



Organicism: Inter-Disciplinarity and Para-Architectures

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Notes

1. Manfredo Tafuri, "Introduction: The Historical 'Project,'" *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. Pellegrino d'Acerno and Robert Connolly (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1987), 18; first pub. in Italian in *Casabella* 429 (Oct. 1977); rev. in

Tafuri, *La sfera e il labirinto* (Turin, 1979); first pub. in English in *Oppositions* 17 (summer 1979), trans. Diane Ghirardo and Stephen Santarelli.

2. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, 1981), 40. Cf. K. Michael Hays, *Architecture Theory Since 1968* (1998; Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2000), x–xv, n. 2.

Organicism: Inter-Disciplinarity and Para-Architectures

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Car, tout étant fait pour une fin, tout est nécessairement pour la meilleure fin. Remarquez bien que les nez ont été faits pour porter des lunettes; aussi avons-nous des lunettes.

Voltaire, *Candide*

The various components of the story of the Scottish planner Patrick Geddes's 1925 town plan for Tel Aviv present rich material for the historian's favorite ploy when accounting for historical "failure": contradiction. A biologist is asked to design a town plan for the future Zionist capital; he is a so-called "expert" who, in a letter to the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, confesses to his utter ignorance about Zionism (while inveterately proclaiming to his clients that the organic force of his propositions was only the modern manifestation of ancient Judaism eschatology!). Then there is the matter of Geddes's much-touted site-sensitivity: his theory of "diagnostic survey." Geddes laid out the plan well after he had left Palestine, never to return. The story gets better, or more curious, depending on one's point of view. We cannot escape the irony that the foundational plan for the future capital city of the post-Holocaust state is credited to somebody who was a fervent advocate for eugenics.¹ Then again, Geddes had proposed that the architecture of the new town be based on that of the surrounding Arab inner cities and villages. This nativism was treated with scant respect by his Eurocentric clients, whose Anglophilic predilections for garden cities in the Balfour era was eventually subsumed under the proliferation of Bauhaus façades with the mass immigration of German Jews in the 1930s.

As it turned out, very few of Geddes's principal suggestions were retained. The 1938 Amendment to the plan, made after Geddes's death, reflected increased collaboration between Zionists and the British administration in the face of Arab insurrection, and was more amendment than original. Nevertheless, Geddes's status as the pioneering planner of Tel Aviv has remained unchallenged.

There is no "picture" here of the series of architectural and other historical trajectories that cross each other every

which way in the events mentioned above. That is, there is no *visual record* that a certain "art history" (with its fetishism of the object) might be able to recapitulate. There is the additional circumstance that Geddes's original plan and model of the Tel Aviv proposals were ransacked by Arab protestors in a Jerusalem office. But more important, there is also the matter of Geddes's organicism: the idea that the transitions wrought by urban planning should be as functionally integrated as the evolution of various biological organisms. Had the plan been realized in its fullness, it would have been as if it were a natural outgrowth of the existing cultural and geophysical environment. It would be impossible to determine where the latter ended and the former began. The new city would have been designed to *disappear*. Certainly, if one goes to Dunfermline, Baroda, Indore—places in the world where Geddes was able to actualize his propositions—one would be hard put to discern his imprint. Visually, it is impossible to say, for instance, that such and such colonnade was added by Geddes or that such and such colonnade is indicative of his "style." Organicism manifests itself here in some of its classic dimensions: a certain vegetal imagery, the disinterest in radically new conceptions of form, the pretense that change has occurred undirected as if it were a self-propelled continuum, the consonance and correspondence of parts as a metonymic image of the (asserted) unity of the whole. It is important to note that this organicism is as much temporal as it is a facet of place-making or city-planning: Geddes's surgical metaphors construed the ideal urban intervention into the geocultural environment as if a graft onto a living corpus, where change is already at work. The new intervention, at once historical and architectural, must mitigate its foreignness, its exceptionality, so that the "improved" elements are indistinguishable from the ongoing life of the ever-evolving whole of the existing environment.

