Architecture of Crowds – preview

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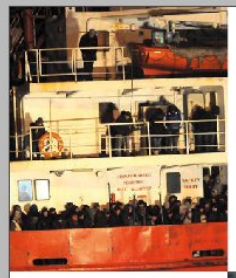
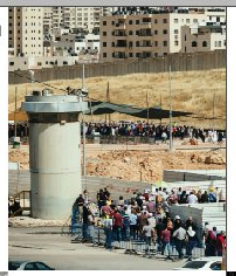


3.1.1 Politics of Overcrowded Space



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2.1 To See a Crowd

What are we looking at when we observe a crowd? Throughout history, the gaze directed at a crowd carried class tension: crowds were perceived simultaneously as a source of strength and as a threat, as bearers of political potential but also as a dangerous manifestation of the potential of the mass. From the 18th century onward, the concept of the crowd was used pejoratively — to describe, or even to ridicule, large numbers of uneducated people lacking the capacity to pursue specific goals or to organize themselves (Schnapp, 2006). Such a perspective in modern times derived from class divisions and the fears of elites regarding the collective energy that manifested with increasing intensity in modern metropolises.

Jeffrey Schnapp (2006) distinguishes between an emblematic and an oceanic tradition in the depiction of crowds. The emblematic tradition presents the crowd as a single entity, often shown as a formation of individuals into a particular shape. An example is Abraham Bosse's frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes's work Leviathan from 1651. Hobbes used the figure of the Leviathan — the mythical sea monster that became a symbol of chaos and devouring power — to represent the all-powerful state organizing society. As presented by him, the Leviathan takes the form of a human being, a man of superhuman size whose body is composed of an anonymous crowd. The Leviathan observes the crowd and the crowd observes it, as in a mirror. Through this mirroring, a kind of proto-social contract can be formulated — between the leader and the led, a mutually dependent social contract arises, in which Hobbes saw the philosophical foundation of legitimate governments.

The second historical mode of depiction is the oceanic tradition, continuing the obsession with grandeur and the sublime characteristic of the Romantic period. The "sea of people" in the oceanic tradition possesses infinite force; the individual who is part of the crowd draws on its strength, and the entire ocean of people moves forward in successive tidal waves. Although the emblematic tradition predominates in pre-modern images of crowds, the oceanic can be found, for example, in paintings of battlefields.

These traditions function as dialectical opposites while simultaneously complementing one another. Both can be used to allegorically name the modes of controlling the crowd — while the first emphasizes the moment of "crossing the threshold," when the individual steps forth from the multitude, the second emphasizes the internalizing moment, when the individual draws on the tidal force of the multitude of which they are part. Continuing this analogy further, one can say that the crowd and the problem of its organization enter the modern era divided by precisely this duality. On one side stands the potential of the crowd to be a force unified under a common denominator; on the other stands the crowd that grows without restraint and has a natural tendency to avoid control. The emerging modern state exists in a state of tension: for effective governance it requires the individualization and separation of citizens, yet at the same time it continues to benefit from their collective force.

2.2 Era of Crowds

The French social psychologist Gustave Le Bon characterized crowds as a distinctly modern phenomenon (Le Bon, 1896, p. 13). One cannot overlook the mass rituals of archaic cultures, ancient audiences, the crowdness of the Hussites, and countless other premodern forms of crowd life — yet it is only with the rise of industrialized economies and urbanization in the 19th century that, according to Le Bon, a certain sense of crowding becomes synonymous with life in the city. Population density increased sharply during this period, and the crowd became a site of cultural and political struggle.

Le Bon's The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind of 1895 reflects a period of social unrest and instability that represented, for the established classes to which Gustave Le Bon himself belonged, a traumatic sense of loss of control. In the hundred years preceding the publication of this book, Paris had witnessed a series of civil uprisings: the French Revolution of 1789, the July Revolution of 1830, the February Revolution of 1848, and the period of the Paris Commune in 1871. These events transformed the streets of Paris into a traditional space of crowd unrest, characterized by spontaneously arising architectures such as barricades.

Le Bon anticipates the approaching 20th century as the Era of Crowds, in which the power of the masses becomes the dominant political

3.1.1 Politics of Overcrowded Space

Canetti's division of crowds into slow and fast does not refer directly to the speed at which masses move, but rather to the manner in which they form. For the purposes of my text, I have chosen to adopt this distinction and develop it further. The indicator of speed in a crowd can most usefully be employed to describe the variable ways in which crowds form in the contemporary world: either slowly and with long-term persistence, or suddenly, under the influence of a short-lived energy that may be just as quickly exhausted.

Crowds that form suddenly — and are therefore the most frequently seen and covered in the media — are fast crowds: groups mobilized by sport, political circumstance, or war most visibly catalyze events in the modern world. I return to the characteristics of fast crowds later in the text. The slow crowd, in contrast to the fast, is defined by the distance of its goal. It can be likened to streams slowly converging into ever larger rivers, ultimately forming a delta. The slow crowd assembles gradually and is permanent only in a long-term perspective. It is not easily satisfied, and its aim is often so distant that it cannot, by its very nature, be achieved within a single lifetime; yet it is persistently driven by belief in a certain value.

