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An architecture of object((ive)(s)(ivity)): Operations on the urban field

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Rice University, 1993
RICE UNIVERSITY

AN ARCHITECTURE OF OBJECT((IVE)(S)(IVITY)):
OPERATIONS ON THE URBAN FIELD

by

KEVIN A. STEVENS

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

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Houston, Texas
May, 1993
**ABSTRACT:**

**AN ARCHITECTURE OF OBJECT((IVE)(S)(IVITY)): Operations On The Urban Field**

by

Kevin A. Stevens

Historically, architectural projects are based on a critically defined position within the culture of which they are a product. In the city of white noise there is no inherent direction or critically definable positions in the traditional sense, only limitless possibilities and options characterized by an inherent silence. It is the position of this thesis that it is the role of the architectural project to again inhabit the city on its own terms. Individual works of architecture must now begin to fill the void left by the demise of urban design. The city as field is approached in terms of matrix, frame, and module as an attempt to question the possibilities of the role of the architectural project within the city as it is currently found.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

I would like to thank the following people for all of their help and involvement throughout this project:

The members of my committee, Professor John Casbarian, Professor Terrence Doody and Professor Elysabeth McKee for their enthusiasm, support, and encouragement throughout this project and for the discussions which happened along the way. My parents, Milton and Georgia Stevens, for their patience, support and doing everything which they could - and more. My friend and colleague Uwe Drost who has been there from the start, asking the really tough questions. And as always Lisa J. Mullikin, for reminding me of the music and poetry.
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FIELD DEFINITION:

Due to the radical changes which have come to pass in the socio-political conditions of the world at large, a paradigm shift is required of the mental structures which govern our perceptions of day to day realities. The current situation of the world socio-political structure may be understood as moving towards a state which is perpetuated by a force of entropy as opposed to being driven by chaos. The reduction and fracturing of the former clearly ordered positions that has come to pass, begins to speak of the realization of a lowest common denominator. A position of the ultimate tension reduction in which traditional hierarchies and understandings are replaced by fragmentation and rude juxtapositions. Only by means of a critical examination regarding the current conditions of the city as it is found will it be possible to develop an architecture which has a reason for its own existence, and which may thereby once again be actively involved in the positive growth of the city and the culture by which it is sponsored.

The condition of the absurd is not now, nor has it been since its inception, a literary phenomena without a conceptual basis in reality. This condition inhabits the day to day affairs of all individuals in one form or another. With the collapse of traditional social structures, the possibility of an exterior author has given way to the primacy of the autobiographical response. Relentlessly affronted by forces and phenomena beyond their control as part of the incessant
reality of everyday life, the individual struggles to find the ability to form a statement, the precise nature of which is as yet unknown and perhaps ultimately unimportant. The elements affecting this affront are somewhat ethereal in their nature due to their accommodation on the part of the individual by means of understanding them as a kind of inescapable white noise. What may be said with certainty of these elements though, is that as products of a cultural condition, they find their natural expression rather unambiguously within the field of the city and that the individual, as author, must come to terms with them by utilizing any means at his disposal.

In various works of literature, many attempts to facilitate such a paradigm shift regarding the position of the individual within the cultural field of the city is encountered. In the works of Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, Albert Camus and many of the authors of the French New Novel, the individual exists in a state of isolation within the city and the phenomena by which it is inhabited. Traditional societal structures fail here. Relationships are by necessity freely sought with the city on the level of its concrete factual existence. Social structures and relations are replaced by a close affinity to the objects which act as artifacts of the society in field of flux. These artifacts are neither personalized or subjective in their nature. They simply exist. They have an undeniable presence which in the end, the individual finds reassuring. They present an area of potential habitation and repose.

The works of these authors tends to be characterized by a violent, confrontational detail which exists independent of any direct necessity. The concept of the traditional fabric of the city is now meaningless. It is replaced
with an understanding of fields which may be continuous in terms of their factual existence, but not necessarily in their meanings and associations. By means heightening and intensification, the precision of the independent object becomes claustrophobic, closed, and ultimately forces its own independence from the concept of fabric and is able to operate within a field on its own terms. The object has an internal consistency which no longer requires a justification or elaboration by elements beyond itself. Precision and clarity themselves become sustaining and elaborating forces. The city and the inanimate object become mute by means of their own overpowering strength. Layers of interdependencies are stripped away, thereby enabling an open reading of relationships between elements and phenomena beyond immediate conditions of proximity in time and space. Infinite flexibility is provided by means of the object of contemplation's own precision. In its conception and development, the artifact changes from a position of subjective interpretation to objective presentation.

