

The meaning of improvisational architecture

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Abstract. This paper focusses on issues and concerns that is traditionally not regarded significant by 'professional' architecture. The paper is searching for apparently insignificant knowledge about ways of living that hasn't been integrated in the architectural language. It looks for things and situations that are not built from technical drawings, specifications and building permits and therefore not visible on any map. Provisional, improvisational building that are approaching a spontaneous order unrestrictedly, breaking the 'professional' procedures in its making. The paper focusses on an intervention, created in care of society. Without a request to act, it tapped into the everyday life of the street of Kolkata to reveal and express relations between different human practices. The paper discovers ways of transmitting new meaning from the intervention by tying together relations between material and immaterial forces through architectural drawing and installation. The architects' traditional media – maps and technical drawings – are reconsidered in order to expose and communicate the invisible in the drawing process. The drawing and the installation can be seen as a kind of plastic re-representation of a public situation that can help create a new sensibility and awareness of places and situations with their relations and underlying narratives.

Keywords. Public realm; building 1:1; improvisational architecture; re-representation.

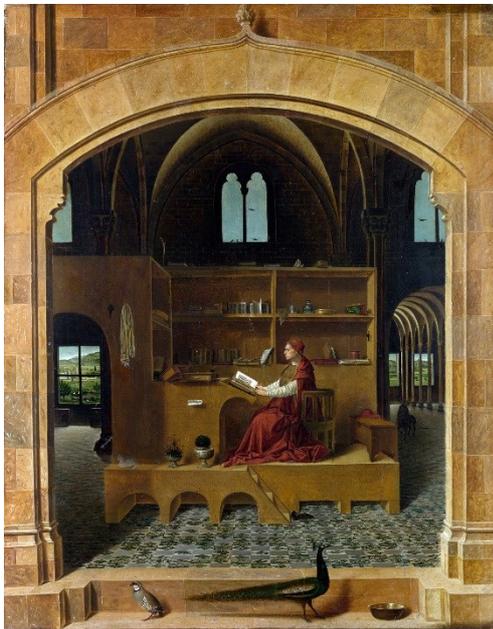


Figure 01

'St. Jerome in his study', Antonello da Messina, 1475.

Caring

To act in care of culture means not to be indifferent to the development of society. Art critics Jan Verwoert (2005) argues that acting usually is mobilized through our own

powers, but the power to care comes to us from somewhere else. Caring is a respond to a need, even though it might not be articulated, or known. Verwoert raises the questions what we can offer, what need we are responding to and how we can avoid to reduce giving and receiving care to an economical transaction.

Care is invisible and not tied to visuals, but in the paintings of saints, Verwoert finds images to express care. The image of 'Saint Gerome in his Study' tells the story of a translator working in a space partly inside and outside with a door open to the public. A lion comes in with a thorn in its paw and Jerome is dealing with it without a mandate to act, since he is not a veterinarian, but a translator.

The contact to the public creates potential situations of care and possibilities for sharing the same space. The reading of 'Saint Gerome in his Study' raises questions about what it means to act, what need to react upon and what proposals to make. Care can begin from a request or from inspiration to act and action can be taken with or without mandate. But the translator could also leave her desk and walk outside and act in public with a proactive and self-initiated involvement.

Building

Architecture can support authorized as well as unauthorized activities by creating situations directly in public space, built in 1:1, face to face. It can choose to focus on maintenance, culture and urban realities, rather than innovation, global growth and urban visions. Every city needs to maintain its culture - which is not necessarily about innovation and growth - and any city needs to know and understand its resources and realities before creating great visions.

Architecture doesn't need to be complete, but can provide a hypothetical form as a condition for different kinds of events to take place. The most important thing is not to create new spaces or new objects, but to use the built form to frame and understand relationships in new ways. This can be done by articulating, engaging, supporting, encountering, exchanging, encouraging, endorsing, framing, maintaining and caring for culture and everyday life.