The current historic period of global political instability, proxy conflicts motivated by economic gain, and climate change manifested by tornadoes, flash floods, and extreme drought has set huge numbers of bodies in motion across the world. People leave places of economic crisis, regions ravaged by war, and lands rendered infertile. Many board boats at coastal borders in an attempt to cross the sea to one of the Western nations. Human bodies are packed into smugglers' vessels at a density that defies basic vital functions: the breathability of skin, the capacity for orientation, and the intake and expulsion of fluids.

The boats on which refugees set out in search of alternative futures represent a model situation in which architectural layout shapes the politics of overcrowded space. The configuration of the vessel ignores the vitality of bodies and places emphasis only on their physical limits. Réthoré (2015) uses the term Mediterranean abyss to designate the part of the central Mediterranean in which a "humanitarian and moral vacuum" prevails. The safety of bodies — defined within the Mediterranean abyss as nothing more than volumes — receives less attention during voyages, disembarkations, and disasters on the open sea than that afforded to others. Similar conclusions are reached by the project of oceanic cartography by Forensic Architecture,[1] in which legally fragile cases of non-assistance at sea,[2] left-to-die boats,[3] or the ignoring of vessels lead to hundreds of deaths that are never witnessed.

The word "overcrowded" can refer to many different situations. From the word itself, it is not clear whether we are speaking of a popular pop concert or one of the Mediterranean boats. A space is overcrowded when it does not provide the conditions necessary to accommodate a certain number of bodies with dignity. Strictly speaking, no space can literally be overfilled — one can only exceed a certain threshold beyond which individuality is transformed into a mere body (Lambert, 2015).

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1 Forensic Architecture – Forensic Oceanography
https://forensic-architecture.org/category/forensic-oceanography

2 Forensic Architecture – Death by Rescue: the Lethal Effects of Non-Assistance at the Sea
https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/death-by-rescue-the-lethal-effects-of-non-assistance-at-sea

3 Forensic Architecture – The Left to Die Boat
https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-left-to-die-boat

that the "competitive" panic familiar from other transport hubs with turnstiles and passport controls — when passengers are rushing to make connecting flights — prevails here. There is, undoubtedly, chaos, yet the airport crowd is somehow productively clustered: pilgrims move in family groups and travel parties, within which they look after one another.

The modern mass ritual thus creates, beyond its risks, specific forms of cooperation. Hani Alnabusi, John Drury, and Anne Templeton (2018) draw attention to the importance of collective behavior in the slow crowd. People in the open spaces of squares cooperate more — not only within families but also with strangers — than is the case in the dense crowd in the vicinity of the Kaaba, where competition for the best view arises. This also enables the crowd to regulate itself, making it possible to prevent tragic crushes by means other than the construction of ever new infrastructure, as in the case of the Jamarat bridge. Perceiving one's surroundings as fellow members of one's own group — which may be defined by a shared faith — motivates mutual support.

The desire for redemption and cleansing from sin becomes, in the conditions of a globalized world, a mass phenomenon. Religious pilgrimages are today firmly intertwined with modern infrastructure and function also through the tension between modernity and the ancient allure of the miraculous. At the same time, however, they must struggle with the challenges of unstoppably growing crowds and the overload of a site's sustainable capacity. Architecture can hardly intervene if a threshold is exceeded and the crowd is compressed to an unbearable density.

3.1.5 Overtourism

Because contemporary mass rituals balance on the boundary between tradition and modernity, they can hardly be separated from tourism, which either parasitizes them economically or merges with them entirely. For example, the pilgrimage site of Lourdes, one of the most important Roman Catholic pilgrimage destinations, was visited by 3.1 million pilgrims in 2024. Susanna Elm (2006) describes the mingling of mass tourism with religion in Lourdes as a natural transformation that churches are undergoing in the 21st century: "Although they go through many transformations, two things unite ancient and modern religious crowds: the way in which the individual experience within a religiously motivated crowd is represented through the most advanced media of its time, and the enduring human need of each participant to communicate with the supernatural, in the hope of obtaining — as an individual supported by the collective — healing, salvation, and grace" (p. 133).

Crowds of tourists move, just like crowds of religious pilgrims, on a planetary scale. At the moment when a particular destination becomes so burdened by crowds that tourism becomes its defining characteristic, we generally speak of overtourism, where crowds exceed the sustainable capacity of the given place. An overloaded place degrades — its historical or cultural value declines or is overlaid by so many perceptual layers of advertising, tour guides' umbrellas, waste, and stalls that it seems to have disappeared entirely. Exceeding the amount of how many people a given place can comfortably accommodate brings with it, in cities, the negative effects of speculation-driven rises in food prices and rents, leading to the displacement of original city residents from their centers. In nature, the overtourist trampling of feet destroys plants, drives away animals, and disrupts entire ecosystems.

At the Venice Art Biennale in 2019, Lithuania presented the opera Sun and Sea. Created in collaboration by director Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, librettist Vaiva Grainytė, and composer Lina Lapelytė, the tourist crowd here takes on the role of opera singers. Approximately 24 performers lie or sit on sand in swimwear, engaged in ordinary beach activities while simultaneously singing about their lives and concerns, into which the impacts of climate change are increasingly woven as the performance unfolds.

Rose-colored dresses flutter:
Jellyfish dance along in pairs –
With emerald-colored bags,
Bottles and red bottle-caps.
O the sea never had so much color!

The sun is beautifully warm — but why does it burn a little too much? How is it that we had Easter weather at Christmas this year? What led to the glistening sea turning as green as a forest with an overgrowth of algae? The destruction of planetary ecosystems forms the backdrop to