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Intravention, Durations, Effects
Notes of Expansive Sites and Relational Architectures

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Umeå School of Architecture
intravention, durations, effects
Inside a quiet cafe, in a well-known European city, a group of master's students in architecture sit around a table while they wait for a guest to arrive. Everyone is a bit excited since the guest is a famous figure of architectural theory that will probably throw some light onto their ongoing discussions about something called ‘relational architecture’. They have invited the guest for an encounter/interview/conversation. But the guest is quite late.
Students and teachers start a discussion partly initiated by some lines read from a transcription of an interview with the absent guest:

- “Speculative theories are the basis to develop projective matter” reads someone aloud.
- “Yes, but aren’t we talking all the time about being concrete?” reacts someone immediately.

- “Wait, there’s something even more interesting here, listen: “[...] more and more designers embrace pluralism and the endless relations that an intelligent system can generate. The danger is that their search for difference or the stimulation of the unpredictable is elevated to an absolute law, and the possibility of difference is fetishized” says the reader again.

- “What does he mean by fetishizing difference?” asks someone else.

- “Hmm... I think that would be if you start focusing exclusively on producing ‘difference’, no matter how small or unimportant that difference is, and that takes over everything else” replies one of them. “As if for instance the fact that I am moving this sugar dispenser now...” and he takes the sugar dispenser in his right hand and moves it to another position on the table while he goes on... “was understood as changing the world”.

- “Well.... but in fact, it is changing the world, isn’t it?” says someone else from the far end of the table.

- “Not really!” says another one that had been quiet until now.

- “I think it does change the world to some extent” adds one of them.

- “I am not sure that is true” says another.

- “...”

We begin setting out our thoughts on immediate architectural interventions with a couple of considerations. One of them addresses the architectural profession’s progressive disconnection from the social, from the political, from history, from the local, from ethics, from the body, from the ‘discipline’ itself. A whole generation of architects has abandoned the design of coexistence — undoubtedly one of the main tasks of architecture — in order to embrace, on the one hand, the serial fabrication of what we see as anti-architectures that repeat types, materials and structural systems on the basis of a pragmatic and productive juxtaposition of normative restrictions and the interests of bankers, investors, and developers; and on the other hand, the production of ‘stunning’ unique prototypes of image-architecture that satisfy the ill, self-worshipping yearnings of architects mired in the ceaseless luxury of formal exploration for the sake of form. We are critical of what is being embraced and of the practices that perpetuate disconnection from lived lives.

1 The sections quoted (recited) in the dialogue are by Markus Miessen and Roemer van Toorn, respectively, as found in Van Toorn, Roemer, 2009, “Architecture as Political Practice: Roemer van Toorn in Conversation with Markus Miessen” in Conditions: Independent Scandinavian Magazine on Architecture and Urbanism, #1, Strategy for Evolution. Oslo, Norway.


Although setting up the ‘other’ as, in a sense, the unmarked term to talk about difference can be problematic, it may be helpful to speak about the differences in approaches to architectural production.

To generalize for a moment: offices like Hadid’s, or Foster’s, or many others of smaller sizes and turnover, have a different ontological and ontogenetic position than ours. That is, they understand how a building comes into being, its processes and practices of development, in a particular way: how one procures work, how one organizes an office, how one communicates to different audiences along the way of building, etc. And, again, with the risk of overgeneralizing, they believe that the building is the center around which all else revolves. They perhaps understand that it will produce effects in both its immediate physical and social contexts; however, these potential effects are not often considered seriously to be part of the building itself. There is a formalist tendency in much of the work, which may or may not produce beautiful objects, and may or may not produce positive effects. The buildings produced might be seen as interventions, but are they transversal? Or diffractive? They are certainly not interventions in the way we will define them below.

Underlying our critique is a position that architecture is not an autonomous entity that is devised in the architect’s studio on the basis of his/her capacities as ‘genius’ and through some kind of obscure, almost magical process and then deployed on a pre-existing piece of land. Rather, it is a complex and relational practice that comes about in various ‘fields’, and takes place in collaboration with things and people, and is always material as well as cultural and political and technological and artistic and, and... It is a practiced practice, involving many different actors, people, institutions and apparatuses.

