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# The City—A Popular Assembly
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## 1. Defining cities

No doubt the world would be safer, more peaceful, if there were no cities; if people dwelt on this planet in a carefully distributed manner, a reasonable distance from each other. Often the attempt has been made to define cities by means of a specific ratio, such as a set number of people per square kilometer, a specific density of institutions, or by a specific infrastructure relative to the size of the population. However, these approaches tend to neglect the design qualities characteristic of cities. For nobody would call a skyscraper a city, even if it could house 150,000 people, if all they did was live their lives in their apartments, catered to by a perfect administration, never taking any notice of each other. Nor would we call this a city if everybody were perfectly informed about everybody else by means of letters, the phone book, the radio, television and the internet, and yet they never met.

The other extreme is equally telling: if a conglomeration was populated by one gigantic family, all very familiar with each other, we would hesitate to call this a city too, because the experience of strangeness and diversity is one of its characteristics, as is the possibility of overcoming affiliations and ›primary identification.‹ One could therefore maintain that the contrary view—that the city is to be distinguished from a mass agglomeration if it has the characteristics of a popular assembly—is more plausible. Whether this is true will largely depend on how we, who have some experience of cities, but none of popular assemblies in the strict sense of the word, conceive these. Is a popular assembly a built structure, a stadium full of hooligans, or a homogeneous mass of human beings, neatly arranged as in an airplane?

## 2. Crowding / assembling

An assembly, it seems to me, should be conceived first and foremost as a movement emerging from a dispersion. The streaming, converging and assembling of people does not presuppose any notion of a shared space, a social order, or any emotional bond such a sense of togetherness or belonging; nor does it imply any common media of perception, any shared communicative infrastructure, or any common language that might allow people to understand and define themselves as a community. Instead we should conceive of the assembly as a movement towards and past each other. The dispersion it originates in can only be retrospectively recognized, as a state of isolation, absence, insufficiency, desolation, or distantiation.

Unlike crowds of people, places of assembly are historically quite rare. The possibility of such an assembly was what the Greeks called *agora*. What began as the regular meeting place of the population developed into the popular assembly as an institution, the precursor of all parliaments. Only later was there a specifically designed building for the assembly of the people, called the *pnyx*. The concept of the agora was used by the Greeks from the 7th century BC to signify both the assembling of people, and the place where this assembly occurs.[1] When considering the architecture of the agora, we should therefore not think of a built space, but rather comprehend it as an arrangement of actions, as an event, a product, and an instrument. An agora is not a place to stack the crowds or to cater for a community; instead it enables public interaction (of humans, animals, things, situations).

The agora in Athens lies next to the necropolis, emerging from an array of graveyards on the Kerameikos. Its actual shape is more fuzzy and rhizomatic than square. In the beginning, long before there was any commercial use of it, the architectural prefiguration of an assembly involves nothing more than clearing a surface, on which people can appear and disappear in multiple ways, dance or look on. It then develops into an arrangement of mutual experience including confrontations, observable traces of movements, and collective patterns of perception of time (like rhythm); something like a common sense. Such sensing creates relationships between singular moving bodies, before any direct corporeal perception of each other. It presupposes neither common modalities of perception nor an enclosed and structured space, but a tension that transforms the primary dispersion. Such a tension has the immediate effect of clearing and opening a space, which makes it possible to practically or symbolically orient and gather together the dispersed.

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1  Hom. Ilias II 95. XVI 387. XVIII 274. 497. XIX 45. 50 etc.

An example of such a tension is the dancing ritual that unfolds on the Keramei-kos. It develops a tension in the form of a rhythm adopted from natural cycles. Dionysos Lenaios dies in winter, descends into the underworld, and returns back to life in spring, provided that his cult, the dance, is performed. His cult on the necropolis marks the beginning of a competition (*agon*) around forms of movement and expression, towards one another, next to one other, and apart. The movement of assembly and dispersion in dance gives rise to an entire architecture of time.[2]

## 3. Cities as collective performances

If an assembly ought to be understood as a movement out of something dispa-rate, the plurality of possible positions can only appear simultaneously with their indeterminacy. One may elicit architectonic means of arranging such tensions; a maze, for example, can do this, as can places of sports competitions. The dance floor (*choros*) is also such an arrangement of rhythmical tension. In the same vein, just as cities are not gigantic houses, nor are they functional systems, or built chains of command: they are not as peaceful as graveyards, not as steady as production lines, not as structured and commoditized as supermarkets. The laws of economy will always fail here, because the architecture of a city furnishes not only the conditions for survival, for doing, for production and exchange, but also the basis for confrontations, upheavals, spontaneous associations, and free action. In such architecture, stones function as forces of inertia, of slowness. Movements of as-sembly act against the petrification of the political and against the inert patterns of containment.

