

## **Signs, Images and Life: Researching the Mimetical Mode of Architecture**

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### **Abstract**

The paper gives a theoretical argument as to the specificity of architecture as a field that touches upon very different modes of signification or modalities of knowledge: scientific knowledge (signs), artistic inputs (images) and interactive processes (life). It will argue that these different aspects are inextricably entwined in any phenomenon of architecture that is studied in its full width and depth. Most research strategies in architecture legitimately focus on certain aspects – e.g. historical analysis, or technical investigations, or inquiries into design methodology. It is our intention, however, to reflect upon the possibility of an encompassing research strategy, which aims at coming to terms with the specificity of architecture. This means that we intend to develop a strategy which deals with architecture's different modalities of knowledge or modes of signification. Examples are given of themes and issues that have been studied following the proposed strategy.

### **1. Architecture as the object of investigation and reflection**

Architecture - it has been known for quite some time - is neither a real science nor a real art. Architecture is not simply a theory but it is neither to be reduced to a purely practical knowledge about how to build buildings. There exists a very long tradition of reflexivity and critique in architecture. The history of architectural writing is - from Vitruvius to Tzonis one could say - full with claims of scientificity. Nevertheless this claim has never been granted completely. Architecture has proven to be too slippery a thing to fit without problems in the rigid systems of science. And even within the humanities it is not quite clear where the study of architecture belongs.

The reason for architecture's resistance to categorization might be that the object of architecture, its 'essence' so to say, is not easily identifiable. One can indeed discuss endlessly about the exact meaning of the word, whether, e.g., we understand architecture to refer to the whole of the built environment or just to a very specific part of it that is informed by some reflexive theory. And even if it would be possible to agree on this topic, then the fact remains that the study of architecture requires an initiation in so many different fields and disciplines that the exact focus on an autonomous reality called 'architecture' anyhow becomes blurred. Nevertheless there is much to say on behalf of the hypothesis that architecture constitutes a very rich semantic and scientific field, and that disciplinary thought and epistemological debate as well in science as in the

humanities can gain enormously from an intensive confrontation with architecture, especially with the ways architecture manages to intertwine different modalities of knowledge or modes of signification.

As one argument in favour of this hypothesis, we want to refer to a book by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, on the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. In a passage which is severely indebted to Walter Benjamin, Adorno and Horkheimer explain how during the course of history the character of language underwent radical change. Originally, they claim, sign and image formed a unity in language, as can be seen from Egyptian hieroglyphs in which signification is the result of the merging of abstract reference in a sign and imitation in an image. This original unity dissolved and both modes of signification/modalities of knowledge, sign and image, developed separately. The sign became decisive for the development of language as denotation - in science and scholarship that is - whereas the realm of the image has been reduced to that of art and literature:

*"For science the word is a sign: as sound, image, and word proper it is distributed among the different arts, and is not permitted to reconstitute itself by their addition, by synesthesia, or in the composition of the Gesamtkunstwerk. As a system of signs, language is required to resign itself to calculation in order to know nature, and must discard the claim to be like her. As image, it is required to resign itself to mirror-imagery in order to be nature entire, and must discard the claim to know her."*<sup>ii</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno do see the divorce between sign and image as a disastrous development, because reason in the fullest meaning of the word cannot be reduced to pure calculation: in that case it degenerates into a purely instrumental rationality, with the irrational consequences that follow. The same goes for the image: when the image becomes pure depiction and is no longer governed by a rational impulse, it is also inadequate and cannot bring about any genuine knowledge of reality.

*"The separation of sign and image is irremediable. Should unconscious self-satisfaction cause it once again to become hypostatized, then each of the two isolated principles tends toward the destruction of truth."*<sup>iii</sup>

Nevertheless, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, it is possible and necessary both in art and in philosophy to confront this fissure between sign and image, and to attempt to bridge the gap. Philosophy operates at a conceptual level, the level of the sign, whereas art works at the level of aesthetic appearances, that of the image. Inasmuch as art and philosophy both aspire to provide knowledge of truth however, they may not hypostatize their own form of knowledge as absolute: philosophy cannot only operate with concepts, while art is obliged to be something more than pure depiction, more than just a reproduction of what exists.

