Paxton after Paxton

Form as formlessness from dance to architecture

dança
arquitetura
filosofia
contato improvisação
recursividade

dance
architecture
philosophy
contact improvisation
recursivity

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Em 1851, o jardineiro Joseph Paxton perturbou pressupostos plenamente enraizados sobre a arquitetura com o seu radical sistema construtivo concebido para a Exposição Universal: o Palácio de Cristal demonstrou não só que a materialidade da construção estava destinada a desviar-se para caminhos sem precedentes graças ao advento de novas tecnologias – como a chapa de vidro e o ferro fundido – mas também que a modularidade na construção, embora familiar à cultura tectónica ocidental, podia significar versatilidade na montagem e desmontagem. Em 1972, o coreógrafo Steve Paxton efetuou uma desorganização análoga das expectativas na esfera da dança com o advento de uma forma não prescrita: o desenvolvimento do Contato Improvisação apontou para possibilidades heterodoxas latentes no encontro entre bailarinos, uma direção que não era corrente entre as noções generalizadas sobre o que constituía a dança erudita porque ia além da prescrição de gestos e da previsibilidade de resultados. Ambos os Paxtons mobilizaram o pensamento de forma profunda e irreversível nos seus campos por gerações porvir. Este artigo propõe uma interpretação transversal destes modos revolucionários de prática com o objetivo de repensar a postura dos arquitectos perante o ambiente construído. Neste sentido, o que liga as transformações não relacionadas trazidas por ambos os Paxtons reside na concepção da forma como uma estrutura recursiva. Poderá uma abordagem baseada no feedback tornar-se uma metodologia robusta para a arquitetura do século XXI? A última parte deste artigo sugere uma resposta positiva a esta questão, apresentando brevemente três exemplos contemporâneos que utilizam a forma como forma-informe através do trabalho de Lacaton & Vassal, Georges Descombes e Carla Juaçaba.

In 1851, gardener Joseph Paxton disturbed fully developed assumptions about architecture with his radical building system conceived for the Great Exhibition: the Crystal Palace demonstrated not only that the materiality of construction was bound to deviate into unprecedented paths thanks to the advent of new technologies – such as plate glass and cast iron – but also that modularity in construction, although familiar to Western tectonic culture, could mean fast assemblage and disassemblage. In 1972, choreographer Steve Paxton performed an analogous disorganization of expectations in the sphere of dance with the advent of an unscripted form: the development of Contact Improvisation testified to heterodoxical possibilities latent in the encounter between dancers, a direction that was not current among widely held notions about what constituted erudite dance because it went beyond the prescription of gestures and the predictability of outcomes. Both Paxtons have mobilized thought utterly and irreversibly in their fields for generations to come. This article proposes a transversal interpretation of these revolutionary ways of practice in order to rethink the stance of architects towards the built environment. In this sense, what connects the unrelated transformations brought forth by both Paxtons lies in the conception of form as a recursive structure. Could an approach based on feedback become a robust methodology for architecture in the 21st century? The last part of this article suggests a positive answer to this question, by briefly presenting three contemporary examples that deploy *form as formlessness* through the work of Lacaton & Vassal, Georges Descombes and Carla Juaçaba.

INTRODUCTION

Can a philosophy of movement reshape how we understand architecture? This paper proposes a transdisciplinary reconceptualization of the built environment grounded in the practice of dance. In order to do so, it traces the epistemological implications of two unrelated events that revolutionized their respective fields: on the one hand, the systematic approach developed by Joseph Paxton in 1851 with the assemblage of the Crystal Palace, and, on the other hand, the creation of Contact Improvisation (CI) led by Steve Paxton and others in 1972. These two movements – one architectural, the other choreographic – are placed in dialogue to explore how notions of feedback, flexibility, and emergence can inform architectural practice today. The paper is structured in four parts:

Part One examines the innovative aspects of the Crystal Palace through the lens of historian Sigfried Giedion and architectural theorist Kenneth Frampton. It focuses on how Joseph Paxton's use of widely available – yet largely overlooked – industrial materials became viable through the articulation of a latent lineage of tectonic rationalism, thereby marking a pivotal shift in the logic of architectural production.

