

SPATIAL THEATRE FOR ARCHITECTS: EXERCISES FOR STUDENTS

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I teach young architects how to think about the purposes of design – why design makes a difference in the world. We talk about values, priorities, and consequences. Students are challenged to shift their thinking away from seeing buildings as composed objects for contemplation and toward recognizing them as vital partners in the social world we inhabit. Buildings may not move, but they act, receiving and directing our movement, opening some possibilities and closing others. Here, I present a series of exercises along with their theoretical foundation, which invite students to explore the social roles of architecture.

If buildings can be considered more than simply backdrops to human action, then how do they ‘act’ in the world? Sociologist Bruno Latour argues that the things in the world that are not human, which he calls “non-humans”, are the missing masses of sociology, ever-present but long unrecognized for the social roles they play (Latour, 2006). Latour debunks traditional reasoning that non-humans are just dumb stuff, mute ‘objects’, which can carry only the meaning put into them by people yet hold little power to act independently or intentionally on us. Latour and other ‘New Materialist’ theorists argue that these non-humans, including animals, plants, buildings, cities, machines, and electronic devices, in fact do act, all the time, in their own physical way in the social world we inhabit.

Latour considered the door closer, a simple mechanical device with one job – to close the door behind you (Latour, 1988). He recognized the non-human door closer as a social actor that takes some of the role that once was played by a human doorman – it closes the door gently behind you and reminds you that the door should be kept closed. A mechanical action is also a social action. Similarly, all architectural spaces have a role in the events of our lives. A stairway can be generous (a human quality) by offering a place to pause on the way up (a spatial quality), with a view perhaps (a gift), or a stairway can rudely insist that people climb single file, thus interrupting conversations, and leaving everyone breathless at the top.

To help young designers think about the actions of their design choices, the first step is to notice how we read built space for its social potential, often without thinking about it. I ask students in large classes to find places in our architecture school building to check out what's happening, for a conversation with a friend, and to think through an idea. Of course, students have already found these places in the course of inhabiting the building, but this time they map them explicitly, measure them and enact them. The Florida International University School of Architecture building is particularly well suited to these exercises because it was designed by Bernard Tschumi, who designs, often provocatively to create events. Students draw plans and sections with themselves as figures in them, and they measure the dimensions that make the spaces work. The next week, they are outside again to find places where the building frames views, placing people so they see each other in strategic or picturesque scenes, like living photos. Finally, students compose 10 seconds of choreography in partnership with an element of the building. They find an ordinary motion in which the building mediates between two people by creating a spatial/social relationship, then heighten the motion for a video camera. They draw the motion in plan, section and as a storyboard (Figure 1). These skills they then use to analyse selected buildings, focusing on how the design treats people spatially and socially.

If we credit buildings with social action, even when they do not move, then an

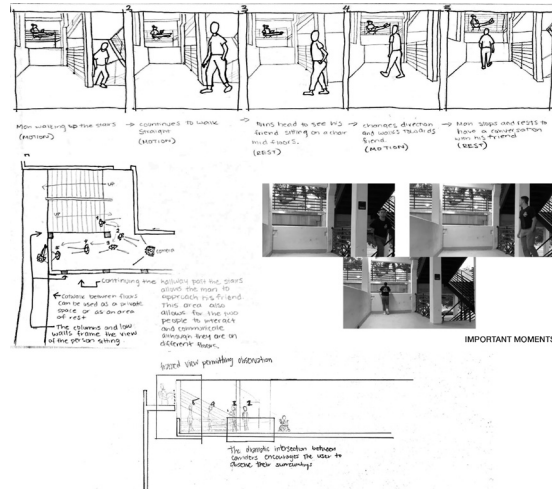


Figure 1. Fernando Arana, John Correa and Shailee Weiss, drawing of choreography sequence in the School of Architecture building, FIU, 2019. Drawing includes a storyboard, plan, section and photos of important moments

architect can be considered a kind of theatrical director, in charge of the non-humans in the scenes of daily life. Like a director, the work of the architect happens long before the action. They block the scene, worry over framing, pacing and scale. They imagine how a layout or detail will perform in a variety of scenarios, with drawn figures standing in for real people. Everyday experience informs decisions, but the skill lies in design that opens to unforeseen possibilities. At best built spaces follow the rules of improvisation, they say yes to the actions of their human partners by receiving them graciously, then move the scene forward by suggesting new potential.

In a small studio class, I asked students to design and build a non-human partner to act with at least two of them in a scene that they performed together. The culminating project/performance addressed one of the fundamental ways that architectural space mediates between people physically, defining social spaces. Two projects in particular demonstrate the ideas.



