



XBASE

Intersection

Felix Kalmenson

October 19- November 10, 2012

ELEVATION//ISOLATION

If we hold that the architecture of tomorrow will always be a modification of the present, we will never truly be able to erase the past and start fresh. All cities are palimpsests and three steps cannot be taken without encountering ghosts. However, a large majority of recent construction has denied this very principal. As architect and theorist Jean Nouvel remarks, "it seems as though the majority of buildings in our cities weren't thought out in the sense of history and history or ideas of architecture, like they arrived there through a kind of automatism or lack of attention...We've built very quickly, very badly and heavily throughout the century and are now find ourselves with a body of effectively ahistorical architectural material."^[1] This is no new idea. Giles Ivain commented in his *Formulary for a New Urbanism* in 1953, about the increasing banality and homogeneity of modern architecture, a.k.a tower development, speaking to the eradication of unique neighbourhoods and experimentation of form. Like a 'Nietzschean sequence of experiences the glass-curtain-walled condos have effectively surrounded us with a system of withdrawal, elevation, isolation and contemplation of the infinite'^[2] that denies the natural processes of decay.

In his most recent installation, *INTERSECTION*, Toronto-based artist Felix Kalmenson has constructed a disorienting labyrinth of panels illustrating various façades of present-day condos. An experiment in psychogeography, Kalmenson's repetitive panels generate a disorientation brought on by the uniformity of the architectures presented. Showcasing the interim-space or non-space instigated by the blank-slate façades of modern condo development, the cross-shaped maze disorients and produces a sense of insipid claustrophobia. By adopting the vernacular of the raw construction material and signage of said condos Kalmenson's makeshift scaffolding and vinyl panels reflect the empty-shell nature of the designs, the 'false dream' of what that space will become. As the artist remarks, within the labyrinth "one is confronted with a dystopian vision in which memory in space has been denied and the neoliberal paradigm of progress and privatization is central."

Kalmenson's portrayal of the blank, uninhabited façades of such commonly seen structures causes us to reflect on the latent effects our surroundings are having on our sense of self and connection to society as a whole; architecture becomes a mirror with which to reflect ourselves. In consideration of this, *INTERSECTION*'s critique focuses on our increasing devaluation of the 'publicness' of a building. Shared spaces are becoming increasingly rare in new design and public passersby are often met with an impenetrable wall, denying any meaningful interactions with the local community. Private communities,



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and condominiums have effectively created economically and socially segregated geographies. Such spaces are no longer critical and produce apolitical, distilled neighbourhoods in which growth and change are stunted.

The principals of contemporary condo design have a long history reaching back to the turn of the century modernists. Champions of functionalism or The New International Style, such as Le Corbusier and Mies Van Der Ros, held that beauty is contained within logic and ethics themselves- hence what is most efficient and functional is most beautiful. Because of this idea, they devised an aesthetic belief in making the exterior of an object or building a reflection of the practical functions of the interior and of the constructive idea. And so we arrive at the blank, unornamented façades Kalmenson's piece is so aptly brings into consideration in his formulation of a future Toronto in which, as he describes, "the condominium boom has proceeded unhindered, creating a landscape of architectural and economic uniformity."

Reacting against disorderly and often unhealthy urban planning of the 19th century, Le Corbusier theorized creating towering 'machines for living in', abolishing the street and making it invisible. As Le Corbusier envisioned in the 1930s, "the new city [as he saw it], would be comprised of elegant, carefully designed apartment blocks having every possible amenity...handsome office towers rising above parkland, far above the city streets."^[3] The idea of Le Corbusier's 'tower-city' was a utopian tower model of a city dwelling that took place above the city's infrastructure and roadways. The issue, of course, is the creation of a distinct socio-economic divide. Those who can, build segregated colonies, hiding all infrastructure including utility employees, postal workers, and anyone non-affluent. Furthermore, such design denies the central processes by which cities evolve, causing them to become outdated early and present challenges when considering any future evolution of their form and structure. As Jane Jacobs commented, "they're really very nice towns if you had no plans of your own and did not mind spending your life among others with no plans of their own...As in all utopias, the right to have plans of any real significance belonged only to planners in charge."^[4] As Kalmenson's piece proposes, the condos present urban landscapes devoid of individuality and human presence.

