

# Architectural Action in the Anthropocene

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At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, in which the impact of the human being has largely surpassed the influence of the biotic process and natural disasters on Earth, as regards the climate and geological changes, it is important to deal with the relevance of architect's action. Not only did humans change the Earth's climatic balance, but also the human living conditions. As asserted by the political philosopher Jacques Rancière (Rancière, 2006), an ethical breakthrough in aesthetics is spreading worldwide and it is clear that this turn comprehends the social and cultural spheres, including the architectural field. Here, the aim is to contribute to such discussion offering an analysis of the literature concerning the political and ethical human actions. The International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme, through The Global Change and the Earth System synthesis has rightly asserted that we are living in the era of the Anthropocene, in which individuals have a considerable responsibility towards themselves and the planet they live on (Steffen, 2004). Considering this, accordingly with IGBP, humanity's actions are unsustainable (Steffen, 2004) and questions regarding the ethics and the legitimacy of certain human actions must become a focus of debate. Natural disasters are not the only events that change the environmental and anthropological conditions of a place indeed, often, it is Man himself who makes drastic modifications through his actions. This paper aims to propose case studies ranging from general to particular by analysing events, actions, agents, consequences and solutions, discussed in the framework of the ethical turn in aesthetics. In accordance with the philosopher Giorgio Agamben (Agamben, 2011), there is a limit to what humans can do and what they cannot do and these questionable ethical acts lead to one present debate: what architect can and cannot design.

One criticism of this thought is outlined in the Environment Bubble of 1965 by François Dallegret and Reyner Banham, where the authors comment on the lack of an efficient protection from the elements, and a high waste of energy in the American household (Jencks, 2000). In this Bubble, the power of the air conditioner keeps the entire structure inflatable and depolluted. This project marked the way of thinking about the atmospheric environment and at its core it can be find the principle of manipulation of the atmosphere through engineering and technological devices by humans (Dorrian, 2013).

As identified by Polly Higgins, the meaning of ecocide is “ the destruction, damage or loss of ecosystems or a given territory, whether by man or otherwise, to such an extent that the peaceful enjoyment of the inhabitants of that territory has been severely reduced” (Higgins, 2010). One case worth dealing with is the environmental crime caused by waste from the Picher mines in Oklahoma. Zinc and lead, extracted from the subsoil, which were great resources for the United States during the First World War. The results of these intense productions have drastically changed the geography of the surrounding prairies, generating a disproportionate amount of waste. When, in the 1970s, the pumps used to dispose water from the mines were disused, an accumulation of waste led to the overflow of water on the surrounding soil. The piles of waste present on the territory were swept away with materials that had contributed at the pollution of the area. The money available to clean up the environmental effects of mining activities was extremely limited. In a first instance, the funds were used to allow the inhabitants of the area to move elsewhere. Amy Norris and Clinton Langevin, the architects that founded the research and design studio Captains of Industry, started to investigate problems and solutions of the industrial heritage. They developed a project known as Supergrid Tar Creek in which the main object featured landscapes disturbed by human industry. Norris and Langevin redesigned human settlement, arguing that disused industrial sites could become new frontiers for human settlement and sustainable innovation (Norris and Langevin, 2012). The generation of solar energy is one of the strategies used by architects in order to catalyse the finances for the site, through a structure that absorbs solar energy from the ground, creating the opportunity to host other activities on the landscape undergoing rehabilitation. The structure, prefabricated in concrete with additives in recycled rock collected on site, acts as a conduit for the transport of water, energy and waste allowing the flow with the surrounding area.

Given the significance of humanitarian crisis cases, it is imperative to draw attention to a certain event that affected contemporary history and had compromise the living conditions of a group of people. The Calais Jungle and the Yazidi genocide cases are notable examples of humanitarian disasters. In August 2014, the terrorist group ISIL invaded the Sinjar region in northern Iraq, which was occupied by the Yazidi

community, a persecuted religious and cultural minority. Unprotected by armies, the Yazidi villages were razed to the ground and their inhabitants were massacred and made victims of the slave trade. Religious buildings and Yazidi's cultural heritage sites were destroyed. To support the investigations on the genocide of the community, Forensic Architecture and Yazda have trained researchers in DIY mapping and specific techniques to reconstruct the site in ruins. This intervention by Forensic Architecture not only had positive social implications for the general welfare of the Yazidi community, but also had a significant media impact.

