Disappearing Inside a Red Granite-Clad Correlate

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This essay is accompanied by an audio piece with the same title. Listen to the piece here:

till-wittwer.net/disappearing-audio

Prelude

Enter, Stage Left, a blue-collared Upton Sinclair. He proclaims:
"It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it!"[1]
Off.

Act I

Something Becomes Evident

The so-called Skyscraper Index describes a correlation between the erection of the world's tallest towers and the collapse of financial markets. It claims that investment in skyscrapers peaks just around the time that economies are about to deflate. Notable historic examples count New York's Chrysler and Empire State Buildings, which opened in the wake of the 1929 financial crisis. For contemporary specimen, one might look at the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, being completed just before the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, and the Shard in London, the former completing, the latter commencing construction in 2009 amidst the chaos of the most devastating global financial bust in recent history.
The argument goes that the abundance of free floating capital, usually directly preceding financial crises, needs to be invested and thus quite literally located: Financial liquidity needs to be solidified in order to keep it from evaporating. Spectacular – and speculative – real estate projects have long been a way of concentrating and locking down vast amounts of capital, a crucial prerequisite for any record-breaking

[1] Sinclair, Upton, *I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked* (1935), Reprint University of California Press, 1994, p. 109.

skyscraper-venture. Of course, the majority of funds needed to even begin these mega-endeavors have been secured and invested well before the first shovel has broken ground, and so it happens that these enormous towers tend to be finished when we're knee-deep in crisis and there is hardly a penny left for red ribbons and champagne comes the opening ceremony.
The Skyscraper Index examines architecture not as a craft that takes care of organizing bodies in space and providing shelter, but it rather defines architecture as an agent that physically manifests wealth in spatio-temporal relations and thus renders it visible. Thus, the Index is not encouraging us to marvel at daring architecture and the limits of what can be achieved in engineering and design, but it rather proposes to read the built environment as a correlate that can help us conceive and understand an abstract relationship by simply looking at the world – or rather – into the skies. From this vantage point, the towers are nothing more than the peaks of a graph depicting the boom-bust-cycles of economy, installed in a three-dimensional grid for improved relationality – each building and its style being signifiers of a distinct time as much as a distinct crisis.
And it is not only the Skyscraper Index that identifies the towers less as structures providing much-needed space in a state of advanced

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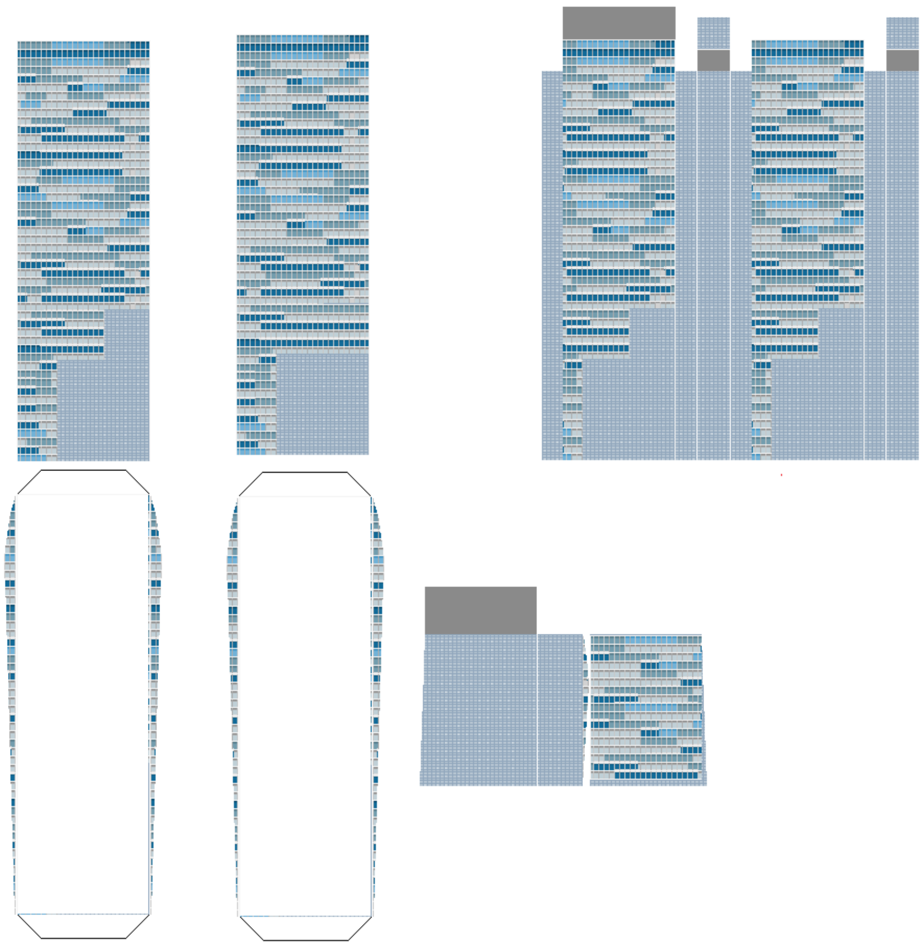

