

Locating Dysfunction: Modern architecture and its not-so-modern inhabitants

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In this paper I am going to argue that the unintended and dysfunctional aspects of material culture may create meanings and social practices that are not premeditated by human agents. Such meanings and practices should rather be appreciated through an understanding of a mutual relationship between human beings and things, in which humans in part come to act as material objects. [SLIDE 2]

The impetus for making such a suggestion is not only the obvious connection to the recent development of a so-called symmetrical archaeological discourse, which is based largely on the writings of the French sociologist Bruno Latour. The motivation is rather the inherent problem of the grand explanations of much archaeology: large-scale narratives that have a very strong tendency to conceive artefacts, objects and material complexes as functional, and as the results of intentional and more or less rationally motivated and causal processes that began with an idea and ended as a product. As a direct consequence, archaeology tends to see cultural materialisations within a given period as uniform and as parts of a homogeneous system, smoothing and levelling the unevenness and irregularity of individual and local lives of human beings and material culture. Thereby, material culture assumes the role of a passive projector of cultural norms and values, stripped of the potential for acting as a social agent with the capacity to change the relationship between human beings and other things. Thus, material culture is seen as an epiphenomenon, rather than an agent in the scheme of human life.

Needless to say, material culture can be understood, misunderstood, challenged or used in ways that fundamentally contradicts the original or past meaning of the artefact. Likewise, things may be dysfunctional and through their dysfunctional effects alter the human use of material culture and the relationship between human beings and things. In this way, dysfunctions create alternative and individual stories and histories that may conflict with the reductionist linearity of grand narratives.

One such example of dysfunctionality and the unevenness of history may be found in Marseille in southern France, in the housing complex *Unite d'Habitation*. [SLIDE 3] *Unite d'Habitation* is the Swiss architect, Le Corbusier's (1887-1965) proposal for an architecture for the future, in which he defined architecture as a so-called 'living machine'.

The building was erected between 1947 and 1952 and was the result of an acute and massive housing shortage in the years following the Second World War. Houses similar to *Unite d'Habitation* was built in a number of other cities, in both France and Germany. *Unite d'Habitation* was not just the result of a housing shortage in France, but also of a new development in architecture, namely the so-called brutalism. Brutalism is a modernist architectonic style, which flourished most successfully between the 1950s and 1970s. The name of the style denotes the building material, from the French *béton brut*, which means 'raw concrete', since concrete is the main building material. The proponents of the style argued that architects should not conform to compromises in order to satisfy conservative bourgeois tastes, but instead aspire for a strong and powerful aestheticism with 'brutal frankness'.

Unite d'Habitation is designed as one big housing unit with all the needs an urban population might require. [SLIDE 4] The building is 137 metres long, 24 metres wide and 56 metres high. It contains 337 apartments in 23 different versions, all of them in two storeys and with a balcony, housing a total of 1600 people on 18 storeys. Its 55.000 tons of Ferro concrete is suspended on 34 concrete pillars, which allows the surrounding garden to continue under the building that – despite of its size and volume – hovers elegantly over the ground. [SLIDE 5] When the house was opened, it contained a supermarket, a bakery, a butcher, a hairdresser, a library, cinemas, a theatre, a nursery centre, a kindergarten, a school, a high school, sports facilities, a post office, a restaurant, a hotel and several offices. [SLIDE 6] A running pitch and a swimming pool were built into the roof, from where there is a marvellous view over the Mediterranean. With all these facilities, *Unite d'Habitation* was to form the perfect habitation for the suburban middle-class nuclear family, located in vicinity of nature, air and light, but also within reach of the benefits of a city and the work places of urban professionals.

The construction as well as the design of the building is simple. [SLIDE 7] Le Corbusier based the building on an incorporation of the golden mean and the proportions of the human body. He also compared the compositional principles of the house with that of a wine rack: a skeleton of reinforced concrete that creates the framework for the spaces that can be filled in with the desired functions, such as living quarters, offices, shops and other service installations. Le Corbusier described *Unite d'Habitation* as a 'residential unit' or a 'unified residence', as the name of the house also indicates.

The building was intended to shape a social space, which could accommodate and balance the relationship between the individual and the communal. This structure was to

be a city and a house in one building, where the social interaction of human beings was central. Le Corbusier wanted to build vertically instead of horizontally in order to create more light and air in each apartment and in the spaces of social interaction, which in the traditional urban housing in the old cities were situated in narrow and dark backstreets.

[SLIDE 8]

Despite all good intentions, *Unite d'Habitation* was exposed to severe problems during the 1970s. The first inhabitants of *Unite d'Habitation* in the 1950s had moved into the building in the wake of its highly celebrated position as a prestigious piece of modern architecture. Through the years, however, the population shifted towards a more heterogeneous composition, and with more mixed uses of the house. A larger portion of the new inhabitants largely failed to use the shops and institutions in the building. The large shops on the shopping deck gradually closed, since few people used them, meaning that the maintenance of the deck was ceased. The problem emerged because larger numbers of inhabitants chose not to abandon their traditional shopping habits at market places, local farms and the smaller merchants in the neighbourhood.

