Space as Receptor, Instrument or Stage: Notes on the Interaction Between Spatial and Social Constellations

Hilde Heynen[a]

[a] Department of Architecture, University of Leuven, 3001 Leuven,
Belgium
Published online: 28 Nov 2013.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Space as Receptor, Instrument or Stage: Notes on the Interaction Between Spatial and Social Constellations

HILDE HEYNEN

Department of Architecture, University of Leuven, 3001 Leuven, Belgium

ABSTRACT *Acknowledging the need for a shared scholarly paradigm capable of explaining the interaction between spatial and social constellations, this paper presents a model which identifies three important ways to conceptualize this interaction: space seen as receptor, as instrument or as stage. The paper reviews the relevant literature from architectural history and theory, positioning it within a broader framework that also addresses material from anthropology, sociology and cultural geography. It points to similarities and parallels, but also to divergent sensibilities and contrasting understandings, which together make up a rich matrix of theoretical positions.*

Introduction

> We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.
> Winston Churchill

Most people will intuitively accept Winston Churchill's statement for the truism that it apparently is. Yet, a well-established scholarly paradigm capable of underscoring this elliptical formulation with a broadly conceived theoretical apparatus does not really exist. We do not yet dispose of a convincing theory anchored in empirical observations or historical interpretations that might be able to give a scientific basis to this idea. There are for sure several attempts to develop such an apparatus, but thus far they fall short of becoming a paradigm that is widely accepted and capable of generating interesting research programmes.

This situation no doubt has to do with the diversity of disciplines that are interested in the questions related to the interaction between spatial and social constellations: anthropology, social and cultural geography, sociology and architectural history and theory — to name only the most obvious ones. They all engage with the relation between space and culture, but they do so from different perspectives, with different methodologies and with different objectives. No wonder, therefore, that they do not easily agree about

---

Correspondence Address: Hilde Heynen, Department of Architecture, University of Leuven, Kasteelpark Arenberg 1, 3001 Leuven, Belgium. Email: hilde.heynen@asro.kuleuven.be

fundamental issues that touch upon their disciplinary core. It seems clear to me, however, that the only chance to develop a convincing theoretical apparatus lies in an interdisciplinary approach that would build upon the insights and methods developed within these different disciplines. In order to do that, it might be helpful to point towards divergent models of thought — it would be presumptuous to already call them 'paradigms' — that underlie the existing attempts to make sense of the relation between spatial configurations of the built environment on the one hand and social/cultural patterns on the other.

My aim in this paper is to review the literature from architectural history and theory that focuses on these issues, positioning them within a broader framework that also addresses material from anthropology, cultural geography and social sciences. I will thus be able to point to similarities and parallels, but also to divergent sensibilities and contrasting understandings, which together make up a rich matrix of theoretical positions. My proposition is that, within the broader literature, the relationship between spaces and social processes is viewed according to different models, three of which I want to outline here as the most basic ones. In the first of these three models, space is seen as a relatively neutral *receptor* of socio-economic or cultural processes. The second model regards spatial articulations as possible *instruments* in bringing about particular social processes. This model engages the built environment in a much more active way as the instigator of social or cultural change. The third model, which encompasses aspects of the first two, envisages the built environment as a *stage* on which social processes are played out. In the same way as the staging makes certain actions and interactions possible or impossible within a theatre play, the spatial structure of buildings, neighbourhoods and towns accommodates and frames social transformations.

As Markus (1993) has pointed out, the most solid architectural scholarship up till the 90s was produced by researchers who viewed architecture as an art, and hence treated social factors as only marginally interesting. This tradition is still dominant in architectural history and theory, but during the last decades a growing body of work has emerged that addresses social questions from an architectural perspective — or architectural questions from a social perspective (Crysler, Cairns, and Heynen 2012). The increasing impact of feminist and gender studies, the influence of postcolonial theories and the dissemination of actor-network theory have given rise to quite an array of studies probing into the interrelations between buildings and social forces. It thus seems a good moment to review this literature and to see which underlying theoretical ideas inform it.

My focus here will be on the relationship between (built) space and social processes. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, architecture has been understood by its practitioners as a discipline that is basically concerned with the articulation of space (Forty 2000). Space, on the other hand, is also seen as the core business of geography (Massey 2005). Geographers and architects (or urban designers), however, do not necessarily mean the same thing, when they discuss 'space'. Their ways of dealing with it are fundamentally different: 'Architecture is at the core a design-led discipline oriented towards (re)making and (re)shaping space. Geography, in contrast, is at core an analytical discipline oriented towards description and diagnosis of already-existing spatial circumstances' (Jacobs and Merriman 2011, 219). Since I am an architectural theorist, my alliance is with architecture — meaning that my use of the term 'space', if unqualified, will refer to the physical reality of the built environment, to buildings, to interiors, to urban spaces and to the way these entities interrelate.

Space as Receptor

The model of *space as receptor* implicitly posits space as a more or less neutral container that acts as a background for social activities. The features of space itself are not seen as decisive, but emphasis is placed on the influence exerted by social or cultural mechanisms, such as capital movements, labour relationships, discriminatory practices, symbolic transformations, etc. These mechanisms produce many kinds of effects whose spatial repercussions can be registered. This model is widely spread among several disciplines, especially among disciplines that are not actively involved in the planning or the design of the built environment. In anthropology and in social geography, for instance, the focus is most often on social mechanisms and cultural processes that play out in space and that leave their marks on spatial configurations, rather than the other way around (spatial configurations that would implicate social changes). The verbs used mostly within this model for indicating the relation between the spatial and the social are indicative verbs such as 'reflect', 'express' and 'embody'. They clearly give the active role to social and cultural processes, the imprint of which can then be detected in spatial appearances. This model produces interesting ways of 'reading' space, generating highly sophisticated methods of deciphering the social meaning of spatial phenomena.

