the ground of the endless city, filled with figurative blocks containing spaces of habitation. But if we look at the grid city as an object, and as a relationship between part and whole, we see that Cerdà's blocks are carefully laid out arrays of individual buildings placed on identical subdivided properties. The blocks turn into aggregated enclosures separated by linear streets.

The City as Archipelago

In 1920s Germany, particularly with Ernst May in Frankfurt, a new kind of city-object emerged: the city produced by archipelagos. In this case, the archipelagos were the *Siedlungen*. A *Siedlung* was an assembly of buildings, mostly single-family row houses, or *Zweispänner* (meaning two flats/floors could be reached by a common staircase), spread throughout the territory of the city. Freed from the grid, the *Siedlung* had no particular boundary. The border of the property simply defined its area. Such *Siedlungen* were a confetti of loosely connected projects, an archipelago. This became, especially after the Second World War, the model of the city of the welfare state.

When Le Corbusier developed his Unité d'Habitation, a figure elevated above the ground, he deviated from the figure-ground relationship. Instead of architecture establishing the ground for a figurative void, the architectural slabs become floating figures liberated from the ground. But if there is no such thing as a figurative object, as Tafuri claims, then the architectural figure can be understood as an agglomeration of inhabitable cells.

The City as a Solid

With Archizoom's No-Stop City, a fourth city-object emerged: the city as a solid. No-Stop City had no exterior. It proposed a city without windows, an air-conditioned internal organization combining three diagrams: the car park, the shopping mall, and the factory. The city turns into a gigantic solid object consisting of various zones for living, working, and parking, utilizing the roof as a park. It is a city based on pure, quantitative measurements. The city as a solid arguably became the prototype for postmodern megaforms. Kenneth Frampton, in his article "The Megaform as Urban Landscape," explains that megaforms are "a continuous urban mass extending predominately in a lateral or horizontal direction rather than vertically; a form in which, unlike the megastructure, the

mass is not broken down into a series of structural subsets."[13] A megaform carries programs like housing, offices, and leisure activities, and by its pure size turns into a landscape or land formation detached from its surroundings. The city as a solid was reinforced by Rem Koolhaas's idea of bigness.[14] Architectural mass replaces Cerdà's gridded urbanism. The city as a solid becomes a pure architectural figure with no relationship to its ground. The city as a solid object becomes the model of the neoliberal city.

The city as a solid is the city as pure figure, assembled by individual cells, small and large, that are as tight together as the rooms in a house. Here, the city literally becomes a house.

If we reread the city as an object, as a unified thing, we can see that in each form of the city, architecture is aggregated differently in order to define the city as a whole. In the city of the circle, architecture consists of various parts with nested spaces of circulation. In the city of the grid, architecture turns into an aggregation of buildings nested within a grid of circulation. In the city as archipelago, architecture becomes an aggregated figure detached from the spaces of circulation.

With these three kinds of city objects, architecture and the spaces of circulation together form the city as an object. In the city as a solid, this unification is gone. Today, I would argue, not only is the city gone, urbanism no longer exists; there is only architecture remaining. Architecture, as such, contains the idea of a fifth model for the contemporary city: the object as the aggregated figure and its unfolding ground(s).

The City as an Aggregated Object

When Alberti likened the rooms of a house to miniature buildings, he essentially defined a house as an aggregation of rooms. I call such a house or building an aggregated figure. Each room can be considered as a building, or an independent inhabitable cell, connected to other rooms in order to form the house as a whole. There is, however, something very particular to such a house. First, the house consists only of rooms, and second, each room provides the condition for the next room. That condition may simply be access to the room, it may be the wall or construction onto which the room is attached, it may be a form to which another form is related. One room provides the ground from which another room can emerge. But Alberti did not describe the kind of city we should imagine if we are to understand the house as an aggregation of rooms.