**Interventions**

Our desire to intervene reflects this awareness and critique of these conditions of disconnection and distancing between people and the social, as well as between people and ‘bodies’ – their own or those of materials, technologies, and indeed discourses. Our desire to intervene is a desire to affect the world, and resonates with the given that, as Antonio Machado says, ‘we lay down the path while walking’. We believe in the need to be ‘inside’, intervening here and now, close to where we are and with the tools we have at hand, with borrowed methodologies, and invented methods. We want ‘to architect’.

The ‘tool’ of intervention is indeed a powerful one. First of all it presupposes a place/time in which to intervene, that is, it takes, and makes, a position. But if we also believe that the very nature of being (and therefore, space) is understood to be always in the coming-into-being – laying down the path – how do we then contemplate something – anything – being ‘there’ in any sort of ‘stable’ way before our interactions with it? Well, we are not relativists, and we can and do establish contours that delineate particular conditions of architecture (for instance, its disconnection to the social, its abandonment of coexistence as a motivator, its production of elitist image-making, topographies, weather, ... ). This is understandable and necessary, because we need to start somewhere, even if we say we are starting ‘in the middle’ ...

We need to have an awareness of ‘history’ (and understand whose historiography we happen to be entangled with), in the sense that it is difficult to speak or act from a position, even to conceive of a position, if nothing was there before we ‘arrived’ and any such negation of the ‘before’ amounts to almost the same as a negation of history. In that sense we would claim that there are certainly many ‘things’ already there when we arrive, from some shared understanding of the material characteristics of the space, to the acquired memories recorded in those things and spaces throughout time, through the field conditions that determine, to a certain extent, those spaces and those things and, most importantly, our own embodied ‘skills’, acquired through time in a process of growth and development that enables us to act. A radical negation of the existence of anything prior to our interactions with things entails an additional risk: that of extreme individualism. Other people and other things were there before, and have been interacting with each other and with other things and people in turn, and the results of all those previous interactions will affect our here-and-now interactions in fundamental ways.

The idea that there is a history, an ‘already there’, a site which we might say preexists this moment, this just now,
is substantiated by our attention to it, an attention which makes (us part of) that site. And it is through a notion of expanded site – rather than a notion of scale with its predilections of hierarchy and nestedness – that we understand the extent of the intervention, i.e., the materials, institutions, social groupings, etc. of which we are involved and are ‘bracketing in’ to our considered purview. Through both the expansion of site into various concerns, and the simultaneous considered selection (the bracketing out, and in) of various actants, agendas, antagonisms and histories, we ethically and politically mark out and are entangled in the world. Where we want to intervene becomes a crucial question, in what site, how, for/with whom? So sites and the interventions that make them afford us the possibility to talk about judgments and political intentions as well as to measure effects. Do we want to enable a particular conversation? Do we want to challenge neoliberal worlds? Do we want to do both?

Intraventions

This notion of attention finds resonance in Karen Barad’s work, where we find a focus on intra-actions rather than inter-actions. She posits not a world that is somehow unstable due to our inability to define moments and spaces, but proffers a world that is full of very precise phenomena produced through enacted intra-actions between things (including people, objects, animals, plants, etc.). Such an enactment – what she calls an ‘agential cut’ – locates quite precisely “… a local causal structure among ‘components’ of a phenomenon in the marking of the ‘measuring agencies’ (effect) by the ‘measured object’ (cause).”

So for us interventions both measure and make, existing as both separate entities (of a city, a street, an institution, a landscape) as well as effects. It follows that we could define interventions as apparatuses, enacting them, firstly, not as passive objects but as things which do things to spaces and times, and secondly, as carrying political ‘power’ through their desires and agendas.

