

## **An Atlas of the Political Unconscious of Architecture**

Donald Kunze

Stefano Boeri describes a recent phenomenon arising amidst the spatial destabilization of Europe, "eclectic atlases" that attempt to fight back against the "zenith arrogance" that ignores local topography in favor of plan-based location decisions determined by algorithms, economic models, cost-benefit analysis, central place theory, etc.

It would be sufficient to drive along any large road that enters or exits one of our cities to realize that the European territory has, over the last twenty or so years, radically changed both quantitatively and above all qualitatively.

We would see that what has changed our territory has not been new districts, large buildings and infrastructures (roads, flyovers, rail tracks, tunnels), but rather a multitude of solitary and amassed buildings: detached houses, hangars, shopping centers, apartment blocks, garages and office complexes. A reduced range of manufactured objects incongruously thrown together, one against the other. Although they are modest constructions, they are at the same time concerned with distinguishing themselves from their surroundings. Scattered and heterogeneous groups of buildings that are expressions of small fragments of our society (the family, small industry, corporations, the shop, the club ...), intentionally isolated from public space and disinterested in its rules.<sup>1</sup>

This condition of the landscape is highly optical, but in a pathological sense. To employ a medical analogy, when the eye ages, the vitreous humor in it begins to harden and becomes sticky. As it shrinks and moves, it pulls off tissue from the retina, forming "floaters," and the pulling itself creates the sensation of visual flashes. In some cases the retina is torn and, if not repaired, separated from its substrate, producing folds that derange the visual field. The condition of what the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan called "extimacy" (*extimité*) pervades. The disruptions suffered internally-subjectively result in symptoms that seem to lie in the external visual field, "subjectified objects."

This is not to say that Boeri is simply projecting a defective landscape, but that the landscape and the means of seeing it are locked in a tight dialectic. The hubris of planners and architects — what Boeri tags as "the arrogance of the zenith" — have resulted in what everyone can then see with their own eyes, which in turn gradually infects public ways of seeing, presenting our eyes with "what we come to expect." From inside to outside to inside again, back and forth, we must accept the fact that the *organ*, the eye in this one case, is not an independent biological function-component of the literal human body. Rather, the organ is this *process of extimation*,

this process of inside and outside transactions. To this new idea of an organ we must also add the economic and political systems set into place as a result of the *pathology* of this organ, systems that provide *fantasies* that allow subjects to bear, at least minimally, the traumatic Real and to participate ideologically in sustaining this Real.

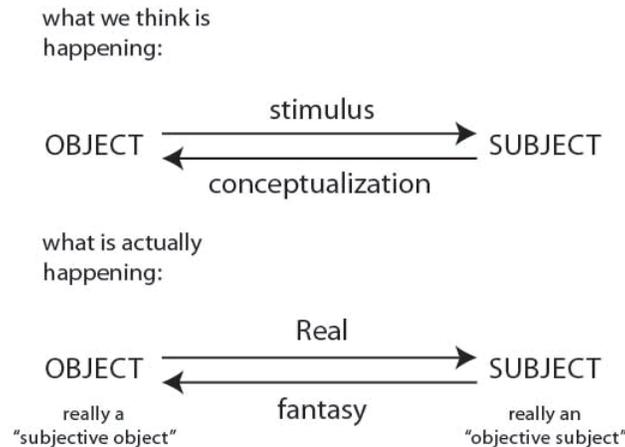


Figure 1.1. An organ is not the isolated capacity to perceive and record external stimulæ but, rather, the transactions by which the Real of encounter is given a dimensionality ("fantasy") that allows the subject to bear the otherwise traumatic proximity of the Real.

