

SETTING ARCHITECTURE IN MOTION BY MEANS OF PERFORMANCE

VIŠNJA ŽUGIĆ

Architecture: Unstable and Dynamic Phenomenon

The main problem with buildings is that they look '*desperately static*', state Bruno Latour and Albena Yaneva in their provocatively titled essay 'Give me a Gun and I will Make All Buildings Move: An ANT's View of Architecture' (Latour, Yaneva, 2008). The static nature that this essay points to doesn't refer to the immobility of buildings in the physical sense, instead the authors advocate for understanding buildings as projects in movement, a series of transformations in the continuous flow. Through this viewpoint, they signify buildings as entities which are primarily *productive in space-time*. This position presupposes certain emancipation of architecture, from a mere backdrop for human activities to an interrelated and active entity. The conventional nature of architecture, observed as a neutral, passive framework in which the action takes place, is therefore surpassed, making it possible to establish the notion of architecture as an unstable, productive, and effective phenomenon.

Although Latour and Yaneva further focus their debate on the dynamics of a design process, the core of their theory is nevertheless relatable to exploring different levels of spatial transformations, especially in architecture's post-designed state. The themes of constant changes and transformations of space

understood as a *mobile* and plural phenomenon, and especially the temporary functions that architecture develops in these processes, represent the broader theoretical base for exploring architecture *as the problem of performing arts*. What makes this method legitimate is the standpoint that any artistic and non-artistic phenomenon can be regarded as the problem of performing arts if the exploration centres the problem of establishing, production and realisation of meanings (Vujanović, 2004). Thus, the idea that physical space can be regarded and explored '*as*' *performance* (Schechner, 2013 [2002, 2006]) opens up possibilities of focusing on how architecture enters different flows of production of meanings and becomes itself one of their active producers in these processes.

Spatial Performativity and the Productive Architectural Text

In the famous chapter of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, titled 'This Will Kill That', Victor Hugo announces the irrevocable *death of architecture*, that will arrive with the first invention of the printing technology. Through such a viewpoint he recognises the textual function of physical space as the one that essentially constitutes architecture. In a completely different context, referring to the moment five centuries after the one that Hugo writes about, Alberto Pérez-Gómez states that in the last two centuries the '*architect has indeed become a "writer" – implicitly or explicitly, a narrator of events*' (Pérez-Gómez, 1994, p.5). Through this immanent narrativity that has accompanied architecture throughout centuries, the architectural text is interpreted structurally – as a collection of signs that reflect specific, previously defined and consciously placed meanings. However, rethinking architectural text through post-structuralism, which sees text as determined by its *context*, brings into focus the process of its production (rather than representation) and its essentially unstable nature. This position indicates that the meaning of text is not inherently determined, but that '*each text is realised as intertextuality*' (Vujanović, 2006, p.32) – the notion coined by Julia Kristeva, which she describes as *productivity* (Kristeva, 1980, p.36). In this dynamic process of intertextual networks and dialogues, the established

meanings are inevitably produced, and their flows are to some extent unpredictable. Based on this (in)determination, intertextuality can be observed as a fundamental theoretical concept for exploring the phenomenon of spatial performativity. Architecture is now approached as post-structural text, which is understood as *an intervention in its surrounding semiotic context* (Vujanović, 2006), realised as a production of meanings in a specific moment in time.

Spatial performativity, understood through this specific model of the phenomenon, refers to the quality of space which often appears not as initially designed, but rather as acquired or gained through specific circumstances or contextual transformations. In that regard, several mechanisms which lead to the establishment of a performative space can be identified. They are determined by *intertextual effect*, which refers to meanings that are not immanent to the work (of architecture) but appear as a result of production in a context that is unstable, ephemeral and changeable. There are three relevant relations within which the intertextual effect occurs: (a) between space and its user (the relation that I define as the *mechanism of Confrontation*); (b) between space and elements of a staged event (through which I define the *mechanism of Correlation*); (c) between space and external inputs which influence its reading (a relation through which I define the *mechanism of Framing*). In establishing the phenomenon of performative space, all three mechanisms employ a productive architectural text.

Mechanism of Confrontation

The mechanism of Confrontation presupposes a conscious and controlled inscription of performative capacities into architecture by its designer. It focuses on how the architectural elements initiate the production of meanings in relation to the user/observer who is exposed to the space.

