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[Figures 15–22, pp 133–136]

Event

In 2005 riots erupted in the Parisian *banlieue*,<sup>1</sup> revealing a hidden reality. There is a void beyond the well-known form of the city, an area in which millions of people suffer near-total exclusion. Žižek described the riots this way:

The message of the outbursts was not that the protesters found their ethnic-religious identity threatened by French republican universalism but, on the contrary that they were not included in it, that they found themselves on the other side of the wall which separates the visible from the invisible part of the republican social space.<sup>2</sup>

The protesters were simply not part of the recognized state of affairs known as “Paris.” Historically, as in nearly all European cities, the material boundaries of Paris were defined by fortifications. Since the end of the 1950s, the circuit of the outermost and last to be demolished city wall has been occupied by the Boulevard Périphérique, a ring road marking the territorial boundary between the city of Paris proper and the *banlieue*.<sup>3</sup> With the events of 2005, a suppressed reality, which had been known in some way to all Parisians, had suddenly become *reality*. Formerly a vague zone beyond representation, the periphery had paradoxically become central to the Parisian world. The opening of this void onto the closed interior destabilized the territorial structure of the city and transformed differential identities into the universal Subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> As Subjects, there are as many differences between an inhabitant of the *banlieue* and a wealthy Parisian of the seventh *arrondissement*,<sup>5</sup> as between me and anyone at all—including myself.<sup>6</sup> Counter to a recognition of the “other,” what was truly

<sup>1</sup> French term for the suburban area surrounding a large city.

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), 77.

<sup>3</sup> While the suburbs beyond the Périphérique vary in economic and social power (southern and western areas gener ally being more affluent), the city is formally defined by an interior and exterior. In this case, through the events of 2005 the underserved and poorer banlieues (mostly in the north and east) define the universal case of exclusion from “Paris” in general and point to a genericity beyond qualitative differences.

<sup>4</sup> Subjectivity here refers to the subject mobilized by the Idea, the subject of truth rather than personal opinion. The Subject is free of the merely “personal.”

<sup>5</sup> Paris is organised into twenty administrative subdivisions, or *arrondissements*, the seventh being particularly wealthy and prestigious.

<sup>6</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 25–26.

The concept of the generic set was developed by mathematician Paul Cohen in relation to the “forcing” methods he developed in his work on the Continuum Hypothesis. Paul J. Cohen, Set Theory and the Continuum Hypothesis (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2008).

This project is heavily indebted to the work of Alain Badiou, and draws much of its technical language from his philosophy, central to which is a commitment to the mathematical ontology of set theory, with the concept of the generic set at the forefront.

Alain Badiou, Being and Event, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2006), 370.

W. Brian Newsome, “The Rise of the Grands Ensembles: Government, Business, and Housing in Postwar France,” The Historian 66, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 794–795.

*Ibid.*, 805.

“Le logement: Un champ d’étude et d’action pour Paris Métropole,” Institut d’aménagement et d’urbanisme (Île-de-France: Paris, June 2010).

lacking was a space for the assertion of the same, a space of “generic” consistency.

The term generic has a technical sense,<sup>7</sup> defining a collection or “set” of abstract objects that exceed all predication.<sup>8</sup> Such a set cannot be ascribed meaning. It always includes further objects that escape the definitions assigned to it, and is therefore indiscernible from within a given situation (in this case, for instance, the generic set of Parisian Subjects is indiscernible from within the Parisian situation).<sup>9</sup> And since, as the event revealed, there is no possible predication for the identity of a member of the Parisian “republican social space,” there can be no architectural content appropriate to giving that set or that space meaning. There remains only the discredited situation, a still reverberating territory, and the Subjective position from which the set’s existence can be affirmed.

