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2022-09-16
Arts Research Africa (ARA)
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/35910

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.54223/10539/35910

ARTISTIC RESEARCH AND THE CITY SPACE: NEW ORIENTATIONS AND COLLABORATIONS

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This paper explores the evolving relationship between artistic research, architecture, and urban design in the context of shifting paradigms in the understanding of architecture and urban development. It highlights the transition from top-down planning to inclusive bottom-up processes and emphasises the importance of perceiving the city as a habitat rather than just a built environment. The historical precedents of artistic avant-garde movements, such as dérive and psychogeography, are examined, and their limitations in the contemporary context are discussed. The potential of artistic research to contribute to sustainability in ecological, economic, and societal dimensions is explored through various examples. Overall, the paper argues for the transformative power of artistic research in shaping future city spaces.

I

Increasingly, we are witnessing the slow beginnings of a tectonic shift in the understanding of architecture, urban research and design in the Global North and the Global South. As the first indications of this shift appear, urban development is moving away from top-down planning towards mediated bottom-up processes in which all the stakeholders in urban development can be involved. This is also a shift away from seeing the building as an isolated entity towards understanding it as a cell in the living tissue that is the city space. And most fundamentally, this sea change is leading us away from considering the city space primarily as a built environment, as a hard infrastructure, towards comprehending it as a habitat, taking into account the "soft infrastructure," the cultural lifeworld dimension with its orientations and identities that make the city work. Edgar Pieterse and AbdouMaliq Simone, urban researchers from South Africa, are looking into the ways in which societal lifeworlds and urban spaces are coded and re-coded in their entanglement (Pieterse and Simone 2017). Cristina Díaz Moreno and Efrén García Grinda from the Institute of Architecture at University of Applied Art Vienna, who have shown their work at several Venice Architecture Biennales from 2000 on, promote "a change of paradigm on architectural design practices, that could break the separation of our discipline and connect us back with societal problems and realities" (Díaz Moreno and García Grinda 2021). The Venice Architecture Biennale 2021 was dedicated to unpacking and negotiating the guiding question "How will we live together?" Architects and urban planners do not just conceive, design and build, says the Biennale's curator, Hashim Sarkis, but are first of all "convenors and custodians of the spatial contract" (Sarkis 2021). In this opening, curricula and work profiles in architecture as well as in urban design are changing, and artistic research in the full variety of its disciplines, from film to installation, performance and the sonic arts, can unfold its potential and make an impact on urban development processes. Emerging individual examples show that new and oftentimes experimental collaborations between artistic research, architecture and urban design are able to unfold novel ways to explore, understand, and map the city; to analyse the current ways in which we are producing space (Lefebvre 1974); to re-define existing buildings; and to project urban utopias, creating scenarios for future city spaces.

II

The idea that artistic research could enter into a dialogue with architecture and urban design and spur innovations in urban development is not completely new, since there are precedents for this kind of cooperation in history that we can reference, translate, and expand upon (cf. Winter 2023). One of the more distinctive examples emerged within the artistic avant-garde in post-war Paris, where – as elsewhere in Europe – various groups tried to build elements of a new culture as the old ways of living together had been discredited or destroyed. In 1953 Ivan Chtcheglov, a member of the Lettrist movement, walked a segment of Quartier Latin over and over again, developing what he called *dérive*, drifting through the body of the city, as a way to take note of the "atmosphere" of buildings, streets, and places. Chtcheglov saw the streets that he explored as if for the first time, and indeed the city space had not been seen in this way before. Guy Debord later wrote: "The sudden change of ambience in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres [...] the appealing or repelling character of certain places – these phenomena all seem to be neglected. In any case they are never envisaged as depending on causes that can be uncovered by careful analysis" (Debord 1955). As Debord stated, *dérive* is a way of artistic research that yields a specific kind of knowledge, and yet is

not repeatable, since it leaves itself to the terrain and thus constellates itself time and again in different ways.

Exploring the atmosphere of sites leads to "mapping" the city in a whole new way. In *psychogeography*, the city space shows currents, vortexes, pivotal points and axes of passage, and is revealed to be subdivided into "unities of ambience." We can study the laws, Debord said, by which the built environment affects our ways to live and live together. The "hard infrastructure" is a manifestation of our current culture, and if we conceive a utopia of new cultural structures, new concepts to shape the city space will go along with them. A new architecture, Chtcheglov claimed, can express nothing less than a new conception of space, a new conception of time, and a new conception of behaviour (Chtcheglov 2006, 10).

