Setting and tweaking

The architect as improvisatory choreographer of ecologies

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Abstract. This research investigates the relationship between architecture and natures; a nature is defined as an ecology that emerges according to its nature. It has developed ways of designing architectures with these unpredictable processes. By supporting their agency, places develop their resilience and diversity. Processes of growth as well as decay are expressed. It has been investigated through reflecting on three series of work in my practice that combine buildings and landscapes.

The tools used are open patterns that fall into two categories: spatial instruments and rituals. They are developed in dialogue with the ecosystems within which I am working, especially with the users. These patterns set situations and tweak the dynamic processes over time. They choreograph the elements of architecture - the void, the climate, the resources and the living.

In this practice, architecture is the improvisatory choreography of the elements' rhythms; the role of the designer is dual: to design a setting and rituals that will guide its polyphonic performance and simultaneously develop a language of patterns for use elsewhere.

Instruments and ritual patterns grow together to support the existing ecological processes dialogically. The designer does not control, (s)he guides ecologies as an improvisatory choreographer.

Keywords. architecture; landscape; pattern language; nature; ecology.

Introduction

The drive behind this research is a fascination for life and its relationship to architecture; of our relationship with the life that surrounds us. What attracts me in life is its unpredictability, the ephemeral quality of growth and decay, its diversity, fluidity, its agency. I enjoy letting it develop and yet help it to do so, and make the processes visible, like an ecological gardener. An ecosystem that has agency, that can develop according to its own nature I call a nature. Note that this is not the nature as an absolute of what is non-human; it describes an ecosystem where humans have not entirely controlled its development. Industrial farming, as well as large swathes of the contemporary city are not natures as their high level of control limits the diversity found there. Traditional forms of agriculture, and areas of cities that are growing organically are.

I practice in, and react to, a context of neo liberalism where dominates virtually identical top down approaches to those used by the public sector in the welfare state; these have transferred to the increasingly large property developer in the private sector. In London where I am based, large developments where owners have little if any right to adjust their environments dominate all production. Inhabitants are increasingly seen purely as consumers. Our countryside just as much as our cities are increasingly monocultural. There has been some improvement through the legislations for sustainable development but here again the result is an increasingly uniform result, not in terms of style, but in terms of use and capacity to change.

My drive towards supporting agency and diversity is more than aesthetic; behind this fascination is a belief in the importance of human and non human agency and diversity

in all its forms – biodiversity just as much as that of human activity. Freedom and diversity are simultaneously seen as beautiful qualities and ethical values; they are perceived in action, in time and through all our senses. They are two sides of the same coin; giving agency to an ecosystem is allowing it to develop its own diversity and thus its resilience; a diverse environment affords agency.

This ecological approach is unlike most sustainable practices that recreate or are inspired by specific biological processes applied through control from the top down. My approach, as those of a small number of architects and artists who inspire me, works with the ecosystem that is already there and from the processes already present. It trusts that an ecosystem is able to develop ecologically from the bottom up with guidance, not control.

The research method is by reflecting on my practice which exists in four interrelated fields; I am an architect, a gardener of landscapes, an entrepreneur and a teacher. I work small, in an embedded and embodied way, from within, like a gardener. Three series of work have been selected as objects of study. They use the media of buildings and landscapes, of built and grown environments.

The paper will follow the development of the PhD. The first part is the first half, it will look at the three series of work and their respective focus, which have allowed me to define the main fascination. Each series has its own evolving community of practice.

In all of these projects two main modes are used: setting and tweaking. Setting is creating a set, and setting processes in motion, so that they can develop with a high level of agency; it is mostly composed of spatial instruments, buildings or biotopes with specific climatic and spatial qualities; it can also include objects and living beings. Tweaking is adjusting the processes, primarily through rituals. It is the openness of these patterns that allows for the agency of the place to develop. These patterns have grown iteratively and serendipitously through the practice from project to project.

The second part is the middle of the PhD and moment of shift, this is when I realised that the patterns' role is to choreograph the rhythms of what I call the elements, in an improvisatory way, to define affordances. Architecture is generally seen as the art of objects and permanence – on the contrary mine is an art of impermanence, an improvisatory art of choreographing flows: weather, plant growths, human activities, financial movements, resources… This is not to be confused with an immaterial quality to the buildings - matter is needed to guide flows. One of these choreographies shapes the financial flows and this is a key force that affords the practice overall. As an architect I am an improvisatory choreographer both of the elements within projects and of the practice.

