

# **IMITATION OF LIFE: THE SIMULATION OF THE EVERYDAY AS A POLITICAL EXPRESSION**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Despite the great range of political and aesthetic implications it incorporates, the notion of everyday life is often formulated from architectural theory purely as a critical argument against architects' estrangement from the 'real' life of the city. In this paper I'd like to overcome this critique by unveiling unexplored ways in which the idea of the everyday has produced relevant architectural results within contemporary aesthetic regimes. In doing so I'll attempt to challenge the typical association between authenticity, social critique and everyday, by suggesting that it is, paradoxically, through imitations of the spatial practices and the images of everyday life, how modern and contemporary architectures have achieved to embody certain political contents. For this I'll use two projects known as paradigmatic of participation in architecture: The Byker Wall by Ralph Erskine and the Maison Médicale by Lucien Kroll, that also share a moment, the late sixties, in which the critical notion of the everyday was probably going through its maximum political relevance during modernity.

The reconsideration of everyday life re-emerges in the contemporary discourse of architecture during the nineties as a programmatic critique against the most accepted ways of practice of the discipline. An automatic product of this critique is the search for alternative design tactics that shorten the gap between reality and architecture. But this is not an easy or even a new task. According to Margaret Crawford, we may pursue it by "eliminating the distance between professionals and users, specialized knowledge and daily experience"<sup>1</sup>, forcing the architect to "address the contradictions of social life from close up."<sup>2</sup> This movement towards a more open and complex reality not only goes beyond the traditional notion of architectural context and, therefore, leaves us out of our comfort zone. It is also, and more importantly, a politically focused shift.

If we, as architects, stand in front of the question of contemporary everydayness, we must necessarily react to what Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord identified as the colonization of everyday life<sup>3</sup>, pointing at the fact that our basic daily activities, such as cooking, driving a car, buying groceries, taking a bus or having a coffee, have been fully occupied by the dynamics of consumption and, therefore, have become simultaneously political and aesthetic. Along the same lines and openly following Lefebvre, Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross consider that "the political is hidden" within "the most banal and repetitive gestures of everyday life"<sup>4</sup>, which is also where we can look for its critical alternatives: "It is in the midst of the utterly ordinary, in the space where the dominant relations of production are tirelessly and relentlessly reproduced, where we must look for utopian and political aspirations to crystallize."<sup>5</sup>

If the critique of the social reality of capitalism and the promise for its transformation are embedded within the spatial practices of everyday life, we may assume that the everyday becomes some kind of political proof of realism for architecture and urban design. Which raises the question whether an architecture that addresses the contingency of the everyday will inevitably become political, and "resistant to the commodification/ consumption paradigm that has become dominant."<sup>6</sup>

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### Small Narratives and Negotiated Utopia

Despite its complexity, the critical nature of the spaces of the everyday is usually approached merely in terms of authenticity: the quotidian as the pure expression of real life opposed to the imposture of the official city built by politicians and architects. According to the triad in which Lefebvre divides the notion of space as a social product<sup>7</sup>, the perceived space, defined by its physical structure, and the lived space, defined by social interaction, are the most direct translations of this authentic reality of the city. Contrarily, the conceived spaces in Lefebvre's triad, the ones designed by architects or promoted by politicians, "too easily evolve into the production of fixed ideals."<sup>8</sup> However, it is precisely on the overlapping of the three spaces of the triad, authentic or not, where space is fully defined as the result of the capitalist productive organization.

In the debates about the problems and possibilities of participatory architecture that took place during the late sixties, similar questions were being discussed. The redistribution of power implicit in participation opened a critical perspective over the role of the architect who, thanks to a disproportionate influence over the 'conceived space', could impose a private, therefore inauthentic, agenda on the everyday life of the citizens. Consequently, some of the most critical discussions about the reasons why participatory processes weren't always successful had to do with its political authenticity. A massive critical response was raised regarding the reality of the democracy of some processes and, therefore, questioning the legitimacy of participation as an effective political tool.