Part Two outlines the emergence of Contact Improvisation drawing on anthropologist Cynthia Novack's account. It highlights the radical propositions of CI – such as the absence of predetermined choreography, the dissolution of authorial control, and the composition of movement grounded in anatomical constraints – to suggest the potential for a similar shift in architectural practice: one that embraces contingency, reciprocity, and the unfolding of form through embodied negotiation.

Part Three draws a methodological analogy between the two Paxtons, revealing a shared logic of open systems animated by external feedback. In both cases, form emerges not through imposition, but through responsiveness. Their originality lies not in defining a definitive shape, but in enabling structures – architectural or choreographic – to adapt and transform in dialogue with their contexts. *Formlessness*, here, is understood in relation to virtuality as the capacity to remain in flux.

Part four exemplifies the abstraction of *formlessness* in architectural practice based on the systematic approach deployed by the Crystal Palace and by Contact Improvisation. It presents three case studies by Lacaton & Vassal, Georges Descombes, and Carla Juaçaba. Their works exemplify how architectural form can remain open, adaptive, and contingent. These examples, previously analyzed through interviews (Lasalvia 2021), illustrate how form can emerge not from detached prescription, but from embracing the context, including its constraints.

JOSEPH PAXTON

After just eight days of design and a little over six months of construction, a colossally luminous structure rose in the heart of Britain in 1851 (Fig.1). The Crystal Palace was unlike anything the world had seen: although its author, Joseph Paxton, had experimented with similar components the previous year in a greenhouse for water lilies, the Hyde Park pavilion had no programmatic precedent in history. Never before had such an utilitarian structure been used to harbor an international exhibition. Perhaps this is so because the mechanized aesthetics embedded in its form was inhuman – a fact attested by its controversial effect on the Victorian mind, which was used to associating the positive developments of art and science to the familiar values of humanism established by the doctrine of classicism (Wittkower 1971). That such a monumental expression of glass and iron emerged from the workshops of England, the birthplace of industry, at such a late stage might surprise the historian of technique, given how long it took for industrial materials to find their way into civil architecture.

By 1851, already three generations into the industrial revolution, the timing for an epochal revelation was just right, and when it finally crystallized before an expectant public, it was acknowledged accordingly: "In contemplating the first great building which was not of solid masonry construction spectators were not slow to realize that here the standards by which architecture had hitherto been judged no longer held good", wrote the German Lothar Bucher in the aftermath of the universal exhibition (Giedion 2008, 253). The Crystal Palace marked a critical turning point: its unapologetic use of machine-made components signaled a profound shift in the logic of building. The delayed emergence of this specimen, despite decades of industrial capacity, echoes Bernard Stiegler's insight that "techniques evolve more quickly than culture" (Stiegler 1998, 12). In other words, disruptive innovations in the technological realm always have a phase of slow metabolization prior to wider social use becoming the norm. In this regard, the Crystal Palace is the documented case of a decisive tipping point in one of the oldest disciplines of humankind. After the demonstration of industrial manufacture applied to the arts of building was persuasively achieved, modernity in architecture could be fully admitted.

The transformation of standards operated by Joseph Paxton was not only limited to the materiality of construction, but also included the very logic of architectural conception. This Englishman was the agent capable of manifesting in large scale a way of thinking that had been maturing on the other side of *La Manche* for many decades, but which seldom saw the light of day as materialized buildings. This lineage includes the typological proposition of Antoine Quatremere de Quincy, the modular systematicity of Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand, the platonic classicism of Étienne Louis Boullée and the neo-gothic rationality of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. If *French revolutionary architecture* was effective in conceiving a robust theoretical framework for the future, it was the English industrial setting which ultimately allowed for the concretization of a new way to erect buildings. The effect caused by this is succinctly expressed by Kenneth Frampton, when he writes that: "The crystal palace was not so much a particular form as it was a building process made manifest as a total system [...]." (Frampton 2007, 34).

Fig.1 - Crystal Palace, Hyde Park, Transept. Papar negative photographed by Benjamin Brecknell Turner, 1852.

