

## **The “Niemeyer City” competition: incompletion and the sense of history**

Andrés Claro

It is not with architecture that one can disseminate any ideology... The important thing is not architecture, but life itself, the struggle for a better world; I express myself with indispensable clearness.

–O. NIEMEYER

From the mythical story of the interruption of work on the Tower of Babel to contemporary awareness of the collapse of the Superstructure of modern philosophies of history, it is common for incompleteness of a total project, fragmentation of the meaning of a totalizing system, to be interpreted as a catastrophe, as decadence, even as a punishment, without paying due attention to the threat implicit in the very urge towards constructional closure, a quest for architectural totalization that usually promises all kinds of other totalizations of a linguistic, communicational, socio-ethnic or religious nature. In this sense, what are the possibilities of resemantising the architectonic utopia of high modernism once the irreducibility of incompleteness and fragmentation have been acknowledged? What kinds of symbolic reconfiguration of the communal construct – and of the construction of the communal – are the contemporary arts able to offer today, precisely insofar as they possess an unprecedented knowledge and experience of the possibilities of representation opened by discontinuity and interruption, precisely insofar as their new artistic languages rely on strategies of fragmentation and montage which far from generating a locked, essentialised meaning, set off a process of signification that resists and overwhelms the urge towards intentional closure of the system? These are just some of the initial and most immediate questions raised by the incompleteness of the original construction project of the Niemeyer City, an urban laboratory whose common imaginary and communal subject it is the task of contemporary arts to reconsider and reconfigure.

## 1. Incompletion of the constructional utopia as interruption of architectural-technical, socio-political and linguistic-communicational totalization: from the Tower of Babel to the Modern Superstructure

It was likely that the next generation with their perfected knowledge would find the work of their predecessors bad, and tear down what had been built so as to begin anew. Such thoughts paralysed people's powers, and so they troubled less about the tower than the construction of a city for the workmen. Every nationality wanted the finest quarters for itself, and this gave rise to disputes, which developed into bloody conflicts. These conflicts never came to an end; to the leaders they were a new proof that, in the absence of the necessary unity, the building of the tower must be done very slowly, or indeed preferably postponed until universal peace was declared. But the time was spent not only in conflict; the town was embellished in the intervals, and this unfortunately enough evoked fresh envy and fresh conflict. In this fashion the age of the first generation went past, but none of the succeeding ones showed any difference; except that technical skill increased and with it occasion for conflict. To this must be added that the second or third generation had already recognized the senselessness of building a heaven-reaching tower; but by that time everybody was too deeply involved to leave the city.

–F. KAFKA, "THE CITY COAT OF ARMS" (trans. Willa and Edwin Muir)

*And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain... And they said, "Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name" ...*

*"Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language" ...*

*And they left off to build the city.*

The warning in the mythical tale of Babel against the aspiration of planning and erecting a total construction sanctioned by a single people cannot be taken lightly today; the very interruption of the architectural totalization associated with other totalizations of a communicational and socio-ethnic character, among those who claim for themselves the power to plan and achieve anything they set their mind to, creates an objective parallel with the present. This is certainly not the first historical re-encounter with Babel, nor will it be the last; the myth was often overlooked in Antiquity and was also lost in the darkness of the early Middle Ages before re-emerging in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when the feudal edifice was being dismantled and the crisis that would issue into the modern order was impending; it was absent from the thinking of classicism and was only partially revived by romanticism,

but became remarkably current once the totalizing aspirations of the political and epistemological order of High Modernity began to crumble. For Babel disappears and re-emerges again depending on whether the experience of a particular order is one of security or crisis. If the identifiable characteristic of ages that use the story of Babel to examine themselves is a readiness to explore new ground following the questioning or collapse of an order that appears exhausted, interrupted or incomplete, such an awareness of a mismatch between the symbolic aspiration and the actual construction has been heightened in our times for many reasons. For one thing, there is an acute awareness of the disparity between the total construct (the superstructure) and the individual; then, there are now entrenched, radical misgivings about the possibility and effects of totalizing institutions and closed systems of thought; lastly, there is a growing perception of the specious transparency of media, economic, administrative and computerized communications, the siren song of those who would have us think that we are all speaking the same language, with the corresponding synthesis of a single representation of the real. Not that it is a matter of mindlessly rehashing the slogan about the 'death of utopias'; the point, rather, is to see how, given the interruption and incompleteness of the monumental project of modernity, the transition can be made from paralysing cynicism to the possibility of a new beginning.