Theorising the perception of art, Donald Kunze emphasizes the importance of the viewer in constituting the overall meanings in the process of their production. Through this theory, the meanings are approached as not completely formed by the artist (author), quite the opposite, the author has to rely on the receiver of

the content, who, to some extent, ‘finishes’ the artwork through the process of reception. Similar viewpoints that originate from the field of performing arts deal with the position of the viewer: proposing one possible interpretation of performance as ‘*a way of seeing*’, which presupposes ‘*certain collaborative and contextual functions (between work and spectator)*’ (States, 2003, p.118), or, emphasizing the role of an audience member in forming a common text of performance, which always exists, even if it doesn’t include any spoken or written text (Jovićević, 2007).

Drawing a parallel with the perception of architecture, Kunze argues that the relation of *frontality* is of key importance. It does not refer to a physical position of an observer in front of a building, but to the imaginative displacement of the observer into the world of illusion, which essentially belongs to the work of architecture. Kunze marks frontality as the drive which makes *the participation in the realisation of the work of architecture* possible:

Frontality in architecture thus designates a moment in the encounter with a building where an act of fascination takes place. Fascination enables the client’s interest to be displaced into the imaginative anticipation of the future recipient of the architectural idea (...). In this constitution, the identities of the architect and the recipient merge – or rather, it would be more accurate to say that the single identity of architect/recipient is born for the first time, out of its prior constituent parts. (Kunze, 1994, p.106)

The concept of frontality can be read as a key theoretical concept through which the mechanism of Confrontation is understood. The act of fascination, which takes place during this process, brings into motion the productive mechanism, which Kunze refers to as the establishment of a unique entity of architect/observer. The confrontation of the viewer with space takes place in a limited period during which the resulted meanings, partly determined by the intention of the designer, and partly conditioned by the direct experience of the observer,

are being produced for the first time. Frontality in that sense is understood as a precondition for ‘entering’ the ‘world’ of architecture, which leads to activating the production of meanings through the mechanism of Confrontation, and finally, to the establishment of a performative space. One of the best examples of achieving spatial performativity through architectural design is the famous Jewish Museum in Berlin, by Daniel Libeskind (2001). It was designed to be perceived actively and productively by its users (rather than passively “reading” the space), thus inscribing the performative qualities of space already in the process of its conceptualisation.

Mechanism of Correlation

The mechanism of Correlation refers to the dialogically structured relationship between architecture as an envelope for action, and elements of a staged event brought into the analysed space.

An important presumption related to this specific context is that the physical space, to some extent, always achieves the role of a co-creator of meanings realised within the event as a whole, becoming one of its integral parts. The correlation between the space and a staged event refers to a synergy achieved between architecture and the elements of a performance (the body, movement, scenography, technology, etc.). The study focuses on physical space that envelopes an action, regardless of the spatial level that dominantly determines it (the building that hosts the event or the secondary level of scenography). Furthermore, the elements of a staged event could be reduced, for the sake of the theoretical argument, to their minimal form: a single performing body. This way, it is possible to observe interconnections between space and the body as a paradigmatic relation relevant to this mechanism.

Theoretically, the mechanism of Correlation relies on Jacques Lecoq’s concept of *complicité* which, in his understanding, extends beyond its basic translation as togetherness, and refers to complicity, a specific form of collaboration between the participants in a performing event (Murray, 2003). *Complicité* is therefore

understood as an abstract category, a quality that refers to a tacit agreement, nonverbal communication, a certain kind of unstated understanding. As a form of instinctive communication, it signifies a precondition, as well as an outcome of a successful staged event.

Regarding the mechanism of Correlation, the main question refers to the possibilities of achieving complicité between space/architecture and body/movement. If it is the quality accomplished between the participants of a successful staged event, and the physical space is possibly approached as one of the event's integral elements, then complicité can be observed as the value which appears in a successful correlation between the space and the body. This quality is reflected through the establishment of an active dialogue and the integration of the two entities. The paradigmatic example of this relation is found in Trisha Brown's performance 'Man Walking Down the Side of a Building' (1970). The 'merging' between the building's façade and the body of the performer, produced by their mutual dialogue, happens on the level of the performance as a whole. In that sense, complicité is understood as a goal of the intertextual weaving of the physical space and a staged event, and at the same time, as an outcome of establishing a co-performative function of space, related to this context.

