The role of the architect in the
production of democratic public spaces

ARC 6989 - Reflections on Architectural Design

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In this essay I’m interested in exploring what is the role of the architect in the social production of architecture as a campaigner for democratic public spaces. How do we as architects design new forms of public spaces that bring the political debates closer to the everyday life and enable civil society and citizens to actively participate in the political life and to communicate points of view in the decision-making process?

I would like to argue that in order to challenge the existing power structures, it is necessary for us, as architects, to produce alternative discourses and practices, as part of a political strategy of inclusiveness and accessibility, a strategy that has the potential to inform and change the organisational structure of the institutions and allows for political participation to happen and to carry on, through the extension of the decision-making process into the public sphere, in spaces of the everyday life.

In Bernard Tschumi’s vision, architecture has the power to change the society, it has the potential to imagine possibilities that would allow for ‘non-hierarchical, non-traditional ’ social relationships to be expressed within space, and if we as architects become more ‘politically aware’ of the implications of our design, we could transform them by challenging the ‘power structures’ that shape our lives, as Teresa Hoskyns argues in her article “Designing the Agon: Questions on Architecture, Space, Democracy and ‘the Political’ ”. (1)
So what would a democratic space be like and what do architects have to take into consideration when designing public spaces that would serve democracy? According to Richard Sennett in the article “Democratic Spaces”, there are 2 types of democracy and each requires a different kind of space to operate in. The starting point in understanding democracy, according to Richard Sennett, is Ancient Athens which had 3 main spaces where 2 models of democracy were performed in parallel: the deliberative (representative) democracy centred on decision-making, that took place in an open space called Pnyx and which was criticised in the political theatre of Dionysus; and the associative (participatory) democracy whose goal was community building rather than decision-making and took place in the Agora. (2)
In the same article, Richard Sennett argues that architects should focus, when designing public spaces, on how to build community amongst the people who differ, where citizens would care beyond the ‘boundaries of their individualised sphere’. (2) That architects should create such spaces that enable communication in the public sphere (as people exert an agency as long as they debate something).

Manuel Castells reinforces this idea, in his book “Communication Power”, by arguing that public spaces should allow citizens to communicate points of view in a legitimate exercise of power (power seen as ‘representation of the values and interests of citizens expressed by means of their debate in the public sphere ’):

“meaning is constructed in society through the process of communicative action [...and...] institutional stability is predicated on the capacity to articulate different interests and values in the democratic process via communication networks”. (3)

In his view, democracy can be reconstructed if the civil society can challenge the failure of political authorities to address the concerns of the society, by enabling a decentralisation of the political discourse and its reach to the local neighbourhoods through citizen participation in the debates.

I believe that this is precisely where architects can take an active role in addressing this ‘crisis of representation ’ (as Bruno Latour calls it in his book “Making Things Public, Atmospheres of Democracy”), by designing new forms of public spaces meant to provide a critical alternative to the existing power structures and to help people interact, communicate and build new social relationships, thus creating communities.
A critical look into the political structures of the authorities shows that they are highly bureaucratic and hierarchical structures that do not allow for direct participation of the citizens in the decision-making process.

A research into the Town Hall structures in Sheffield and Brasov, for instance (see image below), proves that a Council Meeting can accommodate less that 1% of the citizens in the public gallery of the council chamber, where people are turned into mere spectators of a debate (a competition between councillors belonging to a hierarchical structure by political parties), that fails to address what Bruno Latour calls the real ‘matters of concern’ and the true needs of the citizens. (4)
This ‘crisis of representation’ is addressed by civil society and citizens in protest movements meant to criticise some of the decisions taken by the authorities, in assemblies of people organised around debates and discussions, open to public participation (where people come from equal position as there is no hierarchical structure, as both images below prove it).

But both the structures described above (the political authorities and the self-organised protest movements) are extreme ‘practices’ of a so-called democracy, as both lack the true democratic public spaces.

