Architectural hacking, an ethnomethodological approach

Making the polysemic character of urban matters visible

EMMA NILSSON
Architect, PhD student
Department of Architecture and built environment, Lund University
Lund, Sweden
TEL: +46 46 222 73 34
emma.nilsson@arkitektur.lth.se

Abstract

Following paper is an investigation on spatial and material manipulations in the urban field. It holds a material perspective of architectural production which recognizes that architecture can be produced in a number of location, and liberates architecture from a specific sender. After doing this the paper introduces an ethnomethological approach, and discuss incongruity tests as manipulations with spatial and material means. A suggestion is put forward on architectural hacking for conducting design based research in the wild.

Introduction

This paper starts with the notion that everyday life, whether it is urban or more rural in character, is a continuous remaking and reshaping of the surrounding environment, and that such remaking is produced in a reciprocal relationship between all acting parts, be it a human, a spray can, an action or a landscape. In the context of this paper and the conference *Architectural Inquiries,* this points towards an understanding of architecture and its inter-acting parts that raises at least, two aspects of design based research in the field of architecture. First, it is a perspective that pays attention to the *production* of architecture, and recognizes that architecture can be produced in a number of locations. Second, it is one that emphasizes the *materiality* of such a production.

Widening the scope

In the history of architectural theory there has been a constantly debate in progress on how to deal with the boarders of architectural work (Albertsen 2002). I will try to avoid winding in this discussion, since my aim here is not to reach a satisfying definition on how to qualify into the realm of architecture. But my point of departure relies on some conditions of architectural production, and therefore requires some clarifications. For the sake of this paper, and the suggestions it makes for a design based research, I will adopt a perspective on architectural production that releases it from a specific sender. Architecture in this context will be dealt with as *a way of manipulating spatial materiality*, as distinct from a question of artwork. This is a perspective that recognize the multiple and heterogeneous character of architectural work without limiting it to a specific location, such as the architectural office or studio. An example of the inclusive character of this position could be a nature conservator who red-lists some species rather than others. In the view of the paper this would be regarded as a kind of landscape architecture, in that a certain flora and fauna also implies a certain landscape. Analogous to this a

graffitist would be described as an urban designer. This understanding of architecture and architectural production serves the purpose to expand the perspective on both the processes of making architecture, and what actually is included in a study of architectural form. Indirectly it also leaves out the question of good quality architecture as such, but rather evaluates certain qualities in relation to a specific study.

If architecture then is considered as *a way of manipulating spatial materiality* what would the methods thus consists of?[i] This paper a has a very specific reply to that question, still the answer is no more than one alternative among others, and it serves as means for but one of several purposes of design based research. Let me just, to begin with, call such methods a repertoire of techniques and give some theoretical foundations for this. Besides the aspect of production, there is also the emphasize on *materiality* and its implications on inter-human relations. To describe the material effects of certain situations, say a design process or an event in an urban setting, the paper introduces an actant perspective (Greimas & Courtés 1982, Latour 2002, Law & Hassard 1999). Fundamental in this perspective is the role given to non-human actors and their ability to perform and influence a course of action in any given circumstance.

The move to free architecture from a specific sender (the architect) does not deny the spatial and material knowledge that is produced within architectural practice. Architects are by no means deprived of their ability to make architecture, they are merely denied an exclusiveness. And it is still possible within such a perspective to claim that architects hold a certain knowledge on spatial and material matters. This knowledge though is intimately dependent on the forms of production architects are trained in, e.g. the techniques of architectural practice. However, this does not automatically presuppose that the architectural techniques are granted those which by profession or education are labeled architects (se e.g. Hill 1998, 2002). It merely states that the focus is put

