

subjectivity

why is subjectivity an important question for architecture?

February 14th 2008

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Session Notes:

SV: I'll begin by presenting an overview of my PhD research so far and then move on to elaborate on subjectivity within this study. I need to say that 'self-organisation' is closely related to Doina's work and develops the work of Deleuze and Guattari as a starting point. Self-organisation is a term used in many fields, from biology, complexity theory, systems theory as well as urban planning, but does not yet have a specific connection to architecture. Some architects have used it like Doina's practice and recently Stefano Boeri has talked about it but it needs to be looked at in much greater detail.

Self-organisation is understood here as a form of spatial practice and this forms the basis of my research question. Self-organisation is understood as an urban practice, both self-initiated and self-managed. Deleuze and Guattari's work is taken here for their political critique and their practical engagement, rather than a driver for or application to 'form' as has been the case in architecture in the past.

DP: It was a fashion to use Deleuze, specifically *A Thousand Plateaus* and *Anti-Oedipus* in architecture, which were incorporated for their formal effects. Guattari was a huge political figure in France and all of this aspect of his work was ignored. He invented an institutional critique of the psychiatric clinic and invented the concept 'schizoanalysis' as a way of understanding subjectivity. The clinic was reorganised to rethink power relations between patients and doctors and his work has been extremely influential in the intellectual world.

SV: The practice of self-organisation may include informal urban settlements, appropriations of space. I am interested in asking how architecture can promote self-organisation. This relates also to questions of learning and pedagogy as we have discussed before. How can we find these practices? How do we learn from them? How do we understand, analyse and assess them?

I am looking at a number of key theories in relation to self-organisation, particularly the 'rhizome'. As I have said, this is taken for its political rather than formal content. It is decentralised, rather than hierarchical. Deleuze and Guattari have said they are tired of trees. The 'rhizome' is a useful tool to explore social relations. Alongside this, I am researching their

concept of lines of flight, a term related to the rhizome, one that speaks of opportunities and it is also the name of our research group.

DP: Which works are you drawing from... *A Thousand Plateaus*?

SV: Yes, *A Thousand Plateaus*, *Negotiations* and *On the Line*, which also talk about processes of subjectivation. Another key reference for the project is Richard Sennett's *Uses of Disorder*, where he discusses the potentials for decentralised social relations and describes 'survival societies', principally their autonomy from the state. I am putting forward that 'survival societies' are a form of self-organisation. In the *Uses of Disorder*, he writes of the rigid urban planner and I am expanding this to include architecture. The other key reference is de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life*, which I think everyone is quite familiar with.

The research project is divided into three sections. The first is the theoretical framework that I have outlined, the two other aspects are a database and a dictionary of self-organisation. The database will be a collection of examples, at first these will primarily be spatial examples but could also later include others, such as pirate radio stations. The purpose of the database is to function as an analytical tool.

DP: So it is a web-based database?

SV: Yes, it will be updated online as the research progresses.

DP: So it could be self-organising?

JB: Like a wiki?

DP: Yes, it could become a means of collection? If you are formalising the database, you can have inputs? So, how to get people to contribute? How to collect? And then after you can select...

SV: Yes, perhaps also Jean Francois Prost, from Canada, who spoke at *Alternate Currents* might be relevant here? Within the database there might be themes, 'micro-scale'; 'art' and so on, so you can click the theme and it brings up all related practices. So the database uses the rhizomatic structure of the internet. The other part of the research is the dictionary. As different disciplines are all concerned with self-organisation, yet have different meanings, intentions and applications for it, the self-organised dictionary can provide multiple definitions.

DP: I think here there should be a research into taxonomy, dictionaries are ways of ordering. It is part of the research, you are producing knowledge in a certain way.

SV: Yes. Also, the purpose of the two tools is to allow examination of them in relation. There are a number of themes and definitions that relate to practices differently.