The Shard unfolded

urbanization than as mere materialized indicators of financial leverage. Potential tenants – and even the buildings' architects – seem to share this opinion. Take the two most recent towers mentioned: The Burj Khalifa's vacancy rate of provided office space sits at a staggering two-thirds[2], and – while adding to the tower's overall height – 29% of the entire building are not even occupiable – a condition that the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat aptly termed "Vanity Height"[3]. In London's Shard, the Vanity Height counts for 20% of the entire building. Oh, and not a single one of the ten luxury apartments that the tower houses have been sold since its completion in 2012.[4]

Act II

Leaving the Frame

In one of the first film documents ever recorded, the Lumière Brothers capture workers leaving a factory – incidentally, the Lumière Brother's own factory in Lyon, situated on 25 Rue Saint-Victor (today's Rue du Premier-Film), where photographic plates and photographic paper were manufactured. The employees' work shift is over and they hurry to leave the building behind as they pass the heavily-guarded iron factory gates in a constant stream. The workers – men and women – exit the image frame defined by the camera to the left and right to disappear hors-champ and be forgotten.

Lumière Brothers, La Sortie des usines Lumière (Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory), 1895

[2] http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18929271

[3] http://www.ctbuh.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=k%2BK%2FgAvA7YU%3D&tabid=5837&language=en-US

[4] https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/jul/05/shard-apartments-empty-flats-london-market

But what can be stated about the relation between the factory and its workers by watching the short film document? Not much, it seems, as Bertolt Brecht observes: "The situation has become so complicated because the simple 'reproduction of reality' says less than ever about that reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or AEG reveals almost nothing about these institutions. Reality as such has slipped into the domain of the functional. The reification of human relations, the factory, for example, no longer discloses those relations. (…) For those who show only the experiential aspect of reality do not reproduce reality itself."[5]

The relation between worker and workplace has become abstract to an extent that simple documentation will not be able to reveal them. Standing outside the factory gate, where the camera in the Lumière Brothers' film is located, cannot give you a sense of the relations unfolding inside, but it does give you a sense of this reality's evasive nature: There is an inside and an outside and anyone not entangled in a working relation must remain out. The factory becomes a black box, successfully masking all processes that take place behind its gates and walls.

Even more so: Over time, the image of the workers leaving their workplace has lost its specificity and has become a generic event, a typology of images, as the filmmaker Harun Farocki remarks: "An image like an expression: So often used that it can be understood blindly and does not have to be seen."[6] This image as a visual event has dissolved, it has evaporated to become part of a cultural imagination that does not need a visual representation: The workers don't have to be seen leaving the factory anymore. And in fact, they cannot be seen leaving the factory anymore.

An oddball trio

[5] Brecht, Bertolt, "The Threepenny Lawsuit", in: Silberman, Mark (Ed.), *Brecht on Film and Radio*, Bloomsbury, 2000, p. 164.

[4] Farocki, Harun, "Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik (Workers Leaving the Factory)", 36 Mins., Harun Farocki Film, 1995.

Act III

The Great Assembly Hall of Finance

Traversing a number of security checkpoints and descending an escalator, the floor trader enters the building, Stage Right.

The building of the Chicago Board Options Exchange – or CBOE – is located on 440 South LaSalle Street, on the edge of Chicago's financial district. Wedged uncomfortably between the Chicago Board of Trade to the north, Congress Parkway – a main artery for supplying the daily influx of suburbian commuters to staff downtown's service industry – to the south, the Metropolitan Correctional Facility – a Federal prison – to the East and the Chicago River to the West, the building is a factory of finance that sits as awkwardly on the map as any building in any given industrial zone.

As one element of a three-building ensemble of financial institutions, the CBOE building was conceived in 1985 by the omnipresent stand-in firm for corporate structures, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, incidentally experts in vain crisis-architecture, as the firm pioneered in the development of supertall towers. They are responsible for several buildings that at some point could be advertised as "tallest building in the world", amongst them the current title-bearer – the already mentioned Burj Khalifa.

The "oddball-trio"[7] building complex on 440 South LaSalle – visually dominated by striking red granite sheets used as material on the outer shell and giving the buildings' exteriors a shoe box-like flatness – is not exactly a supertall structure: It ranks only 78th in the list of Chicago's highest buildings. However, the indexical function of buildings as a correlate rather than inhabitable space suggested in the Skyscraper Index can be applied to this building as well as it bears the striking quality of making people – workers, above all – disappear inside its red granite-clad bowels.

