

# Forming new architectural approaches to understand the ecology of the Post-Anthropocene

## Narrating non-normative bodies in space

Course: Lecture Series Research Methods

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### I INTRODUCTION

“How we build is informed by how we understand the world, and how we understand the world is framed by what we have built there.”<sup>1</sup>

The tension between a *plurality* of worldviews and the built objects as the common structures born from these views is what makes architecture a challenging discipline. By using the word *plurality*, we are taking Hannah Arendt's definition in her review of action, which is the capacity to incorporate multiple contra-informative actions in the public sphere.<sup>2</sup> The fluctuating nature of both human exchange in society, be it worldviews or politics, brings us to the necessity of testing within research and developing *context-time-based* methodologies to a heuristic technique which may work in the given situation. Thus to understand the exchange of these worldviews, often perceived as (micro-)politics, research is needed which moves away from the usual deterministic thinking.

The Architectural Theory chair conducted a research posing the question of thinking within the realm of spectrums: *Architectural Collective Enunciation: A Question of Forming Relays*. Part of the research is based on the *Architecture's Political Compass* by Alejandro Zaera-Polo and Guillermo Fernandez Abascal. Emerging architecture practices are grouped to a political affinity through their projects. The research then divided the chairs at the Architecture faculty along this political *spectrum*, as opposed to a polarity, following their methodological approaches. Complex Projects (CP), the chair in which I have followed all studios until now, stands within the area of the *Activist* approach. *Activists* are:

“[those] who reject architecture's dependence on market forces by operating largely outside the market, with a focus on community building projects, direct engagement with construction, and non-conventional funding strategies;”<sup>3</sup>

The linking between architecture and politics is relevant, as “architecture is immanently political because it is part of spatial production, and this is political in the way that it clearly influences social relations”.<sup>4</sup>

When dealing with the emancipating power of architecture, awareness of the strength of thinking within spectrums, or *ecological thinking*<sup>5</sup>, is fruitful to resolve (postcolonial) violences occurring in the built. Following Foucault, “the point of engaging in political struggles [...] is to alter power relations”.<sup>6</sup> The built environment is lived by individual bodies, yet has been traditionally shaped by singular masculine, market-oriented powers. The rapid visualization of minorities within society calls for new methods to approach these power relationships, less focused on othering and polarizing. It calls for society undoing the fallacies of Enlightenment, going beyond the norm of dualism, the dualistic normative, or even beyond what is considered human. This means a new post-Anthropocene ecology beyond mere co-existence. We Architects are confronted with these perspectives of the Other, the

queer, the non-human entities of the city, and the contributions they make and have made to the urban fabric, history, and culture. Unfortunately, we Architects also still rely on deterministic, normative molds. How can we design for a new ecology including non-normative, not necessarily *human*, perspectives? I will be reflecting on the narrative-based, *queering*, way to approach this new ecological thinking, involving what we can learn from the evolution of narrating bodies throughout time and the introduction of that awareness within our practice.

## II APPROACHING POST-ANTHROPOCENE BODIES THROUGH NARRATIVES

Ecologies of the post-Anthropocene are winning terrain; “the knowledge of our interdependence with other beings” is blossoming.<sup>7</sup> Typically, this knowledge has been developing first in the fields of the earth sciences in the beginning of this decade, then trickling down to philosophy and humanities. Specific fields where concepts of time, space, and identity intersect are those of Geography, Ethnobotany, and Anthropology. Architecture’s implicit relationship with these other studies in the field of humanities strongly suggests that we may look beyond traditional architectural research methods into the toolboxes of the humanities.

Ray Lucas states that “social sciences give us some access to [...] how something as fundamental as identity can be constructed through engagements with the built environment”.<sup>8</sup> To approach the new geographies of power created by the politics of identity between the Anthropocene and the post-Anthropocene, normative and non-normative, one can constitute a framework of methodologies or epistemes used in both humanities and architecture. A few relevant ones are phenomenological and (non-human) praxeological epistemes, because of their strong link to the observed politics of reality and the intimate potential to subvert through understanding. Often these epistemes coincide with *queer* heuristics, seeking to dismantle normative, binary views on society, rooted in Enlightenment.

Relating to the studio project, it was my objective to research the non-normative bodies of the post-Anthropocene, in this case non-indigenous plants in the Botanical garden of Palermo, and their perspectives, through observation and ‘vocalizing’. This was done by recording their narrative in different ways: photography, video, and interviews. Narrative based research allowed for the deeper context of colonial violence and the normative structures embedded in white Enlightenment to manifest themselves in a softer way, not a direct critique but rather an elaborate question. As Jeffer Kolb says in his essay *Working Queer*:

“[...] there is a certain tone to writing about queerness that resists the type of unapologetic pseudo-directness that we might now associate with post-truth. The pieces here don’t make declarative statements, but rather together craft a disciplinary methodology based on contemporary work...”<sup>9</sup>

Narratives are exactly this. They do not seek to reduce viewpoints to singular statements, which is something theory tends to do: putting the Other in a normative mold.

