



The Funambulist, Politics of Space and Bodies 01, Militarized Cities (9-2015) portada / cover.

IMAGINARIES OF VIOLENCE

Léopold Lambert

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Entrevistado por / Interviewed by

Francisco Díaz

If, consciously or not, imaginaries operate as engines for concrete actions (projects, laws, regulations, behaviors, etc.), it is necessary then to question both their origins and implications. From a very particular position, Léopold Lambert has focused his work on demonstrating that, if there's a certain degree of violence inflicted by architecture upon bodies, then it would be necessary to question its conceptual assumptions and understand it, without idealizations, in its political and material aspects.

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FRANCISCO DÍAZ: What is 'the funambulist'? And why did you use this figure as your pseudonym and now as the name of your magazine?

LÉOPOLD LAMBERT: To start with, the figure is usually better understood in Latin-based languages than in others: 'funambulist' is a word to describe a tightrope walker, and the idea behind that is that architects draw lines and split milieus into two or more partitions, while the tightrope walker is this figure that walks on the line. This doesn't mean that she or he is liberated from it, but somehow she or he subverts the power of the line, the sort of intentionality of the architect, so I enjoy very much this figure. That is why I took it as the name of my editorial project, which started as a blog, then was a podcast, and is now a magazine.

Do you have a net in case you fall?

I have never considered myself as being 'the funambulist.' I'm not a tightrope walker; I'm actually quite clumsy! I think of him or her as a very skilled figure. But if you talk about nets, I guess I should bring up Zarathustra as well, because the book starts with this rope dancer that falls, and as he is dying Zarathustra tells him: "You have made danger your vocation; there is nothing contemptible in that. Now you perish of your vocation: for that I will bury you with my own hands" (Nietzsche, 1883[1976]:6).

In *Weaponized Architecture: The Impossibility of Innocence* (Lambert, 2012), you proposed that architecture has been instrumentalized or mobilized as a political weapon. Does



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this idea operate only on built objects or does it work on architectural imaginaries as well?

It's an interesting question, because it shows that when I describe architecture as being necessarily a weapon, I always mean architecture as a built object for it implies the actual built materiality as operative on bodies. Now, this doesn't mean that architectural imaginaries cannot be mobilized as possible political weapons, but I think it's not the same thing, because when I talk about the inherent capacity of architecture to be instrumentalized into a political weapon I also talk about the inherent violence of architecture. And this is only true when we consider the built object.

When I say violence I don't necessarily imply that it has to be judged within an ethical system yet; I don't consider violence as something that has a fundamentally bad quality – even though we need to be very careful with this concept – but the violence that I'm talking about is a pre-political one. And by pre-political I don't mean chronologically but rather methodologically: how do we think first of architecture as a material assemblage that organizes bodies in space – that's the definition of architecture I usually give – and then, how do we see that organization of bodies in space as something that cannot be politically neutral. So, I guess once we have established the pre-political violence we can look at how it's instrumentalized as a political weapon, and then, we can try to do an ethical judgment and see how much this instrumentalization is part of a political program that we are against – against which we position ourselves – or if it is a political program that we can embrace.

But don't you think that violence can be psychological as well?

This is something that can sporadically appear in my work and research. I'm interested in aesthetics, and you can see how aesthetics is essentially a crystallization of a political narrative. However, when we talk about 'weaponized architecture' – and of my intuition or hypothesis that architecture is violent and necessarily a political weapon – this actually relates to

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the material aspect. It doesn’t mean that it’s an exhaustive definition of architecture; it just means that we can approach the discipline through this filter.

Your argument on *Weaponized Architecture* takes us back to the idea that architecture is a tool of power, to which Foucault has been a key figure. However, in the imaginaries of common people, architecture has something to do with beauty and art. So, if architecture is a tool of power but at the same time it is presented as something good, I wonder, can architecture be used as a sort of image laundering, a sort of friendly interface hiding something not so friendly?

When we talk about image we are in the realm of aesthetics – as I said, something I’m very interested in – but this is simply not within the same realm of violence in architecture. When we are talking about architecture being perceived as something good, I think we are talking about architecture as something with a great degree of intentionality when it comes to aesthetics and to form, but when I talk about architecture I mean something much larger than that.

Everything that has to do with aesthetics has to do with the means of production of architecture, of how a building was made, and obviously it’s representation of the intentions to crystalize a political narrative. There are many examples of this governmental aesthetics and the capitalist aesthetics, but I don’t feel as someone with so much authority to speak about that.

