

Badiou in architecture¹

By Renaud Pleitinx

[103] In a lecture given in 1997 and published under ‘*Comment parler aujourd’hui de la ville et de l’architecture*’ (How to talk about the city and architecture today) in the book *Pour une anthropologie de l’espace* (For an anthropology of space), Françoise Choay criticises the circulation of texts in which architects borrow concepts from philosophers in order to legitimise their architectural production. The attack is severe and focuses less on the principle of borrowing than on the way in which it is reproduced. ‘*Apparue en France dans le sillage de Mai 1968 avec l’utilisation de Heidegger et de Foucault, ayant ensuite trouvé sa terre d’élection aux États-Unis, d’où elle nous revient nantie d’une vitalité accrue, la démarche consiste à dépecer les textes élus en y prélevant, au gré [104] d’analogies formelles ou anecdotiques, des concepts et des fragments qui, une fois décontextualisés, c’est-à-dire désémantisés, sont projetés dans un domaine étranger : voir les aventures de la “déconstruction” heideggerienne, popularisée par Derrida, ou encore de “l’espace public” habermassien. L’architecte Peter Eisenman est sans doute la figure emblématique de cette démarche de légitimation. Aussi éclectique dans le choix de ses idoles qu’approximatif, ou même erratique, dans la lecture de leurs écrits, il a successivement invoqué l’autorité de Chomsky au début des années 1970, puis celles de Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin, Habermas. Aujourd’hui, Hanna Arendt est au zénith et voici venir le temps des Gilles Deleuze et Michel de Certeau².*’

In a footnote, Françoise Choay comments: ‘*Neuf ans plus tard, la situation n’a pas changé. Le nouveau gourou est maintenant Alain Badiou.*’ Cf. ‘Weaponized Thought. Ethical Militance and the Group-Subject’, article anthologique d’Emily Apter dans la revue américaine *Grey Room* (“consacrée à la théorisation de l’architecture moderne et contemporaine”), MIT

¹ This paper is the English translation of the article: Renaud Pleitinx, ‘Badiou en Architecture’, in *Journal of Badiou Studies*, 5, 2017, pp. 103–112.

² Françoise Choay, *Pour une anthropologie de l’espace*, Paris, Seuil, 2006, 113-114. (Translation by the author: ‘The approach, which appeared in France in the wake of May 1968 with the use of Heidegger and Foucault, then found its home in the United States, from where it has returned to us with increased vitality, consists of butchering the chosen texts by extracting, at the whim [104] of formal or anecdotal analogies, concepts and fragments which, once decontextualised, i.e. desemanticised, are projected into a foreign domain: See the adventures of Heideggerian “deconstruction”, popularised by Derrida, or of Habermasian “public space”. The architect Peter Eisenman is undoubtedly the emblematic figure of this legitimisation process. As eclectic in his choice of idols as he is approximate, or even erratic, in his reading of their writings, he successively invoked the authority of Chomsky in the early 1970s, then those of Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin, and Habermas. Today, Hanna Arendt is at the zenith and here comes the time of Gilles Deleuze and Michel de Certeau.’)

press, 14 (2004) 7-23. Cf. aussi les travaux théoriques de l'école d'architecture de Louvain-la-Neuve³.

This comment is inappropriate and regrettable, to say the least. Firstly, it is inappropriate because the article and the works it refers to are irrelevant. Emily Apter's article is not about architecture and does not legitimise any of the work of its author, who is not an architect, but a professor of French and comparative literature at New York University. The reference to '*les travaux théoriques de l'École d'architecture de Louvain-la-Neuve*' is not much more justified; none of the research programmes in architectural theory conducted within the said institution have systematically exploited the philosophical work of Alain Badiou, and none of the researchers referred to have made the mistake of invoking the philosopher's categories to justify their own work as architects. But Françoise Choay's comment is also regrettable because it implicitly disqualifies the interest that architects might have in Alain Badiou's philosophical discourse, who is bluntly reduced to the status of a 'guru'.