A well-known example is the ladder of participation<sup>9</sup> proposed by Sherry Arnstein in 1969, in which eight possible levels of participation were classified on a vertical scale, from manipulation on the lowest level, to citizen control on the highest, or placation in the middle. Arnstein suggests a linear criterion of legitimacy, in which the architectural results of the project or its actual social success are never assessed. Only the political conditions are considered, presuming that redistribution of power always guarantees positive transformative results. An illustration of this way of thinking is the assessment as a process of false participation of the large development built by Ralph Erskine in Newcastle and known as The Byker Wall (1969-1975): "Perhaps the most cynical example of the architects own ideas masquerading as the outcome of a participatory process is Byker Wall. This is clearly an 'Erskine building' and not something designed collectively by the Byker's residents. Yet an elaborate charade was gone through of setting up the architect's branch office in the community."<sup>10</sup>

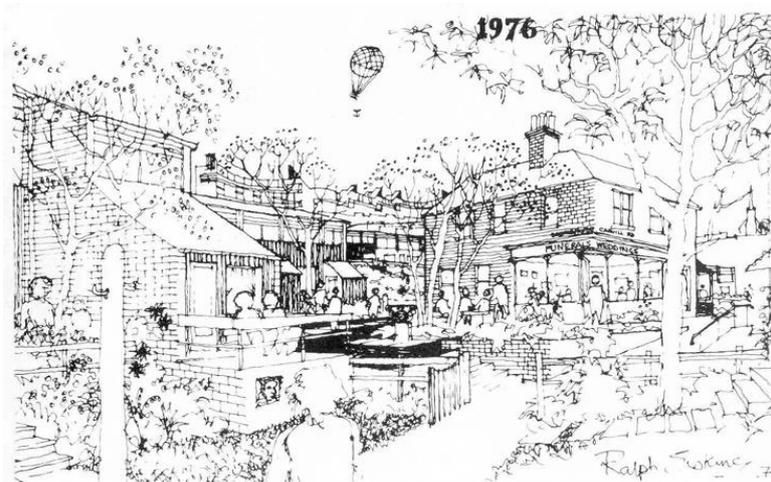


Figure 1. Ralph Erskine, 1976. Drawing of a semi-public courtyard in Byker, Newcastle.

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Against this somehow narrow mode of critique, I'd like to propose an alternative perspective to examine participatory processes as conflictive spaces of encounter between everyday life, politics and architecture. With that end I'll shift the discussion from the notion of authenticity, automatically related to legitimacy, to the sphere of fiction, almost its opposite. In the case of Byker, we could argue that the type of fiction that explains its political agenda and its architectural grammar belongs to the field of realism. As in Andre Bazin<sup>11</sup> analysis of De Sica's 'Bicycle thief', despite the intricacy of the formal internal mechanisms and the intensity of the social problematic at stake, both become transparent in the final result. They remain buried within an architecture that we perceive as natural, even if it's composed of a carefully designed collection of formal gestures. A spatial narrative made of small everyday stories that artificially construct the perception of a normal life. In similar terms, as narratives of the streets, Jeremy Till explains how in design processes with citizen participation, "the role of the architect becomes that of understanding and drawing out the spatial implications of urban storytelling."<sup>12</sup> These small stories incorporate into the project as a form of "indeterminacy and contingency"<sup>13</sup> that needs to be translated by the architect who, far from reducing his responsibility as some have suggested, is more demanded as a designer than ever. Consequently, "the architect, as negotiator of hope initiated through urban storytelling, is thus much more than a mere technical facilitator."<sup>14</sup>