In the New Novel, the very structure of the work itself is called into question. The questioning of the historical function and form of the novel, play, and other literary works becomes a theme. The work becomes self-referential, commenting on and utilizing its historical predecessors in terms of themes, structures, and relationships. The works of these authors does not permit or encourage passive entertainment. They are mentally and physically demanding of the critical audience precisely because of the insistent questioning of their own nature. They demand the same attention of their audiences and have no reservations in their demands. Robbe-Grillet's works become completely self-referential. They quote themselves and repeatedly as
means of elaboration on a theme and in doing so require a great attention from
the audience. Due to their own inner consistency of theme and structure, the
works are able to either absorb the audiences attention completely or repel
them entirely. Temporarily suspended from the context of their personal
realities, the individual is offered a temporary reprieve from external forces of
the city, they are permitted to linger at a point which neither suggests nor
requires any inherent direction.

It is the position of this thesis that the nature of the encounter with the city takes
place on a line at a point which denotes a rupture within the field of the city and
in the culture of which the city acts as a receptacle. It is within this frame of the
city that all urban architecture takes place. On this line, at a specific point,
temporally and spatially, a moment of confrontation takes place. A program, an
idea, or an undertaking is encountered which requires response or recognition.
Whether the response is in its nature violent or passive, the confrontation
denotes a transgression, the crossing of a line or a division. These points and
fault lines function simultaneously as barriers, connectors and relaters of
phenomena. They delineate a pause of an indeterminate length, of unknown
potentials. They are places of presence, absence, and transformation. Once
denoted, occupied and populated the line migrates elsewhere in the field. The
moment of the inception of a project becomes opaque. The potentials of
narrative and didactic functioning of the project ceases. The project becomes
an entity which begins to merely exist. It is open to any number of relationships
and phenomena which could not be foreseen or possibly accounted for during
its initial phase as a projected undertaking.
The existence of the fault lines within the city may remain only temporarily when they are confronted with the architectural project which is initiated with such an understanding. Themes of disjunction, dysfunction, fragmentation, and atomization often arise from the conscious acknowledgment and utilization of the presence of these lines on their own terms. It is the strength of the architectural project, however, to transform and manipulate these conditions by means of introducing a new frame to the city, however temporary in its specifics. In doing so, the architectural project gains autonomy in respect to its abilities to function at multiple levels of complexity and is thereby able to present another layer to the city which may act to re-invigorate the field. It becomes possible to create new tensions while resolving outdated divisions. The autonomous architectural project is able to operate within the urban field as opposed to becoming merely responsive or provisional in its functioning. Like the fault lines within the city, the autonomous architectural object may become a place of presence, absence, and transformation. It acts as a frame which is simultaneously mediating between disparate forces and imposing new directions on the field.
THE MATRIX — A Field of Tensions:

Given that the modern metropolitan city must be conceived of as a field of tensions as opposed to a traditional city of fabric, the question is to what level this phenomena penetrates its reality and at what scales. The ability to recognize fault lines and inconsistencies within the city is, to say the least, not difficult. Radical juxtapositions of scale, function, and consistency of conceptual basis are easily recognized even by the most casual observer of the city. The problem is not to merely identify these inconsistencies, it is also to begin to effectively operate within the given conditions without resorting to an ambivalent resignation to the status quo and the pedestrian desire to smooth out and make things a little nicer so that they are not so offensive to the senses. This is a regressive attitude which operates at the superficial level of likes and dislikes. This does not encourage an engagement with the city or attempt to actively participate in its positive reformation, instead it speaks of a retreat and dismissal of the potentials of the city as a vital force in the life of the individual. The question is, instead, what is the nature of the urban field and how may one effectively within it without resigning to a position of perceived futility.

It is easy to understand the rather elusive qualities of the city as being determined by a condition of flux and dismissing its phenomena as just that and nothing more. However, it is of far greater concern and importance to examine the qualities of these fields of tension, and, from that examination attempt to
deduce a means by which to encounter and counter the field of the city in a positive way. When looking at the modern city it becomes most immediately evident that it may be characterized by qualities which at once seem to be contradictory. Eveness over the field of the city and radical juxtaposition at specific points are simultaneously characteristic of the city. When looking at the modern metropolis the absence of an organizing hierarchical center is immediately evident. It has been replaced by multiple centers or sub centers which are loosely or not at all connected in terms of function, position and social structures. Within and between these multiple centers there is a disparity of parts or the lack of an evident unifying and organizing theme. A condition of radical juxtaposition arises as the scale of the survey becomes more focused.

