TEAM 10 AND LEVINAS: BUILDING TOWARD UTOPIA

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Abstract

The devastation of World War II posed the question of what it means to reconstruct not only buildings and cities, but the conditions of possibility of the polis. In this postwar climate, a number of thinkers in both philosophy and architecture called for a radical interrogation of the nature of social relations as well as the human bond. French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and the architectural collective Team 10 responded to this call with a strong utopian vision, based on the convergence between an unconditional appreciation of the singularity of human beings and a critique of the technocratic worldview endorsed by late modernism. As Team 10 and Levinas emerged from a European society barely recovering from unspeakable acts of atrocity, they provided a stunningly similar critique of human subjectivity, assumed as autonomous and self-sovereign agency. The claim of this essay is that Team 10’s project of a “utopia of the present” may be the society Levinas envisioned under the sign of shalom: a polis in which the ideal of the good life is a construction in which doors are perennially open.
In the aftermath of WWII, with entire cities in Germany and Japan leveled to rubble, the rebuilding of the *polis* became the site for a radical reimagining of the human self, both individually and collectively. The question of what it means to reconstruct, and for whom, naturally raised the issue of what type of construction existed in the first place. “Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then we can build,” wrote Martin Heidegger in his celebrated meditation on the nature of the abode. But what does dwelling actually mean? What role does the ground, the earth as the foundation of all dwelling, play in the project of building a home for ourselves? And is there a distinction to be drawn between a radically virgin, or unbuilt ground, and a built one? Can we think of construction ex nihilo or is construction always already reconstruction? These are some of the questions that philosophers and architects pursued in their interrogation of that ancient dream of the Western political community known as the good life.

In this essay, I am going to explore two very different answers to the question of post-WWII reconstruction by French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and the architectural collective Team 10. Levinas and Team 10 reacted separately yet simultaneously to WWII, the Holocaust, and the technocratic direction of modernism as they demanded that philosophers and architects reevaluate their conceptions of the self and their relation to the world around them. Levinas’s experiences as a Jewish soldier and prisoner of war during the Holocaust came to characterize his writings, as he produced a post-Holocaust reimagining of ethics and ontology. Team 10 united under a
similar mission: to realize a new system of postwar ethics through the rebuilding of the city.

The core members of Team 10 originally began meeting at the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Modern (CIAM), an organization formed in 1928 that served as a platform for prominent architects who sought to spread the principles of modernism. “Team 10” became the nickname for the younger generation of architects that were meant to revive the CIAM, and the group continued to meet as an independent collective after the CIAM disbanded in 1959 (Risselda). Due to the ambiguous nature of membership and the diverse architects that participated in the group over time, I will focus on the ideas and principles that emerged from Team 10 immediately after their break from the CIAM. I will pull selections from the “Team 10 Primer” to articulate the ways in which Emmanuel Levinas and Team 10 produced similar understandings of ethics, being, and the good life. Ultimately, I will argue that Team 10’s vision acts as an architectural realization of Levinas’s ethical ontology, as the postwar city became the site for the reconstruction of nothing less than the human subject.

For the members of Team 10, modernism presented an inadequate expression of human relations, social spaces, and ultimately, the good life. Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck argued that modern architecture had become obsessed with its own technique, “applying on a purely technical, mechanical, and decorative level, not the essence but what was gleaned from it in order to give the pretense of moving more effectively” (Smithson 374). Modern architecture had forsaken its essential role in accommodating the dynamic needs of society in favor of a shallow aesthetic and form-based technical dogma. For Van Eyck and the rest of Team 10, society’s ever-changing relations of individual and community still “move along the same old groove,” but modern architecture had resorted to the same techniques and principles “for the last 30 years” (Smithson 374). Many architects had become occupied with the
superficial procedures and traditions of modern architecture, losing sight of the world they were building for and falling behind the epoch of the times.

The members of Team 10 each expressed a frustration with architects who were continuously retreating into the stagnant and technical doctrine of modernism. As Spanish architect Jose Antonio declared in 1961, "We need thousands and thousands of architects to think less about 'Architecture,' money, or the cities of the year 2000, and more about their trade as architects. Let them work tied by a leg so that they cannot stray too far from the earth in which they have their roots or from the men they know best" (Smithson 37).