The architecture of the city is thus marked by the dispersion of public spaces, within which such action may occur. The public nature of these spaces originates in their tension, their openness, with which they oppose private, commercial, communal, state or otherwise policed and contained spaces. Public spaces are clearings (*Freiflächen*), open spaces, but also compressions and intensifications. A concept of the city must therefore stretch beyond built structures and include the tension, openness, and dynamics of public assemblies: a climate of probable events, political interventions and cultural manifestations, aesthetic changes and onto-logical contradictions. We can then understand the architecture of cities as, in essence, a collective performance.

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[2]  With the permanent retreat of presence, following the traces of the past and stretching into the future, dance embodies this rhythm just as the city embodies time. They are both instances of a common reference to becoming.

## 4. Being-next-to / Being-with

One may object at this point that, first and foremost, the architecture of cities provides infrastructure for thousands of people. Yet even if it seems that the primary task of this architecture is to allow the rational and concentrated administration of many people, their coexistence, their work, and their leisure, we must not overlook the fact that the fulfillment of these functions is not a sufficient condition of what makes a city. Instead all the important characteristics of urbanity enable the meeting of a multitude of people: squares, boulevards, stadiums, cathedrals, theatres, shopping complexes, and so on. Cities are among the conditions for social events, insofar as they assemble people. They offer a crucial example for understanding the architectural difference between »being-with« and »being-next-to«: »Being-with« means sharing one's presence, and »being-next-to« simply implies a spatial arrangement, collocation, juxtaposition of singulars. Cities are the places where we experience how to share one world with other people—and really very different people.[3]

Since the late Middle Ages, sharing a presence has been practically a matter of fixing a proper time. Synchronization started with the splendid clock towers cities began to adorn themselves with in the 13th century to publicize time. Independent now of natural cycles such as the course of the sun, the hours began to have the same length, symbolized by the exhibited cogs and dials. The clocks symbolized social autonomy, integration into a technical world, the potential for humans to govern themselves, to keep appointments and calendars independent of transcendental powers.[4] Yet this social synchronization, of course, meant that time became a modern god and the worship of time a key to survival. This obliges us to take a careful second glance at what is meant by »being with« someone or something. Just as it does not simply mean being »next to,« it also doesn't imply any identity

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[3]   According to Heidegger, being-with means experiencing one's existence as determined by a world inhabited by oneself and others equally: »Die Welt des Daseins gibt demnach Seiendes frei, das […] ›in‹ der Welt ist, in der es zugleich innerweltlich begegnet. Dieses Seiende […] *ist auch und mit da* […]. ›Welt‹ ist auch Dasein. Die Charakteristik des Begegnens der Anderen orientiert sich so aber doch wieder am je eigenen Dasein […]. ›Die Anderen‹ besagt nicht soviel wie: der ganze Rest der Übrigen außer mir, aus dem sich das Ich heraushebt, die Anderen sind vielmehr die, von denen man sich selbst zumeist *nicht* unterscheidet, unter denen man auch ist […]. Auf dem Grunde dieses *mithaften* In-der-Welt-seins ist die Welt je schon immer die, die ich mit den Anderen teile.« Martin Heidegger: Sein und Zeit, Gesamtausgabe Bd. 2, Frankfurt am Main 1977, p. 158.

[4]   Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum: Die Geschichte der Stunde. Uhren und moderne Zeitordnungen, Munich 1992, pp. 66-67., pp. 108 sqq., pp. 121-129, pp. 150 sqq.; See also Otto Mayr: Uhrwerk und Waage, Autorität, Freiheit und technische Systeme in der frühen Neuzeit, Munich 1987.

or sameness. Coordinating time with someone, then, does not necessarily mean being within the same regime of time. It only makes sense to say that you are *with* someone or something if this implies an accordance of something not necessarily in tune, if it is not an obvious combination.

*Withness*, so to speak, does not necessarily mean being in direct contact (»in touch«), in a shared immediate presence, but in a coordination and interrelation of times (which may then imply that I am *with* somebody from the past or the future).

