

# In Search of Expanding the Practices of Architecture Towards a Grander Significance

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## Abstract

Expanding the practices of architecture has generated considerable research interest in the past decade. Expanding the practices of architecture means to move architecture beyond an exclusively physical practice, which designs and creates material artefacts; and to reconsider it as a field that conceive and realize socially progressive spatial projects. Although there is an increasing interest in such practices; a reflective research on discerning the rationalities behind such practices is lacking. Most of these works reflect on the buildings generated through such practices but do not document or analyse the processes through which designs emerge nor the strategies used by such practices to achieve their goals. Therefore, the following paper, *which is part of an on-going PhD project that aims to empirically research, reflect and analyse such socially progressive spatial projects by means of ethnographic research*, attempts to address this gap by presenting a preliminary literature search. First, the paper examines the critique of mainstream architectural production. Second, it identifies several discourses within the quest of expanding the practices of architecture such as “public interest architecture” (Bell & Wakeford, 2008; Anderson, 2014), “socio-design” (Burckhardt, 1980; Richter, Göbel, & Grubbauer, 2017), and “agency” (Schneider & Till, 2009; D. Petrescu & Chiles, 2009; Awan, Schneider, & Till, 2011). Third, it highlights common practices upon which these experimental architectural modes focus on, and which are also inspired from the first ethnographic case study of the PhD project. This paper should, therefore, be of value to scholars and practitioners wishing to discover glimpses of the “other architect”.

**Keywords:** Architecture, experimentation, alternatives, social design.

**Introduction** Expanding the practices of architecture has generated considerable research interest in the past decade (Awan et al., 2011; Bell & Wakeford, 2008; Dodds, 2009; Hyde, 2012; Lepik & Bittner, 2011; Lorne, 2017; Rice & Littlefield, 2014; Richter et al., 2017). Expanding the practices of architecture means to move architecture beyond an exclusively physical practice, which designs and creates material artefacts by primarily

figuring out technical problems or generating artistic forms; and to reconsider it as a field that conceive and realize socially, economically and environmentally progressive spatial projects as counter responses to the present or alternatives to the future.

The motivations behind this particular interest are various. To some researchers, this new quest represents

opportunities for freeing the practices of architecture from static and limited roles (Bell & Wakeford, 2008). To others, it is a way to overcome the world's present day situation, characterized by ecological, economical, political and societal challenges (Hyde, 2012, p. 17). However, a growing body of architects and researchers sees this quest as a counter response to the various manifestations of capitalism in our cities (Querrien, Petcou, & Petrescu, 2013).

The critique of mainstream capitalist architecture can be shortly described as follows: The moment that buildings were transformed from objects to "use" to objects to "own", or in other words from having a "use-value" to having "asset-value"; "city making" started to escape the hands of the architects but also those of the citizens. This produces a generic architecture, which is often described to be similar (Ibelings, 1998; Bull, 2007; Awan et al., 2011), but also commercial without necessarily any ideological statement (Graaf, 2015). It is an architecture of disengagement, which is more designed to respond to "the global majority language of profit" (Stoner, 2012, p. 12) than to the needs of people.

The critique described above drove several researchers and architects into researching and engaging in more social and political ways of practicing architecture. Furthermore, numerous architects decide that critique is not enough and that it needs to be combined with action (Doucet & Cupers, 2009; Schneider & Till, 2009). Therefore they engage in experimental practices, which manage to move around and within economic powers and city logics of production and

consumption, and pursue instead social dreaming and utopian ideals. It almost seems that there is a silent revolution taking place at these present times, claiming an anti-capitalist production of space, reclaiming open space as a common resource and creating a sense of transformative possibility<sup>1</sup>. Such resistance of pre-established norms reflects on and opens a discussion on the current processes of space production in times where most space in cities is privatized (Cupers & Miessen, 2002; Le Strat, 2007; Petcou & Petrescu, 2007; Sassen, 2018) and there is not much space left for possibilities and imagination.

This raises numerous questions such as: 1) How did the critique of mainstream architectural production led architects and researchers to engage in more social and political ways of practicing architecture? 2) What are the various discourses within the quest of expanding the practices of architecture towards a greater social and political relevance? Furthermore, this paper tries to address a broader question of: 3) how does architecture entails possibilities to improve our society?

