SCÈNES DE NUIT – Excursus into Nocturnal Obliteration in Architectural Media

SCÈNES DE NUIT is a research project that explores the role of night in the construction of contemporary cities and societies, illustrating how, still today, architectural theory and critique are associated with sunlight and diurnal paradigms. It is structured around the hypothesis that, since the 19th century, night has transformed not only night-time but most importantly daytime activities and architecture forever. The project addresses the technologies, networks and forms of design deployed in nocturnal architectural spaces and their associated communities, engaging with both local and global audiences through a broad network of practitioners and theoreticians in architectural and night design, as well as experts from different fields, such as sociology, economics, philosophy and media studies, that are relevant to understanding the intersections between space, night and society at large. Scènes de Nuit presents nocturnal encounters seeking to examine and reflect upon the spaces, activities and media found in night culture, using evening events and ephemeral scenography as the main presentation platform. Research is conducted in various formats, temporalities and conditions, focusing on nocturnal architectural spaces through, but not limited to, inhabited scenography, performative exhibitions, international conferences, debates and screenings. Scènes de Nuit proposes that there is no difference between format and content, between the production of nocturnal knowledge and the scenography of night.

Exhibition at f’ar Lausanne, May 2019

For centuries, architectural theory, discourse and agency have been based on daylight and solar paradigms. References to the night in Vitruvius’ De architectura (30-15 BC), widely considered the founding text of Western architectural theory, are residual, and they are similarly absent in the most influential Renaissance treatises, i.e. Leon Battista Alberti’s De re aedificatoria (1452) and Andrea Palladio’s I quattro libri dell’architettura (1570). Likewise, the seminal writings on modern architecture rarely refer to the night-time environment, which can be evaluated both textually and photographically. In this sense, Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock’s The International Style (1932), the resulting from the MoMA exhibition that introduced modernism to America, illustrates a clear preference for daytime images, noting that “the photographs and the plans were for the most part provided by the architects themselves”. This diurnal rationale is further discernible in the books that established the intellectual ethos of architectural modernity, i.e.

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Nikolaus Pevsner’s *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936) and Sigfried Giedion’s *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941), where less than 5% of the images are purely nocturnal, understanding the term in the circadian sense of absence of daylight. Accompanying texts only help to emphasise this nocturnal obliteration. Likewise, the canonical architectural history books published in the last sixty years, such as Leonardo Benevolo’s *Storia dell’architettura moderna* (1960) and Kenneth Frampton’s *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (1980), have institutionalised the diurnal episteme in architectural media.

In the second half of the 20th century, authors such as Reyner Banham, Venturi and Scott Brown, and Rem Koolhaas corrected to a certain extent the invisibility of the night in architectural theory with influential books such as *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (1969), *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) and *Delirious New York* (1978), which partially examine the role of technology and the night in the construction of modern domesticity and leisure culture in Western architecture. From apartments to offices, casinos to nightclubs, movie theatres to theme parks, these texts emphasise how the identity of contemporary human beings and their associated domestic, professional and cultural spaces are inseparable from the night. In the 80s, extensive audiovisual and written research was carried out on the “night as a heterotopia”, as illustrated by the in-depth investigations of dystopian cinema, such as the films *Escape from New York* (1981) or *Blade Runner* (1982), which explore the qualities of darkness, indefiniteness and the uncanny aura of architecture in the absence of sunlight. Night is somehow seen as an “other” (hetero) space, i.e. disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory, and transforming the regular condition of the human habitat. In recent decades, significant contributions have been made by John A. Jakle in the book *City Lights* (2001), Dietrich Neumann in *Architecture of the Night* (2003), Edward Dimendberg in *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (2004) and Jonathan Crary in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013). In the latter, Crary explores how sleep, through its very existence and progressive reduction in recent decades, has become the last remaining bastion of resistance to the increasing monetisation of human activity in market economies. In the same vein, Netflix CEO Reed Hastings openly declared in 2017 that “we are competing with sleep, on the margin, it is a very large pool of time”\(^3\), envisioning human biology as the biggest challenge to his company’s market.

