

Operation Context

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Abstract: This paper seeks to challenge the notion of context from an operational perspective. Can we grasp the forces that shape the complex conditions for an architectural or urban design within the notion of context? By shifting the gaze towards the agency of architecture, contextual analysis is explored as a search for action instead of meaning. For this purpose the notion of context will be discussed from an Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) perspective. By means of research by design, i.e. design experiment and theoretical reflection, the potential of a key concept and method in architectural production shall be re-examined.

Keywords: Context, Actor Network Theory, research by design, performative identity, hairy architecture

"The solution, once again, is to learn how to feed off uncertainties, instead of deciding in advance what the furniture of the world should look like." Bruno Latour

"Context" literally means the circumstances or settings which determine, specify, or clarify the meaning of an event. (Wiktionary) Following the linguist Jonathan Culler though, the relation between event and context should rather be seen as double-acting: *"Context is not fundamentally different from what it contextualizes; context is not given but produced; what belongs to a context is determined by interpretive strategies; contexts are just as much in need of elucidations as events; and the meaning of context is determined by events."* (Culler 1989: ix)

Culler reminds us that the concept of context provides a *model* to describe complex relationships. Obviously there is no "con-text" without a "text", e.g. a work of art or a piece of architecture. At the same time the distinction is partly artificial. Event and context are deeply entangled. Although mutually constituting each other, their relationship can not be grasped in terms of causes and effects. Instead the relationship should rather be considered as the product of a creative act. Hereby follows that both the meaning of the event in question and its context are uncertain and highly dynamic.

From a designer's perspective the focus shifts from interpretation to production and thus from meaning to agency. The question is how to render the notion of context operational in order to grasp and activate potentially formative aspects for an architectural project. In other words, the designer's task is to simultaneously produce both context and contextualized event from the dynamic complexity of everyday life. Starting from the above outlined dynamic and relational understanding of context, we wish to introduce Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) as a possible tool for this task.

ANT provides a *method* to describe how complex relationships are built and how they are maintained in order to achieve a particular goal, for example the development of a product. ANT originated from Science and technology studies¹ in the 1980s and is most prominently associated with the French sociologists of science Bruno Latour and Michel Callon. The theory was developed against the background of extensive case studies on the production processes of knowledge and technological innovation. ANT looks at explicit strategies for relating different heterogeneous elements together into a network that acts as a whole. Although it is called a "theory" ANT does not actually explain *why* a network takes the form that it does. It is much more interested in exploring *how* actor-networks get formed, hold themselves together, or fall apart.²

According to ANT human and non-human actors gather in interdependent dynamic actor-networks by means of their agency. Agency is here not so much understood as an intentional act, but as the capacity to transform other actors. Consequently the actors in a network play the role that they do by virtue of their relations with one another. Starting from this definition, there is no difference in the ability of technology, humans, animals and ideas etc. to act. In addition an actor-network should not be seen as a formal structure

¹ Science and technology studies (STS) is the study of how social, political, and cultural values affect scientific research and technological innovation; and how these in turn affect society, politics, and culture. Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Science_and_technology_studies (2006-09-01)

² Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Actor-network_theory (2006-09-01)

like the World Wide Web, but rather as a set of transformations directed towards common performance, e.g. a car where motor, driver, brakes, insurance companies etc. must perform together to make the car move in traffic. As long as all these different actors in the actor-network "car" perform, it functions as a whole, or as one single actor. Actor and network are thus not to be seen as two things - like individual and society - but rather as two faces of the same phenomenon.³ When the action is no longer performed, the network breaks down, e.g. when the motor stops working the whole network "car" collapses. As long as the car was working, we gave it no second thought; it existed as a "matter of fact". With the breakdown of its performance the car suddenly turns into a "matter of concern". In turn we get attentive to the multiple actors and the complex relationships that are all simultaneously required to make our actor-network work.

