

(IN)DETERMINISTIC PUBLIC SPACE

A Methodological study on Social Praxis

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Thesis "(In)deterministic Public Space"

I INTRODUCTION

What is the role of architecture in the context of locality, culture, society, politics and economy? In architectural pedagogy, we try to answer the question by means of research and exclaim our chosen position through design practices. The methodology that describes the process for carrying out research or the development of a procedure is critically guiding for architectural exploration, evaluation, and discovery. How do we approach our design largely depends on the system of acquisition of knowledge and skill. As Stanford Anderson claimed, “the architect’s problem is not how to found his knowledge positively but how to make his knowledge grow”¹. The research methods are diverse. Each embodies unique heuristic techniques that empower the imagination of design. Among the chairs in TU Delft, students are given liberty to experience various architectural pedagogies. The broadening of epistemological approaches helps us to position ourselves within current mist of discourses. Furthermore, the deepening of understanding towards systematic methodology requires critical reflection on the historical and theoretical evolvement or changes of the method. The course not only provided me an overview of research methods and how to make use of the existing instruments to activate the unknown, but more importantly, triggered me to establish my own research framework for the graduation project.

I am developing my thesis in the graduation studio “Public Condenser” under the chair of Public Building. Copenhagen is my site of investigation on the studio research theme – multiplicity. The studio is engaging in the chair’s persistent inquiry in contemporary public buildings and public realms by questioning the existing typologies and developing new type of building – “Public Condenser” through research and design.

The idea of “Social Condenser” was first introduced by the Soviet Constructivist architects in the late 1920s. As Anatole Kopp said, “Like electrical condensers that transform the nature of current, the aim of ‘Social Condensers’ was to turn the self-centered individual of capitalist society into a whole man, the informed militant of socialist society in which the interests of each merged with the interests of all”². Later Koolhaas defined it as “programmatic layering upon vacant terrain to encourage dynamic co-existence of activities and to generate through their interface, unprecedented events”³. The explicit contradiction between the notions of soviet constructivist and Koolhaas lies the question of determinism. For constructivists, there leaves little doubt in the ideology of social engineering while the morphological characteristics remain indeterminate. However, for de-constructivists, the indeterminacy engendered from formal objectives or qualities that allow architecture to regains its critical edge as a disavowed form of determinism⁴.

My objective is to position my public building design within the determinacy and indeterminacy. To what extent the architect is able to determine or intervene the social life? By which means? Will fixed planned space dismiss the possibility of unprecedented events? Is it possible to design for indeterminate social life? Can public activities be catalysed by any specific spatial characteristic? What’s the precondition for aleatory occurrence?

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

My research approach is situated in the epistemic framework of praxeology and absorbing knowledge from sociology. Architecture constitutes not only an element of space, but also a field of social relation. The pattern of human behaviours is the embodiment of how subjective perception transforms into engagement with the objective environment. Since the perception is never statically planned but involved in psychological complexity, the study of human actions has close relationship with our physical and virtual surroundings. Architecture not only conveys the human notion of relationship with nature, but also as a physical spatial element, plays a crucial role in determining the human behaviours. As we know, space is able to prompt activities, while sometimes limits them. Thus I long to approach a human centric design through investigating social praxis.

Observation is the fundamental method for praxeological research. During the excursion in Copenhagen, I observed the human activities happening around the city as an outsider: the people

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cycling on their bike, the children playing on the playground, the people running on the street, the artist painting on the building façade, the old man sowing seeds in the planter and etc. I also kept my eye open to those trivial objects which tell the stories about people and the city such as an abandoned kiosk with posters. Apart from visual observation, listening to the indigenous voices variously silenced and erased by landscape representation via interview is an effective way reflecting on the changing living conditions.

Praxeology is not simply about study of human actions and conduct, but requires synthetic investigation in human history and human society. After the excursion, we attained a comprehensive understanding of site conditions through a series of historical, political, economic, social analysis catalogued in four topics: City, People, Connection and Power. The research works refer to the approach of book *Atlas of the Copenhagens* ranging from maps, diagrams, statistics, drawings, and information graphics varied in scale (fig.1), which allow for more intuitive understanding of complex conditions or systems⁵. In parallel with the research, the seminar involving a set of thematic trajectories inherent in public and societal value systems as well as functional program, financing, management and construction offers a theoretical basis for the research. It helps reveal the multiplicity of abstract entanglement behind the tangible human behaviours and triggers discussion on discursive issues in contemporary society.