## Situation

Paris has a tradition of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements intimately tied to the city’s urban and material form. During the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, May ’68, and many times since, the city streets have been the arena of direct action. Haussmann’s massive intervention in the city’s plan (implemented between 1853 and 1870) was motivated in part to revoke the strategic advantage Paris’s narrow streets held for revolutionaries—changes that had a large impact on housing. The redesign of bourgeois Paris drove up the cost of land, restricted affordable accommodation, and cast out a portion of the poor population beyond the city walls.<sup>10</sup>

Over the next century, the construction of housing estates at the periphery of French cities increased greatly. It began in the 1880s as a social project intended to diffuse revolutionary tendencies, and picked up steam under the Vichy regime as part of the corporatist construction industry. By 1960, more than 300,000 units were being built per year in France, four times more than in the previous decade.<sup>11</sup> However, in the early 1970s, it had become clear that despite their increased production, rent-controlled complexes (known as *Habitations à loyer modéré*, or HLMs) were

extremely unpopular among their actual residents. In response to political pressure, President Georges Pompidou terminated their further construction. A recent study showed that the Parisian housing situation is defined by shrinking production and increasing demand.<sup>–12</sup> The numbers clearly demonstrate the need for new affordable housing, while the poor infrastructural connectivity of existing HLMs in the *banlieue*, and the ethnic, cultural, and economic segregation of their populations all demand redress.

## Territory

On April 29, 2009, President Sarkozy presented the goals of his government's major plan for the Paris region: *Le Grand Paris*. Central to the plan was a new transit scheme developed by the minister assigned to the project, Christian Blanc, who had already developed a transit plan and a law for its implementation. It included a speculative southwestern loop intended to lure techno-industrial development. However, the City Council, led by socialist mayor Bertrand Delanoë, had also developed a plan based on current need in an underserved ring comprising the inner *banlieue*. The jurisdictional and ideological conflict was eventually resolved by a compromise plan, and presented by the president in October 2011. Coupled with this transit agenda was a general consensus that the high-density HLM structures were moribund and ought to be levelled in favour of more traditional single-family housing. The material and economic irresponsibility of such an approach was highlighted well by the PLUS project of Lacaton & Vassal, and Druot.<sup>–13</sup> While their strictly material intervention was a reasoned response to the situation predicated on improving the existing housing stock, it remained overly bound to the situation as such. Like Manfredo Tafuri's ideal architect at the end of *Theories and History of Architecture*, their method resisted formalist and historicist pitfalls, choosing instead to focus directly on immediately presented reality.<sup>–14</sup> However, this purely supplemental approach to the situation failed to recognize the *evental* status of the problem—it is precisely that apparent “reality” which has been called into question. Because no empirical approach to the situation can adequately address its problematic

13  
Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton, and Jean-Philippe Vassal, PLUS: Large-scale Housing Development: An Exceptional Case (Barcelona: GG, 2007), 17.

14  
Manfredo Tafuri, Theories and History of Architecture (London: Granada, 1980).

territory, the designer—as Subject—is confronted by the necessity to risk producing there a new reality.

## Project

This project begins with a geometrical wager: the formalization of the peripheral transit system into an ellipse. Unlike the typical axes of Paris, which create monumental perspectives centred on privileged positions within the city, the ellipse creates an enormous set of nearly identical perspectives throughout the *banlieue*, all of which are tangential to the curve defining the whole. The ellipse is composed of several infrastructural layers: below-grade metro, plus at-grade LRT and boulevard. On either side, the boulevard is lined by an architectural type with a simple structure allowing for diverse plans and programs. The footprint of these buildings is determined by the intersection of existing streets, which divide them into courtyard blocks rising to a uniform seven storeys. Together, the boulevard and its buildings create a gigantic space of formal consistency without defining individual programmatic cases. While recalling the form of city walls, the ellipse does not act to separate the exterior from the interior of the city. Rather, it traverses the undefined territory of the *banlieue*, connecting and transforming the existing urban structure. Underlying the project is a design strategy of concatenation. Each building considered individually lacks weight; however, taken in near endless repetition, the buildings form a generic *city of subjects*. The project as such can therefore be defined as a method for forcing the recognition of a previously unseen set, in this case expanding the Parisian situation to include the indiscernible subjects of the *banlieue*. Perhaps the failure of universalism under the modern project was not definitive. With the generic, universality reappears rather by subtraction. It is only through the evacuation of architectural meaning that architecture can be tethered to Subjectivity.

