
Camillo Boano revisits the theoretical connections between space and politics by exploring the relevance of Giorgio Agamben’s writings for the theory and practice of architecture as a discipline tasked with producing the built urban environment—the predominant spatial form of contemporary political life. Architecture, Boano argues, has abandoned the critique of modern-day capitalism as architects, planners, and urban designers have taken a position of ideological complacency with the industrial-capitalist complex that drives megalomaniac construction enterprises, fuelling gentrification and segregation dynamics within the existing forms of planetary urbanism. Boano thus envisages the book as a theoretical call for action that will “thematize and tackle questions relating to our ways of doing architecture individually and collectively, producing a repertoire of concepts that in the future could become eminently architectural” (p.167). In other words, this is not so much an inquisitive work on architecture, but rather a critical text that discusses the potential of developing a new language for architecture.

In order to start thinking in such a language, Boano enlists Agamben, one of the most influential, albeit contested, political thinkers of our time. Agamben has inspired countless debates on the politics of space, mainly through his conceptualization of the camp as the main site of modernity (Minca 2015). Boano’s objective is not to readdress already known debates about Agamben’s work, but rather to utilize the latter’s political writings in order to rethink the ideological goals of architecture and in a sense “make” space for new ways to articulate architectural concepts. Agamben’s main potency, explains Boano, lies in the fact that he does not offer solutions from a higher, distant reality, but rather proposes answers that are radically immanent, inherited from within the very discursive mechanism we seek to deconstruct. By doing so Agamben enables a “line of flight away from this current age of theoretical poverty” (p.157).

The book is divided into three parts. In the first Boano traces the multiple ways in which Agamben’s writing resonates with the political and theoretical encounters between architecture and urban practices. The second drafts a “periodic cartography” of Agamben’s œuvre to familiarize readers with the latter’s vocabulary and present the elements and threads at the centre of Agamben’s philosophy. The third unpacks key Agambenian concepts such as “in-distinction”, “indifference”,

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“paradigm”, “profanity”, “use”, “play”, and “example”.

Boano dedicates considerable effort to deciphering the concept of the *dispositif*, as an apparatus of power that combines several discursive mechanisms (such as the production of architectural knowledge, implementation of planning strategies, and usage of legal mechanisms). Since today economics prevails over politics, *dispositifs* massively proliferate in all urban settings and take several distinctive forms, all in one manner or another in order to govern our lives.

Boano is interested in challenging *dispositifs* through the idea of deactivating the devices of power. He shows how Agamben’s critical project is one that calls for the neutralization and deactivation of a number of apparatuses that govern and determine human action and human status, these being law, space, and language (p.57). The key to understanding deactivation lies in unpacking the notion of *potentiality*: the ability to perform an action and the decision not to do so. Boano discusses the tension between the different conceptualizations of potential, or, perhaps, the potential of potentiality as an idea and as an action.

Employing Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street”, Boano explores the power subsumed in the decision not to act on one’s potential and by doing so deactivating the mechanism that depends on this action. As Boano explains, the notion of politics lies in the ability to subtract oneself from the apparatuses of power that govern and prescribe identities, roles, and positions. This is why Agamben is pertinent to Boano’s discussion: his work seeks to explain how one can achieve the “subtraction of the subject from existing apparatuses, whereby they appropriate their own potentiality of ‘whatever’ being” (p.162). This subtraction deactivates and renders apparatuses inoperative: “Only by virtue of being able to realize all impotentiality can an action truly exhibit its own potentiality of acting and being. By actualizing its own impotentiality, the action is able to turn on itself and exhibit itself in the medium of pure potentiality” (p.133).

Hence, the unique trait of deactivation as an action lies in the distinct professional context in which the ability not to act takes place. Classical texts dealing with disobedience such as Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government”, emphasise the capability, and duty, of every individual to take a stand against oppression and political corruption through the decision not to lend body, soul, or property to the powers that be. Yet deactivation is relevant in accordance with the profession of the individual. Hence, we can think, perhaps, of deactivation when we contemplate physicians choosing not to force-feed a hunger striker; a soldier deciding not to examine detainees at a checkpoint; or
teachers opting not to follow the curriculum they find to be potentially harmful.