What Adorno and Horkheimer state here about the relationship between sign and image in philosophy and art, should be understood as instructive for the relationship between scientific thinking and architecture as well. Architecture is, more than any art, the place

where an artistic input is controlled by all sorts of rationalities. At the same time it is a discipline where rationality alone can never completely explain the results of the design process, nor the way people actually use their buildings and relate to them, unless it denies the artistic and poetic dimensions involved. In fact, the process character of design and of the interaction between people and buildings create a relationship between sign and image in which another modality of knowledge or mode of signification is at stake – we can call this the modality of mimesis.

Mimesis is a term that is not yet active in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but that is given prominence in Adorno's later work, especially in his *Aesthetic Theory*. In this book he refers to 'mimesis' as a kind of affinity between things and persons, which is not based on rational knowledge and which exceeds the mere antithesis between subject and object. According to Adorno, art characteristically endeavours to create a dialectical relation between both moments of cognition (modalities of knowledge, modes of signification), 'mimesis' and 'ratio': a work of art comes into being not only on the basis of a mimetic impulse, but requires also a lot of rationality and thought on behalf of the artist. Ratio and mimesis however, are in an antithetical and paradoxical relation opposed to each other: the two moments of cognition cannot simply complementarily or easily be reconciled with each other.

What is important in this idea about mimesis can be resumed under two headings. First of all mimesis has to do with a process of translation, a process of mediation. Mimesis is what is responsible for the very possibility to recognize similarities and to transfer meanings from one language to another. Characteristic for this process of translation that we call mimesis is that it is never completely transparent. There is always something happening, a shift appears, there is some gain or loss of meaning, something that is being twisted. Secondly it might be stated that mimesis can fulfil a critical role. Adorno more specifically relates the critical character of art to its mimetical aspect. Adorno is convinced that works of art on the basis of a combination of ratio and mimesis yield a kind of knowledge of reality, and that this knowledge is critical by nature: art, by its mimetical relation to reality, highlights something about the real nature of that reality, thus criticizing it at the same time. For not the beautiful, the harmonious, the charming will lighten up, but on the contrary, art through mimesis will reveal what is repressed, what is dissonant, chaotic or inhuman. Art in this way visualizes the torn nature of our reality. In as much as the shifting that is the result of mimesis reveals something which hitherto had been repressed or concealed, it is a shifting that acts in a critical way towards the existing situation.

Returning to Horkheimer's and Adorno's diagnosis regarding sign and image in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is clear that they see both as reductions of the correlative capacities of rationality and mimesis: sign refers to an instrumental rationality that has lost its capacity of critique; image refers to an impoverished mode of mimesis, which is reduced to the most literal level of imitation. The concept of mimesis also includes a performative aspect: mimesis has to do with a process of translation, a transfer of meaning, in which something happens that is never completely transparent.

### Three registers and three tracks

Reflecting upon this diagnosis of Horkheimer and Adorno, we developed a working hypothesis that generates a certain research strategy and that is at the same time tested by that strategy. The working hypothesis is that in order to understand architecture in its full width and depth, one doesn't need just two terms or registers, but rather three. The word register comprises here what earlier in the text has been called modalities of knowledge or modes of signification. If, in the terminology of Horkheimer and Adorno, **sign** stands for instrumental rationality, for systematic analysis, for calculation, for denotation and coding (to borrow terms from semiology); if **image** stands for pure depiction, for reproduction of what exists, for representation without presentation, for mirror imagery, both words imply a certain immobility, a frozen state, where concepts and meanings are fixed and do not change anymore. In order to grasp the possibility of change and transformation, one has to take into account a process term, referring to interactive practices that forge an ongoing process of signification that is mobile, shifting and generative. It is thanks to this third term that the other two can be brought in interaction with one another.

