

Tourist space in radical architectures. Actif au Maroc as a paradigm

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Introduction to the concept of tourist space.

The main objective of the research is to clarify the theoretical framework behind radical tourist architecture from the 1960s and 70s. To achieve this, a dual methodology is proposed. It combines an epistemological synthesis of existing theories on tourism during the transition from Modernity to Postmodernity, along with a case study of the Actif au Maroc project, designed in 1971 by architects Herman Grubb and Till von Hasselbach.

Although their design tools included strategies related to representation, radical architectures of the 1960s and 1970s critiqued the dominance of representation in defining architectural space. Referring to this opposition, Maigayrou, F. (2003) notes that “it is no longer only about rejecting Modernity and producing at all costs. It is about rejecting the ‘world of representation,’ the spectacle, the simulacrum. This critique, from figures like Henri Lefebvre or Guy Debord to Jean Baudrillard, seemed locked in a morality of negation”¹. This critical and speculative approach to the environment, with its capacity to imagine alternative futures, fueled the radical projects of those years.

Here, “radical” is understood both as an “extreme proposal” and as a questioning of origins, linked to the word “root.” From certain views on tourist architectural space, the discourse on architectural (re) presentation highlights the need to involve the user community as spectators of the fiction projected and built. Lefebvre himself (1973) commented on the phenomenological and social quality that architectural space takes on when it is perceived or inhabited.

“The space of pleasure cannot consist of a building or a set of ‘rooms’ defined by their functions. It would be more like the countryside or a landscape, a true space of moments: encounters, friendship, festivity, rest, calm, joy, exaltation, love, voluptuousness, but also knowledge, enigma, the unknown, struggle, and play”².

The architectural project soon shifted from a functional model to more complex ecologies. These blended technological certainties with the sensory intangibles provided by the subject’s experience. From the 1960s to the mid-1970s, many experimental architectural

proposals with utopian elements emerged. These were part of the radical architecture movement, whose ideas had been formed since the first crisis of Modernity in the early 1950s³. This was a Modernity that no longer offered opportunities to understand or renew the individual’s everyday order. It was a time when Tinguely had just killed sculpture, Warhol had killed painting, and the Situationists had killed political thought⁴.

In this context of reinventing the subject’s environment in relation to society, greater subjectivity becomes important. The contributions of Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord were key to expressing these aspirations. Both authors addressed the tourist phenomenon by placing it within everyday life, emphasizing its dynamic nature and the nomadic vocation inherent in individuals. This was necessary to inhabit architectural proposals in urban spaces, where enjoyment plays a key role in the subjective dimension of radical social space⁵.

Lefebvre (1973) defined the concept of tourist space in *Towards an Architecture of Pleasure*, approaching it from a contradictory perspective. His essay highlights the tension between the economic system’s pressure, which transforms tourist space from one of use to one of exchange, and the emancipatory potential of the hedonistic, intimate, and subjective aspects of this space. These elements support the individual’s emancipation in relation to the collective⁶.

Lefebvre’s thesis influenced the significance and concreteness of architecture, which was already being reduced to communication and representation. In response, Lefebvre proposed a “utopia of the concrete,” where the sensual and sensory aspects—embodied in the subject—act as creators of encounters and moments in the tourist space. The active subject who participates in this concrete utopia contrasts with the passive subject, who merely observes representations. Here, the body becomes both receiver and interlocutor, distancing itself from “the ideology of image and language, the realm of advertising rhetoric, signs, and meanings in a social space where the body’s reference has disappeared, replaced by discourse”⁷.

Theoretical framework of radical architectures

Radical architectures adopt the principles suggested by the second avant-gardes—pop art, minimalism, land art, performance art, etc.—focusing on the performative, the corporeal, and the relationship between the subject, space, and the collective. In this context, the artistic experience becomes a catalyst for discourse. These architectural proposals, emerging from various regions, but primarily in Italy, Austria, and the United Kingdom, developed between 1960 and 1975. They were not necessarily intended to be built, but rather to provoke reflection on the foundations of architecture⁸.

This period marked the transition to Postmodernity, as post-industrial society began to shape the architectural forms that

would represent it. During this brief and dynamic phase, radical proposals focused on political and social criticism, the influence of the second avant-gardes, and the mediation of the body, as well as environmental activism⁹. These became key themes, with the aim of integrating the artistic experience into the everyday life of the individual.

