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In what is arguably a most crucial time for discourse around issues that are concerned with the political, institutional and social shape of worlds to come, this book explores the agency of the project of architecture and its processes of innovation by constructing an opportunistic and contingent map of effectual positions. The book is built around two sets of questions: the first set of questions concerns itself with the distinction between built objects and actions as the focus of observation, and as objects that are susceptible to innovating, or being innovated. The second set of questions concerns itself with the understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, and is defined by two positions: one that looks to theory as a result of practice, another that looks to practice as subsequent to theory. These two axes are used to locate and compare different positions, thus allowing the readers to construct their own readings of what it means to innovate the project of architecture.

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THE ENVIRONMENTAL ARCHITECT. Reflections on Media Performativity

Lidia Gasperoni

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Who is the architect today? What is her/his role in society, in rethinking the city, in the so-called profession, in university teaching and research, and in those roles that she/he already plays by defining herself as such (or not)? Certainly, the architect is not only a designer of the built environment; her/his field of action is broader and more complex. What is often referred to as the crisis of the architect's profession, almost lost between theory and engineering, hides the appearance of a much broader capacity for action on the part of the architect who designs the environment. This figure, whom I would dare to call an environmental architect, should not be equated with the very important and worthy figure of the architect who raises the primary question of respect for the environment, and therefore of an architectural practice aimed at protecting it and preventing it from being eradicated. The environmental architect is in a more general way the one who, in addition (or prior) to the construction, makes up the environment by perceiving it, understanding it and bringing it to new light with her/his design practices. This new architectural agency concerns also the analysis and documentation of building processes, which are collectors of many different levels of society and culture. The project in this case brings architectural processes to new light, showing the complexity of their impact. In this regard, it is very important to distinguish the concept of design, as the act of producing architecture in the narrow sense, from the concept of a project, which concerns, in a wider sense, all real and potential "effects" produced by architecture (Armando and Durbiano 2017: 73) and in which also documents are grasped in their performativity (Ferraris 2014: 301). Architecture results from the project, which cannot be reduced only to the intentions of the designer but is a social reality constituted by many agents of different kinds.

The main aim of this essay is to highlight the performative function of the architectural project according the attitude, through which the environmental architect analyzes, transforms and discloses our environment. This topic is an essential part of rethinking the performative pragmatics of the project according its capacity to develop a shared environment. Theory in this case has the task of outlining this new sense of the project. Its question emerges from practice, but

as a theory it also has the task of posing questions to practice and, starting from its analytical tools, trying to expand the range of practical action. The theoretical work is not merely explanatory or descriptive; dealing with conceptual features it should have the critical relevance of increasing the relevance of practices. Systematizing certain aspects of the architectural project, the theory of performativity can help us to understand how we can increase the impact of architecture today. This empowerment cannot avoid, in some respects, the mediality of the project, which is a condition of the possibility of the unfolding of architecture in a sensible – i.e. perceivable and, more importantly, communicable – form.