For what is the most recent historical manifestation of the urge that motivated the builders of Babel, the latest project for a total architecture associated with a universalizing and all-embracing representation whose interruption we might now be witnessing? The beginnings of an answer might be found in Hegel, who, interpreting the ancient myth of Babel at the high point of the modern ambition for system totalization, sees the labour organized to build the Tower as foreshadowing the bond actually achieved in the modern State; in *Aesthetics* III.1.1(trans. T.M. Knox) he writes:

In the wide plains of the Euphrates an enormous architectural work was erected; it was built in common, and the aim and content of the work was at the same time the community of those who constructed it. And the foundation of this social bond does not remain merely a unification on patriarchal lines; on the contrary, the purely family unity has already been superseded, and the building, rising into the clouds, makes objective to itself this earlier and dissolved unity and the realization of a new and wider one. The ensemble of all the peoples at that period worked at this task and since they all came together to complete an immense work like this, the product of their labour was to be a bond which was to link them together (as we are linked by manners, customs, and the legal constitution of the state) by means of the

excavated site and ground, the assembled blocks of stone, and the as it were architectural cultivation of the country.

The task of building the Tower is seen as a bond linking human beings through the technique of shared, compartmentalized labour, posited as the goal and substance of the project itself. Insofar as it requires the relinquishment of immediate ties (those of family and community), this regulated labour can be seen as a forerunner of the modern State, as the starting condition or first indication of an era of reason and progressive history.

This does not seem too far removed from the aspirations underlying the plan to build the Niemeyer City, an urban laboratory that was supposed to symbolize the refounding of the modern state in Lebanon after independence, and in which cultural, economic and political ambitions were overlaid. Thus, for its originator, the Brazilian architect and city planner Oscar Niemeyer, what was at stake was above all a humanist cultural ambition; in his words, the pavilions of the project – the Museum of Lebanon, the great dome-shaped venue for experimental arts and concerts, the open-air theatre, the residential buildings that were never constructed – were meant to display “the great themes that impassion the contemporary world: spatial experience imbued with beauty and mystery; the evolution of nature and its perspectives; theatre, music, cinema”. The official terms of reference, in turn, enshrined the stated intent that the project should be an international fair, embedding its imaginary in the economic and civilizing context of the great world fairs, those instrumentalizations of consumption, at once pedagogical and spectacular, which the modern state has been using since the mid-nineteenth century to promote a twofold awareness of national identity and international integration, all physically precipitated around certain monumental and emblematic structures, from the Crystal Palace, built for the first Great Exhibition in London in 1851, to the Eiffel Tower and Grand Palais built for the Paris exhibitions of 1889 and 1890, to the so-called “Big O” for the Yeosu International Exposition of 2012. Ultimately, though, the undeclared but obvious geopolitical intention of the project lay in the staging of a unitary construction that could transcend any community or sectarian divide to express symbolically the identity of Lebanon as an internationally recognized unitary modern state. The unique and recognizable spatial and material syntax of the architecture produced by Niemeyer – a politically engaged architect from the so-called Non-Aligned Movement whose home was in Latin America, which is also home to part of the Lebanese diaspora – was meant to formalize by its

clear geometries and monumentality an ideal of national identity transcending dispute or dispersion.