This paper, which is part of an ongoing PhD project, presents a literature review that attempts to address the above questions. The paper is structured as follows: the first section sheds light on the critique of mainstream architectural production and highlights the need for more socially and politically engaged modes of producing architecture. The second section identifies the various discourses within the quest of expanding the practices of architecture towards a grander significance. The last section highlights the common practices

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<sup>1</sup> These are first impressions from the first empirical and ethnographic case study of the PhD project, which is the Floating University

in Berlin FUB (2018), designed by the collective Raumlabor.

brought up by such discourses and which are reflected in these experimental architectural modes.

## 1. The critique of mainstream architectural production

Before diving into the several discourses within the quest of expanding the practices of architecture towards a greater relevance, it's necessary to shed some light on the critique of mainstream architectural production. This critique had, over the last decades, fueled this quest and drove various architects into researching and engaging in more social and political practices of architecture, believing that architecture holds various possibilities for improving our society.

In his critique of architecture's state, the architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri talks about "impotent and ineffectual myths" (1976, p. 182) that keeps architecture a prisoner of the powers of capitalist development. More than forty years later, it seems that these impotent and ineffectual myths are getting stronger. A simple example would be that of the buildings that complement the ride to any airport in most cities in the world, which represent "the global majority language: the language of profit" (Stoner, 2012, p. 1).

This language of profit manifests itself through "strong normalizing tendencies of mainstream architectural production" (Awan et al., 2011, p. 27), which are often held responsible for creating a homogenized built environment composed of isolated retreats of glassy monuments. According to the architectural historian and critic Hans Ibelings "cities and agglomerations around the world have

undergone comparable development and assumed similar shapes" (Ibelings, 1998, p. 67). Catherine Bull, landscape architect and architectural theorist, adds that architecture is being under "the dominating trends towards the technical standardization, spatial homogenization and off-site decision-making" (Bull, 2007, p. 210). Indeed, the influence of global economic forces on architecture had created, nearly everywhere and by relying on similar processes of space production, to a homogeneous and anonymous urban conglomeration, which the architect and architectural theorist Rem Koolhaas names "the generic city" (Koolhaas, 1995). According to him, the latter has no context, no identity, and no end: "it is a fractal, an endless repetition of the same simple structural module (1995, p. 1251). These generic modules or buildings do not have any relation to each other, or even to their surroundings. They assemble a city of indifference, detachment and most importantly of disengagement (Awan et al., 2011, p. 27). To which, people cannot relate and which is often critiqued for no longer being intended for human social needs but rather for global neoliberalism's profit making (Brenner, Marcuse, & Mayer, 2009).

In his article "spatial agency and practicing architecture beyond buildings", Lorne argues that the global economic recession of 2008 exposed the center of mainstream architectural production since much development was stopped (2017). It also provoked and even forced "alternative visions of urban life" (Brenner et al., 2009, p. 176), which aimed to surpass the current global economic forces as a structuring system of social, economic, political and spatial organization. Most importantly, the global economic recession presented an opening to question the seemingly "steady professional claims to architectural knowledge" (Lorne,

2017, p. 276) and to argue for “alternative and subversive spatial strategies” (Stoner, 2012, p. 18).

Once the center became dramatically exposed since lots of developments projects were forced to stop, it lost the right to define or control what is marginal. Therefore, this paper does not view these experimental projects as marginalized practices but rather as spatial practices that expand, challenge and question the normative ways of practicing architecture. Furthermore, the paper focuses on those spatial practices that are not conceived according to the logic of profit but rather to principles of social necessity, wellbeing and local interest.

### 1.1. Post critical turn

Critique in architecture has often relied on theory to assert architecture’s social, economic and political beliefs, or to blame the dominant architectural production for rather building for profit instead of people. However, with the rise of what is often named the “crisis of theory” proves that critical theory does not necessarily mean critical practice (Doucet & Cupers, 2009, p. 1). Critique is, without any doubt, relevant: it is valuable since it allows comprehending the apparatuses in order to transform them. Nevertheless, critique alone is not sufficient, and it has to be coupled with action, so it can have an impact on the social, economic and political milieu (Schneider & Till, 2009). Fatigued of the reign of “critical discourse” in architecture, researchers and architects engaged into researching and theorizing experimental practices that aims expanding the practices. Believing that they might “lead to other possible futures” (Doucet & Cupers, 2009, p. 1), and generate “alternative worlds” (Petrescu & Chiles, 2009, p. 109).