Against an opinion as unfounded as it is unfavourable, this article aims to show how the philosophical work of Alain Badiou can rightly interest architects and provide them with adequate categories to describe their practice. To this end, we will first discuss the legitimacy and appropriateness of applying [105] Alain Badiou's philosophy to architecture. Second, we will show that it allows, through the category of generic procedure, to describe and attest a particular and exceptional practice, namely generic, of the architectural project.

Badiou's Philosophy and the Architectural Field

For readers less familiar with Alain Badiou's philosophical work, it is appropriate to briefly present its stakes and main themes. The major challenge of Alain Badiou's philosophical enterprise is to attest, against all relativism, the existence of truths. To better recognize their historical actuality, Alain Badiou proposes in his philosophical work a systematic conceptualisation of the process by which truths arise, by defining and describing the instances and operations necessary for their production. Distributed in the philosopher's two major works: *L'Être et l'événement* (1988) and *Logiques des mondes* (2006), Alain Badiou's philosophical discourse can be classically divided into two

³ Ibid, 114. [Translation by the author: 'Nine years later, the situation has not changed. The new guru is now Alain Badiou. Cf. "Weaponized Thought. Ethical Militance and the Group-Subject", an anthology article by Emily Apter in the American journal *Grey Room* ("devoted to the theorisation of modern and contemporary architecture"), MIT press, 14 (2004) 7-23. Cf. also the theoretical work of the Louvain-la-Neuve school of architecture.']]

complementary strands: one that we will call metaphysical, the other ethical. The metaphysical part, which includes the *Ontologie du Multiple* (Ontology of the Multiple, cf. *Being and Event*) and the *Grande logique* (Grand Logic, cf. *Logics of Worlds*), sets out to describe the situations or worlds, according to the perspective adopted, within which truths appear⁴. The ethical section, which includes a *Théorie du sujet* (Theory of the Subject, cf. *Being and Event*) and a *Théorie des points* (Theory of Points, cf. *Logics of Worlds*), is dedicated to the description of the processes that originate in an event, engage the decisions of subjects and lead to the unfolding of truths.

If we are to discuss the legitimacy and appropriateness of applying Badiou's philosophy to the field of architecture, it is important to at the outset re-underline that Alain Badiou does not talk about architecture. This must be understood in two ways. Firstly, architecture is not the designated object of the philosopher's discourse, which focuses on the metaphysical and ethical themes set out above. Secondly, architecture is not one of the arts that Badiou regularly invokes to illustrate or validate his views, such as theatre, poetry, music, painting or even cinema. Indeed, the theme of architecture is very rarely addressed in Alain Badiou's philosophical work and always in an incidental manner. In *Le Siècle*, illustrating the the twentieth century's characteristic universalist desire, Badiou briefly mentions: '*le Bauhaus en architecture, un bâtiment que rien ne particularise, car il est ramené à une fonctionnalité translucide, [106] universellement reconnaissable et oublieuse de toute particularité stylistique*'.⁵ In *Logiques des mondes*, as a way to illustrate the concept of localisation, Badiou describes in properly topological terms the composition of the city of Brasilia⁶. Notoriously, then, architecture is not one of the philosopher's discursive priorities.

This established fact, which we do not seek to explain, does not imply that Badiou's philosophy cannot rightly be applied to architecture. On the contrary, we must realise that Alain Badiou's philosophical proposal, which is characterised by a maximum degree of conceptual generality, necessarily includes architecture. On the one hand, the ontological and phenomenological categories of multiple (or of object), as defined by Alain Badiou, subsume any kind of thing

⁴ Alain Badiou, *L'Être et l'événement* ; *Logiques des Mondes* *L'être et l'événement*, 2.

⁵ Alain Badiou, *Le Siècle*, p. 227. [Translation by the author: 'The Bauhaus in architecture, a building that nothing particularises, because it is reduced to a translucent functionality, [106] universally recognisable and oblivious to any stylistic particularity'.]

