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Biopolitics of Scale: Architecture, Urbanism, the Welfare State and After

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Michel Foucault’s notes on how, since the late eighteenth century, modern urbanism has been entangled with the biopolitical regime of security opens up the space for a general theoretical framework to account for the instrumentality of architecture and urbanism within and after the European welfare state, and requires posing the question of the historical specificity of this instrumentality in the post-war period.¹ This question can be addressed by reading Foucault in the context of the “scale debate” that has taken root principally in the fields of geography, sociology, and the political sciences. This suggests the possibility of theorizing the biopolitical project as a project of scalar organization of society, and urbanism as a project of biopolitics of scale, by which is meant the production of scales as historically specific frameworks of the biopolitical regime.

In this sense, architecture and urbanism of the post-war period need to be addressed by focusing on their instrumentality in the rescaling of socio-political processes which facilitated the shift from the consolidation of the welfare state to the processes of its increasing deconstruction initiated in the 1970s. This requires conceptualizing scale as socially produced material frame of social activity,² or, in the words of Erik Swyngedouw, as “the arena

and moment, both discursively and materially, where socio-spatial power relations are contested and compromises are negotiated and regulated.”

Such a concept of scale goes back to regulation theory, itself developed in response to the crisis of Fordism and the welfare state in the course of the 1970s. This crisis is to be regarded as a crisis of one particular scale, namely the scale of the nation-state, which served as the frame of reference for achieving temporary compromises between competition and cooperation among social forces. This involved the correspondence between the national economy as the primary object of economic management; the nation-state as the primary political player; and national citizenship as providing the main definition of political subjectivity.

Architecture, state, and the national territory

The nation-state was also the operative framework for spatial planning, a claim going back to such works as Walter Christaller’s *Central Places in Southern Germany* (1933), which defined the number, distance and size of cities supplying the population of a given territory with services and commodities [see image 1]. This approach announced the promise of the welfare state as securing equal conditions of daily life for an entire population: a promise to be carried out by the distributive functions of post-war architecture and urbanism, charged with the task of allocating housing, transport, education, culture, and leisure. In architecture discourse from the late 1940s, this resulted in a debate surrounding the “greatest number,” and concerned architects on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Thus the identification of the “society of the average man” (*société de l’homme moyen*) with “the problem of the Greatest Number” (as developed by the French architect Georges Candilis) could be juxtaposed to that of Oskar Hansen’s socialist Poland. Hansen, like Candilis a member of the Team 10, argued that only in socialism can the “problem of the great numbers” be resolved.

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Hansen’s project of the Continuous Linear System, drawn during the 1960s and early 1970s, and consisting of four large settlement strips stretching throughout Poland—from the mountains to the seaside—can be seen as an iconic expression of architecture addressing the national territory as a whole [see image 2]. This subscribed to the official discourse of socialist Poland about the “return” of Upper Silesia and Western Pomerania to the “mother country” after the Second World War. The theme of territorial integrity was just one among multiple links forged between the socialist state and Hansen’s project, for which the planned economy and centralized building industry were essential premises. This radical reformism apparent in Hansen’s work makes the Continuous Linear System a pedagogical project, directed against “real existing modernism.” The project was based upon an empirical analysis of the sites, which were mapped according to a method conceived by Hansen, and resulted in several detailed designs, some of which reached the stage of execution drawings. The project aimed at optimizing circulation on the level of the state and at delineating specific scales within the country as a whole. The principal criterion for this delineation were the quotidian practices of the inhabitant, who was granted the “right” to an urban experience, with all its heterogeneity and intensity. This was particularly perspicacious in the example of the “Masovian strip,” which consisted of a cluster of functional strips intersected by people on their daily route to work. Similarly, in the area of the Western strip—starting in Upper Silesia—everyday experience was to be defined by all overlapping scales of the project, starting with individual houses, constructed by self-organized cooperatives of inhabitants, and ending with the view on the broad landscape from the terraced structures conveying infrastructure, provided by the state [see images 3-4]. In Hansen’s words, “the classless, egalitarian, non-hierarchical character of the housing form for the society in the Continuous Linear System [...] should make legible to everybody his dependence on the collective and the dependence of the collective on the single person.”