Mechanism of Framing

The final mechanism, of Framing, activates the performative capacities of architecture to a certain extent indirectly. This mechanism presupposes the existence of external factors, conditions or contextual determinations, which, in a limited interval of time dictate the ways the architectural space is perceived. The notion of *framing*, in the context of performing arts theories, refers to the way an activity is contextualised and brought into focus (Pavis, 1998). In relation to performativity of architecture, specific conditioning of space takes place due to the *frame*, a contextual system which focuses the attention to a certain (spatial) phenomenon, and structures it in the domain of its meanings.

The notion of frame was coined by Erving Goffman, a sociologist who explored

the *'principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them'* (Goffman, 1986, pp.10-11). Through a detailed frame analysis, Goffman proposes a methodological approach for exploring how the interpretative frames shape social interaction. Especially important for the process of framing architecture is the notion of key, as a central concept of frame analysis, and its verb *keying*, which Goffman defines as:

(...) the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else. The process of transcription can be called keying. (Goffman, 1986, pp.43-44)

Moreover, the characteristic of the described transformation is equally important: *'the systematic transformation that a particular keying introduces may alter only slightly the activity thus transformed, but it utterly changes what it is a participant would say was going on'* (Goffman, 1986, p.45). In other words, the subject of transformation (in this case, the material properties of space) doesn't necessarily have to change, or usually inconsiderably changes its characteristics in the physical reality, but the way it is understood, perceived, experienced and interpreted, becomes significantly changed in comparison to its basic meaning, determined by the primary frame. This principle is of great importance for understanding the mechanism of Framing, in the function of performative activation of architecture. It doesn't necessarily undergo any visible material changes on a physical level, but the (transformed) meanings it produces are guided by the interpretative key imposed on its viewer. Within this context, the key is understood as a means, an external circumstance that influences the production of meanings through a specific way of contextualising architectural space. The application of this mechanism is most notably seen in the series of performances 'Remote X' by Rimini Protokoll. It utilises existing urban spaces, and temporarily changes their meanings, transforming them into one of the actors of these performances.

Performative Spaces and Aesthetic Communication

Single mechanisms that generate the performative function of architecture (of Confrontation, Correlation, and Framing) can be discussed in analogy to the notion of *aesthetic communication*, defined by Ronald J. Pelias and James VanOosting.

Through defining this notion as a certain kind of practice, the authors have identified the contours of the field of research relevant for performance studies. The analysis focuses on text – understood in this context not only as a written text but as a broad phenomenon – and the conditions under which it achieves aesthetic communication. The problem is decomposed through three theoretical lines: (1) the theories that regard the *use* of texts which are in advance defined as aesthetic, and as such placed in society. Here the initiator (a performer) establishes a certain event with an intention for it to be perceived as aesthetic; (2) the theories focused on *qualities* that determine certain phenomena as aesthetic. In this case, the event (the text) possesses certain qualities that are generally seen as aesthetic, regardless of the intention of the ‘performer’ or the perception of ‘audience’; (3) the theories that explore the *effects* or *reactions* that certain phenomena produce in the process of their reception, due to which they are interpreted as aesthetic. In this case, the one that perceives or reacts to the event initiates his/her role as an audience member and reacts to the event as a performance (Pelias, VanOosting, 2003).

Defining these three conditions, aesthetic communication of a text may be achieved from any of the perspectives – of a performer, text or audience. Analogically observing how performative spaces achieve aesthetic communication, what is referred to here as a broad notion of text can be regarded as textuality of architecture and its physical elements. Therefore, the mechanisms of achieving the performative function of architecture can be seen through the following analogy:

perspective of a performer → aesthetic intention → mechanism of Confrontation
perspective of a text → aesthetic quality → mechanism of Correlation
perspective of audience → aesthetic effect → mechanism of Framing

Following the perspective of a performer which presupposes an aesthetic intention, it is possible to position the mechanism of Confrontation as its corresponding match. It refers to the physical space of architecture, or the architectural text, which is designed with an intention to communicate aesthetically, or, to be performative.

The perspective of a text refers to its specific aesthetic qualities, regardless of the intention of those who happen to be in the role of a performer or audience. The mechanism of Correlation, placed in analogy to this position, refers to certain spatial qualities that are under some circumstances recognised and used as performative. In that limited period, architecture achieves its performativity through the specific use of space, independently (or despite) of the initial intention of its designer.

The perspective of the audience relates to the theories that explore the effects of certain phenomena, where the observer inscribes some qualitative relationships into them, and from his/her position presupposes the aesthetic communication. This position is connected to the mechanism of Framing, which relates to activating the external inputs that condition the experience of architecture as a performative entity.