Most of the early literature on the built environment and spatial form discussed in the review article by anthropologists Lawrence and Low (1990) adheres to his model. This is certainly true for the work of many ethnographers, as well as for that of urban sociologists such as Herbert Gans or environmental psychologists such as E.T. Hall. The majority of the authors mentioned by Lawrence and Low indeed study the effects of social and cultural processes on space — while largely ignoring the effects of spatial arrangements in the social realm. They ask questions about the way spatial formations can be seen as expressions of social mechanisms, about the meaning of space or about spatial behaviour of individuals, each time taking the existence of actual architectural and urban space as a given background, rather than as an active factor that in itself is capable of producing such behaviour.

The dominance of the idea of space as receptor continues in more recent contributions to anthropology of space or to urban sociology. Anthropologists such as De Boeck and Plissart (2004) or Simone (2004) are very much interested in urban environments and in the way people move about them, change them and use them to their advantage. They have perfect antennas for picking up people's spatial behaviour and for understanding how the symbolic meanings of built spaces are being modified by the spatial tactics of individuals and groups. They read urban spaces for clues about changing cultural patterns — as De Boeck does, for example, when he interprets recent spatial practices in a cemetery in Kinshasa (2008). In the changing cultural practices that he describes concerning death in Kinshasa, the role of the spatial characteristics of the cemetery is not decisive. The traces of cultural transformations become visible in the cemetery — youngsters squatting in the cemetery, graves being pillaged — but the space as such is not seen as generating or activating the transformations that are going on. De Boeck describes these transformations as happening in the symbolic, cultural realm, albeit induced by economic and political changes. Transformations are acted out in newly shaped rituals, which ascribe a central role to juvenile bodies, and which happen to take place in the graveyard. The graveyard, De Boeck states, 'has given urban youth a space to express the crisis, to find forms to *embody* the disintegration of their state, their city, their society and its culture'. The

cemetery as a space thus reflects these cultural processes, it supports and accommodates them, but De Boeck's interpretation does not stress the actual impact of its spatial qualities (e.g. hierarchy or symmetry in the lay-out of the graves, the rhythm of roads and paths, the presence of trees, etc.).

Also in cultural geography the interrelation between space and society is most often studied by asking how one can recognize the impact of social and cultural factors on spatial arrangements, or by studying the different discourses and practices that relate to spatial constellations, which are basically seen as a given. Landscape studies, for instance, usually look at landscapes as spatial entities that express or embody cultural values, and that is the result of complex practices and negotiations between stakeholders with different interests and different levels of power. Jackson, who initiated this field, did wonderful work analysing mundane entities such as supermarkets or garages and showing how they revealed changing patterns of consumption and family life (1997). Others in this field, especially those inspired by political economy, go a bit further. They do not just ask how (meanings of) landscapes are produced but also what effects landscapes produce on the people who inhabit them. Mitchell, for instance, states that the 'landscape is a concretization or reification of the social relations that go into its making. It is the phenomenal form of the social processes and practices of production, consumption, and exchange, as complex as those may be', but also that

> the landscape is the site for the production and reproduction of social life. Its homes, shops, roads, factories, and farms, its fields, forests, valleys, and ditch-banks, is *where* life is lived. (...) Landscape naturalizes social relations and makes them seem inevitable. (Mitchell 2003)

The last statements bring Mitchell close to those who would rather embrace the second model — space as an instrument, but still his work does not really focus on exactly which spatial features would have which kind of effects. Duncan and Duncan (2004) are more inclined to also study the agency of landscape. Their study on *Landscapes of Privilege* not only looks at how landscapes embody important cultural codes conveying social distinction and hierarchy, but they are also attuned at how the aesthetics of landscape are enmeshed in the production of the American class system. They are attentive to how a place carries with it a range of markers of inclusion and exclusion — hence shaping social hierarchies.

Within architectural history and theory the thought model of space as receptor has been particularly important in the body of literature that was generated by a semiotic approach. For many of the authors inspired by semiotics, spatial constellations embody meanings that can be deciphered through careful decoding, through a symbolic 'reading' of space. Robert Venturi and Scott Brown thus analysed the meaning of Las Vegas street scenes or of suburban neighbourhoods (Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour [1972] 1991). For Jencks (1978) architecture's functioning as a language was a reason enough to declare the death of modernism — 'modern architecture died ...' — and to pronounce the emergence of postmodernism, which, according to him, was based on this idea of architecture as language. Christian Norberg-Schulz revisited the history of architecture by investigating *The Meaning of Western Architecture* (Norberg-Schulz 1975), complementing this Western focus in a later book on *Genius Loci* that also looked at Khartoum (Norberg-Schulz 1980). Many of these early semiotic writings featured a structuralist

approach, looking for clear codes that could be rather easily identified and deciphered. Structuralism, however, could not adequately explain the multidimensionality of architecture — how it is experienced, not just by the mind but also by the body. Post-structuralist thought then offered new avenues of exploration, capable of accounting for shifting meanings and multiple readings, including those of inhabitants and users (Whyte 2006). Thus, the plot began to thicken: more and more architectural historians and theorists stressed how architecture cannot really be reduced to a symbolic language, but lies at the crossroads of many different forms of communication (explicit representation of intended meanings, structural requirements, functional needs, material necessities, aesthetic concerns, etc.). It seems that, if architecture is indeed a receptor of meaning originating in the social realm, this does not mean that it reflects these meanings in an undistorted way. Because so many meanings come together in a material and spatial constellation (be it a building or an urban space), the material and spatial qualities themselves are playing an important role in how they ultimately are conveyed. The material and spatial processing of multiple layers of significance add something to the mixture that is irreducible to any of the ingredients themselves. The full recognition of this understanding, however, would rather bring us to the third model — space as a stage.

