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INTERVENTIONS, DURATIONS, EFFECTS: ARCHITECTING THE CITY AND THE WORLD

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Abstract

We define architecture not as an ‘it’ but as a process, or an apparatus; in our sense, architecture is a verb: to architect. Rather than refer to the (paradoxical) limiting of intervention’s in-between, we posit a new concept: intravention. Intruv’s focus on the ‘within’ establishes intraventions as already a part of the spaces and times in which they are ‘intravening’. We find this a very productive notion, one which is useful in defining the (makeshift) edges of specific situations with which we engage; it helps us negotiate the expanse of the relational meshwork of material, sensory and discursive flows, and allows us to start ‘doing/making’ immediately. When we ‘intravene’, we cut within the site we inhabit to conceive and construct it. It also speaks about intentionality: one decides what the intravention includes or excludes. It is therefore an intensely political act, as well as an aesthetic one. We will discuss the notion of intravention in relationship to its ability to interfere with the complex making of the city and the world, articulating, detonating, and re-articulating relations, actions and intra-actions between various things, apparatuses, people, ANTs, spiders and, very possibly, sugar dispensers.

Keywords

Architectural intervention; duration; effects; agency; public space; things.

Conference topics

Aspects of improving the artist’s “own” awareness of his/her own practice and the knowledge it incorporates;
Aspects of insight, understanding and knowing in the work;
Discussion of the processes of making the work/design/music in the context of one’s own and other practices;
Discovery/definition of values in the process of designing/making/doing/performing;
Implications of uncovering the aspects considered as tacit;
Exploration of the tension between the understanding and emotional experience of the work of art or design;
Forms and frames relevant to represent knowledge based on creative practice;
Investigation of the relation between the creative work and its description – interpretation – explanation;
Inwards and outwards communication in designing/music/arts.

Figure 1
An instant of one of the interventions carried out by Master’s students at the Laboratory of Immediate Architectural Intervention at Umeå School of Architecture
Preface/Introduction

Inside a quiet cafe, in a well-known European city, a group of master's students in architecture sit around a table while they wait for a guest to arrive. Everyone is a bit excited since the guest is a famous figure of architectural theory that will probably throw some light onto their ongoing discussions about something called ‘relational architecture’. They have invited the guest for an encounter/interview/conversation. But the guest is quite late. Students and teachers start a discussion partly initiated by some lines read from a transcription of an interview with the absent guest:

- “Speculative theories are the basis to develop projective matter” reads someone aloud.
- “Yes, but aren’t we talking all the time about being concrete?” reacts someone immediately.
- “Wait, there’s something even more interesting here, listen: ‘[...] more and more designers embrace pluralism and the endless relations that an intelligent system can generate. The danger is that their search for difference or the stimulation of the unpredictable is elevated to an absolute law, and the possibility of difference is fetishized’ says the reader again. (Van Toorn, 2009)
- “What does he mean by fetishizing difference?” asks someone else.
- “Hmm... I think that would be if you start focusing exclusively on producing ‘difference’, no matter how small or unimportant that difference is, and that takes over everything else” replies one of them. “As if for instance the fact that I am moving this sugar dispenser now...” and he takes the sugar dispenser in his right hand and moves it to another position on the table while he goes on... “was understood as changing the world”.
- “Well... but in fact, it is changing the world, isn’t it?” says someone else from the far end of the table.
- “Not really!” says another one that had been quiet until now.
- “I think it does change the world to some extent” adds one of them.
- “I am not sure that is true” says another.

We begin setting out our thoughts on immediate architectural interventions with a couple of considerations. One of them addresses the architectural profession’s progressive disconnection from the social, from the political, from history, from the local, from ethics, from the body, from the ‘discipline’ itself. A whole generation of architects has abandoned the design of coexistence – undoubtedly one of the main tasks of architecture – in order to embrace, on the one hand, the serial fabrication of what we see as anti-architectures that repeat types, materials and structural systems on the basis of a pragmatic and productive juxtaposition of normative restrictions and the interests of bankers, investors, and developers; and on the other hand, the production of ‘stunning’ unique prototypes of image-architecture that satisfy the ill, self-worshipping yearnings of architects mired in the ceaseless luxury of ‘formal’ exploration for the sake of ‘form’. We are critical of what is being embraced and of the practices that perpetuate disconnection from lived lives.