By approaching space with the pragmatic will to systematize it, Paxton composed his pavilion according to a modular logic. The module itself was a result of state of the art technology, which allowed for a load-bearing system rationalized to its static limit in order to achieve maximum transparency. The result can be described as flexible because, as a system, it was able to respond to input coming from the site. After the building was assembled, used and dismantled, it could be reassembled with both a different layout and volume by simply rearranging its components. In effect, this virtual possibility became actualized as relocation and redesign was precisely what happened as the pavilion moved addresses in 1852. In the aftermath of the Universal Exhibition, the Crystal Palace was transferred to Sydenham Hill, where it stayed until the structure was destroyed due to a fire in 1936. The relatively conservative layout of its second iteration barely matters for the current argument, since flexibility does not automatically guarantee avant-garde design. Following Frampton's interpretation, the most revolutionary aspect of this experience was not the form that the building assumed *per se,* but the possibilities afforded by its tectonic system, or, in other words, its *formlessness*.

STEVE PAXTON

In 1972, within the context of wider progressive cultural shifts related to civil and social rights, a group of young artists led by choreographer Steve Paxton created what was to be known as Contact Improvisation.[1] The development of this form was directly influenced by avant-garde explorations that blurred clear distinctions between authorial gestures and the expressions of the everyday. In fact, a genealogical link can be traced from John Cage and Merce Cunninham's experimentations with chance at Black Mountain College to the display of the ordinary by the young Paxton with the exhibition of the piece *Satisfying Lover* (1967) at the Judson Church Group. The early experiences in the career of the choreographer would influence his aesthetic vision and steer it toward the disorganization of expectations. In general terms, the common aspect behind these approaches could be described as bringing attention to whatever was already present, but which was for the most part overlooked.

According to the first generation that took part in the invention of Contact Improvisation, an interest towards the situatedness of the body came out of an exhaustion with precedents of dance tradition (such as preordained choreographic gender roles, the idea that movement should be expressive, structured or that its display should exhibit virtuosity). In pursuing an investigation that bent the legacy of formal dance, this group of young movers adopted a pragmatist-like attitude towards the body that focused strictly on what it could do – in relation to itself, in relation to other bodies, and, most of all, in relation to gravity.[2] From this small set of variables, viable articulations between parts were rehearsed and, perhaps unsurprisingly to art practices after Minimalism, the end result was not impoverished by the reduction of means, but, on the contrary, enhanced. More than 50 years later, this practice still proves to be a generous gateway for reflections that reach far beyond physical movement. From a methodological point of view, perhaps such fecund character owes to the phenomenological-like approach of this form, which is based on drawing attention to perceived experience in order to set forth refined relations – both intrinsic and extrinsic to the observer.

Described succinctly, CI movers engage in spontaneous encounters, usually in the duet form, which are choreographed on the spot. This means that conduction in this dance is not based on individual guidance, but stems from a playful structure that builds upon haptic hearing for an unrehearsed agreement to arise. Within this exchange, codependency is fundamental and practitioners constantly negotiate
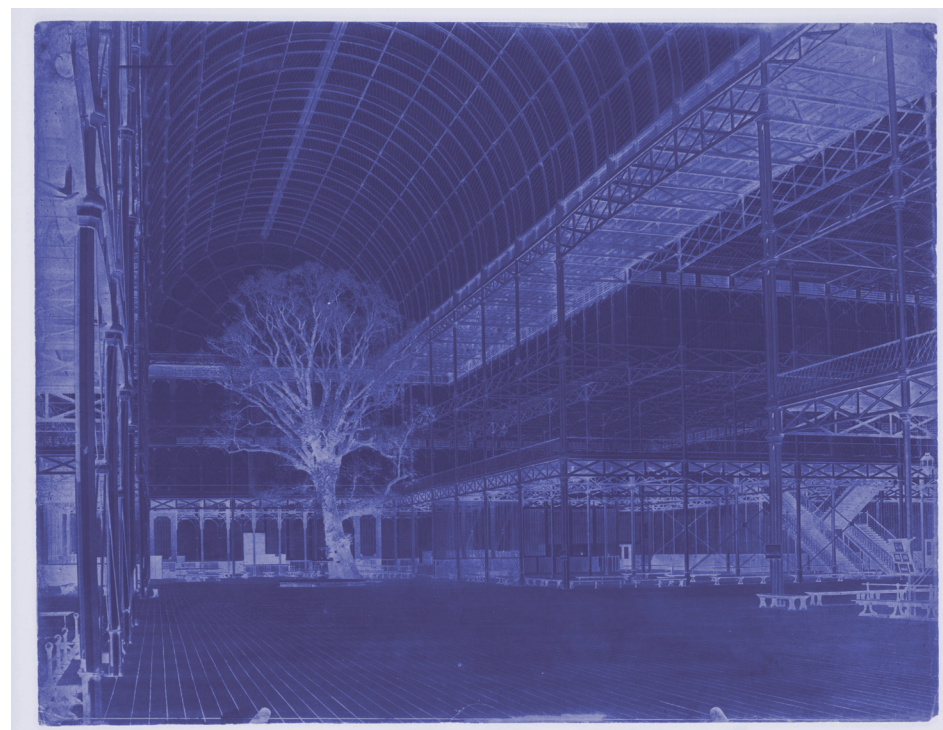
Fig.2 – Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith, performing with Freelance Dance, Northampton, MA, 1980. (In the background, left to right) Lisa Nelson, Daniel Lepkoff, Christina Svane. Photo by Stephen Petegorsky.

