

To break the ring back – (Symbolic profanation and inner public space) I

The Media Age

By Bogdan Ghiu

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The contemporary man, the politician, the architect-curator

In my opinion, there are two professions artistically-immaterial which represent, *de facto*, implicitly, and which should consequently be analyzed at the same time explicitly as models or general paradigms of our contemporary/present attitude, of our spontaneous politics towards the world, towards the others and towards ourselves: the profession of curator and the profession of architect.

Yet neither of them has stayed the same. I find architecture completely updated, but in the sense that it defines the main contemporary direction of political action. I no longer consider that architecture can be practiced exclusively in the restricted, literary, denotative, specific meaning, but rather as a metaphorically generalized model of the political action we take towards ourselves.

And it is precisely when it gains the meaning of politics of memory that the generalized architecture, perceived as an action model, becomes the act of a curator.



But in its turn, the activity of a curator, seen as nurturing, as self-involvement, is no longer what it used to be. Just like in the old times, the director was said to be a leader, a dominator or even a tyrant, a genuine *curatorial turn* is likewise evoked nowadays in the generalized field of contemporary art.

The architect-curator nurtures the memory and makes it available, accessible, approachable. This „curative” evolution of art and, in my opinion, of architecture, and, in wider terms, of our attitude towards ourselves, towards what has already been forged, is related to what we might call „ecological imperatives”. These imperatives are already submitted to a process of generalization, of turning them into *habitus*, submitted to a *sustainable* attitude regarding not only *nature* as seen in terms of *capital* and a fragile and abused *public property*, but also culture and history themselves. According to the increasingly spreading ideology of „*ecologizing nature*” (regarded actually as the reversed process), responding therefore to some specific attitudes and interferences, to a sustainable politics and acting as a *curative curator* towards nature, we are more and more often faced with the generalization of the same ecologically-curative attitude towards history and culture. Therefore it is a „naturalization” of culture and history, but with a brand new meaning.

The museum-city

Following the pattern provided by nature, culture and history thus tend to become at the same time physically-untouchable and physically easy to handle, they can be reconfigured and customized. In my opinion the curative attitude starts to increasingly dominate the politics directed towards the existing, including therefore the architectural methods of interference, or, to be more accurate, of insinuation in what has already been built. This general curative attitude brings along, as a perverted effect, a brand new „*museumificaton*” of the cities, of the urban space.

Our cities display an increasing tendency of turning into museums, into thematic parks, into almost untouchable *memorial ecosystems*, in which one can only interfere in an esthetically-curative way (not ethically-curative) at most, „*expositionally*”, as a reconfiguration of *displays*. And as all this takes place while museums themselves cease to be what they used to.



While historical cities turn into some sort of touristic paradise, or in other words into museums on a scale of 1:1, the end of the traditional museum, seen as ‘disciplinary’ museum or as a ‘colonial’ museum, is mentioned more and more often in the actual museum studies. The untouchable museum was supposed to train the citizens, so it was rather an ideological museum, and, due to its organization, it played even a curative role for its continuous and unilateral narration, which had unified in its turn the natural history and the history of mankind in the frame of the secularized and evolutionist (or, in other words, covert) theodicy. This totalitarian museum is therefore followed nowadays (according to Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, for instance) by the interactive ‘post-museum’.

The world we live in resembles more and more often a museum, or some more museum-cities. The cities themselves, as such, tend to become museums.

These are museums of nothing but themselves, *self-museums* in other words, in which the city itself, the frame as such, becomes the main object of display.

How can this type of museum-cities be lived in, and especially how can they be built? By reconstruction, by a sustainable and ecological regeneration, therefore by a general curative attitude: an ethical display of the self.

