

AR3A160 LSRM Position paper  
Positions in Practice: Constructing the Commons in the Latin American Metropolis  
Methods and Analysis Graduation Studio 2018-2019  
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## Choreographing the Unexpected Mobilizing emergent knowledges through praxis

### The Importance of Research-methodological Awareness

There exist systems of thought that are governed by rules, which circumscribe knowledge. To proceed along the paths towards professionalism, as architects in the making we make deliberate choices on the themes on which we want to deepen our understanding with an acute awareness of the long traditions in the discipline. Our choice of design methods, instruments and tools are based on our critical reflection of the histories of how similar research questions have previously been dealt with. Therefore during our architectural education, we organize ourselves into different chairs in TU Delft and begin to sharpen our broad interests and unbounded creativity by inscribing ourselves into existing systems of thoughts. This sharpening allows us to construct and reflect on our own position as architects in relation to other architects. It is difficult to act from or even conceive of a position, if we assume nothing was there before us. Such negation of history would amount to extreme individuation of certain figures ('starchitects') in the profession. Therefore, our objective is not to design an immediate solution specific to the context we are currently intervening in, but to situate our research within a much broader field of architectural operations across place and time.

To develop a particular research methodology is to develop a particular way of interpreting reality. It conditions the way we perceive our world and carry out our investigation. Heuristics in architecture are processes of experimentation, discovery and critical evaluation to confront questions about a possible future. It is a way of letting one's knowledge grow by learning from trial and error. Such heuristic processes are delimited by our own deliberate choice of methods and instruments suited to reach that projective goal.

### Thesis Research Question

I am developing my thesis in the graduation studio 'Positions in Practice' under the chair of Methods and Analysis. The locality of Teusaquillo in Bogotá is our site of investigation on the studio research themes - meaningfulness, appropriation, and integration. Within the barrios of Teusaquillo are nodes of knowledge production and exchange, which include private universities, theatres, dance schools, etc. The studio is engaging in the chair's persistent inquiry in commonality and knowledge as commons.

Driven by choreographic thinking, my thesis centers around knowledge that is not pre-existing but is mobilized and emerges in praxis. Dance as a heuristic inquiry stimulates the growth of our knowledge regarding the built environment. Can we choreograph the unexpected to oppose or circumvent the normatization of built spaces? How do we reconcile our simultaneous longing for order and chance? How can architects during the formulation of their project foresee the unpredictability of life and use, so that the built project's physicality can broaden the spectrum of possible modes of dwelling?

I have been reflecting on the particular case study of Kowloon Walled City, presented in the lecture on *Investigating Spatial and Social Practices* of this course. Kowloon Walled City was a mostly

ungoverned settlement in Hong Kong which was demolished in 1990s. After the speaker, a student from our faculty, showed images of a child doing homework in a tiny room and a butcher slaughtering pigs, he asked suggestively - 'do you still think a praxeological design approach is successful in this case study?'. The presentation of two selected cases was structured in a way that one was a "failed" attempt and the other was a successful one. Instead of evaluating the results of the praxeological approach from a critical distance, it would perhaps be more productive to bring situatedness into our research and to understand that certain decisions were made out of necessity in situations of survival. Assuming we all strive to live our best lives under unique circumstances and constraints, our role as architects then is not to determine for users the "best" way to dwell, but to broaden the spectrum of possibilities afforded by the built environment.

## Research Approach

My research approach is situated in the praxeological episteme and also drawing knowledge from phenomenology. Praxeology is the study of *routine* practices of ordinary people. Since perception in spacetime is action, the act of perceiving the world becomes praxis. Perception is not statically contemplated. It is always attentive to an imminent future and triggers kinesthetic impulse in the body that suggest actions to be taken. Likewise, praxis is not programmed into the body, we are moved *by* and improvise *with* things in the changing environment. Objects and human beings are not bounded entities detached from their surroundings. They enter into relation with each other along paths of movement.

In a performative workshop with students from Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, we put aside our preconceptions and engaged with Teusaquillo through bodily improvisations. Our intervention has already started the moment we were exploring in Teusaquillo, since our thoughts do not reside in a dimensionless space within our minds, but are spaced out into the life-world through our moving bodies. By observing and performing disobedient practices I was able to get a hold of the dynamics between patterns of governance and human movement in the context of Teusaquillo. My exploration on site was driven by the belief that everyday tactics has the power to circumvent laws of institutional regimes and to subvert these laws from within.

The situated praxeological approach is relevant to the present situation of Bogotá, since it is caught among negotiations between the Spanish colonial urban model and the ongoing absorption of rural "immigrants". There exists creative tension between the intention of buildings and their use and effects in practice.

My objective is not to systematize praxis to generate prescriptive rules for the most optimal design, but to define praxis as a course of action - action that elicit further actions. This approach bears upon speculative inquiries into what the possibilities for life can be, and the formulation of new modes of dwelling.

## Development of the selected research approach

Starting from 1940s, French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) argues for the fundamental role perception plays in not only understanding but also engaging with the world. He takes on Martin Heidegger's notion of *In-der-Welt-sein*, and declares the body as the primary site of knowing the world and the indisputable entanglement of the body with what it perceives. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty explains the world "is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage

each other like gears.”<sup>1</sup> Michel de Certeau (1925-1986) furthers Merleau-Ponty’s view of embodiment to also contemplate the tactical dimension of mundane daily practices. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, he investigates into routine practices such as walking, talking, and dwelling. In these practices, there exists an element of creative resistance and an abundance of opportunities for ordinary people to subvert the regulations and representations which society imposes upon them.