Publications within the field of *queer* aim to picture architecture and the urban sciences as domain crossing fields and in turn theorize how normative structures can be uprooted in these domains. They mainly entail essays from “a new generation of [...] theorists”<sup>10</sup> in journals like *The Funambulist*, *Log*, and the fall/winter 2017 edition of *Footprint*.<sup>11</sup> Some of these normative structures are found in utopian and future thinking, phenomenology, objects, and bio-politics. However, many definitions and implications of queering linked to power, and bodily presence are not yet fully examined in word, let alone the practice of architecture. In the humanities, which tend to be the direct precursor of developments in architecture, the specific heuristic of narrating goes hand in hand with decolonizing practices and “language has been [identified] a tool for community survival”.<sup>12</sup> It is thus interesting to

explore the soft power of narratives in architecture and aim to re-think the normative, masculine, Anthropocene, architectural presence of bodies.

### III NARRATING POST-ANTHROPOCENE BODIES THROUGHOUT TIME

“Any internal history must be supplemented with an external history”<sup>13</sup>.

The power-exchange between body, state, and space throughout time is a crucial one for understanding the position of architects as narrators of bodies. From the “logocentric and anthropocentric discourse”<sup>14</sup> based on Vitruvian texts to the Enlightened domination of the body in Cartesian space, and the 19<sup>th</sup> century clinical treatment of the objectified body, we have collectively travelled to a totalitarian domination of the normative over queer (non-human) bodies in space. The body became “the object of systematic, sustained political attention and intervention”<sup>15</sup> during the rise of the technological context of which Modernism was a product. Relating body to space, changing dialogues of power should be made aware, especially in relationship with a rapidly emancipating society after the Second World War. The theoretical identification of diversity in subjects, objects, and identities has led to the visibility of the bodies, their interior, and exterior, inhabited in space. This raised the awareness of an interchange between these bodies and the Objects they chose to dominate, colliding into spatial relationships, which could be reduced, quantified, and commodified. In order to narrate bodies in relationship with time and political context, it is thus important to realize that “the dynamic, and hence temporal, nature of space means that spatial production must be understood as part of an evolving sequence”.<sup>16</sup>

Narratives, originating from these exchanges between body and environment, have historically been informed by a rational linearity. Painted views, demarcating space as (hostile) territory, co-existed with imperialism. Narratives originated from a will to turn the self into a coherent, controlled subject, and the Other into object. Similarly, academia often examined narratives in a controlled, *subjectified* way of narrative coherence. In literature, and copied in architectural writing, the stylistic tool of oppositions is used to enforce sequence and coherence. Oppositions propose a mental distinction, or closed landscapes of difference. Fundamentally, the usage of oppositions for relational coherence is related to the violence of language. The virtual act of *naming* or attributing in oppositions is reductionist and part of the physical oppression of (non-normative, post-Anthropocene) bodies. It proves to be difficult to let go of the linear narrative as architects, part because of the root of architecture in Enlightenment. The rational mold is a sealed container denying the non-normative or irrational body, because they present the contamination of inconsistency in their environment. Another problem with opening up the architect’s perspective on rationality is “the illusion of stability [or straightness] that the conception of architecture relies on”.<sup>17</sup> It ties in with the embodiment of patterns of technical order in *building*, and these being primarily visual-rational expressions. The architect thus needs to unlearn the need for order in word and image. It remains an interesting question how to transform our language or modes of narration in the light of undoing violence, or even undoing architecture as solely a practice of rational building.

Begin 20<sup>th</sup> century, Modernists, architects of the International Style, and Rationalists portray the position of constructing narratives that “paralleled a structuralist tendency within the humanities”.<sup>18</sup>

Juhani Pallasmaa conducts that “these writings are often ideological or confessional”.<sup>19</sup>

An interesting architect was John Hejduk, who stated in the early phases of this work that “it would appear that we of our time must create masques (programs?) for our times”.<sup>20</sup> These masks can be understood as programs and form, but also characters and narratives, closing the gap between “a subject and an object”.<sup>21</sup> In his later body of work, he favors the fluid, decomposed shape over the previous grids and containers. Hejduk increasingly binds (folklore) narrative with this architecture,

“understood as the possibilities of making proposals with no regards to specific realities”<sup>22</sup>, and thus opens up new approaches to deconstruct the rationality in this field.