Here again we are defining architecture not as an ‘it’ but as a process, or perhaps an apparatus. Again: architecture is a verb, i.e. to architect. Supporting this active stance, we focus on the transformational nature of the interven-

tions that are performed in real times and places, and work through the concept of the performative (in relation to the speculative projective practices of most architectural production). Our focus on the performative in practice means that our bodies are explicitly entangled in our work, and underline our view that we are, in an ecological and expanded ‘cognitive’ sense, both ‘distributed’ through things and places and other people and discourses as well as somehow ‘bounded’. So in relation to our matters of concern, we are interested in what we can ‘do’ with architectural interventions and understand them to be performative not only with respect to their transformative power but also to their ability to establish identities, which may be in agonistic conflict with others.

We posit a new concept to further our work in these ‘conditions’: intra-vention, a word about which we are quite enthusiastic. Although it is only a matter of a couple of letters, intra’s focus on the ‘within’ clearly establishes intra-ventions as already a part of the space and times in which they are ‘intravented’; quite a different focus than the ‘inter’. It is indeed a very productive notion which defines the (makeshift) limits of a specific situation with which we might interrogate/engage, and helps us deal with the apparently endless expandability of the relational meshwork of material and sensory flows, therefore allowing us to start ‘doing/making’ immediately. When we intra-vene, we ‘cut’ (in Barad’s sense) to both locate and make a site we inhabit. This is not a negation of transversality, but an embrace of it.

It also speaks about intentionality: one ‘decides’ what the intra-vention includes or excludes. It is of course therefore an intensely political act, as well as an aesthetic one. Barad’s notion of the ‘cut’ as a defining, parameter-setting tool is useful; at the Laboratory of Immediate Architectural Intervention (LiAi) we cut in various ways, not the least of which is through the use of our ‘matters of concern’. As cuts, these are in themselves quite performative: the juxtaposition of particular terms immediately generates various and interesting interplays that in turn start setting the parameters of our discussions while at the same time they interrogate and help us judge the relevance of our intra-ventions.

Our matters of concern are our ‘terms of engagement’, the ways in which we deal with the task of ‘architecting’ as a function, i.e. a process that is contingent on other processes and other ‘things’. If Badiou would say that architecture is a function of the generic procedure ‘art’ and the scientific category ‘geography’, we might well say that we see ‘architecting’ as a function of, or an amphibian stand7 between, philosophy and art, aiming at the transformation of our conditions of coexistence and at the articulation of spaces for being and living together. This speaks indeed of a need to question architecture’s position within the realm of technology or technique, as well as epistemologies that conceive it as a discipline or body of knowledge within art or science.8

Again, the performative nature of our matters of concern, and an understanding of architecture as a function, makes it part of the realm of the political, of choosing what and for whom we function, of taking responsibility, and of negotiating the implications of such choices.

The terms of our engagements are multiple, and the relationships among their components diverse and certainly not one of dialectical opposition but of productive entanglement: body/apparatus, critical/projective/relational, agency/structure/ANT, the other/difference, the other/coexistence, transversals/micropolitics, aesthetics/politics, affordance/gift, diffraction/representation, discourse/event, and documentation/judgment.

We investigate and encourage working with our oft-neglected body as an experiencing, a knowing, and a difference-making entity in the production of space. Heightening or consciously orchestrating our everyday ‘techniques of the body’ – that is, the ways our body negotiates and is implicated in our material and cultural apparatuses to create meaningful social interaction – can result in performative methods for intra-vention, questioning, and change.

Being close to the sites of our actions foregrounds our bodies’ roles in the making of the world. And if the body itself can be seen as an apparatus, it exists always intra-acting with other things that co-determine effects. And this is no less true for the apparatus of the state than for a particular way of documenting.


8 These reflections about architecture as a function and its relationship to the political have only been possible thanks to the interesting and sharp comments of our Spanish colleague, philosopher and architect Israel Casanovas, to whom we remain, as always, grateful.
We explore the possibilities of a relational approach to architecture that expands the critical vs. the projective debates that have been installed within the field for so long. We believe, with Teddy Cruz, that the future of urbanization will no longer be led by the production of new buildings, but will instead require a fundamental reorganization of socioeconomic relations, which is also a design challenge in which we must take active part.

