ARCHITECTURE + PHILOSOPHIES

Table of content

Introduction: Lethal Theory

Ecologies
  [1] Cultivating criticality
  [2] A critical (and, and) diplomatic ecology of practices

Economies
  [3] Neoliberalism as ideal and practice
  [4] Complicity as aim, disgust and means of resistance

Technologies
  [5] Embracing monstrosity
  [6] “Situated knowledges” and partial perspectives from below

Conclusion: Tools for thinking
Maria Ärlemo

Architecture + Philosophies 2015/06, PhD course, KTH, ResArc, Sweden

Course designer and examiner: Dr Hélène Frichot, KTH, Stockholm, Sweden
Introduction: Lethal Theory

In a conversation with Michel Foucault titled Intellectuals and Power (1977) Gilles Deleuze states that “theory is exactly like a box of tools/.../it has to be useful” (1977:208), but to what ends he thinks theory should be used is less explicit in this dialogue. What is theory to do? In his article “Lethal Theory” Eyal Weizman (2006) in a disturbing way illustrates the potentiality for theory to be used in a most literal way as a toolbox. By discussing the use of theory by the Israeli army in the development of effective spatial strategies for combat Weizman points to the dark backside of theory. Detached from their original ideological contexts and intentions theoretical concepts can be used for whatever ends deemed aspirational by those who chose to make use of them. Ananya Roy (2008) in a lecture stated that “ideas are also weapons”, a phrase which has stayed with me due to its unsettling ambiguity – ideas as or instead of weapons. How then should we as academics practice theory, a field shown to be potentially lethal but also one which furthers hope of enlightenment and positive change. As an academic you will never be able to control how your work might come to be understood and used, but inspired by critical and feminist theory I would argue that an ethical theoretical practice ought to be marked by a critical awareness of one’s own complicity in the production and reproduction of ideology, as well as by extensive contextualization and a clearly stated positionality. To develop such a well informed and reflected position though is a daunting and endless task, and the texts that follow, produced as part of the PhD course Philosophies given at KTH 2015/2016, can be seen as some of the tentative steps on my way.

References

Deleuze, Gilles and Michel Foucault (1977), ”Intellectuals and Power,” in Language, Memory, Counter-Practice, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.


[1] Press conference called to and led by representatives from the local youth organization Megafonen in Husby May 2013 in relation to local uprisings and social unrest. As phrased by a member of Megafonen: “We made something historic, Megafonen gave a political interpretation of why riots happen and it interrupted the view of Sweden as the best country in the world, the welfare state, the country of Olof Palme”.

References
Cultivating criticality

The wheatfield which for a period of some months was established and cared for by the artist Agnes Denes at lower Manhattan in 1982 offered a view which stood in stark contrast to its urban surrounding. According to Peg Rawes, Denes with the setting up of this temporary ecology aimed to "obstruct the machinery" (2013:41) of capitalist urbanism and to open up for critical reflection of the destructive outcome of capitalism, more specifically around issues of food production and the uneven distribution of starvation across the globe. As retraced by Susannah Hagen (2015) the notion of ecology has been used within academia since the 1970s as a means to, with different emphasis, highlight aspects of relationality between ecological, urban, cultural and political forces. And she argues that for architects and planners not to become superfluous "stylists" in face of contemporary challenges of climate change and increased inequalities they need to develop informed ecological views of their complicity in capitalism, as well as ways to, from such inside positions, practice ecological urbanism. But what such a practice would entail Hagen leaves open. Instead Denes project to me seem to indicate what such a practice perhaps could be. As retold by Rawes Denes discuss her work in terms of care, for the wheat to grow the soil, seeds and plants had to be cared for. And the wheatfield therefore embodied an alternative set of values than those represented by the built environment in the adjacent financial district. Where capitalists in hectic search for financial profit levels out difference by means of monetary value, attention to the specificities of the plot and its ecological interconnectedness is essential for farmers for them to be able to harvest, and harvest not only once but over a long period of time. Hence Denes project by means of visual confrontation between an "aesthetics of care" and an "aesthetics of capitalism" made apparent another way of seeing and thinking about Manhattan, urbanism and capitalism. And the invention thereby potentially triggered processes of subjectification and the production of critical awareness. The confrontative approach used by Denes resembles the conditions defined by Jacques Rancière (1999, 2010) as disagreement and dissensus. By juxtaposing differences Rancière argues that the fundamental equality of all can be made visible and a greater social justice achieved. In my research I have tried to translate Rancière’s thinking on dissensus into suggestions for critically engaged architectural practices in search for greater spatial justice. But I have had difficulties seeing how such a relatively slow practice and static outcome as architecture could contribute to the construction of dissensus which to me seems to be a more ephemeral and dynamic phenomenon, inspired though by Denes project and Dawes writings on the possibilities for "architectural ecologies of care" I will make a new attempt.
[2] Husbydialogen. The architects who were commissioned the task to carry out a participatory process in Husby as an initial phase of a redevelopment of the area were given explicit instructions to act “diplomatic” and not “critical”. Insights were not to be gained by means of conversation or provocation but by gathering input through a set of general questions.

