

Resistance and Activist Research: A Workshop with Brian Holmes and Anne Querrien

Kim Trogal and Sam Vardy

Participants: Brian Holmes, Nicolas Laurent, Doina Petrescu, Anne Querrien, Kim Trogal, Sam Vardy

¹ The workshop was organised as part of the seminar series by the PhD research group 'Lines of Flight' at the University of Sheffield, School of Architecture. See, www.linesofflight.wordpress.com [accessed 2009].

² For information on the project see, 56 St Blaise: espace culturel écologique géré par des habitants du quartier St. Blaise, <http://56stblaise.wordpress.com>, [accessed 12th October 2009].

In October 2008, we¹ organised and took part in a workshop in Paris that set out to question the relationship between 'resistance', 'activism' and 'architectural research and practice'. Our guests were the cultural critic, writer and activist, Brian Holmes, and the sociologist and urban planner, Anne Querrien.

The informal workshop shifted from the paths at Parc de la Villette, to a discussion in the space of an apartment, and finally to a gathering at the self-managed cultural space at 56 St Blaise.² The following article is an attempt to present and reflect on aspects of the workshop and is in two parts: the first describes some of the issues emerging from the walk, particularly concerning the agency of architecture and practice. The second part is comprised of a dialogue from the discussion that concerns possible forms of action in architecture.

A Walk Through the Park

Scripted spaces are a walk-through or click-through environment (a mall, a church, a casino, a theme park, a computer game). They are designed to emphasise the viewers journey- the space between- rather than the gimmicks on the wall. The audience walks into the story. What's more this walk should respond to each viewer's whims, even though each step along the way is pre-scripted (or should I say preordained?) It is gentle repression posing as free will. - *Norman Klein*³

³ Norman M. Klein, *From the Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects* (New York: New Press, 2004), p.11.

We began our walk through Parc de la Villette by following what Tschumi named 'the cinematic promenade.' This staged route is magically disorienting. Connecting a series of gardens, the route plays with hiding and revealing, drawing you around corners, over bridges, through tunnels, yet actually defining nothing. Most of all, it hides your own path from you, it hides where you think you have come from and where you might be going. Confusing, disorienting yet essentially safe ground, it is a scripted space.

It is difficult to write about this park, when so much has been said and proclaimed already. Its master plan by Tschumi is part of the canon of avant-garde architecture and was widely held at the time as a 'revolutionary' architecture. But during the workshop, Holmes raised some fundamental questions about this place that also raise pertinent issues for this edition of *field*. Namely, the ambiguity of architecture as an object and activity, and therefore the ambiguity that exists in our own agency. For now, we will take a short detour through the park and some of the discussions as we remember them, to return to this point at the end. To paraphrase Holmes his questions were, approximately, 'How did it get built in the first instance?' and, as in this case, 'what happens when the state takes over, and decides to build madness?'⁴ How did an architect who followed Derrida and Bataille, someone who developed a design and discourse with revolutionary ideas yet who has built nothing, *actually* get commissioned for the construction of one of the largest public spaces in Paris? And what happens when the state decides to build them?

⁴ In his master plan for the park, Tschumi writes that 'Madness serves as a constant point of reference throughout the Urban Park of La Villette because it appears to illustrate a characteristic situation at the end of the twentieth century- that of disjunctions and dissociations between use, form, and social values. This situation is not necessarily a negative one, but rather is symptomatic of a new condition.' Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (London: MIT Press, 1996), p.174.

⁵ Bernard Tschumi and Anthony Vidler, *A&U*, 216 (9)(1988): 9-68.

⁶ Bernard Tschumi, 'Parc de la Villette,' *GA Document* 26 (1990): 38-47.

⁷ Quoted in, 'Tschumi's prize-winning proposals for La Villette' *Architects Journal* 177 (14)(6th April 1983): 37-38.