Thus, the *factum* of interrupted construction, an architectural incompleteness with fairly obvious symbolic repercussions, multiplies the questions. Was it ever possible to match the purpose proclaimed for the project by the (architectural, cultural, economic, political) authority with the subjectivity of the communities that were meant to come together, acknowledge one another and inhabit it? What paradoxes can be identified in this monumental architectural microcosm whose modernist aesthetic reveals both dependences on and resistances to colonial inertia? To what extent does the inbuilt tension between a project encompassing a cultural agora, a trade fair and a housing complex constitute an irreducible specificity that cannot be explained or referred to any artistic or political precedent? If a structure on this scale matches the ambition, optimism and rationality of a state that trusts in the potential for shaping the subjectivity of its citizens, guiding them towards their own transformation, to what extent do architectural interruption and incompleteness require this civilizing imaginary to be rethought in what is now a new historical context? If the project has emerged as an explicit and implicit response to a number of identifiable cultural, economic and political problems and challenges, what capacity for response does its incompleteness still hold, its instrumental potential in the face of all the new problems and challenges that have taken over the cultural, socio-political and technical-economic agenda in Lebanon? More radically, can the construction project really be said to have failed? Does not its incompleteness make it necessary to problematize the very notions of success and failure applied in the attempt to anticipate and entrench the meaning of the construct, close the signification of the symbolic system? What, ultimately, has been interrupted and what finally endures in this great unfinished work of architecture?

Let us return to Babel. For it is curious that the interruption and incompleteness of the Tower should have been read over the centuries as a punishment or a catastrophe, when there is nothing in the story itself to require this reading. In other words, while a clear warning can be found in the narrative about the risks and dangers inherent in what human beings plan and set out to achieve (erecting a monumental structure that is to surpass all others, achieving everything they set out to, making a name for their people), there is no mention anywhere of punishment or collective disaster; indeed, there is not even an explicit moral. The only thing the story of Babel conveys clearly is the general sense of a transformation between two modes of human life separated by an

interruption. Thus, what is there to begin with is a community order as an aspiration for a people that is one, with one language and the ambition of achieving everything it sets out to do, physically symbolized in the project to create a single, superior architectural structure, a tower that will reach the heavens and make that people a name. What follows the interruption, in turn, is the establishment of a new community order where living arrangements are dispersed (ruling out a united effort in pursuit of a single objective and the attainment of every ambition) and where a number of languages are spoken (frustrating the dream of immediate, universal communication), all symbolized in the incompleteness of the total architectural work, which thereafter remains definitive in its incompleteness.

Thus, if the story of Babel raises a number of questions about the possibilities and modes of human living and understanding, the interruption to the constructional totalization symbolizes a number of other interruptions of a political and communicational character.

Undoubtedly the most palpable interruption is to the architectural-technical totalization: the incompleteness of a monumental structure that was supposed to surpass all others thanks to superior material and working techniques, with repetitive, disciplined work being organized in pursuit of an aim incommensurable with the individual. In fact, although the unfinished tower has always been the main character in the artistic iconography surrounding Babel, over the centuries this iconography has reflected the evolution of the constructional utopia itself, following the transformations in the techniques envisaged for superior construction, from sun-dried mud bricks to reinforced concrete. When interruption creates its dispersion in an open spatiality, then, what it is disrupting is a kind of unilaterality and sovereignty of construction technique that leads a group of human beings to appropriate the power of achieving everything they set out to.

This leads on to a second interruption that can be discerned in Babel, namely the interruption of socio-political totalization. If the builders of the tower wish to fall back on a single city and order with a name that symbolizes and attests to their exclusive genealogy, if indeed they mean to use their city of absolute aspirations but limited outlook to fix the past and empty the future of any eventuality, the interruption of Babel inaugurates history as a migration between different representations of the world that have to be translated rather than imposed upon one another.

