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Forced Associations

"*Settling into a new country is like getting used to a pair of shoes. At first they pinch a little, but you like the way they look, so you carry on. The longer you have them, the more comfortable they become. Until one day without realizing it you reach a glorious plateau. Wearing those shoes is like wearing no shoes at all. The more scuffed they get, the more you love them and the more you can't imagine life without them.*"

In Arabian Nights, Tahir Shah (2007)

Today we often hear that there is now outside and that we are living under a neo-liberal condition, a state of hegemony with the capacity to absorb any alternative and turn it into yet another vehicle for the production of capital. Some, like the cultural critic Boris Buden, say that neo-liberal hegemony has come to take control of social and political creativity — the dimension of critique. This take-over is described by Buden as being at the core of the neoliberal project, using its coopting powers to absorb and diffuse every attempt to formulate a critique and an alternative. Instead neo-liberal hegemony takes over critique, patents it and privatizes it. We can observe this in the consolidation of the media industry, how new "public" spaces in reality are completely private and in how education and universities more and more rely on private funding. Whoever possesses social criticism also controls the utopian dimension of society.[1]

How does this translate into architecture practice, is the theory of an increasing privatization something that could be observed in the built environment? If the private is interpreted as an interior space, as an inside, how does this expanding interiorization affect architecture and urban planning?

This text is called Forced Associations, a term taken from a creative technique attributed to the marketeer Alex Osborne, who also is attributed with developing the concept of brainstorming. The idea is to force together wildly different concepts, these artificially paired ideas are then considered for creative possibilities. It came up in a discussion I had with a group of students about whether architecture historically had ever been linked to true social justice, or if architecture is forever condemned to be in the service of power. We talked about how our current societal condition can be perceived as an epochal blur between private and public spheres, how this relates to digital technologies and especially social media and how the private as a result is perceived as becoming more public. This blurring can be described as a loss of privacy and at the same time a loss of the public sphere. So what is this *world of double voids*, neither public nor private? It seemed to me that Forced Associations was an interesting term, not as a creative technique to come up with a business idea, but as an interpretation of how the private sphere is shrinking (privacy) and expanding (privatization) at the same time.

Thinking about this text coincided with the opening of Mall of Scandinavia in November 2015. Located in the municipality of Solna, a few kilometers from Stockholm Central station, it is the largest shopping mall in the Nordic countries. The 100,000 square meter development is owned by french-dutch company Unibail-Rodamco and according to the press release it embodies their vision for the future of the shopping centre industry. The 640 million euro investment, built just next to the newly constructed National football arena, is a crucial component in a new emerging district named the Arena City. 2

Setting out to write this text, I thought it could be an interesting idea to actually write it in this new environment. So I have spent a couple of days over the last month in Mall of Scandinavia, working from different coffee shops, using the free wi-fi. I have been thinking about what it means that Spanish marble coming from the quarries in Macael, once used to build Alhambra in the mid 13:th century, is now covering the floors in a Scandinavian shopping mall? A floor that easily could last for 700 years. What kind of shopping experiences do Unibail-Rodamco imagine in the 28:th century? I can also testify that it is very difficult to concentrate in a theme

based on an "Archipelago of Emotions." The ever-ongoing soundscape, a kind of sweeping Brian Enoesque chimes mixed with birds, is part of a model for retail environments called BrandSound by The Sound Agency from London. Based on the research about how cumulative effects of combining two or more senses can have a super additive results (Forced Associations). The idea is that aligning senses is not linear, 1 + 1 does not equal 2, but according to research at Oxford University, adding congruent sound to vision can mean that 1 + 1 equals 10. According to a presentation from The Sound Agency this Super Additivity is designed to create "Auditory contributions to multi-sensory perception that take place without people being consciously aware that what they are hearing is influencing their overall product experience." 3

For me spending time here trying to write this text, the ever changing and never repeating "psycho-acoustically programmed generative soundscape" combined with enormous led screens, pulsating lights and constant streams of people, made it very hard to stay focused. Most days I had to leave after 4 hours with a splitting headache. According to the website, Mall of Scandinavia went of the charts with over one million visitors after only three weeks, but I wonder if anyone managed to do anything else than shopping, going to the new IMAX or having a DEX, which is retail lingo for a dining experience. 4

"…*functionality is the ability to become integrated into an overall scheme. An objects functionality is the very thing that enables it to transcend its main 'function' in the direction of a secondary one, to play a part, to become a combining element, an adjustable item, within a universe of signs.*"

System of Objects, Jean Baudrillard, 1968

Mall of Scandinavia is not just another shopping centre, but the nave around which a whole city is being built. The municipality of Solna describes Arenastaden, The Arena City, as one of Europe's most modern neighborhoods. The whole area is for example planned with three-dimensional property subdivision, most commonly used in the planning of mining areas. But here it means for instance housing properties located on the roof of the shopping mall, private property upon private

property. Reading the municipal website about Arenastaden I have not found any information about public services, there are no libraries, no cultural or civic centers, no schools. The only traditionally "public service" I could find is a privately run health care centre located just next to the parking garage. It is named Flawless.

