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Towards the Improvisation of Space

Reading urban reality

Urban agglomerations are currently undergoing a process of change and concentration, moving towards an ambiguous network of varied living spaces and different activities of human and non-humans, which somehow appears to develop from the opportunities and material constellations available. At the same time, there is evidence that this network cannot dispense with normative parameters altogether – the rules of urban organisation that influence the direction of urban transformations. What is more, the conflicts surrounding this exertion of influence, as well as interpretations of urban populations and their right to interpret, are on the increase, as the examples of Gezi Park in Istanbul, Right to the City in Hamburg, Stuttgart 21, the riots in Sao Paulo, and the *banlieus* in Paris have demonstrated, just to name a few.[1]

These urban transformation processes have resulted in a fundamental shift in their meaning: the city is evolving into a significant social category in itself – and, conversely, society is perceived as becoming ever more urbanised. However, according to Lefebvre, this social dimension of urbanisation, the expansion of the urban sphere, is not yet visible, or, more accurately, it remains hidden and unrecognisable to us.[2] He concludes from this that "[k]nowledge of the urban phenomenon can only become a science in and through the conscious formation of an *urban praxis*."[3] For town planners, urban developers, architects, and urbanists, this urban practice represents a blind spot or "blind field":

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[1] As witnessed by the social movements that have been forming in recent years under the banner "Right to the City", and which have received a great deal of media attention. *Cf.*, among others, Andrej Holm and Dirk Gebhardt (eds.), *Initiativen* für ein *Recht auf Stadt*. VSA Verlag, Hamburg 2011.

[2] Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, University of Minnesota Press, London, Minneapolis 2003, p. 29.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 138.

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> [T]hey don't see it, and certainly cannot grasp it as such. With complete peace of mind, they substitute its representations of space, of social life, of groups and their relationships for praxis. They don't know where these representations come from or what they imply – that is, the logic and strategy that they serve.[4]

In other words, by being part of a complex of city planning, which is not only highly specialised but connected to a centralised form of organisation and representation, the professional designers of the urban miss out on the superseding practices of the everyday. Consequently, for urban development work to succeed in the broadest sense, and cooperatively, the crucial factor will be to find new forms for investigating everyday urban practice and for developing the skills needed for it. This thesis is supported by Lefebvre's argument that a certain knowledge (which might be called upon) is expressed and unlocked in this practice, and stored within it as "silent", "implicit", or "tacit" knowledge. Lefebvre even goes so far as to say that the urban sphere itself is the key area of knowledge in the present and for mastering the tasks of the future. Hence new forms of investigation that lead to this practice are needed as well, in order to incorporate and utilise them. The recognisable phenomena of urban living environments do not reveal how the rhythms of the city are connected, nor does written documentation of everyday life alone provide access to the impacts of urban processes.

Somehow, in strange contrast to the fixed representations and plans of urban design, the urban sphere today articulates itself as being full of change, intersecting movements, and unforeseeable situations. The inhabitants of cities seem to be passionate about the "here and now". One can even claim that the urban sphere has become a social laboratory itself: even under its most normative regulations, the city is, and remains, a "space of possibility" in a constant state of flux, where no social condition can be captured permanently, or even definitively translated and frozen into a structural state. In other words, the constructive basis of the city is its contingency.

Putting contingency at the fore as a positive resource of the city not only shifts the focus away from the city as object towards the city as process, while making the analysis of urban practice all the more important for all attempts at exerting targeted influence on changes to the city. It furthermore implies a different reading of practice itself, drawing attention away from any substantialisation of action and to the constitutive effects of action. On the basis of this reading, one can claim that the condition for planning and architecture has changed. Its role is not to offer resolution and inherently new *tabula rasa* designs, but instead to carefully examine urban praxis in contingent situations. In accordance with this observation, my argument is that urban practice can essentially be read as the technology of improvisation. In this context, the term improvisation technology indicates the attempt to move away from conventional courses of action and planning strategies, and to engage "in urban situations": the aim is to explore the capacity and strength of change, and to make new links in a relational manner with actors and resources striving for transformation, thus facilitating or stimulating new relationships and assemblages of actions, actors, and discourses on urban sites. The following examples give an indication of what this could mean in practice.