upon the *forms* of production developed within architecture profession and education. In a paper on *'Architectural Gaits' –Architecture as Technologies and Techniques*, Katrine Lotz asks for a shift in thinking of analytic practice and regard architectural production as a set of strategies, maneuvers, tactics and technologies producing materials that establish a foundation for design negotiation on the building-to-become (2007). Such an understanding of knowledge production is deeply embedded in actor-network theory and the relativization of this perspective that has followed in its further development (Law 2002, Law & Mol 2002). It also relies on the notion of reflection-in-action (Schön 1983), and an understanding of knowledge production as distributed cognition (Hutchins 1996).[ii] To a large extent I share the view of Lotz, in how conventional design processes work, but on the contrary to her, I am in search for techniques that *inherit*, rather than make singular and stable the heterogeneity of its material and social settings. This is because the negotiations that I am trying to seize take place in a much more vague location than the course of building projection. I am in search for investigations that expand the conventional domains of architectural techniques, or put in a more critical tone: a design based research process that exits the laboratory. This paper examines one way of doing this by following to different, but compatible tracks. One direction leads into the theory of ethnomethodology and its use of manipulative experiments aiming at revealing the making sense of everyday activities. But first I intend to take a detour into the field of urban fabric itself and pick up on some current phenomena where architects, artists, performances, or just ordinary people gets physical with urban matters.

Production in the field

In his most recent book *Palladio's Children* (2005), N.J. Habraken addresses architectural practice's difficulties with reaching out, to touch the reality of everyday life. He turns to the concept of *the field* as a calling for architects to return to a context of urban fabric which includes the people that simultaneously inhabit and reshape it. For him the term is a way to conceptualize on a fact that contemporary architects and students of architecture have felt for a while: architects are by no means in charge of the transformation of urban form, and there is still lacking ways of dealing with this within the profession. Despite, or perhaps as a reaction to this 'gut feeling' we can see, here and there, the assembling of architects working out attitudes and techniques to come to turns with this blurred and heterogeneous situation (Cumberlidge & Musgrave 2007, Klanten & Feireiss 2007). They share a more direct take on urban situations and architectural proposals. They have taken their architectural knowledge; a knowing and understanding of spatial and material matters, enhanced its relation to human activity, and placed themselves in the midst of the urban fabric. By means that are partly produced in conventional building projections, they have also become their own contractors, acting on behalf of specific urban situations. The sites for interactions are different in character, but they are all united by an attitude of small economics and easily put together structures. Aesthetics is linked with ethics.

To fully grasp the procedures of this urban field architecture one must acknowledge that their appearance intervene with other urban practices that have a physical relationship with the urban environment. The birth of graffiti and the following street art, is one. Others are the related ad busters, culture jamming, flash mobs, urban sports and computer games gone real. This means that also the architectural activities oscillate between playful attitudes and explicit political agendas. Though many of the actions are 'site specific', the influence of electronic equipment and digital arenas are immense. They have produced techniques to spread, share and assemble people, activities, goods and ideas. If we as initiated above, follow actor-network theory and distributed cognition, this understanding of

techniques implies that the material actors are enabled to carry some of the conceptual production in the making process. To engage in the urban field, means to engage in a different set of materials than architectural practice usually do, and along with that other ways to handle them. I will call such activities architectural hacking and set out to explore an ethnomethodological turn on this depiction in order to investigate its possibilities for spatial and material manipulations in a design based research.

Ethnomethodology dates back to the 1960, and evolved around the sociologist Harold Garfinkel. Ethnomethodology literary means *the study of people's methods*, and it has a strong conviction of peoples ability to make sense of their own everyday routines. As such it offers a massive criticism of traditional social science, where the abstract categorization of scientific language is applied as if better or more telling than the actors own knowledge. Thereby ethnomethodology sets out to study everyday practices and the knowledge produced within them, in their authentic setting (Garfinkel 2007 (1967)). How this knowledge production takes place is dependent on a concept central to ethnomethodology: *indexicality*. Indexicality implies that an entity carrying meaning, such as an action, a word or an event is *polysemic* in the sense that it can hold more than one meaning, as meaning is dependent on context. The polysemic aspect also works the other way around; the same meaning can take several different expressions. According to ethnomethodologists, this is where scientific language fail. The stiff and presupposed categorization is unable to capture the more rich, ambiguous and vague everyday speech. Those familiar with actor-network theory probably notice a resemblance in attitude, and one can hear Latour's command echoing in the background: *Follow the actors!* In fact Latour mentions Garfinkel as one of his main influences (Latour 2002:n54). This relationship is also evident in Garfinkel's recognition of meaning relativity, as it is just a somewhat different way of capturing the

relationship between actant/actor that Latour establishes (ibid:54-5).