Subjectivity is a key part of self-organisation. A key aspect of Doina's essay *Losing Control, Keeping Desire in Architecture and Participation* is, as the title suggests, desire. This concerns Guattari's 'subjectivation processes', including how a subject relates to their environment, how they inhabit it. Manuel de Landa, here he is speaking of the notion of friction in self-organisation.

DP: Is there a difference between friction and conflict? Conflict is a key term for Chantal Mouffe, rather than consensus. Conflict is coming from social analysis, whereas friction is attached to physics. Every concept has its imaginary, so if we use friction instead of conflict, it's another analogy.

SV: It's coming from the first part of *A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History...*

DP: where he is putting social and physical phenomena together in their complexity. for him, all these dynamics are parallel and are described in the physical.

SV: So the use of friction for him makes sense in relation to his own argument.

NA: I am talking about post-colonial subjectivity, using the work of Bruno Latour. I have interrogated it through an exhibition project, which I worked on whilst at *muf*. The exhibition was in Linz to reinterpret public spaces in London. You chose your favourite space or one that has significance, a Bengali anthropologist chose the one I worked on: Altab Ali Park. He dropped out at the last moment so I had to do it. It was a place that I knew vaguely from going to the Whitechapel Art Gallery and Brick Lane.

I knew the park held some political significance, there was a march against the Iraq War that started from there and when the First Solution money transfer business collapsed the local Bengali community came together at the park for a rally.

So I started with Homi Bhabha's concept of the hybridity of the postcolonial subject and also the idea that the postcolonial subject is always already a political subject, through necessity and then tried to define this subject as a 'quasi-subject' following Latour.

The reason for using Latour was that I critiquing the prevalent research around the Bengali community of East London, whether academic or governmental, as being too narrow – they almost always focus on one particular issue e.g. family and kinship and look at it in isolation. This produces a knowledge that objectifies others. Latour is a clear advocate of trying to work out the relationships between things, people, environment etc. He talks about the hybrids that modern society produces; the long networks on a global scale that proliferate in our time/world. The postcolonial subject is implicated thoroughly in this due to migration.

Latour's work starts from a critique of the modern condition, which he defines as a lie at the heart of modern society/ western society based on an artificial separation between nature and culture. And this separation is also what separates the west from the rest. This lie sustained through a two-fold process: the work of translation, which creates hybrids of nature and culture and the work of purification, which neatly separates them – creating the modern illusion.

What this process does not take into account is 'the work of mediation' that takes place between the two poles of Nature and Culture, this is the role of what Latour calls, 'quasi-objects/quasi-subjects' – the silent producers of our world whose role is left unacknowledged. Their role is also of mediators but who are demoted to the role of intermediaries. Whilst intermediaries only transmit or transfer, a mediator translates and in so doing creates something new. So in a way this is similar to Derrida's role for Plato's 'chora', which Elizabeth Grosz has called the 'nurse of becoming'. It's a place of nurture that brings something into being.

DP: This is also another concept and tradition of place or space, another culture. Plato invented chora to understand how the world has been made. It is in-between; the place; the thing that holds things together. Chora is a word that is still used in Greek nowadays, to say 'place of origin;' a third kind, not a model nor a copy, the mould (but it's more complex than this!). But what imaginary brings such a concept for those working with space? Rather than extensio, measuring or something that has dimensions. It is generative.

NA: It is more about relations? Chora seems more spatial than Latour's analysis. To come back to the park; I will talk about the park first and then move on to how I think this is related to Latour's concepts. The park is called Altab Ali Park and was named after a Bengali killed in the race riots of the 70s in East London. There is also a sculpture there called the *Shaheed Minar*, it is a 1:5 scale replica of a monument in Dhaka, which was built to commemorate students killed in the language struggles of Bangladesh. When it was still East Pakistan, there were protests for an equal place for Bengali as a national language alongside Urdu.

Some of my colleagues at work found the idea of this monument difficult. They did not like the idea of a public space being claimed for what was essentially a nationalistic struggle, but I disagreed as I thought the repetition of this monument was somehow creating alteration in its meaning. And this was not the only replica of that monument, there is another in Oldham, one in Sydney and Toronto, wherever there is a critical mass of Bengali population. And all 'public' space is appropriated anyway, de Certeau speak of walking as an appropriation of the city space. The problem occurs when things become static.