So the shopping mall is no longer an external large structure out on some field in the periphery. The shopping mall is now an integrated part of the city itself. The shopping mall has become the driver for new urban environments. The shopping mall is the center.

"*The most important issue is to meet the need of the business world for skilled labour and improved communications. Another priority task is to promote and develop Stockholm as a good city with a high quality of life, so that the workers of the future will want to live and work here. In an increasingly internationalized world, a people-friendly urban environment, a rich variety of housing and workplaces, well-developed services and a broad range of culture and entertainment are becoming ever more important in gaining a competitive advantage. Through this, the attractive metropolis of Stockholm could become an even stronger brand.*"

The Comprehensive Plan for Stockholm, 2010

In this quote from the opening chapter in The Walkable City, the current Comprehensive Plan for Stockholm adopted by the City Council in March 2010, the vision for Stockholm is based on the ability to grow by attracting business and high-skill labour. Here what is called people-friendly environments play an important role in the construction of the city. I take this as an example of how public space has transformed into a space for a public. So what is the difference between a public space and a space for the public?

In a public space everyone have access, and it is a space where users can expect an acceptance for political differences. Understood like this, public space is fundamental for the existence of democracy. Accessible to all and capable of containing all the conflicts of what it means to be human. This idea of public space can be traced back to the Greek Agora and is today to be found in all spaces which

allow a gathering and the formation of a political voice. In ancient Greece the political space was an exclusive territory for free men, so far from democratic. It was built on the idea of a clear division between the private and the public sphere. Access to the public sphere and the possibility to be a political subject has been a matter of control throughout the history of mankind.

So it comes as no surprise that the public square under modernism was given such an important role. These public spaces, given new meaning in the existing city and central in the planning of each new community centre, was constructed to become the everyday space for a new modern life. The square as the centre, surrounded with public facilities such as libraries, civic centres, health-care, theatre but also shops, cafes and cinemas. After the second world war, the construction of the welfare state had the formation of public space as it's most important feature. In Sweden the planning and construction of new public spaces was seen as a safe guard against totalitarian politics to ever get hold over society again. The new Modern society was designed with the aim to actively produce democratic citizens. 5

So if the planning of the modernist neighborhoods clearly was about the importance of public space, then what are the properties of the space for the public? In the developer driven city planning of today the public is understood as a target group and "public" space a shopping mall – or any other theme based example of contemporary urban practice. It does not mean that the general public does not have access, but they are not addressed as citizens but as an audience. A public understood as an audience also comes with pre-set instructions for behaviors. This is such a common feature of contemporary city-scapes that it is taken for granted, in everyday life fundamental aspects of the contemporary city is not about public space but rather about a gradient expansion of the private realm. A public is performing, and is expected to do so, a more passive role. This is the contract between places such as shopping malls, or regenerated neighborhoods, and the public that uses them. A public that shares certain agreements with that which it is an audience for. Be it commercial messages, the display in a shopping window or viewing each other as participants in the spectacle of the street.

So what defines a spaces for a public? A space for a public leaves as little as possible to chance. Each detail is programmed and designed in such a way that it is immediately possible to be decoded in order to understand how to perform and easily detect someone not living up to the contract. Such clearly designed instructions of course also limits the patterns for behavior.

In the Nordic countries, over the last ten years, there has been a steep increase in Placemaking as a design strategy to create more vibrant urban environments. Placemaking has its roots in the work done by the American Urbanist William H. Whyte. Under the name "The Street Life Project" he used direct observation, borrowing techniques from anthropology, to study the way that people actually used and interacted in public spaces. In studies like the film "The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces" from 1980, he showed how street life in New York City was spatially organized not only through architecture, but through a complex interaction between people, sunlight, program, activities. The studies were often critical towards how urban planners and architects designed urban space without regard of how people actually occupied and used public space.