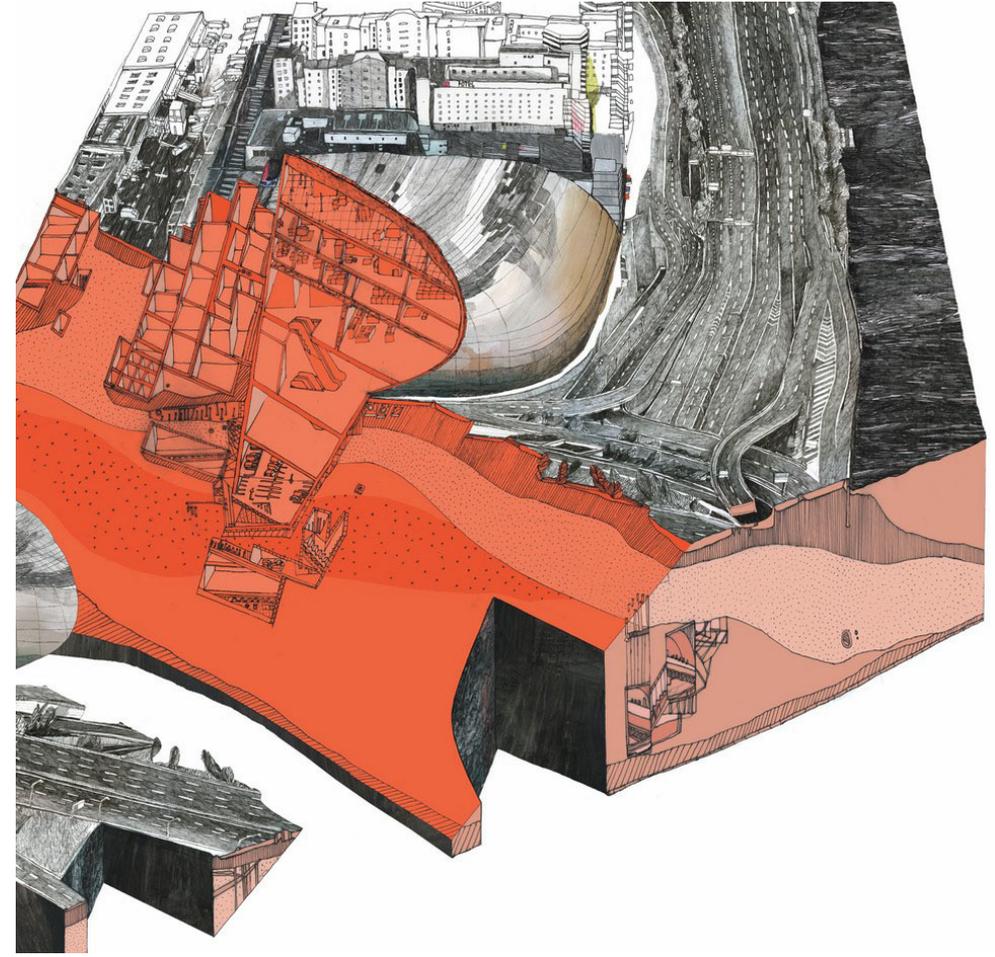


Figure 1
Éva Le Roi, Coupe!, 2018

THE ARCHITECT IS NOT ONLY A DESIGNER OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT;
HER/HIS FIELD OF ACTION IS BROADER AND MORE COMPLEX

Media are no longer considered just tools that are accessories to content or merely artistic experimentations; rather, they are the mediators through which content comes to constitution. Without media, as performative practices, content would also lose its relevance. Without these practices, complex factual situations on a large scale would not be able to reach a new level of synthesis. In this sense, the practices perform the project and realize it.

The mediality of architecture

Architectural projects depend on mediality. In design in the narrow sense, different media are used one after the other and side by side, so that every final presentation in the context of a design seminar, a competition or a commission is a string of media that are simultaneously valid and ultimately represent a multimedia product. This constant interaction between media makes architectural design a perceptible media prism of a complex process of constitution. Design processes are potentially accessible in any medium, and it is well known that there are architects who favor certain media and, in whose work, a specific media language can be recognized – we can think of the model works of Frei Otto, the painterly drawings of Aldo Rossi, and the diagrammatic drawings of Zaha Hadid. Generally speaking, media make architecture perceptible through their connection to the senses. Consequently, media must not be decoupled from their function of making things sensible, which in this case consists in making architectural meaning perceptible. As a discipline of design, architecture sensitizes spaces through media, which contain a specific aesthetic knowledge, constituting real spaces of our experience. In this sense, architecture cannot do without an aesthetic theory that deals with the process of constitution perceiving the environment. Aesthetics thus makes way for new reflection on the sensual expression of our environmental positionality: Rather than consisting in passive perception, human cognition is active in perception, shaping its object through different sensual media, such as images, texts, diagrams, and bodily practices. In this regard, architecture should implement its intrinsic relation to perception, going beyond the primacy of visual cognition – as Pallasmaa points out in his work (2012: 19).

