

## Learning from Le Montavoies –architecture as a guide to the outside

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I'm talking to a computer screen and I'm trying to imagine that I'm talking to somebody, somebody I know and I'm wondering what is most virtual of the two: talking to a computer screen or talking to someone that I'm imagining being in front of me.

To introduce myself I could say that I worked for 25 years as an architect and that I became afterwards a forester—that was not such a great change as one might think—and that I like caves and caving and that I've always been writing. That could do as a short description of myself. Google might do the rest. But I guess that I have to give more as an introduction to be able to make my point.

In all the work that I've been doing there was the idea that spaces that I was looking for or spaces that I was drawing or developing, had to be spaces that made you think more intensively than any "ordinary" space. The thinking I'm talking about is thinking about our existential condition. That means, for me: why we are here, why do people die, how to live with the idea that we're all mortal.

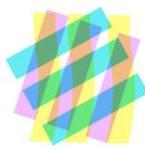
As an architect, I started designing all kinds of buildings, also houses, private houses. But on the way, I realised that that private houses are not the best spaces for thinking. I've never been fond of that clue text of Heidegger in which he says that you have to be able to build, to dwell to be able to be: if that could be right that would mean that homeless people cannot 'be'. And I cannot believe that.

I believe that moments of transgression or trespassing are clue moments in our lives and spaces where you go for these moments of 'trespassing' are thus essential for architecture. Later on, I started searching, most often in urban contexts like Paris, New York or Kinshasa, and often shortly after important conflicts or changes like Sarajevo, Belgrade or Tirana, for places where powerless people, people in need were hanging out or trying to be, as I had understood by then that there is a lot to be learned from these spaces and that these spaces are the same kind of spaces that we go to when we're looking for a moment of transgression, for an existential moment. I called it the rear side of public space and made a classification of these places. These spaces are hidden and are often invisible for people who manage to deny that they themselves might have certain needs too. Later I realised that actually that wasn't the rear side of public space but that, almost on the contrary, the space, where these powerless people were hanging out was the real public space and that the spaces of terraces, streets and squares were very much privatised spaces. To be able to think and discuss this insight, I developed a long definition for 'public space' as I understood it.

And for years and years, often together with students or researchers, we were making long protocolled walks through cities looking for indicators of these public spaces.

One sentence of the definition said: 'The perfect public space would be a space where anybody could do anything at any time. Public space is thus a platonic idea since a 100% public space is unthinkable'.

As 100% public space can't exist, we can thus only speak of spaces with a high(er) or a low(er) degree of publicness and we can eventually compare certain spaces.



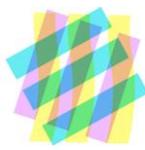
But again and again we want to juxtapose public space against private space in a simple opposition: we want to say that public space is the opposite of private space and then for once and for good formulate a definition of public space on the one hand and private space on the other hand. But pure public space and pure private space don't exist, we can't even hope that we might be able to imagine, to invent or to design pure public or pure private space. Pure public space (and as a matter of fact pure private space) is like Hydrogen which is a chemical element that does not exist in an isolated form, it always forms compounds. Space has always aspects of publicness and aspects of privateness at the same time. But the proportion publicness-privateness differs enormously. I am interested in and am looking for space(s) with a high degree of publicness.

And so I started to talk in conferences and in texts about spaces with a high degree of publicness and I adapted the definition that I had made earlier about public space in that sense.

After I had been confronted with the continuous reduction of publicness in cities, I decided in 2007 to buy a large piece of land (27 hectares) of wild forest on a mountain very close to the city of Saint-Claude in the French Jura. From the beginning I was attracted by the fact that that wild land was so close to a small but very real city. Since then I'm working mainly at and on that land. It was probably a pathetic and certainly a contradictory try to buy a piece of land and try to install a place with a high degree of publicness on it. I didn't know or had forgotten at that moment the Andy Warhol quote: 'I think having land and not ruining it is the most beautiful art that anybody could ever want to own.' Part of the land was historically called 'Le Montavoix', which translated in English means 'The Mountain with a voice or the mountain with the voices'. From the beginning I liked that name, it gave me the idea that I could shut up and it would be the mountain that would speak, and I decided to name the entire land like that: le Montavoix. Much later I realized that 'voix', v-o-i-x and 'voies' v-o-i-e-s, sound perfectly the same but do have a very different meaning: 'voices' and 'paths'. As I had been working by then since a long time to open up different old and forgotten paths on the land, I decided to call the whole land 'Le Montavoies' (with v-o-i-e-s), the Mountain with the paths, there the name as well as the work on the paths seemed to correspond to me with the intention of installing a place with a high degree of publicness. For the refuge, a primitive shelter that I installed in one of the two old farmhouses on the land, where people can stay overnight in a very simple infrastructure, I kept the name 'Le Montavoix' (with v-o-i-x): the Mountain with the voices.