References
A critical (and, and) diplomatic ecology of practices

In her writing on “an ecology of practices” Isabelle Stengers (2005) argues for the need of an ecological view of scientific practices. That is a view which, according to Stengers in opposition to capitalism, does not premise sameness or likeness but diversity and divergence. According to her communication can only take place between diverging parties. And she promotes an academic approach which, to further scientific multiplicity and the production of knowledges, takes borders between scientific fields seriously as those as she sees it are a prerequisite for each field to be able to cultivate its own force and thereby thrive. More specifically does she argue for a diplomatic approach which, drawing on Bruno Latour’s discussion on attachments, respects the obligations and risks that comes with the belonging of each actor in an interdisciplinary condition to a particular scientific field. And she argues that interdisciplinary communication have only taken place when all actors involved after completion can return to their respective field without risk. Jane Rendell (2007) in her writing on interdisciplinarity as a condition for critical practices, more specifically for critical architecture, conveys a somewhat different view. From her perspective the field of architecture is multidisciplinary but she argues that for an interdisciplinary moment to have taken place actors from different fields will have to have applied critical pressure upon each other, implicitly upon each other’s fundamental assumptions. Such a confrontational action would, as I understand it, be the exact opposite of what Stengers promote. As phrased by Stengers a productive interdisciplinary interexchange is marked by the transformation of a confrontational condition to one of contrast, that is by a shift from understandings of “either/or” to “and, and” (2005:193). But she also notes that such a modification “does not result in any final convergence overcoming previous divergence” (2005:193) instead she labels the practice by a scientist who has left his or her field for another without reformulating their way of thinking and practicing for a “misunderstanding” (2005:189). Hence the authors seem to differentiate in their valorization of disciplinary boundaries, where Rendell promotes a crossing of them as a means to instigate processes of subjectification and change, Stengers instead argues for the respect for and upholding of such borders as a means to protect and further scientific diversity. Both authors address what they see as the destructive outcome of capitalism, Rendell react against the climate change produced by capitalism and Stengers against the homogenization of scientific knowledge but the approaches they promote differ between offensive respectively defensive.

Inspired by the somewhat more proactive approach presented by Rendell and the more careful approach promoted by Stengers I am left wondering if, and if so how, these understandings could be made into a productive and not only coexisting “and, and” condition. More specifically, can architects be critical and diplomatic ecologists at the same time?
[3] The appropriation of “strong” theory by “weak” actors. Harakat, a lecture series arranged in Husby by the local youth organization Megafonen as a means to empower themselves and their fellow residents by furthering their theoretical insights. At this occasion Professor Irene Molina, in the back, spoke about what she denoted as the militarization of the suburbs.