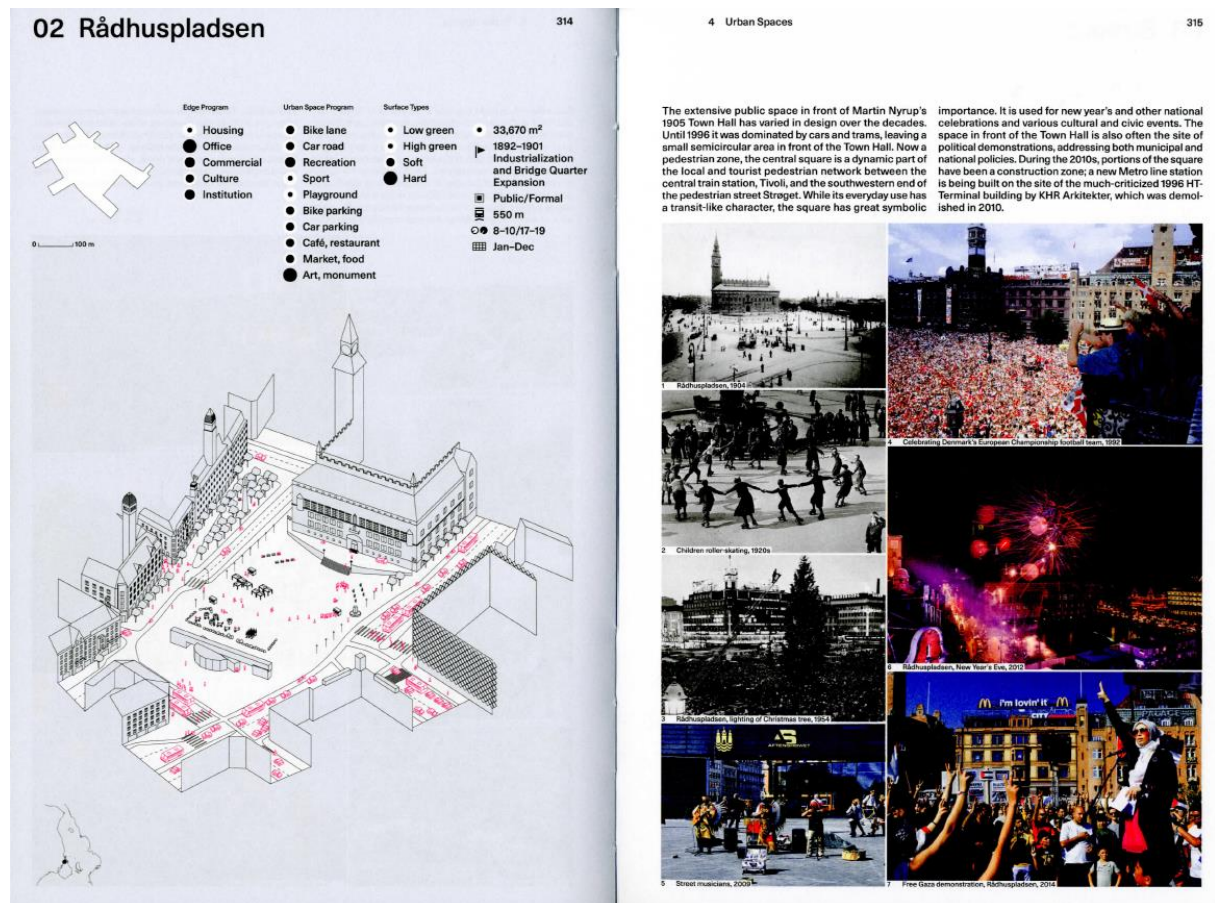


Figure 1 Urban Space Analysis, *Atlas of the Copenhagens*.

