

(IM)PROPER SUBVERSION: TAKING ARCHITECTURE FROM BEHIND

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the subversion of architecture by starting, once again, from the ground. The dual role of foundations, both in inventing the ground and supporting the structure, is interrogated, as are questions of the proper and of property in relation to building. How might we sever these relationships, render the foundations of building in the proper ineffective, and subvert building?

As a guide in this discussion, the paper relies on the life and work of Jean Genet, French modern novelist, playwright, homosexual, and thief. In this work, Genet acts as a thief, allowing us to work surreptitiously, to steal meaning, to uncover ways of understanding architecture that might otherwise remain hidden. Genet is a master of subversion; in his early novels, and particularly in his great prison novel *Miracle of the Rose*, Genet offers a collection of tactics for undermining authorities and systems, including architectural authorities and systems.

"If extreme mobility is a sign of modernity, why not send, whole and by air, Chartres cathedral to spend almost a year in Tokyo?"

— Jean Genet, "Chartres Cathedral"

A COSMOPOLITANISM OF ESTRANGEMENT

To subvert something—an institution, an established system, a discipline—is to undermine its power and authority, to cause its downfall, to overturn or overthrow it from the foundation.¹ Etymologically, the word derives from the Latin *subvertere*, from *sub-*, from below, and *vetere*, to turn. Subvert is related to similar turning words, such as invert, to turn inside out; pervert, to turn to ill effect or thoroughly; revert, to turn back; convert, to turn around altogether. Subversion is thus a quiet, surreptitious turning, one that takes place not from above, not as the result of a frontal attack, but in darkness, underground and out of sight. Despite the image produced by the dictionary definitions—a building crashing down—in today's parlance subversion is not a sudden, violent action, but a slow, careful process that redirects processes and resources, a hollowing out; take, for example, the way in which psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-81) used the term *subversion* to signify the slow and careful removal of the psychic mechanisms that produce the subject, leaving a meaningful void.

Subversion in this sense does not work by attacking the foundations of a structure directly, not by planting a bomb beneath the ground, but by turning a structure against itself, against its most fundamental conceptions and beliefs, against its own foundations. It turns out that subversion is not so much an overturning of a superstructure from the foundations as an overturning of the foundations from the already-turned

superstructure; it is a cutting of that critical reciprocal linkage between superstructure and substructure, between assembly and ground. This is what makes subversion so much more dangerous than simple terrorism: like the work of termites, the process is not evident until the damage is done, and that damage can be fatal. This is why, too, the fear of subversion, the fear of an unseen infection, can be the most dangerous subversion of all.

Foundations, undermine, superstructure, ground: it is striking the degree to which subversion is lodged in architectural terms and concepts. Subversion, one might suggest, is at its root an architectural concept. Certainly, it is a turning that operates on and through one of the key relationships that underlie architectural thought and practice, the relationship between structure and ground. This situation raises some intriguing questions. What, for example, is the role of architecture vis-à-vis subversion? Can we understand architecture as a protection against cultural, spatial and social subversion, as a means of maintaining discipline and order, or should we understand it as a technique, as a tool for producing subversion? My intuition, which will need to stay as an intuition, perhaps a ground, for the purpose of this paper, is that neither of these options is correct, and indeed that the question itself produces a false binary; rather, I would like to simply maintain for the moment the notion that architecture and subversion partake in a structural parallelism. Architecture is inseparable, as a positive or negative term, from subversion; architecture is, always-already, a subversive activity, but a subversive activity in the service of power. Which brings me to the primary question of this paper: if architecture is already a subversive activity, is already subversion, what could it mean to subvert architecture?