Consider three examples: Hotels specialize in making you forget this, but do not always succeed: Hundreds of people have slept in your bed before you. Unless you see some ash in the ashtray or worse, you will not think of this case of consecutive presence as (unwanted) being-with. But if you do see some trace, then you feel connected to strangers and hope that they were not too strange, even though they are gone. The same goes for situations, in a train, for example, where an awful-smelling person takes the seat next to you. Whereas in the first case, a temporal proximity turns into a spatial, physical being-with, in the second, this proximity immediately transforms into an unwelcome and unintended form of being-with (as in the expression: I have to live with it). A third example: Sites on the Internet imply the inverse effect; here, hundreds of people are simultaneously at the same place without noticing it. In most cases, you know this and don't mind how many and how strange they are. This only matters if you want to connect to these people. And then suddenly you can see all the wonderful things that make the Internet different from a giant computer, virtual reality or a robot.

It is evident that »being with« is based on some form of simply sharing a space or a time. But it implies a perceptual relation. One may ask whether this being-with is necessarily reciprocal, or whether I can be with people without them agreeing or noticing (like a spy or an unhappy lover), and whether the basic trait is a matter of raising consciousness, until, for example, you realize that all the other creatures on this planet are your fellows. As I understand it, the »with« in »being with« implies a coordination, as in the term »free association,« not a subordination to an identity, or an awareness, but a mutual responsibility. It stresses the persistence of some heterogeneity. Furthermore, it is never a finished addition, something else yet unknown may join. That is why the term »being-with«, in my opinion, should be kept apart from the contemporary celebration of ›communities‹ in political philosophy.

## 5. Philosophy of architecture and the production of communities

The architecture of cities collects and synchronizes people and things, and therefore cannot be reduced to built structures that define a community. Rather, the built environment is an ensemble, presupposing architectures as acts and operations exposed to outside forces. Understood in this way, one may adopt Roger Scruton's definition of architecture as »the art of the ensemble.«[5] The performative acts that make up architecture bring about ensembles, assemblies of people, things, and their environments.

In Karsten Harries' philosophy of architecture, one finds the idea that architecture differs from mere building in that, »works of architecture can be understood as public figures on the ground of comparatively private buildings.«[6] In contrast to vernacular buildings, architecture is, from this emphatic point of view, to be seen as that which points out what is common between us, and what our values and orientations are; architecture produces »the common« just like a public figure on a private ground, as Harries sees it. It thus consists less in concrete buildings than in real or imaginary structures, which re-present building and dwelling. Re-presentation is for Harries the ethical function of architecture: it has to draw the ideal of common/communal living to everybody's attention, making it present and real. This does not imply that architecture should invent and tyrannically impose this ideal (as Scruton tends to suggest), but rather that the latent infrastructures of sociality are made manifest and amplified. The function of architecture is to articulate the common.[7]

From Harries' point of view, the church is the best exemplification of this. It epitomizes the ideal community, the heavenly city of Jerusalem. Because the church is nothing but the community (of believers), the body congregating to celebrate the sacrament, the church building can at best only re-present this, and invite people to such celebrations. Architectures are therefore not buildings, but repetitions of an event and, at the same time, utopian anticipations; they are, as Harries expresses it: »precarious conjectures about an ideal dwelling«.[8] Architecture succeeds, from this point of view, if it provides a place where people can come together and get involved as members of a community. Architecture has to invite

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5    Roger Scruton: The Aesthetics of Architecture, Princeton, NJ 1979, p. 11.
6    Karsten Harries: The ethical function of architecture, Cambridge, MA 1997, p. 365.
7    »The ethical function of architecture is inevitably also a public function. Sacred and public architecture provides the community with a center or centers. Individuals gain their sense of place in a history, in a community, by relating their dwelling to the center.« Ibid., p. 287.
8    Ibid., p. 264.

people to celebrations as formations of community,[9] it has to offer opportunities for unification and scenes for the presentation of as an ideal community.