When it comes to design practice, case analysis assists us to see how abstract political, economic and cultural conditions were critically reflected and implemented into concrete public space design. The ideology behind each project is definitely inseparable from its historic and urban context. For example, the geometric form of Rusakov Worker Club by Konstantin Melnikov illustrates the idea that architecture serves as instrument of political propaganda (fig.2). Besides the built historical precedents, I think it is beneficial to look into some avant-garde schemes that radically criticize the existing structure. The experimental provocations including Plug-in City by Archigram's Peter Cook, New

Babylon by the former Situationist Constant and Fun Palace by Cedric Price facilitate perpetual change to cope with the rising challenges for mobility. By means of collage, drawing and model, they stimulate us to envision a new image of human society.



Figure 2 Poster for promoting books and education, Moscow, 1923 (left); Geometrical composition of Rusakov Worker's Club (right)

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Tracing back the history of praxeology, in the end of nineteenth century and early twentieth century, alongside industrialization, Taylorism and Fordism became the trend of society and greatly influenced massive professions including architecture. Praxeological study to introduce the idea of standardization originated from the urge for improving efficiency. Bruno Taut in the book *die neue wohnung* stressed out the important role of woman in household. He investigated into more efficient configuration of furniture by studying the daily routines and activities⁶. The idea of universalization and rationalization extended to the modular and the grid system proposed by CIAM, who remarkably advanced the cause of "architecture as a social art" in modern movement in the first half of twentieth century.

In 1953, the GAMMA group conducted a study of shantytowns in the periphery of Casablanca. Unlike the abstract rational parameters investigated by earlier CIAM, GAMMA got closer to the everyday life of the true users and took local, regional and cultural conditions into consideration. Their approach was to study the knowledge of social and physical characteristic of local context by means of sociological and building surveys in combination of cartographic and statistical methods⁷. History and evolution were also one of their focus. However, the intention of architects and urban planners that wanted to revise modern architectural and planning approaches by integrating knowledge on dwelling practices and habits into urban planning and architecture, was considered ambivalent, because ethnographic knowledge is ultimately based on specific production conditions – on conditions that might even lead to a fundamental epistemological 'misrecognition'⁸.

Later in post-war social practice, Situationist marked a notable shift in understanding space and the city not as fixed form but as atmospherically changing assemblages⁹. Guy Ernst Debord developed the theory of the *dérive*, an unplanned tour through an urban landscape directed entirely by the feelings evoked in the individual by their surroundings, tracing the conceptual contours of "unitary urbanism" on the principles of psycho-geography¹⁰ (fig.3). Oriented by "phenomeno-praxis", the method integrated with various forms of art and techniques contributing to the composition of a unified milieu. The New Babylon project by Constant was an extraordinary example of interdisciplinary collaboration and collective research (fig.4). Constant imagined a post-Marxist society of game and creativity that everything is possible. "The environment is created by the activities of life instead of the other way around". The nomadic city built with assist of technology reflects profound criticism upon utilitarian society, rendering the built environment in societal and behavioural aspect rather than functionalist perspective.

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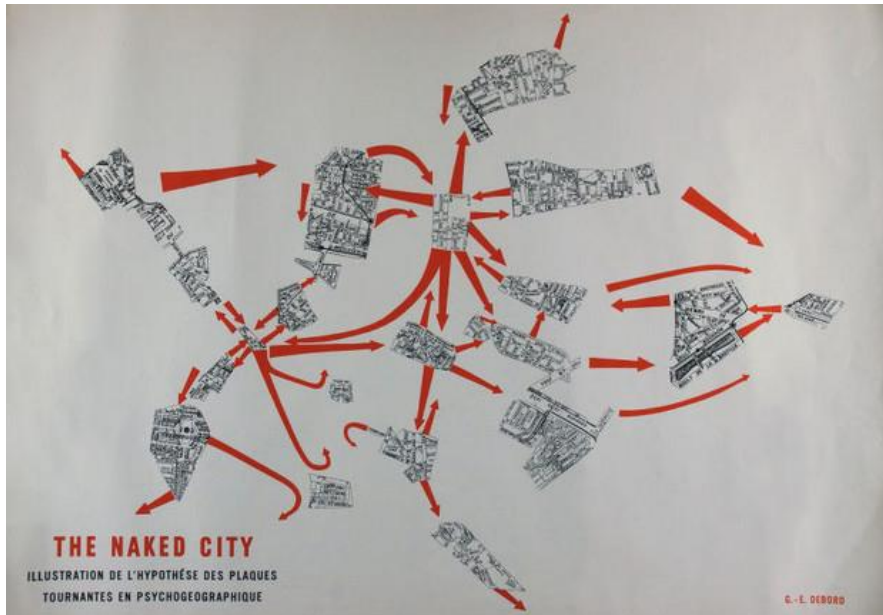