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[4] *Ibid*., p. 153.

European urbanity

In his study "Hollocore Ruhrgebiet, 2002", Rem Koolhaas shows that – and how – the so-called European city is being converted into a new form of European urbanity. In this project it finds its structural and geographic expression in the amorphous super-region linking Brussels, Amsterdam, and the Ruhr Valley: 32 million inhabitants – 9% of Europe's population – live there in cities and towns where no urban population exceeds a million, and where approximately 67% of the population live in cities with fewer than 200.000 inhabitants, in places no one has ever heard of. In order to create an "identity", city centres are reduced to their traditional shopping streets, while the peripheries are filled with a mixture of commercial, shopping, and industrial spaces, along with mansions and innovation parks – faceless urban matter embedded within massive new varieties of greenery.

This type of fluctuating urbanity cannot be influenced by planning directed towards either function or form. Instead of its actions being based on creative drive, planning must resort to learning to interpret the increasingly disparate social claims to the city, so that new types of activity can be derived therefrom.

One has to concur with the writer Robert Musil: “It is reality that awakens possibilities, and nothing would be so perverse than to deny it.”[5]

Creating a square

Lacaton & Vassal are team of architects who try to deal constructively with what already exists. The office’s interventions are based on the urban situation itself, in the “identifying elements, forces and energies which are genuinely determining the spatial performance of a given situation.”[7] Lacaton & Vassal attempt to create spatial structures that will allow new appropriations of space. “For us, this is very often not architecture, but the activities that take place in or around it, thanks [to] or despite the architecture.”[8] So how does it work? In 1996 Lacaton & Vassal were commissioned to renovate Place Léon Aucoc, a square in the working-class quarter of Bordeaux. The architects began by spending a lot of time in the square, as a way of ascertaining its use. Through this phenomenological approach they were able to establish that the square already had everything it needed in terms of structures. Consequently, they dispensed with architectural measures and instead set out a framework for the straightforward maintenance works that are typical of improvisation, and in this way they increased the utilisation of the square. This form of improvisation relies, admittedly, on intuition, but it cannot be achieved without the method of phenomenological analysis (with an attempt to reveal the structures of subjective experience to themselves and others) and knowledge of how to change materials minimally and then reconfigure them anew.

Everyday expertise

Such an approach also requires a steady move towards being an “expert in the everyday”. Permanent repurposing is taking place in the course of urban usage, operating on the fringes of the logic of recycling of the established economy; this conversion process invents its own economies, which are to some extent informal, including the donation, reuse, and conversion of waste and rubbish, as can be seen in Europe’s cities. A migrant from Africa, with his or her minimal structural and economic resources and links to the complex network of his or her *community*, might introduce a new form and style into the function of “living” or dwelling and thus “transforms” his standardised council apartment. A Turkish taxi service that sets up a booth in an IKEA car park introduces a new style to the “transport” function by offering visitors to the furniture store an informal way of getting their purchased items home more quickly and cheaply. These instances are not reflected in any statistics, but are examples of a whole range of urban lifestyles. On a daily basis, they enable the urban production of space, which has the capacity to make planning for urban development productive through improvisation alone.

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[5] Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1978 [first published in 1930], p. 17.

Premises of the analysis

In order to examine how city space results from urban practice, precautions must be taken. Firstly, one has to take into account the historical dimension, although it is not fashionable among many critics of the New Economy. By disqualifying the new forms of capitalism as the end of history, they lose sight of the historical developments under which a development such as the subjectivation of work could arise in the first place. For the fusion of life and work, flat hierarchies and patchwork identity are by no means phenomena *ex nihilo*. However, the relationship between practice and history cannot be taken as a criterion of truth in so far as that which prevails in practice holds automatically true. Nor is the negation of absolute truth intended as a speculative endeavour. In contrast to purely pragmatic as well as speculative thinking, no equation between the truth and the success of an action is assumed. So it is not about the success of a form of action in justifying a political and social theory. Rather, urban practices should be examined as an expression of social reality, which unfold performatively. Only then can the political power relations that constitute and regulate the city be criticised, not in spite of, but because they produce forms of action that carry possibilities of other social forms within themselves. Theory must reflect actual production.