13. Kenneth Frampton, "Megaform as Urban Landscape," in *Conflict: Studio '96–'97*, The Berlage Cahiers 6 (Rotterdam: 010 publishers, 1999), 102.
14. See Rem Koolhaas, "Bigness, or the problem of Large," in *S, M, L, XL*, eds. O.M.A., Rem Koolhaas, and Bruce Mau (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 494–516.

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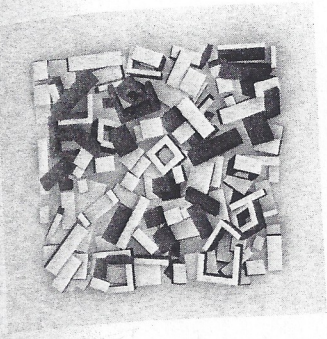

Peter Trummer, The City as an Aggregated Object, 2012. Digital model.

If every room in a house provides the ground for the next, can we imagine a city whereby every building provides the ground for the next building? If we assume that the only thing we have today is architecture, we can imagine a city wherein each building provides the ground for the next, as seen in aggregated figures like Le Corbusier's Unité or Elia Zenghelis's Sphinx Hotel, where the inhabitable cells unfold a common ground through their own forms of aggregation.

In the city as an aggregated object, every building provides the access, the construction, and the ground for the next building. Like every room in Alberti's house, every building defines the condition of the next. In such a city we cannot distinguish between ground and figure, common and individual space, solid and void. When the architectural object becomes both figure and ground, the city becomes an aggregated object, an object unified by buildings performing as ground and figures.

Where the circle was the model for the precapitalist city, the grid was the model for the capitalist city, and the archipelago the model for the welfare state, the aggregated city is the city of late capitalism. If, as Alan Colquhoun once argued, the city is the product of large capital, whether that of individual entrepreneurs or of the state, then today we are witnessing the emergence of an economic model in which the population as a whole behaves as a company. As a society we have never invested so much money to keep capitalism alive. Since the financial crisis, every citizen, through his taxes, has a stake in the buildings of the city. We do not relate to a territory anymore, we only relate to the buildings – the architecture that is the figure and ground of the city. The idea of the aggregated city proposed here is not a utopian project; it is a reality.

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Hudson Yards, New York, 2017. View of first phase of development looking west across midtown Manhattan. Rendering: Visualhouse. Courtesy Related Companies.

Recent groundbreakings on two adjacent Manhattan developments signaled the reality of a new boomtown in "Midtown West." In January, Brookfield properties broke ground on its $4.5 billion Manhattan West development, which will include three towers – two of them over 60 stories – totaling five million square feet of office and residential space, in addition to a one-and-a-half-acre public plaza on the west side of Ninth Avenue between 31st and 33rd streets. Yet this was in the shadow of Related Companies' December commencement, just one block west, of the ambitious Hudson Yards project, or, New York's largest development ever. Hudson Yards' 26-acre site is slated for 13 million square feet of new building and 14 acres of parks and semi-public open space. The initial phase, planned for a 2017 completion, will build up the east half of the site with four towers over 800 feet, the tallest of which, at 1,337 feet, will have a cantilevered observation deck 1,100 feet up. These will amass six million square feet of commercial and residential space above 750,000 for a shopping center and 170,000 in a city-run "Culture Shed," all of this set around a five-acre public square and fountain linked into a park network that will eventually stretch from 14th Street to 42nd. The $6 billion first phase of construction got underway following the commitment of Coach Inc. as "anchor tenant" of the 47-story South Tower. Much credit also is due to the $2 billion public investment in the extension of the number 7 subway line from Times Square to 34th Street and 11th Avenue. Opening up greater access to the undeveloped neighborhood played a primary role in attracting the private investment there. (Another railway extension further primed the building boom: the third and final phase of the High Line park will terminate at Hudson Yards.) The technobabble of infrastructure is quite apt for this "city within a city," where an overabundance of numbers can be cited to describe the project. Indeed, as of yet, quantity is the development's defining quality. Though rousing, the enormous scale alone cannot prefigure whether Hudson Yards will amount to more than a shiny, hulking developer's grab bag.

– Luke Studebaker