Another vital concept in ethnomethodology is *reflexivity*. Between the researcher and the study there is no one-way stream of information, but a mutual and continuous flow of influence during the whole research process. A researcher can never make himself invisible, any experiment is under influence of the procedures that comes with conducting it. Accordingly ethnomethodologists have excelled in what they call *incongruity experiments*. The techniques for doing this consists of an estrangening in common situations. By engaging in a course of action and deliberately behave different than expected - decontextulazing oneself - the experiment aim to make visible a locally produced, but hidden rule structure (Garfinkel 2007:36-8). My approach here is not pure ethnomethodological, it rather serves as a point of departure to capture the urban reality of architectural intervention as described above. What is at stake here is the different ways of incongruity activities and the polysemic character of urban matters. What are the forms of production and the materiality of the architectural hacking, and to paraphrase Hutchins, what is this *design in the wild*?

Architectural hacking as a method for design based research

So far the depictions of architectural hacking have been collected from an urban realm. Now I will try to draw some insights on this and to put forward a suggestion for a scientific approach on spatial and material manipulations. In order to do so, I need to say a few more word on ethnomethodological settings for their incongruity investigations. Ethnomethodological experiments are aimed at bringing to surface the social agreements that support everyday practice. Most of the assigned tasks consists of altering the behavior in a conversational setting. In doing so the focus is not on material aspects, even though

material matters are not denied. In a Swedish context the sociologist Johan Asplund, influenced by Garfinkel, is known for having conducted a series of incongruity tests (Asplund 1987). He has established the concept of social responcivity in order to explain how this mutual and local agreement on the what-is-going-on is maintained, and the material aspects of this responcivity is further addressed in that he recognizes a responcivity of place (Asplund 1983). In his experiments though, he never acts on this understanding. In order to find interventions dealing consciously with material and spatial matters one has to step outside its field. I will introduce an experiment done in the spirit of ethnomethodology (though it does not presents itself as one), an incongruity test that operates with both temporal and spatial, as well as non-human and human actors. This manipulation will draw on some beneficial insight from ethnomethodology, but also show part of the limitations it has received criticism for (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994:106-9).

In a conference on architectural semiotics, held 1982 in the convent La Tourette in Arbresles, a workshop was carried through. It consisted of a series of interventions, or rather confrontations, with unknowingly conference participants, in order to make visible the territorial negotiations that take place among people in everyday activities (Hammad 2002).[iii] The major part of the experiments where made in relation to the cells of the convent. The other three where executed in relation to spaces common to the activities of the conference, as the refectory and the session hall. I will concentrate on the experiments dealing with the common spaces, more specifically those in the refectory.

Quite early in the course of the conference a relative stability was established regarding where some participants chose to sit and eat their meals. Without any formal reservations, the organizer, together with others in the administration, the prior and invited lecturers, sat down at the same table, quickly nicknamed *the table of power*. Its location in the room had some beneficial features. It was in a corner, close to the kitchen, telephone, and personal computer and had a perfect overview of the room in total. A series of manipulations where then decided on in order to study this relative seating stability.