Following this idea of the aesthetics of power, and reversing the question, can there be an architectural counter-imaginary, that is, one which can’t be used as a tool for power? We know that, usually, the hegemonic narrative is based on the idea that both architecture and the architect are benevolent and aim towards the betterment of humanity. This imaginary has left the practice of architecture in a comfortable albeit ethically frail territory, as some of your work has demonstrated. So, does this mean that we would need an evil imaginary for architecture? And if so, which?

I think in this question there's something about the moment we are in right now, which is very interesting for the discipline, because we do have a search for the political implications of architecture and, when it comes to a critique of the built environment, we will find many architects agreeing on it. But when it comes to think of it in a more constructive manner, then I feel that we have two different approaches. One would be like what you are describing: architecture as a sort of 'counter tool,' or architecture against power, or for the betterment of humanity and these kinds of things. But I think that is a very dangerous approach because it bases itself on the fact that there can be something outside of power, as if some would go for the detriment of humanity and others for its betterment.

I favor a different approach, one that doesn't talk about progress or betterment of humanity but about seizing the political violence of architecture for other political programs. Obviously, these programs try to formulate an agenda that can be associated with those ideas behind your question, but I want to be very clear about the fact that we should not shy away from the reality that we are dealing with power. This is similar to the debate on non-violence in political struggles. I think the only time non-violence is best argued is when it is indeed the optimal strategy to counter the formation of power, and, even in this case, the radical disruption that it constitutes can be considered as violent. But if it's non-violence as a principle – since violence is a very bad word – I think we are dealing with something highly dangerous because many things we are up against are built on this illusion that you can be outside power and outside violence.

Let me rephrase the question. I was not thinking of being outside power. I was asking whether it is possible or not to counter the effects of power through architecture. Do you see it possible or is it just an illusion?

I think the question was very interesting precisely because many people would agree that architecture is a weapon but still some would want it not to be a weapon, and I think that's the illusion. We should just think of it as a weapon and ask for what. I actually don't want to call it a 'counter power' because it makes us feel that we are automatically doing something good. The political programs I would like to see more developed among architects are those that force architecture against itself, against its own logic, which is a very authoritative one. I don't think we should try to escape that, but perhaps we should try to think architecture against itself to manage to provide the conditions for a political program to emerge. My suspicion though is that once this political program emerges we should probably get back to work and rethink it against itself, because no political program could ever be necessarily good; it's all a matter of what is the dominant narrative enforcing or overloading power over other parties.

You have recently pointed out how the word 'ghetto' was used in Denmark to designate impoverished neighborhoods, linking poor people to a forcefully segregated community – as in the case of the Nazi regime. Regarding that, you said: "Rhetoric

creates imaginaries and imaginaries inform politics (and vice-versa).” Could you elaborate on this idea?

What I mean by that is that no operative political program emerges from nowhere. It always comes from the construction of a collective imaginary within a society that will make this program legitimate. So, in this particular case, without going all the way to the most dreadful history of the ghetto, having a word like this used by the Danish government to describe im-

poverished neighborhoods with an important immigrant population is a rhetoric legitimizing a certain amount of policies that implement structural racism in that society.

I was in Denmark when I wrote that, and I don't know Denmark politics so well, I do know the French ones much better, so to give you a very simple way of explaining that: when after the 2015 attacks Fox News posted a map of Paris with the so-called 'no-go-zones' (which implied that non-Muslims should not come in and all that ridiculousness), Parisians were either very mad at Fox News or laughed at it knowing very well that they might live in and go to those neighborhoods. But, although Parisians are very keen to make fun of Fox News' terrible journalism, they are not so eager to question their own media, which might be telling them that these no-go-zones are indeed in the *banlieues* in the suburbs of Paris where you, supposedly, would never go as a

white person without being afraid to get mobbed, or having that imaginary of absolute chaos despite never having gone to those places. And that's what I mean by creating imaginaries that will later promote the implementation of racist policies. Now we can see in France how strong those racist policies are.

Indeed, recently the French prime minister used the figure of Marianne – the allegory of the French Republic – saying, “she is not veiled as she is free,” as a way to address Muslim women living in France who use the burka. Then, you criticized him, showing how the actual representations of Marianne always show her with the hair covered. Beyond the actual lack of historical precision of the French Prime minister, what can you say about the use of symbols to prompt national identities? What's the role of the imaginaries in the creation of a political project?



