what to keep of the obsolete?

ExploreLab 32, Research Plan
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Introduction

We live in an obsolete building. It is the old chemistry faculty on the edge between the TU Delft campus and the city centre. Because the building was written off in regards to sustainability regulations and uses, it will be demolished and replaced by energy efficient housing. In this research we will interrogate this paradox of demolishing and building anew in the name of sustainability. Existing architecture seems often addressed with the binary position of either demolition (in case of ordinary buildings) or restoration (in case of monuments). We search to nuance and broaden the scope of intervention on existing architecture, taking seriously the question of 'what to keep?'.

Towards the answer to this question, it should become clear that the performative take on sustainability as we find it here to react on, should be seen in contrast to the understanding of sustainability that crafts a work to last. 'To last' we mean not to load with conservationism, but with something of a curated continuity, vitally important in our society where the Human Condition is in fact a Technological Condition. (Moore, 2019, p.19) Given that social and cultural continuity is externalised, thus contained within technologies, it should be apparent that the dismissal of those technologies on the sole ground of energetic performance is not good enough. It is the cause that Stiegler fought for by the name of Technics.

This in mind, the question of 'what to keep' breaks down into firstly making explicit the values that are disappearing, subsequently justifying which values we argue to keep and which we let be, and finally to the curation of a continuity through design. Three questions centered on Scheikunde in a state of Obsolescence will guide our research towards an applied critique to the current development of the building.

(1) Which framework judges the building as obsolete? We will have to understand under which condition this building is judged as "obsolete". In other words, the framework that allows for its devaluation will show the different criteria used to constitute a culture of obsolescence.

(2) What is the present of the building? (answering also for its past) To produce a different mode of valuation we will adopt the concept of 'ecosophy' brought by Felix Guattari. Ecosophy will provide conceptual tools to value the past and present uses of the Scheikunde. This part can be briefly described as a process of 'transvaluation', a radical revision of what has value.

(3) What is the becoming of the building? We will inquire methods for understanding and curating the realm of the possible becoming of Scheikunde, starting from the description of the building's metabolism as the anchor point for all further bifurcations. For this, we will use Frichot's three tactics (surveying, gleaning, unthinking) to understand and foster the specific qualities of the place.

The relational praxes this research (plan) is pertaining to, should make evident that we will need to dismiss the typical research/design divide, however popular this claim now is in architectural education. We aim for an applied ecosophy that builds on an understanding without universal values or grounding definitions. Instead it founds on the specific values contained in the networks of particular situations. Therefore, the architectural concepts (i.e. typologies, programmes, themes, styles, …) we are taught to approach a site with, are incomplete: we will need to rid ourselves of the disciplinary preconceptions in order to not explain situations with unfit concepts. Here is no research explaining what specific version of a disciplinary concept is applicable, but there is a site educating us what practices we need to learn in order to value it adequately, and a theory of ecological practice providing us handles to become respons-able designers.

Which framework judges the building obsolete ?

Theoretical framework

Obsolescence within Creative Destruction

Scheikunde is undergoing what Schumpeter calls "Creative Destruction". This is the "process of industrial mutation […] that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one." (Schumpeter, 1976, p.83) It is the essential fact about capitalism: in order to keep the growth of capital running, the old value pertained within a product has to be crushed by a new product which provides an added value. The terms "creative" and "destruction" coconstitude a cyclical process, where Destruction accommodates a room for the Creation which instantly fills the gap with a pledge to progress[1]. Within the system of Creative Destruction, the destruction of the existing finds its justification through the rhetoric of obsolescence. One could understand obsolescence as the constructed narrative that allows the reproduction and extension of Creative Destruction. In other words, there is a need for a culture of obsolescence to justify a program of destruction. Through its own specific practices that produce the narrative of (technological and economical) progress and performance, obsolescence creates the opportunity for the new to crush the old. It is the instance in which something is labelled as such so that a new cycle can be initiated. It is "the process of sudden devaluation and expendability." (Abrahamson, 2016, p.2)

