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Making the Brain of the System Mad. Or Not. Critical Encounters between Marginal Practices and Their Narrated Self

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Introduction

The 2016 Venice Biennale curated by Alejandro Aravena had the merit of pushing to the fore of the architectural debate themes, actors and projects which would normally remain outside the reach of the larger part of architectural communities. Or, at the very least, such was its openly declared ambition. Earlier attempts at showcasing very similar arrays of projects and installations are numerous and equally stimulating, to name just a couple of quasi-contemporaneous cases: the *Radical Cities* exhibit by UTT at the Bi-City Biennale of Shenzhen and Hong Kong 2015, or the *Uneven growth: tactical urbanisms for expanding megacities* exhibit at MoMA, 2015-16. However, the Venice Biennale is usually given credit for setting the pace of disciplinary discourse worldwide; consequently, *Reporting from the Front* is the almost compulsory starting point for any contemporary reflection on the relationship between marginal practices and their mediatized, narrated self. This is especially due to the now much-repeated mantra attributed to Aravena and his Elemental-led success: "It is not by participating to seminars that architects will make quality a necessity, the only way to influence public opinion, and those who vote, is through media."[1] The conflicting reviews received by Aravena's curatorial endeavor are testament to the contradictory nature of any such exercise aiming to mix margin and centre, and stitch together patches of a discreet practice with fluorescent thread: on the one hand, those who applaud it as a necessary and long awaited call to arms, and on the other hand, those who doubt the disciplinary value of such a turn of events, claiming that architecture with capital A lies elsewhere, and calling for #lessethicsmoreaesthetics.[2] At the same time, some critics examine Aravena's own work and expose it 'as it is', as opposed to how it is shown,[3] in a late attempt to criticizing the numerous disciplinary recognitions that the starchitect has been awarded in recent times; and others still, who tentatively debunk the inner contradiction at work in an exhibit that allows any disciplinary 'front' to exist and thrive, be it the front of formal plasticity or the front of pressing social issues. Whatever the conclusions to this debate may be, - if any - the premises are clear: trying to secure a prominent place among the disciplinary mainstream for socially-driven practices which lie at the margin of the profession. In a recent article for Architectural Review,[4] Tomà Berlanda aptly suggests that Kunlé Adeyemi's Makoko Floating School ultimately collapsed under the weight of a media overload – which had just been drastically increased by the display of its life-scale copy at the Arsenale and the awarding of the Silver Lion to a promising young participant. It may well

1 http://www.glistatigenerali.com/architettura-urbanistica_venezia/ri-uso-e-primato-delletica-ecco-la-biennale-del-cartongesso-di-aravena/ (15.05.2016).

2 Tom Dyckhoff quoted in http://www.jeremytill.net/read/109/the-architecture-of-good-intentions (10.05.2016).

3 http://www.darchitectures.com/qui-est-vraiment-alejandro-aravena-laureat-2016-du-pritzker-prize-a2848.html (10.05.2016).

4 http://www.architectural-review.com/archive/media-attention-overload-the-collapse-of-makokos-floating-school/10007451.fullarticle (12.06.2016).

be true. The Floating School has attracted an incredible amount of media attention, so much that "one is left wondering how much of its use as a school was staged" in the attempt to crystallize its image and magnify its role as a physical magnet for international attentiveness towards certain issues. The jury's motivation for awarding NLE' the Silver Lion is not to be revised at all under the circumstances, as it superimposed image over built object in the first place: in fact, the award was given "for having powerfully demonstrated that architecture, iconic and pragmatic at the same time, is a tool for amplifying the importance of schooling, in Lagos as well as Venice."[5]

Practices of architecture dealing with the margin but wishing to carry some influence on the mainstream automatically search for a dimension of iconic value, as it is mainly through the reiteration of their image that they are able to gain agency, just as, in the jury's comment, the true value to the Floating School lies in its being able to 'amplify the importance of schooling' rather than in the specific effectiveness of the building itself. This paper looks at curatorial practices with the conviction that more than others they allow for a reflection on the mixing of margin and center, because of their declaredly representative and iconic value. The two examples of curatorial instances that this paper wishes to compare serve the purpose of unpacking the productivity of such practices over the unfolding of disciplinary discourses, by way of measuring their reception and following within it. The time distance that separates them is taken as measure of the evolution – if any – of the disciplinary discourse. Each of them is a re-enactment of instances of building practices lying outside the discipline proper; both are, as such, testimonies to the fascination that the discipline demonstrates towards what lies outside its reach and its influence; both can be read as solicitation for the discipline to reach beyond its margins and learn from what it can find there.

