

Questioning building by not building

Exploring dynamics between doing and not-doing

I prefer not to: On the inoperativity of architecture and the suspension of its canonical ends

Oya Yesim Armagan Atacan

Architectural practices have historically been shaped by specific rules, norms, and what might be called canonical forces. These forces define architecture primarily through the act of building and overlook alternative potentials. However, a new understanding of architecture – where a refusal to build intersects with a liberating ethic – holds the potential to free the discipline from its normative boundaries.

Thus, architecture may not only shape the built/unbuilt environment but also transform into a practice that is potentially suspended, and rendered both inoperative and *profane*. This approach – which can be considered in relation to philosopher Giorgio Agamben's framework of 'inoperativity' – suggests rethinking the future of architecture beyond its disciplinary canons. Here, I will suggest how attitudes of refusal and suspension enable architecture to discover its own nature. By exploring dynamics between doing and preferring not to do, I will discuss how architecture might free itself from the weight of current preoccupations.

Refusal as ethical potential

Architectures that chase solutions by embracing technology – what you might call the techno-solutionists – construct specific futures from specific pasts, seeking to control futures through their own established tools and laws. Such practices occupy the future and close themselves off temporally.¹ In such a condition, we lose the ability to speak of the future as a 'field of simultaneous possibilities.' Instead, we become disempowered in our acts of imagining the future. In



1. A young woman bathes in crude oil in Naftalan sanatorium town, Azerbaijan. This 'miracle oil' is found only in the semi-desert region of central Azerbaijan. Bathing in oil for ten minutes a day is claimed to have medical benefits.

contrast, I seek an architecture that does not chase solutions, and does not prioritise its own ends, but returns to the potential of what can be called non-being and non-doing. For instance, by looking behind the dynamics distinguishing the spatial politics in two images [1, 2], I question forces that construct them and the potential of non-doing contained within. Rather than a proper and reasonable architecture, I seek to highlight one that is not given, and is

thus released from the weight of preoccupations assigned to it, oriented toward its own manner of being. Architect Charlotte Malterre-Barthes approaches the ethic of building and not-building – emerging from architects' specific capacity for failed design – from a perspective that affirms re-use.² Since architecture, by its nature, consumes limited resources, she argues that the essential issue is the question of 'to build or not to build'. In contrast, I focus on the distinction



2. Bibi-Heybat oil fields, Azerbaijan. Oil drilling began here in 1846 and the first refinery was established in Baku in 1859. The ground is subjected to production, and stripped of its potential not to be.

between actively preferring to do and not to do,³ and the dynamics within their potentials, emphasising the importance of the *how*.

What environmental, spatial, and cultural differences arise between these two images [1, 2] depending on the apparatuses that influence the geological-temporal stratum beneath the ground, or the presence of petroleum? Through such visual pairings, I aim to pursue the forces that govern spatial practices, which are suspended, not suspended, halted, cancelled, or tested. In this discussion, I follow the trajectory of Agamben's political project, and specifically his understanding of the 'end'. Agamben's framework aims to establish a new form of social communion. Relating its concepts to architecture provides a ground for new possibilities between means and ends. At a time when commodification has arguably reached its peak, the potential of architecture to generate new qualities, new forms of life, new modes of connection and rupture within social relations⁴ may be uncovered through Agamben's method which he calls the 'profanation of the end.'⁵

Inoperativity, or the power of 'not to'

According to Agamben, the act of bringing something to an end is not limited to completing a developmental process, or reaching a successful conclusion, and nor can it be explained solely by negative actions such as the destruction or elimination of an object. Rather, ending involves rendering something inoperative,⁶ disabling its function within an apparatus, and making it ready for free use.⁷ This approach opposes the

sanctification of action directed toward an end, and instead focuses on the process and potential of rendering something suspended (i.e., inoperative). This conceptual framework helps us understand architectures without tasks or ends, but only with new uses: what might be called an inoperative architecture. These can be characterised as architectures of suspension, effecting self-termination by not completing processes of development nor reaching a point of success. Such architectures can re-establish relations with time as a condition for the emergence of difference and, in doing so, recover from the insecurity brought about by commodification – thus becoming, and allowing, transformation.⁸

Agamben uses the term 'inoperative' not to indicate a

reduction of possible uses, but rather to signal an opening towards a new use. This concept does not affirm inactivity, passivity, or inertia.⁹ On the contrary, it defines a form of practice that is devoid of duty or telos, an action towards an end.¹⁰ Set against the instrumentalisation of such action, it proposes a return to the potential of non-being. What Agamben calls 'inoperativity' is not therefore negation, but can be characterised as an ontological suspension or interruption – capable of disabling productive force, and disrupting established relations between means and ends.¹¹ In this sense, action should correspond instead to a temporal point between the potential *to do* and the potential *not to do*. Being inoperative should thus be understood as a general mode of potential that is not exhausted in execution.¹² Agamben's political gesture here is the affirmation of a potentiality that has been stripped of every actual form¹³ and freed from all tasks or preoccupations imposed on it by privileged forms,¹⁴ restoring being to its own *how*: to its own process. This practice, rendering normative and canonical functions inoperative, involves suspension and making-in-suspension.¹⁵

