

# **TRANSGRESSION – A NEW PARADIGM?**

## **European Architectural History Network Thematic Conference**

Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Bretagne (Rennes)  
17-21 November 2021

The past few years have witnessed a proliferation of transgressive manifestations in the architectural field, echoing a propensity to dismiss rules and norms in many social and political circumstances unfolding around us.

Transgression was, however, always part of our world and of our way of functioning, presenting a centrifugal force opposing the regulating laws of order – a quest of liberty versus the quest of harmony. The very act of inhabiting a given space might be understood as an act of transgression. Why, then, dedicate a conference to this theme? Certainly, the playing and bargaining with normativity is a constant of life as such, but what if the increasing number of diverse transgressive stances is the response to an era threatened by crises and agitated by radical mutations? And what if this troubled climate could be understood as the consequence of modernity's will to embrace the world in its entirety, an ambitious project that ultimately engendered control and exclusion?

By formulating these questions, the conference invites us to reflect on transgression – as concept, positioning and posture – as a crucial element at the core of an epistemology in the making.

*The theme of this conference builds up on an on-going project, which explores since 2017 transgression in the small circle of ENSA Bretagne (and its surroundings) and in a larger circle of international scholars.*

## **CALL FOR PAPERS**

Rules played a major role in establishing architecture as a discipline. Norms and canons regulated its entire field, from the conceptualization of architectural thinking to the conceiving of edifices and their further materialization. With the era of modernity, a dense net of normativity was weaved progressively, being institutionalized by the historicization of the discipline at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and extended and complexified by the emergence of mass society. At the core of this normative system, space was raised into an authoritative instrument of power and control as an effective capital producer (see Engels' *The Housing Question*), as well as an exclusion marker (see Banister Fletcher's "non-historical styles"). Space was expected not only to solve the needs of the new era, but also to differentiate and regulate what architecture was and meant.

What happens outside such normative thinking? What about those "non-architectures" disregarded by Banister Fletcher – comprising, besides the "styles" of peripheral cultures, the informal dwellings of precarious populations? What about the furtive shelters of those deprived of space (homeless/ migrants/ refugees...)? Is architecture conceivable solely within regulated boundaries? What happens when they are trespassed and when rules are broken? Transgression and transgressive acts were always part of architecture. Bataille had explicitly stated this intrusion in his interwar dictionary, while Tschumi perceived it half a century later as the actual condition of architecture. However, beyond any such constant play and bargaining with normativity, we have recently witnessed an accumulation and multiplication of transgressive manifestations in the architectural field. It is as if transgression – as concept, positioning and posture – would ask to be understood as an episteme: a paradigm showing the way out of modernity.

The conference aims to look at transgression in its manifold forms and stances – not only as a

reaction against norms and rules, but in particular as an answer to our agitated times of radical (and highly anxiogenic) mutations. By doing so, we propose to analyze transgression both as tactics of survival and as strategy against the operating system(s). If our inquiry seems to address the immediate present, we definitely pose modernity with its dense net of normativity as the fundament that generated the recent wave of transgressiveness. Hence we believe that only by analyzing this historic causality and by going beyond the contingent alternative nature of transgression can we understand the deep causes, dynamics and mechanisms of its eruption. We invite scholars to reflect on transgression along one of these three themes: **practice/ theory/ history**.

## **PRACTICE**

The very act of inhabiting a given space is an act of transgression. This theme proposes to explore transgression from practical perspectives, bringing together the tactics deployed by inhabitants and the strategies elaborated by makers (architects and/ or developers). Be it by necessity or by will, their different ways of being transgressive could be understood in relation to the existing rules – from the ordinary or abusive appropriation of the inhabited space to infringing the regulation of the architectural profession.

Against the rules? Outside the rules? Or no rules at all? These questions could be addressed from the point of view of inhabitants: the informal practices of precarious and displaced populations, of those deprived of space, of communities of counterculture; but also the “informalization” of mass-housing developments by illegal extensions or annexation of the common space. The same questions could serve to analyze the disruptive urbanities, for the less privileged (such as the *gecekondus*) or the very rich (like gated communities), multiplied by developers avid of capital and disregarding of laws. Or, finally, these questions could apply to the practice of architects who attempt to go beyond the limit(ation)s of their profession.

## **THEORY**

How could transgression be theorized as a concept? How could transgressive manifestations be understood in theoretical terms?

This theme invites participants to situate the topic of this conference within an epistemological frame. Could we consider the current proliferation of transgressiveness as a reaction against the normative system of modernity and its excesses? The ambitious project of modernity strove to imagine a holistic taxonomization of the world in its entirety, aiming to embrace its various geographies and to scrutinize the temporal depth of its development. But by doing that, it provided powerful instruments (time and space) of control and exclusion. Space conceptualization, especially in architecture, played a major role in the fabrication of this constraining normativity. All along the process, this centrality of space was inseparable from notions (and actions) of order and ordering (see Agamben and his reading of Carl Schmitt’s *nomos*).

A critical analysis of the crises that have shaken modernity, including a reevaluation of the postmodern theories that questioned the understanding of time and space (i.e., Venturi or Eisenman), could shed light on the possible change of paradigm.

Given the undeniable ambiguity of dealing with norms, it would be useful to comprehend how transgression could be normalized – be it from outside (the system mimicking flexibility) or from inside. Is being alternative the new norm?

## HISTORY

While the field and profession of architecture, as well as the profession, were extended and democratized, architectural historiography remained for a long while attached to canons, leaving outside its written boundaries all other forms of manifestations related to the act of building. Besides the guiding line of time, exercising already a canonical pressure, the conceptualization of space as the central element of architecture operated a discriminatory approach to the discipline. This is what Banister Fletcher's "non-historical" styles revealed: an incapacity to deal with space, being ingeniously limited to decorative patterns, however sophisticated those were. Nevertheless, in the wake of the changes engaged by "New History" with the opening towards other disciplines (particularly sociology, anthropology, geography), architectural historiography enlarged its *oikumene* and diversified its (alternative) storyline, taking into account "peripheral" geographies and "ordinary" topics.

How extensible is the field of architecture today? How far can it go (even if in several cases its openings more resemble dead-ends)? But even more: after the announced death of history (Fukuyama) how can one write history in the age of post-history (Flusser)? This theme invites participants to meditate on these questions, bearing in mind the historiographical concerns of today (informalities, migrations, ecology...) and their blending into a sphere of acute presentness. This turn in the making triggers yet another question: is history still history?

Please submit your proposal of no more than 300 words (clearly specifying the theme you want to apply for), accompanied by a two-page curriculum vitae. The resulting file, titled as following FAMILY NAME\_THEME, should be uploaded to

<https://transgression.sciencesconf.org/submission/submit>

**before 25 April 2021.**

### Key dates:

- 25 April 2021 = deadline for sending proposals
- 30 May 2021 = notification of the selection
- 29 August 2021 = drafts of the papers to be sent to the session chairs
- 17-21 November 2021 = conference

Conference website : <https://transgression.sciencesconf.org/>

Contact : [transgression@sciencesconf.org](mailto:transgression@sciencesconf.org)

**GRIEF**

**ENS AB**

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