Figure 2. Aileen Garrido and Audrey Handel, photos of dance with façade box. Dancers moved while facing each other, opening and closing layers of the façade

Aileen Garrido and Audrey Handel danced a tango/love story with a box/mask that acted as a building façade, concealing and revealing the face by degrees through screens and behind doors (Figure 2). They played on the drama inherent in opening of a door, the tension of a screen that offers only partial view, and the physical gestures of removing layers of enclosure, like clothing.

A different group of stu explored architectural scale through a gridded façade (Figure 3). Each square of the grid was a drawer that could be pushed out to make a platform or step. The drama proceeded from reading and rereading of simple configurations in relation to movement and the body. The piece moved with them, receiving their actions graciously and proposing new ways to move the scene forward.

If objects act in a social world, with or without moving, do they act with intent? A number of scholars have parsed this question as part of a broad movement toward a new ‘materialism’, which proposes that ideas, emotions,



Figure 3. Performance by Mark Pataky, David Acosta, and Stephanie Colón. Boxes were pushed out or pulled in (by David Acosta behind the scene). Each configuration suggested a specific engagement with the body: climbing steps, stretching out, or having lunch

and metaphysics, which are usually reserved for people, can also be attributed to non-humans: animals, plants and things. Political philosopher Jane Bennett writes that this movement is, “a continuation of earlier attempts to depict a world populated not by active subjects and passive objects, but by lively and essentially interactive materials, by bodies human and nonhuman” (Bennett 2015, p.224). She and others reject the division of the world into human subjects, who act with purpose and agency in the world, and insentient objects who can only be acted upon. Instead, Bennett summons Latour to define all things, including people, as ‘actants’ with presence and power to interact with each other according to their physical being and proclivities. Bennett recognizes ‘vitality’ in all things, whether they are sentient or not. This presence or vitality is lodged in the physical qualities of creatures or things, which arise out of their origins and respond to their position in the world. For example, a raccoon seeks out food in the underbrush, acting with purpose and effectiveness in its

ecological niche. An oak tree seeks the sun, growing branches that place leaves where they will receive as much light as possible. Lacking a brain, it still acts effectively to feed its own growth and reproduction. Even a rock asserts its presence with solidity, resisting the eroding forces of rain, wind, and human machinery according to the qualities of its formation, whether hard if granite or soft if limestone. Designed objects carry the purposes of their creators as well as the material presence of their elements, which act independently. Designers well know that materials resist; they warp or check or bend according to their history and their nature. Do things act with intent? Yes, however their intentions are not the singular, explicit purpose of a sentient being, but the compound intentions of materiality and history.

These intents and interactions are deeply ecological. Nothing exists apart from its relationships with other things. Everything, including humans, asserts its position and continually adapts to its situation, acting with purpose in its own way, with the qualities it has.

To explore some of these non-human qualities and their relationships with people, I gave a week-long workshop with a study-abroad group in Genoa. We warmed up with exercises based on director Anne Bogart's *Viewpoints*, developing an awareness of each other and of the things around us (Bogart, 2004). Then I asked students to find a simple architectural element out in the city, such as a doorway, set of steps, a wall, or a bench and to engage it as a third partner in a short video, which included drawings that described the real dimensions and positions of things and people. The idea was to read the social potential of the element and to interpret it in as many ways as they could, to ask in their actions what else it could do with them, bringing their own set of intentions to the game. Then to draw it to understand the real, architectural dimensions in plan and section.

Elise Francis and Vera Kolalias found an old door on a Genoa street, which they wove into a story of desire (Figure 4). Kolalias' interaction with the door, focusing on her hands, conveys the power of open and closed in emotions of

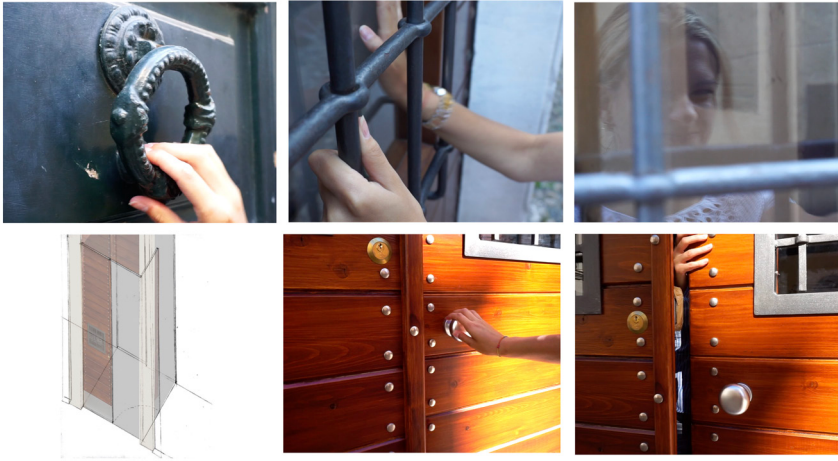


Figure 4. Elise Francis and Vera Kolalias, stills from video exploring the emotional potential of a door in Genoa

touch without words.