For lack of any better word, we provisionally use the word **life** as the third term or register: life refers here to vital forces which ensure that the bleak realities of sign and image are sometimes forced into a condition where they need to interact with one another, thus giving rise to new and critical meanings. If these forces are taken into account, the possibility emerges that, in the interplay of the three registers of sign, image and life, sign is no longer necessarily reduced to instrumental rationality, but lives up to its vocation of critical rationality, whereas image is no longer confined to the literal realm of mirror imagery, but becomes mimesis and can play out its critical intent too. The processes and practices we refer to have to do with the emergence of something new and unexpected, with formation, with performance (acting out), with coincidences, sometimes with a system of self-regulation. It seems to us that they are provoked by a condition of lack: if something is missing, if there is a semantic void, if there is a condition of displacement, if a strong desire wakes up, the forces of life begin to claim prominence because the normally prevailing modes of signification/modalities of knowledge – signs and images - fall short.<sup>iii</sup> In a nutshell its sounds like this: life, process, practice fuelled by conditions of semantic void, displacement, desire manages to bring sign and image into a dialectic tension whereby possibilities of critical rati<sup>o</sup>n and critical mimesis originate.

In order to address the complexities that follow from architecture's involvement with these different modes of signification/modalities of knowledge, we have identified three tracks along which research can be organized each corresponding to different media of architectural expression or experience. (Not every research project necessarily comprises investigations along these three tracks and into these three media. The theoretical model we formulate here can support different actualisations of the model which can have a fairly different outlook when put into practice.)

One can indeed not simply subdivide architectural phenomena into their constitutive aspects of signs, images and life. A more subtle approach is needed, one in which different research tracks concentrate on different media that each comprise a different embodiment of the three modes/modalities of sign, image and life. By differentiating between the media in which architectural knowledge plays out, one can work with the three tracks of ‘built forms, texts and actions’. These three different media embody the register of signs, images and life in different doses, and can be studied according to different methodologies.

**Built form** refers to spatial constellations with a specific history and an underlying (morpho-typological) logic. This underlying logic tends to be more mimetical than rational: it is a logic that has to do with transformations, similarities and correspondences. It is based upon processes of analogy and metaphorical transposition. As such it relies more upon the register of images than upon those of signs or life. The preferred methods to study this medium are morpho-typological analysis, historical analysis, iconography, and the like. Of course built forms correspond also to different registers of sign and rationality. They comprise the facts and figures content of each building.

The second medium is that of **texts**. Built form usually does not emerge out of the blue, but is immersed in the architectural and urban discourses that were imminent at the time of its conception. Studying the **formal texts** (prevalent theories and ongoing discussions) that concern a specific building or an urban neighbourhood, is therefore part of the second track in the research strategy. Here the analysis is mainly focusing on rational elements as they are spelled out in theoretical texts or argumentative discourses. The register of signs is most prominently present in this medium, whereas image and life tend to take second and third place. Under the heading of texts we also study **informal speech**, as for instance when we interview inhabitants or users. In this informal speech life is very actively present, with all the inconsistencies it implies. Such a speech often has image-like qualities, whereas the purely rational level of signs takes on a less prominent role. Discourse analysis is the method that is mostly applied within this track.

The third track comprises the level of **actions**, which is the heading under which we assemble design and implementation processes but also different modes of social interaction with buildings and spaces. One can discern a formal level of action (as e.g. in case a building is designed, realized or used in complete accordance with its official programme and requirements). In such a case, action is mostly based upon the register of signs, whereas life and images take on secondary roles. Sometimes, however, one can perceive another, more dynamic kind of action, which consists of a sort of ‘bricolage’ (Lévi-Strauss) whereby new concepts and solutions originate out of an unexpected interplay of available concepts and solutions or whereby improvisation of use leads to a reinterpretation of what is usable. This applies e.g. in those cases where buildings and spaces provoke uses and interactions which are not consistent with their official functions or intentions (e.g. when spontaneous demonstrations take place on streets normally forbidden for pedestrians). In such cases the mimetical register of the image is often at play, life taking on a secondary role and signs being of minor importance. The analytical skills required to work on this track are not always obvious. Sometimes it requires the

input of fieldwork skills that come more naturally to anthropologists or sociologists than to architects.