"...*with the proliferation of the car, suburban shopping malls, numerous home entertainment offerings, spacious backyards and many other incentives for us to simply stay at home-people venture out in public because they want to rather than because they have to. That creates a new necessity to make city space pleasurable and inviting. Mediocre public spaces will be places no one bothers to visit. Great ones, however, will continue to draw people and foster a sense of urban vitality and community.*"

from How to Revitalize a City, Jan Gehl, 2006

I would argue here that the proliferation of placemaking techniques under contemporary urban planning has nothing to do with public space and everything to do with branding technologies, such as the soundscape in the Mall of Scandinavia. Understood in the tradition of Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt, the public sphere is either defined as open to all and a "society engaged in critical public debate" [6] or inseparably linked to politics, enabling individuals to transcend the

necessities of life and to fashion a world within which free political action and discourse could flourish.7 Public space is about the freedom to be political, not to be manipulated into making a purchase.

In her book The Human Condition (1958), Hannah Arendt writes about how humanity is shaped by on the one side nativity, our constant capacity for new beginnings, and plurality, the fact that we are always born into a populated world. According to Hannah Arendt, public space is first and foremost a political space, a space capable to hold conflicts, both in terms of transcending the human condition of new beginnings and of being a space for pluralities - for difference.

Placemaking is not necessarily at odds with this notion of public space, but in the way that it is being practiced it is first and foremost about creating successful, not political, spaces. The people-friendly urban environment is neither a place for conflict, nor is it about stabilizing conquered freedoms. Placemaking's most well known slogan is "what attracts people most, it would appear, is other people." Which of course is true, but the more important question is what people? Because it is also a way to control what placemakers call undesirables. Creative placemaking is so successful today because it claims to be based on outcomes. Placemaking promises to deliver; lowering crime rate, vibrancy indicators, transform economic development, correlation between cultural assets and poverty decline. The list goes on but what it has in common is that it paves the way for private interest and obscures the underlying decline of public space as a space for political conflict and difference.

"*What relationship is there between the work of art and communication? None at all. A work of art is not an instrument of communication. A work of art has nothing to do with communication. A work of art does not contain the least bit of information. In contrast, there is a fundamental affinity between a work of art and an act of resistance.*"

What is the creative act? Gilles Deleuze, 1987

Following Deleuze in a quote from Thousand Plateaus "…life went not from a center to an exteriority, but from an exterior to an interior, or rather from a discrete fuzzy aggregate to it consolidation. This means that there is no beginning from which a linear sequence would derive, but a world constructed through injections, reinforcements, densifications, intensifications." [8] Architects need to ask themselves what they can do other than creating more intensities, programmed surfaces, information, interiors? What lessons can be taken from the rise of alternative architecture, instant urbanism, critical design practices and the longing for a more ethical architecture over the last twenty years? Many of these practices have been embraced by cultural institutions, biennales, festivals, universities, media industry and even the planning and architecture industry, but less because of the political and social dimensions it raises about the decline of public space and more for its efficiency as a tool for placemaking.

Architects often talk about the importance of architecture, how it influences all aspects of life. But perhaps it is so that it is not people who need architecture, but instead architecture that needs people. In a time – or rather an economy – which revolves not around need, but around desire. The most important question is not what we want from architecture, but what architecture wants from us? In the economy of desire there is a constant deficit of attention, and at the same time a constant surplus of information. This means that it is not people who consume information, but it is information that consumes people.

This is something that the architecture industry have started to understand. Architecture now has a new goal, a model for total interiorization. This urban-industrial complex have created a chronic housing shortage, and at the same time, it erects massive towers with luxury apartments. Reinforcing economical segregation and the division between people more and more each day, but it preaches being inclusive, sustainable, and just. Cities are densified in order to make distances shorter between people, but at the same time creating clearer divisions between those who have and those who don't. Cities are becoming denser and more divided. The economy and the labour market forces people to go all in to enter the urban condition. Taking on loans and binding up peoples lives, so that they will never be

able to free themselves from the urban condition. The contemporary metropolis is about growth for the sake of growth. Architecture has taken on the ideology of the cancer cell.

So is is possible to force the association between social justice and architecture? As architects we have to turn architecture onto itself, or observe when architecture fails and then report about it. But more than anything architects need to realize that architecture is not something happening in some abstract place disconnected from our practice. It happens here, in everyday life, all around us. And the only way to deal with it is to engage with it head on. So architects need to start making countermelodies, build up resistance and solidarity in the commons. We should question more where critical discourse take place, why there, why in the museum, why in the book, why inside the institutions? If we think that public space is important, if we believe that architecture can be part of providing such spaces. Then is up to us architects to make that become reality, but it is never going to happen if we continue as before and it will not happen by itself. The only way forward is through engagement, sacrifice and hard work. Architecture is a cultural product, it is the outcome of a system. This system is made by us and we, and we alone, have the power to change it. Maybe the outside is still out there?

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