But what if that which must not make itself apparent, visible, does not appear in the first place? This is the peculiar fate of Geddes's Tel Aviv plan: designed to disappear into

its surroundings in the first place, its buildings remained unrealized by Zionists and its paper burnt by Arab insurgents. Although this example can be stretched only so far, let us use it to push the proposition to its utmost theoretical potential. The particularity of this historiographic predicament should not be elided: something whose objective was to be invisible to the future historian's eyes did not happen at all. Think of an army so well camouflaged that the enemy ignores the territory altogether, leaving the former completely unable to engage in combat. Or an audience that still thinks it is listening to music, even after John Cage has left the building. Or a museum of contemporary art that takes *seriously* its mission of undoing the sanctifying aura of art, such that one day a broom left by the janitor is mistaken by patrons to be a "found object" (which, in a certain sense, it now *is*). In each of the above cases, the attempt to affect the normal is undone by another expectation of the normal. Think now of the historian's desire to account for life "as it was," or the planner's desire to remake life itself along some new trajectory.

It would not do to reduce the problem here to some historicist account of the essential practicability or non-practicability of a proposition: that X plan "failed" because of Y exigency, doomed by various contradictions that mutually cancel out the possibility of the event. (In any case, the non-realization of a plan or proposition hardly stands in the way of its continued influence on later discourse; utopias are as effective and present in everyday life as "real" buildings.) Rather than *construct* the obvious—the historian's inordinate reliance on rational explication as the tool to neutralize the phenomenon of change—it is incumbent on us to ask what constitutes the terms of the obvious at any given point. The proposed non-occurrence and the actual non-occurrence proceed from two different structures of narrative. To link the two, to "explain" the event, would only be possible at the intersection of several heterogeneous phrase regimens.²

For those of us who teach, let us ask the same question in terms of "methodological" training: If Geddes's Tel Aviv plan was the subject of a seminar, how much training in which of the following fields would be adequate to understand the complexities involved in the non-realization of the plan: International relations? Anti-Semitism? Arab nationalism? Anthropology? Sociology? Biology? Chemistry? Urban planning? Demography? Art? "What happened," then, would not be one event or thing but rather a multiplication of fragmentary scenes obtained from heterogeneous oculi, each shoring up the next to create a fiction of the "whole," that such and such did or did not indeed happen, in such and such a way. Does not an organicism then

lurk at every turn of the story, fracturing it at every point of its tenuous assembly, at the very core of disciplinary thinking, indeed, at the very point where disciplinarity becomes possible, imaginable as a way of thinking? To think that one grasps the entirety of life a little better when one rigorously examines a fragment—is this not organicism? What does it mean, then, to tread into interdisciplinarity, to break with the discipline, if disciplinarity is always already broken through and through, even as it must maintain the mirage of the whole? This last facet of disciplinarity must not be elided—notwithstanding the many confessions of partial expertise and incomplete knowledge: a discipline *cannot exist* without some kind of ulterior claim to explain a totality, an organically constructed, that is, discontinuous, totality, which will then trump all other totalities. Just recall the manner in which architectural thinkers consider all built environments "architecture."

Geddes's theory of "synergy"—the calibrated and interwoven collaboration between various forms of disciplinary expertise—is not out of keeping with such a hybrid, modern, conception of the discipline, although it retains, as we shall see, the residue of what we might call an archaic faith in the servitude of part to the whole.³ Geddes's response to the fragmented construct of the city is to propose a scene of multiplication: where no one discipline can claim authority, many must come together to collaborate. A synergy must emerge between the human and natural sciences, a "positive" organicism where each would be critically self-aware of its strengths and limits, of its place as a dexterous element within the polyphony of the whole (city).

We note here that this romanticism of uniting whole and part suffuses work such as that of the Italian school of "micro-historians": to reconstruct a history of the "normal" by examining the determinant factors surrounding a *chance*—in other words, rationally inexplicable—occurrence that *incidentally* produces a mark in the archive. The "cognitive failures" attributed to the colonial archives by Indian subalternist historians are not exempt from this fantasy of "annalising" the "exceptional-normality" of the event.