Space as Instrument

Foucault's analysis of Bentham's design for a panopticon prison is one of the clearest instances of the use of space as an instrument to instigate social changes ([1975] 1991). Bentham's model for a prison was such that, thanks to the physical distribution of spaces, a sole guard could control a large number of prisoners. The guard was positioned in a circular tower which formed the centre of a ring of cells, each with windows on both the inner and the outer edge of the ring. This allows the guard to observe the inmates and control their behaviour. The constellation even works in the absence of a guard, because the inmates cannot make out whether or not the guard is present. Discipline, therefore, is executed, thanks to the physical, spatial set-up, which is effectively the most extreme case in which space works as an instrument. Newman, in his *Defensible Space*, also focuses on how spatial mechanisms — which for him include physical as well as symbolic aspects — can combine to bring an environment under the control of its residents. His book aims at describing spatial lay-outs of apartments and housing complexes that enable residents to easily perceive and hence control ongoing activities. These visually based spatial strategies are seen by him as contributing to a safe and secure environment, discouraging crime and thus contributing to the overall social well-being in a society (Newman 1972).

The proponents of this thought model use verbs such as 'organize', 'structure' and 'shape' or even stronger ones such as 'dominate', 'discipline' and 'determine' to talk about the relation between spatial articulations and their social effects. They focus on the capacity of space to impose certain desired behaviours on subjects, which effectuate a-symmetrical power relations between domineering and oppressed groups. This model is also at stake in what Lefebvre calls 'representations of space', which he sees as 'conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, (...). This is the dominant space in any society (or mode of production)' (Lefebvre [1974] 1991). For Lefebvre, this type of space is what structures the actual spaces of modernity, which he also sees as 'abstract space' — spaces devoid of sensuality,

of nature, of lived experience, where power is exercised through the imposition of a spatial order that causes reification and alienation.

Using architecture as a tool to change society was a fairly common idea among modernists. Especially left-wing modernists such as Bruno Taut or Ernst May were hoping that their new housing schemes would disrupt old habits by imposing new, transparent and open forms. In their eyes, the openness and transparency of the new architecture was prefiguring the ideal of a classless society to come (Heynen 1999). By living in newly conceived, collective housing that urged them to organize their lives in a new way, workers would become more politically aware, more involved with public interests and less inclined towards a purely individual lifestyle (Teige [1932] 2002). The proponents of the Modern Movement were indeed fascinated by the utopian notion that architecture could offer the leverage to change society. Not just the left-wing modernists, but also Le Corbusier was of this opinion. His famous dictum 'Architecture or revolution' was meant to convince politicians of the pacifying and benevolent capacity of architecture. If they would take seriously the promises of modern architecture — to provide decent living conditions for all — they could re-organize social life in a peaceful way and thus avoid the threat of a violent revolution.

Modernist architecture's desire to fashion people's lives in new ways was taken up by some politicians who relied upon architecture and urbanism in order to effectuate a rapid modernization of their country. The massive buildings' campaigns in Eastern Europe during the post-war decades, for instance, introduced new ways of living which institutionalized communism into a fact of daily life (Büchli 1999). Also in colonial and postcolonial conditions architecture and urbanism were called upon to implement social changes — and often with amazing effects. In Belgian Congo the Jesuit invention of the 'chapel-farm', a new spatial figure hundreds of which were built between 1895 and 1911, provided the Kwango territory with a network of roads and interconnections that was totally inexistent before (De Meulder 1998). In Algiers, the French colonizer invested massively in social housing, which might have been meant to counter the revolutionary forces emerging in the slums (Celik 1997), but which at the same time did accommodate thousands of inhabitants in apartments with modern amenities (Loeckx and Avermaete 2010).

The construction of new capital cities such as Ankara, Chandigarh, Brasilia, Canberra, Dodoma or Abuja should also be seen in this light. In all these instances, building a new, modern, attractive city underscored the ambition to start anew, to leave the past behind and to realign the country with the most progressive and emancipated notions of what a state was meant to be. In the same gesture, housing citizens and officials in newly built modern apartment blocks urged them to adapt their lifestyles and to adopt modern ways of living that kept traditional habits at bay. In newly independent Algeria, for instance, the struggle for modern dwelling was aligned with that against illness, illiteracy and obscurantism. Modern dwelling not only had to redeem people from insalubrious living conditions resulting from colonial oppression, but also to free them from the oppressive, feudal and patriarchal ways of living that lay hidden in the backward dwelling tradition (Loeckx 1998).