## Postscript

The last chapter of Rem Koolhaas's S,M,L,XL is titled “Generic City.”<sup>15</sup> The concept of the generic promoted above can be

seen in greater relief when set against Koolhaas's own conception. He begins by associating the Generic City with a kind of historical break, one involving the obsolescence of the city's historical centre.<sup>16</sup> For Koolhaas, that break is a function of the failure of historically derived identity due to population increase and diversity.<sup>17</sup> These thoughts culminate in the following formulation: "The Generic City is the city liberated from the captivity of centre, from the straightjacket of identity. The Generic City breaks with this destructive dependency: it is nothing but a reflection of present need and present ability. It is the city without history."<sup>18</sup> Many of these perceptions are convincing. In fact, we could say that Koolhaas has accurately identified the *situation* of contemporary urbanism. However, his city is a city without Subjects. It is a city where "anything goes," where validity is a function only of facticity. A more precise term for this kind of world would be "atonic."<sup>19</sup>

The Atonic City is the city without points, the Koolhaasian city of suspended judgement. Koolhaas never ceases to register predicates for his Generic City—all of which are in fact predicates of the *situation*. Rather, the generic city must be brought into being by Subjective action since it is impossible to define from the standpoint of the *situation* alone. Furthermore, the properly generic city is fundamentally historical because it is brought into view only through the intercession of an *event* which ruptures the atonicity of the contemporary city by revealing its excluded *truth* and putting its world into tension.<sup>20</sup> Triggered by the event, the generic city would be the product of Subjective action inaugurating a new reality . . . where the atonic city exists, the generic city must come to be.

16  
Ibid., 1249.

17  
Ibid., 1248.

18  
Ibid., 1249–1250.

19  
Alain Badiou, Logics of Worlds, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), 420. "Atonic" refers to a lack of "points," in the sense that a point is a transcendental moment of tension on which subjects can properly make decisions. We might say that an atonic world is a relativistic world, a world of opinion in which truth is impossible.

20  
Koolhaas even hints that part of the truth of his Generic City is its tyrannical politics (in light of which his formula equating post-modernism to democracy appears highly suspicious).