Figure 3 Guy Debord and Asger Jorn's *The Naked City* (1957)

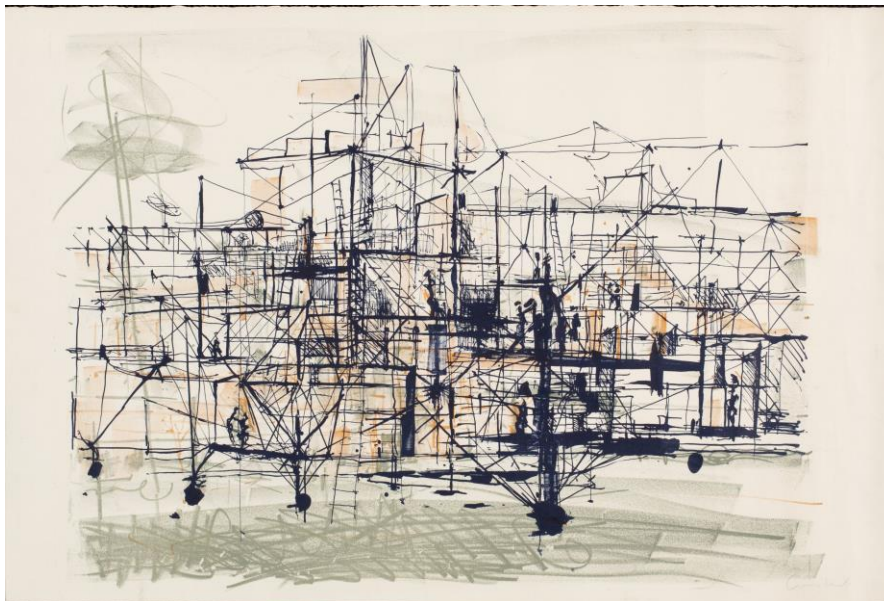


Figure 4 Constant Nieuwenhuys, *New Babylon*, 1961, litho. Collection Academie van Bouwkunst, Amsterdam

In his book *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu disavowed that society's inner operation can be governed by a set of rules, against the preminent ideas of social anthropologists such as Levi-Strauss. Instead, he proposed a theory of practice focusing on the dynamic flow of human actions in the social world based on his fieldwork in Algeria. The *habitus* coined by Bourdieu play a role of linking the structures to the practice of agents. In chapter 3, he further elaborated a practical logic that makes use of indeterminacy. "The uncertainty of usage duplicates the uncertainty of significance: because the ritual use that can be made of an object depends on the meanings it is given by the taxonomy ... And because the meaning of a symbol is only ever fully determined in and through the actions it effects or undergoes." The axiomatics of the system should not exclude the contradiction¹¹. Another prominent figure who contributed to sociological theory of space is Michel Foucault. He asserted the production of space, from institutions to a city, is not a neutral social praxis but serving for political aims and power. Moreover, he introduced the concept of *heterotopia*, the *other* space situated outside - disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory or transforming. In modern society, it appears mostly as form of *heterotopia of deviation* where individuals or social groups who do not fit into the dominant social order act differently from the social norm¹².

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Michel de Certeau pointed out that even if the modalities of its determination are heterogeneous in each case, both Foucault and Bourdieu's elucidation see the ethnological or metonymic cutting-out¹³. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, he investigated into the realm of routine practices, or the 'arts of doing' such as walking, talking, reading, dwelling, and cooking enacted by ordinary people, which act as creative resistance or subversion against the imposed power structures. It provides an innovative angle of reading the power-relations within society that is different from the binary Marxist models. In de Certeau's word, there exists a battle of repression and expression between strategies and tactics: The strategies by ruling institutions take an overarching position in planning our city and social life, whereas the tactics from everyday practice enable agility and abundance of opportunities depending on the situation.