In my view, both the *épistémè* and the *mentalité* and *longue durée* of the Annales historians were attempts to counter this element of the chance, inexplicable event through a structural formation. Foucault did so through the fantasy of a freewheeling collation of random events yielding up the blueprint of the organic totality of an "era;" the Annales school did so by formulating a human historiography measured against the mercurial and transcendent pace of the weather.⁴

We return to the methodological question posed for our hypothetical seminar. The fractured texture of discipli-

narity—in its attempt to explain the vicissitudes of chance—cannot be healed by some kind of recipe of interdisciplinarity combining: ten grams of sociology, three pinches of visual studies, and a spoonful of biology in twelve hours of reading followed by three hours of heated discussion. Disciplinarity is not, in the first place, a simple division of labor. Kant gave us an example that we can extrapolate from further: What fells the apple from the tree? Gravity? The unerringness of my aim? The Oedipal anger that causes in me a rush of sentiment, sublimating itself into inexplicable acts of violence against low-hanging fruit? As Jean-François Lyotard put it, “The ‘action’ of the cause that ‘produces’ the effect is only a principle of the *unintelligibility* of the phenomena.”⁵ Something happened, but who—what phrase regimen—will be called on to explain it? The physicist, the sports writer, the psychoanalyst? The history to be written here traces a *dispute* not only between the “positive” characterizations of the event but also between the relative authority and stakes of various “experts.” The schisms by which different disciplines stake out their territory are neither fluky nor casual, to be retracted at will. Otherwise, the murderer could call Isaac Newton to his defense: Was it not the law of mechanics that was responsible for the bullet leaving the revolver and behaving the way that it did? The ascendancy of some disciplines in relation to others is not a matter of competence—of *better* explaining the whole—but of a juridical felicity.

The same phenomena can receive any number of explanations, but they cannot be reconciled with each other. They are disjunct, heterogeneous. This is because the whole—the field of critique—is for Kant of an entirely different genre from the part—the field of empiricism. Crudely put, the former belongs to the realm of the subjective and the transcendental; the latter belongs to the world of objective phenomena and the sensations they produce. This is at odds with the classical view, where the whole remains an elusive aggregate of its parts, best encapsulated by the well-known tale of the four philosophers touching the different organs of the elephant in the cave in the Buddhist *Jataka*. (One thinks it’s a rope, the other a tree trunk, the third a fan and so forth; the failure to comprehend the whole becomes a fable of the incompleteness of human knowledge in the face of the transcendent.) In many ways, Geddes’s conception of synergy as *multi-disciplinarity* retains this archaic character of organicism: that the particular can be compartmentalized in the service of an efficient conception of the whole.

The modern variant of organicism can emerge only after Kant’s conception of the critique; as such, organicism now marks a site of disjunction rather than that of mere par-

cellization, to which we can also attribute the birth of a proper (inter- or intra-) disciplinarity. For Kant, the whole is of a separate temporality, one cannot build up to it purely from the study of the finite; the “sublime” is the abyss that “aporetically” links the two. The whole no longer hovers above and beyond the part which is not of it but becomes equally a field of human endeavor; the part is no longer part but para-sitical to the whole. Parts can be used to conceptualize any number of variants of the whole and vice versa: indeed, the proliferation of myriad such wholes will cause a proliferation of disciplinarity in post-Enlightenment thought. The proposition, if taken in reverse, leads to an even more interesting clause. The primary disjunction that triggers this proliferation should not be forgotten: disciplinarity does not connote so much a homogeneous strain of objects as a field that gathers unto itself a range of discontinuous, higgledy-piggledy, discourses and objects over which it claims authority. An other-disciplinarity, a para-disciplinarity, is already at work in the very claim of the discipline. A discipline cannot be “built” as if from a foundation, it can only acquire a history, a track record, and a monopolization of examples. For our discipline, then, does not architectural discourse, in its attempt to gain control over the various meanings of architecture, as it holds “architecture” in the mirror as its self-image, always speak of *something else*, multiply rather than reduce its examples in the attempt to strengthen its hold over epistemic territory? This is organicism’s greatest bequest, lurking right within its terminology of unification and systemic wholes: its structure of discontinuity, an all-pervasive structure of fractures and risks where the examination of parts remain irreducibly para-architectural.⁶ To end with our own organic metaphor: Don’t we know that some fractured bones heal to become stronger than they were in their original states, while others remain a permanent wound?

