

Architecture on Architecture
Autonomy as a transformative capability

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the challenges faced by architectural education today. It takes as its starting point the double commitment of any school of architecture: on the one hand the task of preserving the particular knowledge that belongs to the discipline of architecture, and on the other hand the obligation to prepare students to perform in a profession that is largely defined by forces outside that discipline. It will be proposed that the autonomy of architecture can be understood as a unique kind of information: as architecture's self-reliance or knowledge-about itself. A knowledge that is not scientific or academic but is more like a latent body of data that we find embedded in existing works of architecture. This information, it is argued, is not limited by the historical context of the work. It can be thought of as a virtual capacity – a reservoir of spatial configurations that can be transformed and reapplied endlessly through its confrontation with shifting information from outside the realms of architecture.

A selection of architects' statements on their own work will be used to demonstrate how in quite diverse contemporary practices the re-use of existing architectures is applied. It will be argued that the transformative capacity of architecture utilized in such an *architecture-on-architecture* approach depends on our ability to read architectural structures independently from the specific circumstances that defined their creation. As a conclusion, it is discussed how recognising the autonomy of architecture, not as an esoteric concept but as a valid source of information in a pragmatic design practice, may help us overcome the often-proclaimed dichotomy between formal autonomy and a societally committed architecture. It follows that in architectural education there can be a close correlation between the study of existing architectures and the training of competences to design for present-day realities.

Key words: Autonomy, transformation, architectural education

1. The discipline and the profession of architecture

Schools of architecture are battlegrounds. In schools, ideological wars are fought concerning the proper qualifications of an architect and the ways in which those qualifications are best imparted to the students. Schools of architecture are battlegrounds because they are institutions that balance expectations from a diversity of interested parties: from a political funding agency, from the recruiters in the professional practices, from potential future students, from the world of academia and so on and so forth. Somewhat simplified, all these different interests and different conceptions of the “good” education can be reduced to a debate on whether schools of architecture should first and foremost be seen as culture-bearing institutions, committed to preserving and developing an academic tradition – or whether the schools are profession-specific institutions with the primary obligation to prepare students to perform in a professional context that is largely defined by forces external to architecture itself. We may say that the schools have a double obligation: towards the discipline as well as the profession of architecture.

The question is, though, whether this double obligation – to both the tradition of the discipline and the contemporaneity of the profession – must necessarily produce conflict. Instead of depicting opposing worlds we could think of two simultaneous and dynamic contexts for the practice of architecture, neither of which can be ignored without undermining the specific character of the field. This dual context is apparent in the particular ways in which architects handle and represent problems and data, and especially in the type of knowledge that architects employ in their work. By applying this perspective on architectural education, the struggle between two competing areas of interest may be replaced by a cross-fertilisation of two distinct bodies of information.

In a talk at the seminar *Research and Practice in Architecture*, arranged by the Alvar Aalto Academy and the Helsinki University of Technology in 2000, Stanford Anderson presented a very useful model for distinguishing between the discipline and the profession of architecture. The discipline, Anderson explains, is a body of knowledge unique to architecture; a knowledge that manifests itself as a particular way of looking at the world: “To distinguish the surface of a wall from the wall itself and to find in this distinction the opportunity for representation are propositions within the discipline of architecture,”¹ Anderson explains. The discipline is not static; it is growing and changing with time as new internal connections between for instance historical and current architectural issues are established, and as earlier days’ architectural discourses are revived or revised. Thus, one can imagine the discipline of architecture as a vibrant field of information that expands over time and in which material is continually relocated.

The profession, on the other hand, is defined by Anderson as the knowledge that is necessary for the practice of architecture in the present social and political context. Some of this knowledge also belongs to the discipline, but the profession includes subject matter external to the discipline of architecture such as economics, technology, law and management. Thus, Anderson describes the profession and the discipline of architecture as being partly but not completely coinciding. He stresses how precisely the intersection point between the two is interesting because this is where knowledge from two worlds of architecture is exchanged and where this interchange of information – internal and external to architecture respectively – produces new knowledge.