These projects were intended to develop an architectural sensibility based in interaction, rather than visual composition. Design, often considered an explicit projection of human desires onto compliant material, is recast as creating an interaction or event. The projects, in both video and drawing, show people doing what they might do in the spaces, while highlighting the materiality and presence of architectural elements. Design becomes a social proposal, like an improvisational move, asking for a response.

This shift in thinking requires a shift in drawing technique. Plans, sections and elevations are still necessary because they register the real dimensions of construction. The crux of the matter is to show how dimensions and materials play in the life of the place.

Two advanced graduate students: Maria Flores and Victoria Gomes explored alternative types of drawing that might be more suited to a design process based

in the interaction of people and place. Flores designed an entire community based on the premise that when Miami is flooded by sea level rise, its high-rise buildings will still be habitable, albeit accessible only by boat. She devised a “Colony” of inhabitants who built around, within and between existing high-rise buildings, inventing a self-sufficient and communal way of life. She wrote stories from the point of view of Colony inhabitants, which described their post-diluvian life and the decisions they had made to survive together, and she drew architectural views detailing how the city worked. She produced a graphic novel that combined narrative with scenes, people and places. The images focused on the descriptive and architectural more than on interpersonal drama, and the sweeping expanse of her vision became accessible through characters in action. Imagining the future is the architect’s profession. Flores’ work draws on a tradition of almost mythological thinking in architectural education, that flourished particularly in the 1980s and 90s, drawing on literature to feed spatial imagination. That impulse leapt from the stories of the deep past toward imagining technological futures in drawings that hover between science fiction and comic book style. Some architecture students develop exquisite skill in drawing and computer graphics and go on to careers in set design for movies. Victoria Gomes developed a means of drawing to describe the life of an existing place – a market street in Port of Spain, Trinidad (Figure 5). She interpreted a classical form of drawing, the *analytique*, as a means to show the interaction between people and place. An *analytique* merges plan, section, and detail into one composed drawing in order to describe an architectural space more fully than any single drawing can. A building façade is peeled away to reveal the section, which is folded down into plan and a detail projects forward at a larger scale. Gomes started with photographs taken at the market, projected the architectural lines of the buildings outward, then cut sections in order to see both inside and outside spaces simultaneously. Plans and maps sprung out of the photos at whatever depth was appropriate to their scale on the drawing. She populated the scene with photos and drawings of people she observed at the market and she



Figure 5. Victoria Gomes, Analytique of the social life of the Charlotte Street market in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Collage of photos and drawing, 2019

interviewed some of them to add narrative inserts. In this composite way, the drawing shows the overall location of the market in the city, the dimensions of the street, the stalls, and buildings, as well as some of the details of railings and vending tables, all embedded within a scene of the life of the place, showing people both inside and outside doing what they do at the market.

Theatre has long been embedded in architecture and architectural education, notably in the Bauhaus and Vkhutemas schools of design in the early 20th century. Aldo Rossi's *teatro scientifico* and John Hedjuk's architectural performances carried part of the tradition forward. Since the 1990s, architects such as Bernard Tschumi and Diller/Scofidio have embraced theatre and the idea that architecture is meaningless without the events that take place there¹. They design buildings

¹ Tschumi has produced several books on his firm's work that explore the idea of event. See *Event-Cities* 1-4 (1994, 2001, 2005, 2010) all published by MIT Press.

to provide the potential for people to make their own decisions on how to live and move, indeed their buildings provoke or challenge people to make creative use of the spaces. Such buildings do not fit their function precisely, rather they act with people, open to the many reuses and reinterpretations that characterize the spontaneous life of the city (Tschumi, 1994; Diller + Scofidio, 2019). They see their work embedded in action, whether literally in performance pieces or over time as buildings in the city.

Increasingly the pressures of climate change, the imperative of social equity, and even the pandemic challenge architects to build for complexity and change. Creative vision is needed more than ever but framed as a proposal within an ongoing improvisation. It must say yes to its situation, open to the actions of others, and, through the physicality of building, propose a way forward, which in turn will be interpreted by people in the process of constructing their lives as they envision them.

In learning their craft, architecture students should play and playact as part of the process of putting themselves in the role of both the people they design for and the things that they design. Sometimes it's useful to think like a thing, to imagine non-human existence within a social world.

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