Expanding Architecture: Critical perspectives from within a school of architecture

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Abstract—The architectural community needs to be better at managing a diversity of experiences, desires and needs associated with architecture. How can students' call for a more problematizing and inclusive education and industry be used as a basis for student and teacher collaboration, as well as an educational platform for raising diversity issues? The Symposium *Expanding Architecture - Critical Perspectives Acting from Within*, held at the School of Architecture, LTH in the spring of 2018, was the answer to a shortage within the education as identified by the students. The event served as an opportunity for criticism of architectural education and profession, as well as a visualization of these issues for students. It thus became an example of how teaching can address a question based on a specific position and contextualize this issue in relation to contemporary research and teaching.

Index Terms—Architectural education, design pedagogy, architecture profession, critical practice.

I. INTRODUCTION

THIS talk is based on a symposium, *Expanding Architecture – Critical Perspectives Acting from Within* (LAS18), that the authors planned and conducted in March 2018 together with students at Lund School of Architecture, LTH. The symposium gathered all students and teachers at the school and addressed architectural interpretation and creation as a matter of non-orthodox practices. It presented experiences from architectural practice where architectural design and disciplinary reflection have challenged the conformal narratives of architecture and its culture, with a focus on social and cultural differences. This particular focus is an expression of several interconnected and overlapping initiatives originating from the teaching and researching staff of the Department of Architecture and Built environment at LTH, as well as from a group of students engaged in feminist perspectives on architecture (FemArk). These initiatives share a common objective; to increase the awareness of gender issues and normative thinking within architecture education and the urge for (future) architects to be able to deal with a multiplicity of backgrounds, experiences, wishes and needs as part of architectural design and practice.

Architecture education and the teaching of architectural design is, despite progress within architecture pedagogy

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research, still modelled after the nineteen century École de Beaux-Arts, where learning is centred around a studio and its master [1]. In the studio students learn architecture by solving different design tasks guided by an experienced practitioner (the teacher/master) whose architectural viewpoints are transmitted to the students. In its original take, as in École de Beaux-Arts, the teaching situation was more of an evaluation or examination of graphic presentations (sketches and drawings), than the learning-oriented situation practiced today, where the teacher and student discuss and develop alternative design solutions by joint sketching [2]. Pedagogically this shift in architecture education can be read as leaning towards *constructivism*, and the socio-cultural tradition with its acknowledgement of knowledge as something collectively produced and dependent on its context [3]. But since the collective learning in architecture education primarily aims at educating architects, knowledge is integral to a "way of doing" and strongly connected to a community that "share values, assumptions [and a] language" [3, p. 47]. This strong connection between a professional community and its academic discipline affect, among other, a tendency of confusing *episteme* with *doxa*. In order to cope with this delusion, or what Argyris [4] calls the "mystery mastery" of teaching and learning in design setting, students develop learning strategies that rhymes more with a *behaviourist* model of knowledge production and *operative conditioning* [3, p. 39]. The learning strategies adopted thus rather support surface approaches to architectural knowledge than they develop students' own understanding and ability to encompass new ways of seeing. This confusion of doxa and episteme also increases the profession's tendency to reproduce and black-box preconceptions of architecture, creating an embodied "knowing" which is not challenged or critically examined. It is this latter problem, and how we have dealt with it in our response to the students call for a more inclusive teaching of architecture, that we will discuss further in the following paper.

II. A MANIFOLD OF ARCHITECTURES

Although architectural practice and education is quite balanced in terms of gender, it is still a homogeneous group regarding social and cultural background, class and functionality, and this in turn effects the profession and its ability to imagine how architecture can be used and experienced in manifold ways under various circumstances. This is further reinforced by the discipline's discursive history and the way "users" have been interpreted, conceptualized and presented as different kinds of images of the human body [5]. These images have, and to some extent

still do promote and produce certain ideal bodies that explicitly or implicitly protocol "correct ways" for architects to approach bodily matters and use. You would think that architecture and architects by now would have developed sophisticated design methods, techniques and materialities in order to capture something so central for architecture as human bodies, in order to understand the multiple users and usages of architecture. However, already in Vitruvius *De architectura,* it is possible to detect the oscillation between two rhetorical figures [6] that still influence and shape architectural practice and its conceptualization of body: on the one side there is entanglement of the ideal body and the architect, and on the other the standardization of the body into dimensions, proportional systems and design aesthetics. Architectural practice's understanding and conceptualization of those who inhabits architecture is thereby handed over to a standardized norm or a highly specific experience that – regarded over the entire filed – renders those who do not coincide with the average architect invisible.