Le Montavoies is not a project: one engages in a project for a certain time and with a predefined goal. But Le Montavoies is for the rest of my active live. In many ways it is 'like love': you don't decide to fall in love for a certain period, you don't have a goal when you fall in love, but when you say 'like love', you say in the same time that it's not love.

I call my work at Le Montavoies a 'praxis' [p.r.a.x.i.s], a praxis is a practice directed and guided by a theory, and a theory guided and directed by a practice. The work at Montavoies is very physically, it takes a lot of time and effort to open up the land. It might be very surprisingly that I'm making openings in the forest, that I, who claim to work in an ecological way, am actually cutting trees. To understand that you have to know that in the Jura each year there's about thousand hectares of forest more as a result of natural reforestation after farmland was abandoned, the forest is mainly a beech forest, that in the end becomes some kind of a monoculture, it's not at all the richest ecosystem. A forest needs openings in it to make it livable for a lot of species,



it needs borders, edges, paths, etc. to make it a biotope for more species and in the end accessible and welcoming for the people, too.

When discussing spaces with a high degree of publicness, and the definition I had developed for it, people usually said that they agreed with that definition, but just a moment later, it seemed as if they had forgotten it and returned to the classical understanding of public space and thus I had to conclude that we didn't understand each other, that we were actually talking about the different things.

The codex, a law system developed by the Roman emperor Justinian in the sixth century, was an interesting parallel sideway for me. Justinian distinguishes four categories of land that could not be privatized: the first category is the 'res communes': it's the air and the sea, they were seen as the natural property of all humanity. The second category is the 'res publicae': the rivers, parks and public roads, they belonged to all citizens. The third category is the 'res universitas': this were the public baths, theatres, etc. And the fourth category is the 'res nullius', the wasteland, cattle pasture, woodland, wild animals. I found out about the subcategory: the 'res derelictae', which is property voluntarily abandoned by the owner. I realised that the 'res nullius' and its subcategory were the closest to what I was looking for.

It was certainly by working at Le Montavoies that the insight came to me that all the places that I had been interested in, that I had been working on, that I brought students to, that I had been touched by, were all outside, that our desire for animality and divinity – we're so ashamed about it - finds its place outside, not in the functional spaces of mankind. So things became actually very simple: the space I was looking for was outside, the word, the term I as aiming for was simply 'outside'. I can easily prove that it was long before Covid that I came to that conclusion, but it is to me as if Covid sharpened my conviction, proved to myself what I had been thinking before.

But at the same time I realise and I know that we can't survive outside, that it's not for nothing that mankind started constructing little huts ages ago. But since these early searches for protection inside mankind focusses more and more on these inside spaces, we act as if we could forget that there was an outside, as if we could forget our longing to go out and mankind kept developing tools to prevent themselves to be outside. The smartphone is the latest (incredibly powerful) step in that evolution: the smartphone even gives us the idea that we're outside, but we're taking everything of the inside (control, certainty, entertainment...) with us when we're walking around connected. Life evolves inwards, towards the interior, covered, heated, air-conditioned, lit up: we travel from our home to the shopping centre by car, which is probably the most conditioned space we can think of – from one shop to another, from boutique to crêperie, always the same light, from shops to car park, to the metro, the train station, the car, air-conditioned, always the same music, always the same temperature, always a similar drone, dry, windless; radio, GPS, phone, computer within reach, vents for hot or cold air, ergonomic seats: everything can be operated without moving. That continuity on the inside is designed, but it is not architecture. We are domesticated by the light, we are domesticated by the warmth, by the evenness, by the absence of differences, by the continuous light, that is to say: only light, no darkness. Motion detectors connect our movements around the house with light, and they do so too in the garden, in the street, in the city – the lights come on wherever we go: when we get close to a house, when we near the garage, the lights come on: the darkness outside is shut out – the dark outside shut out. One shopping arcade seamlessly blends into the next shopping arcade.