In order to move this analysis forward, I propose that we consider the thinking of Jean Genet (1910-86), French novelist, essayist, playwright, and homosexual thief. Genet does not figure strongly in discussions of architectural theory; aside from my own work and one article by Benjamin Bratton that is only obliquely interested in architecture, I have found no mention of him in the architectural canon.² Nor did Genet, in his extensive writings, produce a large body of work that explicitly discussed architectural theory; although

architecture plays a significant conceptual role in both his novels and his plays (and in his life), he only produced two articles dealing with architecture as a central concept: "That Strange Word....," an essay dealing with the relation of the urban and the theatrical, originally published in *Tel Quel* in 1967 (the strange word is "urbanism");³ and "Chartres Cathedral," published in *L'Humanité* in June, 1977, from which the epigraph to this paper has been taken.⁴

In brief, Genet's essay, as the title would suggest, is a discussion of that great monument of French gothic architecture. Genet understood Chartres to be more than an architectural masterpiece, but also to be one of the great icons that constitute the French nation, pointing to the greatness and the genius of the French people. For Genet, though, this iconic status, or at least the French nature of the Cathedral, is a myth: this founding icon of the French nation is not, as Genet points out, French at all.⁵ Genet in essence contrasts two very different lines: the straight line, the lineage of the nationalist construction, the received official story of the Cathedral on the one hand; and the wandering, meandering line(s) of the itinerant workmen from all over Europe (and likely beyond) who actually built cathedrals like Chartres, on the other. Genet's interest here, as often in his work, is in the relationship between these two forms, between the subaltern voice and the master discourse (although of course he would not have used those terms), in the way the story of the straight line, the argument of lineage but also the argument of the static, the grounded enduring and embedded line, overrides and suppresses the story of the wanderer—and conversely, the potential for the meandering line to cast doubt on, to call out as a fiction, to undermine, possibly even to subvert, the straight line, the possibility of the line of the thief to subvert the line of architecture.

Toward the end of the essay, Genet produces the striking architectural image laid out in the epigraph to this paper. Put simply, his proposal is to disconnect the Cathedral from its ground, from the nation that the Cathedral in the end helped to produce, while simultaneously to reconstitute the international character of the building. This is clearly not a surreptitious proposal; the recent fire at Notre Dame de Paris and the resulting angst across France points

to the effect of such an action. On the other hand, if Chartres were anything but a building, this would not be such a preposterous proposal; the idea of sending cultural treasures abroad as parts of exhibitions is of course an everyday part of contemporary cultural diplomacy. And yet, the proposal remains a shocking one, not simply because of the technical audacity that it represents but also because of its effects on a deeper, more structural level. By removing the Cathedral from its site, by raising it up into the air [note that the specific destination of the building in Japan is not the issue here], the proposal breaks the fundamental link between building and ground, the connection on which all questions of property, of ownership, of identity are developed, and in so doing calls into question the very existence not of the building, but of the ground.

In order to clarify this last statement, we should look more closely at the concept of ground. Ground, by most dictionary definitions, describes the surface of the earth, but this is clearly both an inadequate and misleading definition. Mark Wigley, in his work on the architectural foundations of philosophy, has examined the relationship between ground as understood by architects and as developed in the regime of philosophy, particularly in the works of Heidegger and Derrida.⁴ In his analysis, Wigley shows that the ground in philosophy is nothing more than the place from which we start as thinkers, the place on which we stand. Further, this ground, this place on which we stand, is just an abyss filled with the constructions of our predecessors; that is, the ground is artificial, constructed, a product of our thinking. This situation is perhaps more clear in the world of philosophy than in that of architecture; it is easy, after all, to imagine a ground for philosophy that has at best a metaphorical relationship to the surface of the earth on which we build. However, I would like to argue that the situation is in fact more general, that the ground is never simply the surface of the earth as such, but rather is always the ground *for something*. This notion is buttressed by the etymology of the word ground, which appears to derive from a Proto-Germanic word meaning "deep place."⁷ Ground, then, is defined not by what is below it, not by being the surface of something, but by what is above it, by what stands on the ground. In terms of the relationship between building and ground, then, we cannot say properly that the ground exists before

the building is constructed. It is the building, or its architecture, that brings the ground into being as a place on which to stand, that defines the ground's properties.