In the last decade, these politically and socially-engaged practices started to become more present in the architectural scene. In 2011, the Museum of Modern Art MoMa had curated the exhibition “Small scale, big change”, where eleven social projects from different parts of the world were exhibited. Furthermore, the London-based architectural collective Assemble has won the 2015 Turner Prize for their work, especially for their involvement in the Grandby neighborhood renovation. The Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena has received the 2016 Pritzker prize for his commitment to social housing and was invited the same year to curate the Architectural Biennale of Venice. The architect and urban researcher Teddy Cruz has won the 2018 Vilcek Prize in Architecture. More recently, the collective platform Atelier d’Architecture Autogérée has won the Building 4Humanity Best Resilient Building Built Award for 2018 for their project R-Urban.

## 2. Expanding the practices of architecture

This section highlights how several architects, theoreticians and authors started to search for other modes of practicing architecture. Researching experimental practices is relevant since it allows for discovering new modalities of architecture and for creating a form of reflexivity. The literature search helped identify the following positions, suggesting a counter response to what Gámez and Rogers (2008) refer to as “the post-critical turn”. Taking on an “experimental practice” viewpoint will contribute to the discourses described below which I am positioning my research in.

**Public Interest Architecture:** A group of researchers and architects mobilized

around the notion of “design activism” (Bell, 2008), which is similar to the notion of “activist practice” (Feldman, 2004) call for “public interest architecture (Fisher, 2008; Gámez & Rogers, 2008; Anderson, 2014) that promotes equity, inclusivity and social justice through action or process. In the introduction of “Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism” Gámez and Rogers assert that “to support an architecture of change, a foundational theory that is based on action and provided a counterpoint to the current post-critical turn is necessary” (Gámez & Rogers, 2008, p. 23). Therefore, they propose the notion of “public interest architecture” as a theoretical framework for their practice. In public interest architecture, the relation between architecture and the public is remodelled from hierarchy to collaboration. The public is involved in the design process. Indeed, public interest architecture escapes from what Awan, Schneider and Till call “a close professional circle” (Awan et al., 2011, p. 43), which has exclusive knowledge and restructures the practice of architecture as a shared and mutual engagement. According to Anderson: “public interest design provides a framework for relevant twenty-first century architectural project that involves significant social and environmental issues” (2014, p. 16). There are also architects who are acting in the global south whose approach to architecture share many similarities with “public interest architecture”. Among these architects is Teddy Cruz founder of Estudio Teddy Cruz, which is interested in the possibilities of the informal to go beyond established political barriers and top-down models and has designed various projects within this line such as “Casa Familiar”. Also, Alejandro Aravena founder of Elemental and designer of “Quinta Moroy” (2003) and “Villa Verde Housing” (2010). These projects are based on modular housing unit system, where the

users were involved and given the opportunity to personalize and finish their homes themselves.

**Socio-Design:** Other scholars call for a change of design practice, suggesting instead that architects should not consider themselves as merely designers of buildings but as “moderators of change” (Lepik & Bittner, 2011, p. 23) or more explicitly “as moderators of a kind of social transformation that views architecture as an instrument with ongoing effectiveness and integrates it with other processes” (Lepik & Bittner, 2011, p. 23). According to these scholars, the global society that we live in entails the expansion of the practices of architecture to incorporate the social aspect. This line of thought allies with another group of scholars who critique the relentless obsession on form and aesthetics (Stoner, 2012; Kaminer, 2017; Doina Petrescu & Trogal, 2017). According to these scholars: pursuing architecture for architecture’s sake, or in other words obsessing over form invention has become rather a self-consuming matter with no end (Van Gerrewey, 2015). They suggest a more radical rethinking of architecture and suggest to use its various possibilities to improve our society: “the aspects of architecture that become important are not the ones of form, surface, style or even structure, but rather demand working upon the ecological, economic, collaborative and processual aspects of making space” (Doina Petrescu & Trogal, 2017, p. 4). Instead of evaluating the world only according to objects, architects need to assess it according to societal challenges. They claim that the architect has been programed to think only as in terms of creating artistic artefacts and therefore is freed from thinking about societal problems. These critiques are similar to and evokes what Burckhardt describes as “socio-design” (1980), which takes in consideration

people, objects and their respective milieus.