Canonical forces and architectural apparatuses

In this framework, the potential not to be is understood as rendering a being inoperative by returning to it the absence within its presence.¹⁶ Drawing from Aristotle's notion of potentiality, Agamben establishes a relationship between freedom and potential, between being capable and willing. For him, a perfect



3. Manhattan Schist rock stairs in Central Park, designed by Olmsted and Vaux (450 million years old), photographed by Robert Smithson in 1972. An inoperative trace of both human intervention and glacial formation.



4. Alex Morton, *Theatre by the Hole in the Salt*, Laguna de Cejar, Atacama Desert, Chile, 2007. A temporary structure built during the Incubo Atacama Lab workshop. A spatial practice suspended between geological time, human intervention, and performative gesture.

potential is one that preserves within itself the potential not to actualise. Thus, potentiality necessarily 'maintains itself in relation to its own privation.'¹⁷ A being in the mode of potentiality is capable of its own non-being and, only in this way, becomes potential. In other words, according to Agamben, perfect potentiality (and freedom) can only be approached through the image of a poet who is capable of writing poetry but does not write.¹⁸ This is precisely the architectural/design potential that I aim to emphasise: an architecture that preserves the potential *not to do* as the constitutive counterpart of the potential to do: an architecture not separated from its own potential not to be. In this case, an existing potentiality is the capacity to resist one's own potential.¹⁹ Such an architecture retains within itself the potential and capacity not to act and resists all forces that seek to shape it. Above all, it resists its own capacity to design. In such a suspended architecture, detached from its telos, the architect transcends their impotence in the face of *human capacity and the agency of the designer*.

Kruse and Ellsworth's project *Geologic City* investigates the forces and materiality that New York is exposed to on a geological scale.²⁰ During their fieldwork in Manhattan, they encountered Manhattan Schist, eroded by Pleistocene glaciers [3]. Through their research, they reveal that stairs



5. Abandoned nitrate fields in the Atacama Desert, Chile, 2012. A territorial condition between industrial pasts and unclaimed futures, where inoperativity becomes spatially legible.

were designed into the schist rock in the late 1800s and early 1900s by Olmsted and Vaux. The geological materiality of the stairs has silently persisted within the ever-changing urban landscape surrounding them. Apart from the third step, which appears to have been slightly smoothed by human contact over the past forty years, the stairs seem to have never aged.²¹ These stairs thus embody a design agency that holds within itself the potential *not to do*. They describe a coexistence between what the architect designed

and other forces, underscoring the distinction between being capable and the potential to act. Individuals who are deprived of the potential not to act lose both their capacity to resist and the freedom *not to do* something.²² In architecture, I argue, this condition becomes visible in practices who, stripped of the potential not to design, claim 'I can design' in response to any circumstance. They are practices that have been rendered flexible to the point that not designing is no longer a choice.²³



6. A sedimented ground surface where geological time intersects with human-imposed material interventions. A stratigraphy blurring the distinction between natural deposition and architectural action.



7. Interior view of *Ca'n Terra* by Ensamble Studio, transforming a former quarry into inhabitable space. Treating the site not as an object to be completed but as a geological void to be inhabited and interpreted.

Practices of suspension: Atacama Lab and Ca'n Terra

Sergei Prozorov, engaging with Agamben's 'inoperativity', conceptualises freedom as a twofold structure: a capacity to do something that simultaneously includes the condition of not being obliged to do something else.²⁴ In this context, the perception of 'I can do this or that' creates an illusion that conceals the individual's subjection to mechanisms that exploit productivity. According to Prozorov, the fact that a prohibition can be violated leads to the devaluation of the potential to choose *not* to act. Thus, the issue is not merely the prohibition of doing, but the capacity to freely choose *not* to do.

Agamben talks of apparatuses. He conceptualises them as extensions that restrict our capacity to choose non-being or non-doing, a condition necessary for any possible experience of freedom. Through architecture, I refer to such apparatuses as *canonical forces*. These forces, which guide architecture and the architect's capacity to design, are related to ground and time. As introduced above, the different configurations of paired images – whose distinction lies in doing versus not-doing – are also shaped by the degree to which these canonical forces, or apparatuses of power, restrict the potential of architecture and other acts *not to do* [1, 2].