Patio and Pavilion, 1956

Patio and Pavilion is a 1956 installation displayed within the exhibition *This is Tomorrow* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, and curated by Nigel Henderson, Eduardo Paolozzi, Alison and Peter Smithson. Within the space of the Gallery, and next to other seminal works such as, for one, *Just what is it that makes today's home so different, so appealing?, Patio and Pavilion* marked the beginning of New Brutalism – just as Hamilton's work marked the consolidation of Pop Art. The exhibition was curated by Theo Crosby, who did not confine the theme of the installation, but only insisted on the integration of diverse artistic expertise as "collaboration between practitioners of the different arts was [the] only program"[6] that *This is Tomorrow* proposed as a whole, "to prove that the ability of painters, sculptors, architects and designers to work harmoniously together did not die out with the cathedral builders or the Georgian decorators:"[7] twelve groups made of artists and architects had to produce low-budget works on the theme of contemporary living. The results varied, as Alastair Grieve reports: "Lawrence Alloway, critic and administrator of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, who wrote one of the three introductions to the catalogue and also took part in the exhibition, remarked: 'Among the better exhibits there are two main categories: the formal and the popular.' In the 'formal' division he placed Victor Pasmore, Kenneth and Mary Martin and Anthony Hill, and as 'supporters of the popular' he named Richard and Terry Hamilton, John McHale, Alison and Peter Smithson, Paolozzi and Henderson."[8] One of the Smithsons' most active supporters, Banham commented the installation as showing "the New Brutalists at their most submissive to traditional values. They erected a pavilion within a patio and stocked it with sculptures signifying the most time-honoured of man's activities and needs. This was, in an exalted

5 http://www.labiennale.org/it/architettura/news/28-05.html?back=true (15.05.2015). Translated by the author.

6 Reyner Banham, "This is Tomorrow," *Architectural Review* 120 (1956), 186.

7 Lawrence Alloway. "This is Tomorrow: At the Whitechapel Art Gallery, 9 August-9 September 1956" (press release of the exhibition), in *Salon to Biennial – Exhibitions That Made Art History, vol. 1, 1863-1959*, ed. Bruce Altshuler (New York/London: Phaidon Press, 2008), 366.

8 Alaistair Grieve, "'This Is Tomorrow', a Remarkable Exhibition Born from Contention," *The Burlington Magazine,* 136/1093 (1994), 225.

sense, a confirmation of accepted values and symbols." As opposed to Hamilton's work, which freely appropriated new and exciting visual references from the everyday, dragging them into the world of high art, *Patio and Pavilion* showed some restraint in the choice of setting and the use of primal architectural form as opposed to the white cube rhetoric of curatorial environments, its strength residing in its material effect and in the perceivable immediateness of its building process.

Patio and Pavilion borrows from a variety of sources and inspirations; literature on the subject spans far and wide as to its origin and its intent. For the purpose of this paper, it will be necessary to operate a small simplification and read it as the historical moment of intersection between the two main facets of architecture's fascination with everything informal: the one deriving directly from artistic endeavors across the ocean, which had to do with the negation of the form and the dominance of process or gesture; the other, predominant in the Smithsons' work, and originating in the conviction that architecture should tackle the everyday and the ordinary, the vernacular and the as-found. The influence that the participation of the Smithsons to the last CIAMs had on their architectural practice will be explained in-depth, especially as a response to the increasing interest regarding the ever-growing phenomenon of *bidonvilles* in Northern Africa, as testified, for one, by the IX CIAM.