The park, situated on the North Eastern part of the city is 1km at its longest point and 700m at its widest and was previously occupied by the city's slaughterhouses.⁵ In 1982 it was the subject of an international competition organised by the French government. The brief effectively called for a radical new type of park and public space, and according to the English language architectural press, it demanded:

a new type of park embodying change in social programme, physical form and social context.⁶

the existing Parisian parks and gardens 'perpetuate symbols of glory and an ethic that should belong to the past' [...] The competition designs, it said, should be [...] 'a meeting point of culture, decentralisation and the right to express oneself in which no-one must feel excluded.'⁷

The utopian brief drew enormous attention with 470 schemes received from 35 countries. The jointly winning submissions, most famously the ones of Bernard Tschumi and Rem Koolhaas, were reproduced and much discussed in the journals. Yet it seems that the social issues at stake were much less discussed nor were what the conceptual aspects, such as Tschumi's follies or Koolhaas' strips (the 'neutral spaces'), were actually responding to. So there is of course a story (or many stories) prior to this,

integral to the place, but not within the archive.

Talking informally along the route, Querrien described the post-1968 climate in Paris. She remembers it as one full of restlessness, full of desire for real change. Following the election of Mitterrand in 1981, France's first and only socialist president, she recalls that expectations across the country were high. Everyone was waiting, and had been for a long time. Those in office recognised the urgent need to deliver something; something that could meet the revolutionary ambitions and ideas of 1968. And it was in this climate, that the competition and the brief for the park were established.

Querrien was consulted to consider youth groups in the area in relation to the project and had the opportunity to see the brief and the results of the competition. Querrien explained that the brief asked for an architecture that would allow for the future occupation and self-management of localised sites within the park. She explained that amongst *all* the competition submissions only one architect (Tschumi) had achieved a spatial design that would allow for a different management organisation for the different spaces. His design was presented as the only one meeting the management requirements. Koolhaas' strips, for example, brought unresolved issues of boundaries and access that the follies did not. Querrien's recollections also brought to life the area as it was before the park: the butchers; their unique language; the conditions of degradation in the area and its surroundings at the time. The transformation of the entire area was vast in scale and scope.

⁸ Querrien gave us some references of projects in France which could be seen to retain such a utopian, public ambition, and so form a kind of counter argument or counter example to the situation we are experiencing and arguing against. One reference she suggested is the opening of public spaces in relation to the construction of the tramways in some of France's big cities, in particular citing the space near the river Garonne in Bordeaux. The masterplan for the 6km stretch of the riverbank on the right bank, by Michel Desvigne, reclaims old industrial spaces for a new public park comprised of meadows, riverbanks, woods, an approach which the landscape architect calls 'indeterminate nature'. As with Parc de la Vilette, the social aspects of this project are perhaps less discussed in the architectural and design press. Querrien has explained that this new space is intended to be open to all kinds of users, organised as a link between the different neighbourhoods of the city. Whilst the mayor of Bordeaux is right wing, the local equilibrium is towards the left and although gentrification may happen in the future, she explains it was not the aim of this project and is not there yet. The aim of the project, already realised, is to change the city from a sleeping city housing the wine merchants to an open modern city housing all social milieus and *organising relations between them*.

For us, asking the question, 'what made this project possible?' also makes obvious the fact that such a utopian project of this scale (a huge terrain given to the public, with the aim of creating a real public space where 'no-one will feel excluded,' providing spaces for self-management and so on) will never really be possible again in neo-liberal cities. But here perhaps is an important difference between the UK and other countries, such as France, who have a much stronger public sector.⁸ In the UK, local or national government is unlikely to be the sole commissioner of such a project, nor would it take on such utopian or revolutionary ambitions. In London for example, the improvement of public amenities and the regeneration of public spaces, such as parks, are undertaken with the *express aim* of facilitating gentrification, and through leveraging an increase in residential property prices aims to 'improve' a locality. Public space improvement has long been a cultural strategy for economic growth.

