

PORTRAYING FEAR

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The following essay was written in response to a project by a loose affiliation of graphic artists and architects, known as the SHINE group, who together realised an intervention in one of the more difficult areas of Rotterdam called TWEAK. Their idea, quite simply and effectively, was to insert a living room without walls into specific urban configurations, in an attempt to domesticate the more threatening spaces of the city.

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A tweak entails a far from straightforward complement of activities and gestures. The OED gives a relatively straight forward definition: “to seize and pull sharply with a twisting movement.” It backs this definition up with a telling example: “To pull by the nose as a mark of contempt” That is where the word’s innocence is lost, in the possibility of contempt. In my own mind tweaking conjures up the image of an experienced hostess surveying her living room with a penetrating, military gaze while brushing through and giving a last tug at the curtains and the expensive lush sofa before welcoming her visitors. A third variation, and one I suspect to be rather closer to the purposes of the Shine group, involves the small but confident adjustments to the impressive constellation of knobs on a mixing panel in a studio before the recording is finalised. All three variations will play an implicit and silent role in the following essay which tries to explore the theoretical environment in which the Shine group have launched their TWEAK project.

The essay sets out to do two things. In the first place it is an attempt to undermine the concept of fear as a seemingly well-defined and apparently self-evident praxis. In the second I want to look at the idea of domestication of space. Both of these are necessary, I believe, to make sense not just of the intentions of the Shine group, but the possibility of a wider reading of the project.

Shine’s urban intervention attempts, in my view to do two interesting things. On the one hand it is an exercise in recalibrating the conventional responsibilities of architectural and urban design. In this way they have

taken Cedric Price's short sharp thrust to heart: "It is vital to see where architecture isn't needed" Their attempt to design a soft architecture, rather than a hard architecture questions the role of the urban designer, the architect, whereby the required product is not a building, not an urban assembly, but merely a questioning of assumptions, a restructuring of the social space through interventions which have as their sole purpose to make people conscious of themselves and their ideas about things. In this sense they are entering the realm of art. In this project they have chosen to graft the comfortably familiar, an open wall-less living room, into the all too familiar space of modern alienation. In this way their simulated living room, is at one and the same time an existential act of the absurd as well as a gesture with a clean political purpose: (re)domesticating the modern sublime. The incongruence of the graft, will they hope stimulate a re-evaluation of urban spaces and our knee-jerk reaction to them.

The idea of the street as an urban living room is of course not new. Walter Benjamin had explored the idea of public space as an interior space, the street *as* a living room. Louis Kahn described the street as a room by agreement. Aldo van Eyck wanted the city to be a house and vice versa. People in rather more kindly climates than the Dutch have been *living* the idea of a street as a living room since time immemorial, since the first street was conceived perhaps in Khirokitia, Cyprus. More recently Koolhaas placed a wall-less living room in the large empty agora of his conference centre. Mies, Philip Johnson and Shiguro Ban have explored wall-less-ness in their houses, inviting a similar confrontation with the outside. The designers of modern nomadism have often played with the weird intimacy of domestic bliss in unheimisch surroundings; Archigram and Superstudio are potent examples from the sixties. So the answer might not be new as such, but what is new is the question as well as the context in which the answer is given. And that gives us the peculiar flavour to this project. This open, wall-less urban living room was specifically conjured up to deal with spaces that have become infected by fear.

The world has changed. Not just the former colonies, but now Europe itself is being increasingly confronted with the consequences of the inherent contradictions of the cultural interface of mere ethnic and religious tolerance as opposed to positive curiosity and enjoyment. The problems of an often unilateral multiculturalism, whereby one person tolerates the other, while the other fails to tolerate the one are being acted out on every doorstep. As one of the many products of this internal failure we have generated the greatest media star of all-time: the self-destructing terrorist, whose altruistic acts of

destruction and murder in the name of his miserable cause has destroyed the last vestiges of that social simulacrum, the moral border. At the same time we are being rudely confronted with the paradox of our super-civilised society. As a result of our enlightened sensibilities, moulded not in the last place by the pedagogy of Jean Jacques Rousseau we have tried to create noble savages as children: independent young adults, confident, full of curiosity and initiative, able to teach themselves naturally from nature and the natural. We achieved a considerable success. The result, however, is made complicated by the large number of rather more savagely inclined nobles, flooded with confusing hormones and revisiting the macho as a way to shape their image and satisfy their craving for respect. From the same proto-urban conditions come bands of young and old drug addicts who have given up their search for an ideal and live their sad nomadic lives from charity to theft. This is the price, which, through an increasingly ungenerous public spirit we are refusing to pay.

The circle is nearing completion: our super-civilisation is also and at the same time a super-barbarism, the forms and protocols of which are slowly becoming clear. The two compatible opposites: the increase in wild untamed behaviour and the enlightened spirit that has accommodated this behaviour and prepared its way have combined to create a new hyper sensitivity to fear. The enlightened are still unwilling to act against their vision of the utopian primitive and as a result two movements have tried to supplant them. On the one hand an increasingly paralysing technology of safety has been developed. On the other a boorish sect of quasi military self-help cleansers has stood up to “take matters in their own hand”. This spiral of the enlightened wilderness has all the potential of blowing up into a drama of ethnic recrimination requiring football-like loyalties and aesthetically motivated violence. All this is set against an urban landscape in which the focus has been on simple logistics, scale enlargement and economic volume. It has created a modern sublime of scaleless coarsely woven infrastructure with its plethora of dark shadowy empty places.