The general interest that the Smithsons demonstrated for the vernacular is extremely well-known: let's just think of the introduction of the term *Casbahism* by Alison Smithson in her seminal article *How to recognize and read Mat-building: Mainstream Architecture as it has developed toward the Mat Building* – which is also quite significant as it displays in its very title a clear distinction between centre and margin: the latter is the existing used as reference, and the former, the result of the process of its appropriation. As for the specific case of *Patio and Pavilion*, both Ben Highmore and Zeynep Çelik point out the specific influence that the IX CIAM and the *bidonville* grids had on the making of the installation.[9]

The IX CIAM was held in 1953 in Aix-en-Provence; among the participating design teams were the Smithsons themselves, who presented the *Urban Re-identification grid*, analyzing daily life in the working class neighbourhood of Bethnal Green; and two North African groups: the GAMMA group (Groupe d'Architectes Modernes Morocaines), which included Pierre Mas, Michele Ecochard, and George Candilis, and which presented a grid analyzing the phenomenon of the *bidonville* of Carriére Centrales in Casablanca; and the CIAM-Algiers group led by Roland Simounet and Michel Emery, which presented the *Bidonville Mahieddine Grid*. Interest in the *bidonville* was now at its highest not only in the architectural, but especially in the anthropological world: the phenomenon of ad hoc settlements was booming due to colonial policies involving large scale expropriations of agricultural land, and consequent massive waves of urban immigration.[10] As opposed to the other CIAM grids, these did not focus on modern designs or urban projects; rather they employed the space of the grid as a cinematic device for an almost anthropological take on inhabiting the *bidonville*. The grid had been introduced by Le Corbusier in the 1940's as a device – *the* device – that would allow architects to think and design through images, by making explicit the intersections between the "four functions of life" (i.e. dwelling, work, recreation, transportation) and their spatial projections.[11] Especially in the *Mahieddine grid* of 1953, the hierarchy between the two categories was inverted, implicitly suggesting that whereas before it was up to the built form to actively determine the actions of the user, now it was time to stop and look more carefully into such actions (that increase in number and specificity) and analyze them as generative forces of the built environment. It is significant, then, that the chosen object of this particular grid is a squatter settlement; and it is

9 Zeynep Çelik, "Learning from the Bidonville: CIAM Looks at Algiers," *Harvard Design Magazine* 18 (2003), 70-74. And Ben Highmore, "Rough Poetry: Patio and Pavilion Revisitedm" *Oxford Art Journal* 29 (2006), 269-290.

10 For a more thorough commentary on the matter, see Sheila Crane, "The shantytowns in Algiers and the colonization of everyday life," in *Use matters: an alternative history of architecture*, ed. Kenny Cupers (New York: Routledge, 2013), 103-120.

11 See Giancarlo Motta and Antonia Pizzigoni, *La nuova griglia politecnica. Architettura e macchina di progetto* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2011).

even more significant that the final row of the grid, entitled *Technical Implications/Propositions*, shows definitely modern-looking designs as the results of the visual analysis carried out on an informal settlement, rather than as a 'solution' to the problems encountered in the settlement, suggesting – provocatively, of course – a definite line of descent of the latter through the former. The grid has here substituted more traditional disciplinary tools of representation, allowing a freer disposition of images in a cinematic, montage-like manner, for a more flexible understanding of the irregularities of the informal. Still, a certain degree of disciplinary uneasiness is easily perceivable in the tentative juxtaposition of photography and drawing, where the latter mostly serves the purpose of clarifying and complementing the space of the former, instead of generating it. The production of space – as would be famously carved in stone two decades later by Lefebvre – is left entirely up to the inhabitants themselves, even in the analytical reproduction of such a space, while the architect withdraws towards an almost anthropological stance, that of a translator between observable environment and the discipline. Of course, as in any similar attempt, the relationship between the observer and the observed cannot but be a filtered one, biased by unavoidable colonial struggles.[12] In any event, the ideological strength of pushing marginal settlements to the fore of the disciplinary interests, and displaying them as models to be learned from, was such that it "was perceived by modern masters such as Le Corbusier and Gropius as the crossing of an important boundary […] (and) as a negative deviation from CIAM's original goal," whereas "for a whole group of architects, like Alison and Peter Smithson, Aldo van Eyck and Jaap Bakema, George Candilis and Shadrach Woods, this 'deviation' represented the beginning of a new path for the modern movement."[13]

As Zeynep Çelik argues, *Patio and Pavilion* can be read, among other things, as a direct by-product of the *bidonville* grids: "The composition looked remarkably like the squatter houses documented by CIAM-Alger. The clapboards of the walls of the pavilion were irregular, with cracks between them, the roof referenced corrugated aluminium, the construction material par excellence of the *bidonville*, while the objects artistically scattered on the roof seemed to have been directly inspired from the wide variety of artefacts placed on the roofs of the shacks in Mahieddine to hold them down. The architects' vocabulary describing the project reiterated the associations: the patio and the pavilion were 'full of those inconsistencies and apparent irrelevancies of every moment, but full of life.'"[14] For the purpose of this paper, *Patio and Pavilion* represents the moment of encounter between the newly found fascination that the discipline displayed towards *informal* settlements as explained above, and the fascination with *informal* art – and all the contradictory power that such fascination brought into the land of built form.