So I did a reading of the minar as quasi-object, which holds a significance that changes and it is not just for the Bengali community either. It connects here to there – London, Dhaka, Toronto, Iraq. It is part of a network, which gives it a certain significance and it has altered in its repetition – it is not just about independence anymore.

I could stop here but maybe I will go on a bit about some interviews I did as part of the exhibition. I interviewed some teenage girls from the Bengali community because there was a lot of talk at the time about this 'new' language they were speaking. There was a BBC report on it.

So I asked them about it and they were really self-aware and quite disparaging about me as a naïve researcher. They giggled and said there was already a name for it, 'Benglish' and there weren't any new words just a mixing of English and Sylheti. They also told me about another language they used, they called it 'b-language' or 'backslang', which is I think where you add a certain letter after each letter you speak – do you know what I mean? Did anyone do it?

RT: I did it, yes.

NA: I could never do it. Anyway, we also talked about a murder that had occurred in the neighbourhood recently and about politics, they didn't think the police would bother going after the man who had allegedly killed his wife, if he went 'back home' to Bangladesh. And then lots of teenage talk of boys and lots more giggling. At the interview it occurred to me that these girls were hybrid and their subjectivity really skipped from one place to the next. They were in fact quasi-subjects, full-blown mediators as Bruno Latour would call them.

DP: I think this is quite interesting, a complex subjectivity, not just two but how they are situated in space time as socio-cultural subjects. They have their own hybridity. What we didn't discuss yet is the idea of 'collective subjectivity'. There are certain aspects that are specific, to their group where other things are coinciding.

KT: To return to the question in our title today, why do we think subjectivity is an important question for architecture?

NA: In this case it is an understanding that not all subjects are Western. Perhaps it is less a question for architecture and more for urban planning? There is a need to understand that spaces are used differently and have different associations. For example with the monument in the park, younger people do not know about it or have any attachments to it, whereas for older people it still has significance. It is about our different inhabitations of space.

DP: Do you think a space, or living in a space can have consequences for subjectivation processes?

NA: Yes.

DP: So, an architect can influence acting or inter-acting...?

NA: I think it can engender certain things or equally it can disallow certain things to happen.

JB: Perhaps this is also relational, how an architect is related to the situation? Whether they are within or outside of a community for example?

KT: This is a big debate in ethnography, of the significance of being 'inside' or 'outside' a community. Where one is usually given preference or significance over the other whereas what is important is that they are not static positions but should be understood as dynamic.

DP: Subjectivity is a dynamic concept. In French thinking in the 1970's there was much written about the 'decentred' subject, from post-structuralism. The subject that is never the same, so all subjectivity is hybrid.

KT: I think this point connects to the notion of 'Anthropophagous subjectivity'. This is analysed in an essay by [Suely Rolnik](#) as a specifically Brazilian mode of subjective resistance; one that is based on hybridity, a mixing with the other. Anthropophagy is an ancient Brazilian ritual, where the person eats their enemy. But not any enemy, only the bravest warrior, the one who's strength or aspects you desire. It is a selective relationship within which the mixture does not respect hierarchies; all resources are potentially equivalent. She speaks about a subjective consistency, or an "at home," our subjective house. She suggests that we are all, metaphorically, homeless. How do we give ourselves this consistency, I think she suggests it is through a movement of strategic, selective mixing. An 'at home' made of provisional totalities...

DP: What I wanted to speak about is the essay I have written with Constantin in *Urban Act* called 'Acting Space'. This is a reflection on our own practice over the last seven years of experience. There is a change of paradigm in architectural practice, where here we are part of a collective and were 'users' as well as architects. This questions a lot, the role the architect plays. What was interesting was the role of space and spatial organisation in creating community. This is an important standpoint, there is no client which precedes the project, there could be a demand perhaps, but our necessity was to create desire in our neighbourhood; there was need here, but no desire. So we have taken over a space to do this. The question of subjectivity is very important, it is implicit in the constructing of a group and space to effect subjectivity. It creates subjectivation processes.