Architects had to cease to concern themselves with formal ideas of "Architecture" so that they could recover the inherently social essence of building. Jose Antonio’s critique of modernism recalls Levinas’s ontology, in which he is suspicious of traditions that approach being as something that is self-evident and self-oriented. Many members of Team 10 were dissatisfied with modern architects who approached architecture as “that which is in and for itself,” (Levinas 105). This means that modern architects conceived of architecture as existing apart from society, continuing to build not for the community but for the sake of architecture itself. For Team 10, the modern architects who approached architecture as an isolated craft had rendered the act of building “sterile and academic, literally abstract”—elevated in a self-obsessed ivory tower and ultimately losing sight of its place in the community (Bakema 374). Levinas would argue that modern architecture’s occupation with itself and persistent referral to its own formalist doctrine serve to “affirm the fact of remaining in oneself, returning to oneself, positing oneself as a oneself, as the sense of the world, as the sense of life” (105). When Team 10 launched their attack on modernism, it was not merely a discursive critique. Their criticism acted as a Levinasian re-
imagining of the being of architecture not as an isolated technical art form, but rather as rooted in the social world.

For Team 10, modern architecture’s alienation from humanity was rooted in an ontological orientation that was negligent of ethics. As Polish architect Jerzy Soltan posits, “superficial bourgeois modernism in architecture, supported by some superficial trends in other plastic arts of today, is of the utmost danger to the sanity and health of the city planning and building” (Smithson 47). Modernism’s emphasis on form and function led to a mode of architecture that was purely for the sake of building, as many architects concerned themselves with sleek grid-like forms, industrial utility, and machine-like efficiency in their buildings, defying architecture’s fundamental moral responsibility to the community. As modern architects continued to espouse functionalist doctrine and reproduce the same socially out-of-touch spaces, they displayed a disregard for community that acted as a disavowal of ethics more broadly. As Levinas posits, “ethics arises in the relation to the other,” who “straightaway imposes himself upon my responsibility: goodness, mercy, or charity” (115). Neglect of this prior responsibility to the other negates the very possibility of ethics or goodness. For Team 10, modern architecture’s atomistic notion of the human as an autonomous and fundamentally selfish agent denied this fundamental interconnectedness with and responsibility for society, which would have rendered the reconstruction of the traditional modernist polis a threat to the good life.

The architects of Team 10 thus called for “a new beginning” for architecture in society. In the Team 10 Primer, published in 1962, the group declared its mission of “inducing, as it were, into the bloodstream of the architect an understanding and feeling for the patterns, the aspirations, the artifacts, the tools, the modes of transportation and communications of present-day society, so that he can as a natural thing build towards that society’s realization-of-itself”
Smithson 3). Team 10 sought to ground the very being of architecture in its social essence, as society shapes architecture and architecture helps society actualize itself. This new beginning for architecture, however, was not simply an ideological re-orientation or a rhetorical set of principles. In order for architecture to embody its being in society and for society, the aim was not “to theorize but to build, for only through construction can a Utopia of the present be realized” (Smithson 3).

In order to build this new vision of architecture, Team 10 had to succeed where modernism failed by interrogating how building is always already an interpretation of dwelling, its modes and paradigms, and what building really meant in a rapidly changing world. Post-war society required new urban expressions of social life that reflected the desire for a radical innovation of the stale and potentially asphyxiating doctrine of the “good life,” whose exclusionary elements did not prevent the atrocities of the Holocaust and WWII. An investigation into the essence of architecture would provide a foundation from which to build a world irrevocably changed by the barbarity of WWII, allowing architects to strip themselves of the dangerous ideologies that informed modernism and the rise of fascism. Spanish architect J.A. Coderch declared that to bring about this vision of architecture,

“I believe that we must first rid ourselves of many ideas which appear clear but are false, of many hollow words, and work with that good will that is translated into one’s own work and teaching rather than with a mere concentration on doctrinaireism” (Smithson 37).

Architects had to dismantle the constraints of doctrine, tradition, and preconceived notions of what ‘architecture’ is in order to uncover a truth in architectural craft. Dutch architect JB Bakema echoed this sentiment when he asserted that “young architects must be critical about the social forces of the post-war period in order to find a real base for the structures
for housing ‘the great number’” (Smithson 35). For the members of Team 10, the starting point of architecture was interrogation, as the architect had to problematize the relation between the self and society in order to build. The true being of architecture could only be realized when the architect stripped away the ideologies that informed the modern movement and the postwar period more broadly.