In the second half of the research, two case studies show that patterns grow in a dialogue with situations where my voice if of course present but only one of many. Patterns are thus a collective endeavour building on existing ones, merging them; they can only grow effectively through this dialogue. This demonstrates further the role of the architect as improvisatory choreographer both of the architecture and its design process. The setting and tweaking modes are used both within these two orders of design. These projects also show a new degree of mastery in my practice, both in terms of developing setting and tweaking patterns consciously together and using those in the design process with a higher degree of openness in the dialogue.

Figure 1
The Roots Pavilion.

As an architect I work with the flows of life in the places I find myself in. There are close parallels with Taoist and Zen philosophies. Setting and tweaking are similar to the concepts of non-action, of working the most with and the least against the nature of the world. I do this both within the projects, as a design process, and at the scale of the practice and whole research.

It is a humble practice so the gestures are small yet they may have effects beyond that of the projects and their direct surroundings by inspiring others to act in similar ways. I see my role not as producing masterful objects but as four combined aspects: first to make places more diverse and resilient through supporting the agency of life, second to develop vernacular patterns and test them, third to clarify and expand on the dialogical design processes that create them, fourth to develop a practice model that sustains the other three.

Three series and a language of open patterns that grows dialogically

Defining three series as object of the research

The first insight of the PhD was to realise that the artefacts produced can be classified in three series of work. Each series is working on the relationship between us human and other living elements.

Open vernacular is a series of houses, which look at the question of our relation with others, the landscape and climate. The typologies created have demonstrated that in the mild climate of Western Europe, our relationship with the landscape varies according to seasons and these typologies offer a variety of conditions, from dynamic spaces that are very close to external conditions to more protected spaces. This also defines possibilities of being with others as well as retreat from them. The aim is to encourage ecological behaviour by providing a diverse environmental landscape, a layering of patterns that provide choice for defining in action varied relationships with what surrounds us.

Landscape gestures is a series of landscape art works with a performative dimension that look at our relationship with an ecosystem, a landscape as emergent. The relationship is embodied through rituals; we become the landscape as it becomes us. And these rituals bring a community together as much as they are contemplative acts. The enjoyment is that of acts and processes as much as that of a place to experience. It

supports, is made by and expresses the ecological processes and the diversity that results.

Ruinations focuses on the relation between buildings and processes of growth. It brings these elements so close together that their respective beings are in conflict; growth accelerates decay. It shows that growing together is not only idyllic, there is a friction, a negotiation, a dialogue between different beings and an inevitable imperfection results of this interaction.

Looking at the people who have inspired me, both virtually and those that I have practiced with, I have noticed that each series has its community of practice and that this community of practice evolves overtime. Open Vernacular can be seen as an integration of the universal flexibility of Cedric Price (2003) or Lacaton Vassal (De Maziere, 2009) into the current vernacular language, a system best described by Christopher Alexander (1977, 1979), the arts and craft movement, and more recently Bow Wow (Esher, 2013). Landscape Gestures merge the works of ecological gardeners and landscape artists. It is more "formal" than Gilles Clement (1991) and more acting on the vegetal than Louis Leroy (Boukema, 2002) and other landscape artists. Ruinations brings plants and buildings closer than architects do but in a less tense and controlling manner than Giuseppe Penone (Busine, 2012).

What links these otherwise disparate series is an interest in the relationship between life and architecture, life understood as emergent, as an ecosystem.

A language of open patterns that grow dialogically

All the series use open patterns that fall under two main categories: spatial instruments and rituals of care. These patterns combine multiple dimensons of affordance in a holistic fashion: human behaviour - social and personal, climate, void, resources… all of which interact. The projects are the combination of patterns, both spatial instrument and rituals of care. They are like the set and potential patterns of action of an improvisatory play where the actors are the inhabitants.

A pattern type is prevalent in each series as a tool, yet the other type is also present: spatial instrument is the main tool to design open vernacular yet it is through thinking of the rituals that are present, that could be tweaked, and those that could exist that they are investigated – spatial instruments define potential rituals. Similarly, in landscape gestures, the biotope is chosen and guided by the rituals. In the ruinations, although it is principally shaped by defining the biotope, the evolution will be guided with some degree of care, although it may be almost non-existent.

These patterns grow, evolve, over the duration of the practice through projects as a discussion, between me and their inhabitation. It is essential for the patterns to develop that they are made and inhabited. Only through experiencing this inhabitation can lessons be learned of how they work and how to improve them.

