

A material study into the production of un-war space

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Within the architectural profession a focus on the final outcome/project/building is always at the forefront of thinking and evaluation. Often, from my experience so far very little attention is given to actively reflecting on the design process itself, even less ways to the ways which we conduct our supporting research. In 'Research Methods for Architecture', Lucas defines research as "the process by which you understand the world in a verifiable and consistent manner"¹. By recognizing 'architecture as a knowledge tradition'² we can conduct research in order to improve and build upon that knowledge and ultimately progress, challenge and evolve the profession as we know it. In order for us to successfully conduct research into the field of architecture and define our position, Jorge Mejia in his lecture 'On Heuristics' explained three important elements to us; ontology- what we know on a given subject, epistemology- the thinking behind what we know and methodology- the ways in which we acquire knowledge. It is therefore important to understand the development and thinking behind specific methodologies in a broader sense as they are limited to space, time and philosophy which in affect impedes on how we produce knowledge and understand the world³. By highlighting, their historical development and how approaches towards them have changed also allows us to develop the existing thinking. Ultimately research is subjective as every person has their own set of ideals and background which influences how we approach things, being explicit about our system of enquiry outlines our thinking and the way in which we add to that body of knowledge.

Following the course has allowed me to contextualize methods which I have used before, within certain methodologies, giving me further clarification into the reasons for using them. Previously I have used methods under the umbrella term of 'analysis' without understanding the thinking behind the underlying system of enquiry. I have learnt the importance of choosing specific method(ologies) for framing your intention and outcome. I have also been introduced into new method(odologies) to be explored in the future.

Most importantly, for me the lecture series has underlined an approach to the master thesis which aims to ask more questions rather than seek solutions. In order to build upon our knowledge it is important to retain openness, which allows for questioning and further development on what we know on a given subject. We can see our research as an ongoing process adding to a body of knowledge which can continued to be challenged. Being part of the Methods and analysis studio this is an approach I will continue into the design phase as a way to see the project intervention as part of a process and a way unlocking space rather than to provide a fixed proposal which aims to provide a solution. Conducting this approach is crucial to redefining the traditional goal of the architect as an 'artist of built forms' but rather to use tools to reveal the inherent desire of places, places, trajectories and territories⁴. This gives prevalence to research in the role of the architect rather than as I stated at the beginning being focused on the final outcome.

The studio Neretva Recollections part of the chair of Methods and Analysis aims to investigate sites of un-war space in the city of Mostar from an eco-sociological standpoint as the city undergoes the process of recovery from the civil war in 1991-1995. The city has been approached from the metaphor of a ruin, not in a historical sense but suggesting a time of transition. The aim is to study the transitional spaces in the city, the reactions to them by the inhabitants as well as the material and immaterial residuals within the landscape system of the city and the river. Taking into account the process of ruination; the cause, consequence and subsequent transformation. I have chosen to study the context of a physical ruin of the former University Library which lies in a state of decay, and as a consequence becoming an illegal waste dump (a common theme found among these spaces in the city). My interest lies material relationships aiding the physical and mental healing process of the city. Particularly, in the unique role of nature in transformation of such spaces, in undoing both the destruction of war and post-war human action.

Arriving in Mostar late October, I was still defining my research question along with associated theories and methodologies. Whilst distance research provided some basic knowledge into the city the context was still relatively unknown to me. Initially dealing with a ruin led me ponder the experiential ways in which humans could interact this 'terrain vague'⁵, an umbrella term for abandoned and ambiguous spaces in the city. My research quickly changed from 'theory-led' to 'context-led' and finally back to a 'theory-led' approach⁶ again, as I developed my research topic and my position became clearer. Jumping between approaches highlights that there is no single, straightforward way of conducting research but rather it as being an iterative process.

I began conducting my investigations into the site of the former University Library in familiar ways, observing how people were acting on the site, mapping movement patterns and trying to speak with people about the use of the ruin before the war. It is important to point out that finding historical information on the site proved tricky, speaking with people on site posed a language barrier, highlighting the limitations of acting in a place which is unknown to you. Activity on the site itself was few and far between, as the space as a ruin holds no specific function. In the time I spent there I observed a handful of people interacting with the space itself, mainly using it as an informal toilet, taking pictures and passing through.

This led me to focus on a material approach to my analysis also as a way divert from the imposing narrative of division in the city. In a context heavily charged with post-war conflict I wanted to focus on what I found there and find alternative meanings in embodied in the material residuals found in the space as a way of looking for counter narratives told by monuments and political discourses.