The building's self-supporting revenue ceased, resulting in poor maintenance. It meant that even the most basic maintenance was neglected and that the electricity supply was unstable. **[SLIDE 9]** The house gradually began to deteriorate; exposed iron components such as window frames corroded, and parts of the concrete façade began to crumble. The horizontal surfaces became littered with birds' excrements, which were not cleaned out, resulting in an appalling stench in many of the apartments. The lacking maintenance began to leave its mark on the way people used the house and gradually affected their attitude towards it. Graffiti and other kinds of vandalism became prevalent on the abandoned shopping decks and the social composition of the population changed markedly. The social authorities allocated an increasing number of socially exposed people to *Unite d'Habitation*, and the original inhabitants moved out of the house and into more fashionable and attractive neighbourhoods.

For a number of years *Unite d'Habitation* stood as a partially deteriorated house with a similar socially weak population. Interviews with the inhabitants indicated that *Unite d'Habitation* had become the object of a *topophobia*; a detested the place. The inhabitants were not happy to live there, they turned against the building and its social conditions, and its architecture became the focus of abhorrence. In the local slang, *Unite d'Habitation* was no-longer referred to as *Cite Radieuse*, 'The Radiant City', but now as *La Maison du Fada*, which translates into something like 'House of the tasteless' or 'House of the mad'.

What is so striking about this development are the inconsistencies between the planning of the house and the cultural habits of its population. The economy of *Unite d'Habitation* was so tightly set up that it was simply not possible to keep up regular maintenance if the inhabitants were not using its own shops. And since the southern French population, who inhabited the house, would not give up their usual shopping habits, the entire foundation for a self-supporting and healthy economy was undermined with a remarkable deterioration to follow. Gradually the house came to represent a failure instead of a socially integrating living machine, which was the aim with the house. Those who lived in the house in the 1970s and 1980s saw it as a last resort to an inexpensive rent, and largely experienced the house as an error. In this way *Unite d'Habitation* objectified the topophobia, which governed the house by being the physical setting for a social project that failed.

One of the problems with the material culture of the house was its orchestration of public spaces. Traditionally, public space is shared at street-level, signified by the presence of people gazing in windows and shops, looking out at other people in the street. **[SLIDE 10]** In *Unite d'Habitation* public space is located in elevators, staircases and long corridors. People no-longer automatically share each others' presence in public space by corporeal or visual proximity. In addition, it is easier for non-residents to enter and stay within this public space, and appropriate its space without the social responsibility and care that can be expected from inhabitants of the house. This lack of 'eyes in the street' has in many housing blocks throughout the world created a sense of insecurity, individual isolation and social alienation, of not sharing a public space and not knowing who is present in the social vicinity and what they are doing there.

Two dysfunctions are clearly discernable. First, there is the 'wrong' use of the house, the abandoning of the shopping facilities, which is based on cultural habits that had great consequences for the uses of the house. Second, there are the subsequent uses and misuses of the place for squatting and vandalism, which largely determined people's attitude to the house, the negativity and topophobia related to the deteriorating house.

In the example of *Unite d'Habitation*, we may locate dysfunction and the unintended at the intersection of the social intentions of the architect, his architecture, and the social lives and practices of the inhabitants of his architecture. One of the more wide-reaching consequences of this discrepancy has been the popular notion of brutalist architecture as a

key reference to ‘bad architecture’, - architecture that is not created for humans, but for architects and their idealised principles of human life. [SLIDE 11] Brutalist architecture is often referred to as ‘concrete architecture’, which literally speaking is correct, but is most often pronounced with an outright contempt for the architectonic style. Concrete is believed to be the opposite of humanity and of empathic architecture, and concrete buildings are seen as crushing, dwarfing and alienating its human residents. Recently, concrete architecture has been blamed for the social problems in many French cities, and has been seen as the disease behind the riots in October and November of 2005. One political commentator even claimed that the riots were the direct consequence of Le Corbusier’s architecture.

I believe that this brief examination of dysfunctionality at *Unite d’Habitation* illustrates that we need to change the question ‘what was its function’ to ‘what did it do’ with regard to all material culture. What consequences does this shift have? How will it improve our chances of recognising and appreciating dysfunctions and the unintentional in the archaeological record? The problem still remains that the entire archaeological record may be seen as one huge unintended record, since most of the objects we find derive from contexts, where they were not deposited intentionally, but where they ended up in the course of myriads of contingent events and incidents. But identifying the effects of dysfunctionality may increase our awareness of the active role of material culture, and avoid the disenchantment of the material and of materiality.

Personally, I do not agree with the association between *Unite d’Habitation*, brutalist architecture and any other kind of architecture with the French riots of 2005, but I do believe that the inhabitants of *Unite d’Habitation* were affected by and responded to the experience of dysfunctional material spaces, most notably the materiality of a depopulated architecture. I believe that such observations call for a critical appreciation of how material culture affects human life, and more importantly why it affects human life in historically and locally particular ways. It is because material culture and materiality has effects on human lives that it may change the intentions that were originally embedded in things. To address these issues we need to focus on the particularities of incidents and events, the constellation of locality and materiality, and come up with perspectives from dysfunctional material culture that may contradict the sweeping strokes of the unified and linear Grand Narrative.