⁶ Alain Badiou, *Logiques des Mondes*, pp. 433-436.

deemed to be or whose being is situated. Insofar as architecture and its product, the habitat, satisfy this minimal requirement, they are included, as special cases, in the domains of definition of the multiple and the object. The theses of the Ontology of multiple and of the Grand Logic, which describe the general properties of these entities, are therefore fully applicable to architecture and habitat. On the other hand, the categories proposed by Alain Badiou in the ethical part of his philosophical work describe a process that can take place in fields as different as science, art, politics and love. Insofar as architecture, as the production of habitat, belongs to the category of arts, it is included in the objects targeted by Badiou's ethics. Thus, the application of the metaphysical and ethical categories of Alain Badiou's philosophy to the architectural field is legitimate.

However, it must be noted that the philosophical categories forged by Alain Badiou do not allow for a precise explanation of architecture, understood here strictly as the production of habitat. On the one hand, the Ontology of Multiple and the Grand Logic do not provide concepts that can deepen our understanding of architecture and its product, the habitat. The metaphysical categories defined by Alain Badiou neglect, by the very fact of their generality, the particular properties of the multiples or objects that are architecture and the habitat. Ineffective to this degree of precision, they do not allow to explain the subtle artistic springs of architecture, nor to exhaust the analysis of a given body of habitat. On the other hand, the categories of Badiou's ethics are no more adequate to account for architecture as such. Indeed, their vocation is to describe the instances of a decision-making process. It is indeed, according to Alain Badiou, through the operation of successive decisions that truths arise. The decision occupies [107] a crucial place in Alain Badiou's conceptual system, which in this aspect is a kind of theory of militant decision. The system indeed reports a particular modality of the decision, characterised by event conditions, militant subjectivity, and truth effects. This centrality of the decision gives Badiou's ethics an optative point of view that determines the nature of the objects it is likely to take into consideration. From the perspective of Badiou's ethics, the domains of science, art, politics, and love are not considered for themselves or in themselves, but as sites of decision. This bias implies that the determinisms specific to science, art, politics, and love, whose explanation requires an adapted hypothetical and conceptual apparatus, remain below the elucidating power of Badiou's ethical categories. Applied in particular to architecture, the said categories are ultimately of no help in explaining the fine workings of the production of the habitat. Thus, Badiou's philosophy, even though it includes architecture in its field of relevance, does not allow us to understand and describe architecture, as the production of habitat.

Nevertheless, the exploitation of Alain Badiou's philosophical theses in the field of architecture remains appropriate. Applicable to the description of a decision-making process, Badiou's categories of ethics are proven adequate to report, not on architecture, but on a modality of the 'architectural project', understood here as the deliberative process that orients and informs the production of the habitat. It is indeed at this point in the architectural domain, where the habitat is decided, that they are applied with maximum heuristic benefit.

This justifies why architects, whose socially assigned task is less to produce habitats than to establish architectural projects, are interested in the philosophical work of Alain Badiou and occasionally summon his categories.

Generic procedures and architecture project

Having established the legitimacy and appropriateness of applying Badiou's ethics not to architecture per se, but to the architectural project, defined as the decision-making process that takes the production of the habitat as its object, we will show that it makes it possible to describe, through the category of generic procedure, a militant practice of the architectural project and thus to attest to the existence of architectural truths.

[108] According to Alain Badiou, truths result from processes that are designated by the terms *generic procedure*. To understand the meaning Badiou gives to this expression, it is necessary to define the terms *world*, *event*, *subject*, *investigation* (point) and *truth* that the category of generic procedure conceptually associates and integrates. Defined in the Grand Logic, the concept of world refers in a general way to the locus of generic procedure, which includes objects, situated multiples, as well as the rules (more properly, the transcendental) that govern their appearance, and their consideration in this world. An event is the condition of a generic procedure as much as its point of origin. It consists of the irruption into a world of something which, according to the laws (the transcendental) of that world, did not appear there, and did not count for anything. The term *subject* refers to the agent, whether individual or collective, of the generic procedure. *Investigation* is the operation of the generic procedure, which essentially consists of a decision aimed at establishing whether a particular object of the world belongs to the set of consequences of the event. Finally, *truth* is the result of the generic procedure. It is defined in Badiou's terms as the potentially infinite series of post-event investigations, the collection of which constitutes a set of objects that ultimately proves to be heterogeneous and unprecedented in terms of the world. In

short, a generic procedure is a process by which a truth occurs in a world, bringing to light a radical novelty that disrupts the laws of that world. Its condition is the fleeting irruption of an event and its outcome depends on the ability of a subject to pursue the investigations that constitute a truth.

