A CRITICAL DICTIONARY OF DISTANCES

A Clausure Inventory

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What remains of friendship when we can no longer meet? How to make that physical distance that the pandemic imposed on us productive? This text was prepared in confinement as an exercise in collective, distant writing, raising a reflection on the type of city and life that arises from isolation. Because, after all, what is common when we are all in isolation?

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Essay

We are confused. Exhausted. Compressed in an extended present, crushed on it, immersed in a completely new spatial order yet already entirely known, strangely familiar. A place of multiple crises connected with violence and austerity that already existed – deathly – before the pandemic, which with precariousness, uncertainty and disorientation continue inexorably making bodies, spaces, and thoughts, in excess and disposable. A pandemic late neoliberal present seems to have deleted the materiality of bodies, replacing it by virtuality and continuous production of distances, just as the deadly power of the virus on bodies and its encumbrances leads us mercilessly back into a swampy living, exhausted and dying, losing that salvation which is substantially immanent in space itself.

Indeed, the pandemic world era is "a catastrophe in slow motion" according to Di Cesare (2020:23), a biopolitical event "precisely because it exposes the current

Catal Huyuc. La primera representación de una erupción volcánica, c. 6200 a.C. / *The earliest representation of a Volcanic Eruption, c.* 6200 B.C. Fuente / source: James Mellaart. *Catul Huyuk: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia.* McGraw-Hill, 1967.

state of the political order to which life is subjected." At the center of which are, to recall Arendt's formulation, the "oppressed and exploited": the bodies and flesh of a precarious humanity, immersed in an unlikely geography of distances and in a fragile genealogy of separations that shape and reshape what we consider urban. However, precisely because the pandemic is a biopolitical event, it "cannot be separated from the forms of solidarity caused by the continuous attempt to actualize human dignity" (Benjamin, 2020:2). In this tension, the approach developed by architecture and urbanism in the pandemic has been at most superficial, banal, and reductive: as simple backstage and natural setting of events and a new salvific *telos* of architecture, as a territory to experiment new measures, distances and codes, as rediscovering of wilderness, emptiness and separating nature from economy and culture and, not last, as theorization around the manifold versions of quarantine urbanism (Bianchetti, Boano, Di Campli, 2020).

Curiously enough, the V&A Museum in London has organized an initiative on its website: a virtual exhibition entitled *Pandemic Objects*, which collects and reflects on objects that have taken on a new meaning and purpose, a series of everyday 'objects' suddenly loaded with new urgencies and meanings. There are masks, windows, parks, streets, weather, roses, cafes, exercise books, TikTok, but not the city. It seems that the thought of and on the infrapandemic or syndemic city is absent, because it is flattened in the simplicity of seeing it adapted and adaptable to new standards and measures of self-atomization.

The absence of the city from the *Pandemic Objects* exhibition is certainly not serious as it should be. However it does point the necessity to reposition distances at the center, conceptually a 'pathology' as Díaz (2020) would have said, not to be diagnosed but as an optic, to look at and to critically contrast the often hyper-technological and techno-ecological futures that Di Cesare has called "secular and scientific modernity": where the body and distance are at the center of the urban question highlighting structural injustices and systemic paradoxes in the construction of space, in the way of inhabiting it, and in economic and social relations as well as in narratives that are both estranged and visionary.

What follows is an aesthetic and affective reflection that elaborates on the dichotomy and polarity between contagion and immunity or, rather, between the privilege of immunity and the risk of contagion. Born as a lockdown-writing exchange during March 2020, it wishes to reflect to what is central in the pandemic present – the distance – as a key feature in *post-mortem* city, imagining forms of life that combine 'fugitivity' and 'inhabitation.' Rather than reflecting on a simplified, quantified, numerical notion distances, it suggests alternative cues into the pandemic urban. Distances are interpreted as closure, as suspension and as form of topography, merging literatures and offering trajectories. More the critical dictionary that Bataille publishes between '29 and '30 as a supplement to *Documents* (Bataille, 1974), than a manual for a *post-mortem* city.