The idea that we want to put forward is that a research that is organized along these three tracks, can come up with an understanding of its object that grasps something of the specificity of its qualities as architecture – namely the interplay between different modes of signification/modalities of knowledge. This aim can be reached by confronting the results of different analytical methods – addressing different combinations of signs, images and life – with one another. If it works out well, one can develop out of such a confrontation an understanding which goes beyond the results obtained through the separate analytical methods. To show the potentials of such an approach, we will briefly discuss two cases that work according to these principles.

The first – an analysis of Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish museum – investigates how signs and images fold into one another in a design process that is regulated by a condition of a semantic void (the absence of the Jewish culture). In this case, ‘life’ can be seen as the catalyst of the design process, provoked by this condition of void. ‘Life’ is also present in the case because the tactile experience of going through the building takes a prominent place in the analysis. The outcome of this interplay of signs, images and life (process, experience) is an architecture where an outspoken critical mimetical dimension is at stake.

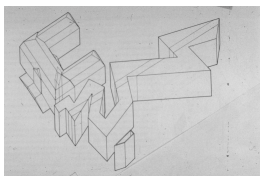
The second case is part of an extensive study of three environments in Kabylia, Algeria – a traditional village, a colonial town and a new spatial constellation consisting of seven conglomerating villages along a road. Here signs and images of modernity and tradition, of the urban and the rural are being fold into one another by everyday practices. Something new – another village, another town – emerges because of a condition of displacement (returning migrant workers who no longer can live within the traditional village and who bring along the signs of Western consumption practices) that provokes a continuous ‘bricolage’ with an uncertain outcome in an environment that resists to all planning attempts.

An example of mimesis as critique: Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum<sup>iv</sup>

This analysis is part of the line of argumentation developed in Hilde Heynen’s book *Architecture and Modernity. A Critique*. The intention of this book is to come to terms with the question of architecture and modernity. Architectural historians and cultural philosophers have formulated many different positions with respect to the question what architecture is supposed to be and how it should relate to societal conditions brought about by modernity. The book aims to clarify the most important of these positions, by focusing on texts and arguments of authors such as Sigfried Giedion or Walter Benjamin. The book moreover develops a critical position of its own by confronting the theoretical

arguments of these authors with architectural case studies that are analyzed according to a mimetical logic.

A project in which mimesis is clearly at work is Libeskind's design for the extension of the Berlin Museum with the Jewish Museum.<sup>v</sup> The aim of the design is to give form to the broken relation between German and Jewish culture. This relation is anything but unambiguous and it is therefore not simple to represent it in a building. Libeskind's project succeeds in expressing the different aspects of this relation: the mutual ties that persist and proliferate underground, the ineluctable catastrophe of the Holocaust, the cautious hope that a new openness can develop. It is the result of a mimetic process that uses various themes as raw material in order to bring about a work in which the tension between the different parts is increased to the point of climax.



The architect calls this project 'Between the lines'. He is referring to two structural lines that are also two lines of thinking: one is a straight line but broken into many fragments, the other is tortuous but continues indefinitely. Both lines engage in a dialogue with each other only to separate again. Their mutual relationship delineates the basic structure of the building. This consists of a zigzag volume transected by a number of voids. These voids are five stories high and they form an interrupted straight line. As he follows the zigzag pattern through the museum as dictated by the layout of the building, the visitor is repeatedly confronted by these voids, that are nowhere accessible and which seem to be senseless. The flowing movement of the routing breaks down as a result. The character of the space changes at the places where the voids are spanned: the high spacious galleries turn here into narrow low-ceilinged bridges from which one can glimpse the cold gloomy depths of the voids.



