

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE MASSES?

Although famous for their pessimism, Adorno and Horkheimer hardly imagined that, decades after writing: “the masses are too astute to identify with the millionaire on the screen”, reality would overcome their worst nightmares (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002:116). In the second decade of the 21st century, the masses are not only not so astute, but they do not even recognize themselves as such.

A century ago, the rise of mass society was a key issue and architecture played a significant role in that debate. For instance, faced with the elite’s disdain towards those masses looking for distraction, Benjamin recognized a different kind of mass reception in architecture: usage or distracted perception offered an alternative to the attention required by other art forms (Benjamin, 2008:39). At the same time, a trained architect like Kracauer not only stood for the legitimacy of aesthetic pleasure in mass ornament, since “its degree of reality” was “still higher than that of artistic productions which cultivate outdated noble sentiments,” but also saw them as one of the few creations of his time (Kracauer, 1995:79).

In that mass society, architecture also took part in more complex aspects. One of those was the emergence of Fascism: the ability of Terragni’s Casa del Fascio (1936) or Speer’s Cathedral of Light (1934-1938) to frame the gathering of large crowds turned agglomeration into an aesthetic spectacle while dehumanizing the individual through his/her abstraction into the mass. Meanwhile, mass-housing’s ability to provide shelter for multitudes of people meant facing large numbers through repeatable solutions; thus, modern architecture replied with standardization strategies without questioning the main feature of the standard: the erasure of difference. This way, both approaches ended up contributing to alienation, either through the aesthetic abstraction of large crowds or the economic abstraction of large numbers.

Nowadays, the scale of the massive is different. No era has built as much nor it has been in charge of as much population as ours. Moreover, none had so many architects. Today, it seems that everything is massive: catastrophes, hunger, wealth, migration, production, fashion or cities. As Reinhold Martin (2011:72) accurately says, “the new tendency toward quantity conjures something like a mathematical or statistical sublime.” This issue of ARQ not only analyzes that condition but also seeks to interrogate it from architecture. Anna Puigjaner shows us collective kitchens all around the world. Saskia Sassen observes the massive inequalities we currently face. Keller Easterling proposes a smartphone app to generate changes on a large scale. Baraona and Reyes show us the energy costs involved in the production of bitcoins. Dogma discusses collective housing coupled with workplaces. Mobil Arquitectos proves,

through a new subway line in Santiago, that architecture can improve mass transport experience. El Equipo Mazzanti systematizes architecture to intervene on a massive scale. De Castro questions the massiveness of a concept formulated by global organizations. Pedro Alonso shows us how Soviet housing is massively being destroyed in Moscow. OMA and Ole Scheeren manage to make a complex of over 1,000 apartments seem less massive. Muszbek and Froimovich reposition the housing-crisis argument. Bresciani and his studio explore the design of entire urban pieces. The project by Marsino allows to reassess market-developed mass housing. Finally, accountabilities for hyperdensification in Santiago are discussed in the debate. As we can see, this issue is the proof that approaches to what is massive are still multiple.

Despite not being a great subject matter, massiveness today is bigger than a century ago, as alienation persists. If in the 1930s the exacerbation of general uniformity obscured individual differences, today the exacerbation of individual differences conceals the uniformity of general elections. For example, now we can pay to choose what to watch privately, but we still end up watching the same shows as others; or we customize devices that are the same as those that everyone has. Interestingly, nobody would say that we are living in a mass society. Have we ended up naturalizing massiveness?

Naturalization, as we know, nullifies the possibility of questioning things. That is to say, it brutalizes us. A century ago, while modernity revolutionized aesthetics in ways that still influence us today, a society of alienated masses surrendered to nationalisms, deriving in atrocities of a massive scale. Today, history seems to repeat itself. Adorno and Horkheimer were aware that, in mass society, “the advance of stupidity” goes hand in hand with the “advance of intelligence” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002:116). We hope that, after a century of hard learning, we had internalized both the fear of the former as well as the need to take care of the latter. **ARQ**

Referencias / References

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