Anderson gives as example how Le Corbusier incorporated the new technology of reinforced concrete into the discipline of architecture through his formulation of his *Five Points of a New Architecture*. A technological invention from outside the territory of architecture is brought into that territory by being reformulated in an architectural language, as architectural concepts. Thus, an innovation from the realm of engineering prompts the development of a new spatial vocabulary that enriches the discipline of architecture and presents the profession with new formal choices. Similarly, Anderson points out, theories developed in an academic context will often prove highly influential on the products of the profession. Stanford Anderson argues that it is precisely the interchange between the discipline and the profession that should be emphasised in architectural education.

1.1. The two contexts of architectural practice

It is this transferral of information from the discipline of architecture to the professional realm that will be discussed here: how is the practising architect applying information from the discipline – and what does it mean for the products of the profession that they are “fuelled” by this information? Furthermore, how can architectural education reflect this dynamic interchange? It may seem obvious to think of the discipline as a mainly academic and theoretical sphere, as a place where information *about* architecture is preserved. But this results in a somewhat contrived distance between the discipline and the profession. A more productive approach is to think of architectural practice as taking place in two simultaneous contexts.

One context – the discipline – is a specific cultural sphere with a content that cannot be fully described or explained with terms from other disciplines; it is primarily mediated through - or as - architecture. Returning to Anderson’s example above, it was by presenting his *Five Points* as formal and spatial motives that Le Corbusier made them part of the discourse of the discipline. This, we might say, defines the autonomy of architecture: if autonomy [auto (self) –nomous (knowledgeable)] is understood as architecture’s *knowledge-on-itself*, it is in works of architecture (whether fragmentary or complete, built or drawn) that this knowledge becomes manifest. As a dynamic continuum of existing architectures the discipline provides knowledge that constitutes a basic context for any kind of architectural practice.

The professional context, on the other hand, does not make up a continuum but is rather a series of specific and diverse project-related situations in which the architect collaborates with a number of shifting players: clients, users, engineers, contractors and political authorities. In this collaboration the architect’s expertise differs from that of the engineer or contractor just as the architect’s relation to or interest in the project differs from that of the client or user. These differences will not necessarily result in an adversarial relationship between the architect and his collaborators, but it is inevitable that the architect understands and handles the project differently from the other parties involved. The architect’s attitude towards the project depends on his relation to the context of the

discipline and consequently his access to information that lies outside the context of the project situation, to information that can be transported from the context of the discipline into the individual project situation.

We may think of this introduction of architectural but initially extraneous information as a process of transformation of already existing architectural material. Albená Yaneva, who in 2009 published an anthropological study of OMA, concluded on her observations of the practice: "...design never starts from scratch. (...) - it does not require grand gestures of radical departure from the past, but small operations of recollecting existing bits of projects and concepts, reusing, recycling, reinterpreting, rethinking; the 're-' stands at the heart of design."²

This definition of design was triggered by OMA's design for the Casa da Musica in Porto that was developed as a transformation of one of the office's abandoned projects – a villa in the Netherlands. Rem Koolhaas has described this transformation as an act of "cynicism,"³ but even if the transferral of architectural form from one project to the other is in this case unusually direct, Yaneva is right in pointing out that architectural design in general involves reuse and reinterpretations. The prerequisite for the reuse of existing material is of course a large reservoir of references, but also the ability to observe this reservoir through a certain both determined and blurred lens. It involves focusing and cropping in ways that at times are defined by the specific project situation, at other times defined by the individual architect's inclinations. In the case of Casa da Musica, it was the problem of handling the concert hall's shoebox dimensions that brought the villa project with its tunnel like living room into play. Such architectural re-activation is not about copying but rather about appropriation – it is the making of architecture on architecture. In the process of transformation a latent capacity of the original project is released, demonstrating how works of architecture can be approached as spatial and structural phenomena independent of the intentions that initially underlay their creation. Thus, in the discipline's reservoir of architectural works we can find a type of knowledge that is neither scientific nor academic but virtual: a latent body of data that can be activated and reapplied again and again through its confrontation with ever new project situations.⁴