Members of the workshop anticipated the habitués of the table of power, occupied it along with its adjacent ones, and waited. When the first group arrived they made their way all through to their table, and found it already taken. The reaction then, in order to hide their embarrassment, was to wander around in an air of seeking. As the organizer entered the room, he already from a distance noticed the occupation, and quickly chose a table that had nothing specific about it. The others joined him. A little later the prior arrived. He became significantly annoyed about the fact that 'his' chair was taken. He lingered around the occupied table and even asked if a chair - reserved by a sweater - was free, but the workshop participants persisted in claiming it was taken. Obviously disturbed, the prior started walking around the room smoking a cigarette. When passing the table with the organizer and the others he was offered to join them. The prior refused their proposal and ended up sitting at a table close to the entrance door, in a chair enabling him a view of the entire room. The disturbance that the experiment caused had a further destabilizing effect. The next day the former table of power was occupied by another group of conference participant, unaware of the workshop experiment that had taken place the day before. A change of events had been put in motion. The intervention had broken the link of quasi property between the habitués and their table. It also had the effect of questioning the stability within the group of power; during the following meals they sat down at various tables, not always together with the prior. And when changing location the group setting was transformed (Hammad 2002:23-5).

Some meals later another experiment was carried through in the refectory. This time the

workshop set out to perform a fake occupation of the majority of chairs. Members of the workshop distributed themselves among the tables and marked the empty chairs with documents, clothes, plates, even glasses filled with wine. The simulated reservations had the effect of excluding about thirty people. When people entered the room it soon became evident that the refectory was overpopulated, as a majority of them was wandering around in search of place to sit down. Anxiety rose, and lot of pressure was put on the members of the workshop pursuing the experiment. Often, when someone acquainted to a member searchingly passed by, they were offered a wrongfully occupied chair. One man, that somehow had understood that a manipulation had taken place the other day, realized what was going on, and got very disturbed. He snatched a chair shouting: *I am no guinea-pig*, and seated himself at another table where he had some friends. Eventually when everyone was seated and any suggestion of a problem had been dispelled, one of the workshop members, who was sitting next to the prior, felt an urge to explain what had been going on. The prior did not at first understand, and when the whole thing started to unravel he reacted by shouting: *In any event, what you tell me does not interest me,* turned his back, and did not speak to his neighbor during the whole course of the dinner (ibid:26-7).

There are several ways of interpreting the actions unfolding during the manipulations.[iv] First of all it is a study of ordinary behavior in an authentic setting, i.e. a situation that is not set up and custom made for a specific experiment. Attending conferences might not be what every person engage in on a regular basis, but the activity as such is fairly general and not particularly strange or different from other gatherings with the same kind of temporality. Furthermore, the manipulations of somewhat trivial manners, are done in relation to spatial and material actors *together* with the inter-human relations that unfold. In contrast to ethnomethodology, the experiment show that background agreements are quite unstable, and that mutual understandings are constantly negotiated. It is also worth noticing that the manipulation questioning a locally produced seating order was further acted upon by people unknowing of the experiment. One can speculate on the reasons for this finding of a more unstable state of affairs than traditional ethnomethodology. I think it is fair to say that it has to do with the experiments' engagement with spatial and material matters. It is well known within organizational theory that a shift in say, corporate organization, in order to be successful must be supported by a rearrangement of material stuff.

So what about urban matters? I will end this paper by giving a final example taken from a diploma work in the school of architecture in Lund. In an assemblage of techniques drawn together under the title *Preliminär stadsutveckling*, Adriana Seserin among other activities set out to conduct a series of *paralochalization* acts, influenced by relational aesthetics (Bourriaud 2002). One of the actions consisted on eating a private dinner of Italian tomato soup out on the pavement of one of streets of Södermalm, Stockholm.

A table with a green and white checked cloth was carried down from an apartment together with chairs and tableware. Contrary to most other relational acts involving food, this was an eating session that did not involve spectators, or passersby. The aim was to push the boundary of private spaces in common urban ground. I do not think much happened. They could finish their meal without any real disturbance or interaction by others. Perhaps things would have been different if for example this experiment was performed in several locations of Stockholm City, for a repeated number of times. Maybe there would be distinguished some differences in the reactions according to spatial or temporal aspects. Or what if one were to examine the critical point for the number, or types of artifacts that can be connected to the situation. Where are the limitations for establishing new territories. Is a standard lamp taking it to far?

