

ΕΘ 2019 - HUST ATHENS STUDIO INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT BRIEF

2008. An international economic collapse in the Western world; in Southern Europe, the situation was disastrous. In Athens, the evidence was all too apparent- unfinished buildings boarded up and abandoned. Streets of empty shopfronts. Graffiti and vandalism everywhere. So, what role could architecture take in this new situation. In retrospect, architects had been all too complicit in an orgy of property speculation. In Athens, the driver had been the 2004 Olympics – while international star architects had been brought in to project a new image for the city: Calatrava designing a stadium and bridge, Tschumi completing the new Acropolis Museum, new buildings had appeared all over the city, a process fuelled by cheap credit. But under the new disposition, there was almost nothing under construction. Central Syntagma Square in 2013 was being deconstructed – stone paving had been broken up and used as a weapon by rioters. So, what could be the new role for architects? 2008 raised the uncomfortable question of whether architects could avoid being implicated in an economic system of speculation, waste and useless consumption. Questions of style and form became re-understood as imbricated within the processes of commercial branding. Tafuri had, after a similar economic collapse – the 1973 oil crisis – pronounced that "The search for an alternative within the structures that condition the very character of architectural design is indeed an obvious contradiction of terms." Or more elegantly, as he later put it: "we pass from the object itself to the system that gives meaning to it."

An *Other* architecture? The history of such attempts to escape the contamination of the real – from the *dérive* of the Situationiste Internationale, the opium dreams of Archigram, Superstudio and Archizoom to the graphical utopias of Raimund Abraham and Massimo Scolari leads us to conclude that this ambition can only be achieved within the visionary, the dream-like state of suspension of reality, in fact from within a mode of thinking that is in essence cinematic. And again, it was Tafuri who placed the film-maker Sergei Eisenstein in a central position within his discussion of the historical 'Project' in which fragments are put into motion within an explosive montage. Benjamin famously argued that the reproduced image exemplified by the cinematic narrative had stripped art of its aura, as cult object, reducing it to 'exhibition value'. If the historical Project is work directed toward the laying bare and demystifying of historical processes and the production of material culture then, as Adorno argued, it is the image as the dis-illusioned artwork, indexical of the process of economic exchange, and as fragment, that is resistant to the nihilistic and totalizing process of this exchange. It is out of this desire for an architecture as critical fragment, simultaneously both utopian and without illusion, that the idea of a series of design workshops in Athens was conceived, in which neither we, nor the student participants, come equipped with the answers. These workshops are to go beyond both the usual picturesque or touristic consumption of the exotic, and a fetishist preoccupation with urban disaster and decay, and instead instil a confrontation with the multilayered and complex city in a state not just of crisis, but also of rapid change. They are to pose the questions of what tools the architect could bring to a creative encounter with the city, in the aftermath of the ten year crisis, and the too-obvious futility of formalist obsessions. Indeed, Athens has been the subject – willing or otherwise – of several recent research projects. Perhaps the most profound investigation was undertaken by Yorgos Simeoforides who asked, before the 2004 Olympics, "What about the homeless castaways of globalization? The refugees of dismantled socialism? Cumbersome infrastructure? The reuse of abandoned industrialization? Our degraded and forsaken peripheries? Public spaces, swallowed up by privatized video monitors?" More recently, the neo-Rationalist Pier Vittorio Aureli with Elia Zenghelis, Maria Guidici and Platon Issaias in 2010-11 ran a studio for the Berlage Institute on the generic Athenian apartment house, the *polykatoikia*, on the premise of the interrelation "...between the nature of labour, the generic in architecture, and the appropriation of this generic aspect of the city as a common space". Reading the post-war proliferation of the *polykatoikia* as a form of ideologically driven anti-leftist policy directed towards the political pacification of the