2. Working from a World of Form

The pre-modern architect was trained in seeing design as a continuation: the renaissance architect studied and reused the types, tropes and proportions of Antiquity, the Beaux Art School was based on a familiarity with the classical styles, and the eclectics of the 19th century juggled well known architectural elements. Today the relation between the study of *the existing* and the development of *the new* is less apparent. John Summerson's famous attempt at defining modern architecture as the shift from "a world of form" (classical architecture) to "a local fragment of social pattern" (the programme) as architecture's "source of unity" is still haunting the self-understanding of many architects.⁵ They will maintain that it is not a close connection to a specific "world of form" that characterises the architect's competences, but rather the ability to analyse and programme complex situations and on that basis develop an architectural form in a collaborative process. Still, it is obvious that also in contemporary practices raw material from the world of architecture is employed, and for a number of reasons. The relation between the specific project situation and the use of architectural information is more complex than a causal relation between a given programme and a given form, and practicing architects will have very diverse understandings of how architectural information is brought into play in their work. If all architectural design can be said to take place in the cross field between the continuous discipline and the situational profession, this double context does not define a certain ideological position. On the contrary, it is a ground for quite disparate architectural practices and opinions.

In the following, three well known contemporary practices will serve as examples of this diversity: British Caruso St John Architects, Danish BIG - Bjarke Ingels Group and the Swiss architect Valerio Olgiati. These offices represent three different ways of working with existing architecture; differences that are revealed in the way the architects present and speak about their work.

2.1. Caruso St John: critical contextualism

*"The practice is interested in the emotional potential and physical qualities of construction. This attitude has developed out of a fascination for materials, backed up with an involvement in academic and office based research. Built projects incorporate this research and respond to their physical context and brief in unexpected ways."*⁶

It is evident from this excerpt from the homepage of their office, that Adam Caruso and Peter St John are interested in tectonics, in construction and in the poetic potential of architectural details. Their work is praised for its quiet yet complex ordinariness and for its contextual qualities. Recent projects such as Bremer Landesbank and Newport Gallery confirm the general impression of architects who are concerned with reading and understanding the places in which they build, and who let this contextual sensibility come across in their design. But if Caruso and St John are truly contextualists, it is clear that to them "context" involves more than the specific building site. Although their projects are precisely tailored and adapted to their urban locations, the site is not necessarily the starting point of their design; the "research" mentioned in the quotation above points to a wider context in which the practice of their office takes place.

The essay *Working with References* by Adam Caruso begins like this: "Sitting and talking was how Peter and I started to design together. Those conversations would be about the site and the programme but would quickly lead to intuitive associations with other things that we knew."⁷ Elsewhere he explains: "the things that influence our practice are rather disparate and through our conversations we struggle to bring these to bear on the social and physical situation of the project at hand."⁸ These statements are interesting as they indicate how to these architects there is an initially loose connection between the brief and the architectural idea. "The opportunities are different and the places are different but you're still working with the same ideas, it's kind of limitless," Peter St John explains in an interview.⁹ These persisting ideas, one is led to believe, stems from a sort of arbitrary process of associations that gathers into certain significant references. Caruso gives as examples of such continuous references the monastery in St Gall and Thomas Struth's photograph of Campo De Fiori – architectural motifs

that are activated intuitively and revisited by the architects time and again. Caruso compares their approach with the practice of other art forms: in the text "Cover Version" he quotes T.S. Eliot who argues that an anchoring in the tradition is a prerequisite for the poet's contemporaneity. Furthermore, Caruso points to art forms such as jazz and contemporary painting as artistic disciplines that "flourish by engaging with and continuing to build upon their own traditions."¹⁰

