

Towards a Tentative History of 21st Century Practice: Codification of Architectural *Epistemes* in Emerging Agencies

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Over the years spent practicing both as employee in various offices – ranging from Rem Koolhaas’ OMA/AMO to Stefano Boeri’s Multiplicity.lab passing through the Het Nieuwe Instituut, MVRDV and The Why Factory, among others– as well as with my collective of design and research Fosbury Architecture, the project has always been a pretext to do research, and research an instrument through which to communicate the project. In Fosbury Architecture codification of knowledge happened through a series of tacit (Polanyi, 2009) references ultimately defining our common ground; instead, in offices lead by others it is a matter of alignment with the office position, which very implicitly passes through generations of employees as well as digital and physical archives, and which evolves unfolding project by project.

Now, as researcher, my aim is to disentangle such implicit knowledge inherent to the transfer between discourses and practice, by isolating the process of codification from institutional narration to daily production. My interest is to look at the last twenty years defining a timeframe that could possibly allow to reach relevant, meaningful and useful discoveries as a medium of interpretation for critiques, instrument for a conscious design for practitioners and as brand new vocabulary for pedagogy.

In fact, as pointed out by Alejandro Zaera-Polo in his essay “Well Into the 21st century” (Zaera-Polo, 2016), if the last century could be organized more or less in streams (Jencks, 2000) based on a shared cultural background, in the recent architectural scene debate seems instead fragmented into a series of micro-discourses that emerge through an increased variety of themes object of several collective exhibitions involving a large pool of participants that epitomize different agencies (Cupers and Kenny, 2009). Appearing through tacit *epistemes* (Foucault, 2001) (Banham, 1990) regardless of major manifestos, independently from their geographical location and in most cases without a direct link to consolidated trajectories or traditions, these agencies represent the forefront of the current ways of practicing and the pioneers in a brand new cultural, social and economic context.

The economic crisis of 2008 has represented a major factor in accelerating these tendencies (Zaera-Polo, 2016) and it could constitute a line of demarcation that questions the consolidated structures of the profession. In addition, technological advancements in communication have encouraged exchanges between architects, producing an unprecedented condition of shared *epistemes* across the globe. In this sense, the argument by Michel Foucault in *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1971) on the need to understand a social constructed knowledge (Foucault, 1971) beyond individuals and cultures, in recent years has not only demonstrated its validity, but it has also become a global phenomenon that can be taken as reference for the analysis.

The research is imagined to be developed through two main phases complementary in terms of structure, object and intentions.

The first one is an horizontal analysis at the macroscale, that spans from early 2000s to present days aiming to map the history of the present practice (Dana Cuff, 1992) building up the context of the contemporary discourse in architecture, ideally expanding Charles Jencks' 'Evolutionary Tree Diagram'. The investigation will be oriented towards the verification of an augmented influence of social, economic and political factors in the evolution of the discipline. Biennales and Triennales will be used as an observatory on the current practice in order to highlight major themes, recurring protagonists, emerging geographies (Požar, Petra, Čeferin, 2008) and eventually marking paradigmatic shifts (Kuhn, 1996) in the discourse.

The second phase is instead a vertical analysis at the microscale (Gingzburg, 1980) based on a selection of firms that emerge from the previous and aforementioned investigation.

A series of offices that embody different practices will be analysed in order to study the influence of the different epistemes on their creative process. The investigation on such tacit knowledge (Cross, 1984) applied to the act of designing should let emerge those consolidated patterns (Alexander, 1977) that represent the codes of each practice.

The research is proposed as a real-time investigation that does not aim to achieve a definitive response, on the contrary it has the intention to track dynamics while being formed, thus requiring an experimental approach that accepts mistakes and approximations, aware of the possibility of failure. The ambition is to test how the fast evolution of society in the last twenty years has produced a paradigmatic shift on the profession, now oriented towards transdisciplinary approaches, thus transforming its traditional codes. The architectural discourse today seems in fact informed by the most evident challenges of the current societal shift, such as an increased awareness of equality at large -with a particular attention towards the role of women and minorities-, a critical take on the environment and technology after the optimism that had characterized the beginning of the new millennium, and a search for alternative solutions to globalization. How then are these new disciplinary interests altering the practice? How are they affecting it? If from a theoretical and rhetorical point of view -which generally becomes manifest through occasions such as exhibitions and publications- the preoccupations emerge clearly, how are the preoccupations themselves reflected into practice?

Bibliography

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Design Driven Research

The second phase of my work has the character of a design driven research, structured around an ethnographic method (Yaneva, 2009) whose research tools are an in-progress list of instruments and methods of investigation that I intend to use to analyse the practice. The list includes subjective ones such as reports, interviews, sketches and observations as well as objective ones such as polls and rough data to be processed. The set of methods and tools will be tailored on the character of the practice as well as in relation with each specific series of sources.

The goal is to enrich as much as possible my researcher toolkit and to find suitable and, if possible, innovative approaches to grasp concepts beyond traditional communication. On this purpose, *Architecture: History of Practice* (Cuff, 1992), together with *Made by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture: An Ethnography of Design* (Yaneva, 2009), represent two very interesting and unconventional references both in terms of content and methodological point of view. Written in first person to reinforce their journalistic nature, they allow a close-up glance made of observations, reflections, interviews, anecdotes, images, data, diagrams and vignettes, giving a tangible feeling of the working environment in the firms described.