One of these most evident qualities of the field is its relative eveness over spatial and temporal dimensions. It is the nature of the understanding of the field as being essentially a free plane or area which may accept multiple layers of disparate information and substance while retaining a relatively neutral position. The field acts as a sort of tabula rasa which organizes these elements without the necessity of qualification. In this it is easy to equate the form of the modern metropolis with the concept of a neutral ordering field. The modern city accepts, with a rather amazing ease, the impositions placed on its form by numerous uncoordinated individuals working independent of any greater vision of the city as has been traditionally pursued. In cases of traditional cities of fabric such as Paris under Baron Haussmann and Rome under Pope Sixtus, a morphologically closed city form was completely re-wrought under the hand of a single figure. Vast areas were literally attacked and razed so that a new layer of the city might be developed. The condition of the modern metropolis as a field
however is much more accepting and accommodating to new layers and impositions than the traditional city of fabric. Though major urban developments such as freeways and large scale private ventures undeniably have an incredible impact on the field of the city, their impact tends to be for the most part much more immediate and localized. In the traditional city of fabric, the placement of a single obelisk might serve to completely restructure spatial and hierarchical orders. The city as field denies this possibility. It serves to limit and localize impacts while at the same time alluding to infinite possibilities. The understanding of the city as field permits the isolation of specific moments and instances by means of a selective framing. It is thereby possible to precisely and deliberately impact a given position with great immediacy. At the same time though, it must be understood that the possibility of selective framing within the field denies the possibility of finality or a kind of closure. Any impact will never be able to be understood as conclusive point in itself. The field demands a kinetic understanding which will serve to shift frames of reference over time while new layers are added and older layers deleted.

Another quality which may be understood as characteristic of the modern metropolis as field is the phenomena of radical juxtaposition. With the limited possibility of impact in terms of scale and dimension as a requisite of the concept of the field, an immediacy of action and interaction is evident in the positions established within discrete frames of reference. Over the breadth of the field an eveness is maintained while within the selected frame inconsistencies and differentiations become prevalent. This is a function of the selection of a specific points of reference within the shifting frames of the city and thereby requires a reaction which is both immediate and direct. Points are
often selected quickly and framed with little or no discrimination, inconsistencies within the framed areas of the field are accepted as both inevitable and desirable in that they serve to maintain and perpetuate the momentum of the frame thereby continuing the fields dynamic. Radical juxtaposition is understood as a quality which is desirable in an active city field in that is indicative of a process of growth and continuous development.

Both the perceived eveness of the overall field and the radical juxtaposition within specific frames of the field are ultimately dependent on the nature of time within the field. Within the field temporal dimensions exists on two immediately identifiable levels simultaneously. It is at once intensive and extensive in its level of impact. The overall field of the city may be understood as being extensive in that it speaks of a continuous, if fluctuating, existence. It is characterized by a long sweeping glance which entertains the vast dimensions of the field and permits a view of its past, present and future simultaneously. The specifically framed fragment relies on an intensive understanding of time. A short critical view is all that is permitted before the frame shifts and turns away offering another view which may be either complimentary or contradictory.

Within these frames physical dimensions will vary according to the specific conditions of the frame or the presence of multiple frames. While it may be possible to closely define the spatial limits of an isolated frame within the field as is required for immediate interaction, it will prove necessary to constantly change and alter the definition of each as new layers are encountered. As defined by the fields nature the bounds of the investigation will be forced to constantly change as new comparisons and relations are made and sought. In
the end, the field itself may be considered as the only constant though its definitions will continuously alter.
THE FRAME — A Context of Specificity:

Among the most crucial tools available for working within the field of the city is the possibility of framing. Framing specifies the point of contact within the field and allows for both quantification and qualification, thereby permitting a critical and rigorous examination. By means of conscious framing it is possible to establish an area of investigation in precise terms which allows the relationship between the field and the module to be temporarily fixed for a period of time and their connections elaborated on before moving to yet another frame. The frame implies an organizational system, however variable in terms of its complexity and degree, which is able to assist in the definition of values and meanings within a given area of the field. These frames are by definition dependent on temporal, spatial, and social dimensions. In each case the exact nature and impact of these factors changes and must be assessed anew. In the act of framing, primacy of certain factors impacting the area are established over others. By recognizing the selective nature of this act, one is able to maintain a relatively objective position by realizing the inherent limitations of the investigation. It is understood that an analysis by means of selective framing is necessarily limited in its qualifications.