These approaches investigating social practices, institutional forces, and material complexity of how humans and spaces interact offer me an integrated insight for explaining the multiplicity of contemporary social issues.

IV POSITIONING

To sum up, I don't think architect should be a swaggering dominator of social praxis with the users submissive to the predetermined rules, but a humble listener who collaborates with the users to catalyse the possibility of serendipity. The functionalist substantially serves for the axiom derived from industrial society that prioritizes efficiency and optimize performance. Therefore, the programme cybernetic method is doom to constrain the mobility and possibility of interaction while overdetermining the space. In many cases of our design, we are used to starting to arrange the given programmes in order to achieve the most rational result cooperating with our concept without further questioning. In this way architect is nothing different from a dictator telling people how they ought to perform.

Praxeological methods bring the architectural research back to the centre of human. However, to avoid the risk of glorification of human use as sole source of legitimacy, the study of praxeology should not be limited in analysis of human behaviour but extend to broader politics, economics and culture domains. As architecture situated itself within a complex of interests and dependencies, expressing their intersections and dependencies. The underlying conditions that have been motivating the changes in paradigms, functionalities, and the inevitable hybridity of today's buildings are worth attention and research. From Durkheim's Functionalism, Mead's Symbolic Interactionism to Giddens's Structuralism and Foucault's Post-structuralism, the theory of sociology offer us an insight for understanding the patterns of social relationships, social interaction and culture of everyday life. Additionally, the evolution of sociological theory foster my reflection on the discourse of public sphere. Public space as a spatial notion involving both individual and collective identities and interests, in my opinion, acts as the heterotopia described by Foucault - a system that both opens to allow penetration and closes for isolation. It is the elasticity of inclusion and exclusion that I want to achieve in my design. From both actual-ontological and abstract-teleological perspectives, there is no denying that architecture is shaped by objective as well as subjective milieu¹⁴. Given that the deterministic aspect within architecture lies in the insistence on the dependency between form and social, political and economic contexts. In a word, such dependencies are the preconditions for the design.

Praxeology should also emphasizes the current transformation of the human society and built environment. As contemporary society is undergoing tremendous revolutions, Hill discussed in detail three Post-war strategies in architectural practice: flexibility, polyvalence and user collaboration¹⁵. Based on different epistemology, modern architects develop their own interpretations of contemporary situations. Koolhaas claimed that "flexibility is not the exhaustive anticipation of all possible changes. Most changes are unpredictable... Flexibility is the creation of a margin - excess capacity that enables different and even opposite interpretations and uses"¹⁶ while Hertzberger insisted "we must continuously search for archetypal from which, because they can be associated with multiple meanings, can not only absorb a programme but also generate one. Form and programme evolve each other"¹⁷. And some chose destructive methods as a way to attain democracy, traversed by undecidability and for ever keeping open its element of promise¹⁸. When we compare today's reality with the utopian schemes

proposed decades ago, it is surprising that there exist numerous paradoxes regarding to social issues such as segregation, hyperconnectivity as well as the relation with technology.

Multiplicity distinguishes architecture from other forms of aesthetic works such as painting or sculpture. It is of great significance to make use of the tension between architectural design and its external referents the avant-gardes or other influences, as are the techniques of reading, writing, or techniques of musical composition and choreography¹⁹. Through such variety of means, architectural research is open to contingency. It seems that the ephemeral quality of everyday life contrasts against the traditional ideal for eternity of architecture. Given that my thesis is intended to investigate the indeterminacy questioning the disciplinary limits, the architectural thing-ness, the precise meaning within a diversity of terrains. If our social praxis is dynamic and even more fluid in today's world, why the architecture remains as a fixed object as hundreds years ago? It is time to reconsider the relationship between body and space, rethink the space-defining element and prosthesis appended to the body in new context. "A rich indetermination gives them, by means of a semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning²⁰", which leaves space for the public to define their own narrative of their public space.

END NOTES

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