In the world of signs

The border between *architecture* as a *performance* and the *city* as a *post-museum*, between inviting to a form of expression and resorting to (that is awakening or forging) memory becomes, therefore, extremely fragile, immaterial, mobile, indistinguishable, unsteady and consequently decisive. This problematic character derives from the homogeneous *semiotic* method of both the architecture as a performance (governed by an economic reason) and the architecture of memory (governed by a civil and civic logic of the public space). The superior environment of signs, which is in itself distinct and



differentiated, untouchable and at the same time infinitely reconfigurable – of a supreme plasticity- must be therefore managed and outlined with enormous care.

An anamnesis of the present- the awakening from the urban drunkenness

The city is memory itself. And this memory should be signaled and marked again by architecture. An outer public monument should invite to introspection, to anamnesis, that is to assert itself as a stimulus, a signal, a call, a reference, but also the referent and the message as such at the same time.

Mutadis mutandis, the punctual architecture based on memory, discreet, surgical and precise as it is, has to deal with the same problems which, according to Tony Bennett in *Pasts Beyond Memory*, the organizers and curators of the “evolutionist” museum had to deal with in the 19th century: that the museum can only display the exhibits, but it cannot frame or reveal what happens between the exhibits, that is history itself, evolution itself. The visual stimulus, a powerful shot from a pedagogical and educational perspective, as well as a political one, is not enough; it must be “labeled”, framed by explanatory texts which slow down our perception and can steal our focus, already so hard to gain and maintain.

The public memory does not exist by itself, so it is not enough to awaken it or to officially reactivate it. It must be developed in an architectural manner. The mere signal, the mere anamnesis is not enough. And then architecture, as a curative politics directed towards the historical city, is forced to settle for some extremely harsh negotiations with the eventful and spectacular architecture. Architecture has to forge this very memory which is shared on the inside as such from the mere organization of symbolic signs, or, in other words, by using its visible side in order to make reference to its invisible side, latent yet existent. It cannot resume itself to signals functioning as stimuli, it has to create an atmosphere, to invite to anamnesis, to trigger the interest by resorting to memory.

Taking into account more than one meaning of this word, the architecture of the memory has to *awaken*. And it shouldn't work like this only during discussions, but also in practice, “on the field”, given that the public space is invaded by messages. Or, to be more specific, it is in the public space that



the individual is assaulted by messages. In this public space, the individual as well as the crowds are submitted to a mass-subjectivization in the role of *consumer-king*. Covering the city, literally and figuratively speaking, and leaving their print on what has already been built, the stream of commercial messages has come to represent the reversed background of human existence. A material archaeology of the walls, even the simplest one you may get, would emphasize this “stratigraphy” at any time.

In the contemporary over-developed urban context, the memorial or architectural intervention has only one possibility – which should be envisaged as a chance, a “negative” one- to space, to provide pauses, “gaps”, “blanks”, “ruptures” in that continuum of the commercial-utilitarian “messaging” which “invades” and abuses the public space by overwriting it. Phenomenologically speaking, it can no longer be the first one. It can only be the last one, interfering as a discontinuity.

In the micro-spaces, in the memorial/ rememorative micro-environments which thus tend to typologically turn into some squares, some small markets, some parks, the anamnesis/reiteration of the past and of the memory which undergoes and leads to an anamnesis and an awakening of the present, at present. An intricate phenomenon of reactivation, of updating the very function of the memory as such takes place. As we are summoned to meditate upon the past, we instantly meditate upon the present, in other words we remember ourselves in the first place, as human beings endowed with memory. The call to memory/ anamnesis awakens in us at first the memory itself, and so its *function* is remade, updated so as to work for the present as well.

The call to the collective memory has in addition an unexpected, but beneficial effect, of “presentification”, of bringing the urban individual back to present.

This secondary effect of denial, of cleansing, of rediscovering the self (as a meditation upon the others, about the common and the collective self), of revealing the self, is inevitably produced precisely because – and on the background of- the public space which becomes a private property. This comes as a consequence of the commercial, economic, anti-civic (and the civic parasitical) abuse of the public space.



“The memorial effect” acts by awakening us towards ourselves, and through us, as an inner mediator, towards the others, towards the drunkenness of the city, along with its dizzy, hallucinating effects: the city as a drug.

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