I think that a very good example of architectural practice that manages to challenge the political authorities’ decisions and to create new forms of public space, is aaa (atelier d’architecture autogérée), a collective, non-hierarchical practice focused on issues of self-organisation and self-management of collective public spaces and social networks in urban contexts, an organisation that addresses issues of ‘global awareness, social divide and geo-political conflicts’. Their projects are experiments of temporary reuse of ‘derelict’ public spaces, re-claimed from local authorities, experiments which test a type of research activity that Dr. Doina Petrescu calls it ‘Stealth Research’.
In her vision ‘Stealth Research’ is a practice held at a relative distance from academia and research institutions, a type of ‘tactical, situated research developed within the everyday life’, an alternative route which is very aware of its ‘political strategy of inclusiveness and accessibility of those involved’, acting by means of ‘continuous participative process’, able to produce reality configurations outside the academic research world and interested in how knowledge is produced through practice and experience. (5)

This platform for collaborative research and action, of which Dr. Doina Petrescu and Constantin Petcou were founding members, was carried out together with other specialists, artists, researchers, NGO’s, institutional partners (universities), students and mostly with members of the communities that inhabit the neighbourhood in which the projects were located, people of immigrant and multicultural background.

What started as one temporary project located on an ‘island’ between the railway tracks of Gare de Nord and Gare de l’Est in the neighbourhood of La Chapelle, in Paris, has developed, after eviction, into three projects located on three new spaces re-claimed from the authorities, again for temporary use. The original project called ECO-box has created a precedence for other projects and has become a model of research cooperation and ‘trans-local network’ for transmission of knowledge based on ‘proximity, mutual learning and action’. (5)
The architects from aaa (Doina Petrescu and Constantin Petcou) have developed new concepts in their cross-disciplinary research, working across social and cultural levels, developing participatory techniques, imagining new roles of architects as ‘spatial agents’ and practicing in ‘a more ethical and transformative manner’, as a critique to mainstream architectural practice. (5)

They acted as curators and enablers, leaving room at the same time for local residents to take over responsibility, to the extent to which, at the moment of eviction, people got together to campaign for a new derelict public space.

It is through their projects in Paris that they managed to ‘influence local policy towards the reuse and development of leftover spaces in the city’. Their projects were continuously developed as a ‘social, cultural and political production’. (6)

What is political about the activity developed by aaa’s architects is the ability to engage with the City Council and the Railway Company from which they claimed the derelict space for temporary use, but also the ability to create a community where it didn’t exist.

The ECO-box project is a good example of what Richard Sennett called ‘associative democratic space’ based on community building, gathering people from very different social and cultural background, thus allowing for difference to be accommodated within the public space.

It is also an example of what Chantal Mouffe called ‘agonistic public space’, a space that allows for different desires to be discussed and negotiated in consensual debates that acknowledge the inherent conflict which occurs within the social and political realm, in the collective production of the social space. (7)
Through this project, aaa’s architects have managed to bring the politics back to the everyday life of a marginalised society (illegal immigrants, drug addicts, unemployed) by organising international seminars about micropolitics of space with people like Chantal Mouffe and invited politicians, thus empowering local people who could participate in these discussions. The benefit of this knowledge production was a capacity building and emancipation of users who felt empowered to campaign for new public spaces for temporary use, when they faced eviction.

The architects became political activists by initiating this project, by taking an active part in it, both as researchers and as inhabitants of that neighbourhood, and by creating not just a spatial sustainability but also a social sustainability (thus creating a network of collaboration between institutions and people).

What was interesting in their activity was the fact that it allowed for the users themselves to organise activities and to take control of the management and programming of the space, putting them in an active position and allowing the transfer of knowledge and skills between people of very different cultural experience.

The ECO-box project was in essence a ‘social space as a social product’, in Henri Lefebre’s terms (8), that allowed for democratic processes of negotiation and spatial appropriation to happen and to carry on. Through a subtle design and situated research, the architects managed to discover the creative potential within the ‘lived space’ (9) of the everyday life.
References


Bibliography

5. Richard Sennett, *Democratic Spaces*, Hunch 9, Berlage Institute, 2005