Paying attention to makeshift orders and the incomplete, can offer systems that are flexible and tolerant of improvisation. Improvisational building is driven by inspiration rather than intention and it endorses, exercises and realizes skills, found in public.



Figure 02
 'Streetkitchen_Kolkata', 2013.

'Streetkitchen Kolkata' is a 1:1 built situation at the pavement in Kolkata in dialogue with street vendors and a permanent sweetshop. In Kolkata, the authorities look at the many provisional food stalls and shelters as mess and disorder, disturbing the image they want to create of the city. They talk about the pavement as a conflict zone, where formal shop owners and street vendors fight over the right to the pavement. The reality is that 70 % of the people working in the city eat their lunch at street food stalls in Kolkata. I was curious to get beyond the propagandized conflict of the pavement. Without mandate and no clear need of the act, I travelled to India to interact with the different practices on the streets of Kolkata.

In order to discover new ways of transmitting meaning from makeshift and improvisational building, I have started a laboratory as an exchange between building and drawing. With inspiration from Bruno Latour, (Ingold, T. Latour, B. & Weibel, P. 2005) invisible things are turned into something visible through exercises that blur the boundaries between what is inside and what is outside. By going out to collect information and then returning to the laboratory to translate it.

Drawing and installing

To make the invisible visible and include the messy and the make-shift, the laboratory explicitly brings forward the overlooked and apparently insignificant by reflecting and translating the 1:1 built situations through drawings and installations. It describes movements, lines and traces of the actions, in order to give examples of a particular reading. This may help inform and propose a critical reading of the practice, since it becomes a retrospective interpretation of how the 1:1 built situations came into being.

The drawings and installations want to demonstrate that there can be instants of intensity and significance in apparently insignificant places and that structures of intensity and

significance can be fragile in character. That they don't need to be monumental and finalized in order to create places of identity, but can be temporary, immaterial and built of minor constructions. Temporary, minor constructions are usually never built on the basis of building permits and technical specifications - and thus never identified and therefore not to be found on any maps.

Traditional maps are digitalized, based on functions and geometry and divided into many different layers of information that can be selected on or off, freely. Outlines of buildings, cadastral boundaries, roads and supply routes. Zooming in on an area expands the amount of information, which - in principle is infinite. The problem is that the complexity of the map is impossible to comprehend because of the necessity to scroll over the map due to the size of the computer screen. If printed out, all you get is just a fragment of the map.

To obtain a building permit, several drawings are needed. Site plan, drainage plan, plan/elevations and sections of the proposed building, construction details, and specifications about constructions, materials and installations. But places are more than just functions; they are full of overlooked structures and relations.

Architectural drawing can articulate the relations between things, instead of proposing determined solutions, as traditional technical drawings, specifications and building permits require. The laboratory proposes a way to visualize site, supply lines and details and to specify construction, materials and installations in a reflective manner. It recognizes and articulates minimal actions and customs, blurs the boundaries of exterior and interior and investigates the relation between public and private space. It explores the potential of experiencing the past, the present and the future all in one place and all at one time.