These references typify the extent to which the identity of contemporary human beings and their domestic, professional and cultural spaces are inseparable from the night. However, as of today, contemporary architectural media, including the most influential magazines such as *El Croquis*, *Apartamento*, or *A+U*, still present theory and photography where more than 90% of the pictures are taken in the daytime. Accompanying essays

rarely refer to night spaces, not to mention night-time activities and associated behaviours. Of all the architecture biennials held worldwide since the Venice Biennale was inaugurated in 1980, not one has been dedicated to the night, yet the night has been the most important laboratory of architectural experimentation since the invention of artificial light in the 19th century, prompting an endless intensification of human activity that has forever transformed the means of material, cultural and spatial production.

Scènes de Nuit aims to examine and contest the obliteration of night in architectural media. The exhibition held in May 2019 at f’ar (Forum d’architectures) in Lausanne explored the role of the night in the construction of contemporary cities and societies, illustrating how architectural theory and critique are still nowadays associated with sunlight and diurnal paradigms. The venue addressed the technology, networks and forms of design deployed in nocturnal architectural spaces and their associated communities, engaging with both local and global audiences through a broad network of practitioners and theoreticians in architectural and night design as well as experts from different disciplines relevant to understanding the intersections between space, night and society at large, such as the arts, anthropology, sociology, economics and media studies.

The approach was typological, namely understanding types as forms of continuity and specificity running through the history of architecture. If type was associated with natural forms by Quatrèmere de Quincy in the 18th century, with geometric and tectonic elements by J.N.L. Durand in the 19th century, and with programs and functions by Le Corbusier in the 20th century4, can we admit the specificity of night types and explore their implications for architectural discourse in the 21st century? Further still, contemporary technical conditions no longer aim to artificially replicate a “natural” night. Instead, they create “night scenes”, i.e. new living environments that are more than a simple imitation of diurnal life. The exhibition sought to address the architectural issues arising from these “night scenes”.

The venue at f’ar Lausanne was only open for five evenings, proposing a mutable scenography that changed according to the night types to be discussed, explored and performed. The five scenes—Shop, Film, City, Club and Dinner—recreated spaces generating practices and night-time rituals on the topics of “consumption”, “cinema”, “urbanity”, “party” and “food”, becoming experimental laboratories to gather data and question the relationship between architecture and the night. Research was developed through events in various formats, temporalities and conditions, focusing on nocturnal architectural spaces through, but not limited to, inhabited scenography, performative exhibitions, international conferences, debates and screenings. The project contended that there is no difference between format and content, between the production of knowledge related to the night and the scenography of night. The above-mentioned night types were directly tested at actual events. In the manner of Period Rooms that reconstruct interiors from a specific period,

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typological and fragmented scenes in various scales were physically created to sit at the heart of stimulating night-time experiences. These new referential spaces, both narrative and scenographic, were used for discussion and research purposes. The venue presented five nocturnal encounters seeking to examine and reflect upon the spaces, activities and media found in night culture, using evening events and ephemeral sets as the main display platform.

Shop. 09.05.2019. 7PM. The Corner Shop may arguably be the ultimate night-time institution. Typically open when other shops are closed, its cheap disruption of the circadian rhythm was explored by proposing a spatial immersion into a reconstructed replica, where sociologist Sukhdev Sandhu and artist Martin Kohout discussed their vision of nocturnal working conditions.

Film. 12.05.2019. 8PM. What makes the Film Theatre an extraordinary place is its capacity to isolate the audience from night or day, creating a space of endless temporality. Within an immersive scenography of cinematic boxes, director Matthieu Bareyre presented his latest film L’époque, discussing with Youri Kravtchenko the entanglements between night, space and architecture.

City. 18.05.2019. 10PM. The lighting aspect of the city is perceived as a parallel space-time to be experienced through lit and unlit territories. How has artificial light affected nightlife? What influences does light have on safety and night-time activities? This event explored those questions through a presentation by Isabelle Corten, lighting designer, and a nocturnal walk led by the Stalker Collective/Osservatorio Nomade in the city of Lausanne.