The distinction between "matter of fact" and "matter of concern" is central for the ANT approach. ANT scholars observed that what happens in research and technological innovation processes is precisely that complex relationships are rendered operational as matters of concern. This operation requires a thorough examination and articulation of the involved actors' modes of production, their connectivity and their impact on each other. According to Latour the scientific discoverer is not a finder of contextless matters of fact, but a manipulator and co-producer of propositions, from which a future discovery can emerge.⁴ In other words: the researcher's task is to construct a well-designed experiment. Latour explicitly compares the active role of the researcher with the role of the engineer or the designer in the development of a new product. (Latour 2005: 80) In the following the potential of the ANT method for architectural and urban design shall be explored by two research-by-design projects. What could possibly be a well-designed architectural experiment?

Following the actors

The study "Imagineering urban identity for Hirtshals" investigates the potential of place identity in an urban transformation process against the background of a shrinking Danish region. For this purpose the notion of place identity is examined in relation to present physical and discursive changes taking place in the urban territory of Hirtshals. A central question is whether it is possible to perceive changes in the study area that point to the emergence of a new identity. And if so, what are these changes, how do they occur and how can they come into play in future development?

The adopted design approach is based on survey and mapping of physical, social and imaginary agencies that shape Hirtshals identity. Hereby the task is to unfold potential through articulation of existing phenomena and tendencies. As heterogeneous entities as statistic population data, the quality of the light in Northern Jutland, the time table of local public transport, bunkers built by the Nazis during World War II, European fishing quotes, the transformation of summerhouses into permanent dwellings and vice versa, Google's PageRankOrder, etc. all have agency. Through the articulation of these agencies and their interconnectivities, the bold "matters of fact" become generative "matters of concern" for the project.

However, the work does not progress in a linear and logical way from survey over analysis to synthesis and finally to project. It rather takes the form of a dynamic actor-network in itself, where the different mapped agencies constantly transform each other during the course of the entire design experiment. The experiment functions as a "hybrid forum", where human and non-human actors are simultaneously represented.⁵ By "giving voice to" apparently non-related or even contradictory agencies a forum for negotiation is created, where possible ways of convergence are tested in order to make the actors work together in a self-sustaining actor-network. The following example shall illustrate the proceeding.

³ Cf. Basden, A.: "Dooyewerd and Latour's Actor-Network-Theory", 2002, <http://www.isi.salford.ac.uk/dooy/index.html> (2006-09-01)

⁴ Cf. Peter Sloterdijk on Latour's Actor-Network-Theory in *Sphären III*, Schäume, 2004, p. 218 ff.

⁵ Cf. Bruno Latour, "Atmosphère, Atmosphère", an entry for the catalogue of Olafur Eliasson "The Weather Project", New Tate Gallery, London, 2003, pp.29-41 "*I am simply saying that contemporary scientific controversies are designing what Arie Rip and Michel Callon have called 'hybrid forums'. There used to be two types of representation of things in nature - and here the word 'representation' signifies accuracy, precision and reference - and the representation of people in society - where it means faithfulness, election, confidence, obedience. A simple way to characterize our times is to say that the two meanings of representation have now merged into one, around the notion of spokespersons offering clearly staged demonstrations to prove the existence of some new entity that becomes the object of collective concern.*"

Statistic population data for Hirtshals show a shrinking and aging local population indicating an emptying housing stock and an increasing need of care for the elderly. Yet, a survey of Hirtshals' representation on the World Wide Web presents a somewhat different image. Google's PageRank order for example lists Hirtshals primarily as a tourism product that combines an unspoiled nature with a surprising palette of entertainment facilities and a rich selection of accommodations. Meanwhile local zoning restrictions seek to prevent the increasing transformation of permanent dwelling into summerhouses. A striking gap occurs between "Hirtshals", the media image of a leisure landscape and Hirtshals, the shrinking local community, a gap that simultaneously holds a potential for conflict *and* for development. By following the different actors, a negotiation theme for Hirtshals' future identity begins to emerge. At the same time the thorough articulation of the conflicting agencies points at unexpected ways to develop Hirtshals' identity: the transformation of an existing summerhouse area into a laboratory for hybrid dwelling forms is proposed. This cohabitation-field of first, second and third homes becomes an experimental space for the practical negotiation of Hirtshals' future identity both on a programmatic and an aesthetic level. The ANT approach generates a performative notion of place identity, where architecture, people, animals, wheather, technology, media etc. strive towards common performance.