Media are also the generative paths of meaning in the broader sense of design as project. In design-driven research, the centrality of media leads the way to a wide approach to architectural design, to experimenting with processes of design, the aim of which is not limited to building production. This aspect also concerns the recent applications of ethnographic and cartographic methods to architecture, which attempt to reveal the complexity of architectural processes, identifying “different ways of gaining knowledge about a building” (Yaneva 2009: 5) and about the multilayered essence of the built environment as a new way of making the earth – as the work of Éva Le Roi shows (Fig. 1). In these recent approaches, research content depends essentially on the media that make content perceivable and communicable. And because the content has to be revealed and not just represented, researchers are looking for new media, for new aesthetic practices, which constitute meaning and embedding hybrid practices – such as bureaucratic documents, interviews, and process sheets.

The constitution of meaning is inventive not in the sense of a genial act in the mind of the producer. It is not understood as a creative-mystical moment – a kind of black box – that is hardly documented, while the execution and presentation of the original concept are seen as mere processes of reproduction and adaptation. From the perspective of a performative attitude, the processes of execution, building, adaptation, and conservation also represent a space for generative reflection, within which the project must constantly be unfolded. The environmental architect is in this respect like a researcher who uses design practices to constitute the complex reality of the environment. As a researcher, the environmental architect must rethink the media of architecture, finding appropriate practices to bring the project to light and to verifying its impact.

In another context, Alexander von Humboldt’s work is paradigmatic of this inventive, generative approach to media practices. His geographic diagrammatic paintings in “Kosmos” are new inventions of poetic and aesthetic media revealing natural phenomena – as the “Géographie des Plantes Équinoxiales,” an intermixture of data and image, shows (Fig. 2). The transmission of knowledge cannot be separated from its aesthetic experience, which permeates different scientific practices. Humboldt was aware that his representations were the only form of documentation in the countries he visited, and he explored the aesthetic boundaries between art and science to show how closely the two are connected. In this sense, his paintings are not representations but rather creative practices

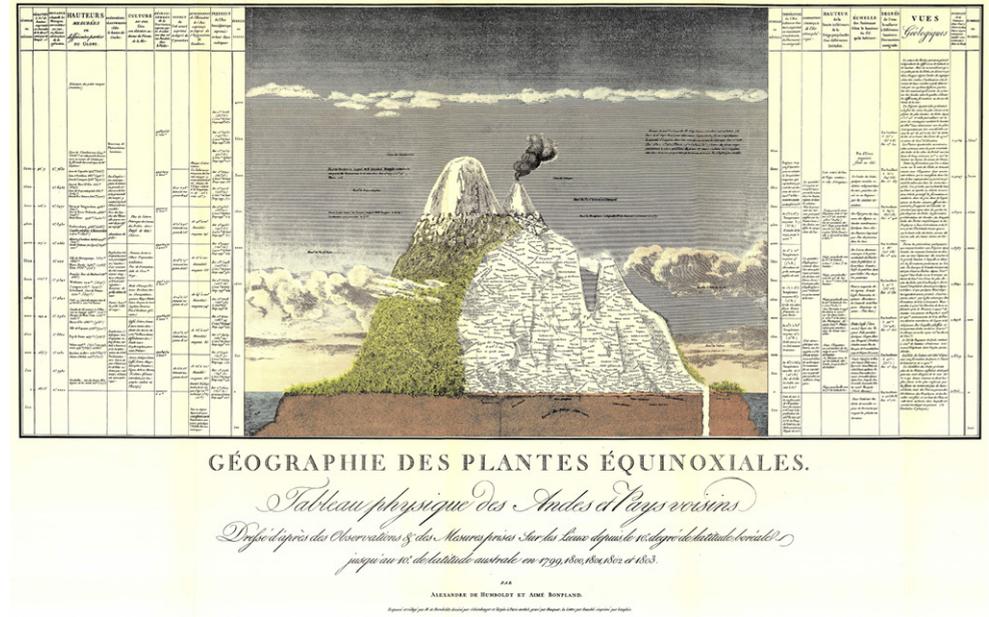


Figure 2
Alexander von Humboldt, Géographie des Plantes Équinoxiales, 1807

of knowledge which combine the analytical function of the diagrammatic with a pictorial act in a new medium. Knowledge thus depends on the performative practice of the environmental constitution.