Club. 24.05.2019. 11PM. The Club both epitomises the nocturnal public agora and constitutes the ultimate laboratory for technological and multimedia experimentation. Ensnconced in a one-night club where visitors were encouraged to explore and perform the nocturnal space, architect Pol Esteve reflected upon nightclubs as architectural types while Octave Perrault elaborated on the Cruising Pavilion at the 2020 Venice Biennale.

Dinner. 29.05.2019. 9PM. Restaurants and bars are the defining nightlife meeting places, scenes of complex human rituals skilfully constructed through interior architecture. Researcher Julien Zanetta described banquet rituals and associated human behaviours throughout history, the point of departure of a special dinner served on a long banquet table crafted for the occasion.

Developed by students in HEAD – Genève’s BA in Interior Architecture programme, the scenography at f‘ar Lausanne was not just a backdrop to the exhibition but rather a prop to stimulate and provoke discussions on the proposed topics, envisioning the architecture event as a place to collectively produce knowledge. Capturing fragments of nocturnal images has often been the field of exploration of photography, painting, cinema and literature. At f‘ar Lausanne, the proposal was to capture and reconstruct the night in various scales. The production of nocturnal spaces and fragments, whether inhabited, experimented with or observed, allowed to grasp their most subtle properties, not only in the process of research and construction but also in the experience of the spaces thus produced. For each event, students designed a scenography that could change as a prototype of space and vice versa, exploring the night
through tools used in architecture and theatre, such as building models, sets and
fragments of space in different scales. The sampling and reconstitution of the
scenes was carried out according to three protocols of demonstration: Walking
in and Looking at, appropriated from Milica Topalovic’s seminal essay
“Models and Other Spaces”5, and Catching in, borrowed from our own
memories and interests. The proposed methodology was based as much on the
process of research/observation of fragments of nocturnal spaces (generally
originating from photography or cinema) as on the unifying and knowledge-
bearing events they generated.

Catching in. This process focused on how collective memory shapes the
recollections, emotions and perceptions produced by the built environment, the
lived space. It represents the ruin, or part of the space that could be assembled
by a nocturnal flaneur. The sampling of fragments is the result extracted from
image-spaces, becoming a catalogue of polyphonic elements such as relics,
pictures, photographs and documents, which together generate a collective
memory of what “night” is.

Looking at. Models in smaller scales are uninhabitable and can only be
perceived by the eye and the imagination. Models in varying scales make it
possible to produce a new image from a miniaturised space, broaching issues
such as the relationship between their representativeness and objecthood, their
dependence on and potential autonomy from full-scale architecture, and their
detachment from the human body and sense of visual inhabitation.

Walking in. As fragile as theatre sets, dioramas and art installations, 1:1
scale models, also known as life-size models, allow for the creation of
observable and experimental three-dimensional freeze-frames in circumstances
that simulate night-time reality through the artifice of construction. These types
of models to be experimented with are as familiar as they are remote. In this
sense, the scenography at f’ar Lausanne was simultaneously representational
(directly alluding to iconic archetypes), manipulative (deforming them both
visually and spatially) and autonomous (becoming both the content and the
objective of their own representation).

The scenes, fragments and discussions presented at f’ar Lausanne
highlight partial and fragmentary tales of a semantic, physical night of which
much remains to be told. From this perspective, the exhibition represents a
beginning. The exploration of contemporary and past habits in the use of night
spaces is limited to a few cases that can shed but limited light on the galaxies
of interiors and constructions that clubs, restaurants, shops, cinemas and urban
fragments provide. Our hope is that this essay, and all it does not contain, will
inspire those who read it to study these nocturnal scenes and draw stimulating
new night-time constellations.

"Taking pictures by night is very difficult, because you only have 20 minutes, the sun is going down, there is a moment when it is perfect, then it is less perfect, and then you can’t do it, it’s too dark. Because you need to see the outline of the building."