Given the shift in the local demographics that continues to take place in the areas surrounding this project, it could be said that this park has also functioned as a device for gentrification. Yet, as Querrien pointed out, as soon as the butchers left the space, their ways of working no longer needed or accepted, gentrification as a process began. She drew our attention to the fact that to actually prevent gentrification and maintain social groups as they were would demand the organisation of a quasi-ghetto. This raises important questions, of how and to what extent are we able to intervene in processes of economic change, and how do we position ourselves in relation to them?

Querrien also told us of the process of consultation she was involved in for the park. This concerned the prevention of violence relating to youth groups in the area, noting that there was an evident social difference between the people visiting the museum and the park, and the people living there. The ambition was to allow the park to be used both by youth living in the surroundings, as well as visitors coming from other parts of Paris, the regions or abroad. The consultation work took place over a few months, in which the research group began to build relations amongst

the differing (sometimes competing) groups in the locality. This process, of enabling the youth groups to become organised and to participate in the self-managed spaces of the park, was stopped abruptly. A different research group, with another agenda, was employed to continue the task. They pretended to organise activities for youth whilst refusing to put confidence in their capacities of self-management. In the park today, of the 26 follies that were intended to facilitate occupation or appropriation by others, many remain unoccupied; some have been incorporated into the permanent running of the park, such as a ticket office, a first aid centre, or the entrance to 'Cité de la Musique;' and some house commercial functions such as cafés or fast food chains. None of the follies were given to youth groups to organise their activities, as one of the rules for the management of the follies is that groups must be self sufficient financially.

These two aspects highlight for us the issue of architecture's fundamental ambiguity, which in fact was always one of Tschumi's interests. His concern lay with the 'disjunction' of space and its use, that architecture is 'constantly unstable, constantly on the verge of change.'⁹ For him, this disjunction was 'its strength and its subversive power.'¹⁰ Indeed, the ambiguity of architecture puts its own power into question, firstly as an object, in terms of its power as a means of control over others, and potentially as an enabling device. It thus highlights both architecture's potential for resistance and its simultaneous risk of incorporation or instrumentalisation. Secondly, the ambiguity that exists, is not confined to architectural objects, such as the follies or the routes, but extends to all associated social processes; *everything* from commissioning, procurement, to consultation, participation or the long-term demographic changes that follow. All are, or can be, subject to instrumentalisation. Ambiguity is both a problem and a possibility over time. For us, the walk and discussions through the park, directly connected this question to the question of the role (and authority) of the designer or architect.

For Tschumi, there is famously no *architecture* without event or activity. Yet, Holmes brought here a new point of interpretation, through the work of cultural critic Norman Klein. Klein's work looks at architecture, amongst other forms, as a 'special effect.' Here he analyses how spaces are constructed as 'illusionistic spaces' and used as devices for manipulation. These are spaces that seduce and construct 'ways of seeing.'¹¹ What is interesting in Klein's analyses is the complicity of the audience in their own seduction. Often in the spaces he analyses, such as the ones in Las Vegas, misuse or transgression is actively encouraged. In his words they are 'scripted-spaces', where the journey you make through a space appears to be an act of free will, but there exists a collusion between designer and audience in the 'co-creation' of the space. For Klein this is one of the devices of capitalism used to absorb political shock, or most usually to elicit consumerism. Holmes asked if we have moved from scripting to being scripted? At the risk of grossly misunderstanding him, we are not only thinking of the 'users' of the park, but also the architect and their own beliefs and intentions. A belief in the 'co-creation' of architecture, its ambiguity or 'disjunction' is also the cutting edge of capitalism.¹²

This is important to consider as in the UK the state now takes a new role and form, numerous state agencies, both local and national work in often complex partnerships to deliver services or certain programmes.¹³ This is especially true for city development and urban regeneration, which are undertaken by complex associations. They take the form of networks, it is notoriously difficult for an outsider to understand how they actually work. At both local and national levels, government agencies have in many cases 'slimmed down' and sub-contracted (i.e. privatised) their former responsibilities. In a general sense, the state's focus has shifted away from welfare towards economic development and growth. Given these major

⁹ Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, p.19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* , p. 18.