The design tools for this formalization came from diverse and heterogeneous sources. These ranged from the pop imagery—already reinterpreted by Archigram and developed with a cadence close to minimalism—the rich theoretical approaches linked to the everyday life of the Smithsons, the synthetic and sophisticated imagery of Cedric Price, to the political and spatial ideas of Situationism and its predecessors, including the COBRA group. It was within this line, more closely tied to artistic expression, that performative and bodily experiences, especially in the Viennese context, took place.

Radical architectures maintained certain constants, both in executed projects and conceptual ones. They developed a critical stance toward architecture as a discipline and questioned the premises that traditionally defined it, which Modernity had not resolved. Additionally, they transformed architecture into a discourse that questioned the need for materiality itself, treating it as a form of thought and a language beyond building construction¹⁰.

As a result, the radical project opened the door to cross-disciplinary actions linked to creative practices, even those distant from spatiality. A theoretical framework was established where the ephemeral and the enduring, and various scales—from clothing to megastructures, from tactile sensuality to graphic virtuality—came together. In essence, radical architectural projects offered a broad design tool, where new protocols emerged, and playfulness was incorporated as a collective strategy, defining new paradigms.

Finally, the synthesis with artistic experience, focusing on the event rather than a finished work, will play a role. This sensibility finds in this approach a glimpse of authenticity, satisfying the desire to break free from the mediatisation of the environment. It defends hedonism, pleasure, and playfulness in art¹¹, aiming to infuse the architectural project with these values, connecting it to society.

Tourism, not yet fully commercialised, was still seen as a space for social emancipation. It provided a field to experiment with the subject’s intimate experience during leisure. In this context, radical architecture, which embraced utopia as a starting point and developed it pragmatically¹², found tourism to be a fitting programme to explore its ideas.

The paradigmatic case of Actif au Maroc (1972)

Although the definition of the radical project is broad, many of its key premises were established in the large-scale implementation of the *Actif Au Maroc* proposal [Fig. 01]. This touristic project was a milestone in bringing

together the diverse visions of artists and architectural studios linked to Viennese radical architecture, which was particularly active and prolific during those years. Directed by Hermann Grubb and Till von Hasselbach, the project was commissioned by a German-Moroccan company in 1971 and developed in the Ifni region [Fig. 02], located on the Moroccan Atlantic coast, south of Agadir. Before the 1960 earthquake, Agadir had been a pioneer in mass tourism.

While tourism implementation in the region wasn't new, this project sought "unconventional ideas" to address the new era of mass tourism¹³. The project team included prestigious architectural studios and artists, such as Haus-Rucker-Co., Domenig-Huth, Grubb-Hasselbach, and artists like HA Schult, Christo, and Jeanne-Claude.

In the unpopulated territory of the Ifni region, with the Fom Assaka valley [Fig. 03] as its axis, six enclaves were arranged. Each of the teams was to offer a proposal linked to aspects of the tourist experience, maintaining a common logic and interconnection. All the density of the radical approaches was disseminated throughout the region. These were formalised in interventions of an extreme nature, from the ephemeral to those intimately rooted in the natural environment.

Thus, Hermann R. Grub's premise "Vacation = Rest + Experience" was present in the character of all the interventions. This premise was reminiscent, in its structure, of the hypotheses of Joffre Dumazedir and Georges Candilis regarding a certain objectivisation of what tourism represents¹⁴. The interventions prioritized the experiential, favoring an identification of the individual's life with the artistic and with individual freedom¹⁵.

If the representation and simulacrum of the vernacular are the parameters beginning to govern the characteristics of the tourist space in established destinations of the Mediterranean basin, initiatives such as Actif au Maroc still persist. These initiatives see tourist activity as a sufficiently flexible and prosperous sphere to develop transgressive experiences. They connect the tourist space with the creative experience of the tourist subject, giving priority to mobility through performance and play, the sensorial aspect of the landscape, and radical architecture as a container. This is based on the conviction that "a family hotel or a luxury hotel will not satisfy the demands of the tourist of the future. The tourist is looking for a holiday away from social pressures. They want maximum freedom for individual development"¹⁶.