So, it is no longer necessary to decide on the direction of causality in the existence of landscape "floaters," "detachment," or "retinal tears and folds." Even people with technically healthy eyes suffer increasingly from this induced pathology of looking at the world as if the plan-view could solve all problems. As Boeri describes, a number of "eclectic atlases" have sought to correct this arrogance of the zenith by developing ways of mapping "multidimensional, spurious, and experimental" conditions that acknowledge the multilayered aspect of experience. This is not to say that the incongruous landscapes popping up all over European are phantasms (Boeri does not mention the mother-lode of such landscapes, the U. S.!). Unfortunately, they exist. But, the reciprocal pathology may also be reversible. The "standard map," in its "zenithal arrogance" has permitted the plan view to appear to be workable while the ground-level view sees the mess that actually results. A new set of maps has to be generated out of a critique of this arrogance, collected in atlases that include the "impossible" topography of the Real, i.e. the trauma that disconcerts the late capitalist planning economy and is concealed within it.

In the analogy to the optical pathology of retinal tearing and detachment, a new, second mapping undertaken to counter the evil of the first becomes therapeutic. As in the ancient case of Tiresius who, once blinded, became a prophet, the "right kind of pathology" has the

unexpected benefit of making the invisible visible. Like the song-lines of the Australian aboriginals, described by Bruce Chatwin as a ritual performance required to heal and maintain relationships with the cosmos evident in topography, flora and fauna, weather, diurnal and other cycles, the path of travel becomes, literally, a map of itself, a map that collates multiple perspectives and determines alternative assembly strategies.<sup>2</sup> In effect, through therapeutic travel, the maps simultaneously form an atlas.

The idea that a map — meaning, here, any behavior that adopts the mentality of mapping — can advance past a descriptive function and be corrective (to counter “zenithal arrogance”) has several important implications, not the least of which is the political/historical factors of this correction. In the books of W. F. Sebald, the author’s long walks in such places as Norfolk, Germany, and Sardinia involve encounters with antique and contemporary versions of Boeri’s “floaters.” Ghost villages, ruins of manor houses inhabited by impoverished descendants, eccentric intellectuals working on Quixotian projects in rural cottages, etc. have drifted away from the mainstream of economic life. Rather, the mainstream changed its course, leaving behind “outliers” cut off from the nourishment of commerce. In the Indo-European root  $\sqrt{\text{WER}}$ , winding and binding are combined, as in the thread woven, wound, and cut by the three Fates. Similarly, it is a sense of uncanny fate that pervades Sebald’s winding excursions. The random choices made in history have produced, at the same time, a ruthless automaton of convergences, coincidences, and destinies. Sebald is thus able to visit the past as it is about to be recognized in a future moment of gnosis.

Sebald sings out the luck that constructed the prosperity of the sites he visits: the curious anatomy of the silkworm; the prodigious breeding habits of herring; the caprices of ocean currents and cyclonic winds. Such details converge on “sites of exception” —made exceptional not just by the circumstances of history but by Sebald’s own visits and inspections, his curious re-connection of accidents with the automatons of historical process. The interior space of the organ and exterior appearances it affords are extimate, a “natural history” that uses extimacy to identify the “unary trait,” the pivot or master signifier that organizes all other signifiers but does not form a part of any system. This is the *Einzigere Zug* that Freud described as the means of transferring identification from the imaginary to the symbolic mode. The trick of defining the unary trait is that the act of defining — Sebald’s walking, for example — becomes, according to its own rules of extimacy, a part of the objective trait. The unary trait is a “subjective object,” correlative to the observer, who, in this kind of mapping, becomes an “objective subject.” By “object,” I mean that the subject has been cut off from an ideological main-stream. Like Sebald and Chatwin, the subject has left home to wander. They are travelers following in the tradition of Odysseus. They “play dead, dumb (*le mort* = the ventriloquist’s dummy, in French) in order to allow a voice to speak through them, “acousmatically,” as Mladen Dolar would put it, in his

account of the uncanny role of the voice in *A Voice and Nothing More*.<sup>3</sup> The floater or flash in the eye is both inside and outside; the map-maker of the natural history landscape, the eclectic atlas, is the wanderer, whose narrative is subjective objectivity written to break the spell of ideology.

