

# *Architecture as Space, Again?*

## *Notes on the 'Spatial Turn'*

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In the introduction to a recent volume on the 'spatial turn', the authors applaud geography's advance from an 'importer' of ideas to an 'exporter', and embark on an exploration of "how geographers have influenced other fields of scholarship and the many forms in which geography has motivated scholars to think spatially."<sup>1</sup> However, calculating such a balance of trade is difficult, and a quick glance at what was called the "spatial turn" in sociology or history suggests that rather than importing concepts, much effort goes into rewriting the spatial genealogies of these disciplines themselves, with sociologists returning to Émile Durkheim, Maurice Halbwachs or Georg Simmel; and historians rereading the Annales School.<sup>2</sup>

In architectural discourse, the concept of space did not have to be rediscovered. Indeed, it occupied a privileged place since the late 19th century in German art and architecture history (August Schmarsow, Alois Riegl), aesthetics (Theodor Lipps, Herman Sörgel), and art criticism (Adolf Hildebrand). The influence of this debate, spreading beyond academic disciplines and beyond Germany, led to a consensus on "space as the essence of architecture," a consensus reached during the interwar period among art and architectural historians, such as Sigfried Giedion, Nikolaus Pevsner, Geoffrey Scott, but also embraced by avant-garde architects in order to bypass the stylistic revivalism of the 19th century: the dilemma aptly expressed in the title of Heinrich Hübsch's 1828 book *In What Style Should We Build?*<sup>3</sup> Yet this consensus is no more, and some of the most innovative contributions to architecture discourse and practice over the last 40 years were developed explicitly *against* the definition of "architecture as space:" from Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown arguing for "an architecture as sign rather than space"; to Rem Koolhaas' confession to having "always thought the notion of 'space' [was] irrelevant" despite his frequent use of the term.<sup>4</sup> Since the 1960s, we have also seen the historicization not only of the concept of space as

developed by the early 20th century architectural avant-gardes, but also of the work of scholars and critics of the interwar period who embraced space as the guideline for architectural knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, if the 'spatial turn' is broadly understood as the introduction of the concept of space into the discourse of a particular discipline, it does not seem to have much to offer current debates in architectural culture.

However, the spatial turn does pose a fundamental challenge and affordance to contemporary architectural research if it is addressed according to its historical conditions, that is to say as a set of theoretical decisions taken by critical thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, or Pierre Bourdieu in response to the fundamental economic, political, technological, and cultural transformations that took place on a global scale in the 1960s and 1970s.

It was in this context that Lefebvre formulated his theory of the production of space in six books published between 1968 (*The Right to the City*) and 1974 (*The Production of Space*), considered by Edward Soja to be central contributions to the "reassertion of space in modern critical theory," as Soja defined the spatial turn.<sup>6</sup> Lefebvre posited his theory as a response to multiple phenomena: the emergence of the "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption;" the crisis of Marxism and the disappointment with state socialism; and the institutionalization of critical thinking – including critical urban theory – in the processes of state-led planning. At the same time, Lefebvre's publications were inscribed into a revision of the modern movement and, more specifically, into a critique of what he considered the modern movement's concept of space. Read today, his account of the 'discovery of space' by early 20th century architects appears characteristic of 1960s polemics against functionalist urbanism and modernist architecture, a polemics itself subsequently questioned by

historiographies of the CIAM and of the modern movement's 'other traditions.'<sup>7</sup> In particular, his attribution to 'modern architecture' of an 'abstract' concept of space – at the same time homogenous and fragmented, geometric, visual, and phallic – did not reflect the multiplicity of the avant-gardes' spatial imagination: from Le Corbusier's *plan libre*, Gropius's *fließendes Raumkontinuum*, or El Lissitzky's isotropic space; through the understanding of space as enclosure, influenced by Gottfried Semper, rethought by Hendrik Petrus Berlage and Peter Behrens, and incorporated in Adolf Loos's *Raumplan*; to the concept of space as an extension of the body, introduced in August Schmarsow's lectures on the history of architecture.<sup>8</sup>

Despite its limitations, what made Lefebvre's writings central to the 'spatial turn' was their attempt to problematize the understanding of space as a privileged medium of architecture. Rather, Lefebvre argued that if early 20th century architecture 'discovered' space, it is in the sense of space's instrumentalization as a medium, tool, and milieu of social practices. Many of these instrumentalizations were studied in Lefebvre's research projects from the 1940s onwards. They included empirical work in rural and urban sociology that paid particular attention to the role of urban space in the class composition of post-war France, as well as studies on the everyday practices of the inhabitants of individual and collective housing.<sup>9</sup> From within these engagements Lefebvre formulated a concept of space as socially produced and productive: produced by and made productive in a variety of practices and by various agents that cooperate, compete and struggle.