Richard Levene, founder of El Croquis. Geneva, 2019

El Croquis is one of the most prestigious architectural magazines in the world. Founded in 1982 by Richard Levene and Fernando M. Cecilia, it publishes five monographs on influential architects every year. Through a series of recurrent features such as the preference for frontality, the display of mirroring photos of interior spaces, plans displaying characteristic linearism, construction details paired with façade photos, and the objecthood and exteriority of architecture models, El Croquis has shaped architectural history over the last 40 years. The volumes dedicated to established Pritzker Prize names like OMA Rem Koolhaas, SANAA Sejima & Nishizawa, Herzog & de Meuron, or Alvaro Siza are considered these architects’ respective oeuvre complète. As opposed to other architecture journals, its editorial line, photography, and layout are the direct result of the decision making of its two editors, who curate everything from the architects featured in the journal to the frame and viewpoint of every single photograph. This creates a unique sense of continuity in El Croquis, both unexpected and uncanny, where architectures as diverse in their idea and spatiality as those of Rem Koolhaas, Enric Miralles, SANAA, Zaha Hadid, or Frank Gehry become Croquis-like when they are published in the journal.

The entanglements between the editors’ vision, habits, and the mediation of architecture are inseparable. Initially, Levene and Cecilia were simply two architecture students confronted with the challenge of delivering their final degree project at the Madrid School of Architecture (ETSAM) in the early 1980s, and the first issues of El Croquis were thus a miscellaneous collection of final projects of young graduates, full of construction details that fellow students could use as reference. It was not until issue No. 15, entirely dedicated to the projects of Manuel and Ignacio de las Casas, two lecturers at the same school, with an addendum on student projects, that the monograph format was devised. Further monographs on Rafael Moneo (20), Estudio PER (23), and Viaplana-Piñón (28), introduced by a critical essay and an interview with the architects, would progressively confirm the now well-known format of the journal. The transition from student projects to professional agencies did not mean a total reshaping of the journal. Original elements such as the abundance of construction details, plans printed in large size, and unbuilt projects presented mainly through models remained, yet photography, as medium and episteme, gained unprecedented centrality.

The journal almost never publishes night photography. During a workshop in February 2020, HEAD – Genève invited Richard Levene to create a “night edition” of *El Croquis*. The workshop focused on the idea that the night is a forgotten paradigm in the construction of contemporary architectural discourse. Students developed an *El Croquis Night* issue based on the magazine’s photographic and editorial language, spending two weeks photographing prominent contemporary buildings in Geneva under Levene’s supervision from the blue hour in the evening to after nightfall, a material that they later laid out and edited in a virtual edition of the journal. The combination of photographic portrayal, plans, text selection, and editing of the collected material enabled students to understand *El Croquis*’ working methods. The workshop was both an invitation and a critique. By keeping the format and methodology but reversing the circadian rhythm, a mirror effect was achieved, opening up the following question for architectural media: Is architectural representation diurnal by default?

In the case of *El Croquis*, take the figure of a journey. Most buildings published in the journal have been visited directly by Levene and Cecilia with their photographer, Hisao Suzuki, who joined the journal in 1988. For monographs involving projects in different countries, this implies careful travel planning, in coordination with the architects and the buildings’ users. Building visits are scheduled during the day, with a maximum of three per day, arranged with the architects and the property. This program is rarely altered, never mind whether it is the blue hour or sunshine, regardless of weather conditions or season. For instance, all buildings in the monograph on José María Sánchez García (189) were photographed over three straight sunny days in Extremadura (Spain), whereas those in one of the monographs on SANAA Sejima & Nishizawa (139) show varying weather conditions in different Japanese, European, and American locations. The point of view, carefully chosen, discussed, and agreed by Levene and Cecilia, is executed, not chosen, by the photographer. In the genealogical tree of media, Suzuki would belong in the category of automaton, his principal role being in the execution and processing of photography, not its conception. Pictures from other photographers are included only in exceptional cases, such as difficulties accessing particular points of view, temporary closures, or building deterioration.