different arrangements so they can jointly respond to gravity (Fig.2). The result is a composite anatomy made from decentralized bodies, where the parties involved must fluidly operate based on a reflexive ability – the capacity to act and be acted upon – in order to engage with opportunities that are renewed at each instant.

Although the questions that lead to the formulation of Contact Improvisation were not explicitly ontological, Paxton's inquiry can be read as an *avant la lettre* investigation in agentic symmetry. CI's approach was to flatten the hierarchy between bodies who shared common motion so they could discover how to move about as one. With regard to the distribution of agency, this method was particularly productive in the sense that, by putting individual deliberation aside, the resulting event could not be explained away by attributing its cause exclusively to one entity or another. More dynamic than that, the spawning root for the shared path was a form emanating from the encounter itself, and, in this regard, something completely unknown to practitioners beforehand.

As an embodied proposition, Contact Improvisation revealed the latent potential of co-implication between parts of a relation. Its impact was not merely ethical – it also expanded the field of possibilities available to the participating bodies. Each encounter within this dance generates openings that are contingent upon the specific

constellation of elements present at a given moment. These emergent properties arise not from isolated parts, but from the dynamic interplay among them. With time and practice, this reciprocity becomes a reliable conduit for creative feedback – an improvisational current born from reciprocity and finely attuned to the mutuality of Newtonian physics.[3]

PAXTON AFTER PAXTON

The connection between Joseph Paxton and Steve Paxton is not one of direct influence, but of parallel emergence – an analogy born not from shared lineage, but from similar methodological instincts. In its embryonic sense, analogy implies different origins that give rise to comparable functions – which aptly characterizes the relationship proposed here. Both figures engage the virtual-actual pair through systematic composition: a method by which a wide range of variation can arise from a minimal set of rules. Their radicality lies in a shared sequence of operations: (a) affirming the constraints of a system, and (b) catalyzing contingent differences through feedback. In this way, form is not imposed but coaxed into emergence.

On the one hand, Joseph Paxton revealed the structural intervals of his bearing system as a compositional logic, arranging modular components – such as pillars and trusses – according to the spatial constraints of the site. Each iteration of the Crystal Palace was shaped by the interplay between internal system constraints and external demands, including programmatic requirements and topographic conditions. On the other hand, Steve Paxton embraced gravity and friction as external forces acting upon the body, conceiving a dance form in which performers engage spontaneously with these constraints. Using available surfaces – whether the floor or one another – dancers respond to tactile cues, navigating motion through

mutual sensitivity and embodied negotiation. From a conceptual standpoint, both systems create a virtual space for action grounded in necessary constraints. Specific configurations are not preordained, but emerge as inevitable responses to the conditions at hand. Could Steve Paxton's proposition offer architectural insights beyond the standardized modularity pioneered by Joseph Paxton?