This tendency to silence other experiences and the positions they are acting from, naturalizes the position of the architect, which in turn enhances a misconception (within architectural practice and profession) of architecture as "timeless" and free of ideological, social and cultural dependencies. In *Architecture Depends* [7] the architecture theoretician Jeremy Till stress the dependency architecture have on other disciplines, how architecture is tied to use and everyday life, and the implications of a situation where the education and profession have constructed a role for architects that cuts all those links. According to Till this assumed autonomy is first of all a chimera, and therefore deeply problematic, as it supports an architectural practice that treats architecture as something primarily descending from architects and therefore as an object that could be under their control. And even though it may come as a surprise to architects (since the architectural education and profession still lack interest and/or techniques to deal with it): architecture is affected by use, time and therefore subjected to contingent forces. Just as the architectural object is much more social, political, hybrid and fluid than architects usually would like it to be, the practice of architecture cannot be regarded as a process only influenced by architects will and thought.

The call for a more diverse take on architectural design that was posed by the students is a reaction to a lack of awareness, and that the absence of a multitude of examples and role models makes the architectural profession numb in its understanding of encounters with architecture they have not experienced themselves. This creates a pedagogical challenge to architectural education, as it would be necessary for architectural education to break and critically examine the predominant pedagogical model of how learning through design processes work through *reflection-in-action*, developed by the urban planner Donald Schön. The student's learning is, according to Schön's model, evolved in the design studio through reflection on design moves throughout the student's work process and discussion with tutors [2]. However, this procedure develops into a master and disciple type of learning situation that is biased against an established normative design tradition that often seek arguments from renowned (male) architects and a

recognized design tradition. Although Schön's original ambition was to replace a too technical understanding of design practice, he fails to address a multiplicity of design situations and multiple motivations for design. If Schön establishes a hierarchical model of architectural learning where a disciple must aim to "rise" to the level of the tutor, the architecture theoretician Helena Webster proposes a more flat ontology where many individuals (together with other affecting actors if we want to expand the context to non-human influence) contribute and influence architectural learning, design and disciplinary reflection. Webster uses Bourdieu's notion of habitus to account for how "epistemological, ontological and embodied aspects of self informs how people act in real life situations" [8, p. 69], and acknowledges many factors that Schön ignores: corporeal, affective and cognitive ways of learning that take place both in formal educational contexts such as the studio and in lectures but also in social events and everyday gatherings such as in the lunch room [8, p. 66].

By widening the learning situation and allowing for other settings than the design studio to influence and shape an embodied knowledge of architecture, Webster also identifies how a tendency to reproduce norms in more formal educational contexts neither is challenged by less formal events nor by experiences brought into those contexts by individual students. Rather, in educations such as architecture schools, where students often spend most of their waking hours and mostly socialize with other architecture students [7], the reproduction of certain norms can be further strengthened by acculturation processes taking place in the whole learning environment. This strong acculturation of the individual student, will not only silence student's experiences that are considered irrelevant in relation to the design task, it will also mute the experiences of those that deviate from the tribe of architects.

III. MINOR VOICES

The students' initial request suggests, together with professional experiences voiced by the invited speakers of Lund Architectural Symposium, that the range of stories and practices we see as relevant to architectural education must be expanded. Isabelle Stengers [9] uses the notion of the *minor* when addressing practises that challenge major or dominate approaches. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's exploration of minor literature as a minor language acting from within the major [10], the minor is here, in the context of this paper, understood as a position from where a criticality may be performed from within. The minor is not understood as external to major practises, but as a way of acting from a minor position *within*.