Night is reserved for dining, in many cases with the architects, and friendly discussions around bottles of wine, where the names of other architects might come up: “Have you seen the work of this architect? Who is the next big name in Japan?” Following the normal circadian rhythm in this way, however, is unrelated to architectural rhythm. Take Rem Koolhaas for instance. The Seattle Library is mostly used during the daytime, and the *El Croquis* photographs thus reflect the life of the building in monograph No. 134/135, whereas the Casa da Musica in Porto, mainly an evening building in terms of programming, appears empty, human-less in the same issue. In 2006, Koolhaas introduced the idea of “post-occupancy,” originally a term reserved for the
evaluation of buildings involving user feedback,\textsuperscript{7} to architectural criticism in a special issue of the journal \textit{Domus} by looking at four OMA public buildings (including the Casa da Musica and the Seattle Library) through the broader media and cultural context within which they operate, empowering the critical experience of users.\textsuperscript{8} The issue included abundant nighttime material on the projects portrayed. Long before the social media era, it was key in the articulation—or consolidation—of a radical shift in the point of view through which architecture is regarded, portrayed, and circulated, from the eye of the specialist to that of society at large, giving it new agency in architectural discourse.

The resistance to night photography in \textit{El Croquis}, other than due to habits and trip schedules, is related to the blurring of architectural volumes at night. \textit{Atmospheric, diffuse, or blurred} would never describe any of its photography. There is a diurnal exteriority in this way of thinking – “Because you need to see the outline of the building,”\textsuperscript{9} as Levene would claim in a conversation on the history of the journal. Only one night photograph, that of the Rolex Center in Lausanne by SANAA, has made the cover of \textit{El Croquis} (155). This creates, literally, an image that shapes the rest of the content. There is a recurrent absence of lighting plans, not to mention diagrams, in the drawings. The \textit{non-visuality} of architecture, i.e., its acoustic, thermal, and lighting qualities, is recurrently rendered invisible, not only by the limitations of photography but also in the choice of the accompanying graphic material.

Through photography, \textit{El Croquis} objectifies – in the literal sense of rendering objects – architectural spaces, particularly from the outside, with a recurrent yet not exclusive preference for the isolated building, be it the small villa or the large public building, surrounded by trees or urban elements, yet bucolic, meteoric in its presence. It is no wonder that architecture models are almost always portrayed from the outside, through a bird’s eye view, as objects, becoming as Levene claims, “pieces of jewelry.”\textsuperscript{10} Models are hardly ever portrayed from the inside, and when they are, space is the negative of tectonic elements, floors, walls, columns. This keeps alive the modern dissociation between architecture and the applied arts, prioritizing the empty, human-less, isolated object over the assemblage.

Most buildings published in \textit{El Croquis} are houses or public buildings. Visits are arranged with the architects and the property. In the case of the houses, owners are invited to leave when their interiors are portrayed. Then, Levene and Cecilia perform an instant \textit{mise-en-scène}: ugly objects of everyday life are removed, hidden. If, in Le Corbusier’s photography, objects construct the fiction that someone was there just before the shoot, in \textit{El Croquis} this presence is recurrently obliterated, rendered invisible. There are no human beings in most pictures. Sometimes Levene and Cecilia pose, in Hitchcock

\textsuperscript{8} See: \textit{Post-Occupancy}, ed. AMO / Rem Koolhaas (Milan: Domus d’Autore, 2006).
\textsuperscript{9} Levene, “Inside El Croquis.”
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
cameo style, as passers-by, but never as users. In sports courts they are never playing sports, in libraries never reading books, as if underlining the artifice of the operation. On the published architects’ side, plans are redrawn, models remade (or simply made), projects invented (“for a private customer”), buildings “cleaned,” garbage bins removed, signs temporarily removed, objects of everyday life erased, people invited to leave. If “post-occupancy” was the promise that buildings were to be launched into society and observed through the process of their appropriation by human beings, then *El Croquis* holds the promise of an architecture never to be occupied or inhabited, where spaces remain pristine, eternally diurnal.