henri lefebvre toward an architecture of enjoyment


Reporting on posthumous books is tricky since the author no longer has the chance to respond. But in the case of Henri Lefebvre’s Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment, published after Lukasz Stanek’s discovery of an unpublished manuscript of 1973 (he exposes the circumstances of such in an eloquent introduction, also providing information essential to the text’s contextualisation), the situation may be even trickier: the author might have replied himself, in later works, to the work under inspection. Is this the case? What is the relationship between La production de l’espace (1974) (The Production of Space) and this slightly older manuscript? Did the author revise the ideas presented in the former work, as the shift from a rather suggestive to a strongly programmatic title in the interval of just one year seems to suggest?

In my reading, rather than representing a mere template for the world-famous book on “production of space”, Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment earns distinct attention for two reasons. On the one hand, it is witness to Lefebvre’s fascination and involvement with architecture – even though in the book he deals with as varied issues as philosophy, anthropology, history, psychology, semantics and economics “of space”, before turning to architecture, which is ascribed the faculty to project the “space of enjoyment”. On the other hand, today it may help us to tackle – more effectively than its successor and, maybe, even its predecessors, from Le droit à la ville (The Right to the City) to La révolution urbaine (The urban revolution) – the discourses around a global reconfiguration of social relations that is perceived as necessary but still lacks creative, subversive impulses. What, if not an “architecture” – here, the term coincides with a project, a programme at global level that stands above the simple economic sphere and attains an essentially political meaning – of enjoyment, can subvert the present-day rhetoric of austerity (obviously apace with other necessary transformations that do not pertain to the sphere of influence of architecture, e.g. of work and everyday)?

Let us delve deeper into this: First of all, Lefebvre conceives of architecture as a practice that can “accommodate certain conditions of enjoyment and pleasure – rhythms, obstacles, tensions” (p. 79), although it and, more in general, “the production of space do not have enjoyment as their goal – they allow it, lead to it, prepare it” (p. 151). Obviously, not all of architectural practice makes room for these conditions; in fact, he comments on many “architectures” that prevent or even strangle enjoyment and pleasure. Moreover, it is useful to specify what is intended by “enjoyment”: “The concept … arises in medieval thought and the idea of the ‘fruitio’ (from fruitus) of an object, especially an object created for such use by nature … The term refers … to the relationship of need and even desire to the object, emphasizing the act rather than the result” (p. 61).

Enjoyment, used almost synonymously with pleasure, must be clearly distinguished from joy, as well as leisure, and implies – one would like to say, calls for – appropriation. Accordingly, as much as “critical analysis can only treat the architecture of leisure as a simulation of enjoyment within a framework that prohibits it, namely the control of those spaces by economic and political forces” (p. 100), just as clearly, a space of enjoyment is “one where use (as opposed to exchange) prevails” (p. 134). Here, far from hedonistic or merely aesthetic concepts of architecture and architectural practice, and in the identification of space with work, lies one of the book’s most important, and most needed, contributions to current debates. In Lefebvre’s own words: “Only an economy of enjoyment that replaces an exchange economy can end that which kills reality in the name of realism”.

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