To work in a minor key [9], whether as a teacher or a practising architect, is to take an unstable and experimental approach to one own's work. The effects of one's actions cannot be foreseen, why one must ask oneself whether it is worth the risk: are we willing "to put both ourselves and the concepts we deploy at risk in the situation to enable its power to cause thought?" [11]. For us the question thus is: could an event such as the symposium enable a more generous space for thinking among students and teacher? The pedagogue scholar Hillevi Lenz Taguchi [12] suggest that the process of "becoming minoritarian" is mainly about

rejecting world-views where subjects and objects are seen as independent from each other. "Minoritarian pedagogy", does not mean that the teacher will have to play a role (e.g. that of a student) to be transformed – everyone who enters a process of becoming minor will be transformed. The sole process of rejecting normative ways of thinking and doing will make her become minoritarian, hence transformed [12]. Transformation does not depend on the abandonment of professional roles, but rather on the rejection of fixed concepts and hegemonic ideas on how to do things.

Whereas the idea of acting in a minor key cannot be deployed easily in practical teaching, there seems to be a value, and certain vigour, in doing things different to the habitual ways of working. Aiming at the minor is a courageous experiment, and at the same time, in each small step taken outside of dominant professional positions, a fairly unspectacular thing to do. The radical potential lies not in the big gesture, but in the gradual development of ways to unlearn one's own disciplinary habits. This is an accumulative process that has to be practised continuously and with a certain persistence that applies equally for the professional habits of teaching as those of architectural practice.

IV. Expanding Architecture

Our aim in introducing a critical, anti-oppressive (*sv. normkritisk*) pedagogical perspective was to problematize established hierarchies, structures and relations connected to identity, power and knowledge [13]. A critical pedagogical practice aims at supporting the students' own development of a critical attitude to the field [13]. We have in this process stressed the act of a criticality from within, nevertheless we admit that also critique is reliant on the critic's own norms and understandings of inequalities.

The symposium *Expanding Architecture – Critical Perspectives Acting from Within* was the answer to an identified lack of diversity in the architectural education: a deficiency exemplified in the architecture examples promoted within the education and in the type of knowledge that is encouraged, as well as the need of critical reflection of learning processes and results performed at the architecture school. The students' identification is in line with the architectural theory and pedagogical research that has criticized the normative reproduction in architecture and design education (and practice). From an educational perspective it is essential to implement these theoretical achievements in actual learning situations within architecture education. The symposium became an opportunity for reflections on how to do that within the architecture education and profession, as well as a statement for diversity at the architecture school at LTH. The arrangement of the symposium thus came to be a pedagogical example of how the architecture school's team of teachers and researchers can respond to a specific demand and contextualize the request in relation to contemporary architectural theory, research and design pedagogy.

The process of a non-normative/critical pedagogical practice can be outlined in three steps [13, p. 118, our translation]: 1) intervention (an attempt to recognize and expose norms), 2) processing (how is the norm created/what does the norm do), 3) learning (what are the consequences of the critical intervention/what did the students learn). The outcome of the symposium can be seen as an *intervention* that exposed norms and tried to challenge "the taken for granted world map" [13, our translation]. Furthermore, the speakers of the event also emphasized what norms do (and what practices that can be used to destabilize them), i.e. the second step of *processing*. We also hope that the above have initiated the progression of the third step as described above, *learning*, that needs to continue within the education. In order to achieve this a certain kind of stabilizing structures would still be required, securing for educational settings which acknowledge that learning is shaped by various collectives and heterogenous work processes, but also carried through each individual.

In this case, it is important to note that the pedagogical achievements and subject-related knowledge that was the result of *Expanding Architecture – Critical Perspectives Acting from Within* do not establish constant and stable knowledge or methods for achieving design. The methods and approaches communicated at the symposium depart from positions of criticality that continuously gathers experiences from its context and from multiple experiences. The event conveyed ideas and practices with the capacity to destabilize the relation between minor and major perspectives within an architectural educational framework. It is our hope that this shift of perspective, although momentary (i.e. performed during one day), will continue to travel throughout pedagogical activities at the faculty of architecture.

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