The fifties saw the rise of informal tendencies throughout the arts. Architecture couldn't remain untouched by what seemed to be a complete and utter rejection of previously accepted artistic processes. The informal broke the conventional, the existing boundaries between what is art and what is not; it rebelled against logic and power. Architecture was swept away by the impossibility to do the same without radically altering its disciplinary identity: "if Mondrian, Klee, Arp had accompanied and oriented rationalism and the organic tendencies (in architecture), now abstract Neo-expressionism, the informal, pop-art, *happenings* mine a non-erasable element in architecture: the project. [...] A turn of such scope is a shock in the architectural field. 'Action-architecture'? Obvious contradiction, absolute indeterminacy equals suicide; a poetics of mere eventfulness looks absurd considering the time necessary to make a building."[15] The list of 'informal' architects proposed by Zevi in this text begins with

12 See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); and V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

13 Tom Avermaete, "CIAM, Team X, and the discovery of African Settlements. Between Dogon and the bidonville," in *Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean: Vernacular Dialogues and Contested Identities*, ed. Jean-Francois Lejeune and Michelangelo Sabatino (London: Routledge, 2010), 255.

14 Çelik, "Learning from the bidonville", 74.

15 Bruno Zevi, *Storia dell'architettura moderna* (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), 401.

Hundertwasser (author of the 1958 *Mouldiness Manifesto against Rationalism in Architecture*), continues with André Bloc, Simon Rodilla, and ends with Arthur Kiesler touching on Paul Virilio and Antoni Gaudì. "Is then an informal and pop-architecture attainable? In a literal sense, no, because the project, be it drawn or not, is an unavoidable stage. Still, the ideology of these tendencies is wide and stable: it frees from those classicist rules which are the ruin of most Neo-rationalisms; it gives attention to 'architecture without architects', to the vernacular."[16] In a short later editorial for *Architettura: Cronache e Storia*, Zevi resumes the issue at hand and proposes a solution to the previously expressed conundrum: is an informal architecture attainable? Although the design phase – which the informal rejects – cannot be eradicated from the building process, still there are instances – such as the "*proposition pour un habitat évolutif*" by Candilis, Josic and Wooods – in which "the research for such freedom coincides with the inclination for the informal."[17] Here, freedom is the incremental character of the building process, and implies the empowerment of the user.

The social and the morphological sides to informality find here a perfect marriage: the indeterminacy left in the use of the built structure substitutes the processual indeterminacy that characterizes informal art; where the latter is contained in the gesture of the artist, informal architecture as explained by Zevi delegates it to the user, providing a framework for such (foreseen) transgression. In a similar fashion, the Smithsons only provide a quick sketch of the idea for the pavilion, leaving all other decisions up to Henderson and Paolozzi; in fact, leaving room for processual indeterminacy and incremental changes.

As an immediate result of this choice, however, transgression retreats onto itself. As 'action painting' carries side by side with its revolutionary approach to process the unavoidable dangers of "trademark" and "wallpaper,"[18] so does an architecture allowing for transgressive behavior to take place inevitably nullify the scope of such transgression: indeed, the paradox of subversion and dissidence is that its success is "secured by the annihilation of itself."[19]

In the same way but on a larger scale, to appropriate practices which are defined by their position at the margins of the discipline and exhibit them in a renowned venue such as the Whitechapel Gallery (or the Venice Biennale in the case of the next instance presented in the paper) has the effect of dramatically enhancing their visibility and their consequentiality, but also of making said margins shift and accommodate their newly stated agenda. In the two cases, the said margins are the practices of self-building, and pseudo avant-garde practices of processual art.