The establishment of a frame is necessarily an act of perspective. It implies an effort on the part of an individual or group to come to terms with or find a meaning in a given situation. In this it is always reliant on an understanding
ultimately of agency. Though the frame may be found to shift over time and space within a field, it is always dependent on the individual or collective for its formation, definition and utilization. As such, the frame is understood as an intermediary between the matrix and the module as well as an independent element unto itself. The frame serves as a temporary suspension and coalescence of the forces of the field which act on the individual units. It serves as a position by means of which the unit is able to effectively operate on the level of the larger field without being relegated to a background position. A context is established temporarily which allows a free interplay between the two under specific conditions of interface as defined by the frame.

The most basic frame of reference might be termed as coincidental and established by means of quantification. In this frame elements exist independently of a greater force or unifying theme. Limits of the frame are established by means of perceived similarities or dissimilarities and are not necessarily reliant on any intensive qualification. Proximity in location and time serves as the major organizational factor which, on the whole, tends to be rather uncritical in its groupings and divisions. Both time and location within the frame of the coincidental operate on two levels simultaneously. The frame is reliant on both immediacy and expansiveness in its definitions. The coincidental is defined within a limited boundary at a specific point in time. It is a selective grouping which is temporarily frozen so as to facilitate an analysis or inventory. At the same time though, it is dependent on an understanding of a time which precedes the frame as well as that by which will be proceeded. The frame is also dependent on the specifics of a dimensional establishment of limits. While the frame of the coincidental is precise in its definition of extents, it is also
dependent on the acknowledgment of dimensions beyond itself in that it cannot exist as a precise and closed entity and remain as a viable instrument of analysis when isolated from the field indefinitely.

A second method of framing is understood to be much more reliant on aspects of qualification as opposed quantification. In this method of framing, the area of analysis is controlled by given conventions or factors which are established more precisely according to a specific criteria. An agent of authority is imposed on the field and specific units or attributes are selectively marked for inclusion or exclusion accordingly. Within this method, time and dimension still have an impact yet they are subjected to a control device which serves to establish the boundaries for the impact of each in much more developed and concise terms. It is within this area of framing that aspects of social conventions and norms come into play. Value judgments are made on and within the field and as a result an analysis may be undertaken which is at the same time useful and unsatisfactory due to its own limitations.

In the development of individual frames within the field it is constantly required that an attempt be made to understand the inherent limitations of each position. By means of doing so, the usefulness and limitations of each frame may be established with some degree of precision. Each frame of operation requires further frames to develop its own position thoroughly. Layers within the field may be established with a greater precision and interrelationships between them may be negotiated in a useful manner by means of the utilization of the frame as a tool of analysis and synthesis.
THE MODULE — The Unit of the Reflexive:

Understanding that it is no longer possible or even desirable to control or manipulate the complete matrix or even large areas thereof, it is important to focus on the basic module within the field. The module represents the maximum point of control which can be established or maintained for any period of time by a singular individual or collective body. The nature of these individual modules is autobiographical in that they manage to establish a particular point under the direction of a specific entity. At the same time however, they tell of the form of the overall city and may be freely related to and interacted with by other individuals which come into contact with them, either by chance or under more directed and controlled circumstances. In this they are an autobiographical unit which is reflexive by means of an intermediary frame. As they establish an autobiography of their own existence they do so for the city at large and distinct aggregations within that field. They simultaneously dictate the history of different entities which are forced together, often by no other force than an unforeseen proximity. These modules negotiate the urban field by means of intermediary frames which allow for the development of points, however temporary in their specificity, within the urban field.

In the study of the module within the field of the city it is imperative to understand the exact dimension of the unit. Depending on the extent of the framed portion of the field the dimensions of the module will alter accordingly.
The discrete object of examination may be at the level of a district of the city, a sub-group or enclave, or the singular element such as an individual building or the individual person. In each case the frame of the field which is immediately relative to the module will change accordingly.

The matrix of the urban field is inhabited by an infinite number of these separate and distinct entities or modules. It is the nature of the matrix that it may always accept new modules or admit the loss of others without substantially changing its own overall structure. In response to these fluctuations within the field, new relationships will be established while older ones are destroyed. Frames will be shifted and altered. In this, the city field maintains its dynamic character which denies the possibility of specific formulations and prescriptions. The field demands immediate interaction with as opposed to removed dictation. Each module exists as an independent entity which has within itself the inherent potential to change position within the matrix in any number of dimensions. This may occur under the modules own power or it may be effected by the imposition of an exterior force. In the case of an individual building, the context within which it was conceived will be immediately altered and dispersed. Its initial impetus will disappear yet the ability of the building to impact and interact with its surroundings will be maintained.