Underlying our critique is a position that architecture is not an autonomous entity that is devised in the architect’s studio on the basis of his/her capacities as ‘genius’ and through some kind of obscure, almost magical process and then deployed on a pre-existing piece of land. Rather, it is a complex and relational practice that comes about in various ‘fields’, and takes place in collaboration with things and people, and is always material as well as cultural and political and technological and artistic and, and... It is a practiced practice, involving many different actors, people, institutions and apparatuses.

Interventions

Our desire to intervene reflects this awareness and critique of these conditions of disconnection and distancing between people and the social, as well as between people and ‘bodies’ – their own or those of materials, technologies, and indeed discourses. Our desire to intervene is a desire to affect the world, and resonates with the given that, as Antonio Machado says, ‘we lay down the path while walking’. We believe in the need to be ‘inside’, intervening here and now, close to where we are and with the tools we have at hand, with borrowed methodologies, and invented methods. We want ‘to architect’.

The ‘tool’ of intervention is indeed a powerful one. First of all it presupposes a place/time in which to intervene, that is, it takes, and makes, a position. The idea that there is a history, an ‘already there’, a site which we might say preexists this moment, this just now, is substantiated by our attention to it, an attention which makes (us part of) that site. And it is through a notion of expanded site – rather than a notion of scale with its predilections of hierarchy and nestedness – that we understand the extent of the intervention, i.e., the materials, institutions, social groupings, etc. of which we are involved and are ‘bracketing in’ to our considered purview. Through both the expansion of site into various concerns, and the simultaneous considered selection (the bracketing out, and in) of various actants, agendas, antagonisms and histories, we ethically and politically mark out and are entangled in the world. Where we want to intervene becomes a crucial question, in what site, how, for/with whom? So sites and the interventions that make them afford us the possibility to talk about judgments and political intentions as well as to measure effects. Do we want to enable a particular conversation? Do we want to challenge neoliberal worlds? Do we want to do both?

Intraventions

This notion of attention finds resonance in Karen Barad’s work, where we find a focus on intra-actions rather than inter-actions. She posits not a world that is somehow unstable due to our inability to define moments and spaces, but proffers a world that is full of very precise phenomena produced through enacted intra-actions between things (including people, objects, animals, plants, etc.). Such an enactment – what she calls an ‘agentual cut’ – locates quite precisely “… a local causal structure among ‘components’ of a phenomenon in the marking of the ‘measuring agency’ (effect) by the ‘measured object’ (cause),” (Barad, 2003)

So for us interventions both measure and make, existing as both separate entities...
Interventions, Durations, Effects - are in tension, setting up dialogues and arguments and different worlds that together make things common and common things. Intentionality is an index of the architect’s position and aims. Like our matters of concern, the intention of the performer who intravenes informs the intravention and determines the (initial) limits of the ambit in which the intravention takes place. It initiates the definition of the intravention, even though these limits will necessarily change or evolve as we go. And, we shouldn’t forget that this intentionality arises out of un/non-conscious aspects of our being, as well as out of ‘affect-ual’, bodily, and discursive, awareness.

We see intraventions as heuristic devices, as apparatuses that are imbued with a will to transform. The intravention is not autonomous but contingent and relational and dependent on many other things. The intravention is made as it happens, and it makes us at the same time. It takes place or happens in a situated field (the site), not on an endless/infinite meshwork, but as part of the relationships and co-existences between the elements comprised within that ‘constructed’ site. Again: things, people, institutions, apparatuses, histories, events and discourses that we start to define through an initial ‘cut’.