References


Neoliberalism as ideal and practice

As phrased by David Harvey neoliberalism is “in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2007:2). It is thus an abstract economic ideal or principle. But it is also at the same time a most tangible and hands on everyday reality and practice, as beautifully retold by AbdouMaliq Simone (2013) in the case of Kinshasa where a gang of young men by means of an elaborated set of tactics attempt to make themselves complicit in the economy of the local market in search for profit and thereby income. If Harvey might be said to promote what J.K. Gibson-Graham (2014) denote as an approach marked by “strong” theory in his writings on neoliberalism, Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore with their conceptualization of “actually existing neoliberalism” (2002) instead stress the contextual embeddedness of neoliberalism when implemented and the resulting specificity thereof of neoliberal policies, practices and conditions. A stance further elaborated by Gibson-Graham in their argumentation for the application of “weak theory” and “thick descriptions” (2014) in explorations of local economies in search for seeds of alternative and less destructive ways of thinking of and practicing economy than the currently dominant mode of capitalism. There thus to some degree seems to be a, perhaps false, dichotomy set up between in depth studies of locally situated neoliberal economic practices and more general claims about the outcome of the implementation of neoliberalism. A tension reflected in my own research which is heavily influenced by Harvey’s writings on the uneven distributive outcome of neoliberalism, at the same time as it applies an ethnographic approach more in line with the “thick description” argued for by Gibson-Graham. Although I have argued for such a simultaneous use of a “strong” and “weak” theoretical approach by referral to the use of an abductive research method, where you alternate between theory and empirical studies as a means to challenge assumptions and to inform the interpretation of the empirical material produced, still the tension between the two approaches has disturbed me and I have struggled with an impulse to either conceal or resolve it. Inspired by feminist thinking though, and more specifically the ideal of multiplicity, I have decided, as phrased by Hélène Frichot, “to let the tension sit there, in the material”. As keeping the itch will force me to further explore why the ambiguity poses such a challenge to me as well as to further my position in relation to feminist theory.
The proposition for a new masterplan in Husby in 2011 brought actors, alliances and money forth and made visible, in line with Simone’s and Martin’s argument, battle lines which embodied not only the issue at stake but more complex power dynamics and struggles.

References


**Complicity as aim, disgust and means of resistance**

Reading AbdouMaliq Simone’s (2013) retelling of the intense search by a gang of young men at a local market in Kinshasa, Congo, for opportunities to become complicit in the capitalist economic apparatus I realize that my own disgust with already being so is, if not a non-issue so at least, a reflection of privilege. Of interest is instead to learn from the forced creativity among those in search for an opening into the system, in search for insights into how the system could perhaps be remade from within. As described by Simone the Bloods make use of an elaborated set of affective, spatial and temporal tactics to open up for opportunities to make economic profit. Degrees of desperation among actors at the local market are estimated, goods and people brought together in new compilations and previously unseen opportunities made visible by the opening up of new lines of sight. The production of new and innovative assemblages of humans and material goods thus seem to be a means to gain access to profit and into the monetary system. But Simone also discusses material assemblages such as urban and infrastructural projects in Congo as means not only, or even primarily, for their obvious ends. Instead the projects according to him “act as a locus, not only to bring out ”money from under the mattress”, but to compel the display of various competitions, complicities and collaborations among different actors” (2013:247). On the same line Reinhold Martin (2014), in a critique of what he found to be an objectified, apolitical and unethical definition of architecture in the setup of the Architecture Biennale in Venice 2014, writes that “architecture is never simply window-dressing for power. At its most basic, most architectural level, it calls power forth, out of the night, gun in hand” (2014:14). Such a perspective on architectural projects makes apparent the complicity of architects. And Martin urges us, with a somewhat disillusioned and cynic tone, to rise to the occasion – to start to map out the system from within with the aim of transforming it. But it is a daunting task, how are we to go about? Steven Jackson’s (2014) writing on the notion of “repair” offers some hope, perhaps we can instigate an incremental change in the system by making small changes in our practices of maintaining the current system. But do we have time for such a long-term change? There are reasons for despair, but according to J.K. Gibson-Graham (2014) an imperative for contemporary academics need to be to explore and nurture hope, for without it – no change. There is thus no longer time for disgust, but for a critically engaged hope.
[5] The outcome of the national election in Sweden 2014 in the part of Husby which, in opposition to the rest of Husby, has a housing stock of condominiums and not rentals. In this part Sverige Demokraterna, a party with an explicit anti-immigration agenda and a racist discourse, received 10.4%. That is about the same amount as in the nation at large but about twice as much as in the other parts of Husby. A somewhat surprising outcome as the population in Husby in general as well as in this specific part is dominated by what within Swedish policy is denoted as first and second generation immigrants.
Embracing monstrosity