In Bataille's perspective, each part of the essay is thought of as a "war machine against ready-made ideas" (Leiris, 1963:68). These parts can be read continuously in one way or simply separate as the reader pleases, almost as individual pages on a worktable on which objects, such as words, are placed. They are like tools to resist the exhaustion and the silent complicatedness of architecture, not to reaffirm distances but to intensify the relationships that sustain them, to inhabit them.

Through different perspectives, merging philosophical, historical, and literary texts, that constituted crucial nodes for the architectural thoughts – and of the spaces connected to them – even before the pandemic, we have tried to think about what it might mean the urban project in the wake of the pandemic break. It is not a question of presenting answers but of using meaningful perspectives as tools to deconstruct paths already taken. In this sense, our intervention is proposed as a look that reflects on inhabitation and its initial Edenic condition, to then highlight what of Eden, however lost, can be recovered: the enchantment and joy of living together.

In a perspective that resists interpreting inhabitation into its best-known declinations – that of public and private space – an indeterminate way constituted by fugitivity is foreclosed. It is one in which forms of life can coexist with happiness, proposing lines of flight not as a renunciation of the urban, but as an infinite declination of it.

Inhabiting the enchantment

The map preserved in the frescoes of the Neolithic site of Çatal Höyük (VII-VI BC) in central-southern Turkey, represents such a non-city, with many roads and where the architectural delimitation between public and private spaces is blurred through a bird's eye view. However, this painting's purpose was not to accurately describe the town and offer a map to get one's bearings. The purpose was not what is usually attributed to a geographical or topographical map, to help the traveller and the wayfarer in bridging the distance, but to define the inhabitability of the place in relation to its sacredness. Not surprisingly, the painter painted the bulk of a volcano caught in full eruption right above this urban representation. This is the Hasan Dag, the volcano located at the eastern edge of the Konya plains and perfectly visible from Çatal Höyük.

The imposing crater is shown in profile so that the bird's eye perspective is interrupted here. This perspective change and the positions assigned to the two objects represented – the village below and the volcano above – help us grasping what inhabiting the world is for the Neolithic community of that place: the erupting volcanic cone does not threaten the inhabited area. Rather, it protects it, and this is what the perspective shift indicates, confirming the evocative power of the absence of perspective theorized by Pavel Florensky. The volcano is the door to that underworld, that underground world inhabited by the ancestors and the kingdom of the Great Goddess, mistress of animals, mistress of life and death, that divinity that the inhabitants of Çatal Höyük perceive in their homes, in the nearby woods, in spirits and dreams, in regenerating life.

A topography is always a search for the subtle texture that binds us and our existence to a place and is the main tool for Benjamin's 'loose masses,' such as the one in Neolithic communities. Living needs maps, topographies, and not geographies. Living needs a topography of enchantment, which allows the perception of that invisible that allows you to walk, live, and pass through it. As Rykwert (1981) reminds us in *Adam's House in Paradise*, the idea and memory of what we have been, how we lived, and how we built, has been at the center of the European architectural debate for centuries, conditioning the way we design and build architecture and cities.

In a well-known drawing in the *Treatise on Architecture*, Filarete represents Adam standing on a piece of land. The man, just expelled from Paradise, is hit by a shower of rain. With his hands he holds his head while his body produces a slight twist. The passage that glosses describes a man who tries to take shelter under the 'roof' of his hands. But it doesn't seem to be so. Adam seems overwhelmed by despair. His body shows both amazement and fear at the fact of finding himself in difficulty, perhaps for the first time. But in this very moment, Adam – and therefore the human being – discovers the art of building. Following the fall, "there is no doubt," Filarete writes, "that the building was found by man." For the Florentine architect, the man outside the garden finds himself "forced by necessity to live by eating" and "living was a job to defend himself from bad times and waters" (Filarete, 1972). Thus, man would learn to build to respond to his own needs, which are presented only outside the garden, In this way, living was nothing more than a '*mestiero*' (metier, craft, profession, n.d.a) to 'defend himself' from bad weather.