This does not imply withdrawing to an historicist point of view that claims one is dependent on the course of history. Rather, there is a dialectical process at work: In (everyday) urban practice, I performatively participate in the production of the urban form (whether I want to or not), and at the same time I am influenced by this form as a time-specific situation or event. What to do can therefore not be determined in a linear chronological manner, but only with regard to the quasi-invisible palimpsest of the unfolding history and its everyday expression. That does not imply the neglect of theory in favour of activism (however pragmatic), but is intended for the conceptualisation of practice to advance in a kind of reverse applied theory, which revolves around the tactical elements and dimensions of practice in their political importance. To do this it is necessary to clarify and thus strategically reveal and make visible the structure of subjective experience so that it can unfold as a vector in the political field.

This strategy, however, does not imply a denial of the increasing economisation of the social. Furthermore, to derive from that an overarching theory of the social would be to take it too literally. For example, both systems theory, which assumes autonomous subsystems, as well as neo-Marxism as economic determinism, or conservative cultural pessimism, assume a certain helplessness of the individual with respect to society. The urban experience, however, is precisely characterised by the fact that it is permanently differentiated and that it is not reducible. This understanding of the city is related to its reading from a performative perspective, which entails reading the city as an unfolding of action situations. Politically, it follows from this that it is always possible for urban actors to find a gap in any power regime in order to try out and experiment on new ways of socialising spatially.

Having stated that, it is important to locate the resources for thinking about urban practices in investigating the shifts and turns of the planning discourses of the 20th century. Generally speaking, the planning literature of the 20th century aimed at theorising the city as an organic whole, as a system with a driving logic behind it. Using different methods and perspectives, these theories opened up a new view on the particular way of life in the city, such as being a place of civic engagement (Wirth[6]) and anonymity (Simmel[7]). While Simmel demonstrated how the individual tries to develop forms to cope with the masses of city life, Wirth and the Chicago School exposed how communities organise in spatial forms and create spaces of difference as well as homogeneity. More recent

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[6] Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as a Way of Life”, in: *American Journal of Sociology* 44 (1) (July 1), 1938, pp. 1–24.

[7] Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, Berlin 1903. Adapted by D. Weinstein from Kurt Wolff (trans.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, Free Press, New York 1950, pp. 409–424.

analyses by scholars such as Bauman[8] and Sennett[9] observe a process of negotiating the distance between the civil and the civic, the withdrawal from active citizenship into self-preservation in the city. However, having determined the spatial form, there still is a need in planning, as Thrift and Amin point out, to get to know how the extraordinary variety and complexity of the city as a place of multi-function, multi-use, of "work, consumption, circulation, play, creativity, excitement, boredom." While they stated that the contemporary city "supports unimaginably diverse social practices,"[10] it can no longer be regarded as a system with its own internal coherence. Consequently, Massey interprets the spatial formations of the city as a "dense network of interactions"[11] produced by differentiation processes. The core of Massey's reading is grounded on the specific theory of the production of space of Henri Lefebvre, which has also been taken up by many others, among them the American geographer Ed Soja. This theory understands urban space as a social product, which unfolds in an historical process. Social relationships exist inasmuch as they exist in space; they are realised as space, write themselves into space, and are produced as this very space. Thus, one has to point out that the change in the social and social space does not only take place in the forms of production, but also and especially in the relations of production.

> Space is no longer the indifferent medium, the sum of places where the surplus value is formed, realized and distributed. It becomes the product of social labor, the very general object of production and consequently the formation of surplus value. This is how the production becomes socially within the very framework of neo-capitalism. In the recent past this would have been unforeseeable, since production and the social nature of production were thought of only in terms of the enterprise and the productive forces, it is apparent in the social production of space. […] today, space as a whole enters into production as a product, through the buying, selling and exchange of parts of space.[12]

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[8] Zygmunt Bauman, *City of Fears, City of Hopes*, Goldsmiths' College, Centre for Urban and Community Research, London 2003.

[9] Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, London, Melbourne 1977.