Hansen’s project is inscribed upon two centuries of a continuous interchange between biopolitics, architecture and urbanism. In the words of

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Karte 4
Das System der zentralen Orte in Süddeutschland
Image 2: Oskar Hansen, “Poland’s Development Concept” (1977), in: Oskar Hansen, Towards Open Form/ Ku formie otwartej (Warszawa: Fundacja Galerli Foksal, Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2005)
Foucault, “from the eighteenth century on, every discussion of politics as the art of government of men necessarily includes a chapter or a series of chapters on urbanism, on collective facilities, on hygiene, and on private architecture.”\textsuperscript{10} As Sven-Olov Wallenstein has argued, if the introduction of such typologies as the hospital in the late eighteenth century can be seen as essential for the “emergence of modern architecture” it is precisely because in these structures “the idea of the building as an isolated object [was replaced] with a variable and flexible facility corresponding to the fluctuating needs of the population as a whole and entailing the introduction of ‘public hygiene’ as a new type of discursive object.”\textsuperscript{11} This logic is consistent with the institutionalization of urbanism by the eighteenth century as a biopolitical instrument, which takes as its proper scale of intervention the territorial circulation of people, commodities, money, orders, and crime, rather than the bounded space of a city. The functionality of urbanism in the management of a given population, as well as the distribution of risk according to an empirically accounted and statistically controlled norm, complements thereby Foucault’s comments on the architecture of hospitals and prisons, revealing that the instrumentalization of architecture and urbanism within regimes of security went hand-in-hand with the development of disciplinary techniques. In this sense, Foucault’s argument that modern biopolitics does not simply replace, but rather complements techniques of sovereignty and discipline, suggests that biopolitics is always already multiscalar, since it operates both as a production of the collective body of the population, as well as a production of individual disciplined bodies.

The multiscalar character of state agency came to the fore from the 1970s onwards, in the course of such interrelated processes as the increasing internationalization of economic relations; the resurgence of regional and local economies; the growing rejection of “overloaded” governments; the crisis of US hegemony in the international order and the increasing mobility of very large numbers of migrants across national borders.\textsuperscript{12} These processes coincided with the introduction of new institutions, projects and struggles on multiple scales, relating to processes of globalization, but at the same time strengthened by the emergence of regional, local and urban


scales as increasingly important platforms for the “governance by community.” Specific to these changes is that social practices are operative not only on many scales, but also across several scalar regimes; this is particularly the case with architecture, which can be understood today only as a product of negotiation and struggle between global, regional and local actors, for which European large-scale urban development projects are a particularly well-researched example.

In the course of these struggles across shifting hierarchies of scales, interconnected in broader, often-changing interscalar ensembles, the concept of scale was redefined as a political concept: as products of economic, social and political activities, scales became contested dimensions of social practice. It is by conceptualizing, representing and organizing these dimensions that architecture and urbanism contribute to the politics of scale. The focus on this contribution in the course of the twentieth century suggests a tendential change from conceptualizing scales as discrete, self-contained bounded spaces towards a topology of scalar systems in which the identity of an element is defined only through its relations with other elements within that system. In this sense, the transformation beyond the regime of accumulation and the mode of regulation specific to the post-war European welfare state was paralleled by a shift in conceptualizing urban scales from a nested sequence of settlements (defined by a specific number of people, functions, forms, and affective modalities of social bond) to an ecological system of in-between spaces. This feeds into the argument of several authors who have identified the realm of the in-between as the paradigmatic site of biopolitics after Fordism, described by Antonio Negri as a site of struggle between “the biopolitical exploitation of life” and a “resistance […] expressed in the experimental practice of an interstitial space.”

Bardet, Sert, and Egli: Scale as a discrete threshold

A series of cross-cultural moves cutting through the history of architecture and urbanism during the twentieth century—from Gaston Bardet, José Lluís Sert, Ernst Egli to the Team 10—would provide case studies for an investigation into this development in the conceptualization of scale. For Bardet, a major figure of French urbanism from the mid-twentieth century and a supporter of the catholic group “Economie et humanisme,” urbanism is understood as the “science of human agglomerations,” aiming at interrelating social and spatial morphologies. In his paper “Community Scales in Urban Agglomerations” (1943), Bardet distinguishes six scalar community levels [échelons communautaires]: patriarchal, domestic, parochial, urban, metropolitan regional and metropolitan capital. For Bardet, the first three levels are unable to generate cultural values, and the last two are destroying entirely spiritual and traditional values. For these reasons the “urban” level of 5,000-15,000 families is optimal in Bardet’s eyes for the full development of the human being: this is the level of a “human city.”