The case of Calais Jungle is also considered meaningful. The Calais Jungle has hosted thousands of refugees headed to the United Kingdom who have escaped from war-torn countries. Before its closure, the camp had the appearance of a network of ephemeral infrastructure including tents, places of worship, libraries and restaurant. Collecting and sharing data on camp conditions and refugee issues, Architecture for Refugees is addressed on the environmental and architectural aspects of the refugee crisis. Organisations such as OpenStreetMap, MapFugees and Architecture for Refugees are pursuing a movement to improve the quality of services and security, taking care the needs of the camp's inhabitants. The sympathetic approach of the AFR aim to influence local governments to create viable environmental alternatives that can enhance refugee camps by supporting the project with concrete data collected on site. The Calais camp, built for and by the inhabitants, is a clear example, for architects, of construction which involves groups or communities in solving problems locally. It can be said that in this case study the role of the architect is an ethically responsible role, they became 'enablers' (Theodorou, 2011), designing a new 'community' situation from the bottom up.

Similarly it is essential to debate about the Ski Dubai, the project of the snow park in the middle of the Arabian Desert, where the average temperature is 50 degrees Celsius. In *Delirious New York, A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (1997) Rem Koolhaas was anticipating what the "culture of congestion" absolutely means. The architect depicted the city as an expression of the widespread variety of human behaviour characterising a country where Western capitalist culture is inculcated in the metropolitan life style of the early twentieth century. The concept expressed by Koolhaas merely represents the basis of a much more extreme and disturbing trend. The Ski Dubai contains an artificial mountain range, a ski slope, a snow park in which one of the main entertainment is a show with penguins. All of this not only expresses a capitalist society devoted to consumerism, but also the idea of developing time control and climate variations. The logic on which climate manipulation is based in Ski Dubai is the tool that filters the paradox of an "engineered freedom" that does not seem to be free at all (Dorrian, 2013). In the age of the Anthropocene, in which it is increasingly difficult to reach environments not manipulated by man, Ski Dubai is allegorically the embodiment of uncontaminated, pure and unpolluted nature. The Potentiality for manipulation has denoted in man the pretension of an uncontaminated environment in which the exposure to extreme atmospheric handling is so high that the environment does not seem manipulated at all, in which what is naturally uncontaminated, in reality is a totally artificial environment. The most disturbing factor, aside from the high rates of air pollution, is the idea of a new world, characterised by climate manipulation dictated by the new statecraft, which aims to create specific microsystems that respect certain weather conditions to meet a consumerist activity (Dorrian 2013). As asserted by Mark Dorrian, nature has become a commodity here (Dorrian 2013). Although, only the limpid vision on what humans "can not do", gives consistency to their actions. (Agamben, 2011).

Many people might wonder why a government has been able to grant the design and construction of a project as eccentric as this one. The reasoning of this is clearly outlined in Maria Theodorou's words in her "Architecture and Ethics of Empowerment", in which she deals with the economic policy characteristic of the Western culture. Resuming the etymology of the word "economy", Theodorou reaches the determination of the primordial meaning of the term. The roots of this word come from ancient Greek: Οικονομικός. The word comes from the union of words οἶκος (oikos), "house" and νόμος (nomos), "norm", means "administration of the home" (Theodorou, 2011). In a second stage, Theodorou quotes Agamben's words explaining how during the Middle Ages, the church fathers used this word to explain the trinity of God. The

word Οἰκονομικός was used allegorically to explain the issue (Agamben, 2009). The communicative strategy used by the church to explain this, looked at the economy of God and therefore the administration of His creation, arguing that in this sense God is truly triple. As a Father, he entrusts this task of administration to His Son Jesus Christ (Agamben, 2009). Overall, the break that the theologians had sought to avoid, by removing the “uniqueness” from the plane of God, separates in Him being and action, the ontology and the praxis (Agamben, 2009). These words indicate that action has no basis in being. Accordingly to Agamben, this "schizophrenia of the economy" is what the theological doctrine of oikonomy has left to Western culture (Agamben, 2009). And this is exactly what happens when a government aims only at its own replication (Agamben, 2009).

Gramsci in the Prisons' Notebook stated that social groups that establish the end of the State and their own end as the objective to be achieved can create an ethical State and a consequent morally unitary State (Gramsci, 1971). Focusing on these words, leaving aside the political background of socialism, Gramsci's concept of the State, as far as this vision can be defined as utopian, is a universal thought, which aims at a shared and supportive ethics. In accordance with Gramsci, the objective of the State was to achieve its absence: the creation of a morally unitary organism. In a historical moment as the current one, in which the planet is witnessing daily violent repression, human rights violations, environmental crimes and humanitarian disasters, do the governments of the Countries with the greatest economic possibilities and the largest number of resources - when they are not themselves causing damage to the environment and the human being - behave appropriately in the prevention of crimes against humanity? Are the tools that governments put at the disposal of organisations involved in the recovery and reconstruction of what has been lost adequate? Finally, the most urgent architectural question to be addressed is the following: are the bodies involved in the training of architects providing the right means to reflect ethically on current issues related to the period of the Anthropocene?

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