In a similar way, architectural media should therefore be regarded as practices of unfolding space in every dimension of perception. The extent to which certain media enable the unfolding of architectural meaning, and how they can lead to a new conceptual and material understanding of architecture, has often been left to the individual competencies of designers in offices and teachers in design seminars. The focus on the performativity of media – also discussed in “Media Agency” (Barlieb, Gasperoni 2020) – is therefore both a theoretical and a practical proposal to bring to light the generative and performative function of media in architectural design and to create an institutional and scientific role for them in architectural practice. The notion of performativity is often abused, but it retains a relevant meaning if we explore and take seriously its philosophical implications.

Performativity: “Not all means are media”

The theory of performativity allows us to introduce new elements to the debate on the role of architecture in the constitution of the environment through a specific mediality. It allows us to define an attitude in architecture that, beyond the mere representation of a primary content, idea or intuition, constitutes it in the design process itself, creating a new type of representation. The theory of performativity thus allows us to conceive an innovative pragmatics of design as a laboratory in which significance is constituted – a significance which depends on (too often undistinguished) “tools,” “means” and “media.” The theory of performativity allows us to distinguish between these different notions of mediation, emphasizing the generative path of design, and thus of the project.

In “Art as Experience,” John Dewey describes two possible means: “There are two kinds of means. One is external to that which is accomplished; the other kind is taken up into the consequences produced and remains immanent in them. [...] But the moment we say ‘media,’ we refer to means that are incorporated in the outcome.” The first kind of means corresponds to a purely instrumental attitude towards an outcome, in which the process is understood as a mere means to an end. The second, on the other hand, implies an attitude that is not indifferent to the process; the process is a medium for constituting the outcome itself. Thus, Dewey states: “Not all means are also media” (Dewey 2005: 205).

Simply put, we can compare this to travelling: We can view travel as a purely instrumental path to a goal or as a part of the traveling itself. We can travel in order to reach a destination, thus understanding the journey itself as purely instrumental, or we can travel somewhere and at the same time consider the journey an essential part of the outcome. In the first case, the journey is only a means to an end; in the second case, the journey is part of the goal – or, as Dewey puts it, “means and end coalesce” (Dewey 2005: 205).

These two forms of travel are exemplary of two different ways of life or attitudes that can also be transferred to the context of mediality: We can understand

the media practices used in design and representation processes – such as models, pictures, drawings, photos, texts – as mere instruments, regarding them merely as means to the end of the final product, or we can understand them as part of the design journey, through which a product reaches realization and in the course of which our way of perceiving and thinking about architectural space is constituted in the first place. While in the first case media are pure tools, in the second case they play an active part in the design process and are thus a prerequisite for experimenting with the qualities hidden in space, and thus in the sociopolitical sphere as well. According to Dewey, in their externality, means merely define the mechanical and have an unaesthetic quality insofar as the relevant things are simply denoted without being essentially constituted by the tools. Media, by contrast, are immanent in things and constitute their meaning – paradigmatically, we cannot separate Humboldt’s diagrammatic paintings from the information they embed.

This approach to media also changes our attitude towards project failures and bureaucracy. From the point of view of the first (instrumental) attitude, they appear as mere obstacles to the planned procedure, while from the point of view of the second (performative) attitude, they can be seen as moments of discovery through which the process changes, which can lead to new, initially unplanned developments. In order to clearly distinguish the performative attitude outlined in this way from a merely instrumental use of tools, it is advisable in the first case to speak of media, which always involve a performative element, while the traditional instrumental attitude corresponds to the concept of means.

In this sense, all practices employed in design processes, but also in the processes of unfolding the project in the first place, are no longer considered neutral objective means, probes or sensors; rather, they are understood in their agency and are an integral part of the design process. This different consideration of instruments contains two fundamental aspects: The first concerns the media as sensible modalities, which structure and articulate meaning. The second aspect concerns the attitude of the designer, as an environmental architect, towards instruments. If it is performative, the instruments will be media, enriching the complexity of the project; otherwise, the means will just be implemented for the sake of representation. These two aspects also play a crucial part in theories of performativity in philosophy, in theater and in gender studies. Applying the concept of performative practices to the field of physics and gender studies, for instance, Karen Barad’s theory is both a media theory and a critique of representationalism. As she suggests concerning also the predominance of words in the determination of phenomena, “unlike representationalism, which positions us above or outside the world we allegedly merely reflect on, a performative account insists on understanding thinking, observing, and theorizing as practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being” (Barad, 2007: 133).

Above all, this performative understanding changes our perception of practices that are not mere instruments of observation, or apparatuses that “can be used as neutral probes of the natural world,” but rather “boundary-drawing-practices” that materially reconfigure the world again and again: “apparatuses

are not mere observing instruments but boundary-drawing practices – specific material (re)configurings of the world – which come to matter” (Barad, 2007: 140). In this sense, media practices are also specific materializations of meaning. The focus on these boundary-drawing practices is the main topic of Barad’s posthumanistic account, the goal of which is not the demonization of humans but rather a critique of the anthropocentric perspective that grounds this materialization process and – I would add – the conception of creative acts as generated only by genial minds. In this regard, the focus on boundary-drawing practices is compatible with a humanistic topic that aims to emphasize the human capacity to cross borders through media practices. As Giancarlo De Carlo stresses, rethinking the role of humanists who visit the Roman temples: “they are not pedants who measure them in order to be able to reproduce them as they are, they are not typologists; they are people who have decided to devote themselves to moving borders and dealing with them even in the most diverse and unimaginable conditions, so that their work becomes an opportunity and a tool for stimulating the imagination, and finally to be inclusive and not exclusive, that is, not to exclude other elements and other cultures, but to include them and measure themselves against the new contradiction. And this enriches enormously not only the human spirit but also the creative capacity of human beings” (De Carlo, 2019: 116-117).

With this focus on boundary-drawing practices as performative media, the creative capacity is also the way in which the environmental architect deals with the interdependency of the different processes by which artefacts and their environmental effects are materialized – as Colomina and Wigley point out in the book “Are we human?” (2016). This approach depends intrinsically on the practices of materialization, but the architect acts performatively looking differently at practices, to view them as media for crossing boundaries and not just as tools of the introspective imagination.

The capacity for experimentation

The critique of representationalism opens up an epistemological level when it comes to the fundamental attitude we take when experimenting with media practices. The environmental architect should be a performative and critical humanist, including in the case of so-called “techniques.” In architectural design, technical applications are pre-programmed for designers and therefore offer limited possibilities in terms of architectural representation that the designers themselves rarely control. A performative attitude can lead to a change of media or, ideally, to intervention by the designers at the level of programming. In this sense, on the media agency approach, the designers are not only users but also hackers of mediality (Cannaerts 2020: 179): They are capable not only of using technical apparatuses in terms of their medial quality but also of transforming and modeling them. In this way, they develop the architectural design generatively rather than merely implementing it technically in order to find new forms of architectural knowledge that explores space. The function of sensorics could become an object of experimentation within space; this is also the aim of

a semi-mobile sensing device called “Jambalaya” (Fig. 3), which was produced 2016 by Barlieb, Müllauer, Cannaerts, and Prang for Fieldstations Berlin. This device, which contains GPS, temperature, air pressure, gas and wind sensors, was used for collecting data on and around Teufelsberg in Berlin. This exploration of space is not merely quantitative; it tries to constitute a complex sensorics in order to approach spaces as fields of complex perception and environmental impact.