The transposition of Contact Improvisation's implementation to architecture quickly encounters some obstacles, but it is not entirely infeasible. The greatest hindrance and benefit of such an undertaking has to do with the political relevance of the redefinition of the author's role promoted in the 1970s. If, in CI, formal dynamics arise from the transition of physical supports, it is evident that architecture cannot do without static stability. Thus, the possible mobility that this discipline can afford does not refer to the bearing system, but lies in the programing of uses, the specifications of site and the typification of building elements, all of which are capable of informing architectural form. Within this framework, the architect's role shifts from that of form-giver to one who responds to internal and external constraints as a dynamic way to articulate ever-changing solicitations.

Amid the time-scales of ephemeral performance and perennial edifices, the rhythms of dance and architecture could not be more distant from one another. Thus, the movement of a building must be understood by its successive transformations in time, which usually occur in a slow and dilated manner. With this in mind, a project systematized around the idea of *formlessness* is capable of producing a design that, by forgoing much precision in attributing a form tailored to a particular function, is capable of being transformed without having to conjecture the future with crystal clarity. This is not a new observation, since precisely this point has been the object of Also Rossi's critique of modern functionalism (Rossi, 2001).

To sum up this point, the notion of *formlessness* as developed here does not imply a disregard for the physical appearance of architectural outcomes. Rather, the flexibility it entails stems from a deep engagement with the dynamics of a given milieu. Form, in this view, becomes receptive to the unavoidable forces that emerge from context. In this light, perhaps the most significant translatable element from Contact Improvisation to architecture is its underlying motivation: actions arise not from a premeditated will, but from a desire to explore the evolving relationships between the multiple agencies involved in a building's life. Based on this, architecture can be rethought as a configuration that voluntarily unfolds in time in correspondence to physical and/or social phenomena, whose order is always to change (Brand, 1995).

FORM AS FORMLESSNESS: THREE CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES

The ideas explored thus far can be grounded in recent architectural practice through three distinct case studies. These examples were deliberately chosen to reflect a diversity of scales – both in terms of architectural offices and project typologies. They range from large-scale housing interventions in Paris, to a landscape transformation in Geneva, and a temporary multi-purpose pavilion in Rio de Janeiro. Correspondingly, the practices behind them span from the internationally renowned Lacaton & Vassal, to the mid-sized studio of Georges Descombes, and the more intimate practice of Carla Juaçaba.

I. Lacaton & Vassal

The French duo formed by Anne Lacaton and Jean-Phillip Vassal developed a reputation for their pragmatic approach. Indeed, sometimes critical attention has even been diverted towards what is ultimately a side-effect of their *modus operandi* – the remarkable

aesthetic expression coming from the austere application of building materials. However, the parsimony of means practiced by the pair does not exist as an aim to achieve formal expressivity *per se*, but arises from the intention to attain more possibilities from a limited set of resources. "We never start from the idea of building cheaply, but ask how we can achieve everything we want", says Anne Lacaton (Lacaton, Vassal 2009, 12).

Among their recurring investigations is the study of greenhouse systems with the objective of transposing their principles into the urban building context, a theme anticipated in architectural modernity by Joseph Paxton. However, the use of agricultural components for the construction of domesticity is a step further in the direction of typological hybridization, which has been steadily rehearsed by the pair since *Maison Latapie* (1993).

Overall, LV's approach operates according to some paradigms that are more or less usual in contemporary discourse. Yet, the particularity of their work lies in how they transpose utilitarian thinking into practice in a way that is resolutely uninhibited. By following possibilities like the use of industrial materials or the adoption of programmatic ambiguity as a means rather than an end, their objective, in their own words, is that buildings "respond as best as possible, and for as long as possible for what they are intended for, while clearly expressing the possibility of their change" (Lasalvia 2021, 313). Thus, the transformation of their own work by others is embraced as an inevitable horizon as time unfolds because "[a]rchitecture is made to be lived, inhabited. Life is therefore an intrinsic part of it" (Lasalvia 2021, 313).