We were very careful with subjects involved, looking at people's activities and relations between them. You can see this, that first, they came for gardening then they became more politically active as they became more confident. They went to the city hall to claim another space for our garden when we were forced to move. It was somehow a discovery, the relation between space, the activities it can host and the subjectivities that are transformed. To develop an architecture of use rather than walls. There is a mutual influence, between what is happening in a space, what it looks like and how it is made. There was a very modest architecture here, made with mobile elements and no strong authorship, it adapted to need. It also allowed power structure to change, and be dynamic. When the garden moved, there was a new structure. The temporality allowed reversible hierarchies and allowed other subjects to emerge.

We have put together a very complex database documenting people's involvement. The advantage of being 'inside' a project, is we know this very accurately. You can play with the database to visualise the processes. One of the interesting things is the idea of the 'synaptic subject.' In the process, certain people became key elements in relationships as mediators between different groups of interest. They complexify their engagement and without them the group would not have existed. The group needs synaptic subjects to keep the collective

together. It is interesting to see how this evolves, how someone becomes strategic and keeps the collective subject together.

One of our methods was the condition that if a member of the association wanted to do something for themselves they must have a second activity that is collective, for others. We have a very simple programme of gardening, which has its own cycles and dynamics and by using these you can create sociality. We call this 'gardening agency;' a process that can generate subjectivation.

The idea of 'resubjectivation' is important following Deleuze and Guattari's writings on the crisis of subjectivity. They call it 'society of control' in which subjectivation processes are controlled by state/ media/ mechanisms... As architects, we were interested in creating resubjectivation processes- changes in subject's relation with their environment. It is important for those from another culture, to help them valorise their culture. Through the way we organised the space we tried to allow for this. For example, African women were involved in cooking at certain events, and were paid to do this; they ran a small economic unit as they had formerly done in Africa. Their knowledge became valorised in a European context, through familiarity. Hopefully this was empowering.

The other person becomes a teacher to others. Through very small initiative it was enough to change the position of one in a collective project to discover another dimension of their subjectivity.

It is interesting to show this visually, with tools of architectural representation. To claim that architectural projects are also about this.

SW: What I have studied in development is that asking people to be a subject in a programme in a way changes their perception of themselves. It is empowering, they learn through the process and then become initiator of a project.

DP: Yes. Another thing to add though is not to be too confident that this happens easily. There are many frictions or conflicts. Some will develop counter-subjectivity. In our own project there were many conflicting desires, the use of a certain space at certain times, what some have understood of the rules in conflict with what others have understood. It is unpredictable and it is always at risk.

This type of conflictual democracy is very difficult to handle. Maybe it is a question of scale? How can we speak about this on the scale of the state? What is a self-organised state for example?

SV: For Richard Sennett, there are always things that are centralised...

DP: Self-organisation is an 'intelligent' system, so there is an amount of time required for learning the process. A lot of time was spent in 'core' organisation, without the pretension that it was self-organised. It is only when user takes over and it depends that *all* are involved. If a

synaptic subject leaves it can't be self-organised any more. I wouldn't have been aware of this if I hadn't had this experience. We need to talk about difficulties, not only what is exciting.

JB: How does the rhizomatic structure relate to the synaptic subject?

DP: Ranciere has written about the 'synaptic subject' in relation to the political. There is a lot written on him now, he has become quite fashionable.

RT: Subjectivity is a taken for granted term. What is interesting in the work of Latour that Nishat has brought is the relation of subject-object, or quasi-subject, quasi-object for Latour the terms are almost interchangeable. The terms we use are particular to culture.

DP: Yes, today we have mainly discussed the subject in French theory...

RT: It can very easily become semantics. If we say all subjectivities are hybrid we can say they always need qualification. The polarisation of nature-culture, subject-object, the critical thing is that we use the words carefully.

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