In short, as Swiss architect Justus Dahinden comments in the project report: 'Holiday activity means participation, changing roles, and playing without group egoism. In this way, relaxation becomes a real function, possible in a re-humanized urban environment'¹⁷. Writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger describes it similarly: 'A radical attempt to break down the barriers of tourism is manifested in the decisions (...) that wish to

put an end to the sacred ceremony of "seeing-sites". They have exchanged "see-sites" for "see-lives" (Koska and Schult, 1973).

Actif Au Maroc rests on a natural landscape, establishing colonization strategies and acquiring its physiognomy to turn it into a tourist settlement. This is done by superimposing various physical and experiential layers, from urban settlements to artistic interventions threaded through a virtual and physical communications network. The artistic experience is an essential part of the ensemble's character. It challenges the user psychologically and aims to reveal new reactions in them: 'Tourists (...) have found an opening to a new world of experiences, which they must also decide to enter a new level of consciousness'¹⁸. The immaculate geographical context that called for 'a free country, wide open for total tourism'¹⁹, and the references to the work of French ethnographer Claude Lévi-Strauss, published in 1955, *Tristes Tropiques*, reveal a certain fascination for the primitive, still closely linked to the logic of romantic travel.

The intervention closest to this reading, highlighting the value of traditional earthen architecture and proposing its use as a construction system for central implantation, is that of Grub-Hasselbach in the Fom Assaka area [Fig. 04]. The project—a village for 5,300 tourists and 1,800 permanent residents—reinterprets the pattern of nearby urban settlements and emphasizes adaptation to the geographical environment through the arrangement of courtyards, atriums, and spacious, shaded rooms. It's a camouflage operation in the built environment where vernacular architecture isn't just turned into a language. Instead, it emphasizes qualities related to users' sensory experience: climatic and solar conditioning in an adverse environment, acoustic comfort in a densely populated project, and haptic qualities endowed with functional meaning.

Fom Assaka is the strategic center of the Actif Au Maroc project as a whole and the nerve center for all tourism activities through the use of communication technologies. These technologies—an authentic communications network intertwining various interventions on the landscape—are proposed from a playful perspective. They serve as a tool to enhance interrelationship between users, making it, in itself, another experience.

The valley around Fom Assaka hosts the biokinetic intervention of German-born artist HA Schult [Fig. 05]. It is an extensive and dense plantation of microorganisms—a chromatically dynamic garden that metaphorizes the resilient capacity of nature to colonize territories while engaging the observer. The aim is to promote "areas that move our thinking away from the usual functionality towards areas of aesthetic dimensions"²⁰. In this way, Schult formalized, on a large scale, the installation he presented at Documenta in Kassel in 1972, where he represented dynamic biological processes in a forum where art as static visual representation was in crisis.

Haus-Rucker-Co linked their PSI-Point proposal [Fig. 06] to the nomadic character of the subject they addressed in the open desert space, proclaiming the journey in that landscape as an inner journey. Thus, they designed a place for 90 people, arranged as a technological oasis formalized in a technological imaginary of polyesters and reflective PVC foam. An autonomous bubble served as a base in the landscape, intended to favor sensory experiences arising from the tourist's disorientation in the desert environment. Their participation was justified by the legacy of Actif Au Maroc and the explicit relationship of their proposals with the sensorial: "they build objects. Objects for psychic and physical activation. Objects that you can enter, that you can lie on, that you can grasp visually and acoustically"²¹.

Emphasizing the artistic nature of the intervention, Hermann R. Grub proposed experiencing the journey and mobility through the desert landscape as a performative experience—not a built architecture, but an action. The autonomous jeeps, with which tourists wander through the territory, are brightly colored entities that define the landscape and communicate by radio. They trace routes between the different bases and Ifni airport.

The Floraskin project [Fig. 07, 08, 09 and 10], designed by the Domenig-Huth team, is the most complex and well-defined architectural proposal presented at Actif au Maroc. The hotel program for the complex envisioned the phased construction of the entire development, reaching a total of 25,000 beds. Günther Domenig and Eilfried Huth were already architects of considerable prestige. They were authors of projects like the urban development of Ragnitz in Austria in 1963, which had a markedly metabolist character.

Situated on cliffs facing the Atlantic Ocean, Floraskin would be a further step in that urban direction. A hyper-technification of the project would allow the realization of megastructures of an organic character, both formally and programmatically. Modular systems would enable the colonization of the territory, generating irregular voids where interaction between users would be encouraged. The complex was covered by a veil in the form of a vegetation cover composed of humus, pollen, and irrigated crops. This related to the landscape in a similar way to HA Schult's proposal.