This kind of practice thus shows that design is part of our sensual perception and constitution of the environment, dealing with geology, anthropology, media studies, sociology and many other disciplines. A new practice of aesthetic knowledge opens up the generative space of architecture, a paradigmatic example of which are the score drawings and notations of Lawrence Halprin (Fig. 4).

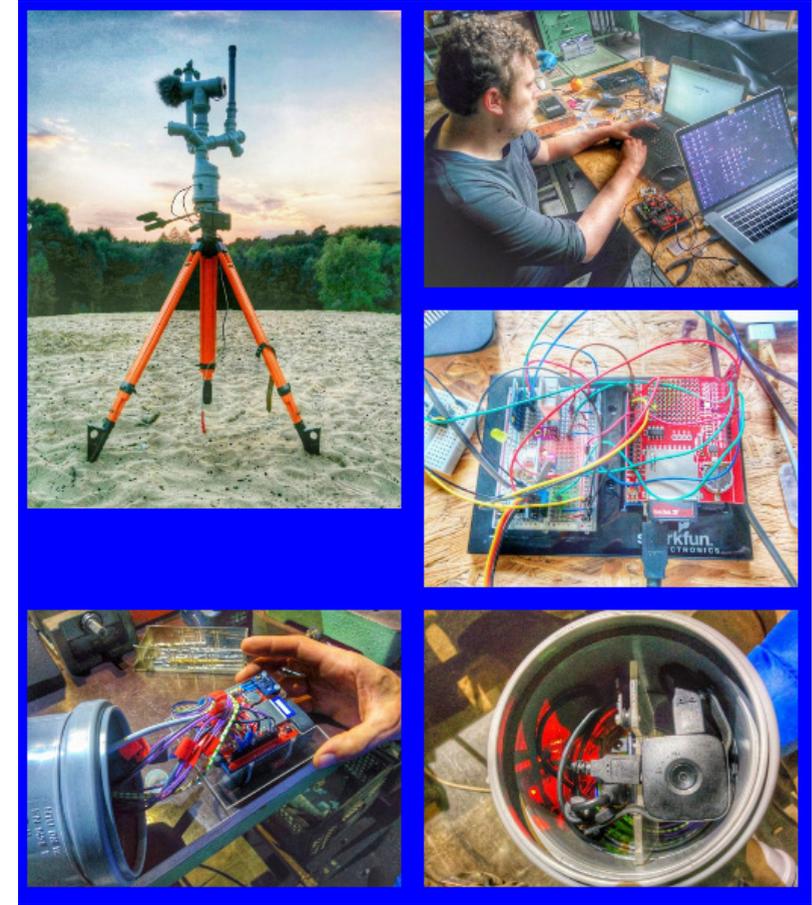


Figure 3
Field Station Berlin (Christophe Barlieb, Sebastian Müllauer, Corneel Cannaerts, Holger Prang),
Jambalaya, 2016

The American landscape architect conceived his own system of notation to analyze, understand and design the embodiment properties of architectural interventions. Design cannot be separated from aesthetic understanding through practices which in turn performatively animate the built space and generate as productive ecology a new approach to landscape.