To Caruso and St John, a preoccupation with the tradition of architecture and its material is by no means opposed to a social or political commitment – on the contrary. Adam Caruso writes: "Not only is it doubtful whether completely new forms can exist, but the imperative to make forms that have no connection to the past and are the harbinger of an enhanced future is anti-critical and conservative. [...] A more radical formal strategy is one that considers and represents the existing and the known. In this way artistic production can critically engage with an existing situation and contribute to an ongoing and progressive cultural discourse."¹¹

The key word here is *critical*. Caruso and St John have the ambition to point beyond the current situation and imply new possible realities, and the essential argument in these quotes is that a critical practice is nourished by an intuitive interest in certain architectural motifs and depends on a historical horizon. Their philosophy implies that an architect's individual preferences can be of broader meaning exactly because they are connected to a cultural tradition that stretches beyond the personal inclination and transcends the specific project situation. Thus, it is by insisting on an architectural agenda which is not defined by the particular project that values beyond the aesthetic is brought about: by pursuing their own agenda the architects act as a kind of architectural smugglers, transporting layers of meaning into the project and creating small disturbances in the programme. "...it has to do with the buildings [...] having a kind of reference that is communicative and familiar while also being strange", Peter St John explains.¹²

2.2. BIG - Bjarke Ingels Group – opportunistic functionalism

*"BIG's architecture emerges out of a careful analysis of how contemporary life constantly evolves and changes. Not least due to the influence from multicultural exchange, global economical flows and communication technologies that all together require new ways of architectural and urban organization. We believe that in order to deal with today's challenges, architecture can profitably move into a field that has been largely unexplored. A pragmatic utopian architecture that steers clear of the petrifying pragmatism and the naïve utopian ideas of digital formalism."*¹³

This energetic presentation on BIG's homepage captures the office brand quite accurately: while distancing their work from mainstream architecture, the architects present themselves as pragmatics who accept the realities of the contemporary world and who - like traditional modernists - emphasize a programmatic and analytical approach and the necessity of "the new". At first glance, the office's attitude seems like the reverse of the critical contextualism of Caruso and St John, and Bjarke Ingels comes close to promoting himself as anti-critical with his perky slogan *Yes is more*. But even if BIG falls conveniently under the category "Fresh Conservatism,"¹⁴ there is more to be found in the practice than a carefree welcoming of the market forces and the ruling political climate. *Yes is more* is also a statement that implies the office's position in a disciplinary context. When Ingels refers to the office as pragmatic utopians he tries to place the practice in what he describes as the "fertile overlap" between the wildness of the avant-garde and the boredom of traditional architectural virtues.

The avant-garde, Ingels declares, "is defined by rebelling against something existing. I find it more interesting to keep on working with things than opposing them."¹⁵ Thus, Ingels implies that he – just like his British colleagues - understands his work in a disciplinary continuum. But while Caruso and St John refer to a cultural tradition, Bjarke Ingels uses biology as a recurring metaphor: architecture, he claims, is like an evolutionary system. He speaks of evolution as "an interaction between a gene pool and an environment"¹⁶ and points out how someone like Jørn Utzon "imported" typologies from other cultures into a Danish context, creating innovative architectural solutions. In the philosophy of BIG, "architectural evolution" is not about determinism and rational selection but rather a history of agility, adaptability and resilience. In his "archicomic" published in 2009, Ingels quotes Charles Darwin: "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change."¹⁷ With this idea of adaptability it is revealed how BIG's rhetoric resonates a kind of functionalist ambition of finding the *right* solution: of the perfect match between an architectural design and the problem of the brief. Unlike Caruso and St John's repeated use of the same references, BIG's approach is about mutation and proliferation of architectural "species". When the office develops a hybrid between the traditional Danish urban block and the Manhattan slab for the project *VIA* at West 57th Street in New York, it is not because of a particular interest in these architectural typologies, but the result of testing architectural variations in a search for the optimal solution for precisely this project site and brief.

