CHAPTER 9

Carte Blanche?

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> 'This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page.'
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> — GEORGES PEREC, *ESPÈCES D'ESPACES* [*SPECIES OF SPACES*] (1974)[1]

Staring at the blank screen in front of me, I began to wonder about the space of architectural writing, the space of writing in general. What does it mean to approach the surface of a white page, whether it be paper or screen, as a 'space'? How will I respond to the solicitation of the empty rectangle in front of me, which so insistently stares back? Will I hover over it, tread across it, delve into it? By now I am already suspended over that void, in thrall to the anxiety and pleasure it must cause, in varying measures, to anyone who is drawn to it. Once a line has been thrown across this space, it feels a bit like walking a tightrope: every sign marks a step across the abyss of the page, and the web of words that forms before our eyes gives us the impression of inhabiting that world, gradually, until we have reached an end. Is the writer's act, then, somehow akin to that of the funambulist, ever intent on finding a balance between an exhilarating sense of omnipotence and the awareness of one's own limits in a grounded and finite world? Meanwhile, the hesitant walk of words has become steadier and, along the way, this short piece has found its title …

One way of thinking about architecture, then, might be to question the notion of 'carte blanche' as a seemingly endless field of potentialities. Through its material evolution from parchment paper to computer screen, this homelike space has provided an immaculate cradle for various forms of representation: a sort of primal scene that is silently shared by art, design and writing practices

alike.[2] As Kenya Hara reminds us, the invention of white paper brought about a new mode of perception with far-reaching consequences, not only in terms of practical applications but also of imaginative impact.[3] Hence, in our digital age, the enduring power of the blank sheet still evokes a zero degree of the creative imagination. Its symbolic force has received a further boost by the recent revival of utopian thinking over the past decade; for instance, a few years ago, Anthony Vidler opened a lecture at the Architectural Association speaking to the blank screen: 'As you may see, my first slide is a slide of utopia … .'[4]

But what does it mean to recognise the white canvas as a space of potentialities? Historically, its cultural import has been related to the formation of a worldview based on subject–object relations. For Michel de Certeau, the blank page marked the advent of the 'scriptural economy' in modern societies. This shift occurred when writing became established as a concrete practice, challenging the primacy of orality in the production and reproduction of knowledge. As a result of this 'Cartesian move', the modern subject was empowered to master any field of human activity by taking a strategic distance from it and confronting it as a separate object. The blank page therefore became a 'place of production' open to different uses and, crucially, 'a place where the ambiguities of the world have been exorcised'.[5] By evoking *la page blanche* in distinctly spatial terms, de Certeau hinted at a terrain of operations with its own imaginative depth that could be managed and manipulated at will. A breeding ground of modern subjectivity:

> In front of his blank page, every child is already put in the position of the industrialist, the urban planner, or the Cartesian philosopher – the position of having to manage a space that is his own and distinct from all others and in which he can exercise his own will.[6]

This process of abstraction reached its apogee in the early 20th century, when the modernist avant-garde gave fresh impetus to the idea of tabula rasa in architecture and urbanism. In the work of Le Corbusier, for instance, the blank page was transformed from symbolic locus of production into a virgin land to be colonised by the *esprit nouveau*. An eloquent example is provided by the empty figure published in his seminal 1924 book, *Urbanisme*, bearing only the

following line in its midst: 'Left blank for a work expressing modern feeling.'[7] For all its utopian thrust, however, the blankness was not meant to invite the whims of an unbridled imagination. Averse to romantic individualism, Le Corbusier invoked instead a gesture inspired by 'the most rational inquiry'; a work that would meet the demands of modern life. For the new zeitgeist favoured the rule over the exception: 'This modern sentiment is a spirit of geometry, a spirit of construction and synthesis. Exactitude and order are its essential condition.'[8] The provocative invitation to fill in the blank suggested a liberatory act yet, at the same time, a highly structured one. Adapting a famous surrealist epigram, we may add a retrospective subtext to Le Corbusier's caption: *Ceci n'est pas une carte blanche*.[9]

Fifty years later, a blank illustration opened an altogether different French book: *Espèces d'espaces*, Georges Perec's series of musings on space that zoomed out from the author's bed on to the wider world. As the author explained in the Foreword:

> The subject of this book is not the void exactly, but rather what there is round about or inside it […]. To start with, then, there isn't very much: nothingness, the impalpable, the virtually immaterial; extension, the external, what is external to us, what we move about in the midst of, our ambient milieu, the space around us.[10]

The enigmatically blank figure was in fact a citation of a previous literary work, Lewis Carroll's nonsensical poem *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876).[11] Perec sought to (dis)orient his reader with reference to the 'Map of the Ocean' used in Carroll's fictional quest for an imaginary creature. As related in the section of the poem titled 'The Bellman's Speech', the travelling crew mistrusted the conventional signs of cartography and praised Captain Bellman for finding a map they could all understand: '"A perfect and absolute blank!"'[12] Perec's mischievous reference to Carroll's map offers a vivid counterpoint to Le Corbusier's empty illustration. Carte blanche here is not a place of production to be harnessed towards modern progress, but rather a space of poetic imagination that revives, through parody, a faded historical precedent.

