

Project(ion)s

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Source: *Assemblage*, No. 41 (Apr., 2000), p. 58

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3171318>

Accessed: 30-01-2019 10:48 UTC

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Project(ion)s

I.

The project of architecture involves temporal projections. The architectural gaze tirelessly sways between an unattainable past and an unknowable future. In search of an ideal past or a unique future, it either rebuilds or projects. Architecture is caught between a “compulsive urge to return” (the myth of the vernacular) and a “single-minded valorization of uniqueness” (the myth of the avant-garde).¹ Yet to some extent, every projection involves rebuilding. In order to project, architecture needs to recollect and repeat what it identified as “architectural.” In this act of recollection, the architectural look relentlessly records, photographs, and documents as if it were possible for it to see what is “really” there; as if the look were not always already a function of desire.

The architectural look searches for the familiar in the unfamiliar. More often than not, it seeks for what has already been named; that is, what is given-to-be-seen by the discipline. The architectural gaze relentlessly architecturalizes others. My question then: is it possible to see “other things” in architecture, and “architecture” in other things, without violating either; that is, by being aware of the precarious boundary between “architecture” and its outside? Can architecture project on the basis of a productive recollection to produce difference rather than a recollection to reproduce identity? To offer a glimpse of an affirmative answer to these questions, I turn to a personal experience.

II.

The semidetached house where I used to live in Singapore had a small front garden. Separated from the neighboring gardens with a very ordinary chain-link fence on both sides, it formed part of a stretch of greenery that extended along the street. For most of the residents the chain-link fence was not the ideal architectural demarcation for their property. It was a poor substitute for a wall, that is, a nonwall. For increased privacy, my neighbors had lined up their garden fence with pots of exotic plants, which were diligently watered early mornings by their newly arrived and very hard worked Filipino maid. With no maid and little time, I often left my small flower bed to be nurtured by the haphazard fall of tropical showers. One

sunny morning, a few days after the maid’s arrival, I noticed spurts of water showering on my flowers through the holes of the fence between my garden and the neighbors’. Every morning from that day on, during her routine act of cleaning her employers’ front porch and two cars and watering their pots, the exhausted woman took a brief moment to nurture my flowers. A brief moment, which she stole from her employers who prohibited her to leave the house at all times. She was not allowed to cross the chain-link fence. Her employers’ house was a prison for her, and economic necessities prevented her from going back home to her family and children.

At the risk of overreading the situation, I am tempted to say that memories of love and care, which the Filipino woman had left behind, enabled her to see the chain-link fence differently: looking at the perforated surface, instead of a nonwall she saw the possibility of a productive crossing. The chain-link fence allowed her an-other moment to nourish an-other space; an-other home perhaps that held an unsymbolized promise. Home, in this instance, turns out to be a phantasmic construct. Its architectural marker is an ordinary chain-link fence, which is hardly worthy of record from the viewpoint of the discipline.

III.

If it is possible to dearchitecturalize the memory of home, it should also be possible to undo the notion of architecture as domestication. Architecture does not need to search for novelty and difference in other places and other times. The immediacy of our environments offers numerous architectural instances, which are not given-to-be-seen by the discipline.

Architecture privileges sight. It mobilizes the desire to look. We may choose to look at our environments with a desire to return to architecture, or use the architectural desire to look, to see “other things,” which may enable other architectural project(ion)s.

Note

1. I borrow these phrases from Kaja Silverman, “Prolegomena to ‘World Spectators,’” in Ursula Frohne, ed., *Video Cult/ures* (Karlsruhe: Museum für Neue Kunst, 1999), 90–91. This essay is largely inspired by the framework that she develops here and in *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 180–83.