In looking back on these episodes, there is a growing consensus among architectural historians that most of these modernist endeavours failed to reach their intended goals. Leach, for instance, argues that:

> A fundamental part of the problem in Central and Eastern Europe has been the issue of the built environment. Architecture has been inextricably linked with social

developments. Clear parallels may be drawn between the utopian social projects of the first half of the twentieth century and the utopian architectural ones. Both represented dreams, noble enough in their intentions. But they were dreams which, against the backdrop of late twentieth-century scepticism, have clearly failed. (1999)

Scott, a political scientist, posits that the ideology of what he calls 'high modernism' — the unscientific belief in the capacities of comprehensive planning and of state-imposed architecture — has, in combination with undemocratic political systems, generated disastrous results, ranging from the Soviet efforts at collectivization of agriculture, over Nyerere's attempt to create *ujamaa* villages in Tanzania to Le Corbusier's urban planning of Chandigarh (1998). Whereas Scott is notoriously negative in his assessment of these planning ideals, others have a more balanced view. Many colonial and postcolonial modernist projects are now looked upon with a mixture of reluctant admiration for their bravura and lingering scepticism as to their results. Across the board the physical determinism that was often inherent to such 'high modernist' undertakings has been discredited — theoretically (Franck 1984; Dovey 1999) as well as empirically (Avermaete, Karakayali, and Von Osten 2010; Lu 2010). Cities such as Brasilia and Chandigarh, however, which in the 1980s were criticized for their ignoring local culture (Evenson 1989; Holston 1989) have more recently received rather favourable accounts, by scholars who herald their openness and modernity (Williams 2009; Khan 2011).

Whatever the ultimate judgement about specific projects, the utopian vision of architecture as an instrument of disciplining has never been fully realized: the final results always were different from the ones imagined by their architects and planners. This does not mean, however, that the whole idea of architecture as an instrument should be completely abandoned. It is not because the outcome does not coincide with the prediction that the instrument did not work at all. After all, in all the examples discussed above, architectural and urban interventions did change social reality — if not exactly in the manner as planned. Hence, it makes sense to further study how exactly these projects made a difference, and what difference they made. This intent is also at the basis of a series of writings by architectural theorists and historians who are focusing on the social effects of architecture. Especially, the activist literature that wants to demonstrate how certain spatial patterns have discriminatory effects continues to adopt the space-as-instrument model. Weisman, for example, implies this already in the very title of her book *Discrimination by Design* (1992). She believes that:

> the spatial arrangements of our buildings and communities reflect and reinforce the nature of gender, race, and class relations in society. The uses of both language and space contribute to the power of some groups over others and the maintenance of human inequality. (Weisman 1992, 2)

Weizman, in his analysis of Israel's architectural strategies of occupation, reads the resulting structures as 'solidifications' of social, economic, national and strategic forces (2007, 6) or as 'accelerators' of political processes which rely upon 'techniques of domination'. Both Weisman and Weizman are careful not to become overly simplistic in their interpretations, and their actual analyses are more finely tuned and subtler than these generalizations would lead one to expect. They both nevertheless insist on the power of

architecture to enforce patterns of domination, even while admitting that those under domination have their own ways of resisting that power.

Space as Stage

The last thought model integrates in fact the first two. In conceiving of spatial arrangements as the *stage* on which social life unfolds, the impact of social forces on architectural and urban patterns is recognized (because the stage is seen as the result of social forces) while at the same time spatial patterns are seen as modifying and structuring social phenomena. The difference with the first model — space as receptor — is that the agency of spatial parameters in producing and reproducing social reality is more fully recognized. The difference with the second model — space as instrument — is that the theatrical metaphor is far from deterministic, and that this thought model thus allows for a better understanding of the interplay between forces of domination and forces of resistance.

The theatrical metaphor is not a new one. Markus points out that Paul Frankl already in 1914 defined a building as a 'theatre of human activity' (1993). Other historians and critics have used the theatrical metaphor to describe the city. According to Mumford, for example, the city is 'a theatre of social action', the place that is absolutely necessary for the 'social drama' to unfold, the social drama 'that comes into existence through the focusing and intensification of group activity' ([1937] 1996). Within the social sciences the idea of space as theatre can be found early on in the work of Goffman (1959). In his account of how individuals present themselves to others, Goffman uses the metaphor of theatrical performance, discussing 'front' and 'back' as regions where people are, respectively, actively performing for an audience or rather preparing their act. He explicitly makes the link with rooms in the home — with the living room as an example of 'front' space and the kitchen as 'backstage'. More recently, the 'performative turn' in the social sciences (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000), building upon the work of, among others (a.o.), Butler, requires attention for the many ways in which performances are important in the interactions among people, as well as among people and spaces. Butler argues that gender is not inherent to bodies, but is acquired through repeated performances of femininity or masculinity (1993). Although she herself does not elaborate too much about the importance of the arrangement of the setting for the success of gender performances, one can easily see — as in the case of Goffman — how her reasoning implies a tacit recognition that spatial settings, just like props and costumes, come to bear upon these performances.

Regarding space as a stage is thus not entirely alien to the social sciences. One encounters it even quite often in a somewhat weaker form — without the explicit reference to the theatre, but in line with the recognition that spatial constellations condition, structure and frame social interactions. Lofland (1998), for instance, subscribes to this notion. She criticizes her fellow sociologists for their 'agoraphobia', arguing that the fear of falling in the trap of physical determinism has made them blind to the impact of spatial variables. Yet, she claims, 'there are very good reasons to accept, at least as a working hypothesis, the idea that the character of the built environment (meaning the arrangement of physical objects in space) is connected to what humans do in that environment' (Lofland 1998, 181). Within cultural anthropology, Low advocates that the role of space and place is much more crucial than generally accepted within her

discipline. In her book, *On the Plaza* she provides both a 'classical' ethnographic account of how people use a public space, focusing on two plazas in San José and Costa Rica, and an argument about how the urban design of these two plazas contributes in different ways to the social construction of differences — class differences, gender differences and age differences. Her account is thus clearly recognizing the critical impact of spatial features on public life and on social expectations as they unfold in these plazas (Low 2000). Political scientist Margareth Kohn, in her book on *Radical space: Building the House of the People,* likewise argues that 'particular spaces function to initiate, maintain, or interrupt interaction. They aggregate or exclude; they encourage or inhibit contact between people; and they determine the form and scope of the contact' (Kohn 2003, 155).