At first glance this looks very speculative, with a specific number of families attributed to each level and multiplied by ten as one moves to the next level (with the patriarchal scale counting 5-10 families, domestic 50-150, and so on). But in fact, Bardet’s “social topography,” as he calls it, builds on empirical methods, and—just as with Foucault’s description of the security paradigm—urbanism is considered a science which aims at defining and implementing norms according to the average level of a phenomenon in question discovered in reality itself. Accordingly, Bardet dwells on methods developed in French sociology, history and human geography since the late nineteenth century, distinguishing “community levels” by means of specific economic patterns and everyday practices, the intensity and frequency of social contacts and the distribution of urban functions. Thus, if the patriarchal scale is defined by 5 to 10 core families, it is because this is the group of people who exchange gifts and services, celebrate as well as mourn together. The next level—the domestic level—is born from the proximity between neighbors, and groups of children playing together and housewives shopping together, who, as Bardet fantasied, meet “to exchange gossip.” Finally, the parochial level encompasses between 500 and 1,500 families, and corresponds to an Anglo-American neighborhood

unit, defined principally by the maximal distance children travel to and from their primary school—the school, then, becomes the urban element that replaces the parish church as the center of a community. In Bardet’s account, the everyday life of a child, not yet fragmented by the Fordist rhythms of work and leisure that characterize the everyday routines of an adult, remains the preponderant criterion for defining a community level. This also points at the fact that the increasing mobility and fragmentation of everyday life is the main challenge to Bardet’s theory: the very challenge addressed by the Team 10, from the 1950s onwards.

Bardet’s contribution was directed both against the European centralized cities (the three “monsters” of Paris, Lyon, and Marseille) and the functionalist urbanism of Le Corbusier and the CIAM. In opposition to both functionalist zoning (considered by Bardet as mechanical, abstract, and expressing capitalist exploitation) and also against the concept of the neighborhood unit (leading, according to him, to city fragmentation) the community levels would facilitate the organic coherence of social groups and would thereby allow for personal development of each and every individual. The city would change completely: rather than a concentric scheme, it would become a cluster [une grappe] of villages or parishes. His aim is thus to create proximity within small closed societies that add up to a large, but “open,” society.

Yet it was already at the time when Bardet published his essay on community levels that the discourse of CIAM urbanism took a self-critical turn towards pre-war discussions within the organization, employing arguments that not rarely coincided with Bardet’s. To take one notable example, in his paper “The Human Scale in City Planning” (1944) José Lluís Sert revised the functionalist approach arguing for its “humanization.” In doing so he questioned the pre-war enthusiasm for the machine, in turn opposing tendencies towards urban sprawl and suburbanization. Taking the number of inhabitants and the composition of functions as his starting point, Sert devised a hierarchy of social and spatial scales, ranging from the neighborhood unit, through the sub-city or township, the city proper, the metropolitan area, and the economic region. With the concept of the community complementing the functionalist triad of the “sun, air, greenery,”

17 Ibid.
such conceived urbanism aimed at the “design and support of human contacts” and “raising the cultural level” of the population [see image 5].

Sert’s article expressed the increasingly dominant idea in post-war CIAM of a hierarchy of spatial entities that were both to reflect and to facilitate the constitution of a community. This was conveyed by a project of a new town for 30,000 inhabitants in the Furttal valley near Zurich, launched in 1957 and developed during several years by an interdisciplinary team headed by Ernst Egli, professor of urbanism at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich. The project was based on a matrix of seven levels of “human organization” combined with a list of twelve basic needs. Egli underscored the role of sociology in the design by claiming that the urbanist “would be grateful if the sociologist could provide him, sociologically speaking, with a useful, spatial net of relationships in the city.” This vision of urbanism as realized sociology resulted in a hierarchy of social groups, starting from the individual, through the family, the neighborhood, a group of neighborhoods, a small district, a district, and up to the city itself [see image 6]. According to Henri Lefebvre, who reviewed this project in 1960, an isomorphism between social and spatial entities is assumed: “one composes the community with families like the functions of the city with elementary needs attributed to various levels.”