In most of the drawings developed along the years for Byker, we can notice the overlapping of the small stories of the lived space with the conceived space of architectural form. The figures of the different groups of people are represented as importantly as the built masses. This isn't merely an issue of graphic communication. More likely, it's as if the contents of architecture found within actions rather than within spaces would require us to build a fiction, a narrative imitation of reality, to express them. Hence the paradox: it seems that the architectures originated from everyday life can only be effectively incarnated by fictions, where the ideological discourse becomes transparent. An illustrative example of a similar realist narrative, can be found on the drawings for the new village of La Martella, designed by Ludovico Quaroni in 1951, where we easily recognize the archetypes from the classic films of Italian Neorealism. But the social atmosphere of the drawings and the way the characters are treated as caricatures reveals the difference between the political ideals behind La Martella and those promoted in Byker. Such ideals, absent in other neorealist expressions, but essential to neorealist urbanism, were based on the paternalist reintroduction of rural life on the new postwar urban neighborhoods, following the ideology of the ruling Christian Democratic party and far from the consensus-oriented solutions of Social Democracy<sup>15</sup>.

The same technique we've found on Erskine's graphic storytelling -the overlapping of different conditions and narratives into a complex composite-, is applied to every layer of the project, always staging the illusory complexity of a shared life: the high raise overlapped with small density cores, the old symbolic buildings with the new modern housing, a monumental gesture of the wall with a micro cosmos of semipublic spaces; all of them parts of a complex equilibrium that reflects the idea of a negotiated social balance. According to John Kaliski this inclusiveness is also distinctive of contemporary everyday life, which "accepts the new, the old, the present, the simulated, and the spectacular within a framework of everyday situations"<sup>16</sup>. But the micro-narratives of urban storytelling are interconnected in Byker by the construction of a wider political fiction: the negotiated utopia of the social-democratic welfare state that Erskine had experienced in Sweden.

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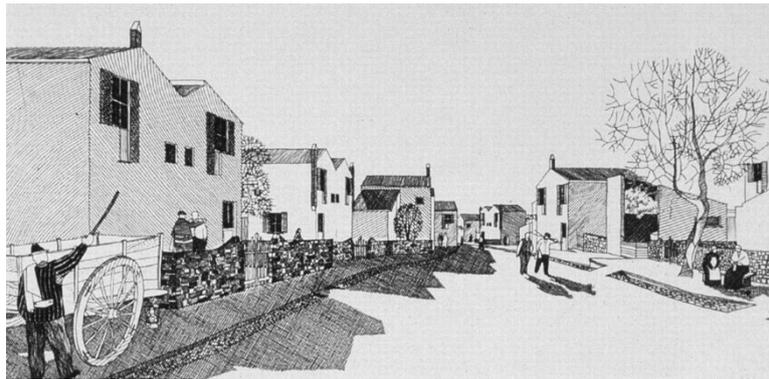


Figure 2. Ludovico Quaroni, Federico Gorio and others, 1951.  
*New village of La Martella, Matera.*

An enormous effort was made by Erskine and his team to simulate the effects of a complex reality, as if the development would have been implemented along decades, growing slowly and organically. This approach epitomizes one of the critical alternatives to architectural modernity, that of the architect as a craftsman, against technical repetition or any sort of generic forms. That is why, despite the great variety and intensity of its form and materiality, the notion of time in Byker somehow denotes a slow pace. The double dialectic history/modernity and design/occupation is resolved, unlike most of the modern architecture of the sixties, as a balanced landscape. The physical structure of the neighborhood seems to function as a stabilized system of spontaneity, in which even if anything seems changeable through *bricolage* -different new doors and fences have been added with time-, nothing really affects the global picture. Even the current, and unexpected, occupation of most of the pedestrian streets by cars, doesn't seem to undermine its social atmosphere or its constructed political expression as a negotiated utopia.

### Constructing the Image of Revolt

If, as Fredric Jameson has stated, the aesthetic expression of a political ideal has two possible forms, utopian or subversive<sup>17</sup>, the *Maison Médicale* (1969-72) designed by Lucien Kroll, would certainly fit on the second group. Together with the Byker Wall, the *Mémé*, as it is usually known, is one of the few examples of participatory architecture of the sixties and seventies that synthesized a political process on a consistent and innovative architectural language. In many ways, the *Mémé* can be interpreted as the next step after Byker. If the architect in Byker was a craftsman constructing a negotiated utopia, in the *Maison Médicale* we might say that Kroll was an activist<sup>18</sup> decided to invent the architectural image of political revolt. Strongly influenced by the politics of its time, the buildings that composed the *Mémé* were without any doubt, “a delayed product of 1968, the year of revolution and protest”<sup>19</sup>.