population, the studio tutors, and Aureli in particular, sought to "... to expose the generic nature of the *polykatoikia*, while recovering the architecture of the city beyond the pixel of the single dwelling. Instead of a master plan, we propose a catalogue of architectural actions that aim to connect the fragmented dwellings into coherent and formally finite collective urban forms. These forms are the courtyard, the block, the street, and the most collective layer of the city: the ground floor." This breathtaking utopianism would seem to fly in the face of Tafuri's call to abandon the illusion that "...by means of the image alone, tries to anticipate the conditions of an architecture 'for a liberated society'". Finally, the Greek multi-disciplinary collective SARCHA, organized by Dr. Maria Theodorou, has attempted a bottom-up form of anarchist urban action, based upon detailed interviews and mapping of the ways in which the Greek cities of Athens and Thessalonica are actually inhabited. To their sociological and political activist perspective, we add a desire to explore the condition of *immanence* pervading this city in a state of crisis and becoming, to explore the particularities of this specific 'exploding montage'. Significantly, the outcomes have to be unpredictable. Rather than allowing an image of the city, real or imagined, to predominate over its social space, we attempt the inverse. For precedents, we turn to the example of Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project, and to the fragmentary urban imaginings of Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant*. In this regard Cunningham notes: The obsolescent remnants of an earlier form of commodity capitalism were an unbidden spatial unconscious. Thus, "when the pickaxe menaces them" the arcades suggest to Aragon that "Future mysteries will arise from the ruins of today's" and the ephemeral decomposition of commodified space becomes evident. "Progress" for Surrealists such as Aragon was already undercut and outmoded without the intercession of a mythical nature.'

This idea of the past that resurfaces as a memory, that flashes up momentarily at a moment of crisis may be juxtaposed with that of the citation or trace of the past within a new construct. This contrast between the past as a fleeting image and the past given new agency through citation may go towards explaining the operation of image and the experience of imageability in projects that appear to embody continuity – both the fragmentary projects of Pikionis, and the social housing projects by Siza in Portugal. Here 'image' acquires a 'thickness', qualitatively different from the contemporary theorization of cultural mediatization and estrangement. Image as citation or trace entails the construction of place through recollection of fragment, through the exploding montage of fragments. Rather than attempting to impose a semblance of formal unity upon this montage, it is proposed that a close reading of the social and physical fabric of a territory, understood through traversing a territory, recording significant traces of urban artefacts, the historical stratigraphy of buildings, topography and spatial practices, may form the basis for a contingent sense of place through which the broader complexity of the city – its memory, identity and latencies – may be apprehended. Athens, unlike ancient ruined cities, or the modern-day ruin of Detroit, is persisting in the face of, in spite of, its abandonment by international capital, is reforming itself into another condition, another economy, as had Aragon's Paris.

So – a workshop for architecture students – students who are foreign to Greece and Athens, who, for the most part, misunderstand the contexts they are placed in, who react instinctively to the confronting images that everyday life throws up – office buildings with openings bricked up and turned into doss-houses for illegal immigrants, wholesale 'shops' that appear to be fronts for activities rather more sinister, an explosive increase in drug addiction on the streets – no longer concealed beneath a facade of respectability. But they also encounter a city where people inhabit the street as an extension of their private world, where moments of richness and authenticity may be discovered everywhere – a vibrant city that is both modern and incredibly ancient. We set the task of mapping this city as a modern-day Marco Polo. We set out, as cartographers, to explore a complex entity. Our desire is to extract a *personal* narrative that is to be communicated in words, images and drawings – individual and group narratives/journeys in 2 and 3 dimensions. Rather than representing an existing

linear geographical composition, these mappings are to reveal latencies, traces, qualities potentials for intervention.

We take a multi-layered approach, embracing both pragmatic, as well as the more intangible aspects. Students must navigate into unknown territories, speculate on potential correspondences and relationships, and form connections across cultural and physical distances. We are interested in the idea of a true sustainability – recapturing and sustaining a sense of wonderment and flow of possibilities within an architectural framing of the world. This is to be approached through an obsessive and focused mapping, tracing and observation of particular places, both known and unknown. Within the projects, spaces must be inscribed with events, out of which a sense of the particular and specific emerges. Students are to be introduced to theories of Psychogeography developed by the French Situationists, and to the profound strangeness of Tarkovsky's surrealist films, notably *Stalker*, which evoked a landscape of wonderment out of the ruins of the recent past, and a dreamlike sense of imminent revelation, that resonated strangely and profoundly with the experience of Athens.