Figure 15

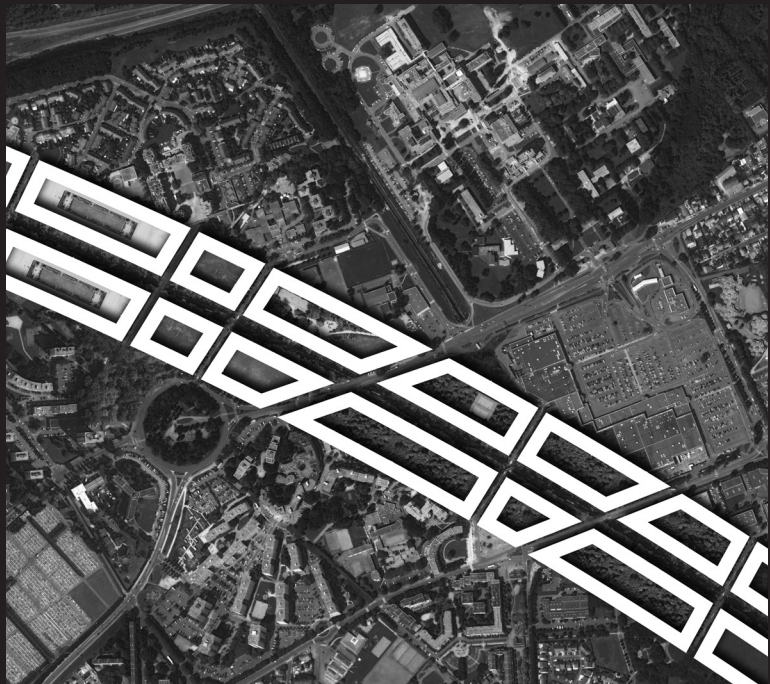


Figure 16

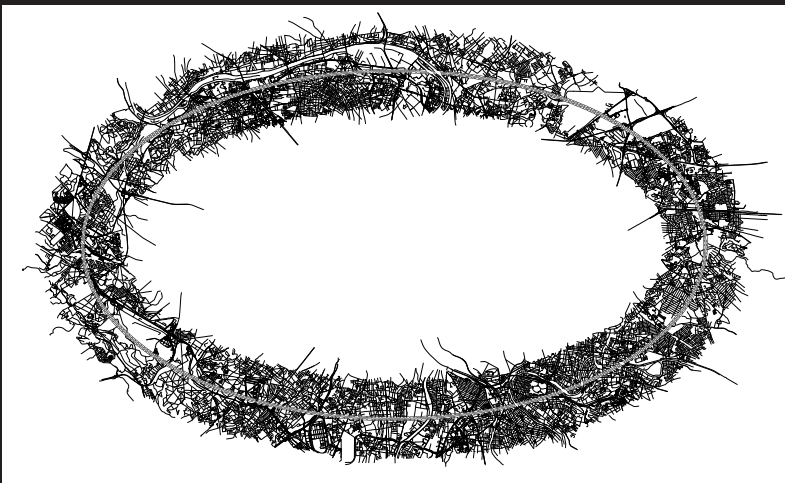


Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20





Figure 21

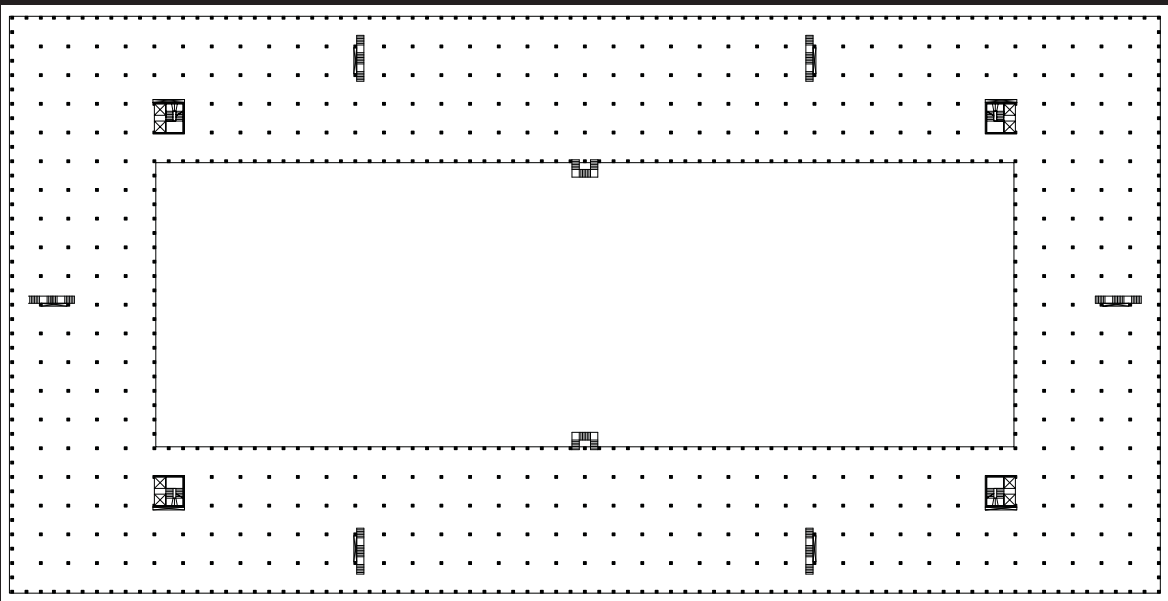


Figure 22