What Boano does is to develop the discussion on deactivation and potentiality further. By introducing architecture to Agamben’s thought, Boano asks: how can space itself be deactivated? That is, how can we render spatial potentials inoperative? Boano rightly remarks that to think through the inoperative potentialities of architecture is counter-intuitive and perchance impossible since we understand architecture as an operative, practical, masculine, concrete, tangible, and problem-solving-oriented when it is confronted with inoperativity (p.5). These specific traits raise the question: how can a discipline resist the imperatives that guide its own development? How, in the words of Bartleby the Scrivener, can architecture simply “prefer not to”?

In order to explore the potential of an inoperative architecture, Boano presents a series of architectural interventions that blur the line between life, art, and politics. The complex interactions of these three discursive fields, explains Boano, constitute the territory where Agamben’s oeuvre needs to be located (p.23). Boano provides several examples (which in my view could have been accompanied by more illustrative images) of the ways in which radical architecture can play with dispositifs of power, presenting and crossing the different thresholds of law, language, and space. One of these is the playful exploitation of planning laws by architect Santiago Cirugeda in a way that enables marginalised groups to access the architectural professional playing field. Boano places particular focus on one of Cirugeda’s earlier projects, “Containers” in Seville (1997), which emerged from a recognition of the lack of playgrounds a neighbourhood, as well as the city’s unwillingness to install them. As such, he applied for a license to place temporary dumpsters which he then reconfigured into a playground—a reconfiguration which played with the potential of architecture to turn the law ambivalent to actions in space, and opened up new possibilities for subversive action (p.53).1

Boano also delivers a compelling analysis of other projects that deactivate the legal and juridical aspects of spatial planning by detailing the effort of Beniamino Servino to redeem places abandoned by the forces in charge of urbanization processes (p.55), or the activity of the collective DAAR (Decolonizing Architecture Art and Residency) in abandoned villages and military bases in Israel-Palestine, exploring how these places are being reused in ways that challenge colonial violence. One of DAAR’s projects, “Concrete Tent” (2015), took place in Dheisheh refugee camp,

1 For more on this project see http://eca-actions.org/actions/dumpsters-construct-playground and http://www.mascontext.com/issues/13-ownership-spring-12/negotiating-legality/ (last accessed 22 September 2017).
and explored the tent as an architectural edifice that is also a fundamental element of Palestinian refugee camps and a material manifestation of the latter's temporary status in the camp. DAAR presented the architectural paradox of a permanent temporality that results in a hybrid between a tent and a concrete house, temporality and permanency, and offered different potentialities to reuse the tent as a spatial construct. These case studies pour empirical content into the book’s theoretical mould, explaining and exploring the possibilities for subversive deactivation of contemporary architectural edifices whether in the context of colonial domination or neoliberal governmentality.
Boano enriches the critical contribution to the discussion on Agamben and space, convincingly demonstrating how the Italian philosopher’s writing holds substantial possibilities to envisage architectural practices that possess emancipatory power. What is missing, perhaps, is a continued engagement with the nuts and bolts that enable one to deactivate space and create the environment in which inoperative architecture should take place.

One possible route is to marry Boano’s discussion with the body of knowledge that explores the relationship between people and things. The literature on materiality and agency have gained significant traction from Bruno Latour’s (1988) analysis of the social interaction that door stops generate, to Jason Dittmer’s (2017) recent exploration how NATO’s decision to adopt .30 calibre bullets impacted world politics. Architecture plays a pivotal part in material (geo)politics as presented in Adrian Forty’s (2012) investigation of concrete, which discusses it as a process that determines social hierarchies and cultural identities. Similarly, Gastón Gordillo’s (2014) brilliant ethnographic work on debris illustrates how geographic space is inseparable from the material, historical, and affective ruptures embodied in the rubble.
These are but illustrations of a rapidly expanding body of knowledge that investigates how to read politics as a more-than-human dynamic that fuses matter, space, and bodies (Squire 2015). Hence, discussions on the (im)potentiality of deactivating architecture might benefit from thinking how this inoperativeness is linked to the ways we choose specific materials and how these materials in turn determine the ability to redesign the living space in accordance with those using it, rather than just with those who planned it. Nevertheless, in order to pursue a material trajectory that perhaps traces one path of deactivating architecture, we need to begin to think in terms of a new political language. What this book provides us with is a concrete platform for the conceptual experiment, to rethink the notion of potentiality, and to re-examine how political theory can challenge our notions of the built environment. From this perspective, Boano makes a compelling call for us to think on the potency of spatial (im)potentiality.

References


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