The analytic endeavour of *dérive* was linked to a projective side on which the artistic research motion constantly sketched what could exist in place of what stands. All these new designs were developed from the background of the social utopia the situationist movement sketched. Their analysis of contemporary culture revealed what Debord called *the society of the spectacle* – a society in which the whole sphere of culture had become commodified. Instead of actively projecting their own existential ways and possibilities, people passively consumed figures of identification and images of ways to live that were produced and diffused by the mass media (Debord 1967). This *dispositif*, as Debord and the Situationist movement stated, perpetuated social injustice and engendered an isolate and frozen time. The Situationist counter draft aimed at a society in constant transformation, where citizens actively engage in creating "situations," or temporary settings for a shared collective time. Accordingly, the Situationist engagement turned against the functionalist architecture of the time, with its static and separated functions, and its eminently boring buildings, and opted for an architecture that could change its aspects and appearance, for spaces that have manifold meanings and are open to novel inscriptions. This built ambience would then set free other attitudes, perceptions and practices in a cohesive society in which heterogenous groups live together in mutual respect.

The Situationist approach, however, did not lead to any concrete cooperation with architecture and urban design. The only detailed concept of a new city space was *New Babylon*, the utopian city for a post-industrial society, developed by Constant Nieuwenhuijs. The many models and sketches by Constant did not translate into anything that was built, but they worked on the mindset of future architects and opened up new ways to think the city.

In retrospect, *dérive* and *psychogeography* show their historical limitations, corresponding to the times of the Situationist movement from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. As the context in which these artistic research approaches were developed, has changed, they cannot simply be continued, but rather need to be *translated* in order to work for contemporary city spaces. In this translation, *dérive* and *psychogeography* get enriched (see, e.g., Careri 2008; University of Johannesburg, Graduate School of Architecture 2018; Möntmann and Dziewior 2005; Richardson 2015; Stone-Johnson 2018, 2020). Use is made of new media such as film and video, and augmented, mixed and virtual reality (see, e.g., Elias 2010; Rascaroli 2015; Sylaiou et al. 2018), and the auditory dimension of the city space is explored (see, e.g., Chattopadhyay 2013, 2017, 2020a, 2020b, 2022).

III

In all these extended forms, and in many other ways that have been developed from the 1970s, artistic research can disclose the social, cultural, and economic structures of an urban habitat in their lifeworld dimension: that is, in a dimension between objective data as it occurs in scientific fields and a merely subjective experience. In its

various disciplines, artistic research helps us to understand the "soft infrastructure" of the city, the fine network of cultural habits, orientations, practices, and identities, which interlocks – or does not – with the "hard infrastructure," the buildings, the utilities and so forth. But artistic research is also devising future buildings, sites and city spaces intermeshed with societal projections and utopias that are way more complex than in former times. We see societies transform along multiple axes, in various dimensions that intersect and intertwine – for instance, in their knowledge cultures, in their economic structures, in their media landscape, and in their social fabric. We see linear transformation, but we also see breaks, leaps, and tipping points that open up unexpected opportunities, but also problems. In a stable context, a small impulse can change hardly anything, while in an unstable context, it can have a massive and structural impact. In short, we are operating in a complex system when we develop utopias that respond to our fundamental challenges.

Some of the collaborations between artistic research, architecture and urban design that are currently taking shape aim at ecological, economic and societal sustainability. And these dimensions cannot be advanced in isolation. We will not arrive at ecological sustainability as long as we live in a linear economic system that by its very structure requires a continuous depletion of resources. And we will not build a sustainable economy as long as we do not move towards a cohesive society, in which heterogeneous groups negotiate and re-negotiate their shares and commonalities in mutual respect.

Some concrete projects can serve as a guide to show the contribution that artistic research can bring to sustainability in its various dimensions. In its ecological dimension, *The Watershed*, a project by Lenore Manderson and Christo Doherty at Wits in 2018, opened up the question of how we deal with the element of water (Manderson and Doherty 2021). A great many scientific studies have highlighted that the way we deal with the environment urgently needs to be changed. But the corresponding transformation has not been achieved because the scientific insights have not connected with our lifeworld experience. As soon as a knowledge/action gap was identified, the efforts of science communication kicked in to visualize or to "sonify" the results of science in order to bring them to a larger public. However, this did not change the basic problem. *The Watershed*, in contrast, started from artistic research and thus opened a lifeworld dimension in which the element of water was considered in the depth of its meanings and the ways we deal with it. From there, the project could differentiate the problem into questions of water use and reuse, access, shortage and pollution, and, in turn, questions of what technological development can do, and what kind of political governance is needed to approach solutions to the water problem.