These different attitudes to the creative imagination of space intersect, unexpectedly, in the biography of the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, a one-

time architecture student at Istanbul Technical University. Reflecting on why he did *not* become an architect, Pamuk recounts his long-standing fascination with Istanbul's old houses, whose everyday uses so often subvert their original design. To the architect's projective thinking, he preferred the 'accommodating imagination' whereby existing buildings are adapted to the ever-changing needs and tastes of their occupants: 'So the imagination in question is not in service to a person who is creating new worlds on a blank sheet of paper, it is in service to someone who is trying to fit in with a world already made.'[13] After ditching architecture to become a writer, however, Pamuk's creative activity was still confronted with an empty space – no less vertiginous than the one he had left behind:

> I abandoned the great empty architectural drawing sheets that thrilled and frightened me, making my head spin, and instead sat down to stare at the blank writing paper that thrilled and frightened me just as much.[14]

Pamuk has since been designing his novels in painstaking detail as though they were literary constructions, a further testimony to the porous boundary between the realms of words and buildings that is often traversed by architects and writers alike (think for instance of John Hejduk's poetry, of Jorge Luis Borges's architectures, etc). In hindsight, his change of path made him reconsider the raison d'être of architecture itself:

> Why didn't I become an architect? Answer: Because I thought the sheets of paper on which I was to pour my dreams were blank. But after twenty-five years of writing, I have come to understand that those pages are never blank.[15]

In a reversal of Bellman's speech, this anecdote prompts us to rethink the white page as an imperfect and relative space, a blank in which the ambiguities of the world are recognised rather than exorcised. Carte blanche, then, may also unfold into a critical space: one that symbolises not only a field of creative possibilities but also the inherent limitations that are inscribed in it. To cite Giorgio Agamben, we are confronted with the philosophical issue of

'potentiality', originally defined by Aristotle as the human faculty that manifests itself in the ability to do, or *not* to do something – that is, in the latter case, a voluntary privation of one's own power. Interestingly, Agamben uses poetry and architecture as examples of this faculty: '[W]e say of the architect that he or she has the *potential* to build, of the poet that he or she has the *potential* to write poems.' And, conversely, 'the architect is potential insofar as he has the potential to not-build, the poet the potential to not-write poems.'[16]

In some sense, the blank spaces framed by Le Corbusier and Perec can be regarded as partial acknowledgements of this potentiality: negative moments in which their architectural and poetic expressions were provisionally suspended. Far from being a nihilistic gesture, the acceptance of non-being might constitute the starting point towards a praxis that mobilises the critical and creative imaginations as mutually nourishing forces. Can we therefore imagine a blank space born out of the interplay between the architect's spirit of geometry and the writer's spirit of finesse? And what kind of space would that be?

Notes

1 Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces* (1974), translated by John Sturrock, Penguin (London), 1999, p 13.

2 Slavoj Žižek, for instance, refers to the whiteness of the film screen as a place onto which our inner drives are projected; that is, the place where the fragile relationship between reality and fantasy is played out. See *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, scripted and presented by Žižek, directed by Sophie Fiennes, 2006.

3 Kenya Hara, *White*, Lars Müller (Baden), 2010, p 14.

4 Anthony Vidler, 'The Necessity of Utopia', lecture, Architectural Association (London), 19 February 2007.

5 Michel de Certeau (1980), *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall, University of California Press (Berkeley, California), 1984, p 134.

6 Ibid.

7 Le Corbusier, *The City of To-morrow* (*Urbanisme*, 1924), translated by Frederick Etchells, Dover Publications (Mineola, New York), 1987, p 40.

8 Ibid, p 38.

9 The reference is to René Magritte's 1929 painting *La Trahison des images* [The Treachery of Images]. In Le Corbusier's blank figure, the message was placed right in the middle of the rectangular frame: the text was elevated from caption to slogan, temporarily occupying the place of a future work.

10 Perec, *Species of Spaces*, p 5.

11 Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark*, Macmillan (London), 1876.

12 Ibid. Henry Holiday's original illustration of Bellman's 'Ocean-Chart' included a series of illogical orientations written all around the edges of the empty frame.