By proposing an understanding of the process by which truths arise, Alain Badiou provides the criteria for empirically recognising the conditions, operations and effective agents, and thus attesting the existence of generic procedures and truths. Consistently exploiting the conceptual resources of his system, the philosopher isolates and gives examples of proven generic procedures: in science, the construction of Set Theory initiated by Cantor, the demonstration of Gödel's Theorem; in art, the invention of twelve-tone music, the abstraction of painting; in politics, the slave revolt led by Spartacus, the Paris Commune, May '68, the Cultural Revolution; in love, the passions of Aeneas and Dido, of Tristan and Isolde.

To apply the category of generic procedure to the architectural project, it is first necessary to clarify what the terms defining it mean in the field of architecture. An architectural world, as the locus of the generic procedure, includes both the formal structures that are usually mobilised by architecture, i.e. all the types and elements of construction, the modes and positions of habitation, and the situational parameters to which the production of housing conventionally refers, i.e. the builders, the inhabitants, the materials, the purpose of the work and the building site. As the starting point of a generic procedure, an architectural event consists of the uncovering or appearance in an architectural world of a form or a thing that is deemed not to appear or to count for nothing in that world. In the order of forms, this can be unusual types and elements of construction, alternative modes of dwellings, but also depreciated layouts or compositions. In the order of things, it can be a question of discredited inhabitants, unusual builders, marginal programmatic assignments, materials deemed unworthy, and parcel or territorial configurations that have remained latent. An architectural subject is any person who is in a position to decide on the execution or occupation of the habitat and who is faithful to an architectural event. He may be an inventive architect, an attentive contractor, a lucid client, a resolute inhabitant, a perceptive critic, or even a suicidal land developer. An architectural investigation corresponds to the moment of decision aiming to establish the belonging of such a form, such a thing or even such an architectural formula to the whole of the consequences of the event. Finally, an architectural truth is identified with the set of decisions resulting from the event that governs the production of a new habitat.

Applied to the architectural field, the category of generic procedure makes it possible to account for a particular regime of the architectural project. It does not allow us to describe the architectural project in general, but only the particular and exceptional cases, properly generic, where the decision-making process that informs the habitat is entirely suspended on the chancy occurrence of an event, guaranteed by the fragile fidelity of a subject, and producing a radical novelty.

However, the category of generic procedure, as applied to the architectural project, remains open to two non-contradictory and possibly combinable interpretations, which we will refer to separately as 'general' and 'special'. The 'general' interpretation of the generic procedure category grants the status of investigation to distinct architectural projects. It considers that projects from separate commissions are occasions for testing the same inaugural event. The 'special' interpretation, on the other hand, grants the status of generic procedure to a singular project. In this case, the project is identified entirely with a generic procedure, and each decision point within the project is akin to an investigation in the sense that Alain Badiou gives to this word. Considered from the perspective of Badiou's ethics, the architectural project [110] can thus be conceived either as one of the decisive points of a generic procedure or as a generic procedure itself.

Finally, the historical attestation of architectural truths depends on whether the category of generic procedure is interpreted in a general or special way. The general interpretation allows to recognise the existence of generic 'sequences' of architecture in history. For example, the historical sequence of Modern Architecture can, in terms of Badiou's categories, be considered a genuine generic procedure. All the terms that define it are indeed found in the Modern Movement's epic. First, there is the European architectural world of the immediate post-war period, where a moribund academicism continues to prescribe the proper use of formal registers belonging to outdated styles and the inclusion of obsolete circumstantial parameters. Then there is the architectural event that can be recognised as much in the rediscovery of the compatibility of concrete and steel, in the invention of abstract painting, as in the emergence of functional or social parameters hitherto disregarded. There is also the architectural subject of those who claimed to be part of the Modern Movement and participated in the first International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM), led by Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier, fierce militants of the modern cause. But there are also the architectural investigations that are the projects of modern architecture, whether sketched or executed, which strive to deduce the consequences of the

architectural event on how housing is produced. And finally, there is the architectural truth of modernity, which, beyond the particular investigations, consists of the reworking of the formal register of architecture, of the devices and the agreed spatialities, and of a re-evaluation of the relevant situational parameters. The perfect coincidence between the sequence of modern architecture and the definition of the generic procedure probably justifies the fact that the few architectural examples cited by Alain Badiou belong to this sequence.