It is in this context that Shine have done their subtle tweaking. They do not wish to erase the product of modern economics, the landscape of logistics, they wish to brace us against it. They wish to tweak the city and tweak our minds, they wish to regain Aristotles’ wonderful definition of the city as *a place where it is good to be*, not by means of an appeal to our conservatism and knee-jerkish attitude to everything that is familiarly unfamiliar and by transforming the modern into the twee, but by setting the comfortably familiar of the domestic into the familiar setting of the alien. In this sense the wall-lessness of their living room is interesting.

Fear is a curious concept in that, more than any other word, it is defined within the blind parameters of cultural and perhaps biological prejudice. For the purposes of this essay we need not dig too deep, but it would be useful to define fear not in terms of the catalogue of different possible fears and phobias such as agora-, claustro- and assymetrophobia. Nor do we need to look at the theatre of repression and the metaphysical psychology of Freud. What we need to do is to look at fear as a praxis, as an activity rather than a feeling. To define fear we have to have an idea of what people with fear do. Fear as an activity is similar to the Aristotelian *theoria*, a form of exercise whereby one's image and knowledge of the world is consciously brought forth, contemplated, rehearsed and made subject to a rigorous critique of its internal structure. In this sense fear, as a dialectical activity upon a flood of images and affects in the mind is an act of continuous portraiture. The connection between fear and mobility, which the Shine group have seized upon is cogent. Movement and fear are complementary, even if that movement is realised only as a wish. Fear is an act of portraiture, in which modalities are given concrete form in provisionally prepared responses, rehearsed as the familiar landscape of fear unfolds itself to us as we walk. The repainting of the object of fear is thus continuous; it is like the Mona Lisa, continually reworked and continually reinterpreted: now the portrait of a middleclass housewife, then the portrait of Leonardo himself... Fear is a portrait which is continually reworked up until the moment of the artist's death. It forms part of his legacy; he leaves behind him the most complete portrait of his fear. This portrait apart from being an instrument of self-revelation is also magical in Collingwood's classic sense. A person's portrait of fear is not disinterested; it is primarily a *useful* thing, or at least a thing that can be acted upon. It creates possible situations in the mind and prepares appropriate gestures and actions so that the movement of the person walking through the city becomes an urban gallery of the portraits of his mind. This dynamic portrait is not could be mere myth, it could represent reality, but it is always virtual in that it is *always* an image of possibility: an imaginary monster related to the real and to the fantastic through the infinite world of possibility.

Fear, like the personal law-enforcement that is violence, is an extraordinary powerful generator of urban usage and form precisely through this continuous act of life –like or fantastic modal portraiture; moreover, a portrait that does not like to discriminate too rigidly between fantasy and the actual. Although such an act of portraiture is highly individual, it nevertheless has the power to shape the city. The city is a product of

individual movements multiplied by the numbers and desires of its population. This, within the parameters of necessary urban movement, creates patterns of usage and avoidance which in turn decides the art of political prioritisation and eventually designed urban form.

Imagine now the grafting of the comfortably familiar, such as a simulated living room, within the territory of the alien. The walls of this simulacrum are merely defined by the inscriptions on the ground. As such the non-existent walls become overwhelming views of the dull-grey background of the modern sublime, much like the walls of the Sala dei giganti by Giambattista Bologna in the Palazzo del Té in Mantua: space disfigured by the overwhelming omnirama of destruction. The non-walls of the simulated living room are full cinematographic frescoes of a dreary background upon which the visitor can superimpose their own personal portraits of potential at leisure. The walls are virtual divisions, cinematographic and not physical. They define a modal space. The living room will simulate the haven, will contain the instruments of domesticity, but will do so with an appropriate sense of incongruence and as a result will provide none of its comforts. The television they are proposing to install plays a subversive role not without its ironies and completes the spatial and conceptual inversion of their living room. Television is the prime suspect of the post-modern condition: real life follows media. Instead of using it the way television appears to work best, that is by promoting and disseminating the culture of hypersensitivity to the outside and by encouraging a passive response to it, it is used to offset the frightening cinematographic non-walls by neutralising them through the projection of stories and monologues about personal and everyday experiences of local space.

It is difficult to see whether the Shine group will achieve their heroic aim of tweaking the urban conscious into learning to live with the modern sublime. Or indeed whether they will succeed in their brave aim of domesticating those spaces which have been infected by events and local myths. I fear their living room will merely exacerbate the all-too human wish for blind erasure by becoming part of the landscape they are trying to improve, simply through the incongruence of the attempt. Perhaps that is not so sad. After all, they say themselves that fear is good. At least these spaces speak of doom in a reasonably clear language. The possibility of violence is always real and it is good to accommodate that possibility in rhetorically similar spaces. In any case the act of domestication is at best two-faced. Domestication is an ambivalent form of evolutionary progress because it systematically chooses the more fragile complement in every binary opposition: man/woman,

wild/tame, rough/gentle etc and achieves an extraordinary docility of which the most resonant example, certainly within a Dutch context, is the tragedy of the large-uddered cow. The cow has sacrificed much to achieve its haven, even, paradoxically, the hope of a peaceful old age. The domestication of savage places will bear a monstrous fruit, perhaps even indifference.

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