I must admit that I find the sense of overview and control that comes with general and totalizing accounts seductive. As they make the opaque complexities of life subside in favor of clear and graspable accounts of the world, as well as of what it means to be a human within it. But I am also aware that the establishment of such order is not only a distortion but a brutal act of dominance and discrimination. Inspired therefore by feminist and postcolonial theory I in my research strive to counteract the homogenizing and oppressive views of and discourses about inhabitants in Husby, a suburb of Stockholm marked by economic deprivation, ethnic heterogeneity and modernistic architectural and planning ideals. Over the years the area has, alongside other areas alike in Sweden, within national media and political discourse been denoted as “problematic”, “vulnerable” and most recently as an “area of exclusion”. And the currently dominant characteristics attributed to the area in media and policy discourses are unsafety, criminality and terrorism. As shown by the ethnologist Per-Markku Ristilammi (1994) Rosengård, an area alike in Malmö, has been used over time to construct Swedishness, that is the area has, in accordance to Edward Said’s ([1978] 2000) seminal writing on practices of “othering” been made into a counter image towards which Swedishness has appeared. Such attempts as mine though, to balance the dominant use of negative stereotypes in telling’s of Husby and its inhabitants, easily tips over into an equally dichotomizing idealization of the same. Inspired therefore by Donna Haraway’s (1991) conceptualization of the “cyborg” as a means to reflect upon and explore conditions of hybridity I will delve into what so far has been the elephant in the room in my research – the issue of race and xenophobia not only against the ethnically heterogeneous population in Husby from the surrounding society but also the reverse as well as in between social groupings in the area. Hence I will, although with some fear, attempt to embrace monstrosity with the aim not only to in an activist manner, inspired by postcolonial theory, contribute to the production of counter images but to produce a more nuanced and accurate account of the partial perspective which I embody.

References


[6] The as phrased by Haraway "forbidden god-trick" applied to Husby, Stockholm

References
"Situated knowledges" and partial perspectives from below

In her argumentation for a feminist version of objectivity Donna Haraway (1988) makes use of vision as metaphor. She argues that vision, in analogy to insights and knowledge, is mediated by “technologies” that is organic and prosthetic devices which all offer specific limitations and possibilities for seeing. There is thus no all-seeing eye and her argument fundamentally opposes what she denotes the “god-trick” of claiming to see everything from nowhere. In opposition to such general and totalizing scientific accounts she argues for the exploration of embodied, positioned and partial perspectives and the production thereby of what she denotes “situated knowledges”, as “only partial perspectives promises objective vision” (1988:583). But what partial perspectives then are to be explored? According to Haraway perspectives from below or from the periphery are preferred as such subjugated positions “seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world” (1988:584). But how then should such perspectives be explored and such "situated knowledges" be produced? Haraway notes that a danger with engagements with perspectives from below is the romanticizing or appropriation by the researcher of the subjugated perspective, and she stresses the need, also in these instances of scientific production, of critical reflection and interpretation. The production of “situated knowledges” as I understand it is therefore not simply a matter of highlighting subjugated partial perspectives, but of exploring, interpreting and exposing the power dynamics at play within the specific partial perspective with the aim of contributing to its reformation. A practice which seems to be in line with Gayatri Spivaks’s (1999) conceptualization of the subaltern, as argued by her the subaltern, or subjugated, are those who are made unable to speak for themselves and as academics and activist we are not to speak for them but to work to make room for them to speak. But is seems to me as if the notion of “situated knowledges” in contemporary academic, artistic and architectural practices often gets mixed up with and to some degree subsumed by the currently dominant ideal of participation. Under such an umbrella and when used as supporting argument for a more inclusive approach the notion seems to lose some of its critical and transformative edge, as it in practice translates more into a gathering of local perspectives and insights than into an analysis and exposure of the powers at play and thereby into the production of a “situated knowledge”. Within my research of a subjugated partial perspective from the periphery of Stockholm I am at risk, due to a humility which stems from a shame of being privileged, of falling into the pitfall of simply becoming a gatherer of local insights. But empowered by Haraway’s conceptualization of “situated knowledges” and more specifically the stress placed by her on the need to stay focused on the powers dynamics at play within the partial perspective explored, I will attempt to become bolder – as without such boldness the contribution produced for a reformation of the unjust condition explored most likely will be minimal.
Conclusion: Tools for thinking

