

Reflection

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I applied to the Explore Lab graduation studio with the desire to carry on studying several themes I had established in previous projects. The Ms2 theory studio introduced me to an array of contemporary philosophies of technology, which I applied further in my written history thesis on the evolution of office furniture systems. My initial idea for graduation was an inquiry into the future of office work in a time of increasingly prevalent remote work. However the formulation of a clear problem proved less straight forward than I anticipated, due to the inherent wider ramifications of the topic. What then began then as limited study of the office building type evolved into a more in-depth study on the relation of information and value. The outbreak of the global pandemic with its immediate and personal implications for work further convinced me of an urgent need for an architectural re-examination of these terms.

The first weeks of the project centred on a more general puzzlement at the increasing difficulty of differentiating the domains of labour and leisure. In its more palpable way this difficulty appears in the changes in office work enabled by information technology. As work increasingly takes place solely in the confines of a laptop screen, it has also become liberated from the constraints of any time and or place. It then seems questionable if there is even a need for specific architectural response. The more challenging expression of the difficulty concerns the production of value in general, put into question partly by the same information technologies. The way that recording of digital data from our ubiquitous personal devices generates profit is analogous to the profit derived from labour. Yet hardly anyone would consider for example browsing social media as labour.

The architectural implications of labour that is indistinguishable from leisure by its material requirements are grave. How can architecture claim intentional gesture on either domain, when their requirements have been reduced to an electric socket and an internet connection? The two current main approaches to this development seem both unsatisfactory. To cling to the established building types of offices means to deny the unprecedented quality of the on-going development. Even though offices will still exist likely for a long time, – just like the Fordist factory and the feudal farm still coexist and persist to an extent – it is futile to rely on them in resolving the upheavals and potentials of brought by the new technologies. The alternative, though, of accepting that there is no separating the domains of digital labour and digital leisure seems even worse. To posit that all space should be designed to equally accommodate the two would equal to surrendering any remaining agency on determining the most crucial rhythms of life to the whims of employers, gadget engineers, and their marketers, who can hardly be expected to have our best interest at heart. Indeed architects are one of the few professionals who can still claim to be in a position to consider all contributing factors and speculate alternative visions of how the otherwise chaotic developments of technology and market economies should best come together.

By P1 the initial inquiry of the problem had condensed into several key research questions. Firstly, where does the value of digital social networks come from? In other words, how does information that is seemingly free and abundant become valuable? Secondly, how should we think of value to begin with? That is, what is the process behind any production of surplus-value? And thirdly, how should we think of information in these two situations? Asserting a definition and understanding how these terms relate was essential to the later formulation of any architectural goal.

The research method consisted primarily of a literary review of contemporary theory regarding information and value. Out of this review the works of Gilbert Simondon and Brian Massumi emerged as the primary theoretical framework through which I developed my approach. The two philosophers' writings on information and value respectively helped me form an understanding of the terms that was crucial in determining the theoretical goals of my design. On one hand Simondon's material notion of information redefines the term as a process, rather than a fixed commodity separate from its production. This means that information is inseparable from a medium being informed and informing, and exists only in relation to particular psychosocial problematics. Accordingly a more useful term might be information-power, or the capacity to be informed in relation to particular psychosocial problems. On the other hand Massumi's affective theory of value delimits the problem to a specific process – that of economization. For Massumi value is always primarily qualitative life-value, and can only become quantified as profit through the production of metrics that make qualitatively different values comparable to each other. The surplus-value of information is in the production of metrics like labour time or social media-impressions, that allow the two qualitatively different domains of life and economy to individuate. When we speak of data being valuable, what we actually mean is the ability of different metrics to bring new fields of life to the field of economy. The redefinition of the two terms means that the exploitation of information also goes much beyond the digital technologies we usually associate with them, and pointed the possibilities for an architectural response to an issue that would otherwise seem outside of its scope. By the P2 the architectural question and aim of the project became clear: how to design public space in a way that doesn't further the economization of life-value.

In carrying the research to practical design I experienced difficulty on several fronts. Throughout the research period it became clear that the conventional programs of labour no longer sufficiently address the actual problem of information and value. Offices and factories are hopelessly out-dated solutions to the value brokered by smartphones. Instead the project needed to develop a program and site based on activities that might usually not be associated with labour and value, forcing me to reconsider a much wider array of potential options than I had expected. Out of the unconventional sites and programmes considered, public transportation emerged as a convergence of a potential real locale, and a theoretical justification. The informativity of transportation, as movement in the city, is inherently spatial in a way that cannot be easily captured by the means of digital technologies. This makes the potential of an architectural intervention to redeem its associated life-value far higher than it would be in an office.

Placing the site in Helsinki, Finland was informed by the city's particular geography and the intense junctures of transportation it creates. It was also a practical decision. Having lived in Helsinki before and being a Finnish citizen, I have a good existing understanding of the city's history and structure. The site of the Helsinki Central station was chosen due to the particularly intense public quality and singular presence in the city. Its placement at a bottleneck between the city centre and the mainland makes the station one of the busiest building in the county. Perhaps because of the prominence of the site I struggled to first find an appropriate relation to the existing environment. Questions of whether the design was to take place adjacent to the station or inside of it, and to what degree should it replace the old building took a long time to resolve, and were only possible in tandem with specifying the theoretical goals of the intervention.

Despite the eventual determination, I was for some time reluctant to fully give up on conventional building types out of concern for losing touch with more established architectural reference. This is why for some time after the P3 I struggled to determine the extent and type of activity that could produce an interesting architectural proposal, without contradicting the theoretical framework laid out in research. During this friction the feedback and criticism of my mentors proved indispensable. Both the research and design mentor had a good understanding of the theoretical goals defined by the research, which allowed them to point contradictions in my approach and raise many of the questions that would lead to an architectural response. While my initial attempts at drafting a design steered towards a metaphorical treatment of the research, the feedback of the mentors helped me to define a specific, architectural response which would deal with the existing conditions of the site.

In addition to the particular issues of the project, the discussions with my mentors provided great insight into effectively managing the relation of theory and design in general. While conducting the research my reading was continuously informed by the opportunities and intentions of a design proposal. On the other hand, the time focused on designing advanced the research in ways that would not have been possible through reading and writing. Neither work should, or could be seen as independent of the other. Yet, the two works are also markedly different qualitatively. Even while informing each other, neither can become into the other without a qualitative shift between the two modes of working. To develop a design proposal necessarily requires a jump away from literature into the domain of architecture. Because of this reciprocal influence and causality, it is important to keep returning to the theoretical work even after having formally finished it. Not only will this retrospect reveal further theoretical implications brought out by design work, but it will clarify the effective functions of the design. This is particularly important in a project driven as strongly by a theoretical instigation as this one.