The inadequacies and rigidity of Le Corbusier's town planning are well known. Regardless of this however, his methods have been retained and realized by generations of architects into the present and will continue to be the case, as Kalmenson suggests, far into the future. Consider how similar Le Corbusier's concepts are to developmental realities such as Toronto's CityPlace waterfront 'community', which is arguably the locus of the recent and projected condo boom in Toronto. Plans for new communities along Toronto's waterfront, for example, have naturalized existing social inequalities in the city. Recall the



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tent city events of a few years ago; namely the destruction, displacement and further obscuring of hundreds of homeless dwellers on the Cherry Street plot, now the new location of the proposed East Portlands condo developments. In such cases, and as is often the norm, there is a strong neglect of historical consciousness, an urge to destroy history. "Paving over tent city was an erasure of the past and social context of the community."^[5] Such transformations are devoid of memory and reference to any social or geographical demographic, they move us towards a society structured around exclusion. Our concerns about such developments don't just apply to the area along the water in Toronto; we are building glass-and-steel suburbs in the sky everywhere. One only has to think of China's infamous ghost towns, sprawling cities such as Zhengzhou New District in the Henan Province and Ordos in the Gobi desert, which continue to be built but are largely unoccupied shells of towers.

Architecture has a profound effect on our spatiotemporal experience, it is a mirror of who we are as a society and can shape future behaviours and relationships. It is a witness and an artifact of history, and by its very existence reflects that history back to ourselves. Through this reflection of struggle, architecture comes to signal the possibility of new struggles. The Situationists recognized this in the 1950s when they defined the term psychogeography as "the study of the precise effect of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, acting directly on the affective comportment of individuals."^[6] As Asper Johns stated "the exterior of a house should never reflect the interior, but should be a source of poetic feeling for the viewer...we must arrive at a dynamic conception of form, we must face the truth that any human form is in a continual state of transformation. We must, not like the rationalists, shun this transformation."^[7] How then do we integrate towered living into the preexisting cityscape or vista, rather than having them exist autonomously as impenetrable fortresses? As the International Style itself has been in existence for almost ten decades the buildings themselves have their own history, but are they able reflect that of their surroundings or are they destined to dominate by means of their severe visual language? It seems as though the later might be the case in that the skyscraper has become the subject, rather than an object of the city itself.

We must subvert the intention to substitute historical imitation with technological invention and somehow integrate the two with actual life. There is a need to transcend the rigid program of a build environment and appropriate it through alternative uses and visions. "We need to make sure that the notion of connectedness is addressed," says The Toronto Community Foundation President and CEO, Rahul Bhardwaj. "Sometimes the physical infrastructure is what it is, but you can get a connectedness through social infrastructure."^[8] In Toronto's St. James Town and Alexandra Park, for example, this has



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meant community kitchens, organic gardens and collaborative community projects to beautify the neighbourhood. We can also take note from pop-up initiatives such as San Francisco born PARK(ing) Day, now observed in 162 cities and 35 countries, an annual worldwide event where artists, designers and citizens transform metered parking spots into temporary public parks. Let's take cue from the Situationists and more recent community movements' insistence on appropriating spaces and make the streets livable, social places where we can interact with one another again instead of hiding behind glass curtains.

-Stephanie Fielding

[1] Baudrillard, Jean & Jean Nouvel. The Singular objects of architecture. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, p.73.

[2] Ábalos, Iñaki & Juan Herreros. Tower & Office: From Modernist Theory to Contemporary Practice. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, p. 14.

[3] Baker, Geoffrey H. Le Corbusier: The Creative Search. London: E & FN Spon., 1996, p.278.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Bunce, Susannah & Douglas Young. "Image- Making by the Water: Global City Dreams and the exclusion of exclusion," in Paloscia, Raffaele (ed.) The Contested Metropolis: Six cities at the beginning of the 21st century. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2004, p.216.

[6] Knabb, Ken. (ed./trans.) "Definitions" (1958), in Situationist International Anthology, 1981, p. 45.

[7] McDonough, Tom. (ed.) The Situationists and the city. London: Verso, 2009, p.54-55.

[8] Keenan, Edward. "Is Cityplace the Next Toronto Ghetto?" in The Grid. November 10, 2011. Online [Available] <http://www.thegridto.com/life/real-estate/is-cityplace-torontos-next-ghetto/>.