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Relationscapes: Mapping agencies of relational practice in architecture

Doina Petrescu

University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

A B S T R A C T

Drawing on the author's experience as a founding member of atelier d'architecture autogéréé (aaa), this paper explores the role and tools of the architect in mapping relational practice. With the aim of preserving urban biodiversity, aaa adopt 'urban tactics' to encourage inhabitants to re-appropriate vacant land into self-managed space. In mapping the ECObox garden project (Paris, 2004), rather than drawing lines of objects and forms, instead the architect portrays the dynamic relationships of a live performance. The mapping of this 'space of subjects' took place during the making of the garden, as the project unfolded in time. Different lines and colours were used. Rather than *represent* the project, 'the map' *enhances* relationships in the making of the project. Instead of mapping buildings and places, the 'relational architect' is seen to 'scape' relationships between people and spaces: *relationscapes*. She, the architect, is seen as an agent operating with agencies of 'being' towards a multiplication of agents and diversification of agencies. Rather than an elitist profession, architecture becomes a shared activity and relational practice. Architecture is part of everyday life activities.

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'L'architecture, ce n'est pas les murs, mais les gens qui y habitent'[1] – used to say one of the users of ECObox. This statement, made by one of the users of ECObox summarises the kind of architecture we are interested in, and also asks an important question: What is the architect's role in producing, instigating an architecture whose quality does not reside in its aesthetics but in the model of sociability it produces? This statement also frames the main question of this paper: What are the architect's roles and tools in a relational practice?

The term 'relational' has emerged in the contemporary intellectual debate in the late 1990s, with the work of French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) who coined the term 'relational aesthetics' to speak about artworks in terms of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt. Bourriaud was interested in artworks and the relations they create with their public but he did not address the spatial and temporal nature of these relations, the way they could evolve, affect space and the way space could affect them in return. Neither was he interested in the ethical and political aspects of this rela-

tionality, nor in how a 'relational' artwork could transform the socio-spatial context in which it sits.

I will address some of these issues in this paper, by referring to Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space, De Certeau's sociological work on the everyday life practices of city dwellers, Deleuze and Guattari's critique of the capitalist socius and psyche, Latour's actor-network theory and the feminist principles of situatedness and connectivity which were for me essential in framing relational practices of space.[2] There are certainly examples of 'relational practice' in the recent history of architecture,[3] but I will particularly focus on the one that I have been engaged with and give an account from within, relating to my own

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E-mail address: d.petrescu@sheffield.ac.uk

[1] 'Architecture is not made by walls, but by the people who live in' (the author's translation).

[2] Some of the key texts that constitute the theoretical background of my approach of relational practice in architecture include: Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space (1974)*; Michel De Certeau, The *Practice of Everyday Life (1980)*; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory (2005)*; Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory (1994)*; Donna Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective (1988)*; Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus (*1987); F. Guattari, *Cartographies Schizoanalytiques* (1989).

[3] I could mention, amongst others, the work of *publicworks*, a London based art-architecture practice () which is analysed in Kathrin Böhm's recent publication "Who builds what?" (University of Wolverhampton Cadre Publication), one of the first theoretical and practice-based accounts of relation practice in architecture. The MArch Studio 2 that I coordinate in Sheffield has also studied the topic of relational architecture ().

Fig. 1. ECObox mobile kitchen and pallet garden installed at 22 Rue Pajol, Paris (2004). Credit: *aaa.*

experience as architect, activist and researcher, member of *atelier d'architecture autogérée.*

Atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa) is a collective practice initiated by Constanin Petcou and myself in 2001, including architects, artists, urban planners, landscape designers, sociologists, students and residents living in Paris.[4] Our practice promotes the re-appropriation and reinvention of collective space in the city through everyday life activities (gardening, cooking, chatting, DIY making, reading, debating etc.), understood as creative practices in urban contexts. The aim is to create a network of self-managed places by encouraging residents to gain access to their neighbourhood and to appropriate and transform temporary available and underused spaces. It is an approach that valorises a flexible and reversible use of space, and aims to preserve urban 'biodiversity' by allowing a wide range of life styles and living practices to coexist. The starting point was the realisation of a temporary garden, made out of recycled materials on a derelict site located where we live, in the La Chapelle area in the North of Paris. This garden, called ECObox, has been progressively extended into a platform for urban creativity, curated by the *aaa* members, residents and external collaborators, catalysing activities in the whole neighbourhood. The platform has moved three times, taking different forms in different locations and involving new users (see Figs. 1 and 2).

Agencies, tactics, assemblages

The idea of 'relationality' is subsequent to the participative nature of our practice: we understand spatial production as a collective forming process which empowers architects and users alike. More than the spatial products themselves, we are interested in the processes they generate, in how they work and who they involve in their making and using. Rather than objects we design *agencies.* Sociologist Antony Giddens (1987, p. 216) states first and foremost that agency 'presumes the capability of acting otherwise'. In terms of architecture, as discussed by Till and Schneider (2009, pp. 97–111) this might involve the architect and perhaps all other agents (i.e. users, clients, practitioners) having to engage *otherwise*, acting 'with intent and purpose' to create critical difference and take social responsibility.

'Acting otherwise' translated for us into a way of getting engaged with the politics of the place in which we live, and questioning the rules and regulations of current architectural and urban practice; introducing participatory approaches, promoting ways of working which are not 'service-led' or 'client-oriented', etc. If, as I discuss in 'Losing Control, Keeping Desire' (Petrescu, 2005), 'the potential of agency might first be understood as the power and freedom to act for oneself' and if, for an architect, this power usually means 'the power to act on behalf of others', we have chosen instead to not act for ourselves or on behalf of others but to act *with* others, by empowering them to become agents themselves and to take collective responsibility. We valorise in this way the contribution of the *other* in this *otherwise* acting of our architectural agency. Rather than an elitist profession, architecture becomes as such a shared activity and a relational practice.

In addition to definitions of agency as 'ends-oriented and means-oriented action', Lash and Picon (2009, p. 8) suggests the notion of 'activity': 'Activity is much less goal-directed, it is much more situational. It's like situationism in a way: you put yourself down anywhere, and see where it takes you'.

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[4] The *atelier d'architecture autogérée/studio of self-managed architecture* (aaa) conducts collective actions and research concerning urban mutations and cultural, social and political emerging practices in the contemporary city ().