Scheikunde

Unlike products such as machinery, cars, smartphones, etc…, architecture has a solidity and size that is unable to share the light-weight throw-away character of regular consumer goods (Abrahamson, 2006). It takes time and effort to destroy and rebuild a building. Therefore, as soon as the mechanisms of obsolescence have produced their label, the building is not removed with the same abruptness as its devaluation, but put in suspension: it is theoretically removed, but practically there. This suspense of obsolescence in our particular case gave us the chance to inhabit

[1] Where in the early stages of the project of modernity progress was still a mobilising factor for emancipation, we must now acknowledge that "there no longer appears to be a cause-and-effect relationship between the growth in techno-scientific resources and the development of social and cultural progress" (Guattari, 2011, p.40)

the building, through which we get to see inside the wide variety of qualities the building (can) host(s) and those qualities inherent to the building itself. From the simple thrill of strolling through the desolate spaces equipped to do things that are completely foreign to us, to the beauty of decay developing noticeably over weeks, to the vegetation and their exuberant display of the seasons, to the people allowed their own place which they would not have been able to afford otherwise, to the sun lighting up different identical windows over the course of the day, to…. What we have come to feel here, is the incredible loss of all those qualities reliant on Scheikunde as they will disappear with its demolition. But also how they were only possible through that same pending demolition.

Three ecologies

This loss of quality through the capitalist mode of valuation (obsolescence) along with the mode of production (creative destruction) has been systematically criticised by ecological thinkers[2], with Guattari as a main figure. With 'Three Ecologies', Guattari (2011) set out an understanding of a different mode of valuation based on what he called "ecosophy". This essay circles the central notion of Subjectification, which redirects the attention to the material and immaterial environment of one's life: the Existential Territory. Through this shift, values other than capital can be mobilised to resingularise away from capitalistic subjectivity. Existential territories may include the vast and extraterrestrial domains of religion to the tiny home-bound habit of cooking, but rely decisively on the actual living environment of the individual[3]. However, they are not disconnected to the systemic hegemony of 'Integrated world capitalism'[4], quite the contrary, IWC reaches and increasingly grids the individuals' subjectification ("Capitalistic Subjectivity", Guattari, 2011, p.44). Within IWC the semiotic of Architecture has a key role for this gridding of subjectification. For example, the advancement of suburban-style family houses or apartment blocks for nuclear families or university campuses and innovation hubs for isolated scientists.

[2] "Ecology" here does not refer to its common biology-related understanding, but to a relational view as a philosophical notion. It denies the typical way of classifying things into their designated categories and instead regards every artefact or practice in relation to its context.
[3] The root of 'eco' is originally from the greek 'oikos' which refers to habitat, natural environment and domesticity, notions that connect to Guattari's conception of Existential Territory.
[4] Guattari distinguishes between the economic concept Capitalism and his notion of Integrated World Capitalism which stretches over four semiotic domains: Economic semiotics (monetary, financial, accounting and decision-making mechanisms); Juridical semiotics (title deeds, legislation and regulations of all kinds); Techno-scientific semiotics (plans, diagrams,