On the other hand, the ‘special’ interpretation of the procedure of architectural truth makes it possible to attest the existence, not of historical sequences, but of ‘moments’ of generic architecture, more confidential by definition. All the defining characteristics of the generic procedure are again present, albeit on a smaller scale, within the strict confines of a single project. According to such an interpretation, the architectural world is then reduced to the terms of a commission fixing the conditions (place, time) and the situational parameters (builder, building plot, budget, inhabitant, materials, etc.) of the habitat to be produced. In this case, the event is a formal or factual possibility encountered in the mass of data collected and formulas envisaged. The subject in this case is constituted by [111] the people directly involved in the project decisions who are intrigued by the eventuality. Each of the decisions taken by this unanimous subject is then an investigation. The purpose of this investigation is to decide whether this form, this thing or this proposed habitat formula belongs to the set of consequences of the perceived possibility. The infinite sum of these decisions gradually constitutes the truth of the project, or more particularly its Idea, and finally leads to the production of a habitat that is unexpected in the eyes of its authors.

Applied to the field of architecture, the ethical aspect of Alain Badiou’s philosophy thus provides the appropriate concepts for identifying and recognising, in the history and the daily practice of the architectural project, eminently singular ‘sequences’ and ‘moments’ in which some people free themselves from the cultural determinations that arbitrarily and conventionally weigh on the production of housing to invent an architecture, a way of producing habitat, that is new considering the history of architecture or its authors. In doing so, it allows us to attest that there have been truths in architecture and allows us to think that there may still be some.

Conclusion

In our view, Alain Badiou’s philosophical work provides the fundamental categories of an authentic anthropology of revolutions.

While classical anthropology provides itself with adequate concepts to reveal the underlying structures of cultural facts that are characterised by their permanence, Badiou's philosophy opens up to an analysis of historical sequences or existential moments, properly revolutionary, that imply an overturning of the structures and systems in force, and leads to their renovation. But, if the main motive of Alain Badiou's philosophy is, as we have insisted, to understand the genesis of truths to better manifest their existence, it remains possible, by going from description to prescription, to derive 'maxims' likely to orient a militant practice of science, art, politics, love, and finally of the architectural project, from his theses.

In the conclusion of *Logiques des mondes*, Alain Badiou states this 'première directive philosophique' (first philosophical directive) which is addressed less to the constituted subject than to the candidate subjects: 'Prends soin de ce qui naît. Interroge les éclats, sonde leur passé sans gloire. Tu ne peux espérer qu'en ce qui inapparaissait'. This directive invites everyone to actively watch for the event to come. According to Alain Badiou, every event originates from a part of situations or worlds known as the event site. The event site, which is also described as being on the edge of the void and as being foundational, is the place where the multiples or objects that belong to a situation or a world but do not count for anything or do not appear in it are located. The 'first philosophical directive' therefore contains an implicit recommendation to be close to the void and to beware of the non-existent. In architecture, this simply means paying attention to forms and things that in the history of the habitat (general procedure) or in the terms of a commission (special procedure) are considered to have no importance or relevance. It is, finally, to the forms excluded from conventional registers and the things omitted by current specifications that Alain Badiou urges us to turn our attention. This, ultimately, is for the chance to experience, as a subject, the exaltation of a generic sequence or moment of architecture.

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⁷ Alain Badiou, *Logiques des Mondes*, p. 529. [Translation by the author: 'Take care of what is born. Question the fragments, probe their unglamorous past. You can only hope in what has not yet appeared.']

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