[10] Ash Amin, Nigel Thrift, *Cities: Remaining Urban*, Wiley, Cambridge 2002, p. 3.

[11] Doreen B. Massey, John Allen, Steve Pile, *City Worlds*, Routledge, London, New York 1999, p. 160.

[12] Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution*, pp. 154–155.

The reading explained above sheds light on two distinctive features of the urban: Firstly, it implies that one can no longer conceptualise urban space as a container, as a fixed object or form. Rather, one must understand it as a dynamic constellation that is produced performatively. Secondly, the city can no longer be generalised. As the geographer David Harvey makes clear, the heterogeneous experience and design of time-making is a crucial phenomenon of urban practice. "Multiple processes," he argues, "generate multiple realities as opposed to Leibniz's ideal differentiation in spatio-temporalities." The *how* of praxis comes to the forefront: "the way in which multiple processes flow together to construct a single consistent, coherent, though multi-faceted time-space system"[13]. The urban is determined by a large span of stored and heterogeneous space-time processes, it "cannot be examined independently of the diverse spatio-temporalities such processes contain."[14]

This approach sees itself complemented by the actual theoretical conceptions that emerge, for example, from the actor-network theories of Michel Callon[15] and Bruno Latour[16]. They emphasise the (full) contingent and relational view of social organisation. Refuting essentialist or technological determinism, these theories replace the concept of absolute space by a relational conception. The decisive idea here again proves to be the understanding of agency as a purely relational and performative process. "In this perspective, social ordering occurs through complex efforts of both humans and non-humans to engage other actors through performative actions that are fundamentally heterogeneous and impossible to generalize," write Amin und Graham. They define agency as a "precarious, contingent effect, achieved only by continuous performance and only for the duration of that performance."[17] This focus on the heterogeneous modes of superposition and interactions, the polyrhythmic interconnections of urban actors, allows simplistic determinism to be overcome and at the same opens the way for an emphasis on the immense differentiation of the space-

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[13] Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution*, pp. 154–155.

[14] David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Wiley, Oxford 1997, pp. 259, 260–261.

[15] M. Callon, P. Lascoumes, Y. Barthe, *Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA 2009.

[16] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005.

[17] Ash Amin, Stephen Graham, "The Ordinary City", in: *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* Volume 22, Issue 4, pp. 411–429.

time opportunities of different social groups in the city. It is from this differentiation that the new conceptualisation of an urban practice can emerge, a conceptualisation that asks how people improvise and appropriate space and time in a performative dimension.

In addition, the definition of agency as the impact of action brings the question of the scale of the political back into view. The citizens began, as a result of financial crises, to realise what is happening: The crisis first arrived in the cities. There was a lack of funding for kindergartens, schools, the fire department, building renovation, social housing, etc. In sum, the functioning of the city as a generator of the public became at risk. As a result, the city was rediscovered as a political issue. While the protests of the 1960s and 1970s, for example in Germany, were located in either squats (listen, for example, to the "Rauch Haus Song" by the 1970s German band Ton Steine Scherben) or the street ("Reclaiming the Streets"), or later in the 1980s, as in the case of the nuclear movement directed to the countryside – Brokdorf, Mutlangen, and Wackersdorf – the slogan now is: "Who owns the city?" This environs the city as a new scale of political agency. For in relation to questions of national or federal agricultural-related decisions, citizens are too far removed, and have little or no agency; the scale is too large. In contrast, the city with its everyday functions and use of services provides a scale in which concern for the distribution of and access to the common good can be articulated. On this scale, it is obvious that the citizens do not want to give up the power to act on their city – here is the place where people want to create and provide a comprehensive and comprehensible form of politics. Starting from an as yet undefined feeling, a process of transformation that changes the interpretation of the city develops. The result is a process that allows the conditions and relations of the right to the city to appear and, in Hegel's phrase, *Bildung* (education).[18]

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[18] "Culture or education is, as we may thus conclude, in its ultimate sense a liberation, and that of a high kind. Its task is to make possible the infinitely subjective substantiality of the ethical life. In the process we pass upwards from the direct and natural existence to what is spiritual and has the form of the universal. – In the individual agent this liberation involves a struggle against mere subjectivity, immediate desire, subjective vanity, and capricious liking. The hardness of the task is in part the cause of the disfavour under which it falls. None the less, it is through the labour of education that the subjective will itself wins possession of the objectivity, in which it alone is able and worthy of being the embodiment of the idea." G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. S.W Dyde, Batoche Books Ltd., Ontario 2001, p. 158.