## 6. Ek-klesia

The Greek word for a popular assembly is *ekklesia*, literally a call–up, a convocation. The related building was called the *ekklesiasterion*. The word church derives from this term, *ekklesia*, the popular assembly. The more general term for assembly in Greek was *syllogos*, based on *legein* (collecting). So we should change the perspective. Rather than, with Harries, considering the church as a paradigm for the assembly, and rather than giving architecture the task of representing ideals, such as the Heavenly Jerusalem (City of God), we should look at the actual ways in which cities enable popular assembly. Assemblies, then, are not preexisting places that determine the functions people who meet in them must adopt, nor communities requiring initiation and identification; instead they construct networks of interaction, of temporal coordination and environmental responses. They do not presuppose the existence of »the people« but rather emerge as soon as people, any people, meet and start to act in front of each other in public. It is a collective performance of this kind that brings about the sensation of togetherness, the perception of a set of singulars that could be transformed into some sort of social order.

Clear examples of such collective performances can be found in processions, parades and demonstrations. In Ancient Greece, processions were (re-enactments of) the founding of cities. The dynamism of the procession traces a route, which anticipates a collective routine, a habit. This festive or habitual way of perambulating bears different names (*pompé, prósodos, agogé, ekphorá, ékdosis*) and adopts different shapes; but all elements of proceeding, of striding, of walking about, of strolling, of *dérive* and *exodus* originate in such interactions between urban agents and their public, and they solidify as bodily habits, symbols and assemblages of objects. This processing builds the frame for further collective events, since it is only on the basis of such an order of procedure that decisions can be made, that man-made events can manifest themselves in a social ontology. In this way, processions not only built the framing action for the Ekklesia (the assembly of the people) which gathered in the Agora and later in the Pnyx. They also framed theater

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9   »There is a continuing need for the creation of festal places on the ground of everyday dwellings, places where individuals come together and affirm themselves as members of the community, as they join in public reenactments of the essential: celebrations of those central aspects of our life that maintain and give meaning to existence. The highest function of architecture remains what it has always been: to invite such festivals.« Ibid., p. 365.

performances and trials.[10] Thus the procedural pattern of action sets up a relation between the spatial coordinates of collective life. These coordinates influence how individual, group, or collective action can be experienced, and how the executing body is defined. Simultaneously, processions demarcate insignificant spaces, project and perceive a dynamic self-image, develop an often-conflictual cohesion, and appropriate spatial and temporal symbols. The procedural collective thus originates in an environmental relation, as it translates a spatial tension into a movement, within view of a public. It organizes itself through the arrangement of such movement against an outside, but within a field of experience, thus enabling a negotiation, manipulation, and densification of forces, perceptions, and symbols.

It is important to note that they are not necessarily staged or commanded. Every flicker, every tiny step, every gesture is an element in the execution of such a procession and relates the procedural space to the patterns of orientation. As the implication of each individual in such an execution is decisive for its success, in the final account, no hegemony can be sure of its ability to manipulate the masses, even though, of course, mass processes and rituals will always be effective means of articulating political power. Like any movement within it, each procession can change the basic coordinates of communal life.[11] The famous Panathenaia procession was a way for the city to celebrate itself, in a procession, leading from the Dipylon Gate at the periphery through the busy Kerameikos and the Agora before arriving at the Acropolis. This procession laid down the main axes through the city and practically assembled all parts of the city; at the same time, moving from east to west, it embodied the route of the sun through the city, and later re-enacted this general orientation. The inscription of the procession as an axis of orientation into the foundations of the city started to introduce the checkerboard pattern to urban planning. The Romans adopted this, in a ritual comprising inauguration, limitation, orientation, and consecration, thereby inscribing the procession into the foundations of each city and adjusting the rectangular street networks to the course of the planets and to the passing of time, thus making it possible to calculate movements. The measurement of temporal relations then gains the upper hand over the spatializing, collective interaction.

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10  The theater performance in the Dionysos Theater in Athens began with the assembly of the public, which in turn announced the entrance of the choir. The choir marched along the *párodos* until it reached a *stásis*, where it performed ritual singing and dancing to honor the god of the theater (*stasimon*), then exited again (*exodos*). The basic structure of the drama parallels this procedure, the unity of the theater play corresponds to this pattern of action, culminating in the final satyric feast.

11  Cf. François de Polignac: La naissance de la cité grecque. Cultes, Espaces et Société, Paris 1984.

However, before it became a hierarchical march, the assembling procession brought random parts of the population into some spectacular formation and enacted a decampment. These original »pompeis« were organized on an egalitarian basis. Those who did not participate could still watch, dance, and eat at the final public meal, because the meat sacrificed to the goddess at the peripety of the procession was distributed to the population as a concluding act. A number of plays reflect this processional structure. Aristophanes' *Birds* ends with an invitation to all spectators to a ceremonial wedding procession, concluding with a public meal. Furthermore, the entire drama competition would terminate with the exodus of the audience to an official banquet. Processions thus exemplify a divine form of carelessness, presence and abundance.

