

Enabling constraints: How to ecologize architectural design?

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Is the current preoccupation of architecture with becoming ‘ecological’ by coming up with ever more efficient formal solutions, genuinely ecological materials, focusing on local demands or smarter technologies to stay within CO₂ benchmarks is perpetuating architecture’s humanist myth? Despite the agreed upon necessity of “ecologizing” design by focusing on questions of co-existences and shared agency, by calling for “fitting” solutions depending on specific situations and loci, architecture’s fundamental tenets appear to remain unchanged: it is still the centered and rational subject that organizes an ever more complex object-world through increasingly sophisticated tools of representation and control.

Rather we should look to design practices treating constraints as enabling structures that (Juarrero, 2023; Massumi, 2014). The recognition of ecological limitations should be perceived as enabling opportunities for designers to partake in actively conditioning the conditions that condition us (Peters 2015). Drawing on relational space theory, ecological thinking, and systemic analysis, boundaries do not simply mark ends or signify differences, they also activate virtualities, potentials and contingency.

Situated “fitting” is not an antidote to the global capitalist production of space. Coming from cultural techniques studies I consider architecture as material and materializing media that rely on conditioning how we understand, represent and design the built environment. By actively exploring new planning and design media (e.g. mapping, diagrammatic reasoning, interactive “graph-games,” scripted disruptions and participatory design labs etc.) to navigate systemic complexity and manage disruptive, contingent events I will argue for an architecture capable of “unfitting” the existing conditions. After all, architecture if it wants to “ecologize” it can not simply represent a particular situation or solve a functional problem in a “fitting” way. Rather, architecture “causes”, not in the sense of producing an effect but in the sense of triggering a contentious conflict that ‘un-fits’ the situation to produce new attachments (Stengers, 2005).