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When we talk about nationalism, we usually imagine that it has a lot to do with the flag, the national anthem – the sort of very obvious nationalist symbols. Now, in the case of a government like the current French one, which is socialist (supposedly from the left wing, although we might need some new definitions for this political spectrum), then nationalism is not so much going through very obvious symbols. It goes through principles of society, and in the case of France, the word ‘universalism’ is always coming back. It is a nationalism that fundamentally forgets that it is using the same principles used to colonize a very high amount of countries in the world. And somehow we see the continuation of this domination of a part of society upon another in contemporary France, and it is a nationalism that goes through the principles of that society.

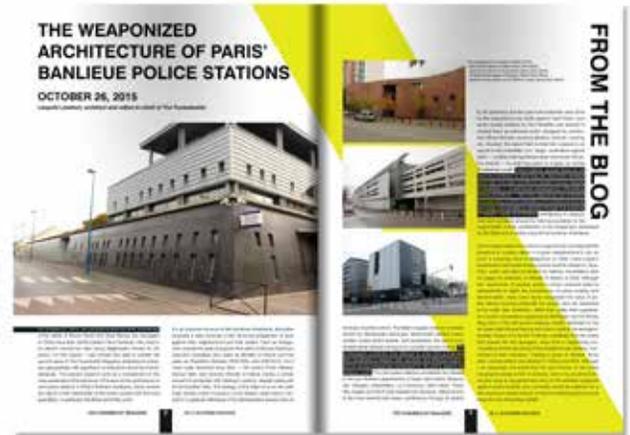
One particularly abused is the principle of secularism – what French people call *laïcité* – and there’s a pretense of not mixing political matters with religious matters. It’s very odd because this is what secularism is about: politics is on one side and religion is on the other. But the way of interpreting it now, by many white intellectuals from the left and from the right, is that religion (understand, Islam) should not display itself within society. Obviously, what we understand behind this is that some modes of living from racial populations that are different to French standards should not appear within society. Everything should be indexed according to the French standard mode of living.

Regarding the symbol of Marianne, this sort of allegory of the French Republic, some historians are showing that it is much more complex than what we think it is. I’m not a specialist in the question and I don’t really care so much about symbols, but I do care for how design is involved in the whole story; so clothing in that case, first the ban of the hijab in the schools and later the ban of the burka or the hijab within public space, the very fact of having a legislation regulating that, to me is the exact opposite of what secularism is about. It is a very disingenuous interpretation of this concept coming from a sort of structural racism.

Regarding the current presence of police in the city, you have written:

Spectacular violence creates inequality in the outrage it triggers, since it involves an observer, which itself involves a territoriality of visibility [...] ‘Normal’ violence, on the other hand, occurs in a territoriality of invisibility where no one can afford to be in the role of the observer, except, perhaps, anthropologists doing their field work. Such territoriality needs to be understood both literally (the *banlieues* for instance) and figuratively. The fact that so many of us do not see the inherent violence in the presence of armed (often male, often white) bodies patrolling our cities is indeed itself a process of invisibilization that simultaneously reveals and reinforces inequalities (Lambert, 2016(6):6).

I agree with you, and would like to take this reflection further. To enter an apartment, police officers need an order, while they are free to move through public space. Therefore, we are somehow blind to the fact that all our imaginaries about the



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positive aspects of public space rely on the existence of the police. In this sense, one might say that architecture creates the limits between what police can access without and order and what they can't. This would be a whole new imaginary of public space created by law and not by design. Indeed, following this argument, the State of Exception would erase the boundaries of privacy created by architecture. Would you agree with this idea? Can public space have this policing function?

I think this question is really interesting in how it challenges the way public space is being understood within the architectural world right now: the idea that what is public is necessarily good. To me, 'the public' is not about being good or bad. The public is rather a site where every dynamic of power within society is taking place. So, when we talk about public space we usually wonder 'what is this space? What should we really be doing?' But maybe, in addition, we should wonder 'what public?' Because, if indeed, like you said, the public space is a space where police is actually operative, it places all our relationship to the police – as the bodies we are with everything it means in terms of social differences – showing us very well those social and racial differences. We can see how many times a brown or black person is being stopped and asked for identity papers by the police – unlike a white person – and we should think of it in parallel to social differences (although it transcends those differences). It also implies our relationship to gender.

