

VALUE IN ARCHITECTURE – A RESEARCH PLAN

In the following essay I would like to discuss and reflect upon my research about the misunderstanding of value in architecture. The issue concerns the monetization and quantification of value as a process in the global economic infrastructure that relies on the exploitation of both human and nature. Social drawbacks and an overshoot of the destruction of natural resources inevitably will lead to collapse.¹ Since the multiple serious challenges we are facing in the era of the Anthropocene are also becoming more pressing in architectural debates, the understanding of the value of architecture as such - beyond its monetary value - is showing to increase in relevance.

Problem Statement

The Canadian philosopher Brian Massumi theorized on the revaluation of value and claims that there is a certain “process by which the qualitative field of life is economically appropriated and subsumed under the principle of perpetual quantitative growth”². In my research I would like to explore the effects of this neoliberal doctrine on the field of architecture and how practicing designers can counter those trends by making use of the affective power of territories. The widespread approach to design architecture as a space is proliferating the neoliberal ethos of understanding the built environment not as a lived experience, but as an investment. This abstracted belief disregards the architectural object to be embedded in endless relations with natural and social contexts, which need to be addressed and expressed.³

We can understand the neoliberal systems of today as an infrastructure that we created in order to meet our ongoing drives and desires. A multiplicity of sometimes contradictory drives is immanent to us as constantly evolving living beings in our everyday life. Those drives are the preconditions for our interests and are thus the creators for the economic ‘libidinal’ infrastructure which organizes them.⁴ However, desire exceeds the fulfilment of its purpose and the survival of our lives. The economic infrastructure therefore exceeds the life-serving purposes of our drives and is leading to the destruction of the conditions for life - human self-destruction, so to say.⁵

French philosopher Bernard Stiegler described the Anthropocene as following an increasingly entropic trajectory. The datafication of our economy is proliferating this effect, due to the extreme prefabrication of the retentional selection we experience whilst interacting with digital technology. In this case, willpower is mostly not produced consciously and deliberately. This is leading to a loss of pluralism and heterogeneity which is needed to move towards the ‘Neganthropocene’.⁶

The desire to grow profit and to accumulate ever more wealth is met through increased productivity and the transformation of human and natural capital into monetary value. This has great negative consequences and is inevitably destructive not only for our habitat, but consequently for humankind as a whole.

Due to this quantification, money-value loses the ability to convey qualitative life-values, which are the ones that make us human and that make life enjoyable. All value is

¹ Club of Rome, *Come On!*

² Massumi, *99 Thesis on the Revaluation of Value*, 39.

³ Moe, *Climate Change, Architecture Change*

⁴ Smith, *Essays on Deleuze*, 160-188.

⁵ Colebrook, *Sex and the (Anthropocene) City*

⁶ Stiegler, *The Neganthropocene*, 48-50.

qualitative at first and has to be understood as a singular event. Quantification makes value measurable, comparable and translatable into different fields and is by nature a reductive process. Monetization as well as a speculative financial market therefore led to the *abstraction* of value.⁷ Conversely, the money-value that reigns today's neoliberal systems doesn't represent the value that something has for the common good. There occurs to be a misinterpretation of the economic thrive into being the goal, whilst it should be the means to the thrive of humanity.

Furthermore, I want to discuss the effect of the abstraction and misunderstanding of true value on the field of architecture. How is architecture influenced by these conditions and what role could it potentially play? I would like to emphasize two problems:

Firstly, the growing global trade and increasing automatization of production processes decrease knowledge about the operation of how an architectural intervention came into being and what kind of natural or human resources have been quantified for its creation. Especially in the digital era, we find ourselves on new grounds of how we experience the world; there is an enigmatic aspect to our interaction with our surroundings. The absence of knowledge of operations cause a certain 'transcendental technicity', which also stimulates the misunderstanding of the value of architectural interventions.⁸

Secondly, the neoliberal *manière* of understanding architectural interventions as investments instead of experiences is leading to an according creation of space. As a consequence, architectural value is mostly understood through its monetary value. Architecture and the life activities connected to it are being economized due to the speculative essence of capitalism.⁹ However, our territories as a way to express and possess also bring great potential to this discourse.¹⁰

Humans emerged through the continuous invention of artifacts and techniques which manipulated their surroundings in order to optimize life.¹¹ The spaces that we create therefore codetermine our development and becoming, they are thoughts and can potentially trigger new modes of thought. Our territories, like everything, are based on dynamic forces and affective relations that reveal bodily capacities in interactions.¹²

A better expression of qualitative values in spaces can potentially increase sensitivity towards those as such and could counter the monetized abstraction of value. The territories that we claim and appropriate to our needs co-determine the way in which we relate to other individuals and are thus the creators of collectives.¹³ Conversely, architectural techniques can stimulate a collective individuation that increases an active becoming of subjects, who will in turn be affected by expressed values.¹⁴ Therefore, the kind of architectural techniques we deploy and the qualitative values of those spaces can contribute crucially to the dissemination and coproduction of pure value as such.

This strain of thought led me to the main- and sub questions of my research: **How can we design spaces that allow a true expression of their value?** What kind of qualitative value can a territory have and for whom? How to design spaces in a way that they express their singular qualitative character? And most importantly, how do our design routines and attitudes have to change in order to facilitate a better expression of those qualities?