This responsiveness is especially evident in their transformation of the *Bois-le-Prêtre* housing block in Paris. Rather than replacing the existing structure, they enveloped it in an exoskeleton of flexible space – balconies, winter gardens, circulation areas – that could be

appropriated and reconfigured by its inhabitants (Fig.3). Here, the role of the architect shifts from form-maker to enabler, designing not precise outcomes but frameworks for occupation.

The expansion of space, defended by Lacaton & Vassal as a condition for the exercise of freedom, arises from the recognition that the possibility of redefining architecture must remain open to all. Their approach frequently involves exceeding the minimum square footage required by the program, deliberately creating room for unforeseen future uses. Juan Herreros has an assertive opinion on this matter:

The realization that almost no functionalism makes sense allows us to discover that, just like an office or a classroom, the objects in a living space can be loose, not boxed in, not 'integrated', not fitted; [...] In short, the idolatry of astutely resolved – and blocked – space makes no sense as an organizational argument because it is not a question of finding a solution to an enigma hidden in a list of requirements but of reinventing the variables with which the building will cope with future changes and experiments (Herreros 2015, 393).

Fig.3 - Transformation of Bois le Prêtre (exterior). © Druot, Lacaton & Vassal.

In this light, Lacaton & Vassal's work exemplifies a form of architectural *formlessness*: a practice that resists a precise finality, embraces contingency and invites participation. Much like Contact Improvisation, their architecture is not structured around prescription, but looseness – as spatial agency is distributed, form becomes an emergent property of lived experience (Fig.4). By favouring square footage over familiar materiality, their work aims for accessible simplicity and rawness. The justification for this is based on the understanding that some of the project's decisions (such as finishes and the attribution of uses) are not necessarily up for the architects to decide and are therefore deliberately left open. Thus, the pair enthusiastically acknowledges the fatality that architecture will always be transformed by its users, and, based on this discernment, conceive their designs in a way that can both facilitate and potentiate this inevitability.

II. Georges Descombes

"Doing almost nothing" (Treib 2018, 12) is a continuous motto in George Descombes' work. The majority of the matter integrated by this architect is mental rather than physical. His interventions, particularly in the landscape, are defined not by imposing new forms, but by articulating latent ones. His work draws from what already exists, often revealing buried histories and forgotten rhythms through carefully placed gestures. As Descombes himself suggests, citing historian Patrick Boucheron, his practice is less an archaeology of the territory than a search for "the still active part of the past" (Lasalvia 2021, 315).

For Marc Treib, who also quotes the architect's words, "Descombes approaches the landscape by "pay[ing] attention, without any nostalgia, to what [are the] oldest [features] there," considering them to be the foundation upon which to build a new landscape" (Treib 2018, 17). Thus, Descombes not only enunciates what exists in the present, but also what has already disappeared – as if his intervention was an abstract map made to scale, superimposed on the place. Elissa Rosemberg describes Georges Descombes' cartographic impulse, specifically with regard to an intervention in Geneva's Lancy Park through a passage that elucidates the general reasoning behind his thinking:

This strategy depends on articulating differences between the new and the old, and making the multiplicity of layers legible and resonant. There is no single narrative of the place – no single positioned viewer, but rather a juxtaposition of fragmentary conditions and spatial sequences that suggest a multiplicity of viewpoints. To insist on describing the condition of absence is, ultimately, to cast doubt on the power of seeing as a means to knowing; knowledge is partial and incomplete and subject to change (Rosenberg 2002, 20).

In effect, actual changes in knowledge paradigms from hydraulic sciences caused, to some extent, Descombes' most iconic project: the reconfiguration of the Aire River valley on the outskirts of Geneva. Historically, the river had been aggressively straightened – first under engineer Guillaume-Henri Dufour in 1899, then again in the 1920s – leading to increased flooding and ecological instability. In the late 20th century, as environmental paradigms shifted, local authorities sought to reintroduce meanders to the riverbed. But rather than simply restoring a historical path, Descombes' team proposed a more open-ended solution.

Their strategy, *Superposition*s, allowed the river to redefine its own course through gradual erosion. To accelerate this process without prescribing an outcome, they introduced a diamond-patterned matrix of shallow channels – essentially a launchpad for hydrological improvisation (Fig.5). As Descombes explained, "we just created a deformation, a launching pattern, whose forms address the play between the river flow and the

prepared terrain" (Descombes 2008, 13). The gesture was precise, yet relinquished control: the river itself became co-author of the design (Fig.6).