French theorists Michel De Certeau and Henri Lefebvre also come close to an understanding of space as conditioning, structuring or framing social behaviours without really determining them. De Certeau distinguishes between the formal planning interventions that deploy *strategies* of the state to discipline and control its citizens (closely following a Foucauldian logic) and the informal *tactics* of individuals and groups who circumvent and subvert the official system in the everyday practices of using city streets and public spaces. For him the use of space as an instrument is therefore never complete and exhaustive, because it evokes its opposite and thus leads to unpredictable outcomes. Individuals and social groups transform the scene that is set for them by officials, they displace the order imposed on them, transforming its coherence into a system full of cracks and gaps which enable the flexibility of the everyday to modify the rigidity of rational planning (De Certeau [1980] 1990).

For Lefebvre, representations of space — which refer to the order imposed by those in power — can be countered by representational spaces, spaces that embody complex symbolisms linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life or to art ([1974] 1991, 33). Whereas representations of space can be understood as (architectural and urbanist) concepts of space that help to effectuate the strategies that sustain a capitalist economic order, representational spaces would rather come close to those lived experiences that De Certeau saw as 'tactical' answers or as subversive techniques of resistance. The interplay between both means that representations of space never completely succeed in ordering and disciplining social life — hence their role as instrument always falls short. Representational spaces, on the other hand, allow for flexible appropriations of space and imaginary escapes from capitalist routines, while they might not be capable of really overturning the basic relations of production. This description might comply with our theatrical metaphor, since Lefebvre acknowledges as well that space is produced socially as that social reality is heavily influenced by spatial relations.

Gieryn frames these approaches by referring to the debate within the social sciences about structure and agency, stating that for theorists such as Giddens and Bourdieu buildings are an integral element of structuration and reproduction. He claims that both these theorists, while agreeing in principle with the notion that buildings are shaped as well as shaping, in their own work nevertheless tend to stress only one of these poles — human agency in shaping buildings in the case of Giddens, buildings acting as external and autonomous forces structuring social practices in the case of Bourdieu (Gieryn 2002, 37). Gieryn argues that 'a complete sociology of buildings requires Giddens + Bourdieu. Analysis must respect the double reality of buildings, as structures structuring agency but never beyond the potential restructuring by human agents' (Gieryn 2002). He thus acknowledges on the one hand the conditioning effect of spatial constellations on

human behaviours, while on the other hand also recognizing that individuals still have elbow room to re-interpret buildings and built spaces, using them against the grain, as it were.

Gieryn is, among social scientists, somewhat of an exception in that he really studies the effects of specific designs and of actual spatial configurations on their users. Most social scientists do not delve very deeply into the actual mechanisms that are responsible for the effects of spatial patterns on social behaviours and/or cultural patterns — at least not on the scale of buildings and neighbourhoods. The analysis of real life spatial configurations that co-produce social reality is done to much more effect by those trained in architectural history or theory. Loeckx, for instance, analysed how, in the 1980s Algeria, a newly developed road interlinking different mountain villages in the Kabylia region, provided a new type of space inviting new types of behaviour: women leaving the villages for errands, children going to school together, groups of men walking the road from the first to the last village and back again. This new spatial figure even became the setting for political demonstrations against the language policy of the Algerian regime — something that was unheard of before (Loeckx 1998).

Dovey offers other examples of detailed analyses in his book *Framing Places. Mediating Power in Built Form* (1999). After an elaborate investigation of different spatial patterns with marked social effects — lineal enfilades, shopping malls, tall office buildings and suburban homes — he can rightly conclude:

> Oppression and liberation are forms of social practice which are mediated by built form. These practices 'take place': they frame and are framed by certain spatial structures and provinces of meaning. The nature of architecture and urban design, their silent framings of everyday life, lend themselves to practices of coercion, seduction, domination and the legitimation of authority. (. . .) Buildings necessarily both constrain and enable certain kinds of life and experience. (Dovey 1999, 183)

Dovey's theoretical framework refers to the space syntax analysis developed by Hillier and Hanson (1984) and Hillier (1996). Space syntax claims to be a specifically *architectural* theory, based on spatial/architectural parameters rather than importing philosophical or social theories from other disciplines. Its basic idea is that spatial configurations have an ordering impact on how social relationships unfold and that it is possible to unravel this connection by studying underlying spatial patterns, such as 'depth' (the number of thresholds to cross before reaching the innermost space in a building) or 'axiality' (the presence of a long visual axis). Space syntax posits that the relation between buildings and individuals is mediated through the spatial configurations formed by built spaces, configurations which affect the co-presence and co-awareness of collections of people who inhabit and use these spaces. Hence, space syntax avoids a deterministic logic, while still claiming that there is a probabilistic relation between spatial configurations and people's behaviour, a relation which can be investigated, modelled and hence predicted (Hillier 1996). Some applications of space syntax should therefore rather be seen as belonging to the thought model of space as instrument. The basic assumptions of the theory, however, are not deterministic as such and conceive of spatial configurations indeed as stages which accommodate and condition human behaviour.