Hairy architecture⁶

In the following the possible role of architecture from an ANT perspective is more closely examined. "94 gardens" is an awarded entry for the 2004 competition for the transformation of Nørrebro Park, a public park in the district of Ydre Nørrebro in Copenhagen.

The brief asked for renovation and modernization according to contemporary demands. Developed through thorough mapping and articulation of the matters that concern this park, "94 gardens" is what Latour would call "hairy architecture". The project proposes an "aesthetics of entanglement" valueing performance over permanence and vitality over harmonious beauty.

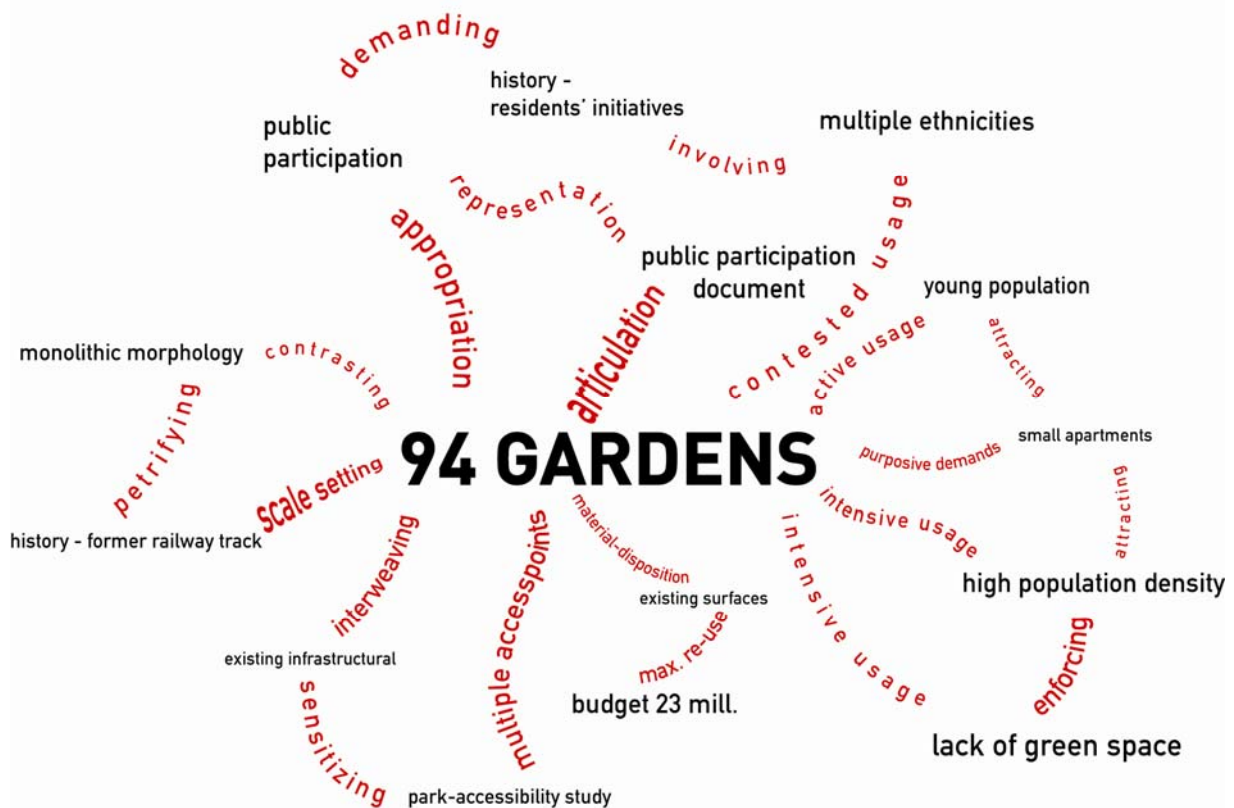
"94 gardens" literally becomes a hybrid forum. In its layout the park responds to agencies put forth by such heterogeneous entities as statistic data, the morphology of the urban fabric, childrens' activities on the playground, the accessibility of parks in Copenhagen, the existing materials in Nørrebro Park or a local resident's wish for a dog-run, etc. Through the articulation of these agencies and their interconnectivities, they all become "matters of concern" for the project.