This project, like Contact Improvisation, embodies a method of initiating structure without fixing its outcome. It establishes a set of initial conditions – material, spatial, and temporal – and lets form emerge through interaction with dynamic forces. In this way, Descombes' work offers a landscape-based model of *formlessness*: an operation that involves recognising existing agencies in order to integrate them into the river's morphogenesis. This repositions the architect not as controller, but as facilitator of latent processes.

III. Carla Juaçaba

When Artistic Director Bia Lessa was tasked with curating part of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in 2012, the usual response – erecting large, air-conditioned tents – felt paradoxical. Instead, she invited architect Carla Juaçaba to develop a more contextually and environmentally attuned alternative for the event's temporary structure at *Forte* de *Copacabana*.

Strictly speaking, nothing is inaugurated with *Humanidade2012*. Topping off a rocky cliff with a monumental building is an impetus already present in the early days of architecture, and the fact that the rigorous modulation of its structure contrasts with the teluric voluptuousness of the surrounding topography only reinforces the effects of its artificial figure. Additionally, as far as ephemerality is concerned, Joseph Paxton also designed his pavilion with a malleable metal structure in keeping with the temporary nature of a project conceived for an international event. Also, the aerial display of infrastructure and the free adaptation of the programme to the structural interstice had been previously rehearsed by Cedric Price with the *Fun Palace*[4] and carried out in collaboration with Renzo Piano

with *Centre Pompidou*. And, last but not least, Juaçaba would not be the first Brazilian architect to adopt scaffolding as an architectural element in its own right – this was done half a century earlier in São Paulo by Lina Bo Bardi with *Teatro Oficina.*

As such, the exceptionality of this case study lies above all in the dexterity with which all of these familiar subterfuges were deployed. In other words, the substantial result did not come from an attempt to obstinately dominate the circumstances with the ambition to transcend the possibilities presented, but arised from the viable articulation of what was already present. According to the architect, the building emerged from what was "already there" – an ephemeral platform built on site, which was just prolonged and extended. As the structure was permeable to wind and light, it presented its "very evident condition of fragility," as she noted in an interview (Lasalvia 2021, 316).

Because the structure relied entirely on standardized, reusable components – including more than 7,000 supports anchored with scrap wood – it could be erected quickly and dismantled without a trace (Fig.7). In fact, the versatility of the formal solution allowed the project to be transposed to another *topos*, not as an object, but as an idea.

The speculative project, *Ministry of All*, located on *Esplanada dos Ministérios* in Brasilia, is based on the same tectonic system as the pavilion (Fig.8). However, in its new imagined context, it mimics the shape of the buildings around it. Although this transposition remains a virtuality, it demonstrates an architectural conception that lends itself to different demands. In this case, this doesn't stem from accommodating multi-purpose functions within a closed form, but through the malleability of a system that changes according to the circumstances. Though unbuilt, this iteration demonstrates that what Juaçaba developed was not just a pavilion, but a system: one capable of adaptation across contexts and scales.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: THE EMERGENCE OF FORM

In general, architects are anxious to seek form as an end – not acknowledging that it can emerge from a designed process. Because buildings must respond to programmatic, structural, and material constraints, architectural thinking can become overly fixated on the attribution of form – treating it as a static resolution rather than a temporal negotiation. In doing so, designers risk solidifying configurations of space that cannot adapt to the evolving needs of life, thus subjecting their work to premature obsolescence. While fixed-form architecture has produced many remarkable examples, its rigidity can leave it out of sync with shifting social, environmental, and experiential conditions.

An alternative approach gaining urgency in recent decades involves treating form not as a fixed object, but as an open system capable of adapting to changing demands. In this view, the pursuit of form becomes the pursuit of *formlessness*: a design attitude that privileges relationships, responsiveness, and transformation over formal closure. The challenge in pursuing this path lies in the fact that it runs in the opposite direction established by Western architectural tradition, which has the notion of stability (*firmitas*) as one of its pillars.