The essence of the being of architecture, for Team 10, was rooted in society. The architect was not a being-in-itself, isolated in their craft and building for the sake of building, but rather a being-in-the-world who, in this sense, always already dwells in built spaces that govern her existing among others and for others. The architect must thus be the conduit for the fundamental sociality of being, because “we are never, me and the other, alone in the world” (Levinas 110). For Bakema, recognizing the self as a being-in-the-world, which is constructed, organized, and thus imbued with architectural form and function, served as the foundation for rethinking architecture, as “our relation with total life has to be acknowledged as the basic element in the evolution of our social pattern, and the architect has to abandon his artificial isolation” (Smithson 35).

Team 10’s ideas of a true and ethical architecture are coherent with Levinas’s critique of ontology, which requires that the human subject be conceived not as a primitive unattached being, but rather as a dependent agent whose self-understanding is hostage to the inexhaustible demand that others exercise on it. In “The Aim of Team 10,” the collective declared that they would plan communities “where each building is a live thing and a natural extension of others. Together they will make the places where a man can realize what he wishes to be” (Smithson 3). For the architect to tap into the truest form of architecture, she had to reimagine architecture as an organic extension of society, an expression of the unity and sociality of mankind, a form of being that is
fundamentally entrenched in humanity. Team 10 approached architecture as a way to realize our being-in-the-world, as they sought to erect spaces where man could actualize his true place in the world among others.

But what does this being-among-others really entail? As a philosopher, Levinas pushed some of the intuitions at the core of Team 10 even further. Being-in-the-world, for him, is not merely living holistically in human society. Because we are always already in the world and among others, the Other has a constitutive role with respect to how we understand ourselves as human. Thus for Levinas, the “Other” is not merely someone who bears different attributes, but rather the Other is the only way in which I am capable of recognizing my own uniqueness as a human agent. If I, as a human self, were not able to respond to the precious and irreplaceable singularity of the Other, I wouldn’t perceive myself as I do. As Levinas posits, “the Other is other because of me: unique and in some manner different than the individual belonging to the genus” (106). Being human, in this perspective, doesn’t mean having the ability to legislate for oneself, autonomously from everybody else, but rather to feel the call of the Other, responding to the threat that always exposes them to the risk of disappearing.

This fragility, which defines the Other’s ethical essence, is the truly universal characteristic, which does not pertain to the people I recognize and love, but instead extends to all others. In this sense, for Levinas it is paramount that the Other be the stranger that I cannot recognize among my neighbors or friends, can’t fully identify as belonging to a familiar classification (ie, nurse, mother, American)—a faceless face that I cannot imagine or place. I exist only in the face of the absolute alterity of the Other; as my relation to the Other “is the originary place of identification” (110). My own identity is thus at stake in the survival of the Other; his death is my death, his vulnerability calls out to me for my protection, mercy, and love. My very being is for the Other. As Levinas posits, “someone
concerns me; the Other concerns me,” and through this concern, “there is a passage to the human,” as we recognize the vulnerability of the Other in the “defenselessness and nudity of his face” (108). Responsibility to the naked and vulnerable Other is what makes us truly human, and through our concern for the Other we discover goodness.

Levinas’s call to the Other elucidates the ideas and principles of Team 10. Team 10 declared that in order to achieve a “Utopia of the present,” the architect must build for-the-other, as architecture is founded upon a prior moral obligation to society. As the group declared in their mission statement: “to build has a special meaning in that the architect’s responsibility towards the individual or groups he builds for, and towards the cohesion and convenience of the collective structure to which they belong, is taken as being an absolute responsibility” (Smithson 3). The architect, as a being-in-the-world, must recognize that “responsibility is the first language” of both the self and the architectural trade (Levinas 108). For Team 10, the architect had to face his being as one that was fundamentally for others—a being that has an absolute imperative to respond to and build for the call of the Other. The architect must build in order to house the multitudes, to construct the places where the masses work and eat and dwell, to render the urban landscape hospitable, to create spaces that allow man and society to realize itself in its mutual interdependence. The architect had to recognize a fundamental alliance between the self and the Other and, as Coderch states, the architect thus needed to work with “dedication, craftsmanship, good will... and above all, love, which is acceptance and giving, not possession and domination—all these must be taken hold of and clung to, for these are the true values” of being, and thus, of architecture (Smithson 37). We bear responsibility for the Other, we care for the Other, and ultimately, the goodness of humanity lies in loving the Other, reaching out to the Other, building for the Other.
Although Team 10 had a consistently communitarian orientation, they did not simply build for the immediate client, neighborhood, or social group. While they did build to connect neighbors and communities, there was a prior sense of obligation, a more essential call to build for a more fundamental individual that they felt responsible for. As Bakema recalled,