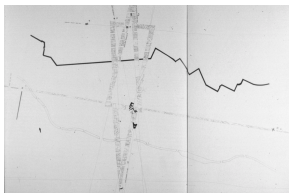
The zigzag-shaped building has no entrance on the outside. It has the appearance of an enigmatic and impenetrable volume. Visitors to the building have to enter it through the old entrance in the main building, which provides a link to the new complex through the basements. To this end an incision has been cut in the main building that is a mirror image of one of the voids in the new complex. This mirror relationship, while it cannot be seen by the unsuspecting visitor, nevertheless forms an active presence, evoking the fatal mutual involvement of German and Jewish culture.

The underground level of the new building contains the areas reserved for the museum's own Jewish collection. The whole is organized on three axes. One axis forms the link with the main stair that leads to the exhibition rooms on the upper stories. A second axis is oriented on a free-standing tower-shaped object



that, like the incision in the main building, is a 'voided void' - echoes as it were of the voids that form the straight line that intersects the zigzag-shaped building. While the first void refers to the absence of Jews in Berlin, an absence that is decisive for the identity of the city, this voided void that is white and open to the sky, refers to the streams of energy and creative potential that was nipped in the bud with the annihilation of so many people. Finally there is a third axis in the basement that leads to the 'garden of E.T.A. Hoffmann'. This consists of a wood of concrete columns at right angles to the sloping ground. A ramp that winds round this square-shaped garden gives access to street level.

Despite the fact that its lay-out is far from self-evident, the new museum is a very effective response to the existing urban situation. The slightly protruding facade on the Lindenstrasse accentuates the curve in the street at this point. The front facade of the new extension is extremely narrow here, but it is still clearly present. This suggests that the building is subordinate to the old Berlin Museum, a suggestion that is straightway contradicted once one gets the chance to size up the full scope of the new extension. Between the old building and the zigzag shape of the new one a narrow alley leading to a courtyard, the Paul Celan Hof, is created that fits in with the Berlin tradition of *Gassen* and *Hinterhöfer*. More towards the rear of the building the high broad volumes forming the last sections of the zigzag are arranged as spatially defining elements for the public gardens situated on both sides of the entire complex. The volumes have an effect that fits in excellently with the rich contrast of architectures in the neighborhood.<sup>vi</sup>



The David's star that Libeskind states as his starting point for the design is a revealing drawing. It is not only of the addresses of the people named in it that give the matrix its form, but also the contours of the *Landwehrkanal* and the trajectory of the Wall. The latter figures comprise as it were the horizontal supports of the drawing, while the outline of the star is formed by a section cut out of the map of Berlin. By combining this selection of graphic elements a pattern is created that makes the lay-out of the new building if not totally clear at least plausible. One recognizes that important components of the history of Berlin are crystallized in the zigzag form of the new extension: the classical pattern of the Friedrichstadt with its rectangular pattern of streets and geometrical squares, the flowing lines of the canal, the broken and shameless line of the Wall, all this is echoed in compressed fashion in the discontinuous shape of the new museum. Unlike a classical site layout plan, what is involved here is not any rational explanation based on the morpho-typological qualities of the new building. Instead the aim is rather to show how different aspects of Berlin as it exists today - both visible and invisible - mimetically converge in a new cutting that is grafted onto this organism. This drawing expresses the inner relationship - the *Wahlverwandtschaft* or elective affinity, if you like - between a constellation of existing structural elements and the additional urban figure.

In his text 'Between the lines' Libeskind suggests that the Moses and Aaron theme has to do with the intertwining of the two lines that gives the building its shape. Schönberg's opera is incomplete: the second act ends with Moses alone on the stage, expressing his dismay at the breakdown of his relationship with Aaron and consequently with the people of Israel as a whole. Aaron wants to communicate with the people and to lead them to the promised land, whereas Moses is unable to convey what God revealed to him with an image through which he could reach the people. "Oh word, thou word, that I lack!" - these are the final words of the opera. Moses knows the truth, God has revealed it to him but he is unable to convey the contents of this revelation. His truth does exist, it is unequivocal and consistent, but it cannot be translated, it is incommunicable. The only way he can deal with this truth is through silence, an absence of words, through the void. By contrast his brother Aaron is associated with the tortuous line of history. Aaron cuts a path for himself around the truth, seeing himself confronted repeatedly with an abyss that he does not dare to enter. The musical content of this unfinished opera has thus to do with the eternal and insoluble conflict between words and music, law (in this case the unspeakable sign) and image, revelation and communication. This content is translated mimetically in the architectural form of the building through the interplay of the lines, a translation that acquires shape and content in the design process itself. The mimetical dimension opened by the process and the architectural result is a critical one in the sense that it enacts an unspeakable and often repressed truth.