Floraskin defined an architectural space of a touristic nature intimately linked to experience. This was evident both in the organic character of its living cells and in the open space between them and the communication structures, which was protected by a vegetal membrane as an allegory of an incipient ecological discourse. The project aimed to evoke a dreamlike and sensorial quality in the tourist community, combining gaze and body, representation and corporeality.

The heterogeneity of the group of sites forming part of the tourist complex was completed by Christo and Jeanne-Claude's

intervention in the Dulad area [fig.09]. The packaging of a rocky massif using textiles and compressed air would definitively turn the Actif Au Maroc complex into an experiential tourist product. Christo and Jeanne-Claude had already carried out large-scale interventions with media repercussions. The aim was to use their intervention to attract general interest.

By way of final consideration, it should be noted that, apart from using tourism marketing strategies to provide the necessary viability for implementation, the nature of the tourism product offered at Actif au Maroc was ascribed to the premises of a participatory experience for the tourist. Sensory perception and the performative experience, in an environment open to unexpected events, were valued. The architectural project was developed in line with that narrative, taking into account a wealth of scales—from approaches more closely linked to the landscape to the design of limited spaces such as the dwelling units. Between these disparate scales, relational links were established. These could either set the rules for colonization of the territory or define more focused areas, such as landmarks. In this way, the same heterogeneity that characterizes the nature of radical architecture is present in the Actif au Maroc proposal. It represents a transversality of disciplines nested in the development of a complex tourist space linked to the intimate and collective experience of the tourist community.

Conclusions

This research began by reviewing the theoretical premises that defined radical architectures of a touristic nature. At the time, this evidenced an opportunity to respond to the demands of certain contemporary theories. These theories saw leisure and recreation—and therefore the field of tourism—as an ideal field for defining utopian ways of inhabiting. The underlying theoretical corpus placed the subject at the center of the architectural scene and took the body as the central link in the architectural chain. Thus, the space of use sponsored by Modernity became a space of change with the arrival of Postmodernity.

This initial discourse, which assumed the existentialist condition inaugurated at the beginning of the 20th century, came to incorporate throughout the century the different social conquests of the individuation process. The different 'I's' came to define new tourist profiles, adding greater complexity to the tourist architecture project. Today, the tourist architecture project is a multifaceted product that encourages diverse consumption. Some proposals go so far as to incorporate an entire virtual fiction to satisfy the different digital identities embodied by tourists. Likewise, the human or speciesist perspective gives way to a post-natural quality that calls for an ecology of greater equidistance or sensitivity to other species. These and other design considerations are non-negotiable in the contemporary tourist architecture project.

The active subject that inhabited the radical architectures of Postmodernity has gained value in the contemporary tourist environment, repositioning itself as the central agent of the architectural project. The renewed and revised link with nature, with the sensorial, or with the collective, is transformed through playful strategies into new paradigms of the tourist experience. It should be noted that nature—today perceived and reinterpreted as a paradigm of 'authenticity'—and aspects linked to sensoriality, from the taste for culinary offerings to the hearing of music, are the ultimate stimuli for the development and design of events in which tourist spatiality can actively participate. Demand from the end consumer defines the nature of their leisure in a more active way and also implies the expiration of the model of the passive tourist subject.

Faced with this reality, it is urgent to review certain guidelines that confine the project of the tourist space and remain closely linked to approaches where a narrative of the visual prevails. Thus, recovering proposals in the field of tourist architecture that were not fully developed in the past—such as Actif au Maroc—but aimed to solve previously intuited problems, allows us to identify lines of temporal connection in the architectural project. These connections between events, hypotheses, theoretical statements, or derivations of social behavior can serve as guidelines for designing new proposals.

The Actif Au Maroc project retains its validity as an integral artistic experience. The playful or active participation of the subject implied defining a space intended to generate moments and channel performative activities. Actif Au Maroc encouraged the realization of a tourist environment on multiple scales, where the corporal dimension of the individual took precedence over mere observation. Opposed to the passive subject excluded from action—a consumer of high doses of programmed leisure—Actif Au Maroc prioritized the active subject who interacts with an architecture designed with a strong mediating component.

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Tourism
Tourism space
Performative
Radical architecture
Leisure

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