Thus, to challenge the capitalist mode of valuation ecologically, what is necessary, is a transvaluation into Existential Territories that are no longer increasingly reigned by IWC, but become resingularised into technicities and individuals who are both more 'different and united'. (Guattari, 2011, p.45) This resingularisation is what occurs at a moment of bifurcation from gridded Existential Territories, and is where and when ecosophy aims to cultivate another mode of valuation. "Thus ecological praxes strive to scout out the potential vectors of subjectification and singularisation at each partial existential locus." (Guattari, 2011, p.37) Accordingly, Guattari coined the three ecologies as interchangeable lenses, framed to attune to the different qualities that constitute the territory.
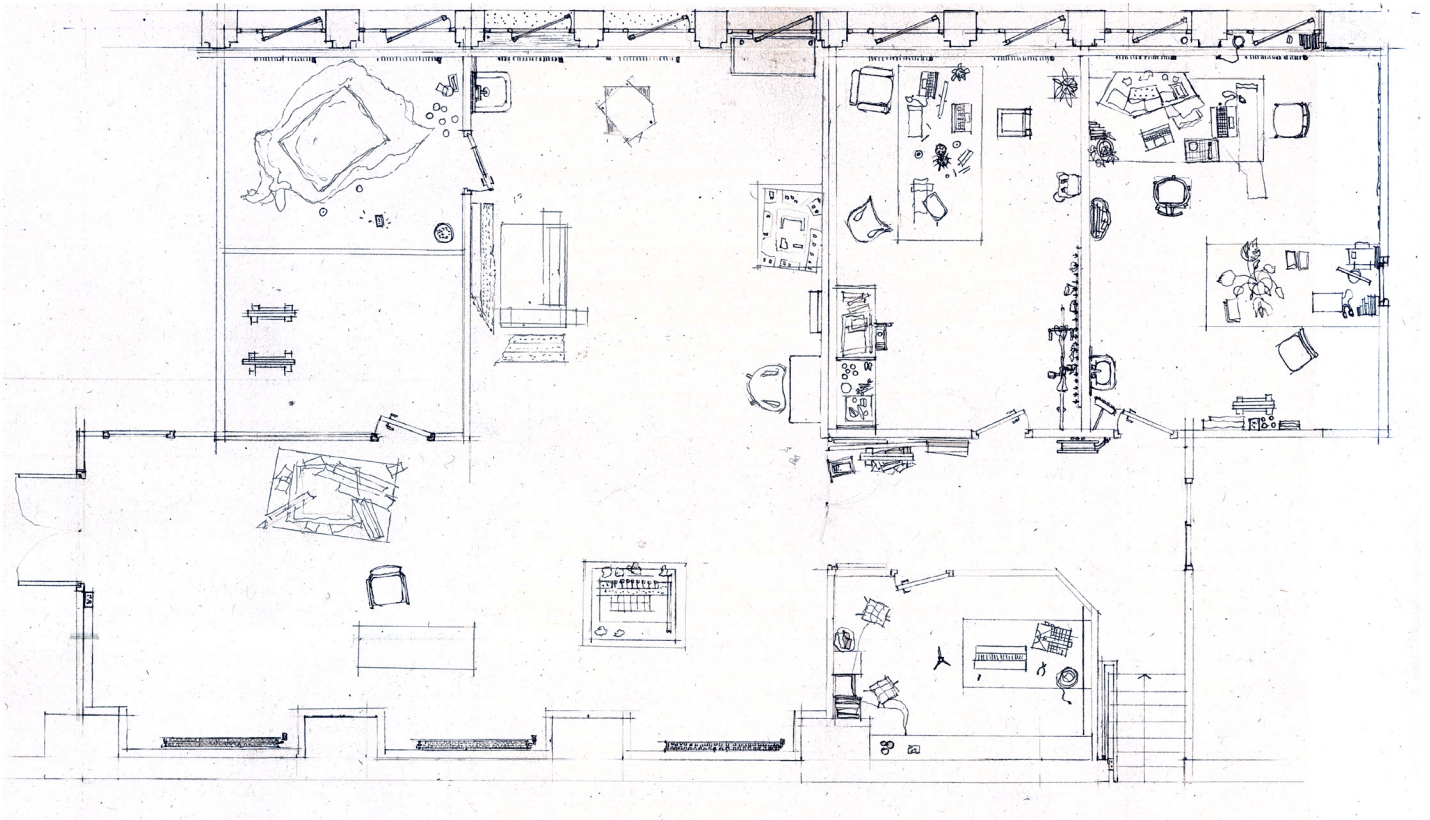
- Environmental for the use of resources;

- Social for the belonging to a collectivity and shared memory;

- Psyche for the sense of place and appropriation.