Moreover, the specific circumstances that surrounded the commission for Kroll were also decisive: The project itself was born from a conflict between the students and the administration of the Catholic University of Louvain, in which Kroll always allied with the students: “They supported us in conflicts, took part in discussions with officialdom, and organized demonstrations against university's alternative project”<sup>20</sup>. In this context, the aesthetic discourse of social revolution, the radical expression of freedom and disagreement with the status quo becomes the main theme of Kroll's project. Leading to an architectural implementation of this discourse as the “disorder”<sup>21</sup> of the built form “which, not being institutionalized, renews itself continually, constantly reinventing images of a

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reality in transformation”<sup>22</sup>. The radical interpretation of the everyday routines of the students: “I get up, wash, it’s cold, the neighbor’s radio annoys me, I go to get bread...”<sup>23</sup>, revealed as a fertile material for an experimental approach to a residential program and as the antidote for institutionalization.

In Byker Erskine combined a model of participation based first on consultation, and then on an ultra-customization of the design meant to carefully translate each of the desires of the neighbors. Consequently, the team of architects was forced to produce a disproportionately large amount of detailed variations<sup>24</sup> so, even within the great variety of formal solutions, the consistency and equilibrium were kept. There is an essential divergence in the way Lucien Kroll tackled the issue of difference and technology in the Mémé. Kroll constructs an architectural image to embody the idea of constant revolution, of an ever-lasting fight for freedom: there is neither possible equilibrium nor utopia. But the refutation of the “authoritarian and repressive condition”<sup>25</sup> of the system requires the illusion of spontaneity and flexibility when, in reality, the formal disorder of the building is a direct consequence of a very precise system of control.

The design of an irregular structural scheme following what Kroll calls “the wandering columns”<sup>26</sup>, will determine the size of every other element attached to it, making impossible a perception of order or a sense of control. The freedom to use any size of window, or even to ‘do it yourself’, is not simply a way to delegate power of design. It is, in fact, a way of securing a very well planned effect of disorder, which is surprisingly similar in different scales: in the general volumetric organization designed by Kroll, and in the cloud of smaller and lighter elements attached to it.



Figure 3. Lucien Kroll, 1972. *Maison Médicale*, Brussels

### The Limits of Architecture as a Political Activity

The interpretation of the Mémé and the Byker Wall as buildings conceived from simulations doesn’t diminish their relevance as political architectures. If anything, it reinforces them; it identifies them as pioneering projects in the development of alternative strategies to express the transformative potential of the practices of the everyday. Let’s now briefly examine, through this same lens, the very recent trend of participatory urban design and public space reclamation strategies. Successful Practices like

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the French collective Atelier d'architecture autogérée or the Spanish office Ecosistema Urbano, have worked consistently in rebuilding the idea of a more democratic urban citizenship through the design of temporary structures or collective urban actions.

The social and economic context of the recent financial crisis, as well as the influence of movements such as Occupy Wall Street, have stimulated the restoration of the notion of participatory design, that had been neglected for decades. But, how politically critical are these new proposals after all? Undoubtedly they are more than just a new aesthetic trend, they contain a substantial political focus that we may easily connect to Henri Lefebvre's ideas in *The Right to the City*. But, is this enough? We can find a revealing example on the recent project for a park in Oslo, by German landscape architect Silke Volkert. The potentially subversive re-appropriation of a former landfill by people, is resolved as a benevolent environmentalist utopia, expressed through a set of images of fictional everyday actions that show groups of active and happy citizens working on urban gardens. As in many other recent projects, this proposal embodies the appropriation of the critical agenda of environmentalist politics by official and corporate culture, through the representation of an ideally green everydayness.