"Doing the most with and the least against"

Another insight of this first stage of the PhD has been the definition of a shift around 2008. This happened when we sold our first property and bought another two, one in London and another in France where most of the *Landscape Gestures* have taken place. During this period, the improvisatory method practiced on a landscape creates a loosening of control in my building projects, a form of subconscious transfer of method between disciplines. This lead to a new set of references in architecture and eventually the creation of our Design Studio 9 with Camilla Wilkinson at the University of Westminster. We will see later how this shift occurred in more details.

It is from this point that I work increasingly "the most with and the least against" this phrase from the book by Gilles Clement (1991) is the essence of his concept of *garden in movement*, the first, and main, concept which we have followed on this land.

Gilles Clement refers to the parallels between his practice and Taoist and Zen philosophy and the principle of non-action.

The writings of Freya Matthews on the relations between Taoist philosophy and ecological design help to clarify this method. Her concept of nature as a situation where "everything unfolds or behaves in accordance with its intrinsic dispositions or an innate conatus", with their nature, corresponds to my own understanding of natures not being an idealized absolute but an emergent process that we are part of. These natures are for her in contrast to "abstractness", "a state of affairs in which the dispositions of things are diverted by agents to produce end-states which match those agents' abstract ideals or imagined scenarios", are controlled. (Mathews, 2004).

She analyses the Taoist concept of wu wei, which encourages us to work with the flow of the world rather than against it, with its nature. The metaphor of a river is often used; "Flowing into whatever spaces are available, finding a way around obstacles rather than contending them, insisting on nothing, but nevertheless, by dint of continuous adaptation to whatever presents, unwaveringly achieving its end". The main concept here to my mind is this idea that through continuous engagement, dialogue, one can reach its destination, develop its own conativity and yet what surrounds you also does so.

She defines multiple ways of doing this. There is a "passive form" where you only let yourself flow and there is a "constructive form" where you set a situation in such a way that it leads towards a desired outcome. This parallels the tweaking (rituals) and setting (instruments) methods in my practice described above. There are nonetheless a few distinctions. The first is that tweaking is not just going with the flow, it is not passive, it is guiding the flow as it happens towards one of the potential directions with minimum effort, and adjusting the ritual following reactions. The second difference is that the two categories are not working separately; they function together. Defining the setting guides the rituals and defining the rituals shapes the setting.

She describes a range of ecological positions, of "degrees of sustainability" from the lower "letting be", the passive and constructive forms of wu wei, the mutualistic form, where "the benefit [derived] is reciprocated" and the synergetic mode where an "agent's conativity is adapted to the conativity of others", where one learns to want what the ecosystem needs.

Synergy can happen causally, through natural selection, or intentionally when "adaption to the conativity of others takes place either as a result of deliberation or, […], as a result of communicative encounter or exchange" (Mathews, 2011, pp. 15-19). We will see in part three how the combined processes of dialogue and deliberation happens in my practice.

It is also worth pointing out that setting and tweaking, instruments and rituals, are similar tools to those used in improvisatory arts such as theatre or performance. Similarly, improvisation requires a language of patterns, of elements that can be used according to circumstances (Smith, 1997).
After defining the open pattern language that is used to design with the agency of places, we will look at what the patterns do and the type of practice that supports such method.

The architect as improvisatory choreographer of the rhythms of the elements

Patterns choreograph the rhythms of elements

Realising the number and variety of timelines in my sketchbooks, it became clear that time was an essential dimension in my work so I decided to redraw them. I realized that what the patterns do is to choreograph the rhythms of what I now call the elements of

architecture: climate, the living, money, resources and the void. It is this that defines the affordance of the architecture.

It uses various tuning modes such as diverse levels of tempering climatic rhythms, switching between property rhythms, resetting the rhythms of ecological succession, conflating periods of history… As designer I am an improvisatory choreographer working with the rhythms of elements. Rhythm is understood here in the sense defined by Henry Lefebvre, of a pattern of repetition in time that is not recurring identically, that can adapt (Lefebvre, 2013).

Being a free-agent to create time and space for dialogical investigation

The most complex of the timelines was looking at the financial rhythms in relation to a number of small property development projects as well as commissions and other types of practice. Gradually, as the self-generated work expanded, my practice increasingly worked on projects in smaller phases, as a gardener does, doing something, seeing what happens, adjusting in next phase. This was not only the case on self-generated work where there is more control but also on commissions as clients wished to phase the work due to the difficulties and risks of borrowing since the beginning of the recession in 2008. From then, almost all projects develop incrementally. The patterns gradually open at the same time as the design processes become increasingly dialogical.

