Sustainable Aesthetics of the Pathological

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Abstract

According to Georges Canguilhem, the Normal cannot be comprehended without the concept of the Pathological. For him, deviation from the Normal is not a failing, but an indispensable driving force for establishing new systems of order. Re-evaluating the impact of pathological situations of crisis can alter our understanding of the temporal and transformational character of urban systems. On discourse level, this helps to redefine the term Sustainability by introducing a reference system, which is not based on global standardization but on local intervention. On application level, architects could start to accept crises in order to question accepted - 'normal' - positions in urban design. The pathological state becomes a catalyst for development and challenges our preconceptions of what we conceive to be normal or beautiful. The thesis will be discussed on the basis of exemplary design projects like R&Sie's gallery in Bangkok or the "Badeschiff" in Berlin.

Normalizing Ideology

In the beginning of the 20th century, the Modern Movement introduced ideas of functional efficiency and hygiene into architecture and urbanism in order to "heal" the city. In the rhetoric of the time, the existing city was a sick body very much like its inhabitants suffering from tuberculosis. By establishing a new spatial, aesthetic and behavioural regime, Architecture would heal those bodies of all grievances. While doing so, Architecture did not only aim to envision, regulate and generate spaces, but necessarily aimed to envision and produce new 'normalized' inhabitants[1]. Architecture became a profession eliminating misfits and enhancing health and security by structuring peoples lives. In this way, modern architecture was the compliant executor of the normalizing agenda of a disciplinary society as described by Michel Foucault. From society as a whole constituted by difference, modernism aimed shaping it as a potentially homogenous whole.[2]

A central idea of the modern movement was the definition of standards. Those should, applied to the production of architecture and urbanism, enforce the medical and social improvement of cities. Standards and Norms became normalizing tools projected to serve global development. In a way, the global city and the global citizen were designed long before the term came into use. Compared to those norms, earlier normalities turned into deviating pathologies. The increasing awareness of crisis might have stemmed from the growing propagation and influence of national, international and global standards. Those crises were to be avoided at all costs.

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[1] Teyssot, *Georges, Norm and Type, Variations on a Theme*, in: Picon, Antoine, and Ponte, Alessandra, 2003, *Architecture and the Sciences. Exchanging Metaphors*, USA, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, p.165 "The new abstract type was formed by means of calculation determined by the laws of evolution, and grafted on to the skin by thousands of inscriptions. Although type no longer informed architecture (except as a revival), typology reorganized the environment in a thoroughly normative way."

[2] Foucault, Michel, 1979, *Disciplilne and Punish. The Birth of the Prison.* USA, New York, Vintage Books, p.183 "The perpetual penalty that treverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*."

Normative policies and catalogues like the German "Neufert's Bauentwurfslehre" turned architecture into a means to support a process of societal normalization declaring previous spatial models pathological. The modern home became an education machine in which objects and activities had their proper places. It was considered a shelter from chaotic and unordered life and, as a mass-processed good, also a therapy to "cure" these conditions. The absurdity this models and future visions is exemplarily expressed in the work of the French film director Jacques Tati.

Today, we are very critical towards the homogenizing agenda of modernism and its patronizing social agenda, but we are still left with the question of how to deal with situations we cannot but consider crises, aberrant conditions or misfits. This paper will try to establish the pathological as a constituting element of the normal condition and from there will develop a new understanding for evaluating and working within sustainable processes.

Pathological Nature

A major break from a binary understanding of the human body was George Canguilhem's research 'The Normal and the Pathological' where he clarifies that the healthy condition cannot exist without the pathological. There is no physical state in the total absence of pathogenic agents or infections. As Canguilhem writes: "The healthy man does not flee before the problems posed by sometimes sudden interruptions of its habits, even physiologically speaking, he measures his health in terms of his capacity to overcome organic crises in order to establish a new order."[3] In other words, crises can be ways to test and enforce a body's health.

Accordingly, crises should be investigated as potentials to develop an architectonic and urban thinking that is not anymore based on binary thinking of good or bad, sick and healthy or clean and dirty. Instead, crises should be understood as an integral part of our daily life. We propose that an urbanism developed from the phenomenon of crisis will in fact create a more robust order and will be better prepared for things to come. Integrating crises offers chances to integrate the specifically local instead of applying global standards.

Sustainably Sick

1. *Silverelief, B-mu*, Bangkok, R&Sie Architects

For the design of the Contemporary Art Museum B-mu in Bangkok, the Paris based studio started from the urban phenomena considered one of Bangkok's most evident crises: the dust particles polluting the air. Describing Bangkok, they write: "The dust dresses the city and her biotope, even going so far as to modify the climate. (…) luminous, vaporous, pheromonal, hideous, shaded, transpiring, cottony, rugged, dirty, hazy, suffocating, hairy…"[4] What in conventional binary terms would be a condition to be eliminated, R&Sie… understands as an aesthetic local phenomena that can be transformed into a quality generating new spatial models and local ecologies. The layout of their museum they describe as schizophrenic. Inside, a rectangular, Euclidean structure defines a series of white-cube exhibition spaces that are designed for the global context of the international art scene. The building's skin, on the other hand, an electrostatic metal mesh, is highly related to its physical, local context. Over time, it will collect the air's dust particles, build up a furry cover and protect the exhibition spaces from the sun.