In a space concentrated with a multitude of debris, waste and vegetation the organic and non-human material displayed undeniable role in the space. I documented the these non-human inhabitants, not forgetting the ruin itself, using methods of sketching and photography; making a catalogue of materials found on site and their locations. Furthermore, I began sketching the intersections between these different materials, for example observing trees growing from cracks in the ruin wall, plants growing from human feces and cats hiding amongst plastic paper plates. Making me think about the relationships between humans, nature and objects. I used these material 'actors' to imagine how the ruin arrived in the its current condition. The waste materials revealed the relationships to the human activity in the surrounding area by as invisible traces of interaction. These traces of material culture gave me insight into the interaction between humans and their environment, more over the disengagement of environmental concerns of the inhabitants of Mostar. I further began asking myself questions, not about the value of objects in relation to humans -as waste is deemed valueless- but the inherent value of the objects themselves. How could they form a productive role in the transformation of the space? Especially in conjunction with natural systems found there. This takes us to developments within the discussion of material culture or 'object orientated anthropology'⁷, where more recent theories such Actor Network Theory and assemblage thinking provide a framework to understand the agency of non-human things. These relational theories consider all entities such as humans, objects, animals, plants as having the same ontological status by denying the distinction between the social and material, rendering them capable of acting by the means of their own agency⁸.

Material culture can be understood in the broadest sense as the relationship between humans and things. In Britain, material culture emerged as a result of colonization, "the first role of the object was to symbolize the people who created it.. the object provided major means of representing the exotic places and people visited"⁹. These objects became integral to anthropological studies of non-Western cultures. In the same way objects have been studied by archaeologists as a means to understand cultures of the past. The meaning of the objects in these cultures, always imbued by the interpretation of the active subject. Similarly, methods stemming from archaeology have been used to study society of present, an example being the method of E.McClung Fleming, 'Artifact study: a proposed model'¹⁰,

which begins by studying the material properties of an object; construction, provenance, function and finally moving to the interpretation of its value in order to shed light on the culture which has produced it. The approach of these methods being to understand the value or meaning given to the object by the cultures in which it is created.

We continue to 'give' meaning and value to objects, this is discussed by Pearce as to what makes an object collectable in the study of museum collections, being prone to fluctuations in social changes¹¹. In Pearce's paper 'Museum Collections'¹² she discusses how the collection of natural history specimens converts natural objects into material culture, explaining that nature can only be perceived due to human classification systems and any material thing in the world of human values is considered part of material culture. Furthermore, in the study of commodities, Appadurai explains the common understanding of economic value, as written by Georg Simmel, in 'The Philosophy of Money' is that value is never an inherent property of an object but is given by the judgement of the subject¹³. However, Appadurai, develops this thinking by studying the 'social life' of commodities, discussing how value is embodied during the exchange¹⁴. This shows the changing approach to material culture to be understood within the context of process. Appadurai studies the biography of these commodities, following their life cycle "in motion from one state to another"¹⁵, with the ability to some degree dictate their own value.

Within this historical context of modern thinking, material culture has been understood through the dichotomies of subjects and objects, social and material, human and non-human, culture and nature. The leading approach has been to study objects on the terms of value/meaning given to them by humans. Meanings are thought of as abstractions; ideas which hover over the material which in itself holds no significance¹⁶. Viveiros de Castro, questions the very approach of the anthropologist in how we come know these objects, stemming from simplification of ontology through Cartesian dualism through which "things were classified into the realm of exterior, uniform world of 'nature', subjects began to colonise and chatter endlessly"¹⁷.

Post-modern theories and methodologies haven't taken a different approach towards artefact-orientated anthropology which deny the oppositions between social and material. By denying a *priori* between humans and materials, objects or non-humans are regarded with an agency of their own right¹⁸. Bruno Latour's Actor Network theory has been picked up by social science since the 1990's, understanding the world through a relational network between all things human and non-human, theorizing objects as actors within the social network. Similarly, to other theories such as Bennett's assemblage thinking¹⁹, relations are both material and semiotic, with no assumption to the hierarchy of actors. Therefore no differentiation is made between the abilities of humans and non-human actors to act within an assemblage or network. Finally, "Thinking Through Things" edited by Amieria Henare, from the position to reconfigure anthropology's analytical strategies, poses an alternative methodology. The aim of the method being "to take 'things' encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something else."²⁰, therefore material *is* meaning. Rather than a singular theory of 'things' like Latour but enabling multiple theories to be generated. In essence closing the gap between concepts and things and rethinking our actual approach to thinking.

Using the methodology of material culture has helped me to both understand the context of my research and to support ideas for the transformation of the space. I have relied on more traditional approaches in order to situate the site historically using similar methods proposed by E. McClung Fleming's 'Artifact study: a proposed model' gathering information on the date, construction and function of the ruin. Employing a traditional approach to material culture, through reading the materials on site has allowed me to evaluate how inhabitants of Mostar relate to their environments. I have been able to analyse cause and consequence of this transitional space, through objects revealing traces of human action from both war and post-war destruction of the space, for example the damaged ruin walls from shelling during the civil war and trash and feces from its use as waste dump and public

toilet. It is by recognizing the condition of the site, reading the waste and nature through their attached human values, I can pose the problems of degradation and pollution taking place.