Even if the complex and relational nature of the world cannot be disputed, it is often ignored, or at least relegated to a position at the bottom of the architect’s list of things to interrogate and integrate. The relationships in any complex meshwork of people, places and things constitute the structure of durable practices, territories and fields. Various cultural, social, political and economic practices are maintained and sustained through these relationships.

The discussion of the interplays and reciprocal entanglement between our ability to act and to choose how to act and for whom, i.e. agency, and the existing habitus of practices and conditions that co-determine and define the limits of such ability, i.e. structure, is enriched and becomes more relevant in the light of recent advancements in the fields of science studies and what is known as actor-network theory. An understanding and exploration of architecture in those terms turns out to be very productive.

We address the notion of ‘the other’ through several dimensions. One relates to a kind of bottom line ethics of respect, and care for difference, for a multiplicity of actors and their beliefs; a basic understanding that others shouldn’t be harmed. Another, related dimension for us can be highlighted in the difference between a belief that there is one truth, on and about which we can have our own perspective, and the belief that there are many worlds to which course can communicate and share things, but are in fact different. Yet another dimension would speak of the interplays between that notion of the other and the one of coexistence, to rethink the role of architecture in the production of spaces for being and living together.

Our engagement with transversality and micropolitics, touched upon here and there throughout this paper, is not a minor one: the interlocking of, for instance, immigration policies in Europe, and Sweden, the arrival and presence of unaccompanied minors in homeland territories, the relationship between urban planning and the distribution of the population in space, discourses of integration and the presence of a certain number of asylum homes in a particular peripheral, urban enclave of Sweden’s Norrland, appears to be also cut by discourses and practices of biopolitics, the position, shape and nature of a particular set of furniture, the size of a room and the configuration of a particular domestic space in which those minors live their lives, which might be only accessible through some initial conversations with those kids and their ‘guardians’.

Architecture operates through making, and through making things visible; it produces and reproduces new and old spatial and aesthetic apparatuses. As we have said, it is not an autonomous practice but contingent and relational, it has to negotiate its position, it is, therefore, political. It is political also because it plays an important role in our distribution in space: it sets us together or apart. Architecture, as we will see, is in that sense a function, and participates in the complex interplays of the state and politics, as well as in other social and political discussions.

Another of our engagements starts through our attention to architecture’s ability to afford us ‘things’ and conditions of possibility, as well as the relationship of the above-mentioned ethics of respect and care with affordability. These reflections make also possible to conceive of architecture as a gift, and to imagine the potential of architecture to be an embodied critique of building-as-consumable-object as well as to produce ‘uncertainties’, contingent relationships and unexpected effects which can help define more positive value systems.

The notion of diffraction helps us think of different things coming into contact with each other and producing effects through their mixing in each other’s medium. In terms of waves (light, sound, etc.), it is clearly different from that of reflection, which has waves bent back away from an encounter, remaining in their own medium. A focus on reflection then might be more about a typical understanding of representation’s mirror, rather than on diffraction’s transformation of the world, our ability to make a difference rather than displacing the same elsewhere.

The reliance of architectural production in representational techniques and approaches has distanced it from itself and its powers, lately in more than worrying fashion: architectural images today, by the hand of new representation and construction technologies, and thanks to the enormous accumulation of political and economic capital,
forget the inherent limitations of representation and dilute the difference between what is represented and what is built, restricting, almost eliminating the possibility of interpretation, as if aiming to neutralize or control the interplays of the real and the fake. The most fantastic and impossible drawings ever imagined are literally built, suddenly appearing in the middle of the desert; complete islands are conceived, materialized and urbanized in a few months or years. The rhetorics of void and wrapping are camouflaged underneath surfaces and skins, and articulated through fantasy, deception and magic.