¹¹ Klein, p. 12.

¹² Here we mean to emphasise an applicability of Klein's analysis of the co-creation of a space as a kind of 'scripted' freedom, or tolerated transgression, that applies to Tschumi's notion of disjunction (where architecture itself is seen to exist in the event). Klein's work has highlighted for us how other contemporary, participative aspects of architecture and urban regeneration may also operate in this way: such as approaches that aim to 'activate' a space; event-based approaches to making or transforming spaces in the city; or even participative projects that attempt to engage people directly in the design. These approaches are of course not radical in their own right, but are tools that can be used for different motivations, potentially providing a venue for a 'scripted' freedom.

¹³ Querrien has latterly emphasised to us the important differences that exist between our own experiences in the UK and what is taking place in France, for example in France, public-private partnerships are not very well developed. She explains that the field around the Great Library (the Library François Mitterrand) cannot be finished without huge public money; whilst the work of ANRU (Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine) is mostly public urban regeneration that organises gentrification, but is also obliged to organise a social mix.

shifts in both the formation and function of the state in contemporary neo-liberal cities, we must accept that an architecture that strives to be 'revolutionary' will not be possible through these channels, if indeed it ever was. What then, are other forms of action we might take?

A Discussion in the Apartment

Clear Spaces

SV: Sam Vardy
DP: Doina Petrescu
BH: Brian Holmes
AQ: Anne Quirren

SV: I would like to start this session by introducing some broad questions that we might tackle directly or indirectly, namely: what might be some distinct spatialities of resistance? And at which points do architecture and resistance make the other more, or less, possible? More specifically, an architecture of resistance might consider practices that open up opportunities to revise and remake our local context, harnessing peoples' desires to change and adapt their environment. There is, however, an noticeable tendency to identify those practices that challenge accepted patterns of behaviour as problematic or abnormal. This agency of people to transcend the 'formative context', the act of transgression as an expression of desire, Roberto Unger calls *negative capability*.¹⁴

DP: [The] capability to say 'no'... but still 'capability'—which means a positive movement.

BH: Yes, so you are refusing something, but making something at the same time.

AQ: You are not obliged to do what you think you are obliged to do.

SV: This idea is connected to that of resistance in that, if people feel that they can make that change, to their context, then that is what is important. If that isn't there, that feeling, then resistance is less possible. The question then might be, how might the practice of architecture engender that feeling? This makes resistance a *potential* somehow, of architecture.

BH: How might the potential be realised?

SV: Well, that's what I would like to discuss – this is the question.

AQ: This is actually the opposite of participation, what you are talking about. The confidence in negative capability is a confidence in your ability to change yourself, but it is a kind of not participating, not giving any chance for participation but giving the *idea* of flight or escape.

SV: But if it is understood as a collective negative capability,

¹⁴ Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.36.

then...

BH: Well that's when it becomes interesting... If you manage to keep the state, and the powers of capitalist reorganisation *out*, then this is a *space* [created]. Already to keep them out is really difficult. One thing that is semi-successful in this is massive crime, [which] carries its own problems, but I can see that in terms of negative capability. Architecture though, is usually about building something new, and so with the new comes possibilities: to reorder, to regulate, to expropriate and so on. I would think that to attach architecture to this negative capability, this 'keep them out', while you are doing something in a space that is cleared of management, enforcement and so on—the architecture here is probably *not* going to be about building something from scratch, right?

SV: **Yes, it would be an approach that would build on what is already there, and build on relationships that already exist.**

AQ: An example from a conversation with [Patrick] Bouchain: there are areas for nomadic people, and in the French law, the [authorities] are obliged to create these areas [which may] be built on non-authorised areas for building. Now the French non-nomadic do not have right to build on an area not authorised for building. Bouchain says we must make a legal struggle for the French to be equal to those that roam, and have the right to build in such a nomadic way. He says that you must create (he does not say negative capability) an analysis of the law, all the interstitial spaces in the law, to create new rights for people to build their homes.