When the man was still in the garden near the Garden of Eden, before the fall, there were no jobs. Man lived naked, without a house in which to dwell, without a will of his own, without property, in harmony with other creatures. In this garden, where "all sorts of trees sprout from the ground" (Gen 2:9), needs, necessities, and self-preservation were not a problem. Having not yet eaten from the tree of good and evil, the man did not know shame, and his body did not blush.

This image of a heavenly dwelling, in which salvation is substantially immanent in space itself, is present in many

cultures besides the Judeo-Christian one and has found different forms and expressions like the Zoroastrian *House of Song*, the Sumerian *Dilmun* or the Greek *Age of Gold*. It is curious that these utopias, these places where man is inseparable from his happiness, are often thought of as inexperienced. Yet, for a long time, the Garden of Eden was represented in geographical maps, testifying it was thought of as a place on Earth. In fact, what separates man from Paradise, the Kingdom of Heaven, or the heavenly Jerusalem, what makes the *topos* a *u-topos*, a place without a place, are not distances, but temporalities. Therefore, it is not space or matter; rather, it is time.

Not 'where' but 'when'. In the common vulgate, Eden would find itself in a remote past that is now lost, while the Kingdom of Heaven would seem to exist only in the future 'not yet.' Thus, we are living an intermediate time between the remorse of a past now lost and the expectation of a future. As many thinkers maintain, this temporal fracture – which involves any Western form of thought that places salvation outside the present time – shifts human happiness at the polar edges of the fracture, thus harnessing the bodies in a *teleocratic* government, in an *oikonomia* of salvation.

But this seemingly metaphysical, temporal fracture, does not only remain in the world of ideas. It is not merely an abstraction but involves both space and matter. Space, like bodies, finds itself lacerated by time, torn apart by a structure of 'temporalities' that stiffen it, fragment it. This spatial schizachrony, this suspension of living polarized between guilt and expectation, crosses the streets, producing lines, walls, paths, fences, shelters and borders. An uninhabitable dimension of time that today turns to urban space, with the difference that what is at stake is no longer the salvation of the soul, but, above all, the survival of the body.

Suspend, loosen, distance

According to Hanna Arendt, the ancient Greeks originated the *polis* and thus politics to emancipate themselves from the state of necessity and biological ties.

> "The polis was distinct from the domestic sphere in that it was based on the equality of all citizens, whereas family life was the centre of the strictest inequality because the means to respond to needs were 'force and violence'. Private space was therefore an insecure space, while the domain of the polis, on the contrary, was the sphere of freedom, a freedom that resided exclusively in the political sphere [being] the essential condition of what the Greeks called happiness, *eudaimonia*" (Arendt, 2017:60-62).

Today, without too much hesitation, it can be said that the situation is completely reversed. Looking at urban realities through the lens of *Vita activa*, it would not be wrong to say that public space has indeed failed to guarantee security and freedom. On the contrary, private space, invested by an unprecedented infrastructural development, has been able to separate itself and at the

Antonio Averlino Filarete. Adán en Vitruvio, sobre los orígenes de la arquitectura / *Adam in Vitruvius, on the origins of architecture,* *C*. 1465. Public domain

same time connect with the world, becoming the only space able to guarantee the 'life' of citizens.

"How does architecture become an active part of this form of community which, by preventing friendship, leads to the destruction of every community?", Abensour (2012) asks and asks us at the end of his volume *On compactness*. Today we know that monumentality is not only a formal principle but, above all, relational. We know that the same places, the same spaces, the same objects that had their own meaning until the day before, can suddenly acquire another one. We know that, if charged with a certain legal and emotional intensity, these entities can become uninhabitable. If it is true that enmity is what still drives social dynamics today, producing toxic neighbourhoods and abnormal emotional distances, hatreds, and individualisms, if it is what 'destroys ties' by building unbridgeable distances, it is always worth asking oneself about the resonance of these questions today, perhaps to try to overturn them.

