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Assembling archaeology, atmosphere and the performance of building spaces
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On shaping buildings

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Part 1

Form and temporality
On shaping buildings

Mikkel Bille and Tim Flohr Sørensen

Introduction

Building in the twenty-first century is characterised by a number of challenges framed by economic, environmental and social circumstances. Architecture today needs to be financially and environmentally sustainable, and strategies of so-called up-cycling and cradle-to-cradle are employed as ways to decrease ecological damage (see Love, this volume). As cities expand on a global scale and their spaces become inhabited and used in a multitude of ways (Kohn and Dawdy, this volume), there are ever-present expectations of the flexibility and adaptability of architecture, and at the same time a demand for sustainable architecture and planning for the future. Temporality and ‘temporary spaces’ have become a central theme in contemporary architecture; for instance in the requirements of the metropolis as a creative space that harbours momentary cultural events, refugees camps or buildings occupied by squatters, where people may be staying fleetingly or for a longer – yet often unknown – period of time (e.g. Mehrotra and Vera 2013; Ramadan 2013; Vasudevan 2015; Ziehl et al. 2012).

The increased focus on temporality and flexible form requires architecture to be malleable and reversible, and the planning must take into account the sustainability of obsolescence and anticipate the afterlife of buildings (Cairns and Jacobs 2014). At the other end of the scale, repositories for spent nuclear fuel are currently being constructed in Finland with the aim of lasting for no less than one hundred thousand years and are in fact planned to be entirely forgotten (Russell 2012; see also Joyce this volume). The notion of ‘temporary spaces’ is endemically vague, and in many ways offers a challenge or provocation to architectural ways of thinking about spatial robustness, order and permanence (Haydn and Temel 2006; Pløger 2008: 56). ‘Temporary spaces’ confirms that architecture is about form and formation of spaces. But it also shows that there is a temporality to this form. A stall at a marketplace is temporary, maybe being set up early in the morning and disassembled late in the afternoon. A megalithic monument from the Neolithic is also in a certain sense temporary. Built perhaps late in the fourth millennium BC and used for some centuries as a burial place, and then quarried in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century AD. Planning and time are seemingly the essence of how spaces of both of these timescales are built. Integral to this endeavour is a concern with the material dimensions of architecture; a concern that is by no means novel to contemporary architecture, but is also evident in the archaeological record globally. Human manipulation –
and non-human agents – add layers to architecture, peel layers off or corrupt the order and stratigraphy of architecture over time. All of these effects and conditions need to be understood as implications of dwelling and the materiality of built form that both facilitate and challenge spaces of inhabitation. In a sense, thus, as also outlined in the introduction, there are two central ways of conceiving architecture: either as form or as process. However, it would be ill-advised to see form and process as separated or opposing aspects of architecture. Form changes, even if slowly, and process is inherently temporal in its passing and planning of form. Temporality should here be understood both in terms of the pasts and presents that architecture materialises, but also as the duration of the less fixed forms, such as the temporary spaces and uses of space as illustrated above.

This section explores how the past, present and future is entangled in giving architecture form. The contributions to this section reveal different perspectives on the intersecting, non-linear and sometimes contradictory temporal processes unfolding in the building and re-building of architecture. Focusing on time is also a way of focusing on the ephemeral and processual qualities of form. Much research has dealt with conserving the identity of a geographical point in space as a necessary condition for human life, the *stabilitas loci* (Norberg-Schulz 1980: 18). But not all architecture is made of solid walls, nor does fixed architecture imply permanent inhabitation (Marcoux 2001). Nomadic architecture for instance consists of a minimum amount of material culture that is continuously reconstructed and moved. Yet it may be argued that the nomad’s home is not temporary, but simply moving (Prussin 1995: 42). Architect Kari Jormakka also argues that the idea of fixating the spirit of the place, *genius loci* in the vocabulary of Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980), ignores how there is a spirit in movement, a *genius locomotionis*. He argues that ‘architecture as the art of space is indissociable from actions and there is no architectural space without motion’ (Jormakka 2004: 192). Motion in essence is about temporality by negotiating form.

We believe that archaeology has something particularly valuable to contribute to this observation. As a discipline, archaeology is preoccupied with detailed analyses of the material dimensions of how buildings (and other artefacts) come into being, but sometimes, it seems, even more so on how they dilapidate and contribute to the formation of what we refer to as the archaeological ‘record’ (Lucas 2012; Schiffer 1987).

Precisely the elements of form and time are central to the contribution by Lesley McFadyen. She explores alternatives to the sometimes static view of form as something stable and shaped – a mudbrick, a wooden pillar, a wall and so on. McFadyen shows in her contribution, there is also a tremendous amount of materials used in architecture that are immanent and malleable – turf for instance, does not maintain its form – and due to the compression over time it does not appear easily in the archaeological section drawings. To McFadyen this malleability has meant that there has been an archaeological bias towards building materials with form compared with those without form, such as turf, scree or lumps of clay. Even if some materials are forced into form, they may not endure. The instability can then actually be seen as the potency of the formless materials that makes up many buildings from the past: the lack of stable, final or transcendent form is what makes them responsive to other materials and to a sealable matrix, in McFadyen’s study. Materials without form thus instigate different kinds of participation in assembling architecture.