Architecture is expected to produce a ground in which the rules are clear and reliable; indeed, such a statement could stand, at least provisionally, as definition of architecture. This means, first of all, producing a ground that is stable, on which the rules of action are reliable and comprehensible, on which the physical and conceptual abyss that is under our feet is not in danger of swallowing us up. Architecture's role, in part, is to obscure the irreality and artificiality of the ground that has been constructed, to naturalize the ground. There is also a temporal-conceptual sleight-of-hand in operation here: in order to produce stability, architecture must construct a ground that appears to exist prior to its own construction, a ground that pre-exists the very architecture that creates it. Architecture must therefore produce not just a ground, but a *proper* ground.

Proper: there are few words more tightly bound to architecture. Through its institutional and financial connections to power and money, architecture always has to act within the realm of the proper. More than this, as the analysis of ground would suggest, architecture has the responsibility to not just conform to the proper, but in effect to both produce and define the proper. One could say, in fact, that architecture is the art of the proper. Proper is also a powerful and curious word, derived from the French *propre*, meaning both "own" as in "my own", *ma propre*, and clean.⁸ Proper is about identity, about group identity, about enforcing what is ours over what is foreign, what is theirs: and what is not ours is improper, unclean. A proper architecture (meaning *all* architecture), is therefore primarily about separating and maintaining, about the production of lines and walls of division, about constructing interiors (where we are, where all is proper and clean) and exteriors (where the barbarians and the non-human live in filth). Thus the ground as constructed by architecture is a ground of interiors and exteriors, a binary ground of division. The proper ground is indeed nothing more than the ground of *proper-ty*, of ownership, of the lines that enclose and divide, of inside and outside, of us and them.

If architecture is so tightly bound to the proper that architecture has the role of creating, defining, disciplining and policing the proper, then to subvert architecture might be to think the architecturally improper.

The proper ground is a ground of property, a ground with properties of propriety, a ground where everyone has a place, where the rules are known. We know, though, or at least we suspect, that this propriety is ingenuine, that architecture acts as a prop to prop up this stage scenery of the proper. The French anarchist philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-65) put the matter succinctly and powerfully in 1840: "*property is theft*."⁹ Property is the master's discourse of theft, a discourse of the once wandering and furtive line that has repressed and hidden its origins and that disguises itself as the direct, right, straight line of the proper.

Who better, then, to guide us to the improper of architecture than a thief?

In that same year of 1840, the Colonie Pénitencière de Mettray opened its doors as a utopian institution in the Loire valley devoted to caring for deprived, disadvantaged, or abandoned children (for the most part boys), many of whom had been arrested for petty crimes such as vagabondage.¹⁰ Mettray was a direct outcome of the utopian movement in French modern architecture, and formed the subject of the last chapter of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*.¹¹ Genet was sent to Mettray when he was sixteen, in 1926, and spent several years there.¹² The Colonie appears as a setting in several of his books, but the most thorough treatment is in his great novel of fate and transformation, of love and betrayal, written on flour sacks while he was a prisoner at Fresnes prison, *Miracle of the Rose*.¹³ Genet makes use of a number of descriptive tactics that re-appropriate the site for his own ends, that re-draw the ground of punishment. These tactics, as I have discussed elsewhere, are topologically akin to laying a piece of tracing paper over the site and redrawing it from a different position and with different ends in mind, ends founded in transgression or subversion, lifting us as readers into a new and different world.¹⁴ Here I will call the lines that are drawn on this second layer, lines that move and change, lines that start and stop, lines that dance and move through walls,

Genet-ic (*trans*)formations, not simply because they are grounded for me in the work of Genet, but also because of their ability to form the genetic material for a meandering and distinctly improper conception of architecture. These are (*trans*) tactics that Genet uses in his texts to describe and subvert buildings [and other things], tactics that can be understood as in opposition to the (*cis*) strategies of the institution:

Transsubstantiation, in which one object or event is transformed into another, or one substance changed into another, the mechanism that Sartre refers to as *magnifying judgement*.¹⁵

Transsimulation, or correspondence, in which two places, objects or people are understood to be discrete manifestations of a single reality;

Transmiseration, in which the meaning that a place, object or situation takes on is changed as a result of the tactics of inhabitation used to *détourner* it;

Transfiguration, in which a chain between the wrists of a condemned man remains a chain, but changes to a chain of roses, in which a person, place, idea or object remains itself, but changes its materiality or its form; and

Transcorporation, in which the intangible act of writing [for Genet] or design [for us] becomes bodily, has concrete effects on the world and on our lives, making insubstantial the walls of our prisons.