The issue of the right to housing, with respect to the displacement of low-income resident groups from the centres of access to community facilities and the use of public space, is only one of the more important aspects Lefebvre (1967) subsumed under the phrase the "right to the city." With the resurrection of this idea, a fundamental debate has opened up as to how the appropriation of space and production in the city might look today, and how this would be understood as the "politics" of social space. Nevertheless, the search for a form that would instantiate this, and how the concomitant crisis of representation could be defined and handled, is still in its infancy.

From the Production to the Performance of Space?

If I may recapitulate: Soja makes it clear at the outset that the aim of planning must be to develop new forms of organisation of the city, where producers of the urban act as political agents on different scales.[19] Fundamental to this consideration is the notion that space is socially produced. But this thesis has to be refined: while the term production traditionally has a teleological connotation,[20] the city can no longer be defined as a teleological process. This is where the term performance comes into play. In this context, performance does not mean a theatre or speech act (although, there are perspectives of philosophy or performance studies that relate to these notions), but rather refers to the conceptualisation and acknowledgement of the non-teleological and non-intentional levels of production of space which express themselves in the non-simultaneous developments of the city. The question of the city, the reorganisation of the urban, is a matter of compression as well as differentiation, the heterogeneity of co-habitation, not, however, as a result but as a condition of spatial production. The latter produces the different conjunctures of urban existence and thus, *inter alia*, the normative question of the right to the city or of the right to housing. But how do we redefine the functionalist order when working, dwelling, and living one's life converge? In any case, the performative turn not only forces a change in focus, shifting from the "what" to the "how". The further funda-

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[19] See also Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, Verso, London 1989.

[20] See, e.g., Georg Lukács, *Ontology of Social Being*, Vol. 3: Labour, trans. David Fernbach, Merlin Press, London 1980.

mental aspect of the concept of performativity to consider is the inclusion of indeterminacy in the concept of action, as Mersch has shown.[21]

Subsequently, not only the question of the change from conceptualising the space as given fact to its production is crucial. Also the teleological concept of production is undermined by the contingency of the observed urban phenomenon. Taking into consideration this distinctive orientation is crucial to understanding the epistemological consequences illustrated by the actual shifts in representations and the current evolution in mapping techniques and concepts applied by urban designers. The raft of case studies we see in books such as *Made in Tokyo*, *Behaviourology*,[22] *Plus*, or *Learning from Las Vegas* fulfil their function in the course of the broadening of the discussion of the actual discourse on the urban. I see this discourse – with all its semantic and semiotic crises which undermine representation while producing it – as an inventory, and a step towards broadening the discourse on what Sophie Wolfrum has termed "performative urbanism"[23]. And as Mersch has pointed out, there is only one performative scene – we cannot help but deal with the uncertainty of the urban.[24]

It is against this background that the social dimensions of architectural thinking and acting take on relevance. The effects of this transformation are not only a shift in focus away from the city as an object towards the city as a process, but also from production to performance. One conceives of architecture as not merely object-related, but also as situation- and context-related. With this shift of focus questions arise concerning the relationship between structure (object), performance (situation), and acting subject. Currently, a strategy of urbanism is emerging from this reflection that I would like to describe as a transition in urban planning, a "reverse functionalism, a functionalism from below that results from the use of the city, from the operative interconnections of a topography of potentialities that are functionally led to their actualization."[25] This strategy recognises that the city qua phenomenon is embedded in the context of a process that cannot be interpreted as a closed, completed product with implemented or projected functions, but instead must be conceived as a performative practice, in which the use determines the form. But again, one has to ask what the notion of the performative could mean in the context of the city and its reverse functionalism.