The post-structuralist Diane Agrest takes this deconstruction further to fragmentation of architecture in narratives, parallel to the fragmentation of the initial linear, anthropocentric approach. She takes the city as a text, to be infinitely decomposed in various narratives, open and fluid in its addressed subject. Narrative in architecture is currently “departing from the more poetic gestures of fictional presentation in the 1980s to move towards a combination of analysis and creative tool in architectural design.”<sup>23</sup> With this development, vocalizations of minority perspectives are being de-fictionalized, legitimized, concretized, and therefor spatialized.

#### IV COMPLEXITIES IN NARRATING POST-ANTHROPOCENE BODIES

Klaske Havik underscored the importance of scriptive approaches in architecture as mediums to investigate and project life in spaces. Narrative is used to reveal and make aware of the non-human centered experience as reality, within the “embodied [...] nature of architectural experiences”<sup>24</sup>; it can push to imagine a new ecology of inclusivity. The awareness of the embodied reality adds to the political position of the non-normative bodies. As Havik says, “Literary writing deals almost by definition with subjective experience and may give objects identity.”<sup>25</sup> We can combine this realization with Hejduks legacy of deconstructing shape, space, and normative bodies, as one lead to transform linear narrative to one vocalizing non-normative bodies in the post-Anthropocene. Hejduks poetic manner of describing space through composing characters aided to bend the normative binaries of subject-object, while still revealing the tension inherent to the opposition. The scriptive approach is thus an important key to unlock a new approach to violences like displacement and “repression”, defining a construct occurring simultaneously on the inside and the outside of the body.<sup>26</sup>

In the case of the Botanical garden of Palermo, the scriptive crossing of the inside and outside, fictional and realistic, the character and narrative of the plant as subject, posed the problem of identity in analysis. This problem takes on an important form within the current discourse of non-normative or queer identity in architecture, which relates to the myth of the subject. Who was the actual narrator, if the context of violence was one lived by the plant-subjects but *interpreted by* and *identifiable for* a human? There is undoubtedly symbolic power embedded in the narrative and the fluid character of its subject, which can be interpreted by the architect. Yet the architect does not have the sole agency to this interpretation or the agency to assume the position of subject. This is still, as with the embedded notion of linearity earlier mentioned in this text, a current problem of the behavior of the architect as Architect. As mentioned by Klaske Havik when speaking about the architect Rogelio Salmona, the latter considers “the responsibility of architecture to provide meaning to the everyday life of people”.<sup>27</sup> This is an assumption of agency and subject, while narrative and thus the subject equally “reside in both the human and the non-human”<sup>28</sup>, architect, non-architect, and environment. The actions of these discursively influence each other in the given body and space. The ecology of queer thinking probes into this interconnection between inside and outside identity.

In turn, when continuously speaking about the body as (n)either subject nor object in this essay, the inevitable question in architecture is, like Agrest poses, “What body?”. Asking this in relationship with the previous problem of agency within the current discourse of narrative might be “the key to unveiling many ideological fabrications”<sup>29</sup> in architectural discourse. Several of these ingrained rules still revolve around outdated standards of beauty, like symmetry, composition, and proportion, rooted in the aforementioned enlightened thinking. These displace the non-ideal bodies of women, the queer, the non-human, relating dispossession of space to spatial purity. Now it is the challenge to look, as Agrest says, at “the body as a metaphor of the fragmented architectural body, which cannot be recomposed within the system of architectural rules”.<sup>30</sup> Narrating these experiences of repression, being explicit

which body is being voiced, can lead to a repossession of the lived space. This state of explicitness needs to be constantly reaffirmed within “a [contemporary] reality that consumes queer”.<sup>31</sup>

Concluding, I argue for the position of architect as non-master and initially non-human, rather a *to be defined* body capable of narrating. In this queer post-Anthropocene discourse, it is highly engaging to be aware of and partake in the realm of the emancipating, political possibilities of the narrative. Narrative and language have had a history in confining the body to the normative spaces of aesthetic, grid, and stability. To design for a new ecology including non-normative, not necessarily *human*, perspectives is to question the very static conceptions of duality and agency in body, subject, and object. The scriptive tool of the word can be harnessed for visualizing readable spaces to undo these violences. Narrative can be a start in the architectural project to question the rationalization and normalization of (architectural) bodies.

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- <sup>25</sup> Klaske Havik, *Acts of Symbiosis*, (Delft: Delft University of Technology), 2018
- <sup>26</sup> Repression does not exclude a force, since true exclusion is not possible. Repression still implies the force having a space to counteract as explained by Diana I. Agrest, *Architecture from Without: Body, Logic, and Sex* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 29
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- <sup>30</sup> Diana I. Agrest, *Architecture from Without: Body, Logic, and Sex* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 37
- <sup>31</sup> This constant state of consuming queer is a danger, as it circles the revolt and fragmentation back to a new norm of re-excluding bodies. Jaffer Kolb, *Working Queer* in Log no. 41 (New York: Anyone Corporation, 2017), 63.