These tactics are evanescent and transient. Their effects at best burst into bloom and then fade quickly, lacking the power to create any permanence, any new grounds. Born, according to Sartre, from Genet's masturbatory fantasies, these tactics can only survive as long as one's desire – or, as Genet might put it, until the right arm gets tired. Critically, though, these transformations are not presented as elaborate fantasies, as poetic descriptions, as existing in the world of metaphor, but as concrete realities: the chain does not appear like a chain of roses, or take on the form of a chain of roses, but becomes a chain of roses; the murderer does not walk in spirit through the walls

of the prison, but walks simply in his flesh through those same walls. This is the miracle of Genet's *Miracle of the Rose*, but it is also the miracle of architecture, the means by which architecture operates: the fantasy, always born of masturbatory desire, that presents itself as real, the artificial and imaginary ground that insists on its solidity and permanence. This is, to paraphrase Deleuze, ("taking architecture from behind"), using architecture's own methods to overturn its structure.¹⁶

I will conclude with one last observation from Genet. In an interview with Hubert Fichte in 1975, when asked what sort of revolution he would prefer, Genet responded that he had no desire for any revolution:

The current situation, the current regimes allow me to revolt, but a revolution would probably not allow me to revolt, that is, to revolt individually... My point of view is very egotistic. I would like for the world—now pay close attention to the way I say this—I would like for the world not to change so that I can be against the world.¹⁷

This is exactly the question that is at issue here, in this discussion of subversion in architecture, of the subversion of architecture: we cannot subvert architecture by changing architecture, because that after all amounts just to the (re)production of the proper. To subvert architecture, we need to be always against architecture, even while using architecture against itself. It is this *against* that is most critical here—an against that can never transform itself or become a *for* by simply changing its object, an against whose teleology can only ever be negative. We need architecture not to change, so that we can be against architecture. If we are sincere about our desire for subversion, we will need to embrace anti-architectures, ways of thinking and building that desperately resist the utopic in all its aspects—including the utopia of the non-utopias—embracing the slithering line of the migrant, the transient and immaterial, blood and sperm and concrete and feathers, meaning and non-meaning, life and life, but also death and death, frantically drawing and building our dream worlds until our right arms are exhausted. ■

ENDNOTES

1. See Oxford Dictionaries [en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/subvert], Merriam-Webster Dictionaries [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/subvert], Webster's Dictionary.
2. Benjamin Bratton, "For a Staging of Jean Genet's The Balcony in 2007," in *Dispute Plan to Prevent Future Luxury Constitution*. (Sternberg Press, 2015), 54-113; Colin Ripley, "Safe as houses: The Mettray Colony as seen by Jean Genet," *Space and Culture* 9, no. 4 (2006): 400-417.
3. Jean Genet, "That Strange Word...", in *Fragments of the Artwork*, translated by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 103-112.
4. Jean Genet, "Chartres Cathedral," in *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews*, ed. Albert Dichy, translated by Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 164-170; epigraph 166.
5. Ibid., 165.
6. Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's haunt*. (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1995).
7. See for example the Cambridge English Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ground>, accessed August 12, 2019. For etymological information, see the Online Etymological Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/ground>, accessed August 12, 2019.
8. Online Etymological Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/proper>, accessed August 12, 2019.
9. P.-J. Proudhon, *What Is Property?: An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government*. Translated by Jordan Manley and Benjamin Ricketson Tucker. (Alfred, NY: Whitlock Publishing, 2017).
10. For more information about this period of Genet's life, see Ripley, op. cit. For a complete and thorough biography of Genet, see Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1993).
11. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979).
12. See Albert Dichy, "A Chronology," in White, op. cit., XXI-XLII.
13. Jean Genet, *Miracle of the rose*. Translated by Anthony Blond (New York: Grove, Evergreen, 1988). Original work 1942, pub. 1951; trans. 1962. Genet also discussed Mettray at length in two other works, his unproduced radio play *L'Enfant Criminel*, (Paris: L'Arbalète Gallimard, 2014) and an unpublished film script, *Le Langage de la Muraille: Cent ans jour apres jour*.
14. Ripley, op. cit.
15. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*. Translated by Bernard Frechtman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012). For example, Sartre tells us that "Genet's art is a mirage, a confidence trick, a pitfall. In order to make us eat shit, he has to show it to us, from afar, as rose jam. That is the purpose of the "magnifying judgements..." Sartre, op. cit., 498.
16. Gilles Deleuze, "Letter to a Harsh Critic," in *Negotiations*. Translated by Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 6. Deleuze refers to his own process as one of "taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous."
17. Jean Genet, "Interview with Hubert Fichte," in *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews*, edited by Albert Dichy, translated by Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 132.