However, a great challenge also means a great opportunity, since a whole new horizon remains to be investigated if *form* is understood as a perpetual metamorphosis. Ignasi Solà-Morales points precisely to this prospect when he describes the idea of a *liquid architecture*:

An architecture based on the intuition of becoming as *durée*, as multiplicity of the experience of spaces and times, must be founded on this multiple continuity in which events do not fix objects, nor delimit spaces or stop times. On the contrary, the modern experience of space/time in consciousness reveals continuity and multiplicity, so that what were fixed spaces become permanent dilations in the same way that what were timed times become flows, experiences of the durable (Solà-Morales 2001, 28).

Perhaps one important complement to Solà-Morales idea – as well-crafted as it is – is an emphasis on relations. Form does not emerge from isolated elements, but from the interactions between them. In this context, the concept of relationality becomes instrumental – allowing us to think about latent potentials that may become actualized when the right conditions arise. As Nicolas Bourriaud and others have suggested, contemporary artistic practices increasingly turn toward the dynamics of relation, rather than the autonomy of form (Bourriaud, 2024).

This article has proposed an architectural methodology grounded in the *formlessness of form*: a systematic openness derived from Steve Paxton's development of Contact Improvisation. Through a reading of three architectural practices – Lacaton & Vassal, Georges Descombes, and Carla Juaçaba – it has shown how such a methodology can take shape across different contexts, materials, and temporal scales.

Ultimately, the strength of *form as formlessness* lies in its capacity to change – and thus to remain relevant to the lived experience of space. Whether through the redistribution of agency to inhabitants (Lacaton & Vassal), the integration of natural phenomena into morphogenetic processes (Georges Descombes), or the deployment of standardized systems toward open-ended ends (Carla Juaçaba), the pursuit of *formlessness* offers architecture a way to stay in conversation with context across time.

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NOTES

1. Although Steve Paxton actively sought to decentralize his role in the development of CI, and openly stated "I feel like I have invented nothing", out of stylistic reasons this article will refer to him as the "inventor" of this practice. Other figures that took active part in the early period of Contact Improvisation's development include Nancy Stark Smith, Danny Lepkoff, Lisa Nelson, Karen Nelson, Nita Little, Andrew Harwood, Peter Bingham and Ray Chung.

2. Steve Paxton describes the experience: "I was in the delicate position of leading a group of students to find within themselves the reflexes and survival to dance a dance I had felt but not seen. A duet with Douglas Dunn during a Grand Union performance. I did not or could not describe to them the nature of my experience. They had to find their own. Doug and I were in great shape. The students were athletically inclined but not trained nor tested. So I got them to move a lot in an intensive period prior to the Webber performances, accepting that whatever we accomplished would be at least a step toward the general idea. Several of that group worked with me for the next 5 years, developing and refining the movement architecture of the dance. I think we did achieve the idea of a specific effect, at last. It was riding touch in the flow of movement. Just that it had first to be proved safe. We didn't have mature examples to see. We had to become the mature examples" (Lasalvia 310, 2021).

3. In a video that summarizes the first decade of Contact Improvisation, Steve Paxton explains: "When we get our mass in motion, we rise above the constant call of gravity toward the swinging, circling invitation of centrifugal force. Dancers ride and play these forces. Beyond Newton's third law, we discover that for every action several equal and opposite reactions are possible. Therein lies an opportunity for improvisation." Paxton continues: "An important aspect of Contact Improvisation is the pleasure of moving, and the pleasure of dancing with somebody in a very spontaneous way. It happens in a framework which considers the body in all its variety as the primary focus from which the mind can draw. With this, the distance is refinable to ever more precise relationships with the physical forces" (Nelson & Contact Editions, 1997).

4. In this regard, Carla Juaçaba explains that "Price was trying to build an image of the future. A rhetorical image, of someone who wanted to foresee it. [...] I think the *Humanidade* Pavilion represents something else: what you can do in each place with what you have and using as little energy as possible. Although the image is similar to the *Fun Palace*, the ambition is from another time" (Lasalvia 2021, 317).

Fig.7 - Humanidade2012 foundations. Carla Juaçaba.

Fig.8 - Ministério de Todos (2014). Carla Juaçaba.