We thus arrive at the third form of interruption discernible in Babel: that of the aspiration for transparent communication in a single tongue with few

words (whose more recent versions include the phantasmagorias created by the immediacy of the electronic mass media, the conference English of false diplomacy and the industrial formatting of audiovisual languages). It is to counter the regressive limitation created by the particular representation embodied in a single tongue arbitrarily raised up to the status of a universal language, a single viewpoint that operates transcendently in the synthesis of a conception of the world as though it were reality itself, that translation is needed between different historical tongues with their different syntheses of the world, indeed between different uses of the same tongues in the speech of a diverse range of communities and individuals.

Here, then, are at least three types of interruption – the architectural-constructional, the socio-political and the linguistic-communicational – that could serve, subject to all the relevant caveats and distinctions, to bring into dialogue the incompleteness of the Niemeyer City, something that opens up a new set of unavoidable questions. To begin with, what symbolic interruption might this unfinished city itself be capable of producing? What is the impossibility of architectural, technical and systemic totalization that it reveals today? What is the impossibility of socio-political and ethnic-community totalization that it expresses? What is the impossibility of linguistic and communicational totalization? Then, narrowing the focus, what dialogue is to be established tomorrow between the modernism confined within the ellipsis of the Niemeyer City and the multiplicity of historical districts and urban communities in Lebanon, or with the overlays characteristic of a city like Tripoli and its port, where the traces of Assyrians, Phoenicians, Persians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, crusaders, Ottomans and Europeans criss-cross in a palimpsest where no straightforward genealogies can be discerned? What is symbolized today or what could be symbolized tomorrow by that obviously secular dome conceived by Niemeyer to preside over the complete order of the project, or the experimental space it generates within itself for a community to gather in? Lastly, and more generally, how far might the new pro-Babelian optimism that could begin to gain ground under the influence of multicultural models be fruitful, and how far might it be just a deceptive utopia, so that however desirable its effects might appear, it ends up benefiting only a privileged few through the multiplication of contacts and communications? Conversely, how far does anti-Babelism, the unitary drive that still has its episodic resurgences, really contain the certainty of a future project, and how far is it just the guilty conscience of an order that has undergone a collapse?

If the tension activated by this series of unavoidable questions can be summed up as the difficulty of reconciling the construction of an order combining territorial and unitary ambitions with the multiplication of contemporary contacts, responses are still urgently needed, for on them depends success in establishing the difference between cynical exploitation of circumstances by a *postmod* fashion and an awareness of the fragmentation and incompleteness inherent in human modes of living that can provide a basis for rethinking the modern project which arose under the auspices of the great Enlightenment ideal. Rethinking, recombining, reconfiguring, resymbolizing; not destroying or erasing. For if the Niemeyer City, as part of this Enlightenment project, has ended up unfinished or fragmented, it still remains – and should remain – definitive in its incompleteness: as an open city, so that new fragmentary and juxtaposed competences can generate from it the sense of a vaster way of living.

This, at least, is the task to which the contemporary arts have been called, and which they are ideally placed to accomplish.

## **2. Fragmentation, interruption and incompleteness as knowledge and experience of the contemporary language of the arts: perspectivism, montage and the meanings of history**

If perfect works did exist, reconciliation would be possible in the midst of the unreconciled, to which realm art belongs. In perfect works art would transcend its own concept; the turn to the friable and the fragmentary is in truth an effort to save art by dismantling the claim that artworks are what they cannot be and what they nevertheless must want to be; the fragment contains both those elements. The rank of an artwork is defined essentially by whether it exposes itself to, or withdraws from, the irreconcilable. Even in so-called formal elements there is by virtue of their relation to the irreconcilable a return of content that is refracted by their law... Those works are deep that neither mask the divergent or antagonistic nor leave it unreconciled.

–T.W. ADORNO, *AESTHETIC THEORY* (trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor)

What makes the challenge issued to the contemporary arts to visit, inhabit, rethink and resymbolize the Niemeyer City something more than a statement of good intentions is that their new languages have built up an unprecedented knowledge and experience of the potential for signification and representation opened up by fragmentation, interruption and incompleteness, starting with the ways their different forms of perspectivism and montage proved able to generate a more polyvalent and less intentional meaning for history as such.