The discoveries will constitute the basis for the definition of what contemporary processes of codification could be, as guiding principles of innovative design approaches. In the next months, in relation to the evidences that I will be capable to collect, I aim to define a suitable comparative method to frame codification processes in different design approaches.

Keywords:

architecture practice, tacit knowledge, ethnographic research

Bio

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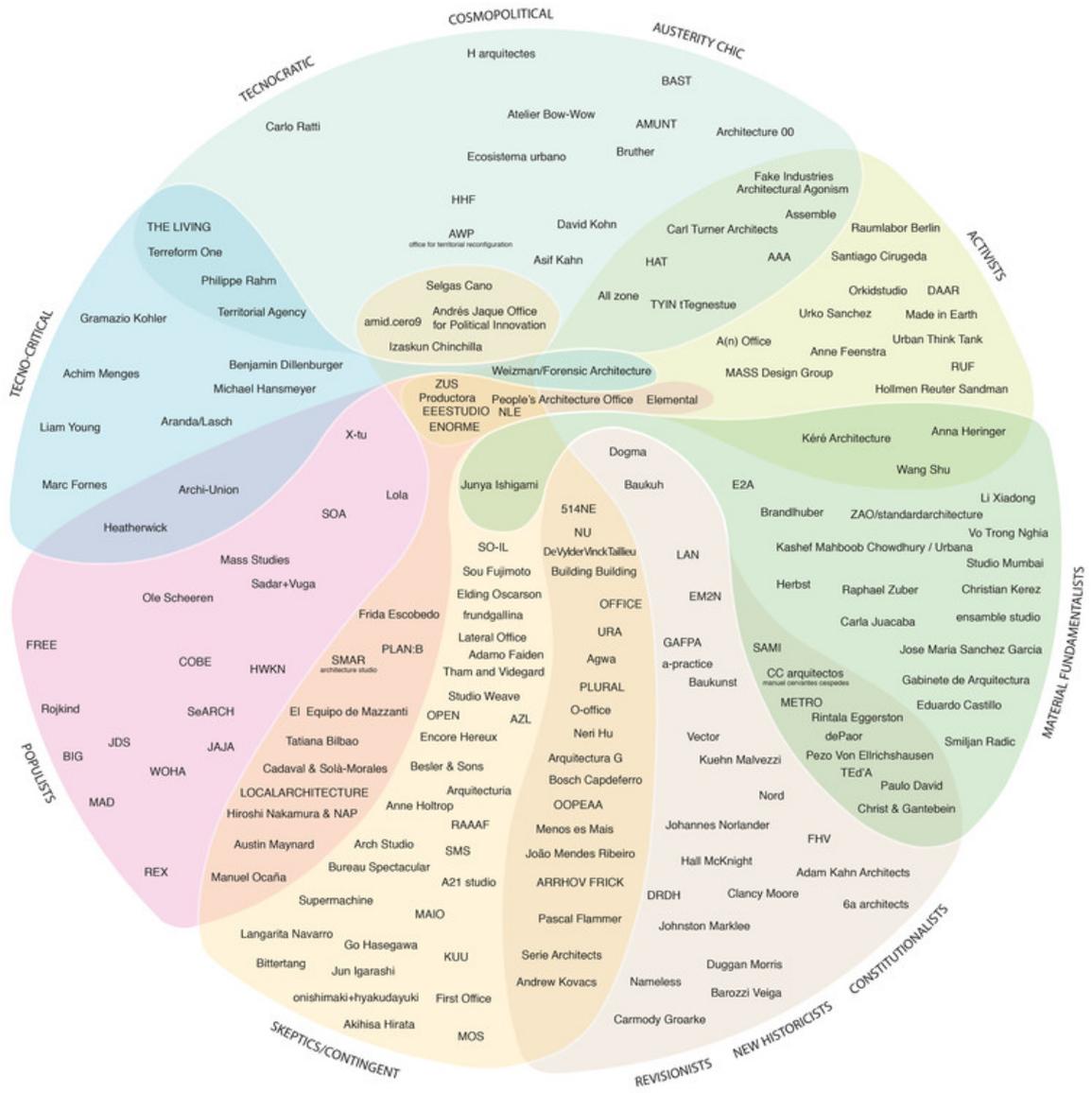
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Claudia Mainardi is a first year PhD candidate within the course in architectural, urban and interior design at the Politecnico di Milano as part of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie funded project *TACK / Communities of Tacit Knowledge: Architecture and its Ways of Knowing*.

Prior to the current position, Claudia worked for numerous offices including OMA/AMO, MVRDV and Studio Folder with whom she won the special mention at the XIV Venice Biennale. In 2019 she was head curator of the exhibition and graphic design of UABB Shenzhen Biennale and in 2017 she was assistant curator of BIO 25, the 25th Biennial of Design in Ljubljana. Since 2013 Claudia is partner of the architectural design and research collective Fosbury Architecture.



Alejandro Zaera-Polo & Guillermo Fernandez Abascal, *The Full Political Compass Diagram*, 2016