

Event Spaces: Infrastructure, Interference, and Indeterminacy

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No architecture without event, no architecture without action, without activities, without functions.

Bernard Tschumi: "Architecture and Disjunction". The MIT Press, 1996, p.255

The term 'Event Space' has become commodified in recent years, and is now regularly applied to corporate entertainment venues or shopping centre food courts. However, there is an interesting and more optimistic interpretation of this concept; as a common ground or infrastructure, which can be freely used for a multitude of activities or functions. There are two apparently contradictory strands of discourse around this kind of space; one may focus almost exclusively on the political or social intent through the layering of functions or events, or almost exclusively on the phenomenological qualities of the space itself. The focus on the "event" in architectural discourse is typically associated with the first strand, growing from Bernard Tschumi's writings in the 1970s and 80s and implicitly linked to the événements of 1968.

Architecture was seen as the combination of spaces, events, and movements without any hierarchy or precedence among these concepts... This unlikely combination of events and spaces was charged with subversive capabilities, for it challenged both the function and the space.

Bernard Tschumi: "Architecture and Disjunction". The MIT Press, 1996, p.255

Two parks

These two images of London parks from the 19th century show how minimal architectural elements can provide a structuring framework or backdrop for a public event.



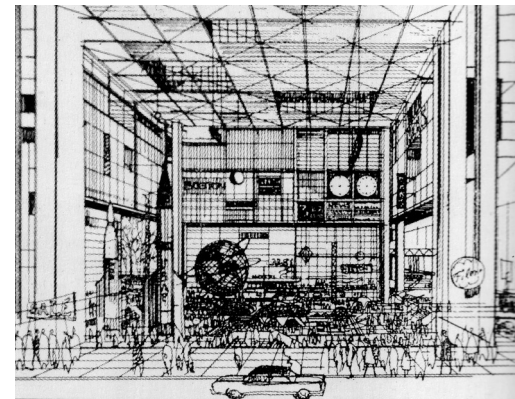
Engraving, Hyde Park screen by Decimus Burton, 1827

Benjamin Read's print of a group of aristocratic Regency dandies modelling the 'present fashions' shows the new stone entrance screen at the corner of Hyde Park as a representative backdrop for a life of luxurious leisure.



Photograph, Great Chartist Meeting on Kennington Common, 1848, William Edward Kilburn

William Edward Kilburn's Daguerrotype shows the Great Chartist demonstration on Kennington Common just over twenty years later – thousands of working class men campaigning for electoral reform and mass suffrage beneath a factory chimney.



Fumihiko Maki, City Room

Four spaces

These four images show architectural proposals from the mid-1960s that we might now describe as Event Spaces – a bold public room accommodating activities that might previously have taken place in a square or a park, and typically expressing a particular contemporary vision of technological and social progress.

The City Room, Fumihiko Maki, 1965–1970

Intended as an 'intermediate unit' of urban space in the new hyper-dense Metabolist city defined by megastructure and 'group form', the City Room celebrates the ability of new building technologies to enclose large spaces.