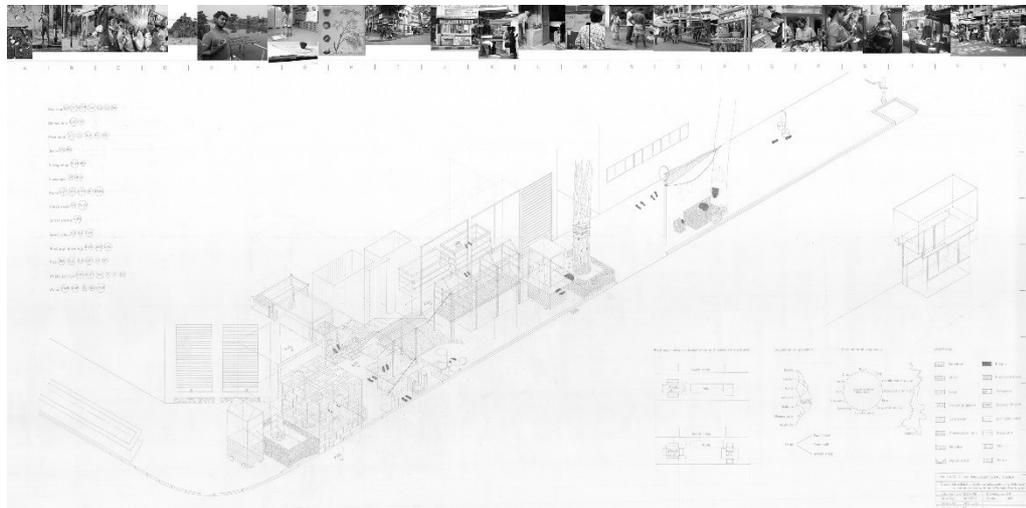


Figure 03
'In care of an improvisational order', 2017

'In care of an improvisational order' is a 1 x 2,2 m pencil drawing on paper that frames the practices on the pavements of Kolkata and visualizes and communicates how they are connected to history, customs, materiality and everyday life for the majority of people in Kolkata. It identifies the place by the things that are invisible on traditional maps, - specified by material signatures, references to photographs of 1:1 built situation, imprinted human activities and unfolded details with their connection

to ideas and culture. The static buildings only appear as very thin lines, since focus is on the things relating to human activity.



Figure 04
'East West River', 2016.
Photo: Lars Arnfred Fynboe.



Figure 05
'East West River', 2016.
Photo: Lars Arnfred Fynboe.

'East West River' is a 11m long installation in a museum that deals with the history of the workers. The installation is made of wood, clay cups and a video of the potter's workshop. It is a tea stall/pavement/gutter and city map at the same time, built to bring the hum of living into the white cube.

Potters in Kolkata send thousands of clay cups out to street vendors every day, in order for the citizen to participate in the ritual of drinking chai many times every day.

The cups are made of clay – excavated from the bottom of the river – and turned into cups, dried in the sun. For generations, chai wallahs have sold their chai in the little clay cup, which are thrown to the ground as soon as the chai has been drunken. The potters belong to the Kumhar caste - in rank with untouchables - and the street vendors are illegal. Their workshops and tea stalls are invisible on the city map and therefore the installation has no marks on its surface, which is covered with crushed clay cups.

The re-presented public situation through drawing and installation show how things are connected to resources, place of origin and to neighborhoods with their habits, customs, daily life and infrastructures. By bringing provisional building and everyday rituals into the white cube and architectural language of drawing, it may remind architecture of the importance of an improvisational order and demonstrate that it can be documentary and propositional as well as performative and productive as architecture.

'Street Kitchen', 2013: Three-week intervention in Kolkata by Gitte Juul in collaboration with Indian photographer, Dev Nayak, Indian potter, Surindar Prijapaty, Danish visual artist Anja Franke and citizens of Kolkata ([www.http://gittejuul.dk/gadekokken_kolkata/](http://gittejuul.dk/gadekokken_kolkata/)).

'East West River', 2016: Installation at The Workers Museum in Copenhagen by Gitte Juul in collaboration with Indian photographer, Dev Nayak and Indian potter, Surindar Prijapaty ([www.http://gittejuul.dk/east-west-river-2/](http://gittejuul.dk/east-west-river-2/)).

'Inhabitation', 2016: 6 weeks building and drawing workshop by Gitte Juul in collaboration with 180 students of architecture and teachers at KADK, Copenhagen. ([www.http://gittejuul.dk/bosaetning/](http://gittejuul.dk/bosaetning/)).

'In care of an improvisational order', 2017: Drawing by Gitte Juul, exhibited at Works+Words Biennale at KADK, Denmark. ([www.https://kadk.dk/workswords](https://kadk.dk/workswords)).

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