Also, concerned with form, but at a different scale, Michał Murawski explores the massive Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, Poland. Turning to a building of enormous proportions, Murawski pursues a scalar approach to architecture, appreciating the immensity of certain forms of architecture that are ‘absolutely out-of-scale’, as he argues. Showing how the Palace of Culture and Science has a potency owing to its sheer size, Murawski relates how some citizens of Warsaw claim to have had ‘exhausting’ involuntary erotic experiences as the result
of the building’s phallic force of extreme proportions. A focus on large proportions offers a critique of assemblage theory for omitting the relevance of scale to the understanding of architecture, and challenging the ‘tendency to focus on the small over the large, to elevate the micro and elide the macro’.

Adding to such perspectives on the form, scale and temporality of architecture, Jonathan Hill pursues how the notion and reception of ruins has changed in architectural theory and history. He traces aesthetic and architectural developments through architectural icons Andrea Palladio, Giovanni Battista Piranesi and Louis Kahn. He argues that it is misconceived to distinguish monuments, invested with symbolic power, from ruins, with their allegoric potentials. Such a distinction neglects how both aspects may be present simultaneously in a building, issuing forth with potent effects. Hill argues that the eighteenth century notion of the ‘monumental ruin’ challenges precisely the idea that time and dilapidation mark the change from architecture to ruin. Through Kahn, Hill pursues the notion of ‘wrapping ruins around buildings’ to argue that ‘wrapping a ruin around a building is equivalent to wrapping absence around presence, the past around the present, and death around life’. In this way, the ruin is not necessarily the after-effect of the monument, but can constitute an entangled part of a building or an urban layout, combining ‘ruination and construction, broken remains and entire forms’.

In much the same vein, Gavin Lucas argues for the relevance of furthering the concept of ‘contemporaneity’ in archaeology, exploring how forms emerge as the coming together of elements with multiple simultaneous temporalities. He examines a seventeenth–eighteenth century building at Skálholt in southwest Iceland, showing how elements come together to an assemblage of architecture, exploring what different forms of matter and temporalities do to this becoming. The notion of persistence is central for Lucas ‘as the imbrication or overlapping of different architectural elements’. In effect this allows us to appreciate how buildings are animate forms that not only change over the long term, reflected in sequential archaeological phases, but also need to be understood through the rate of change of the various elements, ‘each with its own rhythms, tempos, speed’. By approaching buildings temporally in archaeology, Lucas seeks to conjoin ‘the idea of time as change with the idea of time as movement’. This offers the opportunity to complement periodisation with a metabolic feel of dynamism.

These imbrications of disparate temporal processes are also found in Alison Kohn and Shannon Lee Dawdy’s study of ‘informal cities’ of La Paz, Bolivia. In rapidly evolving cities temporary settlement may become permanent as rural populations move into cities. Often people are not able to find available houses or apartments, inhabiting instead ‘informal cities’ that emerge and in some cases expand speedily around whatever space is available. Unlike their reputation as hostile, poverty-stricken, disaster zones and the product of modern society, these informal or vernacular cities are full of meaning, history and future potentialities. Informal cities, Kohn and Dawdy argue, are places where temporality unfolds in different ways from in planned cities. Also, they assume different scales when miniature versions of planned material infrastructure are enrolled in ritual and the social lives of the inhabitants. The informal cities are essentially ongoing construction work throughout the lives of their builders, owners and inhabitants, drawing on the future and the past in the everyday lives (see also Nielsen, this volume).

The section ends with a photographic essay by Mark Minkjan and Ingel Vaikla. They focus on the relationship between parts and wholes in the material composition of Brussels. The city’s shifting make-up and the heterogeneous relationship between the urban plan and its individual parts makes it a conflictual place. It issues forth as an assemblage characterised by clashes between old and new architecture: ‘a patchwork of mega modernisation projects that imposed uncompromising changes on a city that had grown more or less organically until the mid-nineteenth century’. This tension forms an ambiguity and multiplicity that is also captured in the many
names of the city from the French Bruxelles, to the English Brussels, plural of the Dutch Brussel. Minkjan and Vaikla suggest that this should be seen as a ‘captivating confusion’, marked by ‘Architectural styles, infrastructural incisions, construction sites and urban decay [that] emerge where they are least expected, creating eclectic environments and rich scenes’. In the end this challenges the notion of Bruxelles as ‘a city’ in the singular, and Minkjan and Vaikla explore through words and images the potential multiplicity and fuzziness of the city.

We have thus in this section moved from the malleability of form over time towards the interwovenness of multiple temporalities invested in such forms. Particularly the contribution of Kohn and Dawdy and Minkjan and Vaikla show how temporality and form by no means are apolitical. Rather, there is a politics of form and recognition at play when building.

References