

Academic activism: Meditation on a single breath
Simon McLellan, PhD.



Source:

<https://resources.stuff.co.nz/content/dam/images/1/b/b/o/k/y/image.related.StuffLandscapeSixteenByNine.1240x700.1ky2ve.png/1502393719482.jpg>

Inhalation: Possibility at the impossible university

In 2017, a senior lecturer at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) school of architecture, assisted the Architectural Centre to successfully argue that the heritage status be upheld by the Environment Court for a building recently acquired by VUW from a government department. The legal proceedings against the university were reported as being extremely unpopular (Dominion Post, 10 August 2017), while the university deemed the building as surplus to its requirements and sought its immediate demolition. Persuasive arguments before the commissioners were made by McCarthy (NZEnvC 116 (9 August 2017)) that outlined the meaningful contribution that the existence of the building makes, not just for those vulnerable tenants who had previously been removed from the building, but to the historical consciousness of architecture in New Zealand. The commissioners agreed and in August 2017 issued a ruling that upheld its heritage status, delaying demolition being undertaken by the university.

Exhalation: Impossibility, suffocation, emptiness, as a possible activism for academia

The activism shown by an academic here is understood as part of an impossible discussion, the discarding of a disused building. At a university, this type of advocacy activism that exploits and attempts to grasp at the ungraspable belongs with academic freedom. When academics are confronted with what is not possible at a university, there is a loss of freedom for discovery, debate or dissension that draws attention to itself as a responsible freedom. The advocacy of heritage architecture, should that arrive, suggests a possibility from an impossible situation.

Inhalation implies taking a swift secretive movement between the self and the outside world, such as the pursuit of legal justice. Exhalation implies impossibility, suffocation, emptiness. In this activism there is suffocation, namely, the removal of social housing from government books at a time of extreme social hardship. Tenants were restrained, removed and silenced. Architecture had had a previous role to play in the provision of social housing, and Gordon Wilson, after whom the building is named, was a notable government architect who housed the most vulnerable.

The impossibility, therefore, of possibility for academics needs to be first addressed, that is, the overwhelming invasion of the infinite, which brings the gift of the infinite. Emmanuel Levinas writes “the idea of the Infinite, *Infinity in me*” (Levinas, 2010, p.174), a relational passivity for the other that overwhelms us and makes of the self, makes more from our existence. Speaking out as an exhalation, dying for the other, or substituting oneself for the other, is an invasion of the Infinite and arrives prior to possibility. To meditate therefore on the importance of architecture to social housing would be incomplete without the impossible sacrifice of substituting oneself for the cry of another.

Reference

Editorial: The Gordon Wilson flats do not deserve heritage protection – tear them down (2017, 17 August), *Dominion Post*. Retrieved from www.stuff.co.nz

Levinas, E. (1989). God and philosophy. In S. Hand (Ed.), *The Levinas Reader* (pp. 166-189). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

The Architectural Centre v. Wellington City Council (NZEnvC 116 (9 August 2017)).
Retrieved from <https://architecture.org.nz/gordon-wilson-flats/>

Academic activism
Simon McLellan, PhD.

“....those who testify to the truth will not stop doing so, because no one can bear witness for the witness.” Agamben, 2020

As part of a recent graduation ceremony at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch (Dec, 2019) an address was made by a local medical officer of health. He is held in high esteem by his colleagues and the wider community, and frequently makes public comment on the wider public health concerns, of which there are many in Christchurch city. The ceremony came within days of the release of a report into an investigation of the death of a student, Mason, at halls of residence. The unusual fact was that Mason had died on campus by suicide and, for weeks, his body lay undiscovered at the university halls of residence. In fact it was so decomposed that a cause of death could not be determined by the coroner. Many theories are circulating as to how this could have happened at a place of learning and it is with some reassurance to the university community that a public medical officer of health commented at their graduation ceremony. No mention was made of Mason's death in the speech, instead its tone and direction was informed from Rousseau as a commitment from the theories of science that a university such as this, takes seriously the well-being of students and their learning.

As philosophers of education would recognize, there is a great deal, that, taken in greater depth, the university, its processes and considerable resources, are struggling with and that perhaps, as yet another theory, might have been the result of the effect of sweeping global reforms on the university, long cited as a malaise that conspires against showing the sort of care from education that benefits the learning being offered. The ideas of Rousseau from the 19th century, should they have been taken seriously, may have offered a model of care from education that avoided the obvious neglect in this case.

Philosophical thought has yet to be given a chance to pause over the circumstances of the death of Mason on campus. Reflecting on the conflict of fighting the coronavirus crisis, Agamben (2020) characterised the convergence of Christianity, capitalism, and science

emerging as a new “cultic practice” that overlooks its obvious neglect of truth. Pausing to bear witness to the neglect of a student on campus, is to sacrifice myself to all those to whom I am obliged. To pause before truth is to betray millions of others to whom I owe an obligation, a sacrifice that might draw attention to the effect of “cultic practice”. One’s salvation as an unconditional gift for others has been likened by Derrida (1996) to a fear and trembling that you might feel as you die, an unconditional uniqueness, which for Derrida brings together both a relationship with God and the world. In this sense, the unconditionality in me suspends my obligation to the call of a future community out of neglect for others, in order to bear witness at a university struggling with the death of a student.

Reference

Agamben, G. (2020, May 2). La Medicina Come Religione

Retrieved from <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-la-medicina-come-religione>

Derrida, J. (1996). *The gift of death [Donner le mort]* (D. Wills, Trans.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.