Three theoretical decisions undergird Lefebvre's approach to space. First, a shift from research on space itself toward the study of the processes of its production at a variety of scales: from the everyday rhythms of *métro-boulot-dodo* (commuting, working, sleeping) to the global reproduction of

capitalism. Second, the acknowledgement of the multiplicity of social practices that contribute to these processes, which include material practices of transformation of space, practices of representing space, and its experience and appropriation.

Third, the focus on the contradictory and political character of the processes of production of space. These decisions introduce a research perspective incompatible with attempts at the conceptualization of space as operating through a singular image of thought or as a universal principle. This perspective challenges not only the spatial imaginary of the modern movement as Lefebvre saw it, but also his own attempt to reduce the fundamental dialectics of space to one general form governed by one universal contradiction, in the vein of Marx's opposition between 'use value' and 'exchange value'.<sup>10</sup>

The stress on the multiplicity of practices implicated in the production of space makes such reduction impossible. Does this mean that there is no one space, but rather a multiplicity of spaces in which we live? Such a vision was conveyed by much architectural theory from the late 1940s to the 1970s, and expressed by authors as diverse as Bruno Zevi, Christian Norberg-Schulz and Philippe Boudon. In his book *Architecture as Space* (1948) Zevi lists multiple 'interpretations' of architecture: political, philosophical (religious, scientific, economic), social, materialist, technical, physio-psychological and formalist. All of them are valid to the extent to which they deal with architecture – that is to say, with space, because architecture consists in "the enclosed space in which man lives and moves."<sup>11</sup> Norberg-Schulz in *Existence, Space, and Architecture* (1971) also described a range of 'spaces' in which people live: the 'pragmatic space' of physical action; 'perceptual space'; 'existential space'; 'cognitive space'; the 'abstract space' of pure logical relations; and an 'expressive space' that included 'architectural space' described by means of an 'aesthetic space'.<sup>12</sup>

The logical consequence of this multiplication was to charge specific disciplines with the task of accounting for these various 'spaces', a task pursued in 1960s debates in France and beyond. In other words, what appears as speculation about the ontology of space can be translated into a pragmatic question about the possibility of an interdisciplinary cooperation between architects, urbanists, geographers and sociologists in education, research and design. And indeed, for much of French research on urban space from the late 1950s to the early 1970s – informed by the work of Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, Raymond Ledrut, and Lefebvre, the differences in their understanding of 'space' notwithstanding – it was this possibility for interdisciplinary cooperation that was at stake.<sup>13</sup>

What is the role of architecture research within such a restructured division of labour? On the one hand, if 'architectural space' – argued by Norberg-Schulz to be the specific competence of architecture – is one among many other 'spaces', a philosophical discussion about the relationships between these specific 'spaces' is inevitable: a discussion that seems to project the division of labor into an ontology of spaces, thus violating Ockham's rule not to multiply entities unnecessarily. In this framework, the hierarchy of reified 'spaces' reflects the power relations between their producers, reducing architecture to "one of the numerous socioeconomic products that were perpetuating a political status quo" – as Bernard Tschumi argues in his 1975 reading of French urban sociology.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, if this 'architectural space' is understood as somehow encompassing all others, architecture's disciplinary crisis is inevitable: as space is produced by many agents – architects arguably among the least influential – they will be held responsible for something they cannot control.

These arguments – exercised in numerous debates first in France and Italy beginning in the 1960s,

and later in the United States – suggest that the understanding of space as produced by and productive in heterogeneous social practices is incommensurable with the modernist definition of 'architecture as space'.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the 'spatial turn' – at least as understood in the writings of Soja and those who followed – is based on an idea of space that not only differs from that of the early 20th century avant-gardes, but that was developed explicitly in opposition to their claim about space as the specific medium of architecture. The deep entrenchment of this claim in the professional self-consciousness of architects was recently manifest in a debate initiated by the German journal *Der Architekt* which was marked by the contrast between the 'architectural' definition of space and that developed by social sciences within the spatial turn.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than perpetuating this claim, it is more productive to develop a research perspective on architecture within the processes of the production of space as a multifaceted and multivalent product of apprehension, experience and reification that straddles physical, ideological and symbolic reality.<sup>17</sup> More specifically, this means abandoning the understanding of 'architectural space' as a realm of architectural competence and, instead, moving towards a study of the multiple engagements of architectural practices at all stages of process: from formulating a demand, to research, programming, conceptualizing, designing and construction. Furthermore, the understanding of space as materially transformed, represented and experienced requires an attention to the variety of actors with whom the architect engages, thus moving beyond the bipolar, 1960s image of the architectural practice overshadowed by its dark other: 'the market' or 'the state'. At the same time, this perspective facilitates a study of a variety of products of architectural practices: not only technical documentation, but also research methods, modes of knowledge production, conventions of representation, educational tools

and regulatory proposals.<sup>18</sup> This includes studying architecture's "transformational, active, instrumental function", as Eve Blau states in her 1999 study on the Red Vienna, and, as Nancy Stieber advocates, it means reinserting "the formal analysis of the visual into the problematic of social space", extended towards an attention to the performance of architectural forms as perceived individually and collectively, experienced, interpreted, contested and appropriated.<sup>19</sup>