The city can be seen instead as mixtures of immediate, singular, specific, enacted, practiced, diffractive, performative, interactive, transformational, improvisational, embodied, political, ethical, transversal, intervenient events, i.e., things that happen; and discourses of various sorts: histories, interpretations, commentaries, theories, disputations, categorizations and orderings.

We will engage with and produce in ‘real time’ singular events, as well as the discourse that participates in the performance of those singularities. If the power of the event speaks, as Badiou tells us at the beginning, of a latent urgency and a memorable energy, such energy has to be combined with a shared demand and the working of, by means of discursive articulation, the problem of politics par excellence, namely, organization.

Methodologies of events, discourses of issues, intraventions and their effects must be made public in order to both enhance those effects and share the knowledge derived of their enactment. Documenting what happens is paramount and can’t be left for a final, retrospective analysis or account. Since elements of judgment are involved already in the very first steps that lead to the invention of these sites, events, issues and interventions... so must be the stories and their methods devised and put-to-work in ‘real-time’ to explain the complex meshworks, including processes, implementations, outcomes and intentions.

Our matters of concern are indeed tools for cutting, for establishing the shifting limits of our expanded sites. They are full of intention, just as the terms themselves are in tension, setting up dialogues and arguments and different worlds that together make things common and common things. Intentionality is an index of the architect’s position and aims. Like our matters of concern, the intention of the performer who intravenes informs the intravention and determines the (initial) limits of the ambit in which the intravention takes place. It initiates the definition of the intravention, even though these limits will necessarily change or evolve as we go. And, we shouldn’t forget that this intentionality arises out of un/non-conscious aspects of our being, as well as out of ‘affect-ual’, bodily, and discursive, awareness.

We see intraventions as heuristic devices, as apparatuses that are imbued with a will to transform. The intravention is not autonomous but contingent and relational and dependent on many other things. The intravention is made as it happens, and it makes us at the same time. It takes place or happens in a situated field (the site), not on an endless/infinite meshwork, but as part of the relationships and co-existences between the elements comprised within that ‘constructed’ site. Again: things, people, institutions, apparatuses, histories, events and discourses that we start to define through an initial ‘cut’.

If an intervention is an addition that is an impossible condition of a pre-existing situation or event and therefore something that exists also before and ‘outside’ the situation/field/place where it happens, then an intervention is born through that situation, it becomes. It is a becoming, it is unfolded as it happens within and part of the site, it is interior to that site (we don’t break in: as always, we are already there).

If Barad’s intra-action is defined through an agential cut in the on-going life of the world - everything is intra-action for her - our intravention happens, to a certain extent, out of a willingness to engage in transforming/disturbing that life. It has the ability to produce change by transforming the site we are considering from within.

Criteria of Intraventions

Paramount in the assessment of the intravention is its relationship with time. We can think on the one hand of its ‘duration’, as literally the time it lasts, regarding both the materiality of the objects that make it and that of the meshwork in which the objects are entwined. In this first ‘side’ of temporal criteria we can also include the duration of the effects (for how long is the intravention affecting/transforming the world?). On the other hand, if we think of it as a ‘thing’, we can speak of its ‘durability’, as its inherent ability to both dwell within the assemblages, clusters and meshworks in which it takes part, as well as to coordinate and curate those assemblages.
The duration of our *intraventions* and their effects, which are crucial, are multiple. It might be, of course, that if something is around longer it has more impact … but not always. Let’s take an example. We intervene with something a very short lifespan (for instance, we build something which remains for 24 hours and then is removed). Though physically present for a mere day, the things that this *intravention* sets in motion, that is, the effects it has, might be significant. People of course remember it, but it might also be that people theorize it, that people begin to repeat aspects of it (e.g., an event which happened within it gets staged again in another setting), etc. And their duration and effects are evident in the ability of *intraventions* to trigger and afford dreams, generating something that didn’t previously exist. A common hope, an imaginary.