Throughout his career, Bjarke Ingels have been engaged in communication. His success is to a large extent grounded in his talent for explaining the office's works and philosophy in an easily accessible and inviting manner. Being entertaining, self-ironic and direct, making use of popular formats such as the comic book and animations, his impact is huge. Using specific architectural references that are known beyond the architectural community, he invites non-architects: clients, politicians and the public at large to activate their own experiences with architecture. The *8-house* in the new neighbourhood Ørestaden in Copenhagen is described as a modern version of the "potato row houses" in central Copenhagen, and *The Mountain* in the same area is explained as a piling of Jørn Utzon's L-shaped courtyard houses. Presenting these new residences as affordable remakes of well-known and highly attractive local housing estates, BIG strives towards an inclusive narrative that emphasizes architecture as a public and communal phenomenon.

While Caruso and St John stress how recurrent architectural references are decisive ingredients of their work, BIG seems to let each project situation determine the choice of architectural concept or type. The office's point of departure is the extrovert and fragmented situations of the profession, and these make up an unstable base from where the tradition of the discipline is scanned for relevant information. Their evolutionary approach is an opportunistic but also socially engaged functionalism, and if BIG is a critical practice, the critique is proactive:

"(...) if the city doesn't fit the way that we want it to be, then we have to change it. I think you should always remember that we created the city, we created architecture, so therefore we can re-create it, change it, evolve it," Ingels proclaims.¹⁸

2.3. Valerio Olgiati: non-referential idiosyncrasies

*"This is a private collection of pictures and is edited by Mr. Olgiati regularly."*¹⁹

This is the somewhat enigmatic presentation that appears when one seeks information on Valerio Olgiati's website. None of the usual menu options such as *projects*, *about*, *news*, or *press* pop up – only a few links to recent book publications accompanies the collection of images. Some of the photographs in the collection are obviously very old; others, one supposes, must have been taken by the architect himself. Some of the images show Olgiati's own works, but most have different content: landscapes, urban situations, historical buildings, interiors, details, architectural drawings, models, as well as paintings and graphic works. Each image offers a strong aesthetic statement which contribute to an idiosyncratic and vaguely defined body of architectural ideas. Clearly, the collection is meant to be without order or hierarchy and the architect's own projects are presented as embedded in a floating field of free and disparate motifs.

In a number of publications and interviews, Olgiati has referred to the image collection as his "iconographic biography". They are, he says, "the basis of my projects (...). It is always my aim to build something that is related in some way or other to these images – either the image itself or what it illustrates."²⁰ At the same time, Olgiati declares that he wants to create pure, non-referential architecture, a goal he admits to be impossible. Thus, the "iconographic autobiography" seems to represent a dilemma: the striving for a non-referential architecture is presented through references. At the same time, the images present a strategy for coping with this dilemma: the architectures displayed in the collection are not only primarily from the past; most are also geographically and culturally distanced from the Central European context in which Valerio Olgiati works. He explains the predominance of historical references like this:

"When I look at these old buildings from my own perspective, then they are freed from the programmatic purpose for which they have been built. They are also freed from the societal conventions that caused them to become built in the way they were. (...) they are ripped out of everything and only exist as pure architectural objects without any projection surface for anything extra-architectural, pure architecture! That is the advantage of old buildings: The centuries that lie between the time they were being built and today has shaken off all those aspects of buildings that are, strictly speaking, non-architectural."²¹

Olgiati is maybe the contemporary architect who most openly proclaims the autonomy of architecture and most vehemently declares his work as belonging to the discipline of architecture. "As soon as the architect makes architecture primarily dependent on another discipline, he has left the core domain of architecture," he states.²²