In a note in the second edition of *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility*, Benjamin (2012) proposes the existence of two types of mass: the 'compact' mass and the 'loose' mass. According to the more generic definition offered by the vocabularies, 'mass' is a social multitude; it is a set of people who present, or are forced to, assume similar behaviors. The adjectives that Benjamin adds to the word 'mass' speak precisely of what 'pushes' it to adopt the behaviors that characterize it. While the compact mass, "always carries with it a panic aspect – whether they express themselves with war enthusiasm, with hatred of Jews, or with the instinct of self-preservation," and therefore is built on fear, the loose mass (which Benjamin identifies as the only one capable

of expressing revolutionary power) builds bonds based on solidarity. The compact mass moves by reaction, while the loose mass "stops being under the dominion of mere reactions; take action" (Benjamin, 2012:73).

The literal meaning of the two terms seems to suggest that the distances between the components of the 'loose mass' are much greater than in the 'compact mass.' However, we must think that the opposite happens since it is not the spatial measure of these distances that matters, but their quality. In fact, if fear tends to unite singularities through 'pressures,' to achieve clear objectives (which in most cases arise from the continuous identification of the enemy), solidarity loosens these pressures in the mass, relaxes the bonds that thus they pour into mutual disinterested care. The loose mass has no purpose. It generates relationships that must constantly be kept alive, cared for, desired, inhabited. In this sense, it is precisely the void, the distance that exists between the parts that make up the loose mass, that becomes the place of all the 'revolutionary' power of friendship.

If the compact mass is distant from the world and cannot in any way inhabit it, because by crushing itself on the most visceral needs, on bare life, it renounces any form of relationship with them, how can we imagine a loose mass that is capable of relating to the world? How can we think of an architecture of friendship? What topography for a new way of living?

Clausure and sacralization of life

The line of continuity that combines life in the metropolis, sleepless neoliberalism, the relentless exploitation of territorial resources, and the pandemic's triggering has already been drawn and retraced several times. Like a commodity product, in a suspended and tight time, words always come out again but without any load of novelty. Imagining the pandemic itself as a device that interrupts, separates, distinguishes spaces, such as behaviors, helps to follow this line, to see where it leads. In other words, if at its end (the spatial boundary of the *termen* and its ultimate limit), it is still a politically qualified life, a life worth living. That the device at stake is biopolitical is out of the question. It is not only that the government security measures are exceptional in view of the ethical-political consequences they cause. Also, "the disparity between protected and defenseless [...] has never been so striking and brazen as in the crisis caused by the COVID-19" (Di Cesare, 2020:31). Because although the poor, together with the 'non-essential' workers, are the real excluded from the world productive machine, there is still no separation and distance that is not actualized through the bodies (Foucault, 1996:123).

The effect of action over reality, which postmodernism had already revealed precarious, exploded in its illusory potential during the pandemic phase. No active procedure has been able to stop anything, and the suspension between non-activity and activity has become a spatialized time, a waiting lapse charged with impotence. The 24/7 rhythm we were used to, was in fact "the announcement of a time without becoming, subtracted from any concrete

or recognizable delimitation, a time without sequential or recurring rhythm; [...] Celebration of a hallucinated present, of an unalterable permanence made up of incessant operations, without friction" (Crary, 2015:33).

If the studies on efficacy are not wrong, we must move away from the event to reach the city that will come after the pandemic. Without predetermining or designing it, we must occupy the time of impotence and think of transforming the flow in which we are irreparably inserted, explaining and evaluating it. Only in this way, the friction with reality will be turned into a potentiality. From this point of view, a reference to the cloister – characterized by separation and distance – will perhaps allow an understanding of these terms which, specific to our time, can regain meaning through a shifted investigation.

Life or, better, the monastic choice, is not characterized by separation from the world, but coincides with separation itself. It is not by chance that enclosure takes on the very meaning of a way of life defined because of its being 'withdrawn.' In the male enclosure, the *claustra* aim at preserving the internal space of the monastery to prevent the stranger from entering. In the female enclosure, access is controlled and exit is prevented to protect a life sanctified precisely through the distance with the mundane life. By denying access, the enclosure forbids human proximity. The space created between bodies – of the world and in seclusion, profane and sacred – is full of embarrassment. But, from another perspective, it satisfies the most perfect proximity: the exclusive proximity with God.