Of course it is difficult to predict these question. But they say something about what kind of activity architectural hacking is and the sort of materials it could engage in. By which techniques and formative principles are wide open to examine.

References

Albertsen, N. (2002), Arkitekturværkets netværk, tre samfundsteorier, *Nordisk Arkitekturforskning* No 3

Alvesson, M. & Sköldberg, K. (1994), *Tolkning och reflektion. Vetenskapsfilosofi och kvalitativ metod,* Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Angelo. (2003), *Prisoners' Inventions*, Chicago: WhiteWalls.

Asplund, J. (1983). *Tid, rum, individ, kollektiv.* Korpen, Stockholm: LiberFörlag.

Asplund, J. (1987). *Det sociala livets elementära former,* Göteborg:Korpen

Bourriaud, N. (2002), *Relational aesthetics,* Dijon: Presses du réel.

Cumberlidge, C. & Musgrave, L. (2007). *Design and Landscape for people. New approaches to Renwa,.* Thames and Hudson. New York.

Garfinkel, H. (2007(1967)), *Studies in Ethnomethodology,* Camebridge: Polity.

Gedenryd, H. (1998), *How designers work,* Lund

Greimas, A. J. & Courtés, J. (1982), *Semiotics and language: An Analytical Dictionary*, Bloomington: Indiana B.P.

Gedenryd, H. (1998), *How designers work,* Lund

Habraken, N.J. (2005), *Palladio's Children*,Taylor and Francis.

Hammad, M. (2002), *The privatisation of space,* Lund: Studies in theoretical and applied aesthetics

Hill, J. (1998), *The illegal architect,* London: Colophon

Hill, J. (2002), Building a Drawing and Drawing a Building, *Nordisk Arkitekturforskning* No 4

Hutchins, E. (1995), *Cognition in the Wild,* Camebridge:MIT Press.

Klanten, R. & Feireiss, L. (2007), *Spacecraft. Fleeting architecture and Hideout,* Gestalten Verlag.

Kuroda, J. & Kaijima, M. (2006), *Made in Tokyo,* Tokyo.

Kärrholm, M. (2004), *Arkitekturens territorialitet,* Lund

Latour, B. (2005) *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory.* Oxford: University Press.

Law, J. (2002), Objects and spaces. *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 19, No 5-6.

Law, J. (2004), *After method. Mess in social science research,* Routledge:

Law, J. & Mol, A. red. (2002), *Complexities, Social Studies of knowledge practice.* Duke University Press.

Law, J. & Hassard, J. ed. (1999), *Actor network theory and after*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Lotz, K. (2007), *'Architectural Gaits' – Architecture as Technologies and Techniqhues.* Conference paper Design Inquiries 2007, Stockholm.

Rudovsky, B. (1964) *Architecture without architects*, Camebridge: MIT Press

Rykwert, J. (1981), *On Adam's House in Paradise. The Idea of the primitive Hut in Architectural History,* Camebridge: MIT Press.

Sandin, G. (2003), *Modalities of Place*, Lund

Schön, D.(1983), *The reflective practitioner.* New York: Basic Books

---

[i] Here I take the perspective of production, one might as well have a descriptive one, as in *a way of analyzing spatial materiality*, and still regard architecture without a specific sender as in the book by Rudovsky, B. (1964) *Architecture without architects*, or in a more recent example by Kuroda, J. & Kaijima, M. (2006) *Made in Tokyo.* For a more problemizing examination on the historical implications of linking architecture with architects se Rykwert, J. (1981) *On Adam's House in*

Paradise. The Idea of the primitive Hut in Architectural History.

[ii] For a thorough evaluation on these matters in relation to design processes, see Gedenryd, H. (1998) *How designers work.*

[iii] See Kärrholm, M. (2004), *Arkitekturens territorialitet* for an extensive investigation on territorial concepts and actor-network theory.

[iv] For an more elaborate analysis on Hammad and his conceptions of space see Sandin. G. (2003), *Modalities of Place*.