Within the literature focusing on gender and architecture, one finds very fine-tuned analyses which build upon an understanding of space as stage. Torre's observations on the

Mothers of the Plaza del Mayo (who brought down the Argentinian military dictatorship by their insistent reminiscing of their disappeared sons and daughters during low-key demonstrations in Buenos Aires' most prominent public space) are a very fine example of this (1996). Colomina's analysis of the gendered architectures of Loos and Le Corbusier also focuses on how these architects rely upon a theatrical (Loos) or a cinematographic (Le Corbusier) understanding of space (1994). The connection that Friedman unravels between feminist ideals of reforming domesticity and modernist houses likewise is based upon an interdisciplinary approach that links architectural with social and cultural history. This approach highlights how architectural configurations on the one hand testify to the conventions of social reality while on the other hand contributing to their transformation (Friedman 1998). Her case studies of a.o. the Rietveld Schröder house, the Farnsworth house (architect Mies van der Rohe) and the Stein-de Monzie house (architect Le Corbusier) show how the female clients of these houses requested new spatial arrangements to accommodate their expectations of new patterns of family life and new forms of social interaction.

In the proliferating literature applying postcolonial perspectives on architecture and urbanism, the approach I labelled 'space as stage' is also most often adopted. Postcolonial studies of colonial planning and architecture usually bring to the fore how these interventions only rarely achieved the intended results. These studies do show, however, that the modern urban spaces that were produced by modernist planning and architecture functioned as catalysts for forms of behaviour that were definitely new and modern — if not the docile kind of 'modern' desired by the colonizers. Kusno, for example, discusses the workings of the urban space in Djakarta as absolutely crucial for the construction of a national Indonesian subject as well as for forms of resistance that work against dominant political forces (2000). Hosagrahar discerns 'indigenous modernities' in Delhi, arguing that the confrontation between imported modernism and local realities created urban and dwelling spaces where colonialism was negotiated rather than imposed — acknowledging the two-way logic of spaces that are on the one hand imposing a certain order while on the other hand opening up cracks and gaps that allow for inventive reinterpretations and uses that exceed what was intended by those who planned them (2004).

The recent literature on 'agency' in architecture (Doucet and Cupers 2009; Kossak et al. 2010; Awan, Schneider, and Till 2011) very often focuses on the agency of the architect rather than on the agency of architecture as built space. Yet the most theoretically informed contributions to this literature also engage with the latter question. Jaschke (2010), for example, advocates an ecological reconsideration of architecture, which addresses questions of embodiment, agency and performance. She criticizes the notion that architecture arises from a mental image in the mind of the architect, which then is simply transferred into built reality. Following Tim Ingold, she rather understands buildings as coming forth from, and transforming, specific relational contexts that their makers are involved in, contexts that not only include engineers, clients, contractors, stakeholders and users, but also the natural elements — the land — that make all of this possible. Hughes (2009), reflecting upon transdisciplinary methodologies and upon 'relationality', ponders the need for transverse epistemologies, which are necessary if architecture is to be linked with social and environmental sciences, with art and with technology. 'To work in the space *between* disciplines,' he argues, 'we may have recourse to liminal thinking — paradox and contradiction, epistemic control and release' (Hughes 2009, 52). This

liminal thinking in architecture might be found by conceiving of architecture as a *gesture*, as an essentially performative mode that ties together, negotiates and modulates the many relational contexts it is involved in.

Hughes refers to the argument of Latour and Yaneva (2008) that we should learn to look at architecture as a series of transformations. Latour and Yaneva claim that buildings are not static objects but moving projects, continuously being transformed as well during their conception stage as once they are built:

> we should finally be able to picture a building as a moving modulator regulating different intensities of engagement, redirecting users' attention, mixing and putting people together, *concentrating* flows of actors and *distributing* them so as to *compose* a productive force in time-space. (Latour and Yaneva 2008, 86)

Yaneva explicitly contrasts this approach with the strands of architectural theory that we identified above as relying upon the models of, respectively, 'space as receptor' and 'space as instrument' (2012, 37). The relational approach she stands for refuses to take the bifurcation of architecture and society as a starting point. It rather conceives of buildings as 'mediators, regulating flows of actors and energies, concentrating and distributing humans and non-humans, connecting and disconnecting them, facilitating or impending communication' (Yaneva 2012, 110). This conception is very close indeed to my metaphor of architecture as stage, although, surprisingly, Yaneva's elaboration of this approach in concrete studies of specific buildings does not consider so much their material realities, but rather the discourses that surround them.

My surprise at the absence, in Yaneva's work, of discussions that deal with the physical articulation of space as found in specific buildings or urban spaces, is often repeated in confrontations with work of cultural geographers. Nigel Thrift's *Non-representational Theory. Space / Politics / Affect* (2008), for instance, is again remarkable for its theoretical explorations of space as a set of configurations mixing in a variety of assemblages of the social, as a poetics of the un-thought and as harbouring active qualities designed into its becoming (2008, 16). Like Latour and Yaneva, Thrift is serious in exploring a 'flat' ontology where humans and non-humans all take up agency and where space, rather than being 'ground' or 'background', is seen as a mediator and a connector, the materiality of which matters. In advocating this position, these social scientists come a long way in recognizing how the social and the spatial are mutually entangled. Yet for architects and urban designers it is very strange to see that in their concrete analyses they do not seem to believe in the productivity of analytical drawings, plans, maps or even diagrams. The supposedly all-important materiality of spaces is accounted for through discourse — text rather than graphics. This, it seems to me, is a weakness. The flatness of an ontology that puts everyone and everything on the same plane, does not do justice to what one could call temporal differentialities in movement. If buildings move — as Latour and Yaneva (2008) convincingly argue — the pace of their moving nevertheless is far slower than the everyday movements of users and inhabitants. Buildings are, after all, 'mutable immobile[s]: (. . .) fixed in space (. . .) but (. . .) open to adjustment' (Guggenheim as quoted in Jacobs and Merriman 2011, 216).