### **Natural History: From Ideology to Love and Death**

What remains to be done with such mappings, after they have described the desolate ruins, abandoned fields, overgrown gardens, and silent villages? These are the antipodes of the idea of the "progress report," because "progress" in the landscape of natural history (to christen the acousmatic places of the *Enziger Zug*) is actually the downward digression toward a nadir, a rebuke to the arrogance of the zenith. We descend from the temple to the labyrinth along a single line, which created them both, hubris and its nemesis, at the same time. The eclectic atlas is sober, if not downright depressing.<sup>4</sup> Its post-ideological project deals with remainders, cut-offs, ruins. It does not promise therapeutic benefits for the reflective visitor, as does Rose Macauley in her famous book, *The Pleasure of Ruins*, but nonetheless there is a Zen-like satisfaction in the peculiar form of silence that haunts such sites of exception as Sebald and Chatwin describe.

What is the source of this satisfaction? In the reciprocity of past and future, subject and object, inside and outside, one could say that the silence of self-reference is synonymous with the acceptance of the paradox of the Möbius band, the realization of the depth of the issue of two sides co-existing with one, two edges co-existing with one. Temporality is exposed in the same way that Lucretius's even flow of atoms, intended to be invisible (just as the space between the frames of a film strip do not appear in our illusion of filmic motion) become visible when the motion stops. The gaps open to another dimension that had been sealed off by the fantasies of ideology. The subject can pass through into this dimension by being an object — by abstracting him/herself through detaching from ideological "ideal subjectivity" — because the object that did not appear, the  $\phi$  function, one might say, has, through becoming a subject, shown itself.

If the atlas of eccentric maps can, by its very eccentricity, "heal" the pathological conditions it describes, such healing comes in the limited form of awareness. This is not knowledge, *per se*, as one might describe in terms of correspondence of representations/ideas to external objective conditions, nor is it quite the counterpart of correspondence, "coherence," which provides esthetic versions of subject-object coincidence (Schiller's "beautiful soul," for example). The disquieting results of eccentric maps and atlases has to do with the remainders they address, which are radically and existentially irreducible. The reason for focusing on such sources of un-pleasure has to do with the relationship between ideology and — surprisingly — love. Where ideology works, according to Althusser's theory of interpellation, through a topological short

circuit between an objective exterior authority and a subjective interior, Althusser's claim that this case of extimacy was a "clean cut" has not proved to be true. Mladen Dolar argues that there is, in ideology's interpellation, always a remainder, a failure of ideology to completely take over the subject, or in general terms, subjectivity.<sup>5</sup> We might identify this gap, this remainder, as the object of the "knowledge-without-knowing" of natural history, with the process of extimacy, with the eccentric map. Dolar identifies it with *falling in love*, and to correlate these quite different "theoretical procedures" (if falling in love can be said to be a "procedure") we must see what he says of the matter.

Dolar's daunting challenge, to see ideology and falling in love in a necessary sequence, is not as bizarre as it might first sound. We should not marginalize his suggestion as a "crazy Lacanian idea," relevant only to a small group of scholars and practitioners who have committed themselves to a notoriously difficult thinker and a vocabulary larded with obtuse technical terms. Consider Boeri's other passion — afforded by his editorship of the mainstream architectural journals *Domus* and *Abitare*. He has proposed a bridge between the "intended outcomes" of professional architects and the "experienced outcomes" of those, such as janitorial staff, who must deal with the results of architectural thinking on a daily basis, and from entirely unplanned perspectives. It is the "anywhere" relocation of the point of view (POV) that radically undermines the carefully controlled location of the POV (and ideological employment of the frame) of what Lewis Mumford called "the Pentagon of Power."<sup>6</sup> Once the idea of an atlas incorporates unintended/unpromoted "sideways" views, the comparison of this shift to falling in love begins to make more sense. How?