Entering into this course, for the second time, I came both with expectations and dread. For some reason I have put off reading some of the literature part of the syllabus. More specifically have I kept both feminist and critical theory on an arm lengths distance since starting up my PhD. Not because I am not a feminist, but because I have had difficulties with some of the work, which I at times have found navel-gazing, that has resulted from so-called feminist practices. But I am now humbled, and cannot understand why I have resisted for so long. Or yes, I know. I simply have difficulties doing what is expected of me. And as I joined a division with an outspoken critical and feminist profile those were the fields I did not enter into. Obstinance, it is a childish but potent impulse to resist and one which I up until now had understood neither the strength nor the effects of. Although not an academic outcome I am grateful for the increased self-awareness which the readings within this course have given me. As noted by Hélène Frichot in the introduction to the course, reading theory is transformative, I would add though – not always in ways that you imagine.

So, from a more academic perspective, what would I like theoretical concepts to do? Drawing on Donna Haraway’s (1988) visual metaphor as well as Ramia Maze’s advice I understand theoretical concepts as glasses which, due to differences in prescriptions and colors of the glass, offer more or less alternative accounts of the world. Hence, as I have learned with age, I need a multitude of glasses to see in different conditions as well as to see different things. And although in strive for the production of “situated knowledges” I would argue that within the partial perspectives explored a multitude of glasses should be used to enrich the understanding and account of the world.

What particular concepts then learned from the readings of this course will I bring into my research? Focus of interest within my research is placed on the relation between ideals of justice and space, more specifically on the potential for critically engaged architectural practices to contribute to a greater “spatial justice” as elaborated by Edward Soja (2010) and Mustafa Dikeç (2001). As indicated by such an interest can many of the theoretical concepts used be characterized as what J.K. Gibson-Graham denote “strong theory” (2014). Although I find the simultaneous application of “strong” and “weak” theoretical approaches productive, the former as what Isabelle Stengers (2005) denote the “cause” that makes me think and the latter as an indication for method, I will, inspired by the argument put forth by Gibson-Graham for a “weak theory” approach, keep an eye to the balance between the two approaches in my work. Equally inspired though by feminist theory, more specifically by Haraway’s conceptualization of the “cyborg” (1991), I will not attempt to relieve the tension that result from the simultaneous use of what Gibson-Graham denote as fundamentally
alternative and counterproductive approaches. The notion of the “cyborg”, as well as the argument made by Haraway for the production of “situated knowledges” (1988) by means of striking up power sensitive conversations with particular contexts, will also be used as a reminder not to shy away from the at times uncomfortable, and what from a postcolonial perspective might seem as counterproductive, accounts of partial perspectives from below. Hence, with the aim to produce knowledges that have potential to contribute to the reformation of what Haraway denote subjugated perspectives, Gayatri Spivak (1999) subaltern positions and Jacques Rancière (1999) the fundamental “wrong” made, conditions of power and domination will be explored and conveyed no matter their appearance.

The notion of complicity is central in my work and up until now I have argued for the complicity of architects in capitalism by drawing on writings by Henri Lefebvre (2003) and David Harvey (2005) on processes of spatial restructuring and urbanization as central to the upholding and expansion of capitalism. Inspired by the readings on “ecology” though I will elaborate the argument in a manner which I believe will depict the condition in a less pessimistic and more hopeful manner. A view more in tune with my argument for critique and change from within, as well as more in line with the argument made by Gibson-Graham for the production of hope as an obligation and imperative for contemporary academics. Hence what I will bring from this course is not simply conceptual tools for thinking about my issue of interest but also, and perhaps more importantly, a somewhat revised motivation for doing research – to cultivate hope in an at times discouraging present.

References