It is worthwhile putting this in parallel with a number of architects who have been working incrementally or iteratively. Lucien Kroll developed engaged consultation and co-design processes that were then procured using a standard procurement system. Christopher Alexander showed through his practice the frictions between what he calls "system B" – the top down contemporary procurement system – and "System A" a co-design incremental procurement more akin to the processes of the past (Alexander, 2012).

On many projects, I have been using both systems in tandem, projects are segmented in phases that are delivered mostly using system B. This permits the benefits in terms of efficiency of system B whilst giving some of the adaptive quality of system A. I am using system B to produce and create financial return in order to support system A.

The closest contemporary practice that I often refer to is the collaborative group Assemble in London. They also work incrementally in unusual procurement and funding situations. The difference is that I work using a combination of property development and gardening, whereas Assemble works mostly with temporary venues and craft. They have a workshop, I have a shed and a landscape.

This small entrepreneurial approach allows the dialogical testing of patterns through inhabitation, but it is limiting in terms of scale, it takes time to grow.
The architect is an improvisatory choreographer of the rhythms of the elements. The practice has been increasingly working iteratively/incrementally. In a society that is focused on objects more than flows, a practice needs to create a space and time for dialogue; this is done through self-generated work combined with entrepreneurship that exists in the interstices of contemporary building procurement in a manner similar to Guattari's process of "chaosmosis" (Bourriaud, 2001).

Growing rituals and instruments together dialogically within a project

The second half of the PhD followed three parallel lines of enquiry. One line aimed to merge the building and landscape practices further. The second focussed on a strategic use of patterns in order to understand them better, in particular of using the two types, rituals and instruments, together consciously. Thirdly, the awareness of their dialogical process of creation led me to try to set more open design processes, to loosen my hand

further in order to understand the essence of what I do. This was researched through zooming into the process of three ongoing case studies.

Roots Pavilion – growing a pattern without a site and shaping the practice through a pattern

This project has seen an unusual use of patterns in my practice; it was set up as a site-less self-generated project that aimed to investigate further the Ruinations series but with a less frictional relationship between build and grown material and a reduction of the build part to a minimum. It shifted into a new series, which I call *Growths*.

This pattern, which can be both seen as a landscape or a building, is primarily a spatial instrument that guides the growth of a piece of forest through shaping the ground to create a vault made of earth and roots– the ritual of care is minimum, the trees will be mostly left to their own devices.

The absence of site has led me to develop other ways of creating dialogues with other beings. Firstly, through growing models using live plants to test the inhabitation at a different scale. Secondly with a number of "gate keepers" who know potential patrons for such work and thus, however distantly, give a sense of their mindset. The project evolved through this dialogue, once removed from reality.

The other dimension of this pattern is that its creation, virtual existence and communication has an effect on my communities of practice – the landscape gardening and building sides have started to interact. I have brought people together in the design process and I have spoken at an event that looked at both. A workshop based on this design process was organized at KU Leuven and I am now working on growing it as a Design Studio at the University of Westminster.

The dialogue that is creating the pattern and may lead to its realization is a way of defining the boundaries of the field I will practice in.

The Repository of Stories: an instrument and a ritual combine in one pattern that develops dialogically

At the beginning of this refurbishment of the existing building of a literacy charity in South London, I decided that it was a perfect situation to design a building primarily through rituals as the budget and existing buildings meant that it would be primarily an interior design project. I aimed to think of this building in the same way as I think of a landscape, a meadow for example. The briefing and design processed were set up to create the maximum possibility for dialogue by using facilitated workshops and regular meetings where we discussed a sketchbook of open drawings. I aimed to have the lightest hand possible.

This dialogical process was in three stages. Firstly, finding rituals and patterns already on the site by looking and listening to those living there – illustrators drawing on a wall, the way people come to greet you when you arrive, a climber growing through the tarmac. Secondly, bringing other patterns from elsewhere that resonate with these, some from grand libraries from the past, some works of artists such as Laure Prouvost installation *Swallow* (http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/max-mara-laure-prouvost/). Thirdly, merge and shape them gradually through regular conversations with the client. The main result is this library (figure 2) that will be continually renewed by wallpapering every year a new scheme from a different illustrator. An existing ritual is given a larger instrument to play in and is tweaked by increasing the drawing scale through scanning and digital printing. The ritual and the spatial instrument grow together. This dialogical process increases the likelihood that the rituals are likely to happen overtime.

Figure 2
Library of the Repository of Stories.

The result is doubly ecological. Firstly, it strengthens the relations with publishers and illustrators, increasing the connectivity, including financial, and thus resilience of the centre. Secondly the aesthetic is an expression of the life processes within the centre, the story telling; the centre is constantly alive. These are allowed to develop according to their own agency. The frame enables this process. Without it and the ritual, illustrators may not feel allowed, or able, to work at that scale. Similarly, it allows for constant change with a degree of order to maintain a sense of coherence and identity.