Team 10 and the urbanism of the in-between

This cursory move from Bardet, a major exponent of French “culturalist” urbanism, through the evolution of “progressivist” urbanism of Sert or Egli, suggests that notable representatives of what Françoise Choay identified in the 1960s as antithetical tendencies in twentieth century urbanism, shared the fundamental assumption about the obligation of urbanism to interrelate nested hierarchies of social and spatial morphologies. The way in which this

21 Ibid, 53.
interrelationship was conceived came under fire by the third generation of the CIAM and the Team 10, which challenged the definition of a community by means of geographic isolation. Convinced that “the creation of non-arbitrary group spaces is the primary function of the planner,” the members of the Team 10 introduced the concept of the “hierarchy of human associations,” inspired by the “valley section” of the Scottish biologist Patrick Geddes (1909). This hierarchy, which the Team 10 postulated in exchange for the Athens’ Charter, was not defined by means of bounded spaces: “the principal aid to social cohesion is looseness of groups and ease of communications rather than the rigid isolation of arbitrary sections of the total community with impossibly difficult communications, which characterize both English neighborhood planning and the ‘unité’ concept of Le Corbusier.”

This was developed in the *Team 10 Primer* (1962), edited by Alison Smithson, by means of three categories used as chapter titles: “Urban infrastructure”; “Grouping of dwellings”; and “Doorstep.” What at first glance suggests a hierarchy of scales—from that of the city, though a housing neighborhood, to an individual apartment—refers, rather, to three modes of defining scalar hierarchies. First, urban infrastructure (such as large-scale road system) was considered as foundational for the identity of the community, defined through movement: it is through the hierarchies of movement that various spatial and social scales are established. The question of dwelling, secondly, introduces housing as the criterion for a different scalar hierarchy—from the house, the street, the district, to the city—all defined by mobility and communication of groups of people: a modulated continuum of scales which became a major theme for the Golden Lane Deck Housing project. This discourse was based on the imagination of a traditional city (“it is the idea of street, not the reality of street, that is important”) and in subsequent years it was replaced, in the discussions of the Team 10, by a more abstract language about “stem,” “cluster,” and “cell.”

In contrast to two other categories from the *Primer*, the “doorstep” stands for a different type of understanding of scale, developed in the texts of Aldo van Eyck. For van Eyck, the doorstep is an in-between sphere, in

26 Smithson, *Primer*, 80.
27 Ibid, 88.
which polarities are reconciled: the individual and the collective; the outside and the inside; the unity and the diversity; the part and the whole, the large and the small; the many and the few as well as the opposition between architecture and urbanism. The failure of modern city planning, according to van Eyck, stems from its inability to deal with these “twin phenomena” as he calls them: “Failure to govern multiplicity creatively, to humanize number by means of articulation and configuration [...] has led to the curse of most new towns.”

The role of both architecture and urbanism is to define a configuration of clearly delineated intermediary places; in other words, scales are not defined any more as bounded entities but rather as a set of in-between realms.

While much of the discourse of the Team 10 was a response to the Fordist society, this understanding of the in-between realm announces a different type of discourse about the city, one that, from the late ’60s onwards, became increasingly dominant. It was marked by a proliferation of debates about “intermediary spaces,” “semi-public,” “semi-private,” “spaces of transition,” “spaces of negotiation,” and “urban voids”—a vocabulary that, indeed, governs discourse about urban spaces to this day. Such modulation of the in-between spaces puts an end the fundamental dialectics which defined the social-democratic imagination of much of the modern movement as well as the architectural and urban practice of the welfare-state: the dialectics between the Existenzminimum, on the one hand, and, on the other, the “collective luxury” of sun, air, greenery, and social facilities which are calculated according to the density of the inhabitants within specific scalar thresholds. In the course of the last thirty years this dialectics has been increasingly replaced with an architecture and urbanism charged with the task, in the words of Aldo van Eyck, to create an “interior both outside and inside.”

Consequently, such conceived urban space becomes increasingly modeled according to intimate links between a bedroom, a kitchen, a living room, a staircase and a garden. And thus it is not accidental that much of the critique of the Fordist city—functionalistcally fractured into spaces of work, housing, leisure and transportation—was developed, during the 1960s...

28 Ibid, 100.
31 Smithson, *Primer*, 104.
in France, Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States from within the bounds of both sociological and ethnographic research about the domestic interior, preparing architecture for its emerging role as a mass medium of normalized images of domestic consumption. From that point onwards, the domestic interior and the city have become increasingly intertwined into one urban field of production and reproduction: a set of in-between spaces whose articulation is dominated by concerns of privacy, identity, and security.