Dolar introduces love not by any of the usual romantic reference points, but through the idea that love is, on one hand, incomprehensible without the element of free choice (i.e. one cannot be forced to fall in love, although love might arise from any number of constraining circumstances). Yet, on the other hand, love from its inception is felt to be "destined," a process determined by fate even though begun by luck. The two contrary ideas, which I abbreviate glibly as fate and luck embody some powerful philosophical points. In Aristotle's ideas about causality, he adds to the well-known "human" set of four (efficient, formal, final, and material), a set of two lying outside human control: *automaton* and *tuchē*. *Tuchē* is affordance, opportunity; the unexpected advantage offered by luck. When lovers' eyes meet across a crowded room, *tuchē* is at work. The encounter had to be unplanned, circumstantial. But, once they have performed this ocular union, *automaton* takes over. The lovers feel that they were destined to meet "all along" and that, for better or worse, the course of their love is now determined by the stars. In this sudden addition of fate to accident, two aspects of *automaton* are revealed: its mechanical blindness to good or bad, good or evil; and its need for the randomizing aspect of *tuchē*.

With the role of automaton and *tuchē* understood, it is possible to see what Dolar means when he asserts that subjectivity's second project, after it has been defined through ideology, is psychoanalytical and modeled after the structure of falling in love.

The ideological phase of subjectivity is most compellingly described as that of *interpellation*, following the famous theory of Louis Althusser. Condensing, this could be explained as the sudden presumption of the subject that an authoritarian Other wishes them to do something. The identity of the Other, or its location, is not required. In fact, if we listen to Kafka's advice on the matter, it is precisely identity and location that are obscured in the matter of constructing the authoritarian Other. When several pedestrians crossing the street hear the policeman's whistle, they all believe they are guilty of some undisclosed crime; even if they can see the policeman, they cannot determine what line leads from him to a subject, so each presumes him/herself to be the guilty end-point. The guilty subject accepts the fate of mistaken identity, which places him/her into a network of symbolic relations (Lacan: "the Symbolic") determined by rules that the Other does not have to obey. In interpellation, the subject experiences the trauma of the Real (i.e. the subject may actually be hauled off to prison and interrogated using torture), and has only the Imaginary, the capacity to fantasize about the Other and the things that are happening to him/her, to make the Real somehow bearable.

### **Fantasy, Utopia, Architecture**

If this were all there were to subjectivity, life would be lived entirely inside *The Trial* or *The Castle*. Unfortunately such is a real possibility, considering the holocaust(s) and, in more recent times, the practices of "extraordinary rendition" and "black ops." By falling in love, the subject escapes to that part of subjectivity that, though it may be no happier than the totalitarian conditions of interpellation, at least deploys fantasy in utopian rather than dystopian modes. What does this have to do with architecture? In Boeri's argument about the need to move from the planned POVs of professional architects and multi-national corporate clients to the layered and exceptional POVs of gardeners, delivery services, and maintenance staff to uncover that which was *unconscious* in relation to the former over-manipulated consciousness of the glossy photo and guided tour, an actual unconscious is involved. Boeri's unconscious corresponds to Dolar's, and Dolar's to Lacan's. The triangulated relationship shows that the "unconscious of buildings," the political remainder of the first, ideological stage of subjectivity, leads to a second phase, the discovery of this remaindered unconscious, the "exceptional" architecture that was left over from the ideological projects and projections of architecture. And, as Boeri suggests, exception requires an atlas.

Nadir Lahiji has written provocatively and eloquently about the state of ruin as something already-always built in to the building from the beginning.<sup>7</sup> Can we discuss this in relation to the two "phases" we are proposing for understanding architecture, interpellation and falling in love?

Also, can we sober up from our romanticized views of ruins, to see what is involved philosophically, culturally, and perceptually? The ruin, especially the idea of the “pre-ruin” Lahiji introduces, has provocative implications. The first is that it is not necessary for a building to become obsolescent, deteriorate, and return to a state of nature to qualify as a ruin. In fact, the building may be working perfectly. Consider the well-known existential condition of alienation, brought into clear focus by Sartre’s character, Antoine Roquentin, who in *La Nausée* confronts a chestnut tree in an inverted Joycean epiphany. There is nothing wrong with the chestnut tree; it is not diseased or damaged.