Nowadays, architects are very keen to think of public space – which has not always been the case – so I think we should value this interest. The only problem is that we are only wondering about space when we should really be wondering about what the public is. And this says a lot about who are the people thinking of public space. When architects think of it, we still find a profession where its centers of thought are mainly in the western world, in places where the profession is overwhelmingly occupied by white people (I think when it comes to gender the tendencies are changing very fast but it's still very much a male profession). So, if the people who think of public space are the same ones who benefit from the dynamics of power of the public, then the

least people will wonder what the public is. And those thinking of public space will hardly ever think about what the public is. They are only interested in space.

Taking this idea further, and considering what you have noted on the issue “Clothing politics” of *The Funambulist Magazine*, we could also define ‘public space’ as the space in which we should wear clothes – since public nudity is condemned in most of the world’s legislations. Based on this, I would like to bring this question back to architecture. When we design, we think of space and the ways in which bodies behave within it; however, we usually take for granted the layer of clothing that mediates between a body and a space. Why did you put your eyes on clothing as an issue within the relationship between politics and space? What’s the role of clothing within this relationship?

First of all, regarding the clothing politics – I wrote a chapter of my latest book on the question (Lambert, 2016) – I am indebted to two persons who have been thinking about that together and individually for a few years – Mimi Thi Nguyen and Minh-Ha T. Pham, who are both contributors to the issue you mentioned. So, maybe before answering this question I should say how much this, in the way I want to look at it, is almost a discipline that was invented by them.

And I think it brings the realm of clothing within this entire realm of design and built environment. I really don’t see why we are creating such categorization between clothes, objects, architecture and urbanism. For me, they are all related to the very same thing and they just embody different layers of political intensity around the bodies. Now, I think that because of the proximity of clothing with our bodies, and the fact that somehow we choose it (even though we know it’s only half-true because there are obviously economic contingencies), our clothing is fabricating a particular identity, and that’s why it is read within the entire normative or value spectrum. So, everything we described earlier about the public and the dynamic of relationships of powers within this public may not be actually taking into account this clothing aspect of things.

So would you say that clothing influences the way public space is used and the way bodies behave within it?

I think it does it to the same degree than architecture. For, what is a space? If space is this interfacing media between bodies, then it starts with clothing. The only difference is this sort of virtual inseparability of bodies and clothes.

And this brings us back to the way a particular element like the hijab is experienced in France, because it seems like many people are considering it as fully part of the body. It’s very interesting. I don’t think most white people in France think of the hijab as something someone is taking off even when that person enters her home (because it’s not something you wear at home). That’s what I mean by the virtual inseparability of clothing and body, because even though there’s a rational understanding that you could take it off, this normative judging of it makes it entirely inseparable, and because of that it enters

completely within the barriers of violence imposed on bodies, depending on their positions.

And if we consider clothing as a communicative device which expresses our tastes, wealth, religion, and so on, would you say that clothing is part of the identity of the one who wears it?

Yes, but I don't want to phrase it that way. I would say that it makes a part of your identity. It fabricates a part of it.

My point is that if, at least in theory, public space is that space in which you are allowed to show your identity (In fact, police can ask for your ID), then the ban on a piece of clothing that shows your identity should be a contradiction in a secular society.

Well, beyond that sort of relationship between religion and secularism, I'm interested in the very idea of making laws about clothing. It seems such a strange thing when you think about it. You were saying that sort of axiom prompted by law of "you should wear clothes, you shouldn't be naked," and even there there's something quite interesting in the fact that there would be already a sort of gender differentiation, because it is accepted to see a man not wearing any shirt while for a woman it would be unthinkable. So, even regarding nudity there's a sort of normative reading of what should be the minimum of it. And then, you have laws that determine what you should wear, but even more interesting, how much or how little you should wear. Thus, we see that this gender differentiation is still very active. Whenever we see this kind of legislation is often a sort of male majority of legislators addressing how female bodies should be dressed, whether it is by adding or by taking off more clothes. **ARQ**

LÉOPOLD LAMBERT

<info@thefunambulist.net>

Architect born in France. Founder and editor-in-chief of *The Funambulist*, a bimonthly printed and digital magazine associated to a podcast and a blog, which examines the political relationship between the built environment and bodies. He is the author of three books, *Weaponized Architecture: The Impossibility of Innocence* (dpr-barcelona, 2012) on the intrinsic violence of architecture and its necessary political instrumentalization, in particular in Palestine; *Topie Impitoyable: The Corporeal Politics of the Cloth, the Wall, and the Street* (Punctum books, 2016) on the politics of bodies in relation to these three scales of design, and *La politique du bulldozer: La ruine palestinienne comme projet israélien* (B2 Éditions, 2016) on the use of the bulldozer by the Israeli army as a war weapon since 1948.

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