However, throughout my research I will draw on theories of ANT and assemblage thinking to structure my findings and explore possibilities of organic and non-human actors in the transformation of the site of the former University Library. Cataloging the materials I found there and observing the intersections between them for example, the vegetation growing from cracks in the ruins allows me to understand the agency of non-humans acting in the space already, without the attachments of human meaning or value. This seems paradoxical in the discussion of material culture. Henare explains, “possibility that things may be treated as meanings- will seem paradoxical only to anthropologists who see the task of putting those things into context”²¹. However, it is within a certain context I have been able to place my research. How inhabitants of Mostar have formed a relationship with the non-human agents is essential in understanding how the space has been transformed in such a way in the first place.

However, I believe taking a position towards a post-modern thinking of material culture allows us to envisage new relations for the transformation of the site. An example of new relationships between humans and material can be found in Armina Pilav’s research ‘Sarajevo: Material Mediation and Survival Bodies’²². During the siege in Sarajevo people’s relationships with materials changed. Acting instinctively people transformed spaces adapting materials and their bodies, forming new spaces and functions in the city born out of survival. Whilst these transformations took place under the traumatizing conditions of war, breaking away from the determined functions of things and the conventional context, new relations were able to be formed which Pilav argues was an act against the violence through creation of un-war space. Finding new relationships with the materials found in the context of Mostar since the civil war can be seen to as a continuation in this creation of un-war space.

With a traditional approach to material culture the leftover waste and unplanned for vegetation may be read as valueless to humans within the current context, leading to a solution to remove it and rebuild the former building. This view positions the human as the dominant actor in the space and non-human actors in the realm of the ‘other’. With this view of superiority, non-human actors are subject to human colonization and objectification, regarded without agency, closing the door to new forms of relationships. By undoing subject/object relationships, it is possible to open up and see all combinations of interactions and intertwining of the material and social²³. Through this ‘unlearning’ of the material world and ‘de-contextualization’ we can rethink the material capabilities.

Redistributing the social agency through the accommodation of ‘non-humans’ allows us to think about ‘life’ as a means of thinking past the human²⁴. This of course relates to broader questions of how to deal with waste renewal, global warming and moving past the Anthropocene within the field of the architectural discourse. It also opens up the question: how the space should accommodate the human actor? Traditionally, the human actor would dominate by controlling and adapting nature and objects until the space suited our needs. However, if nature plays the predominant role the transformation of the space, undoing the destruction and post-war pollution; How can humans use the space and adapt to these new spatial conditions?

Using the method of sketching, I as a human was co-dependent on the objects of a pen and pencil throughout my research. It could be argued that as an architect I take the role of the dominant actor by controlling the analysis and eventually the project outcome. However, by taking a position to recognize agency of non-humans I would argue that my role as a researcher and architect that of another actor within the network and the ultimate transformation of the space. Is it with this we challenge the role of the of the traditional architect recognizing ourselves as a mediator.

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2 Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 7
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4 Andrej Radman, 'Ecologies Of Architecture', Posthuman Glossary (2018)
5 Manuela Mariani and Patrick Barron, *Terrain Vague: Interstices at the edge of pale* (London: Routledge, 2014)
6 Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 13
7 Amiria Henare, *Thinking Through Things* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1
8 Martin Muller, 'Assemblages And Actor-Networks: Rethinking Socio-Material Power, Politics And Space' (2016), *Geography Compass*,
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9 Daniel Miller, 'Things ain't what they used to be', *Interpreting Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study* (London: Routledge, 1994), 13
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11 Susan M. Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study* (London: Routledge, 1994), 2
12 Susan M. Pearce, 'Museum Objects', *Interpreting Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study* (London: Routledge, 1994), 10
13 Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life Of Things* (Cambridge University Press 1986), 3
14 Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life Of Things* (Cambridge University Press 1986), 3
15 Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 104
16 Amiria Henare, *Thinking Through Things* (London: Routledge, 2006), 3
17 Amiria Henare, *Thinking Through Things* (London: Routledge, 2006), 10
18 Martin Muller, 'Assemblages And Actor-Networks: Rethinking Socio-Material Power, Politics And Space' (2016), *Geography Compass*,
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19 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter; a political ecology of things* (Duke University Press, 2010)
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22 Armina Pilav, 'Sarajevo: Material Mediation and Survival Bodies' (2017) *The Funambulist*
23 Sarah Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies* (London: Sage, 2002), 5
24 Sarah Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies* (London: Sage, 2002), 5