The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench. I couldn't remember it was a root any more. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, stooping forward, head bowed, alone in front of this black, knotty mass, entirely beastly, which frightened me. Then I had this vision. It left me breathless.

The “ruin” of the chestnut tree consists in its uncanny resistance, its status as something Real, in an obscene over-presence that cannot be covered by fantasy. The distance that normally sets up the opportunity for relations, thoughts, sentiments, etc. has collapsed, not permitting even a safe point of view from which to take in the spectacle of the tree. This is a ruin that reveals the sudden unexpected “short circuit” that has thrown Roquentin into a funk.

We should take this pre-ruin idea seriously. It describes the condition of ideology, of being bound inside a structure of the Other without enjoying the benefits of any meaningful social or symbolic networks, of receiving enigmatic commands from a *distant, indeterminate* location, of not being able to comply or even succeed in resisting compliance. Something from the *outside* has reached into the interior of the subject and subjectivity itself, an alien presence that has no content but, rather, exists in the form of a void. It turns the subject into a dummy through whom ideology speaks, as if from a ventriloquist (*le mort*, in French, is the word for the ventriloquist’s dummy.) The architectural summary of these conditions specify that the condition of ideology is the “ruin” of the labyrinth, a “stochastically resonant” structure (i.e. constructed in a fractal manner), resonant also in the sense that it relates to the command of ideology in terms of an unlocatable *acousmatic* (off-stage, enigmatic) voice. The uncanny aspect of this labyrinth is the way that cultures have invariably identified it with the condition of “between the two deaths,” an interval relating actual death with a symbolic death.

But, we must ask: *a death of what?*

The process of interpellation is clear. Something from an indeterminate location outside yells at subjects, yells at subjectivity in general. It “freezes” them. Because the source of the yell cannot be known, and in relation to this the “causal arrow connecting source and destination”

cannot be mapped, the yell is all the more effective. Outside goes not just to the inside but the controlling center (extimacy). A void is formed. Dolar advises that this process of interpellation leaves a remainder, related to the aspect of void, to the enigma of the command, to the “death” of the field that is now frozen (i.e. its temporality has been reduced to a lifeless machine, a line). Ideological spatiality is born out of this temporality, which is in all respects a *non-temporality* in that the spatial field configured on the basis of a *missing element*. This is the “remainder” that Dolar points to, the basis of all the negative aspects of interpellation.

...

Just as accidents accelerate or obsolescence retards a building, pulling it out of step with ongoing functions and events, the ruin of building can be described by the idea of a Lucretian flow of atoms, moving along in a parallel temporality. Ruin is the implicit swerve, the *clinamen*, that building carries with it from the beginning, a characteristic and inner wobble that will eventually take it forward to a premature fated end or cause it to lag behind and return to a state of nature.

Because Dolar has written elsewhere<sup>8</sup> about Lacan’s unusual and central relationship to the subject of the uncanny, I am justified in linking his thoughts about ideology and love to Freud’s idea of the uncanny (and, hence, a relationship to optics and identity that can be summed up as “anamorphic”) as well as to Freud’s main source on the subject, Ernst Jentsch’s pithy observation that uncanny phenomena stem from a *primary exchange between life and death*, where each is inscribed into the other, with an  $A_D$  form (“death” inscribed into the “alive” state) defined as life drawn toward a fated end (an “appointment in Samarra”) and a  $D_A$  form, the persistence (a, “alive”) of the dead subject (D) beyond the point of natural death, imagined to be an interval terminated only by a second symbolic death. Lahiji argues that the idea of “between the two deaths” is key to understanding architecture’s relationship to ruin and to ideology. I agree, but would reach forward to implications that connect this interval to the mechanics of *virtual space*, which structures materializations of it in architecture as well as other forms of art and popular culture. Because  $A_D$  and  $D_A$  are not simply categories but systems for managing time and space, Jentsch’s primary conditions of the uncanny are able to show us how, precisely, the ideological subject is able to survive the death of ideology and sustain its “angelic” existence within the “Hades” of virtuality (= fantasy) — how, in Dolar’s terms, “falling in love” engages luck and fate in strikingly material ways.