As mutable immobiles, buildings do have effects on their users, allowing certain behaviours and prohibiting others. This physical conditioning necessitates a kind of analysis that cannot solely rely upon discourse, but requires methods of investigation characteristic

for disciplines such as architecture and urban design. This is also recognized by Thomas Gieryn. In considering 'A Space for Place in Sociology', he found that he was lacking tools to analyse place in its concrete dimensions:

> I am a victim, perhaps, of trained incompetence in a discipline that cultivates stat-istics and words as means to grasp the social. Sociologists could become more adept with maps, floor plans, photographic images, bricks and mortar, landscapes and cityscapes, so that interpreting a street or forest becomes as routine and as infor-mative as computing a chi-square. That visualizing (I think) is the next step. (Gieryn 2000, 484)

Conclusion

This article has discussed three different ways of understanding the relation between phys-ical, spatial constellations and social patterns. Whereas social scientists and anthropolo-gists tend to adopt the model of 'space as receptor', architects and planners are more inclined towards the idea of 'space as instrument'. Both these thought models however can only give a partial account of the issues at stake. In many cases, spatial entities such as landscapes or urban spaces can indeed be 'read' and 'decoded' in order to uncover the traces of the past and the symbolic meanings they embody. This approach of space as receptor however does not give much insight in how spatial constellations actively and effectively influence people's behaviour. The 'space as instrument' approach on the other hand focuses very much on the structuring powers of spatial constellations, foregrounding effects of disciplining and control, but neglecting the many different ways in which individuals and groups misuse, misinterpret and turn around spatial arrangements that they do not appreciate.

The third model of 'space as stage' is the one that allows for an integration of the two other ones. It is the model that underlies many recent interdisciplinary efforts to under-stand the relation between people and space. This model can be considered as most pro-ductive and allowing for further fine-tuning in the gradual rapprochement between the 'spatial disciplines' (architecture, urban design and planning) and social sciences (soci-ology, geography and anthropology). I am not alone in advocating the need for more and closer collaborations between the disciplines. Jacobs and Merriman likewise plea for more creative dialogues between geographers and architects:

> what might the practices of geography learn from the speculative thinking of archi-tecture? What expressive and representational possibilities exist within the visual languages of architecture? (...) We hope that [the] trend toward a more relevant and relational geographical practice also results in renewed possibilities of collabor-ation between geographers and their architectural colleagues. (Jacobs and Merriman 2011, 219)

Such an interdisciplinary approach is indeed dearly needed, since more and more it becomes clear that a sustainable development of the built environment should not only rest upon technological and disciplinary insights from the spatial disciplines, but should also take into account the manifold ways that people deal with how the built environment conditions their behaviour.

Addressing space as stage also allows for a more encompassing understanding of the notion of 'spatial quality': it would imply that this quality is on the one hand intrinsic to specific spatial constellations (hence adequately assessed from an architectural or urban design point of view), while, on the other hand, the full realization of its 'promesse de bonheur' would rely upon the way it favours and stimulates the unfolding of socially desirable effects.

Acknowledgements

References

Avermaete, T., S. Karakayali, and M. Von Osten, eds. 2010. *Colonial Modern. Aesthetics of the Past, Rebellions for the Future*. London: Black Dog.

Awan, N., T. Schneider, and J. Till, eds. 2011. *Spatial Agency. Other Ways of Doing Architecture*. London: Routledge.

Büchli, V. 1999. *An Archaeology of Socialism*. Oxford: Berg.

Butler, J. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. London: Routledge.

Celik, Z. 1997. *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations. Algiers Under French Rule*. London: University of California Press.

Colomina, B. 1994. *Privacy and Publicity. Modern Architecture as Mass Media*. London: MIT Press.

Crysler, G., S. Cairns, and H. Heynen, eds. 2012. *Handbook Architectural Theory*. London: Sage.

De Boeck, F. 2008. "'Dead Society' in a 'Cemetery City': The Transformation of Burial Rites in Kinshasa." In *Heterotopia and the City. Public Space in a Postcivil Society*, edited by M. Dehaene and M. De Cauter, 297–308. London: Routledge.

De Boeck, F., and M. F. Plissart. 2004. *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City*. Gent: Ludion.

De Certeau, M. [1980] 1990. *L'invention du quotidien 1. Arts de faire*. Paris: Gallimard.

De Meulder, B. 1998. "Mavula. An African Heterotopia in Kwango, 1895–1911." *Journal of Architectural Education* 52 (1): 20–29.

Doucet, I., and K. Cupers, eds. 2009. "Agency in Architecture: Reframing Criticality in Theory and Practice." *Footprint*, no. 4: 1–6.

Dovey, K. 1999. *Framing Places. Mediating Power in Built Form*. London: Routledge.

Duncan, J. S., and N. G. Duncan. 2004. *Landscapes of Privilege: The Politics of the Aesthetic in an American Suburb*. London: Routledge.

Evenson, N. 1989. *The Indian Metropolis. A View Toward the West*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Forty, A. 2000. *Words and Buildings. A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Foucault, M. [1975] 1991. *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Franck, K. A. 1984. "Exorcising the Ghost of Physical Determinism." *Environment and Behavior* 16 (4): 411–435.