“Many works of the ancients became fragments. Many works of the moderns started as them” (*Athenaum*, 24). Even the beginnings of a recognition of the potential for other models of artistic production and philosophical architecture in early romanticism (fleeting as this was, it must be said, and without excluding systemic exposition) depended on consideration and exploration of the possibilities of signification and representation offered and generated by the fragmentary. In principle, a fragment may perhaps be likened to the ruins of work from the past, since the evocative outputs of a monument are recognized in both, given that they create an awareness of something fractured, lost, an unfinished process. Thus, the fragment is not freed from its nostalgic and even negative connotations: it continues to generate the imaginary of destruction and failure, the impact of an unfinished or destroyed project, a disaggregation that may even manifest itself as the aftermath of violence (not for nothing is it often pointed out that the Latin words *fragmen* and *fragmentum* come from *frango*: break, fracture, demolish, destroy). But the other side of the coin is quickly perceived, i.e., the fact that the fragmentary is a *sui generis* form of signification, a new formal possibility of representation, whereby that which does not aspire to totalization or exhaustiveness can be staged in a way that permits an ongoing, plural, eclectic, even collective process of signification. If in the ontology of the fragment the idea of becoming is more important than that of being, as Schlegel put it, the system is to be seen not as a closed constructional organization but as a living, changing organicity that gives a group its cohesion. The artwork itself can be seen as being ‘in the making’, as a kaleidoscopic form whose signification and representation need to be constantly unfolded and reconstructed. At least three decisive aspects of the fragmentary as artwork can be recognized and appreciated as a result. First and foremost, there is its relative and irreducible incompleteness, which makes artistic creation an ‘essay’, an attitude of permanent creation, constant testing. Then, there is the impossibility of closing the discourse, resolving the signification of the unfinished and unfinishable in an unchanging unity of meaning or stable presence. Lastly, there is the eclecticism of pieces that are metonymically combined, juxtaposed in such a way that they challenge the rules of analogical and genealogical linkage and the hierarchical inclusion of parts in a whole.

It was this knowledge and experience of fragmentation and discontinuous juxtaposition that would be deepened and developed in an unprecedented and massive fashion in the contemporary language of the arts, starting with the way historical vanguards revolutionized the forms of

representation of the real by developing the poetics of montage, in which they recognized the potential for generating a more polyvalent and less intentionally manageable representation of a story and of history as such. For while the most obvious thing about the formal device of montage that dominates the language of the contemporary arts is the twofold labour of perspectivist ‘fragmentation’ and discontinuous ‘juxtaposition’ (what in the language of documentary cinema, for example, would be called cutting and editing), this twofold labour, however deliberately the artist might carry it out, generates a signification that exceeds any subjective anticipation. Right from the first, primary moment, montage made use of the potential for signification of the fragmentary as such: it identified or produced discrete and significant cuts in the real from a particular perspective, in accordance with certain criteria chosen by the artist or the strength with which a more or less epiphanic manifestation of the real was imposed, a moment of intensive fragmentation capable in itself of disclosing the key to a total event. Then, even more crucially, it developed a whole syntax of juxtapositions that allowed the discontinuous fragments and perspectives to be placed in new significant relationships whereby, while the artist acted as a catalyst in a reaction that he could not fully control, the interaction between the fragmentary images was able to generate a dynamic, polyvalent, non-intentional signification of the real.

As would soon be realized, this configured a new way of bestowing meaning and envisioning history, even or especially whatever in the past was perceived as curtailed, fragmented, unfinished. Benjamin, one of the pioneers in the effort to extend the revolution of the contemporary language of the arts to the representation of history as such, would eventually sum it up in the *Arcades Project*:

The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event. And, therefore, to break with vulgar historical naturalism. To grasp the construction of history as such. Refuse of History.

Method of this project: literary montage... I needn't *say* anything. Merely *show*. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, *to come into their own*: by making use of them.