Between the two deaths is “always-already” architectural, because cultures have engaged this category of the uncanny with universally consistent references to the labyrinth. The recursive, fractal meander known best in the West from its canonization as the Thesean labyrinth, the idea is clear. Blocked from knowledge of the plan view, the subject must confront the “paradox” of going out while seeming to go in and *vice versa*. The labyrinth performs a spatial knot, which is

also to say that the labyrinth is the *architectural performative* in its purest form. In the architectural labyrinth we have an opportunity to make a short circuit, to jump over categories and disciplines, to connect directly to the issue of the unconscious, and specifically the unconscious of architecture. Apart from its logical relationship to the Möbius band, what can be said about the labyrinth? The cultural employment of the performative labyrinth as the materialization of “between the two deaths” makes the depressing suggestion that, after ideology, there is only death. But, if we hold out for the survival of Dolar’s psychoanalytical subject, are we adding a hopeful alternative to death? I would not be the first to compare love and death, nor even the first to compare the combination of automaton and *tuchē* to point out that, in terms of structure, the two cannot be said to be significantly different.

A joke will get this across. The joke is Jewish — from a culture with historic literary appreciation of the ironic business relationship between love and death. Mrs. Greenberg sits with her dying husband. Distressed, she asks him what are his last wishes.

“I want you to marry Feldman.”

“— Friedman! I thought you hated Feldman!”

“That’s right.”

The wife discovers *in retrospect* that the husband intends to inflict on his enemy what he himself had endured in life, a “love” that was for him like time spent in Hades. For the two rivals, Mr. Greenberg and Mr. Feldman, it is Greenberg’s time to escape death and Friedman’s time to return to it. Like Castor and Pollux (but without the mutual affection), they *take turns* in Hades. The logic (or magic) of etymology constructs a triangle between the labyrinth as a wandering trial/judgment, invisibility (the literal meaning of “Hades”), and misrecognition (the theme of rivals and twins that permeates tales of exchange). Within this triangle emerges the voice, the “angelic voice,” that whispers of love; and it is the figure of the tri-angel that explains how this works.

In happier marriages, there is the same structure with the opposite effect. The opportunity of free choice, *tuchē*, has led to automaton’s double function of accident and machinic fate.

## Notes

- 1 Stefano Boeri, “Eclectic Atlases,” in *The Cybercities Reader*, ed. Stephen Graham (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 117–122.
- 2 Bruce Chatwin’s *Songlines* (London: Cape, 1987) theme is evident in his own travel-oriented novels (*Utz, Travels in Patagonia, ...*), just as W. F. Sebald’s method of slow travel is built into each of works.

- 3 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).
- 4 For this reason, perhaps, theory, which has preferred a “happy meals” approach emphasizing development, *sustainability*, mastery of techniques and topics, and the endurance of professionalism promoted by the pedagogy of the scenes of instruction, has avoided the melancholia of natural history. One could generalize that theory, to the degree to which it inevitably faces the truth of dialectical digression, becomes a pariah for degree-granting programs in architecture, landscape architecture, and planning. At the ideological level, there can be zero tolerance of the negative, whether in the form of Freud’s conclusion that the only cure for pathological subjectivity is death or from climatologists’ conclusions that there is no longer any possible reversal or even slowing of global warming and the depletion of natural resources implied.
- 5 Mladen Dolar, “Beyond Interpellation,” *Qui Parle* 6, 2 (Spring/Summer 1993): 75–96.
- 6 Lewis Mumford, *The Pentagon of Power*, vol. 2, *The Myth of the Machine* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1974).
- 7 Nadir Lajih, “Building in-between the Two Deaths: A Post Mortem Manifesto,” in *Architecture Post Mortem*, ed. Simone Brott, Charles David Bertolini, and Donald Kunze (Farnham, Surrey, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).
- 8 Mladen Dolar, “‘I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night’: Lacan and the Uncanny,” *October* 58, *Rendering the Real* (Autumn, 1991): 5–23.