Notes

1. Given Geddes’s pacifism, his eugenicism would not lend itself to something like the Final Solution, but rather to something like more recent demographic managerial tools such as the Genome Project or the quieter holocaust of “population control” in the Third World.
2. For an explanation of phrase regimens, see Jean-François Lyotard, *The differend: phrases in dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis, 1988).
3. Geddes’s theory of “synergy” involved collaboration between the various new fields developed in the late nineteenth century: biomechanics and biometrics, psychology and sociology, hygienics and eugenics, telecommunication, electricity, and statistics. It is important to note that all these fields were themselves hybrids, involving contributions from several different areas of research. These hybrid forms of expertise, in Geddes’s view, supplanted the modern fields of academic research, themselves barely warmed over from the classical disciplines: philosophy and mathematics (logic),

physics and chemistry (aesthetics), biology (psychology), and sociology (ethics).

4. See part 3, "The Territory of the Historian," in Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Histories: French Constructions of the Past*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer et al. (New York, 1995). See also Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in Guha and Gayatri Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York, 1988), 345–88; orig. pub. as Ranajit Guha, "The Prose

of Counter-Insurgency," *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (1983), 1–42.

5. Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (Stanford, 1994), 133.

6. I use this word as the working title of my next book, on built infrastructures and theories of wealth in the history of modernity: "ParaArchitectures: TransNational HaHas and Other Archaeologies of Capital."

Social Theory of Space: Architecture and the Production of Self, Culture, and Society

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In 1989, geographer Edward Soja contended that, for at least a century, time and history had been privileged over space in the conduct of Western social science.¹ While Soja's position may have been overstated, it formally recognized intensifying attention to the critical role of space in the conduct of society itself. In architectural history, too, there has been a growing recognition of the instrumentality of built space (buildings, cities, landscapes) in such diverse facets of human life as cognition, selfhood, social and ideological relations, economy, politics, and power. Inquiries into that complex instrumentality of built space have been ongoing in many disciplines since the beginning of the twentieth century, with consequences that have become critical to the pursuit and understanding of architectural history. This essay represents a sampling of some of the more influential strands of those inquiries.

The role of the physical, material environment in articulating human consciousness, and thus in making meaning, was a critical factor in the work of both Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.² For these phenomenologists, who were concerned with the manner in which the human body was in its own right productive of space, a crucial matter was the process by which the specific material fabric of space structured bodily orientation and human consciousness. Martin Heidegger, in his discussion of building as a process of gathering and presencing, explored the opportunity that architecture afforded people to *dwell*—with considerable spiritual, metaphysical, and corporeal importance being attendant on that word.³ Complementary efforts by pragmatists such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have extended further the understanding of built space (and its relation to the body) as a fundamental instrument in the articulation of consciousness, understanding, and identity.⁴

Empirical analysis of the instrumentality of built space in

human belief systems was central to the work of Émile Durkheim, who in analyzing the physical spaces of Australian and Native American cultures demarcated the role of those spaces in the articulation of social relations (such as in clans), consciousness, and cosmology.⁵ Durkheim's work set the stage for much structuralist analysis to follow, an approach that—unlike the phenomenologists' insistence that space is *produced* by the person—constantly contended with the danger of determinism, that is, understanding specific material environments as capable of inculcating specific beliefs and practices. Michel Foucault offered a partial, and highly influential, corrective to this problem in his analysis of buildings not as instruments of consciousness or as prescriptive of social relations, but rather as capable of deploying power. Exploring the manner in which specific building types and designs both afford and deny specific practices, Foucault underscored the instrumentality of material form in the transmission of regimes of power: built space became an apparatus for fashioning ranks and roles of people in society.⁶

Foucault did not entirely resolve the determinist dilemma. From a Foucauldian perspective, regimes of power, as materialized in built space, primarily articulate the *relations* that govern the people who inhabit that space; they do not prescribe personal consciousness or identity (although these surely are shaped and influenced by the relations of power that obtain). Nevertheless, Foucault's account affords scant room for personal agency in the face of the extent and durability of the architectural apparatus. Change is possible, but only over considerable spans of time and/or on a revolutionary scale. In contrast, Allen Feldman has shown in his study of resisters incarcerated by the British in Northern Ireland that the most rigid of architectural confines do not erase agency, and in fact afford opportunity to further political ends.⁷