Another theme refers to a list of names, names in which history is petrified. They are no abstract numbers but signs of individuals who can be traced through their names and their place and date of birth. The paradoxical presence of those who are absent that underlies the Gedenkbuch is taken up in the complex interplay of voids and galleries in the building. Here too what is involved is to make visible what is invisible, to make one feel that which has been repressed. The Holocaust is a black hole in history, a hole that swallows up all rhetoric of progress, but which is invisible to the naked eye. This invisibility is transformed here into an experience that is incomprehensible and yet ineluctable. The visitor will be subjected physically to the confrontation through a series of spatial experiences that can leave few people unmoved: the entrance via the old building and the underground passages; the sloping basement with its complex axes; the endless stair to the upper floors; the sense of disorientation induced by the zigzag shape; the repeated crossing of the voids. These insistent experiences are reminiscent of the unthinkable events that are interwoven into the identity of our present culture.

This is how Libeskind's design for the extension of the Berlin Museum can be understood. There is a quality of endless resonance inherent to the mimetic operations on which both the design process and the experience of the building are based. Mimesis raises the question of repressed aspects - those aspects that cannot be contained either in a clear-cut logic or in an all encompassing image and which do not lend themselves to a definite meaning. The mimetical operations of design and experience create transgressions between different registers of knowledge and signification: speakable signs (the rational organisation of an urban plot, the museum programme, the collection ...) and unspeakable ones (the register of names, the historical facts, the real object of display ...) interact with suggestive images and more distant imaginative analogies (the Berlin addresses, the David's star, the Wall, built voids and mirroring voids, the straight

and zigzag lines, Mozes and Aaron ...). The transitions and interactions are rarely unambiguous. To the degree that mimesis ‘works’, a signifying process is generated that has no end. According to Adorno the mimetic impulse is rooted in a gesture of negativity that does not have any positive ultimate goal: a final salvation, a full recover, in the case of Libeskind’s museum an harmonious “Wiedergutmachung”. It is this negativity, this ever vacant semantic void, that is responsible for the never-ending of the chain of signifying. Mimesis does not render any positive image of reality, let alone a positive image of what a utopian, ideal reality might be. The broken lines of the design testify to a broken reality. They do not succeed in achieving a synthesis, because reality does not lend itself to be conceived as healed and complete. Mimesis rather produces negative images and art is then par excellence the appropriate means to mimetically expose the negative qualities of reality. The term quality however distinguishes negativity from a complete absence of meaning, a profound nihilism, total despair. No direct image of utopia is offered us here, but the idea of utopia is preserved because we see clearly how great a distance separates our present reality from a utopian condition of reconciliation. The awareness of this distance outlines a never fulfilled desire that fuels the creative process of design and experience.

Every day environments and the mimetical enactment of another modernity<sup>vii</sup>

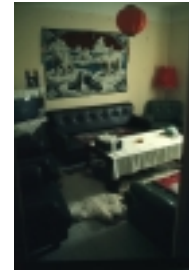
This case summarizes the main findings of an extended research programme carried out by the Post Graduate Centre Human Settlements of our Department in cooperation with the Algerian “Centre National d’Etudes et de Recherches Intégrées du Bâtiment”. The aim of the research was to elaborate an insight in the often disruptive processes that are mutilating many urban and rural environments in North Algeria. Three kinds of environments have been studied: traditional villages affected by the exodus of their inhabitants, modern urban housing estates resulting from massive planning and housing programmes by the Algerian government and finally growing and conglomerating villages reconstructed in an haphazard way by the returning migrants. The ethnographical work by Pierre Bourdieu offered a conceptual frame to start with. In each case the research studied forms, texts and actions using different methods such as interviews, participatory observation, morpho-typological analysis and design simulation.