BH: **A utopia! I would like to think of an example that involves, not Roma peoples, but (and it is exactly what you are heading towards) something that I could be part of. There must be some more other than EcoBox.¹⁵ You can theorise anything, but it is really important to have actual human situations to deal with. So for example – Exodus collective in Luton in the UK. That is really interesting. They are called Exodus, but their slogan is more or less 'We are staying here.' What constitutes their collective is to have... outdoor Reggae parties—a sound system collective out of, I think, housing estates that have been squatted. Does it still exist?¹⁶ That is worth looking into, its a big inspiration.**

¹⁵ For details of the EcoBox project by atelier d'architecture autogérée see, Urbantactics.org (2000-2008) <http://www.urbantactics.org/projects/ecobox/ecobox.html>, [accessed 11th October 2009].

¹⁶ The Exodus collective ceased to exist in 2000. During their active time, they developed the Long Meadow Community Free Farm, which incorporated not only space for music events, but an organic farm, and housing.

Killing Desire

DP: What is also interesting is if this can last? What is the mechanism of making this sustainable, or long-term? In one of John Jordan's texts he is questioning why it [isn't] possible any more, now, to organise a 'carnival' as it was in the 1980's and 90's, even knowing that there might be enough reasons to do it again. They are trying to do this and there are just a few people turning up, whereas it was amazing to get thousands of people all over the globe doing this in one day [previously]. So why or what makes things possible at a moment, and the same things not possible any more?

BH: **I have two answers to that, one is you have to have**

hope, right? This is the obvious one, you have to be enthusiastic, you have to want, there has to be desire. But the other thing is about control. The desire is actually killed deliberately. Deliberate actions to kill desire. Usually it's done in two ways: with direct oppressive force, and then with a kind of banalising discourse of cynicism. The combination of the two is really strong, producing something called depression, and that's where [Franco] Bifo [Berardi] has really produced discourse that's so important, that people don't know how to deal with it, but he's right, he knows what he's talking about.

Assemblages And Evasion

SV: Questions of how to create sites of resistance has been interesting for me in conjunction with considering the Free Radio movement in Italy, and its most well known station, Radio Alice. Looking at Guattari's writings on this can, I think, set up some ideas about the potential affects of an architecture or a spatial practice.

AQ: **Can you explain a little? Because for me, radio is typically a non-material space, because we have a miniaturisation with Free Radio—you have a box like this [small gesture] which was the thing to send the sounds and it cost less than €1000 and so everybody wanted to have this. Radio Alice was very militant, in a room like this one, with people coming and it does not need any 'architecture' in the normal sense of architecture, that is building space, but [is a] social relations space, with a lot of people, a network of people sending news, coming to speak at the machine.**

SV: It is that assemblage of many different forms that is interesting. Although the radio itself did not require its own specific architecture, I wonder whether we could conceive of a practice of architecture that attempted to consider itself, in that way, as an assemblage, one that has different aspects to it, that isn't *only* about the construction of a physical space or object.

BH: **Well I was told that there are housing estates in the Greater London area where people set up radios in abandoned apartments. The first thing they do is brick up their window, as the police will come in on a rope through the window. Tunes are worth money, its 'popular' music that is copyrighted, and you have to pay for that. So you broadcast for a week or so until they [the police] find the thing and so the whole thing is set up, and you have to have an architectural knowledge to escape from the police because the whole point is that you do it until you are raided, and when you are raided you must escape with your equipment, because its too expensive to lose.**

SV: Some of them have lasted quite a long time in this nomadic way.