Theoretically, it is possible to observe the defined mechanisms through the typology of the conditions necessary for aesthetic communication. Within the actual architectural, artistic and social practices, however, the single mechanisms don't exist necessarily as isolated. On the contrary, they are most often interrelated, appearing in a complex and dynamic coexistence.

Conclusion

Rethinking architecture as a collection of time-spaces, as opposed to one finished physical outcome, displaces the attention from the process of conceptualising architectural spaces, towards the flows that architecture enters in its post-designed state and exploitation. The themes of instability, change, process, movement, transformations and effects of architecture, have been recognised

in the inscription of textual practices into the built environment, which lead to accomplishing spatial qualities beyond those purely utilitarian.

The problem of production of meanings has been formulated as the basic criteria for the accomplishment of architecture as a performative entity. Architecture was observed as the problem of performing arts and the phenomenon that belongs to the extended field of performance – *one which is not a performance but can be performative*. Three distinctive mechanisms of accomplishing performative architectural space were identified: (a) *the mechanism of Confrontation*, which is realised through architectural space as a collection of elements designed with an intention to make the observer/user an active accomplice in finishing its overall meanings; (b) *the mechanism of Correlation*, which focuses on relations between architecture and elements of a staged event. In this context space surpasses the limits of a neutral framework, and becomes a co-creator of the overall meanings of the performance; (c) *the mechanism of Framing*, which refers to a specific way of conditioning the perception, understanding, and interpretation of space. Thanks to the frame that belongs to the realm outside the designed space, its primary meanings are transformed towards generating an active, performative entity.

The approach shown in this research was developed in order to point to the existence of the dynamic phenomenon of performative architecture, where physical space is seen '*as an initiator, generator and a protagonist of the newly created story*' (Zeković, Žugić, Stojković, 2019, p.58). The final destinations for the practical application of the research outcomes range from designed to spontaneous physical structures, from planned to subsequently generated uses of space, and from permanent to ephemeral, temporarily constructed and inscribed characteristics and qualities of space.

References

- GOFFMAN, Erving (1986). *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- JOVIĆEVIĆ, Aleksandra (2007). "Uvod u Uvod Studija Izvođenja" in Aleksandra Jovićević & Ana Vujanović (ed.), *Uvod u Studije Performansa*. Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, pp.3-18.
- KRISTEVA, Julia (1980). *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- KUNZE, Donald (1994). "Architecture as a Site of Reception-Part I: Cuisine, Frontality, and the Infra-Thinby" in Alberto Pérez-Gómez & Stephen Parcell (ed.), *Chora Volume One, Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*. McGill-Queen's University Press, pp.83-108.
- LATOUR, Bruno & YANEVA, Alben (2008). "Give me a Gun and I will Make All Buildings Move: An ANT's View of Architecture" in Reto Geiser (ed.), *Explorations in Architecture: Teaching, Design, Research*. Basel: Birkhäuser, pp.80-89.
- MURRAY, Simon (2003). *Jacques Lecoq*. London and New York: Routledge.
- PAVIS, Patrice (1998). *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis*. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press.
- PELIAS, Ronald J. & VANOOSTING, James (2003). "A Paradigm for Performance Studies" in Philip Auslander (ed.), *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, Volume 1. London and New York: Routledge, pp.215-231.
- PÉREZ-GÓMEZ, Alberto (1994). "Chora: the Space of Architectural Representation" in Alberto Pérez-Gómez & Stephen Parcell (ed.), *Chora Volume One, Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*. McGill-Queen's University Press, pp.1-34.
- SCHECHNER, Richard (2013 [2002, 2006]). *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge.
- STATES, Bert O. (2003). "Performance as Metaphor" in Philip Auslander (ed.), *Performance, Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, Volume 1. London and New York: Routledge, pp.108-137.
- VUJANOVIĆ, Ana (2006). *Doksid*. Novi Sad: Izdavačka Knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića.
- VUJANOVIĆ, Ana (2004). *Razanajući Označiteljile Performansa*. Beograd: Studentski Kulturni Centar.
- ZEKOVIĆ, Miljana; ŽUGIĆ, Višnja & STOJKOVIĆ, Bojan (2019). "Intangible, Fetishized & Constructed – New Contexts for Staging the Socialist Heritage" in Nebojša Čamprag & Anshika Suri (ed.), *Three Decades of Post-Socialist Transition*. Urban Morphosis Lab, Technische Universität Darmstadt, pp.51-59.