1_silverelief_1

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[3] Canguilhem, Georges, 1989, *The Normal and the Pathological*, USA, New York, Urzone Inc., p. 200

[4] Ruby, Andreas, 2003, *R&Sie… architects. Spoiled Climate*, Seitzerland, Basel, Birkhäuser Publishers for Architecture. p. 137

1_silverelief_2

1_silverelief_3

2. *UnitedBottle* (N.N)

UnitedBottle is an architecture strategy currently developed to be employed by organizations like the UNHCR. The project rethinks western societies' pathological waste production. Under the conventional premise of sustainable development, looking at the cycle of water distribution, the western world's huge amount of PET waste is considered unsustainable in comparison with deposit bottles. But UnitedBottle claims "More Consumption = More Sustainability". The project superimposes this western cycle with the need for local water distribution and temporary housing in catastrophe scenarios. UnitedBottle is the development of a new PET bottle that perfectly integrates into the western distribution cycle, but is able to be stacked like a modular brick for architecture purposes, once filled with material like sand or gravel. In case of an emergency situation, UnitedBottles would be taken out of the regular recycling circuit and used in the crisis area to locally transport water and build tent constructions and simple huts. Only the singular element is provided, the technique of assembly and appropriation is developed by the users and draws back to their knowledge and already established techniques of recycling. In the long run, temporary or permanent urban environments will be established by a joint venture of basic infrastructure provided by the UN and affiliated institutions, while the urban fabric would grow with people's ability to appropriate this new material to their needs.

2_unitedbottle_1
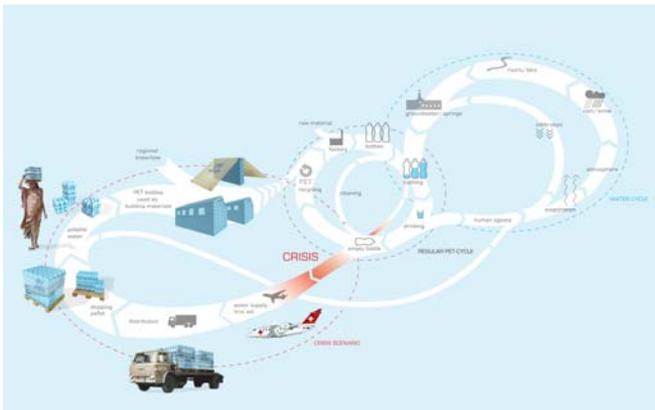
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2_unitedbottle_3

3. *Badeschiff*, Berlin, Susanne Lorenz and AMP Arquitectos

The city of Berlin can be considered a perfect model for future development redefining conventional understanding of growth. It is characterized by huge areas of fallow land – nightmare of most urban

planning experts – within the urban fabric due to its specific history and the unexpected economic crisis the new capital had to face. Within this environment, the temporary use of fellow land became a practise that slowly developed from illegal appropriation to more or less accepted or supported practice - especially in areas where conventional investment and development strategies failed. One good example is the "Badeschiff", an initially temporary swimming pool floating on the river Spree that can be transformed into a sauna in winter. This project has become a magnet and stands in a line of interventions along the river Spree, activating the formerly unattractive river embankment.

3_badeschiff_1

3_badeschiff_2

As put forth in the Brundtland Report in 1987[5], sustainable growth has to take into account not only a responsible use of resources, but the development of the socio-economic context in order to secure the needs of future generations. The report proclaims that growth is a necessity in order to feed and house the world's growing population, but a new attitude towards its guiding parameters is required. Without being cynical, what are considered to-be-eliminated urban crises or pathological states from a modernist's perspective can sometimes be inherent characteristics of a place that we cannot and maybe should not get rid of.

Although Silverelilef is acting on the scale of architecture with its dust-collecting façade, it is a role model for a new understanding of the urban ecology. As we will hardly achieve uncontaminated urban environments in the near future, the toxic or molesting substances can be activated and, within a different context, proof beneficial and even beautiful. The project UnitedBottle moves away from educative measures to reduce waste, but tries to integrate it into another use cycle. Thus, a sustainable practice following the Brundtland report is not anymore bound to reduction of consumption, but actually

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[5] WCED (The World Commission on Environment and Development), 1987, *Our Common Future (Brundtland Report)*, Oxford, England, Oxford University Press.

envisions new ecologies and economies. Within those, contemporary crises can be transformed into future blessings. As for the temporary use of fallow land exemplified with the project Badeschiff, the former pathological condition of a non-continuous and unprofitable urban fabric can turn into a chance for future urban development. In all three cases, the new parameters for urban development require an understanding for the temporal character of urban transformations. Not one of those projects exists in a fixed state. It will be the challenge of future urban strategies to understand the processes and the temporal character of crises scenarios in order to not act against, but learn from them.

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