

# Tabula Non Rasa. Toward a Performative Contextualism

Ilka & Andreas Ruby in Conversation with Jean-Philippe Vassal

You once defined your architectural creed as “never demolish, always change, add, reprogram.” Interestingly enough for an architect, this position excludes the notion of building anew, which is what most architects would probably see as the essence of their discipline. Why don’t you?

I really think that building anew represents only a small share of architecture and not its essence. Essentially architecture is adding things to something existing. Even if you build an entirely new building, you ultimately add on to a preexisting organization of space – be it houses in the neighborhood, a city quarter, a group of trees or a landscape. And I think that an addition can become meaningful when we analyze this *proto-condition* of architecture sincerely, in order to determine what it might lack – for only this should be added. Emilio Ambasz once said that if nature were perfect, we would not need houses. Following this logic, here I would throw in the idea that architecture should only add to reality what it lacks in perfection.

But how do you define the *existing*? In the contextualism of the 1980s, the existing was understood as the built heritage of the city. This often led to Postmodernist pastiches of history, a mimicry of existing building configurations devoid of any creative surplus: architecture had become a kind of pre-emptive conservatism. It failed to produce a vital city just as much as the *tabula rasa* thinking of Modernism which contextualism

had sought to overcome once and for all. How do you avoid this pitfall of contextualism?

By identifying those elements, forces, and energies which are genuinely determining the spatial performance of a given situation. And for us, this is very often not architecture, but the activities that take place in or around it, thanks to or despite architecture. The famous square Djemaa El-Fnaa in Marrakesh provides the perfect example. It is one of the most exciting urban spaces I know, but its quality would be inconceivable if you look at it from a purely western-European point of view. The square is essentially a big open space only vaguely defined by a perimeter of fairly non-descript buildings. The urban quality of Djemaa El-Fnaa is not derived from its architecture, but from the ever-changing sequence of events that take place here in the course of a day: in the morning, it is completely flooded with cars driving over it in all directions. After a while, an acrobat, poet or musician sets up a stage in the middle of the bustling traffic and begins a performance. Within moments a circle of passers-by forms to watch him. Soon thereafter, another acrobat joins him. In this way, the square is gradually filled with performers and spectators until it seems to consist entirely of circles of people around which the traffic must weave absurd routes. Later on the square will be transformed into a huge market, and, in the evening, it will be covered by a myriad of fast-food stands. The place is whatever takes place on it.

When we designed Palais de Tokyo in Paris, we basically started out with Djemaa El-Fnaa as a conceptual model.

This leads us to Cedric Price and his definition of architecture as an *enabler*, which poses the question of solid and void, and to what degree they contribute to shaping the space of the city.

Yes, it’s a question of priorities. Ultimately architecture is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The meaning of the walls of a house does not reside in the walls themselves, but in the space they define – because you can do something within space, but not within walls. I think there are architects of the solid, who believe that architecture is an absolute value in itself, and architects of the void, for whom the value of architecture lies in what architecture allows to happen though and beyond its own material body. We (Anne Lacaton and myself) tend to be members of the latter species.

How can you practice such an architecture of the void given that architects are mostly asked (and paid) to make solids?

By first and always scrutinizing every commission whether its task makes sense and is necessary. One should never take this for granted. And architects should not automatically build something only because someone has asked them to do so; otherwise, they turn into pure service men. We were once asked by the city government of Bordeaux to do a project in the context of a public space program called *Embellishment of Places*. The



politicians had identified forty or so squares in Bordeaux which they thought needed embellishment. We were given a small triangular square near the main railway station called Place Léon Aucoc, a square like any other in France, certainly not spectacular, but charming in its modesty. When we came to see it, we were puzzled. For us, it was already beautiful the way it was. We could see neither how nor why we should *embellish* it. In order to devise a meaningful intervention, we carefully started to study it. We analyzed the architecture of the surrounding houses, the surface materials and urban furnishings of the square, the organization of traffic, and also interviewed the inhabitants. In the end, we found only minor misfits, none of which would have been *solved* by an architectural project. Instead we drew up a catalogue of maintenance measures which were strikingly obvious and yet, completely neglected, including regularly

Fig. 1: Place Leon Aucoc, Bordeaux, 1996 . Before and after the intervention.