Through the development of frames the unit is able to actively engage the field or resign. In its ability to select its position of interface precisely and to suggest possible connections beyond its immediate condition it operates as a flexible and interactive unit within the field. As such each unit or module may be said to inscribe on the field its own autobiography as well as that of the city at large.
MATRIX, FRAME AND MODULE -- Demonstration / Qualification:

In the development of the elements of matrix, frame and module in regard to the city, the specifics of a program will be derived from initial investigations regarding the nature of the field. In order for the initial analysis to effectively develop a program for the demonstration, the analysis must act as a design process as well. As such it will be possible to at one time gain an understanding of different potentials for interface with the city as well as developed a means by which this investigation may be pursued.

The program, in terms of its scale, dimension, and extent, will be generated during and following the initial analysis. It is intended that the program will be developed so as to facilitate movement within the field and to maximize the scales of the investigation and the impact of the program. As such it is initially intended to investigate the program of housing within the city field. It is believed that this program will enable the possibilities of framing specific modules within the field to be investigated from the scale of the overall field of the city down to the individual unit of personal habitation. In this a mobility of framing will be maintained and the utility at multiple scales may be investigated. In addition the program of housing tends to be universally applicable element to the field of the city in that it has traditionally been understood to be the essential unit of the city of fabric and as such requires investigation within the city as field.
It is necessary for the project demonstration to function in a manner similar to the operations which will be used to confront the city and establish a position within the frame. As an initial qualification of the demonstration it will be necessary for the project to have mobility within the field in terms of its specific locations and relations within the field, thereby providing a possible test for frames which are established in terms of the coincidental. The demonstration should also function to simultaneously establish a new field within the city. It is a flexible frame through which it is possible to interact with other fields, and as a precise module within the larger field. Again, it is believed that the program of housing in the city can address these issues on several levels. It is able to deal with the social framings of individual to individual, individual to collective and individual to city. The constantly shifting frame of the individual person within society is an immediate concern in the development of the program of housing.
FIGURE 1. Massing Study
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FIGURE 14. Plan - Level 0.48
FIGURE 17. Template / Field - Level 1.13

Overlay / Alignment - Level 1.13
FIGURE 18. Core / Structures - Level 1.13

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FIGURE 21. Line / Plane / Volume Study
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Overlay / Alignment - Section 2.1
FIGURE 33. Core / Structures - Section 2.1

Elaboration / Composite - Section 2.1
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FIGURE 36. Massing Study
FIGURE 37. Template / Field - Elevation 2.1
Overlay / Alignment - Elevation 2.1
FIGURE 38. Core / Structures - Elevation 2.1

Elaboration / Composite - Elevation 2.1
EVALUATION:

The final review of the project took place on April 24, 1993. Invited jurors were Elizabeth Martin, Jeffery Inaba, Micheal Bell, and Sanford Kwinter. Professor John Casbarian and Professor Elysabeth McKee of the thesis committee as well as Professor Mark Wamble were also present. Professor Terrence Doody was not able to attend for personal reasons.

Due to the scope of the project and the amount of analysis, the jury was, as a whole, silent after the initial presentation. The initial questions and discussion tended to focus on the analysis and exploratory drawings in attempt to define the exact nature of the project and where the discussion and criticism should be focused.

in the discussion of the analysis and exploratory drawings an attempt was made to clarify essentially two points. The first point addressed was what, if any, relationships within the field existed. This was a point of concern due to the overlay of a series of texts with the form of the city in addition to the overlay of abstract ordering systems. It was a point of concern that these might have been both selected and utilized in a somewhat arbitrary manner, until it was explained that these selected frames were used as a means to generate the field and the qualifications for the selection and application were detailed. The second point of concern dealt with the development of the demonstration
project in regard to the field and the possibilities of literal one to one correspondences between the two.

In regard to the demonstration project, most of the discussion concerned where the project had its real origins, whether or not it was actually a result of the defined field, and regarding the definition of subject of the investigation. Whether the subject of the project was the individual, experiencing subject, the city, or the morphological development of the building as building was really central. The nature of the field, however, eliminates the possibility of these clearly defined positions and, in fact, the proposal had all of these aspects intrinsically present within it due to its reliance on the larger field.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the entire project is attempting to define the relationships between the matrix, frame and module and the manner in which the impact one another and the demonstration project. Unfortunately, certain singular elements of the initial field were focused on to great extent and the demonstration problem was initially discussed only in terms of this point. The field, nor any of the specifics of it, are intended as a focal point. They are instead meant as a catalogue which might be indexed or referenced as a means to inform the development of the project. It is not intended to be a generative force. As stated initially, the relations between these constantly shifts and migrates making it difficult to establish precise connections and methods of referencing.
Overall, the review was very successful in that it generated a great deal of highly critical discussion. In the discussion further areas of investigation became apparent and possible future areas of investigation became evident.
BIBLIOGRAPHY:


