RE-ANIMATING THE BUILT; DE-CENTERING THE HUMAN

Design Against Objectification

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> “As designers, we can consciously—intentionally—re-animate our environments. By seeing buildings as living organisms that co-exist with us in this complex 21st century ecosystem, we can begin to more effectively design against environmental apathy, against mindless consumerism.”

Art and life flow together, inseparable. Architecture then concerns itself with dynamic structures: tissues, networks, matrices, heterarchies. (Woods 1997, 14)

Buildings operate as dynamic, malleable organisms in response to their social and material contexts. As organisms, they depend on their relationships with people and their physical contexts in order to exist, and their characters change as these relationships change. By turns, buildings' interactions with people are planned, unplanned, public, and private. And they are always being made or unmade.[1]

Buildings have not always been understood in terms of the active manner in which they are made and unmade. Until the 1970s, buildings were broadly understood to "have meaning because architects endow them with meaning and skilled observers can decipher it" (Guggenheim 2013, 446). Later, buildings were understood as capable of projecting symbolic worldviews owing to the ways people used them (ex., Harvey 1979; Bunnell 1999; Goss 1993). More recently, however, scholars have called for more active readings of material environments (ex., Lees 2001 & Jenkins 2002). With this call, the previously held notion that buildings are designed by architects and then exist as merely symbolic "black boxes" was problematized. For example, Jenkins suggests that:

> Instead of simply treating buildings as stable, safe, and static black boxes on which we can hang our arguments and claims, no matter how laudable these accounts, we need to dispel the myth of buildings as being static, closed, and materially constant. (Jenkins 2002, 226)

Jenkins questions the tendency to understand buildings as fixed entities that "passively await manipulation" (Beauregard 2012, 183). Counter to the idea that buildings are passive, people are now starting to understand them, as well as other material objects, as having the capacity to "make things happen" (Bennett 2010, 5).

In order to understand buildings as agents having the capacity to *make things happen*, it is necessary to decenter the human subject from our considerations of buildings.[2] As mentioned above, when scholars have looked at buildings, they have historicaly understood them as objects whose meaning was grounded in their architects' conceptions of them or in the symbolic meanings that seem to be projected by their forms. In both cases, our understandings of them are primarily derived from what we see as a building's utility to people.[3]

1. Jacobs writes, "... the materiality of the building is a relational effect, its 'thing-ness" is an achievement of a diverse network of associates and associations. It is what we might think of as a building event rather than simply a building. Conceived of this way, a building is always being 'made' or 'unmade', always doing the work of holding together or pulling apart. (Jacobs 2006, 11)
2. Jacobs et al. write, with regard to decentering the human subject within their research, "Our work has always tried to see architecture as eventful, vital, and performative, much more than simply a built context for human action and more than a mere product of human action" (Jacobs et al. 2012, 128).
3. Beauregard offers his critique of this system of thought: "To believe that humans are all that matters is to fall victim to the culture-nature divide that has plagued modernism from its inception (Latour 1993). If we are to understand how buildings are produced and cities are made to grow and develop (and to decline), we must leave behind such a human-centric, and false, view of the world." (Beauregard 2015, 533-534)

Taking a less human-centric view of buildings allows us to see buildings as agents with their own "vitality" (Jacobs et al. 2012, 135). Decentering the human subject also enables us to see "humans and non-humans alike [as] material configurations, not dividable, separate or separable, but integrated, co-constituted and co-dependent" (Tolia-Kelly 2013, 154). This idea that humans and non-humans are inseparable material configurations that co-constitute and depend on one another situates buildings as active participants in human lives, and humans as active participants in the lives of buildings.

The literature on material geography is helpful in understanding how to conceptually approach these active qualities of buildings. Recent material geographies, like the architectural geography of Jenkins (2002), look at how materials operate in "dynamic circulations" (Tolia-Kelly 2013, 155).[4] With respect to architecture specifically, a number of scholars encourage a linguistic shift away from understanding "building" (Mimisson 2016), "architecture" (Schmidt et al. 2012), and "space" (Lees and Baxter 2011) as *nouns*, to understanding these ideas as verbs. To this end, more recent studies of architecture that look at the dialectic between people and built environments often frame buildings in relation to what they do (ex., Gieryn 2002; Strebel 2011; Guggenheim 2013). In each of these studies, buildings are framed in terms of the active roles they play in their local contexts, both material and social.

When conceptualizing buildings as living agents, people have a tendency to frame buildings' actions in terms of the negative influence they exert in response to human intentions. For example, framing buildings as *obdurate* (Beauregard 2015, 533) or *recalcitrant* (Latour & Yaneva 2008) conveys a negative power.[5] However, buildings are not solely stubborn objects, but also convey a "positive, productive power" (Bennett 2010, 1). For example, buildings can connect diverse human and nonhuman actors—including planners, community members, construction workers, building materials, and electricity—through their design and construction processes (Yaneva & Heaphy 2012).[6] This productive connection between both human and nonhuman agents is sometimes framed as an "intricate dance" [7] (Bennett 2010, 31) or a "dance of agency" (Griswold et al. 2013, 360). Of the role people play within this dance, Bennett writes, "It is also possible to say something about the kind of *striving* that may be exercised by humans within the assemblage" [8] (2010, 38, my emphasis). Among human and non-human agents, humans demonstrate a transformative capacity to strive or consciously exert themselves within this dance. Bennett continues:

> This exertion is perhaps best understood on the model of riding a bicycle on a gravel road. One can throw one's weight this way or that, inflect the bike one direction or toward one trajectory of motion. But the rider is but one actant operative in the moving whole. (2010, 38)

Buildings often "gain momentum" through their interactions with the people who strive to inhabit and maintain them, as well as through their interactions with their broader social and material environments (Strebel 2011, 245).[9] Thus, buildings neither exist as impermeable black boxes nor as autonomous entities that simply carry out their architect's bidding. In other words, "[f]or a building to take form and sustain itself as a big thing, it must 'surrender to technologies; to engineers, to contractors, manufacturers; to politics; to others'"

4. About this dynamic quality of materials, Heatherington and Monroe (1997) suggest that we "move beyond the surface of matter, to engage with the politics, grammars and productive power of materials that are in place, shaping place and effectively making a difference to place and the place of each other" (Tolia-Kelly 2013, 154).
5. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to these understandings of material objects, such as buildings, as agents which affect their surroundings (Latour 2005). While I'm not formally framing this essay in terms of ANT, the theory's intellectual underpinnings influence my argument that buildings operate with agency.
6. Of this capacity to connect "heterogeneous actors," Yaneva and Heaphy (2012, 35) write, "This particular capacity of a building to associate both human and nonhuman actors makes it an important actor. The social can be found here, in the process of mobilization and enrolment of actors."
7. As in, "Humanity and nonhumanity have always performed an intricate dance with each other" (Bennett 2010, 31).
8. Here, "assemblage" refers to the "mosaic" of relationships of human and nonhuman agents.

(Jacobs 2006, 12, quoting Koolhaas 1995, 513-514). Just as a human life is created, is sustained, and gains momentum through the interactions of a variety of natural, social, and economic processes, so, too, do buildings.

As designers, we can consciously—intentionally—re-animate our environments. By seeing buildings as *living organisms* that coexist with us in this complex 21st century ecosystem, we can begin to more effectively design against environmental apathy, against mindless consumerism. We might then take more special care in specifying materials that will last—in identifying the "skin," the "bones" and the "tissues" that will persist through time, that will heal quickly. We might work more tirelessly to design *sensitive* configurations that result in pleasure, in pride and in resilience, not only for people, but for the living buildings, too. Re-animating the built and decentering the human.

9. For example, Strebel (2010, 244) argues that "buildings are 'brought to life' through the work of a block check," and that "the notion of the living building … brings to light a variety of settings in which users, workers and other actors organize their activities, not simply with respect to co-workers and other people involved, but with respect to a specific layout and arrangement of the built environment."

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