Entering the building as a guest is difficult, even though the tall iron factory gates the Lumière Brothers' used to shield off their production facility have given way to more refined mechanisms of exclusion: Only by invitation may one approach the security checkpoint that – once you pass metal detector, CT scanner and turnstile – gives way to a number of polished elevators, rushing the visitor up to the second floor of the building. To reach the trading floor – arguably the Exchange's center piece – one has to step onto an insistently grumbling escalator that transports the bewildered intruder back down and into the building's core, as far away from the outer walls as possible. The stage set here communicates exclusivity and high security.

[7] http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1987-08-30/entertainment/8703050910_1_buildings-tower-plaza

The workers who in their day took the elevator up and the escalator down to their great assembly hall were called the “market makers“. Sporting CBOE-branded blue trader’s coats, they gathered on the vast trading floor – which they affectionately called ‘the pits‘ – to bring together buyers and sellers, to facilitate and provide the liquidity needed to trade options on literally anything that can be traded on a financial market – be it a company’s stock, crude oil, a particular batch of grain, or the their own business’ demise. Their working day was framed by the operating hours of the Exchange and their labor was manual – a range of standardized and swiftly executed hand motions, transmitting a variety of messages referring to traded products, quantities and dates, all supplemented with the most primal instrument – the voice. The sound on these floors was deafening, when up to 4,500 market makers met in the pits on any given day to form a frantically screaming sea of people barking out orders, staring at screens arranged overhead to form an array of squared colored light, jotting down numbers on tiny note pads, ripping out the pages and handing them over to clerks who hurriedly carried the slips across the shifting mass of sweating and trembling bodies to the booking tables on the other side. The flat slabs of red granite framing the factory became the outer walls of a deafening echo-chamber. And even though the products assembled on this factory floor were immaterial and speculative, the bustling and vibrant atmosphere down there did not much differ from the one in Ford’s Model-T assembly hall or the Lumière Brothers’ workshop for producing photographic supplies: It was all precise hand- and vocal work, rhythmically stomping noise and blue collars that filled the silo with sell- and put-options.

Act IV

Disappearing

But, to break down a somewhat romantic phantasy about labor in a brief sentence: These days are gone. Since the digital revolution swept across the international financial markets in the early 2000s and with it brought the dawn of algorithmic trading, the banking man’s silo has been radically remodeled from an echo-chamber into a black box devoid of hands, bodies, sweat, and reverb. The market makers – blue-collar dinosaurs, obsolete relics of an analogue past – were crushed by the momentum of this revolution. They were compressed, liquified and transformed into the speculative crude

oil that now powers the server farms' basement generators – the very server farms in which the trading algorithms that replaced the human trade force now toil, being at once infinitely better at their job and cheaper to maintain. Automation has become elimination as the workers' voices, once filling the great assembly hall with laborious noise, have receded one by one, ousted by the methodical hum of servers, taking both their places and their jobs.
440 South LaSalle, and maybe all the other real estate projects that pre- and post-crisis financial bubbles have brought into the world, have finally become apparent as that which they might have been all along: Empty shells of largely vacant space, nothing more than physical manifestations of an abstract correlate that render any carbon-based life-form entering them obsolete and invisible. The solidified capital flow of these structures made from steel, glass (red granite, occasionally) and vanity dissolves life in their merely indexical function, in their image typology and hence, the workers who once passed the turnstiles, marble lobby and checkpoints to start their shift – all representing a theatrical environment of mock-security – have fallen into their own bottomless trading pits and were swallowed whole by the liquidity they once provided, as all carbon-based life was streamlined until the line became so thin in the stream of data that it vanished. Capital manifests while carbon liquifies to make room and become the fuel for the endless rows of server racks and infinite growth.
As an inside joke without any insiders left to hear it, the escalators keep running. Their perpetual grumble forms a soundscape that carries unobstructedly through the vacated building and fills the empty hallways, empty lobby with its pointless security checkpoints, and empty elevator shafts, just to bounce off the massive walls of red granite, changing direction and encasing the empty trading floors, empty office spaces, and empty luxury apartments, to ultimately meet the infinitely efficient hum of the server rooms. Together, they create the very soundtrack of progress played inside a coffin bare of any-body's trace.
The generic event of workers leaving the factory has become a generic non-event: No worker will ever leave the factory again.

Act V

Leftovers

The stage is empty, the walls are bare and solid, the sound of escalators and servers fills the space. From afar, a painfully slowed down version *of Duane Eddy's 1958 hit song "Rebel Rouser" – recorded in a disused grain silo – sets in. It plays only in our imagination, as there are no ears left to actually hear it. The distorted tune fuses with the escalators' grumble and the servers' hum to melt into a sound tapestry that haunts the CBOE's ghostly halls in a mockery of all the workers that have vanished inside.*

In addition to the referenced material, ideas for this essay were sparked by an interview with Kevin Davitt, a former market maker at the Chicago Board Options Exchange. The interview was conducted in October of 2017.