

Cities as Social "Facts"

Interview by Nader Vossoughian with Mark Gilbert, 2003

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Recently, I found myself in Vienna's Museum Quarter, in the library of the Architectural Center. It a place where I love to read, write, and (sometimes) sleep, if only because it seems like the only library in Europe open on weekends. While there, I was paging through a recent issue of *Umbau*, a journal of architectural theory and urbanism published by Vienna's Technical University, and I came across a very impassioned text on the subject of Rem Koolhaas and urbanism.

The author of the piece, Mark Gilbert, was blunt in his assessment of Koolhaas. As he writes in the opening paragraph, "[a]moral and pragmatic, [Rem Koolhaas] dismisses leftist concerns for collective good and derides nostalgia." I was immediately taken by Gilbert's candor, so I read further. Koolhaas, he observes, "busies himself with the issue of reception, preferring to address the constructed identities... that abound in the city today." Gilbert continues: "Koolhaas proposes that decentralization will be the urban process that will free the city from historically defined spatial interrelations."

In the concluding pages to the text, Gilbert proposes an alternative of urbanism rooted in a notion of "social facts". What exactly does he mean by a "social fact"? I asked myself. I wrote him just this question, and, as you will find below, he responded in kind with a series of very illuminating statements.

Vossoughian: *In your essay "On Beyond Koolhaas: Identity, Sameness and the Crisis of City Planning," you make the provocative claim that thinking about cities in terms of their "social facts" might prove a more fruitful model for urban planning than the "post-city" philosophy espoused by Rem Koolhaas. Do you think you could elaborate on what you mean by "social facts"?*

Gilbert: Maybe the best approach to the notion of facts would be to reflect upon its conceptual genesis. The ideas arose in response to Koolhaas' contention that the generic city is – or would be – everywhere the same, and that the ahistoric "post-city" represents a radical rupture in the production of urban space. I believe instead that a city can transform itself radically without losing its essential identity. For me, understanding and defining this identity gives us a way of comprehending the city. Through the notion of "social facts", I try to move away from semiotically-conditioned conceptions of identity – such as Barthesian signification, which is about constructing meanings through the projection and reception of symbols, images, and signs – in favor of notions that are rooted in the *performance* of the city; that is to say, in how the city constructs itself.

For me, facts are the essential agents through which the complex social relations that constitute the city take comprehensible form. What do I mean by this? For example, I have been long interested in Wittgenstein's famous analogy of the Gramophone. In trying to infer the relationship between a thought and its communicable form, Wittgenstein wrote how a musical thought as imagined by a composer could be conveyed as musical notation, as sung or played tonality, as grooves in a record platter, etc. He seems to contend that none of these forms is the privileged representation of the musical thought; rather each is a homolog of the thought itself. In this sense, homolog forms are entities or phenomena that demonstrate or exemplify the qualities, value, or structure of this common idea. It is through the homologues of sheet music, of song, or of recording that this idea can be conveyed from the conceiving subject to the world at large, and it is the sum total of all of these forms that is the projection of this musical thought into the world.

The city can be thought to be very similar to Wittgenstein's music, except that instead of a single composing subject, it is the urban collective that produces an idea of social relations. The city is the homologous form of these social ideas. And, much like music, the city is a complex entity which has many forms, all of which are equally privileged projections of the abstract relation. Public space, commercial architecture, the domestic realm: all of these are materializations of the social basis that underlies the city. These social relations produce the needs to which the city responds. They drive its activities, its production of space as well as architectural form.

My contention is that the city is much more than its mere architectural materialization. If this is true, how can we usefully describe what it is? This is where the idea of urban facts comes in. Facts are the social constructs that codify and spatialize social practice; they take on many forms, most of which are rooted in the banal actualities of everyday life. Property laws and real estate are facts. Zoning laws are facts; so are building codes. Financial practice and tax law are facts. Building technology, material availability, and the organization of the construction industry are facts. Financial practice and tax law are facts. Political empowerment and economic corruption are facts. Local rituals, taboos and hygienic standards are facts. Social distribution and neighborhood development are facts. The existing built environment is a fact. The list is long, but the point is: the urban facts of a city are its set of collective rules, agreements and habits that specifically mediate between space and social practice.

How can the notion of the city as fact help to facilitate the making of urban form? Ultimately, a factual urbanism does not offer recipes and methods for creating form. Instead, it offers a model for seeing the city as a systemic process. Different players have different agendas for the development of the city, and fact-based urbanism helps foreground these discursive conflicts of interest.

One potential embedded in a successful, fact-based urbanism would be that of resistance; for example, resistance to global capital. Now, this is not a call for bans on development or a nostalgia for community. Rather, the challenge is to find processes which allow for the comprehension and counter-balancing of different facts and interests – and not just those embodied in the capitalist market.

Vossoughian: So the approach to urbanism you seem to be calling for appears to resemble the position espoused by the Dutch office MVRDV. As Bart Lootsma has observed, MVRDV's "datascape" methodologies attempt to spatialize those invisible rules and codes that give our civil society its order and coherence. Am I right in drawing this comparison?

Second, when you call for an urbanism based upon the idea of "resistance," are you deliberately invoking Kenneth Frampton's writings on critical regionalism? How would you assess Frampton's position, his view that vital forms of regional architecture can help offset the effects of globalization?

Gilbert: On a very simple plane of comparison, one might say that Frampton is underdeterministic in his approach; and MVRDV overdeterministic. Let me try to explain this somewhat cryptic statement by beginning with critical regionalism.