Recent development has seen efforts in uniting the approaches of ecology, phenomenology and praxeology across disciplinary boundaries. Social anthropologist Tim Ingold proposes a synthesis of “‘relational’ thinking in anthropology, ‘ecological’ thinking in psychology and ‘developmental systems’ thinking in biology”<sup>2</sup> His dwelling perspective of daily practitioners is influenced by de Certeau, in that life is not contained in things, but grows and unfolds along paths of movement. The subject, and the landscape it dwells in, is perpetually under construction, and in an intertwined state of becoming. These processes of becoming imply that we dwell in space and also in time. Philosopher and feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz calls for the reconsideration of duration in processes of design and construction. The objects made by human beings “inscribes a specific duration and concrete boundaries within the broad outlines of temporal succession or flow and spatial mapping.”<sup>3</sup> Duration allows life to perpetually unfold and for differences to emerge.

Furthermore, I have been studying how the themes of embodiment, duration and indeterminacy discussed by the above theorists are tested out in the fields of music, dance/choreography and landscape architecture. Thinking through choreography with an ecological awareness of the interwoven relations between bodies and the environment allows me to expand my understanding of my research themes.

Graphic notations first appeared in 1950s as a deviation from traditional linear scores to introduce indeterminacy into music, as pioneered by avant-garde composers such as John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen. It was radical in inviting performers to construct the musical work. Starting from 1960s dancer-choreographer Anna Halprin and landscape architect Lawrence Halprin experimented with notational systems for dance and music in organizing environmental workshops, involving students from the two fields. This transdisciplinary approach was later used by Lawrence Halprin to redesign not only urban landscapes but also the creative process of the architect, resulting in the non-goal-oriented methodological system called “RSVP (resources-scoring-valuation-performance) cycles”.

Seeing how architectural plans functioning in an excess of determinacy could limit the capacity for unexpected encounters to emerge from below the threshold of our perception, I look for an alternative way of making – scoring, as used by Lawrence Halprin in his built projects. Scores “provide instructions to initiate actions and engagements, but require and demand improvisation, and a readiness and openness to engage ‘others’ and to follow the emerging effects (...) and trajectories(...)”<sup>4</sup> Choreography calls for an ongoing questioning and reformation of its previous definitions through enactments of the score. The method of scoring can be used as a way of composing the built environment, which regards acts of appropriation not as subsequent violation but as being constitutive to the architectural project. As opposed to the definitive plan, the score carries a certain degree of ambivalence and invites users to overturn its instructions to suit their needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1962), pp. xix-xx.

<sup>2</sup> Ingold, T., *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Grosz, E., *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Minnesota: MIT Press, 2001), p.169.

<sup>4</sup> Altes, A. & Lieberman, O., *Performative Inventions and Matters of Care: Choreographing Values* (Transvaluation: Making the World Matter, Gothenburg (conference), 2015), p.135.

## Positioning

My thesis opposes the functionalist position that is built upon a complete knowledge of what a standard body is or how a standard body ought to perform. Ernst Neufert's pursuit of the norm immensely influences architectural education through the circulation of its printed form, *Architect's Data*, which contributes to the standardization of design practices. Instead of assuming users to be submissive to rules, I am interested in the ways in which people (under various degree of oppression from which they cannot escape) subvert these rules. De Certeau speaks of the subversive power of such practices by using the example of indigenous Indian cultures under Spanish colonization. The laws imposed on them "was diverted from its intended aims by the use made of it...they subverted them from within - not by rejecting them or by transforming them(...) but by many different ways of using them."<sup>5</sup>

There exists a temporal dimension in acts of appropriation since they always operate within durations. Architecture is often mainly considered through spatial perspectives, however, a building has a duration just as an event has a duration. Architecture is open to forces of destruction, transformation, degradation, always being re-contextualized and reappropriated over time. This moment in time, when our existence are affected, if not threatened, by unprecedented changes in politics, weather and geology, perhaps calls for a reconsideration of architecture's temporal and metamorphic qualities.

What then, would we score in architecture? To score an environment would be to arrange spatially and temporally sequences of ambivalent architectural elements (instruments), which invite plural readings of their uses and meanings. This method denotes a shift in the way we perceive architecture. Instead of serving as a passive receptacle, architecture emerges perpetually through actions. Architecture is constituted by limits at which movement comes to an end. These constitutive limits are constantly agitated by the event and are capable of accommodating modifications and thus growing. Through the operation of weaving through the existing fabric of the neighbourhood, I wish to introduce new variables and configurations that upset the norms and conventions that have been shaping dwelling spaces.

Since choreography is both the enactment and the score for that enactment, this way of thinking dissolves the binary distinction of identities, between the authoritative architect and the people whom we design "for". It proposes an alternative way of becoming "with" that is in line with one of the central beliefs of the chair of Methods and Analysis. It is the belief that the architectural project is not a single-authored endeavor that ends at the moment a building is inaugurated, but a complex process that evolves through time, involving multiple stakeholders. The reflection on the architect's position is important in the context of Bogotá, a city reinventing itself after decades of violence, immense dynamism resulting from mass migration, political reform, etc. shapes the city as a complex interweaving of diverse narratives of the past and desires for the future.

However, there is a risk of a praxeological approach in architecture in becoming a blind glorification of use as the sole source of legitimacy, detached from political, historical and cultural reality, and regarding architectural forms as a source of repression. This challenge will be further discussed throughout the formulation of my thesis. I aim to devise a mode of operation which does not entail our professional expertise as architects is no longer valued. As mentioned in the sub-question of my research topic, it would demand the initiation of processes from which collective aspirations are drawn up, well before the actual design is produced.

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<sup>5</sup> De Certeau, M., *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California press, 1984), p.32.

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