

TITLE

Details and Totalities

Exploring the Dialectic of Epistemic Reciprocity

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a sustained reflection on two large urban design experiments. The reflection describes an emergent effect named “epistemic reciprocity”. The latter part of the paper grounds its description in a body of design theory. The design experiments were carried out in Pendrecht/Zuidwijk (Rotterdam, NL) and Hellersdorf-Süd (Berlin, DE). Both areas are post-war urban expansions that are in need of an update in terms of urban sustainability. The design experiments were devised to explore and document the spatial possibilities of urban renewal and the epistemic potentials of architectural design. The reflection for this paper deals with the oppositional interplay between details and totality; large visions and tiny details; structural decisions and local details. This dialectic between the details and their totality can be couched in epistemic terms. Between the two opposites, an emergent effect of “epistemic reciprocity” occurs. Without details, the design proposal seems void; yet, it cannot be reduced to a collection of details. Dealing with totalities and details can be done in such a way that different scales of a given proposal reciprocally support each other. Knowledge from one level triggers insights on adjacent levels. Prudently switching between detail and totality enables these moments of “epistemic reciprocity”. The movement of zooming in and out on an idea is not only useful for defining details but is indispensable for developing parallel tracks of thought.