If an intervention is an addition to what is an impossible condition of a pre-existing situation or event and therefore something that exists also before and ‘outside’ the situation/field/place where it happens, then an intravention is born through that situation, it becomes. It is a becoming, it is unfolded as it happens within and part of the site, it is interior to that site (we don’t break in: as always, we are already there).

If Barad’s intra-action is defined through an agential cut in the on-going life of the world - everything is intra-action for her - our intravention happens, to a certain extent, out of a willingness to engage in transforming/disturbing that life. It has the ability to produce change by transforming the site we are considering from within.

Criteria of Intraventions

Paramount in the assessment of the intravention is its relationship with time. We can think on the one hand of its ‘duration’, as literally the time it lasts, regarding both the materiality of the objects that make it and that of the meshwork in which the objects are entwined. In this first ‘side’ of temporal criteria we can also include the duration of the effects (for how long is the intravention affecting/transforming the world?). On the other hand, if we think of it as a ‘thing’, we can speak of its ‘durability’, as its inherent ability to both dwell within the assemblages, clusters and meshworks in which it takes part, as well as to coordinate and curate those assemblages.

The duration of our intraventions and their effects, which are crucial, are multiple. It might be, of course, that if something is around longer it has more impact … but not always. Let’s take an example. We intervene with something a very short lifespan (for instance, we build something which remains for 24 hours and then is removed). Though physically present for a mere day, the things that this intravention sets in motion, that is, the effects it has, might be significant. People or course remember it, but it might also be that people theorize it, that people begin to repeat aspects of it (e.g., an event which happened within it gets staged again in another setting), etc.

Laboratory of Immediate Architectural Intervention (LiAi) we cut in various ways, not one. Barad’s notion of the ‘cut’ as a defining, parameter-setting tool is useful; at the Laboratory of Immediate Architectural Intervention (LiAi) we cut in various ways, not the least of which is through the use of our ‘matters of concern’. As cuts, these are in themselves quite performative: the juxtaposition of particular terms immediately generates various and interesting interplays that in turn start setting the parameters of the least of which is through the use of our ‘matters of concern’. As cuts, these are in themselves quite performative: the juxtaposition of particular terms immediately generates various and interesting interplays that in turn start setting the parameters of the apparently endless expandability of the relational meshwork of material and sensory flows, therefore allowing us to start ‘doing/making’ immediately. When we intravene, we ‘cut’ (in Barad’s sense) to both locate and make a site we inhabit. This is not a negation of transversality, but an embrace of it.

It also speaks about intentionality: one ‘decides’ what the intravention includes or excludes. It is of course therefore an intensely political act, as well as an aesthetic one. Barad’s notion of the ‘cut’ as a defining, parameter-setting tool is useful; at the Laboratory of Immediate Architectural Intervention (LiAi) we cut in various ways, not the least of which is through the use of our ‘matters of concern’. As cuts, these are in themselves quite performative: the juxtaposition of particular terms immediately generates various and interesting interplays that in turn start setting the parameters of our discussions while at the same time they interrogate and help us judge the relevance of our intraventions. Our matters of concern are our ‘terms of engagement’, the ways in which we deal with the task of ‘architecting’ as a function, i.e. a process that is contingent on other processes and other ‘things’. If Badiou would say that architecture is a function of the generic procedure ‘art’ and the scientific category ‘geography’, we might well say that we see ‘architecting’ as a function of, or an amphibian stand (Nilsson, 2009) between, philosophy and art, aiming at the transformation of our conditions of coexistence and at the articulation of spaces for being and living together. This speaks indeed of a need to question architecture’s position within the realm of technology or technique, as well as epistemologies that conceive it as a discipline or body of knowledge within art or science.

Our matters of concern are indeed tools for cutting, for establishing the (shifting) limits of our expanded sites. They are full of intention, just as the terms themselves are in tension, setting up dialogues and arguments and different worlds that together
And their duration and effects are evident in the ability of *intraventions* to trigger and afford dreams, generating something that didn't previously exist. A common hope, an imaginary.