The ritual is given a carefully defined spatial instruments that is tight and loose enough. The flat colonnade is just wide enough to give enough flexibility for the illustrators' schemes. The relation is not causal; other rituals could happen in this space; the pattern is an invitation.

Designing this place is guiding an emergent ecosystem. It is working with what is already present in the same way as the meadow; my role is as facilitator of the growth of an existing process by transforming the ritual and giving a form to a new instrument.

I perceive the creation of patterns as a collective enterprise similar to the constructivist notion of knowledge creation. Patterns support ecological processes thanks to their openness and this openness is defined through the dialogue. Openness functions at different scales, that of a pattern's flexibility, that of a variety of patterns to choose from combined in a place, that of the language's adaptability and capacity for addition.

Lo(o)sing control

There are a number of lessons I have learned through these case studies. You need to remove your ego in such a process, or keep it at bay. For the dialogical growth to occur, you need openness to what is already there and what happens, you can't start with a preconception of what it ought to be. You design with the situation and thus are not the sole creator. This means having empathy and being able to trust that the ecosystem knows important elements and that it can do it for itself.

This does not mean that your hand is invisible but that it expresses itself through your presence, what you perceive, how your acts overtime shape a situation. It is not

out of ego, it is through your character, the library of patterns for both project and the design process.

It is through this dialogue that synergies develop. Gradually, all involved, through empathy and pragmatism, adjust what they want for the benefit of the others, realize opportunities where they were not expected. It requires from the designer a capacity to facilitate openness from all, including him/herself. This conversation is continuous, it has started before the designer arrives and carries on afterwards.

The main difference to Schön's description of how architects work is that this conversation happens for me primarily with the entire ecosystem (2011); even when I design alone, the dialogue is not with myself but with the situation through empathy, with the inhabitant or client. This has much in common with what Schön's advice to practitioners is on how to engage with the world.

Conclusion

In order to design with the agency of life, my practice uses a language of open patterns composed of spatial instruments and rituals. They have developed through my career iteratively through projects.

These patterns choreograph the rhythms of the architectural elements. In order to develop these patterns increasingly dialogically, an entrepreneurial method has been essential to partially detach the practice from "system B". This method has itself appeared gradually over time in response to circumstances.

As I have become conscious of the patterns and the dialogical method, I have started to use them not only within projects but also in the design processes and the shaping of the practice through a site-less pattern. I also started communicating these patterns. Both of these acts have supported an increased merging of plants and buildings and their respective communities of practice.

Looking at the growth of a pattern closer, I have realized that rituals and instruments, although not directly connected, grow together. This growth develops through a dialogue with multiple voices where already existing patterns come together. And through a dialogue with the client and others involved in the project, an adjustment occurs that leads to a strengthening of relations, of resilience of place, and likelihood of the patterns to work.

This practice exemplifies the wu wei method – the concept of non-action. But it is not as such non action, it is action that goes with the flow, yet the designer, as well as others, do act. This principle is based on trust that those already present can design and make. The designer's hand is clearly present but (s)he does not control. Doing the most with and the least against, is not being invisible but being visible with the others visibility by creating a synergy. All adjust their wants through empathy to what others want. This is only possible through dialogue, as it is there that the adjustment occurs through empathy – through this process all become the situation and the situation becomes all – I want what the situation wants and vice versa.

The five categories of my practice function as a system: the focus on designing with the ecosystem dynamic means that the architect is an improvisatory choreographer of the elements rhythms. A language of open patterns is necessary for this improvisation and it develops through the dialogical method. Lastly the way I work as free-agent allows me to avoid using the system of total control which is dominant today. I work like an ecological gardener, serendipitously, with what is there. This practice could not happen primarily in the office or academia, it needs to be engaged and embodied.

The architect as gardener, working dialogically with the ecological forces is different to Koolhaas' metaphor of the surfer riding the neoliberal waves. The surfer is the let-live strategy, making the most for oneself of the situation, from above, without

damaging but without giving anything back. The ecological gardener acts small, from within, gets dirty, and works to increase the resilience of a place.

Lastly, what has been striking in the last months is that the last two case studies can be described as a new series called growths. They both have a system of renewal, one is the forest, the other the renewal of the illustrated wallpaper skin. Surprisingly for such a focus on a conceptualisation of method during the PhD, the resulting language has become increasingly light, it has become an oneiric realism.

Acknowledgements

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