I think that Frampton is trying to describe strategies for resisting globalized systems of representation; at least on the basis of his essay "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", it seems fair to say that Frampton is more interested in the question of representation than he is in problem of process. His idea of the *arrière-garde* proposes the use of local characteristics as a "middle way" alternative to the sort of architectural composition based upon the glorification of technology or the scenographic appropriation of historical forms. When he touts the ability of „critical

regionalist“ architecture to resist capitalist hegemony, he refers explicitly to its formal traits – how it offers *aesthetic* strategies for making alternative forms. Although there is reference to ideas of local modes of production, in my opinion, Frampton’s idea of the local fails to offer a decisive definition of what context really is. It seems to me that, devoid of any specific and identifiable criteria for defining context, we can only rely on aesthetic judgment to determine what is authentically local; issues of materiality and construction are understood ultimately as problems of imaging, rather than as problems of systematic production.

What interests me, however, is the idea of the city as systemic and historical process. The site consists of its facts, and there is no authentic or inauthentic choice in its development (*contra* Frampton), only possible and non-possible strategies as defined within the discursive conflict of interests that accompany any project. This is not to say that there are no good and bad results, or even desirable and less desirable results. It is to say, rather, that the issue of formal authenticity is not the avenue of resistance within a fact-based notion of urbanism. The resistance arises first and foremost at the level of the *discursive conflict of interest* (an idea I talked about a moment ago), not at the level of representation; resistance is the question of the interested interpretation and the weighing of the site’s facts. A fact-based urbanism does not guarantee a better or more equitable city, it simply means that a system for the perception and weighing of all interests – local and global - is conceivable (although not necessarily present).

Any idea of a fact-based system of negotiation brings us to MVRDV. In my opinion, through his quite masterfully argued essay “What is (really) to be Done?: The Theoretical Concepts of MVRDV,” Bart Lootsma is able to place the work of MVRDV in a much clearer context than the group has yet done for themselves. Lootsma firmly elucidates the benefits of a world that can be parameterized by statistical data, as well as pointing out some of the difficulties of this approach. He argues that the benefit of data is its property of (apparently) objective description of a site, which can be used both as a basis for interest group negotiations as well as a starting point for the projection of the future results of negotiated agreements. For Lootsma, the drawbacks of data-driven negotiation in our age of universal urbanism are, first, that the sample area is difficult to define, thus rendering questionable the validity of data at hand, and second, that the society of rational, consensual democracy is far from universal, making fairly negotiated agreements difficult to achieve and well-nigh impossible to carry out. Yet, despite these drawbacks, Lootsma is more than optimistic that such a statistically-based planning strategy offers a progressive and effective ideal for planning in the future world.

While one can glean much of virtue to from Lootsma’s text, it contains some very basic problems that need to be addressed. On the one hand, there is the extreme positivism upon which the approach is grounded; on the other, there is the rather deterministic role of time and the developmental dynamic that the approach embodies.

It seems to me that, in order to function, MVRDV’s approach is dependent upon the sort of quantifiable data that statistics describe, and relies upon the assumption that the facts required to project and plan are measurable. I have significant doubts that our intercourse with the facts can be completely, mathematically, and verifiably described. *To simplify dramatically, I would argue that all (meaningful) data are facts, but not all facts are data.* The belief that emotions can be fully described through elections or opinion polls is a hard nut to swallow. They are good measuring sticks, possibly the best we have. Yet for me, these quantities are neither adequate nor sufficient for describing a site. Similar to how the final sentence of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* implies that what is really important in the world cannot be described in words, my fundamental question is whether all essential facts of a site can be described in quantities.

Of course, many facts, such as population density or yearly sunshine, are quantifiable; many others, such as property laws, are institutionalized. Yet many facts resist quantitative description. Some, such as unplanned or unplannable multi-functionality, exist more in the realm of ritual than in the realm of data. For example, how many functions does a Japanese tatami room fulfill? Some important urban phenomena are difficult to quantify, as they are contingent upon irrational and unpredictable human factors. Traffic engineers have had insurmountable difficulty modeling traffic jams, as their inception is often caused not just by verifiable accidents, but by other human-induced flow disruptions that occur below the threshold of an accident. Numbers are important, but they don't describe everything. I live and work in Vienna, a city where intrigue and relationships are salient and decisive facts in the planning and realization of the city. How do we quantify intrigue? It's pretty unsatisfying to think that the urban world, or even any specific site, could be reduced to quantified data.

It is important to reiterate what the idea of the city as a totality of facts is – and isn't. It isn't about architecture, it is about urbanism and site. As Jean Attali cogently states, architecture and urbanism “belong to different orders”; this notion of facts attempts to describe the constituent basis of urbanism. It deals first and foremost with conditions, evolutions and potentials, not with the methods of their embodiment which would be architecture. The notion of a fact-based urbanism is not prescriptive; it cannot offer recipes for producing city form or even individual buildings. It offers a conceptual framework for understanding the city as a complex, historic, yet unpredictable spatial system whose facts are real but not always measurable. When we engage only those facts of a site that are quantifiable, we are potentially missing out on extremely important aspects of the urban world that might be the cause of trajectories wholly different than what numbers would predict. The city is an historic, ongoing and often irrational process. What MVRDV is doing is useful, but it is important that we don't mistake data for the city. It isn't: what datascares produce is a significant and interesting approximation, but not the real thing.