Life in the traditional Kabyle villages is not anymore what it used to be. The present appearance of many traditional houses in Kabyle villages testifies to the ongoing exodus. The image is still there, with all its appeal described by Bourdieu and others. It is an image formed by the “demon of analogy”, full of semantic coherence and correspondence: between the human biography and the life cycle of nature, between the social and the built environment, between sexuality and inhabitation. One semantic field offers images to signify another one. The inhabited environment acts as a structure of reversal mediating between the outside, urban, masculine world ruled by signs and the inside, rural, feminine world dominated by images and analogies.



Migrants' departures and their annual comeback for holidays, however, disrupt the traditional coherence. The imprint of this disruption is legible in the built fabric. A stable transforms into a kitchen, cupboards and suitcases replace earthenware jars, a weaving loom becomes just a decorative object, new rooms are built in modern materials, furnished and locked, waiting for a visitor. In certain Kabylia villages the never ending process of modernizing the house apparently announces the return of migrants which in fact turns out to become at best a holiday stay. Confusing traces allow us to decipher an ambivalent desire for urban *and* village life, that leaves no other solution than a final exodus softened by rituals of yearly return and rebuilding. The lost traces of modernization and the migrant's leave are both signs of a displacement that, instead of acting as a catalyst of a regenerative process, further disrupts the coherence of images and analogies.



The introduction in the seventies and early eighties of modern town planning and modern architectural forms, as implemented in the regional capital city of Tizi Ouzou, often can be understood as the vehicle used by the socialist government for a far-reaching pursuit of modernization and emancipation. The massive building of modern apartment blocks at the outskirts of formerly colonial towns came forth from the young and independent Algeria's quest for a way out of the encumbrances of old traditions and backwards habits. By offering people leaving the villages ruined by the war of independence new dwellings with high standards of modern comfort, it was thought that they would, along with the adoption of new ways of living encoded in the built forms, also embrace new, modern values and attitudes. This, however, was not what happened in reality. Instead of wholeheartedly accepting this "political economy of signs" (Baudrillard), the programmatic modernism with its new way of life and its promises of emancipation, people went along only halfway. They came to stay in the city, in order to be near opportunities of work, education and modern amenities, but they did not really 'dwell' there. Their point of reference remained the traditional village, the realm of image and analogy, to which they returned for all matters of importance such as social interaction, annual festivities or funerals. The modern town, functioning according to the mode of 'signs', thus accommodated only part of their lives. The never ending displacement between town and village takes the form of a split in people's daily life. It seems to limit at the same time the full inhabitation process of the urban environment and the necessary modernization of the villages.

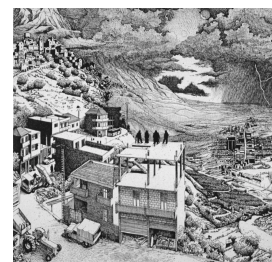
In studying the building practices of returning Berber migrants in the Beni Yenni in Kabylia, one notices that they introduce certain urban activities and building types from their migration career in Paris - shops, garages, apartment buildings. These new types are grafted in a haphazard way onto the asphalt road that links different neighbouring villages of the clan territory. This gradual process results in the development of a spine connecting seven old villages into a kind of new urban agglomeration. However, since the villages are situated on ridges and hilltops and the spine road runs slightly below each village, the compact village form keeps its



identifiable shape. By introducing these alien elements through countless building and dwelling practices that are often contradictory to each other and to the village context proper, returning migrants construct in a rural environment something that performs like a modern town without actually being one. Out of a contradictory condition of displacement emerges an ambivalent environment that seems to correspond to an equally ambivalent desire for a modern urban life, full of performative signs of modernization, that does not oblige them to lose the cherished village tradition and its collective memory of images and analysis. It is as if the transferred signs of modernity lose their pure instrumental logic and acquire imaginative power in their new context. At the same time images and analogies of a worn out tradition acquire new imported signifiers to reconstruct an enlarged coherence.