Exploring the boundaries between the conventional representation and the experimental exploration of our living space is the task of designers as inventors of space-generating practices that also have a common, shared dimension. The experiments with children performed by the Italian architect Riccardo Dalisi show that the performative power of design exceeds architectural representation. With his animation architecture, he invented a performative practice in the 1970s that consisted of drawings and model works to explore a living space beyond representation with children. Dalisi is a producer of practices that attempt

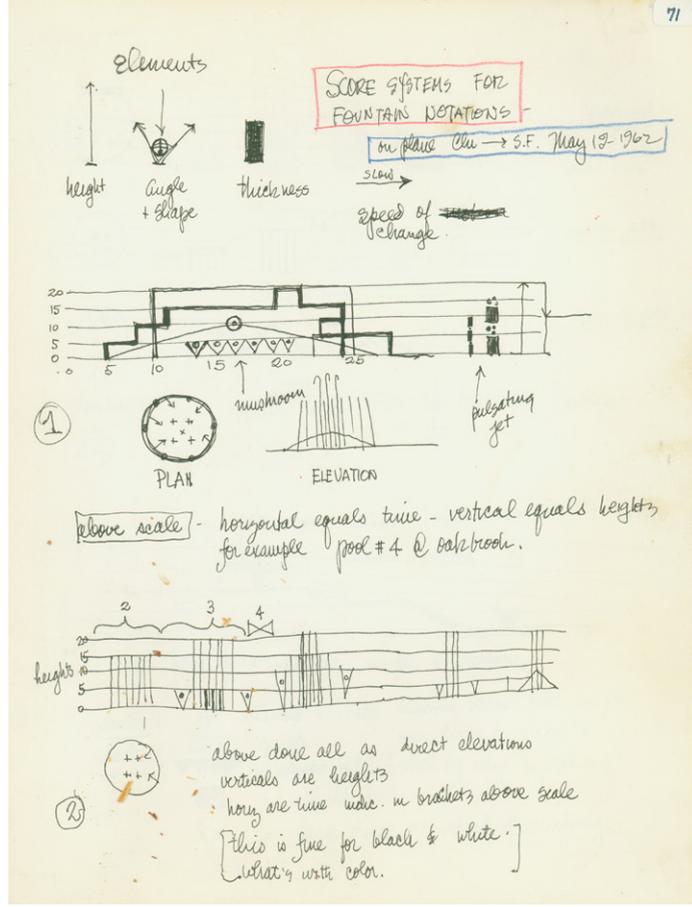


Figure 4
Lawrence Halprin, Ira
Keller Fountain, 1970

to discover latent aspects of perception in collective memory in order to develop a common language of space. This results in a change to the function of practices, which, rather than merely being technical competences of designers, are already present in our perception of space, in our sense of space, even in children (Fig. 5). Thus, they cannot be reduced to a mere instructive representation; they must be attributed to the much richer area of the figurative, which contains manifold dimensions of perception. In this sense, locality represents the sensual place of the imagination, which can and should be explored quantitatively and qualitatively with all of the senses. Locality is the field in which perception, descriptiveness and re-conceptualization of the environment become the generative laboratory of designers – a laboratory that is exemplified by the “spatial agency” (Awan, Schneider, Till 2011) of interdisciplinary groups like Haus-Rucker-Co, Raumlabor and Constructlab. Design already takes place in the perception of space and in all the (aesthetic, cultural, sociological, environmental) dimensions that local space potentially contains within itself.



Figure 5
Riccardo Dalisi,
Architettura d'animazione,
Rione Traiano, Napoli,
1971-1975

The experimental approach contains an aesthetic component that lies in the relationship between the perception and the design of our living space. This approach is generative creating new sensible forms and articulations of the environment. But from a performative point of view, the complex relationships with which the designer deals should be renegotiated. In this regard, the architectural project is the production of effects and social realities. Experimental practices, which at first glance aestheticize and de-functionalize architecture, are the essential part also of the architecture that seeks to become aware of its environmental constitution. But in order to be not just generative rather performative, experimental practices should impact by changing the environment, with which they are dealing. It is not sufficient to create a new practice to obtain an environmental impact. This needs an effect producing changes. That is the reason why it is very urgent to question the role of architectural practices dealing with the Anthropocene and the climate emergency: these phenomena need not only the implementation of building techniques, but rather performative practices and strategies in order to renegotiate the manifold connections within the environment.

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