What, then, do the project situation and all the external parameters involved mean to an architect like Valerio Olgiati? How is information from outside the core of architecture handled in projects that are primarily explorations of an architectural idea? Some of his works demonstrate a possible strategy for dealing with non-architectural circumstances: the given restrictions are reinterpreted as formal parameters of an architectural idea. In the *Office Building in Zurich* from 2001, legal requirements such as building regulations and the rights of neighbours determined the structural – and thus architectural – concept, forming an at the same time rickety and sturdy version of the conventional office building. Likewise, the *Perm Museum XXI* is described as a simple stacking of the programmes, which – because of the functions' changing dimensions – results in an unusual and slightly disturbing building silhouette. These examples show how Olgiati translates legal or functional conditions into geometric or compositional logics; in an almost perverted pragmatism, the specifications are dislodged from the practical realm and brought to serve as formal factors. The result is a kind of estrangement effect: the extra-architectural requirements are taken into consideration but at the same time hijacked into the architectural experiment. This strategy is in a way a bold effort to utilise the project situation to expand the discipline of architecture: Olgiati's work is about manipulating the given in order to incorporate it in his catalogue of *pure architecture*.

The purpose of his non-referential endeavour is more than the pursuit of originality; Olgiati wants his architecture to provoke public engagement: "(...) I, personally, always make sure that my buildings function flawlessly, but to succeed in that aspect is not a very significant measure whether one is considered a good or lesser good architect. The measure of a good architect is whether he or she can conceive buildings that make people enter a discourse with themselves and their world," he claims.²³

3. Conclusion

Whether the reuse of architectural matter is seen as an act of cynicism, of criticism, as a new form of functionalism or as downright idiosyncratic, the statements above show how applying and transforming existing material allows the architects to challenge the given commissions, introducing qualities and possibilities beyond the project brief. Caruso St John use certain references repeatedly, establishing a connection to the tradition of architecture, but in new and "strange" adaptations. In the case of BIG, transformation takes place through displacement and hybridisation, whereas Olgiati's approach is less direct: an ongoing reinvention and reformulation of ideas from his private inventory. These three ways of relating the two contexts of design are by no means comprehensive of the variety of approaches that could be found among architectural practices. They do, however, begin to suggest a way of positioning such different approaches: Caruso St John are anchored in the discipline, forcing material from here into the project situation, whereas BIG's starting point is the specific project situation, which determines what architectural material will be of use – and finally Olgiati has the most radical approach: he insists on absorbing the project situation into the discipline of architecture. In any case, a certain gap – historical, geographical or programmatic – between the architectural material and the situation in which it is used seems to stimulate potentials embedded in *the existing* to be released in *the new*. Seen in this way, the autonomy of architecture is not an esoteric concept removed from the realities of the professional

practice of architecture; it is architecture's capacity for perpetual transformation and shifting connectivities. It follows that the architect's ability to read existing works and concepts as adaptable and transformative sources of information allows him to play a particular and potentially critical role in the collaborative processes of building and planning.

Stanford Anderson pointed to the intersection between the profession and the discipline as a natural point of departure in architectural education. Still, the way this interchange is handled in an educational environment must differ from what takes place in professional practices. In architectural education the challenge is that we do not know the professional reality and the kind of project situations in which the students will be operating after their graduation. Statistics show that only a minority of graduates from schools of architecture will find work in a traditional architectural practice, most likely the majority will have to define their field of practice themselves and work in new and for now unknown ways. This condition only stresses the necessity of prioritising the discipline of architecture in architectural education.

An effective and valuable relation between architectural and extra-architectural matter begins with acknowledging their separate basis and schools of architecture should give students time and encouragement to develop their individual stock of references. Not only to ensure their cultural education – their *bildung* – but also to support their ability to hold a significant position in interdisciplinary collaborations. Problem oriented studio assignments can work as testing grounds for possible interchanges between specific social challenges and strictly architectural concepts. Continuous discussions on the potential of different approaches to such interchanges will serve to develop the students' competence to work with actual architecture as a mouldable material that can proliferate into an almost endless array of virtual architectural propositions. If handled as instruments for analysis as well as subjects of examination in a specific project situation, such propositions can stimulate societal involvement and a critical approach among future architects.

Notes

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2. Yaneva, Albena, *Made by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture*. (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2009), 103.
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13. "About," accessed March 2, 2016, <http://www.big.dk/#about>.
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23. Breitschmid, "Valerio Olgiati's Ideational Inventory," 26.

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