The multiple participating actors are given space to articulate and unfold their specific agencies. At the same time they are encouraged to affect and fertilize one another. The collective architectural experiment is directed towards building and stimulating a dynamic common space. Multiplicity in "94 gardens" is thus not pure juxtaposition, but directed towards collective performance. For this purpose "94 gardens" focuses on working out "neighborships" between agencies. Along the varying path-network, the carefully designed borders of the different gardens – equipped with benches, a running track or specific topographic adaptations – invite for a maximum of programmatic and sensuous entanglement and mutation. Strolling through this vigorous park with its rich blend of diverse programmatic and aesthetic components, offers everchanging unexpected encounters.

"94 gardens" does neither answer the brief with a final aesthetic and programmatic solution nor does it propose a formless framework for an ever open process. It sets a specifically designed and articulated, porous tissue that invites for negotiation and offers many connection points for multiple agencies. Its characteristic geometry turns the park into a "dialogic tool"⁷ with the capacity to simultaneously absorb and encourage contesting demands. The quality of the concept should be measured by its ability to accomodate appropriation and adaptation. In short: by the quality of its performance as a robust actor-network.

⁶ "Hairy architecture" is a free adaptation of "objet chevelu" in Bruno Latour's terminology. In the English edition of "Politics of Nature" the term is translated with "tangled object". *"The risk-free objects, the smooth objects to which we had been accustomed up to now, are giving way to risky attachments, tangled objects. [...] Unlike their predecessors, they have no clear boundaries, no well-defined essences, no sharp separation between their own hard kernel and their environment. It is because of this feature that they take on the aspects of tangled beings, forming rhizomes and networks. [...] They have numerous connections, tentacles, and pseudopods that link them in many different ways to beings as ill assured as themselves..."* Latour 2004, p. 22-24

⁷ Cf. Ahnfeldt-Møllerup, M., Klar - "Clear" speech, Arkitektur DK 2006/08



From context to co-text

The ANT approach does not simply enlarge the notion of context for an architectural event from its physical surroundings to social, cultural, technological, etc. aspects. By shifting the gaze to the agency of all the involved actors, ANT abandons the distinction between "context" and "text" altogether. According to ANT, the architectural event is one actor among many in a hybrid forum; an actor that is co-producing and being co-produced by a collective actor-network. Implying that only who or what actively plays a part in the construction of the network, i.e. makes a difference to other actors, qualifies as an actor. At the same time a well-designed architectural project can be described as an actor-network that is coherent in terms of collective performance, like in the example of the car where multiple heterogeneous actors perform as a whole. Thus "co-text", as in co-producer, would be a more accurate term to classify the relationship than the duality of "context" and "text".

Moreover the focus on the collective performance of multiple agencies makes it impossible to call in for example a social, cultural or technological context in order to *explain*, let alone *legitimize* an architectural design. In turn architecture cannot be reduced to a media that *expresses* a specific context. ANT implies a general shift from meaning to action both in its method and in its results. Representation is not a symbolic question but is understood in the political sense of the word as "giving voice to" multiple actors through sound articulation. According to Latour, a priori contextual categories are not only useless for this task, but risk concealing interesting new actors simply because they do not fit in the established sets of explanation.⁸ Being open to observe and trace the unexpected is one of the first virtues of the ANT scholar. He seeks to unfold the dynamics of entanglement in complex relationships in search for performance instead of structure and order. Nevertheless we would like to stress once again that the dynamic and relational ANT approach by no means brings about formless architecture. With *hairyness* and *performativity* ANT raises new criteria for architectural quality.

⁸ "At best they [the contextual explanations] apply equally to all your actors what means they are probably superfluous since they are unable to introduce any difference among them. At worst, they drown all the new interesting actors in a diluvium of older ones. Deploy the content with all its connections and you will have the context in addition. As Rem Koolhaas said, 'context stinks'. It's simply a way of stopping the description when you are too tired or too lazy to go on." Latour, B., "Reassembling the Social", Oxford University Press, 2005, p.147-148

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