From the first third of the twentieth century, often under the impact of the forms of the dynamic image in the oriental arts, Imagist poetry, Cubism and the new language of cinema developed new forms of signification by perspectivist fragmentation and discontinuous juxtaposition of the real, bringing about a revolution in the language of artistic representation that has been perpetuated down to our days. What can also be recognized here, though, is a new potential for generating representation both of events in the past and of the conception of history as such. For the effect of the multiperspectivism and assemblage characteristic of montage provides a response to the two basic requirements arising after the crisis of the subjectivist and teleological forms of representation that had dominated during the period of High Modernity. First, it responds to the need to generate a more polyvalent signification; second, it responds to the need to generate a less intentional representation that can overwhelm the attempts at control of an empowered subjectivity. It is thus that the fragmentation and juxtaposition of montage allow a significant interaction to take place between the present and the past as a way of opening up the future, a way of leaving behind a possible threefold ontology of the present that constitutes the true catastrophe, namely the tragic conception of the identity of the past as an immutable set of happenings (the past-present that historicism claimed to know better than it had known itself), the mythical conception of the present as that which irrevocably occurs (the presence of the present where fascism sees no possible mediation between what happens and what should happen), and the teleological conception of the future as an inevitable destiny (the future-present of the naive optimism of an ideology of progress that subordinates every material setback as a necessary step to an ideal goal). Far from limiting the signification of history as a stable, controlled representation (or as a plot leading ineluctably from a beginning to an end), the selection and significant combination of heterogeneous fragments generates a dynamic effect that, by exceeding the intentional possibilities of the artist and whoever experiences the artwork, offers a new way of doing justice to the specificity and vastness of events in history, an unprecedented and unevasive way of turning the incompleteness of the past into future signification.

Accordingly, to reactivate the chain of questions that must be answered today, to what extent do the knowledge and experience characterizing the languages of the contemporary arts occupy a privileged position when it comes to addressing the challenges of historical resemanticization raised by the irreducible fragmentation and incompleteness of the Niemeyer City? If 'cinema is first and foremost montage', as already Eisenstein would famously put it, what

new syntheses of the representation of history are the audiovisual languages developed over the last decades capable of providing when they come to deal with the dispersion that is now the condition of the modernist architectural project itself? Is there perhaps some vaguely sensed order in which it might be possible to edit the phantasmal images offered by the different perspectives on the Tripoli site? Given this incompleteness, will it be possible to activate an artistic work that can withstand not only the urges of modern utopianism (the closed system and the sense of an ending) but also the cynical postmodern fascination with the absence of meaning, to represent history on the basis of what does not surrender to meaninglessness, but exceeds the expectation of *a* meaning? Will it be possible for art to articulate not only spatial discontinuity but even the temporal dispersion produced by the disjunction between the project for a modernist city and the multi-layered urban environment in which it sits? What kind of signification might it be possible to generate from this myriad of images laden with past and future, which seem not so much to combine in a stable structure or follow on causally from one another to a conclusion as to challenge all teleology and systematization? What kind of future order could be made to emerge from a dialogue with this intensive reality that is the Niemeyer City, from a non-programmatic interaction where the analytical cut-off that is presented to our view and the synthetic recomposition that is addressed to our understanding disengage the meaning left over from the past as seen from the perspective of a new time?

These are just some of the further questions that leap out and can be thrown as a challenge to the multiple languages of the different contemporary arts, since these themselves will pose further questions as they address the fragmentation and incompleteness of the past from the perspective of the needs and ambitions of the present. For certainly, over and above the need to recognize and preserve this unique site that is the Niemeyer City, there will be different understandings of how its historical future depends on a novel interaction that can set off the unforeseeable signification compressed in its curtailed past. This is a form of cultural resistance against a fatalistic repetition of the past, against an endless return in which, like in a cosmic after-school detention, human beings are forced to write the same empty slogan time and time again.