My proposition is that architecture should render these canonical forces – forces that guide and constrain architecture by erasing its potential not to act or be – *inoperative*, reclaim its own potential not to act, and be purified of what I call *canonical sanctities*: solutionist, utilitarian, goal-oriented, and purpose-driven actions. The process Agamben calls *profanation* is an attempt to return what has been confined to the inaccessible realm of the sacred back to free use.²⁵ In this sense, the suspension or interruption of sacred operations becomes a kind of 'Sabbath'. Agamben notes that the absolute example of this can only be found in moments of festivals and play, when everyday laws are suspended. These are moments in which laws – forces – are suspended without any positive goal – such as production or power – in order to relieve the stress of the fault lines.²⁶ I therefore propose an *end* for architecture through profanation: an architecture that becomes suspended or chooses not to act by liberating itself from all its exalted meanings and canonised duties, which have fixed the relationship between its means and its ends.

An architecture that prefers not to

I will discuss two examples of architectures that have regained their capacity to act by rendering inoperative the restrictive laws of ground and time within systems of forces – topographic, atmospheric, tectonic, and geological; ecological and biological; material, political, economic, cultural – and that thus remain suspended within their own Sabbath.

Incubo Atacama Lab was an art workshop held in the Atacama Desert, Chile, developed in collaboration between Incubo and the Land Arts of the American West programme at Texas Tech University. Workshop leader Chris Taylor talks of 'a new way of reading and interpreting what is already there, in the search for alternative ways of making visible the interconnections of our interactions for architectural practice.'²⁷ Atacama Lab presents an inoperative practice of architecture based on the reading and interpretation of geomorphological processes. Emerging from a desire to explore the topographic changes left behind by nitrate mining in the region, Atacama Lab stands in contrast to the operative nature of extractivist practices, which, under the heavy influence of canonical apparatuses, have been deprived of the

potential not to be [4, 5].

Geomorphological forces and human design agency thus become intertwined. The workshop is liberated from economic, administrative, and functional extensions that could be identified as canonical forces of the built environment. This approach, suspending normative spatial production, enables the designer to redefine their relationship with place.

The architectural outcomes of the Atacama Lab took the form of small-scale, temporary constructions made from simple or found materials like wire, paper, and stones. They represent site-specific gestures: models, ground markings, or assemblages. These constructions were assembled directly in the desert, documented, and then dismantled or left to disintegrate.²⁸ Emphasising transience over permanence, the Lab treated architecture as an open-ended engagement with terrain rather than built form. One example was Alex Morton's wire model of high-tension towers, briefly installed in a lagoon before being discarded.

Another example is *Ca'n Terra*, a residential design by Ensamble Studio [6, 7] located in Menorca, Spain. The design began with the discovery of an abandoned sandstone quarry: a geological void. The architects carefully scanned, mapped, and inhabited this quarry through minimal interventions. The resulting space retains the irregular surfaces and textures of the excavated stone, forming a cavernous interior with no added façades or conventional construction elements. Openings were carved for light and access, but the original geology remains largely untouched. The design thus reads more as a found space than a built space, emphasising an inoperative occupation rather than the power of *doing*. Transforming this void into an architectural programme, *Ca'n Terra* presents a radical break from conventional modes of construction by treating spatial existence not as a finished product but as a continuously suspended process. This kind of transformation allows design to establish a new balance between passivity and action, blurring boundaries between architecture's potential to do and not to do. In this way, the architect shares their capacity for design agency with geological entities.

As these collaborations illustrate, the attitude of choosing not to act is directly related to criticality. We preserve our potential not to act *only* as long as we preserve our criticality,

especially against the canonical forces that attempt to strip it from us. Contrary to the closure trap that utopian architecture can fall into due to its radical break with time, imagining and seeking alternatives in the materiality and possibilities of the suspended presents becomes possible. It is enabled by the critical stance of an architecture that refuses the sanctification of actions directed toward a predetermined end.

I argue that this will to *not act* is the moment when an architect can reveal their vision, their will, and the perfection of their potential, challenging disciplinary prohibitions that disable the potential not to be. A conception of architecture liberated from traditional norms and given structures sheds the weight of existing preoccupations and traces its own existence. The preference between doing and not doing does not limit the architect's design capacity but rather engages a liberating ethic. Architecture not only builds physical structures or designs the worlds it affirms, it also considers unrealised potentials. As a result, an architecture in search of alternatives must embody the potential to choose *not* to act, instead of embracing adaptive flexibility, omnipotent capability, or the sanctity of solutionism. This approach allows architecture to discover its own nature and potential, and thereby liberate its own end through the profanation of the canonical.