**Agency:** Others take this debate beyond the critical discourse in architecture and propose the notion of “agency”. In 2009, “Footprint: Delft School of Design Journal” dedicated an entire issue to theorizing the concept of Agency and making it into a category of contemporary thinking in architecture (Doucet & Cupers, 2009). Schneider and Till developed the notion further in the book “spatial agency: other ways of doing architecture” (Awan et al., 2011). The spatial agency group, which is based in the university of Sheffield, position their work within Lefebvre social production of space to broader architectural practice beyond form giving, and assert that architectural knowledge is not limited to and exclusive professional circle. This approach places the practices of architecture within the social production of space and rejects the notion that architecture only be produced by “heroic” figures such as architects (Lorne, 2017, p. 270). The spatial agency group calls for collaborative and cooperative methods and “encourage socially oriented design approaches that work with different human and non-human agents so as to open up possibilities that challenges the “status quo” (Lorne, 2017, p. 276). Spatial agency offers the opportunity for architects to practice in a life-changing way, and to surpass the discourse of merely critiquing present day conditions. This means to expand briefs, to initiate projects, to design for uncertainty and temporality, to reclaim and reuse under-used resources and to defy global “neoliberalism” as it reveals itself in the contemporary city (Awan et al., 2011).

Although the architectural scene is starting to recognize such socially and politically engaged architectural

practices, there is not enough publications about them in architectural magazines. Somehow they have failed to reach the pages of the prestigious British architectural magazine the “Architectural Review”. However, other magazines offer an open platform for such experimental practices to show their projects and to further discuss their ideas: For example, the Dutch architectural magazine “Volume” published multiple issues on such practices: Engineering Society (July 2008), Architecture of Hope (April 2009). In 2018, the German architectural magazine Arch+ has dedicated an entire issue, showcasing diverse transgressive practices and framing them in form of an “Atlas of commoning”. The same Atlas serves as a catalogue for an ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) exhibition that started in Berlin in summer 2018 and will tour worldwide for the next ten years. Architectural Design (AD), which often seems to be more concerned with digitalization and automation in architecture, published a special issue untitled: “New Modes: redefining Practice” (Sept./Oct. 2018), featuring texts written by the main advocates of this movement such as the collective Raumlabor or the collective Atelier d’Architecture Autogérée.

### 3. Conclusion

At the centre of these various discourses there is a strong call for architecture to assert its position as a social and political act in society. These practices went beyond the strong fascination with the architectural object, to stimulate a growing interest in various aspects such as the everyday, the relational, the self-built...etc.

This set of practices which are presented and discussed below, are also

inspired from first impressions of the first conducted empirical and ethnographic case study of this PhD project, which is the “Floating University” in Berlin FUB (2018), designed by the collective Raumlabor.

**Focusing on the everyday:** They focus on the everyday life practices, believing that changing the future starts with small steps. But also in the capacities of everyday practices to escape, resist, and navigate the structures made by social, economic and political power. Such projects often negotiate with the communities to understand their everyday needs and integrate this knowledge to create a fruitful and mutual engagement between communities and architects. They also focus on the notion of “the everyday space” because it is constantly changing according to the various activities that it holds, allowing the creation of new social meanings for formerly designed spaces.

**Implementing DIY aesthetics:** They have a certain DIY sensibility and self-built aesthetics. The projects are often on a small scale, and built from recycled or upcycled materials since they are not only easily accessible but also sustainable. Furthermore, the DIY sensibility of these project makes them appear as if they are not yet finished and they are still in progress. Such elements seem to give the users a sense of empowerment since the projects appear as if any ordinary person can build them herself.

**Designing the relational:** These practices propose a different understanding of architecture’s relation to society. It suggests that buildings are not only passive vessels in which

structures happen but also shapers of these structures. This means that change happens not only through the material organization but also through the relations that inspire and create their design. It remodels the relation between the architects and the users from a “single authorship” to rather a “collective”, but also from a “strict hierarchy” to a “malleable network.”

**Collaborating with the community:** These practices are community-oriented since they involve and collaborate with the community during the process of producing the project. They revolve around people needs and aims to strengthen their sense of community. They also intent to address local concerns in various ways. They place the human being at the centre of their attention.

**Assembling atmospheres:** These practices are not in pursue of formal invention, which is often considered to be the subject matter of architectural production. They rather create atmospheres of dreaming, inspiration and spontaneous encounters. They, most importantly, create atmospheres of “hopes in design”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Borrowed from Manfredo Tafuri’s lats words in his book “Architecture and utopia:

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