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[21] Dieter Mersch, "The Power of the Performative", in: Sophie Wolfrum, Nikolai v. Brandis, (eds.), *Performative Urbanism. Generating and Designing Urban Space*, (JOVIS), Berlin 2015. One has to remark that pointing out, as Mersch did, that performance theory is of limited use for architecture or not compatible with it is simply a presumption of the theorist. Two points are worth mentioning: firstly, the practitioners have the right to make use of the theory to reorient themselves. Secondly, it is possible that the proscription of the use of the performance concept in architecture and urban design in fact shows that performance theorists are not aware of the latest developments in urban theory.

[22] *Atelier Bow WOW: Made in Tokio*, Tokyo 2001; *Atelier Bow Wow: Behaviourology*, Rizzoli New York 2010; Druot, Lacaton & Vassal, *PLUS – Les grands ensembles de logements – Territoires d'exception*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona 2007; Venturi, Scot-Brown, Izenour: *Learning from Las Vegas*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1972.

[23] Sophie Wolfrum, "Performative Urbanism", in *Performative Urbanism*, *op. cit*.

[24] See also Christopher Dell, *Das Urbane*, JOVIS, Berlin 2014.

Today, performance seems to appear as the modality that pervades all areas of production in capitalist societies, whether socio-cultural, technological, or organisational. Performance is the hallmark of the current relations of production in society. If, following Henri Lefebvre, we conceive of space as something that is produced, performance thereby becomes the practical element of the way in which this space is "made". Accordingly, every type of social organisation generates a living space that is in a direct causal context that encompasses social relations. In this way, a dialectic of space unfolds that interprets space as both a medium of social relations as well as a product that, as something that has been produced, can in turn retroactively affect society. This also entails that space is not objectively given, but instead is produced through social forces. Produced space is therewith dependent above all on our performance, and the performance of the technologies we utilise. Space and performance thus represent an interplay of relationships that permeates everyday life and has far-ranging effects on the intermeshing of the individual and society. In summary, in industrial society, the individual was exposed to absolute external control and supervision, and disciplined according to the principle of "discipline and punish". In a post-industrial, urbanised society, in contrast, the performance principle tends to prevail inasmuch as supervision is shifted into the subject himself and social norms are internalised. Foucault formulated a the-

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[25] Christopher Dell, "Reverse Functionalism. Deleuze and the Structure of Diagrams", in: Valena, Avermaete, and Vrachliotis (eds.), *Structuralism Reloaded*, Axel Menges, Stuttgart 2011, p. 288.

oretical basis for this power shift from a disciplinary to a performative model in his study "The History of Governmentality".[26] Therein, he describes how the unfolding of power in modern society never occurs one-sidedly, but is instead always characterised by an interplay of self- and other-determined governance. Not only is this interplay the Archimedean point of almost all social problems of our times thus described, but our relationship to space – and therefore our role as subjects in space, more concretely as users and actors – can also be attributed to this interplay.

Cedric Price's Fun Palace

Prototypical of this development was the emergence of a new tactic with the aid of which marginalised groups or individuals aspired to the "centre" in the 1960s. Instead of organising a majority by means of a protracted political struggle, marginalised groups and persons sought to penetrate directly into the centre of societal debate from – seen in social terms – the outer point by means of maximally performative effects. What previously could only be achieved by means of securing a majority now functioned with the implementation of a tactic of positing. In this context, the "Fun Palace" project of the English architect Cedric Price can be highlighted as a central prototype from the 1960s. As a round-the-clock multi-purpose entertainment centre, the Fun Palace combined communication technologies and building components into a performative machine aimed at adapting to the needs and wishes of its users.

In order to meet the requirements of convertibility, the Fun Palace's flexible structure was constructed along the lines of a shipyard and, depending on the changing situations, could be converted at the roof level by a crane structure. The circulating movement was made possible by connecting bridges and conveyor walkways. The concept of architecture as built space makes way here for the concept of a controlled space: functional governance regulates the constellation of construction. Symbolic expression makes way for a time-based automation: moveable sun shields replace the function of the roof, spatial division is organised by screens, optical barriers, and steam zones. Specifically

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[26] See Michel Foucault, "Governmentality", in: Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1991, pp. 87–104.

functional requirements such as sanitary facilities and kitchens are installed in standardised modules on mechanically moveable decks, thereby ensuring improvisational options. Here, built space is replaced by the concept of the abstract meta-machine. Nevertheless, the Fun Palace had serious drawbacks: it was an externally controlled field, a cybernetic illusion of planning all possible solutions and situations in advance, or even worse: a manipulative space governed by the imperative to perform.