Returning to the present, we can therefore wonder: what kind of proximity our isolated lives access in the *unités d'habitation*, the Corbuserian building inspired by monastic culture and one of the greatest expressions of the modern movement? What kind of sacredness do they acquire when they take shelter from the outside through separation? In other words, recalling the meaning of the verb 'to enclose' – before the action breaks through again into the flow of suspended reality – it perhaps makes sense to ask ourselves, what life "ends" in the actual enclosure?

Fugitivity and living as a resistance

The exhibition organized by the V&A Museum in London on its website, attempting a pandemic inventory, a sort of *ultima Thule* of objects, seems to diagnose the end of the city as a shareable space just made of usable objects decontextualized, subtracted by their own space. Achille Mbembe returns this in a strong image, underlining how the pandemic has made us experience that "there is no humanity without bodies" and that it can never "free itself by itself, [...] and freedom will never be at the expense of biosphere" (Mbembe, 2020). To think of the city perhaps means to think of it short-sighted, with multiple lines of flight and therefore, to think of other, different relations to the 'scene of awe,' borrowing Saidiya Hartman's phrase (1997:275) as an operational force that precedes and surpasses this scene. The impossibility of thinking about the pandemic city and its effects (a turning point could be what Harriet Jacobs called "a retreat loophole"), is a condition of possibility to make visible and recover

practices long hidden in plain sight and, therefore, to both value and defend life. Escape, or better in Fred Moten's terms, "fugitivity," is a desire to be outside, an outlawed edge that is always already improper.

Beyond the intentions of those who speak and write, fugitivity comes out of one's adherence to the law and correctness. The 'spirit of escape' that defines fugitivity is an openness to a kind of collectivity that, imbued with immeasurable differences, can be found in what Harney and Moten (2013:123) call 'undercommons.' It is a radical reinterpretation of the traditional concept of commons which owes of the black radical tradition and not bound to physical space. Moving between the public and the private, the concept of 'undercommons' describes an orientation towards a fugitive sensibility that is intrinsically collective. The recognition that the structures we inherit from oppression and the pandemic are irreparably broken defines the undercommons. It describes a space in which the flesh reaches out to find more flesh, establishing a social relationship defined by the inability to be appeased. It is a space of polyphony and noise, one that moves towards an understanding of subjectivity based on a collective relationship. Developing this notion in relation to contemporary university, Harney and Moten (2013:125) describe a radical mode of being in common that could exist within, and yet work against, structures that dictate what they refer to as "the call to order."

The undercommon is a space of refusal where rejection is always directed towards fugitive actions or modalities. The undercommons is a space for the realization of a perspective of escape. It is a zone of indetermination between the individual and the collective, the public and the private. It is a current escape route in which to rearticulate the present by recovering the enchantment of that garden which is now lost but not for this reason inexhaustible. Indeed, Harney (2013:112) tells us that "the undercommons is a kind of ongoing behaviour or experiment with and as a general antagonism, a kind of way of being with others." That is, it refers to the unbridled production of difference that moves beyond agreements or, as Moten (2013:132) writes, it is "a rally in the breaking of all those already broken voices," organized by the desire to "completely demolish this shit and build something new."

Perhaps then, in a situation of pandemic decay, designing does not mean reimagining a *post-mortem* city, but rethinking living starting from the forms of life that meet in a commune in which 'fugitivity' and 'dwelling' coexist and resist. It is a question of thinking the new urban post pandemic as fugitivity, as a 'project of care,' in which "not reasoning, but memory – remembering oneself and our being in the world – can give us back access to a cosmos free of fear" (Agamben, 2020). This will allow us to experience today, here and now, what has not been. As Benjamin (2000:528) states in a fragment, "history is not only a science, but also and no less a form of remembering. What science has 'established' can be modified by memory. Memory can make the unfinished (happiness) into the completed and the completed (pain) into the unfinished." **ARQ**

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