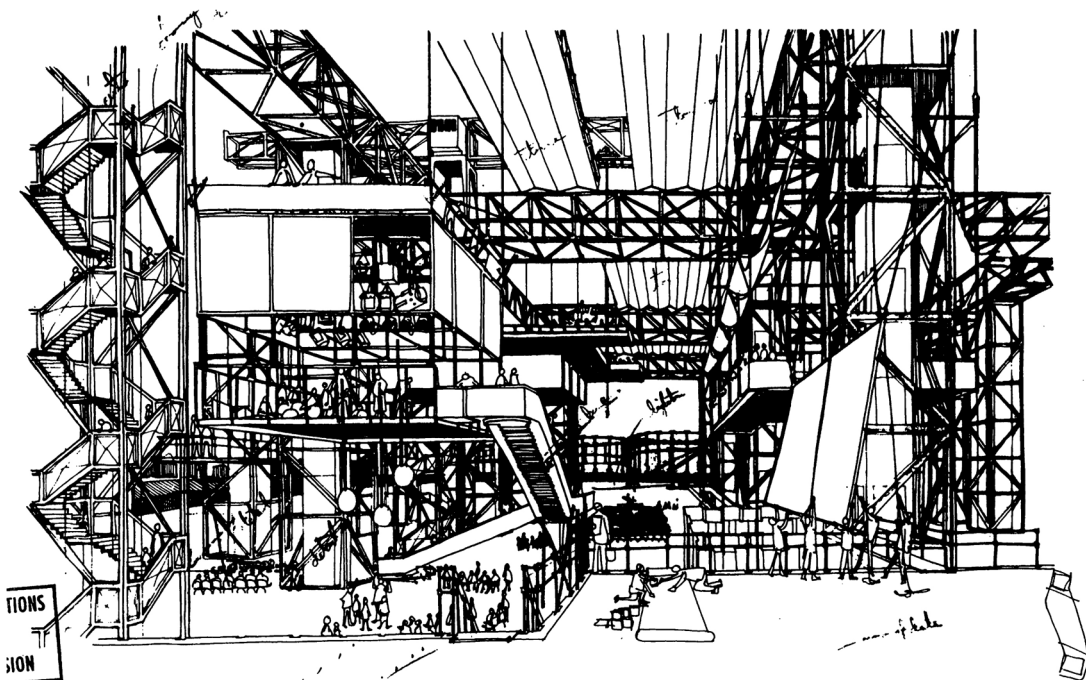
Once Le Corbusier said that 'air' and 'sun' are the basic needs... Today we have air conditioning and fluorescent light.

Fumihiko Maki: "Investigations in Collective Form". Washington University School of Architecture, 1964, p.58

The City Room is seen as an urgent solution which may supersede previous definitions of architecture; the seductive intensity of Maki's drawing, with its crowds, rockets, and articulated surfaces, paradoxically celebrates the architect's lack of control over the space:

... we must realize that these new focal points become urban energy generators. The architect does not concern himself with the ways City Rooms and City Corridors will be used.

Fumihiko Maki: "The Theory of Group Form". Japan Architect February, 1970, p.40



Fun Palace, Cedric Price

Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre, Boissenvain & Osmond, 1962 – 1965

The original images of the Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre, one of the first enclosed shopping centres in Europe, express a wide-eyed optimism for the type of development which would become commonplace and then rapidly outdated in subsequent years. The apparent generosity of public space and natural light was not to be realised in practice.

The Fun Palace, Cedric Price, 1963 – 1966

A collaboration between Cedric Price and activist theatre director Joan Littlewood, the Fun Palace was a utopian attempt to create a radically new place for learning and leisure; providing access to 'the latest discoveries of engineering and science' as well as a place to 'eat, stroll, meet, and play'. An industrial infrastructure would create an almost totally reconfigurable 'anti-building' to serve the working classes who would soon be freed from labour by industrial automation. The proposal was explicitly intended to be 'a temporary measure' in the understanding that its emancipatory effect would eventually make it superfluous.

Learn how to handle tools, paint, babies, machinery, or just listen to your favourite tune... Try starting a riot or beginning a painting – or just lie back and stare at the sky... We are building a short-term plaything in which all of us can realise the possibilities and delights that a twentieth century city environment owes us. It must last no longer than we need it.

1 Leon, A.M., 2013, "Designing dissent: Vilanova Artigas and the São Paulo School of Architecture", in: Weizman, I., Architecture and the Paradox of Dissidence, Routledge, p.74



Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre, London

São Paulo School of Architecture, Vilanova Artigas 1961 – 69

Artigas designed both the building and the curriculum of the São Paulo Architecture School. The sky-lit atrium at the heart of the school explored contradictory qualities of monumentality and informality, heaviness and lightness, machine-age technology and manual labour, with quite explicit polemical intent amidst the turmoil of Brazil's development and politics in the 1960s.¹ It has been used as a studio, a common room, a concert hall, and a place of protest against a number of regimes.