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Notes

- 1 Frédéric Neyrat, 'Occupying the Future: Time and Politics in the Era of Clairvoyance Societies', in *The Present of the Future*, ed. by Susanne Witzgall and Kerstin Stakemeier (Berlin: Diaphanes, 2017), pp. 79–90.
- 2 Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, 'On the Ethics of Architects: To Build or Not To Build', *Zweifel*, 28 (2016), 78–81.
- 3 I use this formulaic expression with reference to Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (Herman Melville, *Katip Bartleby*, trans. by

Kaya Genç [Can Yayınları, 2018]) and Deleuze's reading of *Bartleby* as a figure of clinical resistance. See Gilles Deleuze, *Kritik ve Klinik* (Istanbul: Norgunk, 2007).

- 4 Elizabeth Grosz, 'Time Matters: On Temporality in the Anthropocene', in *Architecture in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Design, Deep Time, Science, and Philosophy*, ed. by Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2013), pp. 93–106.
- 5 'Profanation' (in English), *profanazione* (in Italian), or *dünyevileştirme* (in Turkish), is a gesture that can return to free human use that which had previously been taken away and confined to the inaccessible realm of the sacred. See: Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2007).
- 6 'Inoperativity' (in English), *inoperosità* (in Italian), is one of Agamben's key concepts. Throughout this text, I will instead use expressions such as 'suspension' or 'remaining in suspension' to better convey the conceptual nuance.
- 7 Sergei Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).
- 8 Grosz, 'Time Matters'.
- 9 *Désœuvrement* (French); initially discussed by French thinkers such as Alexandre Kojève, Maurice Blanchot and Georges Bataille through terms like 'non-work' or 'unemployment', this concept was later developed by Agamben through his own distinctive approach. See: Guillermo Marmont and Gonzalo Primera, 'Propositions for Inoperative Life', *Journal of Italian Philosophy*, 3 (2020), 9–21.
- 10 Sergei Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).
- 11 Marmont and Primera, 'Propositions for Inoperative Life'.
- 12 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 13 Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics*.
- 14 Marmont and Primera, 'Propositions for Inoperative Life'.
- 15 The key term here – a condition of suspension – is illustrated by Agamben through the example of the Jewish Sabbath, a day on which all sacred work is brought to a halt. See Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. by David Kishik (Stanford,

CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). The most compelling examples of such suspended architectures appear in student projects from architecture schools, which celebrate their release from canonical forces and action-oriented finalities.

16 Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics*.

17 Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Selected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Janet Kruse and Elizabeth A. Ellsworth, *Geologic City: A Field Guide to the GeoArchitecture of New York* (Belfast, ME: Smudge Studio, 2011).

21 Ibid.

22 Agamben, *Potentialities*.

23 I would like to emphasise that what still leads us toward 'preferring not to' is criticality – and, by extension, critical theory itself. However, the main framework of this text focuses not on critiques imposed from the outside, but on a criticality that emerges from within the subject. In this sense, we must redirect Reinhold Martin's question – posed in his critique of the post-9/11 World Trade Center projects, 'By What Criteria Can Such Architecture be Judged?' –

towards the architect's own actions, and thus toward an internal mode of criticality. Rather than judging the architect according to external criteria and thereby detaching them from their own potential not to act, it becomes increasingly urgent today for architects to construct their own critical stance and cultivate their capacity to prefer not to act – particularly in a time when canonical forces almost entirely constrain this potential within architectural practice. At this point, we must ask the following question while reading this text: 'What is it that makes me, as an architect, prefer not to design a solar power plant control building in the middle of the Konya Plain?' Though projective in nature, this question still calls for the critical – and for a mode of thinking 'from within'.

24 Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics*.

25 Agamben, *Profanations*.

26 Ibid.

27 Chris Taylor, 'Casting Architecture in an Expanding Horizon', *Journal of Architectural Education*, 62:4 (2009), 15–23.

28 Chris Taylor, William L. Fox, Flora Vilches, Gonzalo Pedraza, Rodrigo Pérez de Arce, Pilar Cereceda, Andrés Rivera, *Incubo: Atacama Lab* (Santiago: Incubo, 2008), pp. 95–6.

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arq gratefully acknowledges:

Ensamble Studio, 6, 7
Witold Marczewski, 2
Smudge Studio, 3
Mathias Depardon, 1
Xavier Ribas, 5
Chris Taylor, 4

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was written as part of the doctoral course *Visionary Design and Architecture* taught by Prof. Dr. Ayşe Şentürer within the Architectural Design PhD programme at Istanbul Technical University (ITU). I thank Ayşe Şentürer and my colleague Alperen Ergin for their generous support during the development of this work. Parts of the text were previously published in Turkish in *Arredamento Mimarlık* (March 2025) and I thank the journal's editorial team for supporting this earlier version.

Competing interests

The author declares none.

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