Torre David – Gran Horizonte

Torre David – Gran Horizonte, an installation by curator Justin McGuirk, Urban Think Tank (UTT) and photographer Iwan Baan, won the Golden Lion at the 13th Venice Architecture Biennale in 2012; this was the edition curated by David Chipperfield and entitled *Common Ground*, a vague theme with a declared interest in the architect's engagement with societal issues such as inclusiveness and participation. *Torre David* obviously tackled the general theme in a bolder way and pushed its boundaries, becoming – possibly – a testing ground for Aravena's Biennale. What it did was to construct a life-scale representation of an informal setting – namely a slice of the 45-storey skyscraper Torre David, which had been built originally as banking headquarters during the 1990's in Caracas, and then left incomplete with the death of businessman David Brillembourg. This particular slice housed a vibrant cantina – Gran Horizonte, "abierta 24 horas" – selling Venezuelan delicacies; the visitors to the Biennale

16 Ibid., 406.

17 Bruno Zevi, "Un'architettura informale, se vi piace," in *Editoriali di architettura*, ed. Bruno Zevi (Torino: Einaudi, 1979), 283.

18 Harlod Rosenberg, "The american Action Painters," in *The Tradition of the New* (Granada, London, 1970), 44.

19 Adrian Lahoud, "The third degree: interrogating the scale of climate conflict," in *Architecture and the paradox of dissidence,* ed. Ines Weizman (London: Routledge, 2014), 207.

who would stop by could themselves become an active part of the display after a long stretch as spectators – this inversion of roles being one of the reasons the jury decided to award the Golden Lion to the installation.[20] The number and level of works – both built and published – by Urban Think Tank makes it superfluous to dwell on the possibility of *Torre David – Gran Horizonte* being a simple and straightforward commodification of a controversial issue aimed at exploiting the ample visibility offered by such a venue, even though some commentators undoubtedly simplified the issue so much as to make suspicion unavoidable: Domus, for one, reported that "sounds, videos, images on the walls […] introduce the visitor into the lively and chaotic atmosphere of the slum without filter."[21] Such visibility was indeed necessary in order to bring to the center of the debate what used to lie at the margins. "Our project was largely a critique of this situation – a call to do something productive with the tower. Not even the Institute of Architects in Venezuela has raised this topic."[22] The architects took a step back and decided to put an existing situation into the spotlight in order to raise awareness on it, in the frame of a "learning from" rhetoric which is indeed a trope of architectural engagement with everything informal: "we strove to focus greater attention on the story and situation of Torre David because we believed that there was something valuable to learn from what the residents created in years of extra-legal occupation;"[23] much as the CIAM-Algiers group had done with the Mahieddin *bidonville* in 1953, much as Bernard Rudofsky's seminal exhibit at MoMA in 1964, the disciplinary engagement with informality is often one of observation rather than intervention, possibly also as a by-product of the fact that most of the literature that architects refer to belongs to the humanistic disciplines, especially anthropology and sociology. The third chapter of the catalogue, entitled "Possibility," pushes forward a timid attempt at a design proposal focusing on mobility and generation of sustainable energy; but it holds a minor place in the structure of the research and retains a purely provocative value, notwithstanding the choice in using the term "solutions" as a subtitle.[24]

As Peter Mörtenböck and Helge Mooshammer point out, "with the Golden Lion for the Best Project […] it seems that urban informality has finally arrived in polite society":[25] *Torre David-Gran Horizonte* indeed has the merit of giving the issue of urban informality a proper and first-row place within the disciplinary discourse. To a certain extent, *Torre David* has become the new Kowloon Walled City, the epitome of orderly disorder and self-organized chaos, a fascinating and complex mixture of illegality, corruption and bare survival: as in the Hong Kong city-within-the-city, finally razed to the ground in 1994 (with the small exception of its original historical nucleus) and substituted by a public park, media visibility has revealed its double-edged nature; just a year after the *Torre David – Gran Horizonte* exhibit had toured Venice, Berlin and Winterthur, inhabitants were being evicted by the hundreds and relocated in a "city over 50 Km outside the capital".[26] Even though it would be presumptuous to think that the research and the exhibit, by themselves, could have ruffled political feathers to the point of such consequences, the amount of visibility given to the event might well have had some direct or indirect weight on the decision. In the same way, as Crane notes, "the design proposals featured in the CIAM-Alger grid were never implemented as such. However, the Mahieddine did become a target of Mayor Chevalier's campaign to 're-absorb' the *bidonvilles* in Algiers by way of an accelerated campaign of mass housing construction initiated in 1953. The 'discovery' of the *bidonville* by architects and urban sociologists as well as the attention paid to its previously overlooked inhabitants helped to fuel the systematic destruction of these settlements."[27]

20 Lydia Kallipoliti, "Torre David/Gran Horizonte," *Journal of Architectural Education* 67/1 (2013), 159-161.

21 http://www.domusweb.it/it/notizie/2012/08/30/torre-david--gran-horizonte.html (25.05.2016).