⁷ Massumi, *99 Thesis on the Revaluation of Value*

⁸ Hörl, *The Technological Condition*

⁹ Massumi, *99 Thesis on the Revaluation of Value*, 17f.

¹⁰ Bogue, *Deleuze on Music, Painting and the Arts*, 19-24.

¹¹ Stiegler, *Memory*

¹² Kodlak, *Affective Aesthetics beneath Art and Architecture*

¹³ Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Arts*, 1-24.

¹⁴ Meillassoux, *Subtraction and Contraction*, 99-104.

Approach

The strategy for this graduation trajectory follows a multiplicity of methods. The problematic of value calls for a change in attitude and manner of doing architecture. A process of work is codetermining the evolving of practitioners and it is therefore necessary to establish a more negentropic technique of doing things.¹⁵ I thus want to develop an alternative design approach, which will be integrated into the trajectory of the research.

Firstly, by the means of literature research I will be informed about negative implications of endless economic growth and theories of value in capitalism in order to define the problem statement. Readings on value in architecture and contemporary architectural attempts to challenge the capitalist understanding of value serve as inspirational sources. Finding ways to connect the research themes is crucial for the continuous process of specifying the problem accurately.

Secondly, the more practical approach of an observational endeavor will examine how qualitative values express themselves in space and how we can capture that. A mere representation of those would be counterproductive, which is why I will be focusing on the affect as the bodily reaction to concrete spatial situations.¹⁶ “Affect studies is a contemporary field of debate that offers the potential for interdisciplinary dialogue and the invention of new methods, modes of experimentation and theorizing across the arts, humanities and the sciences”.¹⁷

According to Gilbert Simondon, *la bonne forme* (the good form) is a form that is somehow meaningful to whoever encounters it. In contrast to the before mentioned process of datafication, *la bonne forme* is emerging from an exchange of significant information.¹⁸ I want to understand the value of a form in a relational manner and investigate the potential it bears for the encounter with it. The observation will therefore focus on the activities and actions in space and how they are meaningful. By doing so, I will try to capture their affective power or affordances. I will further reflect on the field of action in those spaces and speculate what kind of architectural techniques could amplify their affective power.

Thirdly, I want to conduct research through experimentation, which will be an integrated process even up to the design. “Zest, beauty, wonder and adventure provide aesthetic categories that might pave the way for the revaluation of values to go beyond normative criteria and judgment”¹⁹, which is what I wish to investigate through an active attitude of experimentation during this journey of investigation. Research and design through making, traversing all scales, will help to discover the space of possibilities of expressing values differently. Through technically pluralistic means I plan to investigate the expression of materials and their qualities, of production processes and the affordances that a space can offer. It is essential to challenge the notion of hylomorphism and the hindering of a technological understanding that accompany it.²⁰ The expression of materials and operations through which a space came into being can potentially stimulate a better understanding of the essence of architecture and defy the absence of knowledge that we are faced with nowadays. With this attempt it is imperative to embrace and accept the heterogeneity of the relationships of form and sensation. If the expression of value in space is to be improved, we must also embrace the fact that each situation is a *singular* event.²¹

¹⁵ Hörl, *The Technological Condition*

¹⁶ Masumi, *The Autonomy of Affect*

¹⁷ Blackman, *Affect and automaticity*, 363.

¹⁸ Simondon, *L'individuation psychique et collective*, 31-65.

¹⁹ Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value*, 95.

²⁰ Hörl, *The Technological Condition*, 5-7.

²¹ Sauvagnargues, *Artmachines - Delenze, Guattari, Simondon*, 72-75.

Having understood the importance of this, I am planning to carefully test and observe my experimentations on processes and resources in interaction with living beings.

Unexpected encounters might reveal hidden potential, challenge assumptions and conventions or provoke new thoughts. Appreciating the fact that an object or territory's values are non-static, I additionally want to focus on how the relational value of something differs in time. Since aesthetic sensation is autonomous and not exclusively reserved for human beings, an investigation of beyond-human encounters will be integrated into this research approach.²² As a point of reference, I will critically study the work of more experimental practices such as Studio Ossidiana or RAAAF.

The choice to apply methods of both theoretical and practical kind is deliberate. By reviewing writings of theorists and thinkers, my own thought process is stimulated and keeps on defining the true issue of this research. The combination with observation and experimentation allows me to test thoughts in a hands-on manner and acquire knowledge in a practical way. The concretization of those in resulting artifacts or reports can make a rather abstract strain of thought tangible and understandable. This process is by no means linear: an experimentation with value-expressing techniques will provoke new thinking which will in turn be tested in new experiments. Through this rather cyclically evolving graduation process, I hope to arrive at a more accurate understanding of how to express qualitative values in space in a manner that amplifies sensibility towards value as such.

Reflection on the Course

The Research Plan graduation course of the chairs of Methods and Analysis, History and Theory in the architectural faculty of the TU Delft has provided guidance and inspiration for the in many cases unclear situation of a graduation process. Instructions on the design of an integrated research process stimulate reflection and are therefore an aid to understand better personal intentions, goals and expectations for the graduation as a whole.

²² Kodalak, *Affective Aesthetics beneath Art and Architecture*, 423.

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