Another aspect of our *intraventions* is immediacy, a concern which transverses complex meshworks. We can do things that occur quite quickly, and quite closely. However, to understand quick only according to the clock would negate the various ‘timings’ of the world; to understand close only as physical distance would disregard emotional bonds, as well as social media’s always now, always here. Because we see architecture as relational and connected to all those other ‘things’, we prefer to work in close proximity as our aim is to affect the world around us, to make a difference, and therefore the immediate, the here-and-now become important.

The *intraventions* that we are interested in,

- … ask questions of their effects and their duration, producing effects that matter.
- … endure, either through their effects - in the cases in which they are themselves short - or through their own lasting existence, that continues to effect a pressure in their surroundings and therefore transforms the world in meaningful ways.
- … ask questions of our complicity in others’ agendas.
- … challenge the order of things, confronting the status quo with the inadmissible, that, as Rancière puts it, “reconfigure[s the distribution of the sensible”.

intraventions that ask questions of both consensus and dissen-
sus. ... take the other into account. The various others. Intraventions treat these others seriously and emerge from a fundamental ethical drive that transpires in our encounters with them.

... create situations of freedom, revealing ideologies and generating spaces for a freer existence through coexistence.

So we are interested in intraventions that produce effects that matter. It follows that we need some criteria to assess the effects and to decide what it means to matter, for what and for whom. We might say we need to ‘assess’, or, rather, judge an intravention, reflecting on what makes one more or less successful than another.

As we have said, an essential criterion of the intravention is its transformative power: its effects will matter inasmuch as they manage to transform the world in a meaningful way. In order to do so, we believe that intraventions must on the one hand oppose particular strong discourses and on the other hand involve and engage a multiplicity of other actors/people/things.

The extent to which the intravention is explicitly enmeshed in both the material flows and the currents of sensory awareness that make life as it happens will also be an important measure, and reflects our focus on the performative.

Our intraventions should be as fully integrated and entangled as possible, and must address public matters, that is, issues of public concern. Their singularity must be used to critique and question the multiple/the plural through/with the polemical.

They must confront the conditions of ‘the many’ in/through potentially destabilizing, i.e. inadmissible, actions.

Such radical intraventions, must aim at “making more room in the world for new political forms [...] and new excitations of power”. They must test, and experiment with, unexpected forms of ‘effective togetherness’ that ask questions about the definition of the commons and what is public and what these definitions exclude, searching for forms of ‘grouping’ and/or ‘organization’.11

If these intraventions address ‘the public’, they must also have the power to involve ‘publics’, in the sense of managing to engage multiple and various actors. Often, this engaging of various actors is initiated/afforded by an ability to connect through aesthetics. Intraventions can operate not only through agonism or dissenus, but also by being friendly and ‘cool’.

The various collective and distributed ingredients of the intravention should also lead to collaborative ownerships that are emergent rather than claimed. Such ‘self-distributing’ forms of ownership are both the result of and an active part in the establishment of alternative communities of practice.

We can then ask a series of questions: How are the changes generated by our intraventions establishing connections amongst the city’s inhabitants? How are our intraventions questioning ‘official’ discourses of public space in the city? How is the city ‘rewired’ through such intraventions? How are the proposed and effected transformations able to generate previously inexistent possibilities or ideas? How do they foster new ‘dreams’ about public, or rather, shared space? How could our intraventions guarantee the functional and discursive integrity/durability of such new public spaces? How would our intraventions incorporate, and further enable collaborative ownership and communities of practice?

These are some of the questions which keep us busy as we try ‘to architect’ our part in the making of the city and the world through immediate architectural interventions. The minimally different event is not enough. An Event needs an Organization and an Idea. To architect is a function and it is therefore political. Intraventions help us articulate those terms towards architecting politically. //

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10 Thrift, N. J (2008), Non-representational theory: space, politics, affect, (International library of sociology; London: Routledge) x, 326, pp. 22

11 Thrift puts it this way: “How is it possible, in other words, to group around states that are neither dependent on lasting objects nor on fixed locations?”, in Thrift, N. J (2008), pp. 22