In recent years, we have seen many examples where cutting-edge tech development was prompted by artistic research, rather than the field of science. An example is the Kirigami Solar Cell, developed through cooperation between researchers from the School of Art & Design and the Department of Material Science & Engineering at the University of Michigan. Borrowing from the ancient Japanese art of paper cutting, an artist-researcher in the team came up with the idea of a solar cell that can split into tiny segments, which fold and spread apart to follow the sun over the sky. The engineers developed that cell, which is now available to produce 65% more energy than classic solar cells.

In the economic dimension, a circular economy tends to redefine buildings. In this process, artistic research in its site-specific forms can play a major role, as it can recollect the history of a space and open it up to future meanings. In this hinge function, the installation *Hansel and Gretel* – by Ai Weiwei, Pierre Herzog and Yves DeMeuron – fostered a re-coding of the Armory Show in New York, which had served as a military building for more than 150 years (Weiwei et al. 2018). This history was condensed into an overhead surveillance ambience with thermal cameras,

sensors, and drones. Marked areas on the floor invited people to hold poses for a while and to see their images appear and slowly recede into darkness. The visitors playfully experimented with their images and interacted with each other, and the building swung into its new function as a centre for the performing arts.

In the same vein, *The Coming Tide* by Ivor Houlker from 2013 explored an abandoned industrial area in London and dug through the layers of meaning of the site. Through a kind of archaeology, the waterways that were used to transport industrial goods are tracked back to their shamanistic layers of meaning, and in this commemoration the work prepares to re-code the area.

In the social dimension, the *Hotel Yeoville* project in Johannesburg shows how artistic research can induce societal cohesion (Kurgan 2013). In 2013, Terry Kurgan and a team of artists and architects researched the ways and habits of the people in Yeoville, a working-class suburb in Johannesburg where micro-communities of immigrants and refugees from other parts of the African continent live. In tune with their internet café culture, the project team built an interactive website, a virtual place of exchange, and corresponding to this, a real-space exhibition in a public library building offered a place where people could narrate their lives and their expectations. They could write or talk in storytelling booths, take photographs and do short videos. Presenting this material, the project encouraged and empowered people to realise their own voices. The result was a sense of common interests, belonging and mutual appreciation.

Theaster Gates gave another instance of community building when he transformed the abandoned Stony Island Bank in Chicago into a centre hosting exhibitions, archives & collections, research, artist residencies, and public programmes. It is a space for a predominantly black neighbourhood to access, reimagine and share their heritage – and a destination for artists, scholars, and curators; in short, a performative space in which a neighbourhood is able to identify itself.

In the current state of affairs, projects like these are isolated, distributed points, but they certainly have the potential to connect and in the long run form a wave of transformation. To remind ourselves that ways of exploring and designing buildings, sites, and city spaces also have a historical dimension, I return to the translations of *dérive*, for instance in a concrete building, the Musée des Confluences in Lyon, devised by Coop Himmelb(l)au. The museum is built in a place where the city fabric opens into nature, and it interacts precisely with this context. In its outside appearance and inside experience, it fulfils the Situationist demand for an architecture that is constantly changing. The built space is in itself dynamic – its identity is not fixed, it constantly reconstitutes the perception of its visitors, as if they are taking a walk through territory where their perspective is changing all the time. This complex porosity can only come to pass if differences, contradictions, breaks, and leaps are put to work to generate fluidity and transformation.

This brings us back to Ivan Chtcheglov and the motto in his legendary *Formulary for a New Urbanism*: *"Sire, je suis de l'autre pays* / Sire, I am from the other country" (Chtcheglov 2006, 7). This marks precisely the position of artistic research: on a cutting edge, in the moment and out of the moment, as the moment itself is out of joint, and is constantly leaving itself behind while renewing itself to be the next moment. In this movement, I am here, in this place that is familiar to me, and I am also elsewhere, at a slight distance of perspective, from which things start to look different. This sojourn on the edge gave Chtcheglov the opportunity to discover the world anew, time and again, beginning with a few streets in Quartier Latin. And indeed, what would be the alternative?

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