*Figure 4. Silke Volkert, 2012.  
Park on the former landfill of Grønmo in Oslo.*

Moreover, this focus entails the disbelief in an architecture capable of radically transform reality by itself. Instead, it suggests its development into a mutable discipline that has to adapt carefully to the changing dynamics of contemporary society and become acceptable to be somehow influential, rather than challenging the status quo. Therefore, the new architecture of participation doesn't really need to be formulated in formal or material terms -the space of the park virtually disappears on the drawings-, as the radical architects from the sixties did. Instead, it opens a different model of practice that embraces fiction and politics non-traumatic fashion, recovering the idea of architect as an activist, but without a fixed ideological agenda.

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Figure 5. *El Campo de la Cebada*, 2010. Madrid.

### Conclusion

As a conclusion, I'd like to shortly describe a case of citizen participation that might raise some final questions and, maybe, enlighten the importance of the political image of architecture nowadays. In the urban experiment of *El Campo de la Cebada*, in Madrid, an available urban void has been spontaneously appropriated by local community groups, which in a self-organized structure are programming the space for all sorts of events and activities until the void is filled, in the near future, by a new construction. These activities, most of them part of the everyday life of the neighborhood, have naturally generated different temporary architectures that have successively occupied the space of the void. It's a model of participation without a stable architectural image or a recognizable political narrative. In the ultimate phase of participation, apparently, there is no need for design nor ideology. There is no fiction, no simulation of the complexity of life. Instead of an architecture that imitates reality, it's the social reality that has invaded the city and made architecture, finally, irrelevant, opening a new set of questions: Do these experiment show us the limits of architecture as a political activity? Can we still rely, as Erskine and Kroll did, on the construction of architectural image as the incarnation of political agendas? Are there new ways to reintroduce architecture, beyond activism, as a legitimate political medium to deal with the instability of contemporary everyday life?

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Crawford, introduction to *Everyday Urbanism: Expanded*, ed. Margaret Crawford et al. (New York: Monacelli, 2008), 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Andy Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: a Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross, introduction to *Everyday Life: Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 1-4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-4.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Harris, "Everyday Architecture" in *Architecture of the Everyday*, ed. Steven Harris et al. (New York: Princeton, 1997), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (New York: Blackwell, 1991), 26.

<sup>8</sup> John Kalinski, "The Present City and the Practice of City Design", in *Everyday Urbanism*, ed. Margaret Crawford et al. (New York: Monacelli, 2008), 107.

<sup>9</sup> Sherry Arnstein, "A ladder of citizen participation", in *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35 (1969): 216.

<sup>10</sup> Nigel Cross, "Participation", *The Architects' Journal* (1982): 76.

<sup>11</sup> Andre Bazin, *Que es el cine* (Madrid, Riapl, 1990), 330.

<sup>12</sup> Jeremy Till, "The Negotiation of Hope" in *Architecture and Participation*, ed. Jeremy Till et al. (London: Taylor, 2005), 39.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Rowe, *Civic Realism* (New York: MIT, 1997), 108.

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<sup>16</sup> Kalinski, *Present City*, 107.

<sup>17</sup> Fredric Jameson, "History Lessons", in *Architecture and Revolution*, ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 71-80.

<sup>18</sup> Till, *The Negotiation of Hope*, 39.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Blundell Jones and Eamon Caniffe, *Modern Architecture Through Case Studies 1945-90* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2007), 128.

<sup>20</sup> Lucien Kroll, *Buildings and Projects* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 40.

<sup>21</sup> De Carlo, *Architecture's Public* in *Architecture and Participation*, ed. Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu and Jeremy Till (Abingdon: Spon Press, 2007), 18

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Lucien Kroll, *The Soft Zone*, *Architectural Association Quarterly* vol. 7, no. 4 (London: 1975)

<sup>24</sup> Aurora Fernandez and Javier Mozas, *Historias sobre vivienda colectiva. Análisis gráfico de diez obras esenciales* (Vitoria: A+T ediciones, 2013), 386.

<sup>25</sup> De Carlo, *Architecture's Public*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Lucien Kroll, *An Architecture of Complexity* (Cambridge: MIT, 1987), 42.