In each case, processions weave a demonstration of power and an aesthetic game into one another. Thus processions can easily turn into sites of political fermentation or arenas of political contestation:[12] a well-known example is the restoration of democracy after the Tyranny of the Thirty, by means of a procession starting from the city gates at the Piraeus, leading towards the re-opening of the popular assembly (*ekklesia*).[13]

## 7. Architectural requirements of demonstrations

Are processions not just boring rituals? It is important to observe that they often draw on established patterns, but then may suddenly bring up something completely new. Such was the case at the birth of the demonstration. The royal *entrées*, the *marches* through the parks and streets of the Faubourg St Antoine, the demonstrating masses, who opposed the dominion of the walls, as in the case of the storming of the Bastille, formed a cultural background to the unification of women in their march from the Palais Royal and the Place de Grève towards the Château de Versailles on October 5, 1789. This was still a popular march protesting to the authorities the poor supply of bread. Upon their return, the following day, waving revolutionary banners, and with the King practically in their hands, these several thousand women addressed a political audience. This event may be counted as the first political demonstration, a pattern now followed somewhere in the world practically every day.

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[12]  Cf. Athena Kavoulaki: Processional performance and the polis, in: Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne (ed.): Performance culture and Athenian democracy, Cambridge, MA 1999, pp. 298 sqq.

[13]  Cf. Kavoulaki, ibid., p. 305.

The government under Robespierre invented all kinds of new occupations of public space, with distractions, fake cult parades, and ritualistic interplays, in order to make such processing masses governable and prevent spontaneous and unruly demonstrations. Thus he invented the »Fête de la Fédération«, built gigantic circus structures, and tried all kinds of techniques for mass assembly in a new kind of bread and circuses policy.[14] Since then it seems that modern urban planning has concentrated on aggregates of solitary cells and on »collectivization attractors«, in which the consensus to being governed is being »hollered out.«[15] It could certainly be said that cities today are machines of »forcible coordination.« Is it not the case that today, the only chance to escape the permanent control and administration of life is to become invisible, to decamp from the cities, back into diffusion, obscurity, dispersion?

The political performance of architectonic spaces, however, is not restricted to functioning as a mere technology of power, nor to reflecting a heterotopic image. Rather, it should be analyzed as an enablement (*Ermöglichung*) of concrete modes of perception and experience. Architecture is not restricted to the plans of professional architects; instead it is, as I have argued, a collective act.

People will always have the option of acting against the intention of the master builders, and of using and redeveloping architectures as resources, spontaneously or according to a plan. Architectures can only guide every step we take, and put every decision determining our everyday life into a black box, if we immerse ourselves in them, integrating their dominant program, in order to acquire agency, only if, in other words, we adopt them as our fundamental laws. Architectures structure our life-world. They affect our perception, our experience, our cognition to the point where we have the impression that our autonomy is fulfilled when we conform to these buildings as our fundamental laws and their constraints, which we take to be necessities. Yet we have only to turn our attention to the controversial dynamics between the purely physical and the symbolic levels of such spaces in order to apprehend the porosity of social orders, the plasticity (modifiability) and the transgressability of architectonic markings and positings. For these very same architectures also play a central role in movements of liberation. Collocation then becomes assembly; »being-next-to« turns into »being-with.« Despite all kinds of security devices, political unrest requires physical presence, and immediate contact.

The revolutions in France in 1789, in Germany in 1989, in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011 did not take place in the mass media. Journals, pamphlets, radio, television, Internet, all played an important role in the dissemination of opinions and news

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14  Cf. Mona Ozouf: La fête révolutionnaire 1789-1799, Paris 1976, pp. 220-221.
15  Cf. Peter Sloterdijk: Schäume, Sphären, Vol. 3, Frankfurt am Main 2004, p. 620.

before and during revolutionary events. Yet the revolutionary masses took to the streets and the squares to make their voices heard. As long as oligarchical powers are secured architectonically, by walls and barbed wire, by panoptical asymmetries of observation and dispositives of control, as long as the concept of ›the people‹ is invented by techniques of representation, there will be representative violence in the streets as a means of forming popular sovereignty. In order for a revolution to take place, someone has to occupy a square and kick in some doors. The better argument does not change the world.