

# CAZA

2015

## Slip Left then Punch Right: Anticipating Volatility

*“To gaze in on another may be an inadequate path to understanding, but in the case of boxing, it might be the only one”*

-Christopher Bedford

Boxing is probably our earliest form of civilized combat. Considered to be one of humanity's oldest experiments in relational dynamics, it pits two fighters in a ring bound by a set of rules. The Greeks held matches to commemorate the fallen after a war. The Romans popularized athletes into the most prized entertainers in the empire. The sport's drama is a function of a tightly controlled volatility: two bodies are throwing punches at each other with the intensity of serious conflict while the precipitating chaos is subject to strict spatiotemporal regulation.

A boxer-in-training, however, is confronted by none of these exigencies. Boxers train in an almost melancholic solitude repeating a combination of moves devoid of the presence of the other boxer. They punch, slip and block alone. They drill outside of the ring and typically box in front of a mirror. They gaze at themselves, attempting to imagine the missing boxer while confronting an optical inversion of their surroundings. A boxer's practice is a kind of perverse functional diagram by which a subject projects the possibility of a specific kind of relationship with another subject through their absence.

The ancient Hellenic sculpture, *The Boxer of Quirinal*, is a breathtaking homage to this process of partial and unfinished subjectivity. The Boxer rests. He is neither in training nor in a fighting stance. His genitals are scarred, his skin is cut, his hands are gently wrapped and his slanted head bespeaks a history of vicious combat. We don't know if he is triumphant or in agony. His repose is not free of the ghost of the other boxer.

*The Boxer's* solitude suggests the presence of another body. We consummate the implied absence of his attacker by building an imaginary bridge between his body and the act of fighting. His scars, his straps, his exhausted muscles, all refer to something outside of the space of the sculpture. We envision the ring, his opponent and the unpredictable frenzy of two bodies at war. The Boxer's solitude is a proxy for the tacit knowledge construed out of an incomplete picture of reality.

Critics liken boxers to dancers. The metaphor works because both dancing and boxing are radical forms of alternative communication. Professional dancers and prize boxers are obsessive readers. Their strength comes from their ability to be in extreme physical discomfort while remaining open to the shifting subjectivities of another body. Boxing technique is based on the need to interpret and anticipate volatility.

Boxing drills appear to be about endurance yet their real purpose is to create the possibility for a feedback loop. Boxers become themselves by undoing the standard closed circuit between a body and its surroundings. They learn not to react when hit or to lurch down around an incoming body to dodge a punch. They must protect themselves while creating openings to lure the other body in.

A boxer's form is rhizomatic. They slip left then punch right, flowing through a cycle of unbroken vectors that map out a system of tangent relations. They must imagine the body of their attacker while staring at themselves in a mirror. Boxers can only learn to cognitively flip their body for that of their attacker through relentless practice.

Boxing gyms are temples of repetition. The sights and sounds of these gyms are familiar to all boxers: a hypnotic rhythm of rings—3 minutes on, 30 seconds off, 3 minutes on—with bodies moving through their combinations and punching objects that endlessly return. Repetition cultivates nerve sensitivities necessary for the dual processes of reading and reacting to volatility.

Boxers are in constant search of a partner to analyze and in turn self-evaluate. They must defend and attack simultaneously. Their posture and their split-second movements address the other boxer. Every punch must be connected to another move. Boxing is an example of technique over ideology in a situation of hyper-connectivity. Boxers learn to how to act in a tense environment populated by another body whose unpredictable movements define their survival.

Architecture is similarly beset with issues of connectivity and social cohesion while being confronted with piecemeal conceptions of our universe. As architects, our practice is based on the critique of forms before they are fully crystallized. We are tasked to design for life that has yet emerged. Our profession profits on the creation of spaces in the absence of people who will inhabit them. We perform interviews, conduct surveys and host countless user group meetings in the hope that we can address this gap. Like the boxer, we must build future ecologies of chance while working with incomplete fragments of ourselves in the present.