Friedman, A. T. 1998. *Women and the Making of the Modern House. A Social and Architectural History*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Gieryn, T. F. 2000. "A Space for Place in Sociology." *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 463–496.

Gieryn, T. F. 2002. "What Buildings Do." *Theory and Society* 31 (1): 35–74.

Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.

Heynen, H. 1999. *Architecture and Modernity. A Critique*. London: MIT Press.

Hillier, B. 1996. *Space is the Machine. A Configurational Theory of Architecture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hillier, B., and J. Hanson. 1984. *The Social Logic of Space*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Holston, J. 1989. *The Modernist City. An Anthropological Critique of Brasília*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hosagrahar, J. 2004. *Indigenous Modernities. Negotiating Architecture and Urbanism*. London: Routledge.

Hughes, R. 2009. "The Art of Displacement: Designing Experiential Systems and Transverse Epistemologies as Conceptual Criticism." *Footprint* 4: 49–64.

Jackson, J. B. 1997. *Landscape in Sight. Looking at America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Jacobs, J. M., and P. Merriman. 2011. "Practising Architectures." *Social & Cultural Geography* 12 (1): 211–222.

Jaschke, K. 2010. "Acting Up: Architectural Practice as Ecological Performance." In *Agency: Working With Uncertain Futures*, edited by F. Kossak, D. Petrescu, T. Schneider, R. Tyszczuk and S. Walker, 79–88. London: Routledge.

Jencks, C. 1978. *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*. London: Academy.

Khan, H. U., ed. 2011. *Le Corbusier: Chandigarh & the Modern City*. Ahmedabad: Mapin.

Kohn, M. 2003. *Radical Space: Building the house of the people*. Ithaca: Yale University Press.

Kossak, F., D. Petrescu, T. Schneider, R. Tyszczuk, and S. Walker, eds. 2010. *Agency: Working With Uncertain Futures*. London: Routledge.

Kusno, A. 2000. *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Space and Political Cultures in Indonesia*. London: Routledge.

Latour, B., and A. Yaneva. 2008. "An ANT's View of Architecture." In *Explorations in Architecture. Teaching Design Research*, edited by R. Geiser, 80–89. Basel: Birkhäuser.

Lawrence, D. L., and S. M. Low. 1990. "The Built Environment and Spatial Form." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19: 453–505.

Leach, N. 1999. *Architecture and Revolution. Contemporary Perspectives on Central and Eastern Europe*. London: Routledge.

Lefebvre, H. [1974] 1991. *The Production of Space*. Malden: Blackwell.

Loeckx, A. 1998. "Kabylia, the House and the Road: Games of Reversal and Displacement." *Journal of Architectural Education* 52 (2): 87–99.

Loeckx, A., and T. Avermaete. 2010. "'Architecture ou Révolution'. Critical Moderns and the Search for a New Urbanity in 1950s Algiers." In *Colonial Modern. Aesthetics of the Past, Rebellions for the Future*, edited by T. Avermaete, S. Karakayali, and M. Von Osten, 170–187. London: Black Dog.

Lofland, L. H. 1998. *The Public Realm. Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory*. New York: De Gruyter.

Low, S. 2000. *On the Plaza: the Politics of Public Space and Culture*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Lu, D., ed. 2010. *Third World Modernism: Architecture, Development and Identity*. London: Routledge.

Markus, T. A. 1993. *Buildings & Power. Freedom and Control in the Origin of Modern Building Types*. London: Routledge.

Massey, D. 2005. *For Space*. London: Sage.

Mitchell, D. 2003. "Dead Labor and the Political Economy of Landscape. California Living, California Dying." In *Handbook of Cultural Geography*, edited by K. Anderson, M. Domosh, S. Pile and N. Thrift, 233–248. London: Sage.

Mumford, L. [1937] 1996. "What is a City?" In *The City Reader*, edited by R. T. LeGates and F. Stout, 183–188. London: Routledge.

Newman, O. 1972. *Defensible Space. Crime Prevention through Urban Design*. New York: Macmillan.

Norberg-Schulz, C. 1975. *Meaning in Western Architecture*. London: Studio Vista.

Norberg-Schulz, C. 1980. *Genius Loci. Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. London: Academy.

Scott, J. C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Simone, A. 2004. *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities*. London: Duke University Press.

Teige, K. [1932] 2002. *The Minimum Dwelling*. London: MIT press.

Thrift, N. 2008. *Non-Representational Theory. Space / Politics / Affect*. London: Routledge.

Thrift, N., and J. D. Dewsbury. 2000. "Dead Geographies — And How to Make Them Live." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18 (4): 411–432.

Torre, S. 1996. "Claiming the Public Space. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo." In *The Sex of Architecture*, edited by D. Agrest, P. Conway, and L. K. Weisman, 241–250. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Venturi, R., D. Scott Brown, and S. Izenour. [1972] 1991. *Learning from Las Vegas. The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. London: MIT Press.

Weisman, L. K. 1992. *Discrimination by Design. A Feminist Critique of the Man-Made Environment*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Weizman, E. 2007. *Hollow Land. Israe's Architecture of Occupation*. London: Verso.

Williams, R. J. 2009. *Brazil. Modern Architectures in History*. London: Reaktion.

Whyte, W. 2006. "How Do Buildings Mean? Some Issues of Interpretation in the History of Architecture." *History and Theory* 45 (2): 153–177.

Yaneva, A. 2012. *Mapping Controversies in Architecture*. Farnham: Ashgate.