CALL FOR PAPERS & PROJECTS DIALECTIC IX

Dialectic IX: Decolonizing Architectural Technologies

Deadline:

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Requirements:

Abstract (350 words)

Short CV

Design and technology are inextricably connected, radically impacting the way we produce form and inhabit space. In the last several decades, technological shifts have pushed efficiency, performance, and data mediated approaches to spatial production under the guise of objectivity and universal applicability. But the distance of these physical and digital tools from the idiosyncrasies of the human hand and mind, does not make them neutral instruments. Their placement after **decolonizing** (a process of achieving self-realization of a previously dominated people) in the title of *Dialectic IX* is strategic. It strips away from "**architectural technologies**" all claims of universality, scientific neutrality, and knowledge progression, reframing both decolonization and technology as cultural practices. Furthermore, the focus on techniques in our thematic identifies the locus of resistance to spatial inequity and colonial erasure, not elsewhere but squarely in designers, preservationists, urbanists, cartographers, engineers, programmers, and most of all in educators.

Acknowledging technology's role in perpetuating and amplifying spatial and social structures that discipline human behavior, choices, and imagination, how might it be used instead as a tool for delivering cultural sovereignty? We have numerous examples of this. In recent years, preservationists, anthropologists, and archaeologists have adopted digital techniques such as 3D scanning, photogrammetry, and augmented reality to protect, interpret, and transmit not only tangible or built heritage, but also intangible expressions of culture—performances, practices, oralities, and lived experiences. Indigenous artists and urbanists are employing digital media technologies such as virtual reality, mobile apps, and sound recording as new

modes of storytelling that are immersive, relational, and non-linear. In architecture, interactive tools have fostered participatory and collective modes of working, expanding the agency of designers and community end users in creating more adaptive and inclusive environments. The building industry has transformed vernacular building materials such as earth and wood by connecting them to advancements in construction technology and contemporary concepts of ecological design and circular economies. Geographers, film makers and landscape architects have also brought the act of mapping into question. Learning the notation of landscapes with petroglyphs, natural observatories, smoke signals, and dance has brought into sharp focus scientific mapping as an instrument of cultural domination. The emerging field of cultural mapping, in conjunction with geo-spatial information technologies, has been employed to protect tribal resources, expand the potential for engagement and empowerment for indigenous communities, and spatialize new ways of knowing the relationships between people and places.

The editors of *Dialectic IX* welcome submissions on the braiding of different cultural attitudes to building construction with industrialized modes of project delivery, recoveries of endangered ways of building, harvesting materials, and the application of technologies both material and immaterial, animate and inanimate, in design thinking and practice. How are the lines of inquiry opened by immersive storytelling, cultural mapping, and the collection of indigenous epistemologies disrupting status quo practices of communication, analysis, and production employed in the design of cultural landscapes? Do we have good examples of new research methods in design that address the biases implicit in technology? Are there case studies that insist on human processes to offset technology's tendency to favor merciless efficiency, optimization, and cost-effectiveness? How are colonized peoples re-appropriating the technologies that have excluded, erased, and othered them in the past?