Another aspect of *our intraventions* is immediacy, a concern which transverses complex meshworks. We can do things that occur quite quickly, and quite closely. However, to understand quick only according to the clock would negate the various ‘timings’ of the world; to understand close only as physical distance would disregard emotional bonds, as well as social media’s always now, always here. Because we see architecture as relational and connected to all those other “things”, we prefer to work in close proximity as our aim is to affect the world around us, to make a difference, and therefore the immediate, the here-and-now become important.

The *intraventions* that we are interested in: ask questions of their effects and their duration, producing effects that matter; endure, either through their effects - in the cases in which they are themselves short - or through their own lasting existence, that continues to effect a pressure in their surroundings and therefore transforms the world in meaningful ways; ask questions of our complicity in others’ agendas; challenge the order of things, confronting the status quo with the inadmissible, that, as Rancière puts it, “reconfigure[s] the distribution of the sensible” (Rancière, 2006). In that sense we are interested in *intraventions* that ask questions of both consensus and dissensus; *intraventions* that take the other into account; the various others; *intraventions* that treat these others seriously and emerge from a fundamental ethical drive that transpires in our encounters with them; *intraventions* that create situations of freedom, revealing ideologies and generating spaces for a freer existence through coexistence.

So we are interested in *intraventions* that produce effects that matter. It follows that we need some criteria to assess the effects and to decide what it means to matter, for what and for whom. We might say we need to ‘assess’, or, rather, judge an *intravention*, reflecting on what makes one more or less successful than another.

As we’ve said, an essential criterion of the *intravention* is its transformative power: its effects will matter inasmuch as they manage to transform the world in a meaningful way. In order to do so, we believe that *intraventions* must on the one hand oppose particular strong discourses and on the other hand involve and engage a multiplicity of other actors/people/things.

The extent to which the *intravention* is explicitly enmeshed in both the material flows and the currents of sensory awareness that make life as it happens will also be an important measure, and reflects our focus on the performative. Our *intraventions* should be as fully integrated and entangled as possible, and must address public matters, that is, issues of public concern. Their singularity must be used to critique and question the multiple/the plural through/with the poltical. They must confront the conditions of ‘the many’ in/through potentially destabilizing, i.e. inadmissible, actions. Such radical *intraventions* must aim at “making more room in the world for new political forms […] and new excitations of power” (Thrift, 2008). They must test, and experiment with, unexpected forms of ‘effective togetherness’ that ask questions about the definition of the commons and what is public and what these definitions exclude, searching for forms of ‘grouping’ and/or ‘organization’.

If these *intraventions* address “the public”, they must also have the power to involve “publics”, in the sense of managing to engage multiple and various actors. Often, this engaging of various actors is initiated/afforded by an ability to connect through aesthetics. *Intraventions* can operate not only through agonism or dissensus, but also by being friendly and ‘cool’.

The various collective and distributed ingredients of the *intravention* should also lead to collaborative ownerships that are emergent rather than claimed. Such ‘self-distributing’ forms of ownership are both the result of and an active part in the establishment of alternative communities of practice.

We can then ask a series of questions: How are the changes generated by our *intraventions* establishing connections amongst the city’s inhabitants? How are our *intraventions* questioning ‘official’ discourses of public space in the city? How is the city ‘rewired’ through such *intraventions*? How are the proposed and effected transformations able to generate previously inexisttent possibilities or ideas? How do they foster new “dreams” about public, or rather, shared space? How can our *intraventions* guarantee the functional and discursive integrity/durability of such new public spaces? How would our *intraventions* incorporate, and further enable collaborative ownership and communities of practice?

These are some of the questions which keep us busy as we try to ‘architect’ our part in the making of the city and the world through immediate architectural interventions. The minimally different event is not enough. An Event needs an Organization and an Idea. To architect is a function and it is therefore political. Intraventions help us articulate those terms towards architecting politically.

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