Infrastructure, interference and indeterminacy

One prototype for the Event Space is the concept of the "Social Condenser" proposed by the Constructivists in 1920s Russia and later claimed by Rem Koolhaas as one of OMA's 'universal modernization patents':



Faculdade de Arquitectura e Urbanismo da Universidade de São Paulo, 1969

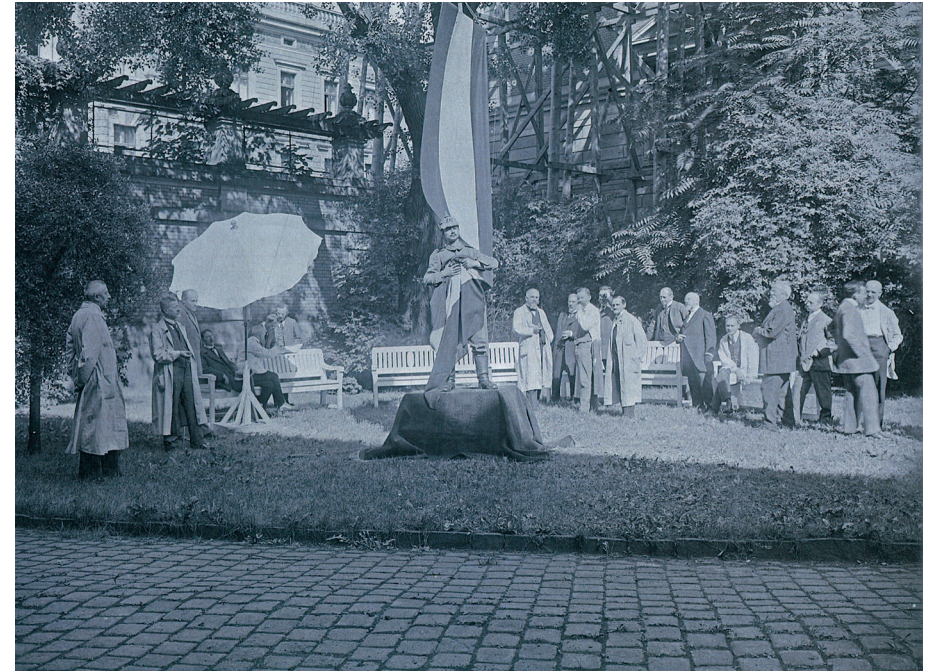
Programmatic layering upon vacant terrain to encourage dynamic coexistence of activities and to generate through their interference, unprecedented events.

Rem Koolhaas: "Content".
Taschen, 2004, p.73

However, it seems that the concept of a "Specific Indeterminacy" developed by Florian Beigel and Philip Christou is perhaps the most useful; they propose an architectural infrastructure which seeks a specific and particular character rather than aspiring to universality.

It would be characterised by a specificity of context, place and materials; would be indeterminate with regard to a pre-determined set of uses; and would tolerate unknown future uses... it is a space that is waiting for something to happen, a space where one can be alone or in a crowd. It is a space that attracts temporary proximity of different uses, densification of use and change of use.

Florian Beigel and Philip Christou:
"Brikettfabrik Witznitz: specific indeterminacy – designing for uncertainty".
Architectural Research Quarterly Vol. 2,
Winter 1996, p.18



In the courtyard of the art academy in Leipzig:
a semi-public space, ideal for exchanges and
dramatic presentations by artists, propagandists
and academic showmen.

Picture of the West-Court taken by the English
photographer Frank Eugene Smith, about 1914.

Creating a re-activated public space for the Leipzig art school, its students and staff. Together with the London architect William Haggard the System-Design Class, Oliver Klimpel and Britt Helbig designed and built two new

elements which form a new temporary landscape of follies in the college: the pavilion, the mobile staircase, and the rock shelf.

See also page 174 – 175

