

## A blink event

*As architecture takes on trendy names such as “reactive”, “active” or “organic”, it is only normal to expect it to breathe, or at least show some sign of vitality. How can we test this? Are we allowed to use defibrillators to enhance some of its characteristics? Can we augment its vitality by messing with its nervous system, the same way neurologists sought to explore the brain through psychedelics? An unusual project such as blinking the lights is a test that displaces expectations about the staticity of buildings. The Ev building is equipped with motion sensors to manage lighting heating lighting and security: what can be derived from this infrastructure when it is explored away from its functional vocation? What happens when the lights leave the main choreography and starting pacing at another tempo?*

The EV edifice is a workplace, a study environment, and the setting of research and development. Sometimes described as cold, the building is nevertheless a prime site of knowledge where frictions, exchanges and ideas emerge/bubble up. Inhabited by the engineering on one side and the visual arts faculty on the other, the EV represents the union as much as the separation between so-called rational disciplines and creative arts at Concordia University, Montreal. But the most important dynamic may be the politics of the building, more concretely different claims of ownership. The Blink project enhances the experience of architecture not as a neutral container to exist in, but as an agent in social relations.

The performance consists of making the building's lights flicker, using human agents on every floor. As such, it seeks to do two things. First, Blink triggers the building's membrane from within. Traditionally, facades have conveyed a static message determined by the architect. Only in retrospect can the viewer interpret it differently; but fundamentally the building is always “saying the same thing”. With the advent of reactive architecture -or simply windowed spaces-, there is the possibility to influence the façade of an edifice in real-time. Through this self-activation, we develop the metaphor of the facade as a semi-translucent liminal space that both reacts to outside queues and exteriorizes “private” processes. Using it as a canvas whereby each floor can be lit or dark, the façade becomes a canvas through which inhabitants coordinate their gestures.

This brings us to the second point, namely how human agency can make the lit/dark state of the room matter. We must begin by explaining the mechanics in order to have an understanding of the portée of the gesture. When the blinker pushes the light button, she activates the lights of the whole floor. Adding an electric switch to the light circuit makes this possible. The agency of the human switcher is extended from one room to the entire floor. As a result, different floors can coordinate more easily. From their room, users log on a website where they access a live video feed. But instead of seeing the overall picture, they are limited to the neighboring floors. This is derived from Swarm Intelligence, a natural phenomena by which agents adjust in relation to the state of their neighbor. This explains natural phenomena such

as bird flocking or the coordination of ants colonies. Contrary to popular belief, there is no central command in these systems. Neither the leading bird nor the queen ant emit diktats. Speed and direction of the birds and ant paths is actually the product of horizontal decisions. Each agent adjusts relative to its environment, and this produces an overall harmonized effect.

In the case of natural phenomenon, the effect is determined by evolutionary needs, such as migrating or food gathering. But this kind of distributed decision-making process is politically loaded when used in the context of human intervention. In our case, there is no central choreography to be followed. Blinkers must relate to neighbors in order to determine the state of their room. However, the states of the neighbors (lit or dark floors) do not necessarily determine an agent's behavior, contrary to rigorous cellular automata systems. The neighbor's states are simply a context against which one determines his own rhythm. We can make conjectures about rhythm: will blinkers seek to harmonize floors to create a seemingly unified entity? Will some floors exhibit a counterpoint attitude, or even an arbitrary one? After the first iteration of the project, some blinkers spoke about their attempt to coordinate with other floors by looking at the reflection or nearby buildings. The website now at their disposal facilitates this process, but leaves open the rules to be inferred from neighboring floor's states.

The notion of rhythm can be transposed to the realm of political stand (Sha Xin Wei). We can pose mainstream alignment, dissent and revolutionary marginality as the corresponding metaphors of following the tempo1:1, counterpoint and random in the political domain. If we take as our ontology the building as a metaphor of society, we can think of how different rhythms relate to dominant discourses and stances. Here's a typical situation: After a few minutes of adjustment, a main rhythm emerges. It may change over time, and blinkers committed to it will adjust. Fewer blinkers may actively seek to differentiate themselves by a diametrical opposition to the pattern (when most floors are lit theirs is dark and vice-versa). Even fewer will have a pattern that cannot relate to their neighbors' in simple terms of alignment/opposition. Those marginal, seemingly random blinkers still situate themselves in relation to their neighbor by ignoring them. Yet their response is far more radical in that it rejects any form or alignment, negative or positive. In the political realm, this can be equated with a square refusal of participation in the mainstream official framework.

Rhythm as a situator of political stances also evokes questions of polyphony versus simple tempo. We can think of the richness of multiple rhythms not as cacophony, but as a sign of precious diversity. Cacophony can be heard against the authoritarian simplicity of modernism and dictatorship. Before categorising this stance as a post-modernist claim to diversity versus the myth of a unified voice, and reject multiplicity as inharmonic.