22 Brillembourg quoted in Kallipoliti, "Torre David/Gran Horizonte," 161.

23 http://www.dezeen.com/2014/07/24/torre-david-mass-eviction-urban-think-tank-response/ (05.05.2016).

24 Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumpner, *Torre David: informal vertical communities* (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2013), 334-359.

25 Peter Mörtenböck and Helge Mooshammer, "Informal Market Worlds: Instruments of Change," *Scapegoat* 04 (2013), 204.

26 http://www.dezeen.com/2014/07/24/torre-david-mass-eviction-urban-think-tank-response/ (05.05.2016).

27 Crane, "The shantytown in Algiers and the colonization of everyday life," 114.

Fig.1: “At the margins? *Patio and Pavilion* and *Torre David – Gran Horizonte* among an array of informal architectures”; collage based on Bayer’s *Field of Vision,* and a selection of pictures of Marjetica Potrč’s work.
Fig.2: Mixing margin and center: *Patio and Pavilion* and *Torre David – Gran Horizonte* among an array of mainstream architectures; collage based on Bayer’s *Field of Vision* and a selection of pictures of London Serpentine Pavilions.

Conclusions

Patio and Pavilion and *Torre David – Gran Horizonte* are two very different types of installations, far apart in time, geography, methodological approach and even intent. However, both of them are key examples of an attempt to crystallize the fascination with *alterity*[28] in the context of an exhibition. Unavoidably, the strength of these installations lies in their acceptance of the contradictions which are implicit to such an attempt, and in the effort to make them productive; the main contradiction relates to ideology. *Patio and Pavilion* mixes the two faces of architecture's fascination with the world of radical art and with the world of social engagement, thus unavoidably clashing with the undying dualism between ethics and aesthetics.

Felicity Scott tells a fascinating tale of institutional ambiguity regarding Drexler's and Ambasz's curatorial experiences at MoMA in the 1960's and 1970's. The former "saw architecture as a high art, as an act of imagination. His idea was that knowledge comes after images, and he therefore had a lingering distrust in ideology. For him, the supreme misfortune occurred when the idea arrived before the image."[29] According to Scott, Drexler acknowledged architecture's powerlessness with regard to carrying out a revolution (the decades-long debate starting with Le Corbusier's *Architecture or Revolution*, the intended title to *Toward an Architecture*, which subtly suggested that architecture was indeed a viable and effective alternative to a political revolution[30]); nonetheless, he did not believe that such powerlessness was the reason for it to discard any political involvement: "although implicitly flawed as the locus of ethico-political intervention, architecture did not have to jettison political ideals; the discipline remained for Drexler a site of 'visionary' conceptualization of an alternative and better world."[31] Ambasz, on the other hand, attempted to carry out a transgressive mandate from his position as Curator of Design at MoMA; his *Universitas* experiment, which was meant to be a "halfway house between the academy and the profession"[32] had the merit of rounding an incredible array of known scholars around the topic, among others, of institutional indiscretion; Ambasz "frequently cast his work at MoMA in terms of a transgressive occupation of, or resistance to, its institutional mandate, hoping that his exhibitions and projects could themselves convey alternative messages to that of the museum's official voice. The possibility, or naiveté, of such a strategy was questioned by many, including Alloway, who in reviewing the *Universitas* symposium queried why corporations 'responsible for environmental deterioration' would support such a critical body. How, he queried, […] could such an officially sponsored institution 'preserve deviance and dissent?'."[33] The question is even more controversial since the gallery can be read – as it often is – as the place of retreat from social engagement, as the white cube where experimentation is allowed by definition because it does not bear any direct consequences onto the real world. But this may not be quite so, given the rising interest in disciplinary by-products that inverts the relationship between practice and research, where the former used to be the object and the latter the observer. In fact, while analyzing the influence of Colomina's seminal book *Privacy and Publicity* within the growing interest that historians have demonstrated for the study of media products related to architecture rather than buildings themselves, Tahl Kaminer reveals such shift as "an implicit rejection of the idea of architecture as agency and related to the architectural retreat from social concerns into the realm of culture,"[34] and stresses, in Jenck's words, the disjunction between the discipline intended as a

28 The term is borrowed from Michael Jenson, *Mapping the global architect of alterity: practice, representation and education* (New York: Routledge, 2014), and from the *Architecture of Alterity* conference held at University of Edinburgh, May 2015.