BH: **There is definitely a real architectural knowledge there.**

SV: The difference between the pirate radio stations in the UK and free radio was that pirate radio was set up by groups of people to

'represent' a kind of *speciality*, in a way, for example a Reggae station or whatever, and the DJ was given importance as the 'expert'. In free radio, it was breaking that down more. Guattari speaks of the 'locals', the 'modernists' and the 'militants'. The 'locals' were the community radio people who would, again, claim to be representing a given group, 'modernists' are the technicians who can make the perfect sound, but it wasn't about that in Free radio, it was low tech and crackly, and the 'militants' were using the radio to 'persuade' the masses.

DP: **So it was almost more important the situation of broadcasting and what this created. Although we have never broadcast for real, at EcoBox we gathered the people, we recorded the elements to be broadcast, so the situation was spatially and socially very important, more than the product, more than the broadcasting itself. I think that this is some how the difference also—in free radio, the fact that everybody could access the radio and broadcast was more important.**

BH: In fact what is being talked about, the same exact things, with the same kinds of players, has been done in our lifetime, right now, with Indymedia. The same exact roles going on, the same situations, and its with the same kinds of necessary resistance. I was at the Republican National Convention in Minneapolis and you had a collective called the Eyewitness Video Collective. They arrived in Minneapolis after having four years before gained evidence against police abuses resulting in 400 convictions of [the] police dept. The first thing that happens is that the house where they are staying gets raided, all their equipment, computers, cameras, all taken by the police. Second thing that happens – they get their second set of equipment, which they had ready, because they knew this was going to happen, and they go out on the street and start using it, until the third thing, they get busted again towards the end [of the event].

AQ: **In terms of architecture, when people are involved in resistance networks, with a place to stay, this place must have a door [at the back]—for escape. So in the Hausmann setting, in the 19th Century buildings, you have two sides, linked with services perhaps. Also, generally, even in the working class, most people had somebody living with them and paying a rent, so that they were not too dependant on the salary, but this was forbidden. So a lot of reasons made the new standard plan to be with only one entrance, to provide a kind of control system. So new resistance buildings should definitely be with two sides!**

BH: Escape seems to [be] becoming more important.

AQ: **Its an interesting concept actually.**

Everyday Resistance

NL: Nicolas Laurent

NL: **I heard of a radio station on a housing estate, where I have a flat. The people who take part are the teenagers and people living on the estate. They address the**

issues and concerns that are particular to the estate. The interesting thing there is that it is not particularly activist, but it is creating a voice. By tapping into that, it brings on another perception of the space.

BH: You can do that legally pretty easily too. You have the right to broadcast for a certain number of metres usually, and you can do a 'daisy chain', so you don't even need a permit, if you have the community desire to have a radio. You have a transmitter here, and a *receiver-transmitter* here, and so on... and it means you can actually cover a whole housing estate with no need to even have a permit.

DP: This is a good example of 'negative capability' because you see the results of this way of doing or making. You won't call it resistance, but it is somehow resistance, in a way of inventing something – a way of, say, not listening to the BBC, and listening to your community radio [instead].

BH: And also [by] not having a permit, you are also resisting having to deal with the bureaucracy.

NL: It means that if there is pressure coming from somewhere, there is also a greater sense of unity as well. Not just with people involved in the radio, but people getting used to listening to what other people have to say. For example, there was a very recent threat that the council would sell half of the estate, which would be demolished to be able to pay for the refurbishment of the other half. So a meeting was called, 70 attended the first, and three times that number attended the second. That was a huge number for something where you would usually get three or four people turn[ing] up.

BH: And do you attribute that to the radio?

NL: No. To a sense of knowing that there [are] a number of activities going on, the radio is one of them, to a response to a threat.

BH: Its easier to respond to a threat when you have people to respond to.

Talking Space

SV: ...very often power is invisible, or the way that it is being exerted is difficult to identify.

BH: That's because you are [an] individual, so maybe you can identify but you can't do anything. You can only do something when you have other people to do it with. That's something that I have really noticed a lot, because its actually hard to get other people, and this is one of the reasons why culture is political, because its a way to be with other people, and you can naturally respond to a threat then, because you already have the capacity to talk, which, in many cases, you don't in contemporary life.