“An old and famous American architect said to another who was much younger and was asking for his advice: ‘Open your eyes wide and look; it is much easier than you think… Behind every building that you see there is a man that you don’t see.’ A man, he said. He did not mention whether he was an architect or not” (Smithson 35).

This human, I want to suggest, is Levinas’s Other: an individual we cannot identify, whose face we cannot fully grasp. This Other is who the architect builds for—the faceless dweller of the office or apartment building, the man who is “emptied of all ‘social role,’ and who, thus, in his nudity—his destitution, his morality,” fundamentally imposes himself as a responsibility on the architect (Levinas 115). The stranger’s imposition serves as an immediate call for love and charity, and it with this fundamental “acceptance of the anonymous” that the Team 10 architects had to build (Smithson 46). The architects of Team 10 built for the stranger, that anonymous Other, thus bearing a responsibility that “is transcendence from one to the other… from the unique to the unique, before all community: love of the stranger, hence holier, higher than any fraternity” (Levinas 108). Team 10 extended the kind of ontological charity to the anonymous that, for Levinas, would serve as the only possibility for goodness.

For Team 10, architecture’s ultimate function was to reveal the ethical truth of being. Van Eyck stated that “although architecture answers very tangible functions, ultimately its object… is to express through men and for men (through ‘us’ and for us) the real essence of existence” (Smithson 33). Team
10’s mission ultimately served as an expression of a Levinasian ethical ontology, as being is articulated and realized through building as in-the-world and for-the-Other. Team 10 built out of care for the community, for the anonymous multitudes, and for the Other, and sought to erect interconnected cities that facilitated that love and hospitality toward the Other. This urban vision recalls Levinas’s own Utopian dream that he expresses in architectural terms:

“I call love peace... peace is sociality, it is to attend to the other. It means not to close one’s shutters, not to close one’s door, but to put a mezuzah, a sign of welcome, on the doorpost. In a society placed under the sign of shalom, man always cedes his place to the Other” (113).

For both Team 10 and Levinas, Utopia is a society of open doors, of sociality and peace, circulation and connection. Both Levinas and Van Eyck discuss the role of the closed door as a signifier for isolation, as Van Eyck inquires, “what is a door? A flat surface with hinges and a lock constituting a hard terrifying border line? When you pass through a door like that are you not divided?” (Smithson 95). Team 10 sought to obliterate the solitude of the closed door, open man up to his true social essence, and ultimately achieve a society of shalom. As Bakema asserted, society can only find this peace, this “belonging-together, by means of the way we express in housing how to live together” (Smithson 39). Team 10 and Levinas therefore envisioned parallel Utopias, with Team 10 ultimately providing an urban expression of the imperative love for the Other.

As Team 10 and Levinas both emerged from a society recovering from an unprecedented destruction, it is no coincidence that they called for similar visions of Utopia, a new and imperative system of ethics, and a world characterized only by a peaceful sociality. The isolated conceptions of “being” that disavow the Other perpetuated the technocratic doctrines of modernism, and proved incapable of containing the autocratic regimes behind the devastation of WW II. Levinas
and Team 10 thus endorsed the need to give ethics comes priority over ontology, which meant that a sense of responsibility toward the Other is the core of our understanding of human existence. Team 10’s “Utopia of the present” may be the society Levinas envisioned under the sign of shalom: a polis in which the ideal of the good life is a construction in which doors are perennially open—a new architectural expression of being that recognized the naked vulnerability of the Other, bore responsibility for him, and fundamentally cared for him.
Works Cited