Per-formed space

Cedric Price's Fun Palace demonstrated in exemplary fashion how architecture can function as a temporary expository machine of this transition in the social production of space. Thereby socio-political effectivity – in other words: the effects of the socio-cultural performance of architecture – likewise takes centre-stage. As an aesthetic form of action, architectural practice can also be a platform for new forms of political performance. In this connection, Rancière speaks of the creation of stages for lending visibility to new political actors.[27] When such stages of enablement are created, not only political goals play a role, but also the form in which they are per-formed. In this way, aesthetics can be regarded as central to politics, because it determines what Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible, which comes into form as aesthetic 'regimes'. One should understand these as different forms of organisation encompassing forms of visibility, ways of making form, and ways of conceptualising these.

At first, form sounds alluring to architects: the discourse of form seems to confirm an understanding of space as pure form, as something transparent and intelligible. This conception makes it seem possible that the chaos of the world can be tamed rationally by means of an intellectually understood space, as if the complex tangle that is the city can be "generated" with a series of precisely defined operations. But this is deceptive. According to Lefebvre, in the urban context we experience a non-transparent, occult form: "Urban space purports to be transparent. Everything is symbolic [...], everything stands in relation to pure form, is the content of this form [...]. But one [...] notices that this transpar-

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[27] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible,* trans. Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, London and New York 2004.

ency is deceptive. The city, the urban, is also a mystery, occult."[28] Lefebvre's point about form here can be easily misunderstood. This is due to his definition of form in relation to movement, to time. Space is interpreted as a storyline/ course of action, as a dynamic entity that has a structuring influence on the fabric of social relations and is co-determined by the latter at the same time. In this process, everyday life retroacts systematically on the performance of space. The possibilities of constituting spaces performatively are dependent on the given symbolic and material factors found in an action situation, on the habits and disposition of the actors, on the access control embedded in the structure, as well as on physical options. A shift in focus thereby begins, away from objects and towards that which objects make possible. Complexity and disorder arise from a field of urban actors, interactions, sites, and discourses that constitute the urban. The critical analysis offered in this article thus draws attention to improvisation as the mode of urban practice that seeks constructive ways of dealing with disorder on the basis of the performative. Here, it is of decisive importance to interpret the outward form of performance not as a determinant, but instead solely as the point of departure for new forms. On the basis of this reading, I suggest turning the conventional understanding of form on its head. This is unspectacular, and for this very reason so effective. Those who assume that movement follows from form, can, for instance, as a city planner maintain that sufficient planning also produces the right urban movement. My view is the exact opposite: form emerges from movement and not the other way around!

By re-reading the production of space as the improvisation of space, urbanism becomes situative: in the recognition that the doable, the real, the potential of the situation is drawn from the interplay of mutually influencing factors. If one desists from spending time pressing reality into forms, one gains the opportunity to analyse those structures that regulate the course of the process of transformation. It has the effect of liberation: discovering structural coherence in material disorder instead of avoiding disorder as form, and thereby taking urban practice and life itself as the point of departure. Instead of a call to order and a return to an overriding subject perspective, the issue now is the possibility of urban subjects to reconfigure themselves through improvisation. This also means: the consistency of the subject also does not remain untouched.

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[28] Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, p. 120.

But what is the relationship between performativity and improvisation? One can maintain that action is a performative act: in other words, something that is carried out and that is full of indeterminacy. And vice versa: in order to become an emancipatory force, performance presupposes an art of action, a practical-reflective knowledge, a constructive, intersubjective approach with disorder: *improvisation*. If one speaks of improvisation as performance here, one is dealing with improvisation's "showing of itself" in its cultural, technological, and social meanings as concurrent representation, achievement, and execution.

