Designed to improve? (Hamburg, 22-24 May 14)

Hamburg, May 22–24, 2014
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Hanna Katharina Göbel

Call for Papers

Designed to improve? Buildings, interventions and the makings of the ‘social’ in interdisciplinary urban practices

International Workshop, 'AG Architektursoziologie' of the ‘Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie (DGS)’, sections cultural sociology and urban- and regional sociology in cooperation with the University of Hamburg and HafenCity University Hamburg

Organizers:
Dr. Hanna Katharina Göbel (Universität Hamburg)
Dr. Monika Grubbauer (TU Darmstadt)
Dr. Anna Richter (HCU Hamburg)

In the last three decades interdisciplinary and sometimes informal design and building practices of intervention in urban spaces have established their own field of social expertise for the built environment and questioned the monopoly of urban professionals and authorized city planners. In the face of neoliberal urban policies, state withdrawal, austerity measures and economic crises and disillusioned by institutionalized planning procedures, architects, urbanists, designers, activists, artists with various backgrounds in the performing arts, visual arts, or music, cultural workers and do-it-yourself (DIY) movements intervene in the urban built environment with a view to improve their communities and the lives of their neighbours. Socially engaged building and design practices have an overall focus on action and processes rather than aesthetics only. The outcomes are buildings as well as smaller and temporary interventions into urban spaces. Material change and design are meant to function as agents of specific social transformations. Frequently, inspiration for these kinds of interventions in European and North-American cities is taken from practices of informal urbanism in the cities of the Global South.

These buildings, material interventions and acts of design-activism are partly realized by or with the help of architects and designers, partly without them and sometimes explicitly against them and their authoritative claims on expertise/knowledge. Many collaborations actively involve artistic knowledge and research strategies derived from choreography, scenography, landscape appropriation or conceptual arts. Thus, this field of contemporary socially engaged practices of urban intervention cannot be easily divided by distinguishing between the formal and the informal. Bottom-up building and design practices operate across the boundaries of established disciplines and have created many different versions of interdisciplinary collaboration throughout the years,

often also involving sociologists, geographers, anthropologists, or political scientists.

The aim of the workshop is to explore the ways in which interdisciplinary collaboration is performed and knowledges from diverse fields are drawn on in these urban interventionist practices. We are particularly interested to interrogate how knowledge from the social sciences is translated and variously picked up and interpreted in these practices and how they build on explicit and implicit references to concepts of the 'social'. Can we state that these practices are characterized by the common belief in a certain desired social impact of buildings and urban artefacts? What kinds of references to concepts of the 'social' can be found and in what way do they serve to suggest 'social improvements' of the current state of affairs? As urban interventions have a history in activism pushing social change, politicization would seem to be key in this field. What kinds of (de-)politicizations and moralizations of social agendas emerge and how do they take shape concerning the performance of buildings and urban artefacts?

The workshop invites contributions from scholars across the social sciences (sociology, geography, anthropology, political science) and the design and arts disciplines that address the above questions and engage with the makings of the social in interdisciplinary building and design practices. We invite perspectives of architectural sociology, critical urban studies, assemblage-urbanism, practice theory and other contemporary paradigms; we are also interested in historical analyses of interdisciplinary building and design practices in the 20th century coming from the history of science, architectural history or related fields. We suggest papers address one of three ways in which references to the 'social' and 'social improvement' are made in bottom-up building and design practices but papers with different foci are equally welcome:

1. Laboratorization of processes. Many practices are concerned with the innovation of the process of design itself, often by introducing various forms of empowerment technologies/strategies. For many architects and urban designers – frequently organized in collaborative structures referred to as 'urban labs' – the notion of the laboratory has become a widely used metaphor for considering interdisciplinary, experimental and participatory forms of engagement with artists, authorized planners and communities in an isolated and controlled micro-context. In what way does the laboratorization of design processes presuppose positive findings about the social impact of buildings and urban artefacts for other uncontrolled outsides? How does the concept of the laboratory as controlled and consciously created environment relate to the open-ended nature of participatory approaches in design and planning? What kinds of aims does the (metaphorical) use of the laboratory serve?

2. Fetishization of the built object. A second focus is on the social impact of the material/built object itself. In many socially engaged design and building practices the building and other urban artefacts are meant to represent the successful and 'socially' resonant integration of various actors, processes and ideas in order to prove social change. In many cases of gentrification, for instance, the appropriation of derelict structures in inner city environments for new uses is legitimated by deliberately exposing the 'raw' and 'authentic' materiality of these structures. Similarly, socially engaged architectures, particularly in the cities of the South, are distinguished and legitimated by the use of traditional construction techniques and vernacular materials such as clay, mud bricks and bamboo. How are buildings and urban artefacts fetishized through such references to their materiality? What roles do the empathic perception of materials and authentic mod-

elling play in making buildings and urban artefacts ‘socially’ relevant?

3. Practiced starry-eyed idealism? Although utopian ideas that buildings of modernism have embodied, are explicitly denied, urban interventionist and design practices undeniably employ a certain register of utopia. This third way of referencing the ‘social’ occurs when certain intellectual concepts are mobilised as a reaction to ecological crises suggesting a ‘better’ future. They stand for the most appreciated impacts of urban interventionist practices and are often iteratively and sometimes exhaustively used. For instance, the prominent notion of ‘relational aesthetics’ (Bourriaud) has become a romanticized vision focusing on the (improving) harmony of communities in the arts and in activism related contexts. Equally, the architectural concept of ‘cultural/social engineering’, increasingly used in the context of digital urban innovations, suggests a future of urban spaces organized in a ‘more sustainable’ and resource-efficient way. Why and how do these concepts and others become successful in the context of urban interventionist practices? What sort of politics is being performed through these idealisms and visions of the future?

The workshop wishes to facilitate open and productive discussion on socially engaged building and design practices. This does not mean to judge the various interpretations of the ‘social’ that result from the interdisciplinary nature of these practices and the translations that occur between disciplines and sectors of practices by producing short-handed critiques. Rather, the intended workshop aims to create an arena for the exploration of the social accomplishments that are bound up with these propositions along with reflections on how the various affirmative versions of improvement produce moralized knowledges and practised formations of the social. We seek to experiment with the question of how these building and design practices accomplish and enact their own social theory, whether and how this field can be compared with others and how such practiced social theory can be brought back into the disciplines. A publication on the outcomes of the workshop is planned.

We invite abstracts of no more than 500 words (including an indicative reference list) by 12th January 2014. Invitations will be sent out on 3rd February 2014.

Please send your abstract to
Hanna Katharina Göbel: hanna.goebel@uni-hamburg.de
Monika Grubbauer: grubbauer@stadtforschung.tu-darmstadt.de
Anna Richter: anna.richter@hcu-hamburg.de

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