The transformation of the road connecting seven clan villages into a proto-urban spine that acts as the main generator of spatial and cultural changes, is not due to the implementation of a coherent planning purpose. It can be seen as a collective staging of individual actions and trials, allowed by the topographical situation of the seven villages and initiated by occasional initiatives of modernization undertaken by the government (monument of war, post office, school, bus stop). A multitude of ad hoc 'bricolages' by the villagers add up with the remarkable interventions by returning migrants, who introduce along the road building types and functions displaced from their migration journey. Although the resulting conglomerate is most of all confusing, the road and the buildings, the physical space, the economies and the uses it conveys, seem to converge in one way or another, as if an implicit staging turns ad hocism into coherence. The play generated by the staging achieves much more than the countless individual actions that compose it. The emergence of the spine is profoundly urban and theatrical and so are the uses it induces: the seemingly pragmatic reconnoitering of (male) public space by the women, the show-off walks by young males, the demonstration march for the recognition of Berber cultural identity (an early sign of the forthcoming national crisis).



The formal and functional capacity of the road – referent of a clan territory, landscape feature, morphological backbone, functional support, scene of urban behavior - plays a prime role in a process of mimetic identity formation that seems to succeed in transforming contradiction into ambivalence. The resulting mimesis is a critical one since it aims at correcting both an alien mode of modernization and a tradition that lost its development potential. Concluding their journeys of migration and removal, the Beni Yenni villages outlined the possibility of another urbanity and rurality, an 'otherness' that would enable them to realize their ambivalent desire for both tradition and modernity. Such ambivalence and otherness are however far from stable conditions. They constitute a kind of provisional synthesis or suspended dialectics that does not outline another utopia but offers a cue for a critical rationality of development.

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<sup>i</sup>. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 17-18; German version: "Als Zeichen kommt das Wort an die Wissenschaft; als Ton, als Bild, als eigentliches Wort wird es unter die verschiedenen Künste aufgeteilt, ohne dass es sich durch deren Addition, durch Synästhesie oder Gesamtkunst je wiederherstellen liesse. Als Zeichen soll Sprache zur Kalkulation resignieren, um Natur zu erkennen, den Anspruch ablegen, ihr ähnlich zu sein. Als Bild soll sie zum Abbild resignieren, um ganz Natur zu sein, den Anspruch ablegen, sie zu erkennen.", *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 40.

<sup>ii</sup>. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 18; German version: "Die Trennung von Zeichen und Bild ist unabwendbar. Wird sie jedoch ahnungslos selbstzufrieden nochmals hypostasiert, so treibt jedes der beiden isolierten Prinzipien zur Zerstörung der Wahrheit hin.", *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 40.

<sup>iii</sup> Hilde Heynen, André Loeckx, "Scenes of Ambivalence. Concluding Remarks on Architectural Patterns of Displacement", in *Journal of Architectural Education*, 52-2, Nov. 1998, pp. 100-108.

<sup>iv</sup> This analysis is published in Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity. A Critique*, MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1999, pp. 200-208.

<sup>v</sup>. Kristin Feireiss (ed.). Daniel Libeskind. *Erweiterung des Berlin Museums mit Abteilung Jüdisches Museum / Extension to the Berlin Museum with Jewish Museum Department*, Ernst & Sohn, Berlin, 1992.

<sup>vi</sup>. Bernhard Schneider, 'Daniel Libeskind's Architektur im Stadtraum', in Alois Martin Müller (Hrsg), *Daniel Libeskind. Radix - Matrix*, Prestel, Munich, 1994, pp. 128-135.

<sup>vii</sup> A more complete version of this case study is published in André Loeckx, "Kabylia, the House and the Road: Games of Reversal and Displacement", in *Journal of Architectural Education*, 52-2, Nov. 1998, pp. 87-99.