Lacaton & Vassal revisited – An architecture of enablement and improvisation

In order to indicate how a shift from performance to improvisation can be tackled, I want to again draw on and look more closely at the example of the above-mentioned work by Lacaton & Vasall. They are an architectural office that is expressly committed to opening up individual free spaces. Anne Lacaton and Jean Philippe Vassal seek to grasp the essence of improvisation, form from movement, and to transport this into architecture. Here, they do not take as their point of departure the event-oriented programme of the 1980s and 1990s that aims to supply forms in order to generate events. They also do not conceive of form as an architectural problem of continual elaboration, but instead: form is the aggregate of an architectural analysis of a particular situation. Architecture is then primarily something that emerges from a situative movement: first life, the appropriation, the enabled improvisation are what constitute the spatial quality. In the case of Lacaton & Vassal, we can therefore speak of an architecture of enablement, a second-level production of space. They produce spatial structures that in turn enable the production of space. For Lacaton & Vassal, the spatial added-value is measured not in additional square meters alone, but also in the added potential of living movement, lived experience, and ultimately in the quality of life. The connection with time produces a lightness in architecture that counters the idea of the monumental, the eternal, removed from time. We discover a direct line to Price here. But inasmuch as architecture includes time as a factor of life and production in a building, it becomes lighter, more capable of transformation; even its own disappearance has been taken into consideration as well.

One could claim that Lacaton & Vassal proceed analogously to conceptual art: they analyse the interior of a situation and from this develop a conceptual programme that transforms itself as long as it remains open until the time is ripe for admitting formal determinations. The given is what determines: the question is posed in accordance with the consciousness for the situation. This can go so far that the architects refrain from intervening because they recognise that the situation already functions just as it is, as in the case of Place Leon Aucoc in Bordeaux. Changes in the previously existing, subtle balance of the place are out of the question. Lacaton & Vassal restrict themselves to simple maintenance work. Period!

Just as a place can become a ready-made, technology can become an instrument of reinterpretation, of détournement: hothouses are transformed into housing machines (Le Corbusier, *unité d'habitation* / *Wohnmaschine*). And since hothouses are also inexpensive and at the same time generate maximum openness, the view of the economy is likewise changed. Paradoxically, Lacaton & Vassal have integrated the economy as a driving force in such a calculated fashion that, on the other hand, they liberate themselves from it: "We never start from the idea that we're going to build inexpensively; we ask ourselves how we're going to be able to offer ourselves everything we want."[29] The buildings are so inexpensive that they enable luxury without a great deal of money: luxury for all. "*Se libérer de l'idée de forme*" thus does not mean dispensing with form, but deriving form from movement. This frees our attention for the significance of people's everyday life and its movements generated from within.

Improvisation of space

On account of the above, the key hypothesis would be that improvisation as a technology could be the mode of practice that enables not only navigation through the new urban spaces but also to produce them *in situ*. This implies understanding improvisation as a model of action that is to be regarded as a socio-material resource of the city. It acts as its facilitating structure in urban spaces that are characterised by dimensions of abrupt change, uncertainty, and insecurity. But that implies reconfiguring the term in question. Originally the

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[29] *A Conversation with Patrice Goulet*, in: 2G, *International Architecture Review*, Barcelona 2002, p. 123.

term improvisation was used to describe a stage of repairing situations, to correct in a sloppy way what went wrong. Although improvisation is inherently associated with flexibility and mobility, it was only ever meant to be in temporary use. When cities become transit places, the situation turns around: complex urban space takes on the qualities of permanent improvisation. The form of transition becomes one of the key features of the everyday life of people living in the improvisatory state and improvisation technology becomes the technology of the self[30] that facilitates that individuals intersubjectively produce and use space. Yet the notion of improvisation as it is coined here does not speak of naïve vitalism or a socio-romantic notion of the everyday, but rather questions new modes of politics. In this way, the contemporary city is interpreted rather as a space of transition: In the actualities of change that can arise from the unexpected reaction to and the spontaneous productions of urban life there lies the possibility of transformation, and, in general, the invention of new forms of organisation and thus new spaces of the political.

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[30] Foucault, Martin, Gutman, and Hutton (eds.), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst 1988.