Architecture is almost always seen as a space that shelters people, an enveloping space, a space that encloses, a space that gives those who own it the right to be *in* it. But the space that shuts in also shuts out: those who are shut out look for the space that allows them to *be outside*. Architecture = the space and the spatial elements that make it possible for us to be outside, that shelter us but do not shut us in, do not keep us inside. I don't mean outdoor camping or survival techniques for an (urban) guerrilla. I don't mean the best Gore-Tex jacket, the lightest tent or the ultimate hammock. Architecture = Non-Conditioned Space = Non-Heated Space. As I said before: Heidegger was mistaken when he wrote *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*. Architecture is unconditioned space, unconditional space and probably unconnected space. Architecture=space to be outside.

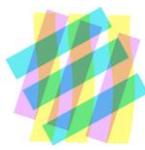
I think of the (outside) world as an isosceles triangle, that way of looking undermines the reductive juxtaposition of interior to exterior space. On one side of the triangle is the space of the gods: it is a full, impenetrable mass of rock. On the other side is the forest: that is where the beasts live. The hollow spaces of, for and by human beings border the third side. The mass of the gods hangs over the outside world that is the rock shelter, the separation between the outer space and the forest is the forest edge, the canopy hangs at the space of the human beings; and in the outer space there are here and there isolated trees. We humans are attracted by the sublime of the dense, impenetrable world of the gods and we are attracted by the animality of the forest. We cannot endure in the outside world; we can pause for a moment in the shadow of the rock shelter, of the canopy, of the forest edge, of the single tree. That is, in the end, probably the most outside we can be: in the shadow of the sublime, in the shadow of the beastly, looking for a sublime or a monstrous moment.

That are my four basic models of architecture, the spaces that makes it possible for us to be outside: the canopy, the forest edge, the rock shelter and the single tree.

All four are variations of the unfolded niche: the lateral surfaces, the upper surface and/or the lower surface are folded away.

The difference between a niche and an unfolded niche is like the difference between an 'ordinary' room and a room without a finished stone or wooden floor but with an earthen floor, a room without a ceiling or roof: a room with a chasm. We could still appropriate the niche, but against the wall, under the canopy, someone could lean in, rub up against us, grab us in the crotch: in the niche we could still stand as a statue stands in the niche: the niche made for that one statue, the statue made for that one niche, as if we belonged there, as if we were at home there...In the unfolded niche we are as exposed as is possible for a human being. We could remain in the niche, but not in the unfolded niche.

We, humans cannot get any more outside than in the unfolded niche. The field is open, the forest is dense, the forest edge between them is teeming with life, it is where the trees produce seed, everything flowers there much more brightly than in the forest itself, it is where birds come to look for food, where birds make their nests, birds of prey find an abundance of food, insects are drawn to flowers and berries. In the forest edge you can stand in or out of the light, in or out of the shade, in or out of sight, In the forest edge you can eat or be eaten. At the edge, often literally at the edge of the wood, foreigners are waiting to step into the light, to cross the open field, the Channel or the Mediterranean for example. There, in the open field, they can be caught, shot at. There, exposed, they run the risk of perishing.



Architecture = Infrastructure for strangers, for foreigners. The stranger stands outside, the stranger is an outsider. Being outside is essential, being outside is existential. Architecture accompanies the person who is outside, architecture is the *accompagnateur* of the outsider, of the stranger, of those who are not at home.

The overhanging rock protects us from rain and snow, but the mass threatens: when will the boulder fall? It's allegorical for the human situation: we seek, again and again, shelter under the threat. We shelter under the overhanging rock, just as we shelter under a single tree that can get hit by the lightning.

Language fools us all the time, we keep on thinking that we understand each other but in fact we don't. A writer writes a book but everybody reads it in a different way. Somebody says 'red' and everybody who hears that word sees a different colour. I'm, on the contrary, very hopeful about the possibilities of space: we, and especially people that recognize and accept their need, have a great capacity to read and understand spaces in very similar ways. We can understand each other through space, that's why we meet interesting people under the rock shelter, standing under the canopy, in the forest edge, under the single tree. It must be a pre-verbal knowledge that binds and connects us.

If there's any lesson to be learned from COVID, it's without any doubt the fact that we should be outside and not talk to a computer.