One could object by arguing that the acceptance of such a research perspective does not necessitate the acceptance of Lefebvre's concept of space. Even if his concept, as I have argued, lies at the origin of this perspective, it could be seen as a prosthetic device to be disposed immediately after serving its cause – much like Wittgenstein's comparison of his *Tractatus* to a ladder to be thrown away after it was used to climb. In other words, would it not be better to abandon the discourse on 'space' and restrict architectural discourse to 'buildings', 'streets', 'squares', 'neighborhoods', 'parks' and 'landscapes'? There is nothing wrong with this, provided that they are not understood as reified architectural typologies but, rather, as constructed in collective processes operating on various scales and on various facets, including their materiality, representation, use, experience and imagination – that is to say as part of the social production of 'space' in the sense put forward by the 'spatial turn'.

## Notes

- 1 Barney Warf and Santa Arias, "Introduction: The Reinsertion Of Space Into Social Sciences and Humanities," in *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Barney Warf and Santa Arias (London : Routledge, 2009), 2. The first version of this paper was presented during the roundtable "Beyond the Spatial Turn: Redefining Space in Architectural History" with the participation of Stephen Cairns, Greig Crysler, Hilde Heynen, Anat Falbel, Janike Kampevold Larsen, Alona Nitzan-Shifftan, and Carmen Popescu (First international meeting of the European Architectural History Network, Guimarães, June 20th , 2010).
- 2 Jörg Döring, Tristan Thielmann eds., *Spatial Turn. Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften* (Berlin: Transcript, 2009).
- 3 Panayotis Tournikiotis, *The Historiography of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999); Ákos Moravánszky and Katalin Moravánszky Gyöngy, *Architekturtheorie im 20. Jahrhundert. Eine kritische Anthologie* (Vienna: Springer, 2003); Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space : Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000); comp.: Heinrich Hübsch, *In welchem Style sollen wir bauen?* (Karlsruhe : Müllersche Hofbuchhandlung, 1928).
- 4 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, *Architecture as Signs and Systems: For a Mannerist Time* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Rem Koolhaas, "Navigating the Local: Conversation with Sang Lee," in *The Domestic and the Foreign in Architecture*, edited by Sang Lee and Ruth Baumeister (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2007), 344.
- 5 Tournikiotis, *Historiography*; Moravánszky, *Architekturtheorie*.
- 6 Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: the Reassertion Of Space In Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).
- 7 Dirk van den Heuvel and Max Risselada eds., *Team 10, 1953--81. In Search of a Utopia of the Present* (Rotterdam: Netherlands Architecture Institute, 2005); Colin St. John Wilson, *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture: The Uncompleted Project* (London: Academy, 1995). See also: Manuel de Solà-Morales, "Another Modern Tradition: From the Break of 1930 to the Modern Urban Project," *Lotus* 64 (1989), 6-31.
- 8 Moravánszky, *Architekturtheorie*; Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary Of Modern Architecture* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000).
- 9 Lukasz Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space. Architecture, Urban Research and the Production of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
- 10 *Ibid.*, chapter 3.
- 11 Bruno Zevi, *Architecture As Space: How To Look At Architecture* (New York: Horizon Press, 1974 [1948]), 23.
- 12 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space and Architecture* (London: Studio Vista, 1971).
- 13 Françoise Bedos et al., *Les besoins fonctionnels de l'homme en vue de leur projection ultérieure sur le plan de la conception architecturale* (Paris: Centre de recherche d'architecture, d'urbanisme et de construction, 1970).
- 14 Bernard Tschumi, "The Architectural Paradox," in Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 32.
- 15 Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space*.
- 16 *Der Architekt*, 2/ 2008; for discussion, see Christina Hilger, *Vernetzte Räume Plädoyer für den Spatial Turn in der Architektur* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2010), 11ff.
- 17 Comp. *Fertile Spaces: The Productivity of Urban Space in Northern Europe*, ed. by Peter Arnade, Martha C. Howell, and Walter Simons, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Spring 2002, Vol. 32, No. 4.
- 18 Lukasz Stanek, "Simulation or Hospitality-- Beyond the Crisis of Representation in Nowa Huta," in *Visual and Material Performances in the City*, edited by Lars Frers and Lars Meier (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 135-53; Lukasz Stanek, "The Instrumental Use of Representations of Space in the Practices of Production of Space in a Postcommunist City," in *De-signing the Urban. Technogenesis and the Urban Image*, edited by Patrick Healy and Gerhard Bruyns (Rotterdam: 010, 2006).
- 19 Eve Blau, *The Architecture of Red Vienna, 1919-1934* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 14; Nancy Stieber, "Space, time, and architectural history," in *Rethinking Architectural Historiography*, edited by Dana Arnold, Elvan Altan Ergut, and Belgin Turan Özkaya (London: Routledge 2006), 179.