Boxing as a model for design privileges the need to deal with change. Boxers

must be watchful of what is not yet there. As architects, our work consists of a limited repertoire of operations meant to produce explosive outbursts of creativity. Our moves are simple and our technologies archaic. Like the combinations a boxer is taught, our tools consist of the rudimentary projection of matter into space.

Boxing and architecture are practices that prosper on viewing the world the wrong side up. The power of design rests in its capacity to transform the commonplace through a different appraisal of reality. Program, building materials and site are subject to a permanent intervention of action. We are obsessed with techniques that produce an upturned diagram of the social futures we must anticipate. Our tools of projection present nature as both changeable and eternally in flux.

The boxer's effortless in the ring is our inspiration. We strive for a practice that never overcommits to a particular ideology. Extreme conditioning in architecture demands a loose scanning of our surroundings in the hope of finding alternative patterns of inhabitation.

The ideological battles of the last few decades can be summarized in terms of their neglect of technique. We must design navigable environments for the shifting sensibilities of users we don't know or who don't exist. Architectural form-making should never be absolute. We are, after all, practicing an applied sociology in the future.

Architecture as spatial technique first before ideology enables us to re-assign the making of form as the means by which we acknowledge our precarious state as beings continually threatened by near ruin. Our design techniques, like those of the boxer, are based on an admission of incomplete knowledge through active engagement. We must make do with the imperfect reality of our profession by focusing on how we make things in this world for users we can never fully know.

The body of the missing boxer is the strategic regulating factor in this relationship. The boxer construes the other body in the ring through a specific series of operations in space and time. His attack is conceived as an series of forms that adapts as it occupies time. The presence of other moving bodies in space triggers a pattern of proportions, distances and volumetric overlaps. Geometry is hereby activated by use and charged with the ability to produce effects.

"If they give you lines offer them circles," a boxing coach tells his young pupil. Understanding thrust as a function of shapes moving through space is a boxer's technique for both defense and attack. Geometries calculated in relation to their potential for influence turns architecture into a method to both think and act. We

can see our world, assess our failures and devise delightful ways to make it work differently.

Architecture at a time of massive information overload demands a bias towards action. Why would one select a straight line versus a curve? The answer depends on a way of understanding how forces affect a territory. Architectural technique requires us to be connected to our surrounding systems in a specific formal way. Our practice necessitates a continual evaluation of the shape and organization of these connections. Our work entails the construction of fractionally new worlds out of old recyclable forms.

Global production cycles force us to commit to the impossible. We are expected to innovate. Our industry values disruption. Novelty is our means of reacting to an environment that is defined by its ability to never stop. The current mediated design marketplace has brought about a situation of watered-down populist sleekness.

As architects trying to be in the vanguard, we don't truly know what we are doing—keeping this in mind is our strength and advantage. Geometry offers us a method to deal productively with our madcap desires. Major details remain in flux while we run towards tighter implementation deadlines. We are asked for magic so we must keep the illusion up. Like the boxer, we are compelled to diagram the unpredictable, to listen for the future movements of other bodies in this world and imagine new architectural configurations that bring about spaces between relaxation and efficiency.

Architecture is a spatial practice obsessed with relationships that might fail. Failure in the system is the reason we admire the boxer's effortlessness in the ring. Looseness with agility or strength with flexibility ensures that energy can be dispersed across multiple figures in a field of activity so as to enable the machine to re-boot itself after a partial collapse. The correlation of points in the space not the abstract volume of the space itself is how failure is averted. It is a form of working that is as interested with what is physically present as with that which passes through a space. The boxer trains relentlessly to be able to see the transient eruptions of force in the ring. All that work helps them understand volatility and react accordingly.

Boxing and architecture offer a technique to intervene on the world by always watching for the logic of action outside ourselves. Our environment, our cities and our communities are at stake anytime we choose between specific geometric patterns of action. Our capacity as designers rests in being able to gather entropic

forces and create meaningful connections without cancelling out the reality of our precarious present. Design as an anticipatory relationship with others, albeit a kind of action-based ethics, offers up the possibility of civility as a physical and emotional aftershock to late capitalism.