29 Emile Ambasz as quoted in Felicity D. Scott, *Architecture or Techno-utopia* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 85.

30 For a wider reflection on the influence of Le Corbusier's slogan see Felicity D. Scott, *Architecture or Techno-Utopia*.

31 Felicity D. Scott, *Architecture or Techno-utopia,* 86.

32 Peter Eisenman as quoted in Felicity D. Scott, *Architecture or Techno-utopia,* 90.

33 Felicity D. Scott, *Architecture or Techno-utopia,* 110.

34 Tahl Kaminer, "Framing Colomina," *Footprint* 4 (2009), 129.

mode of communication and any efficacy in the social sphere. Both *Patio and Pavilion* and, more openly, *Torre David – Gran Horizonte* seem (at the very least) to make an attempt at contradicting this standpoint, in that the white cube is employed as platform, in the architect/curator's intentions, for opening up the discipline to hybridization and social engagement – among other things.

Still, Brillembourg and Klumpner's cautious attempt at recreating a site of political and social division within the official framing of the Venice Biennale carries with it a number of dangers which the two architects are careful to dodge. In the introduction to *Torre David: Informal Vertical Communities*, serving as catalogue to the installation, Brillembourg and Klumpner write what looks very much like a disclaimer of any direct political intent which might be read in their work: "our focus here […] is not political, though it is impossible not to touch upon politics. We are not ideologues; we do not subscribe to any '-ism', either political or, for that matter, architectural. Our concern is the ethical and moral role of the architect in society […]. We neither support nor denounce invasions and squatter settlements. Whether or not they ought to have occurred is irrelevant to our work."[35] This disclaimer is meant of course to avoid giving the impression of being affiliated with any party involved, and is a necessary corollary to any such research embedded in a critical political situation; more importantly, though, it is a disclaimer against the possible accusation of disciplinary inconsequentiality: practices of architecture that look beyond their realm run the risk of engendering a one-way stream of energy that does not return anything to the discipline, as both the object of their interest and the scope of their intervention lie elsewhere. This long debate, closely associated with the one around disciplinary autonomy or disciplinary engagement, the Whites and the Greys, criticality or post-criticality, has been re-ignited by recent recognitions, such as the Turner Prize – one of Europe's most prestigious visual arts awards – granted to the London-based collective Assemble, or, again, the Pritzker Prize as well as the direction of the Biennale both awarded to Aravena in a matter of months. In his comment to the news, Patrick Schumacher betrayed ample amounts of uneasiness with regard to the "wider trend in contemporary architecture that in my view signals an unfortunate confusion, bad conscience, lack of confidence, vitality and courage about the discipline's own contribution to the world"[36] and a critical stance towards the fact that "architectural innovation is replaced by the demonstration of noble intentions"[37] – no doubt allowed, in his words, to the possibility that the two might be able to coexist.

Brillembourg and Klumpner's disclaimer points to the 'role of the architect,' albeit a 'moral and ethical' one, in order to avert similar attacks; as long as the attention is focused on the discipline, and the visibility is such as offered by the grounds of the Venice Biennale or the Whitechapel Gallery, the work holds a rightful place within the mainstream discourse and can afford to take a shot at inverting margins and centre. To exploit the mainstream, the institutional, the official, in order to attempt 'making the brains of the system mad,'[38] as Ambasz strove to do during his mandate as Curator of Design at MoMA, seems to be a productive strategy: from the *Mahieddine Grid* to *Patio and Pavilion*, and from *Torre David – Gran Horizonte* to *Reporting from the Front*, the risk of inconsequentiality – at the very least – has been averted.

35 Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumpner. *Torre David: informal vertical communities*, 26-27.

36 http://architizer.com/blog/patrik-vs-pritzker/ (20.05.2016).

37 Ibid.

38 Archizoom as quoted in Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The project of autonomy: politics and architecture within and against capitalism* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), 73.

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ILLUSTRATION CREDITS:

Fig.1: Collage by the author based on Bayer’s *Field of Vision,* and a selection of pictures of Marjetica Potrč’s work.

Fig.2: Collage by the author based on Bayer’s *Field of Vision* and a selection of pictures of London Serpentine Pavilions.