These three ecological lenses allow for 'the engagement of various levels of practices in processes of heterogenesis' (Guattari, 2011, p.46): through adopting them we can think of the coexistence between contradictory praxis. Their irreducibility and transversality counter the ongoing production of capitalistic subjectivity. "Rather than remaining subject, in perpetuity, to the seductive efficiency of economic competition, we must reappropriate Universes of value, so that processes of singularisation can rediscover their consistency." (Guattari, 2011, p.45)

programmes, studies, research, etc.); Semiotics of subjectification, of which some coincide with those already mentioned, but to which we should add many others, such as those relating to architecture, town planning, public facilities, etc.

What is the present of the building? (answering also for its past)

Ecology of Practice

Describing the site from an 'ecological practice' should avoid describing practices 'as they are' but 'as they may become'. (Stengers, 2005, p.4) This attentiveness to bifurcations demands us to take a curational rather than resolving stance about the site and is what she calls the 'minor key'. The term is inspired from what Deleuze calls "penser par le milieu" and implies to think without 'grounding definitions' or 'ideal horizons', but instead to think with the surroundings. "'With the surroundings' would mean that no theory gives you the power to disentangle something from its particular surroundings (...)" (Stengers, 2005, p.5) Therefore no practice can be thought of without its habitat or environment. Stengers opposes this attitude to the 'major key': the scenario of obsolescence producing the homogenisation refrain of progress and innovation. Aiming for a transversality, is refusing that major key: "(…) to resist any concept, any prospect, which would make those destructions the condition for something more important." (Stengers, 2005, p.3)

Parliament of Things

This resistance would start by giving a voice to the diversity unrecognised by obsolescence. Latour argues for this as a political representation in a Parliament of Things (informed by matters of concern, not matters of Fact[5]). By the means of representation, he is both recognising the inevitable human perspective, and risking to not recognise a matter of concern in its own right. Nevertheless, in regards to the technological-human condition, it is important to make explicit what are the 'life supports' and 'collaborators' that maintain us in a stable condition: to pay heed to our precariously fragile interdependencies. As an astronaut is reliant on his space suit and space station, we are reliant on our own earthly enveloppes, all of which are artificial[6]. (Or what Sloterdijk calls 'spheres') We are never outside, we 'move from envelopes to envelopes, from folds to folds'. (Latour, 2008, p.8). The degree of interdependencies between human and non human matters of concern makes earth bound envelopes complex to reveal. Yet it is this process of explicification (for which there are no disciplinary 'visualisation tools') that we need in order to make communicable and reflective all the opportunities to diverge into a heterogenesis.

[5] Matters of Fact have through science in our 'modern' society the authority over irrefutable Truths, hiding their own dependance on organisational and social affairs and refusing other sincere matters of concern in an equal discussion.

[6] Conditions of being in the anthropocene: by acknowledging the possibility of absolute human-technological domination (even for situations that are not (yet) artificial), this power has to be recognised, accounted for and devised against.

What is the becoming of the building?

Methodological positioning

Analytical

Moving from an understanding of a sense of place to intervening (from with)in that location requires parallel modes of action. Where Latour and Stengers describe practically the matters of concern and the attitude to face them, it is Frichot (2019) who extends to how it is possible to, architecturally, "strive to scout out the potential vectors of subjectification and singularisation". (Guattari, 2011, p.37) She coined three sequential tactics[7]: surveying, gleaning and unthinking, that would iteratively enable to keep a continuous attention to those things out of the ordinary: chances for bifurcation.

(1) SURVEYING   to address the 'environment-worlds':

Surveying is the studying of a situation in which happens what you expect to happen, the ordinary and the conventional, which you learn to understand by spending lengths of time surveying the place. Understanding the conventions of an environment then allows you to notice those things out of the ordinary. Describing this involves both the things going on and the place in which they go on. (In past and present tense.)

(2) GLEANING   to address the 'things':

Gleaning is the attitude which assumes to find value in any kind of situation at all, by persistently and painstakingly sifting through all material left-overs. From having surveyed the environment of these things, they are technicities that entail a particular technology-practice. Thus to glean is to find the border of a practice as it bifurcates.

(3) (UN)THINKING   to develop theories (tools) to understand (1) and (2):

[7] As opposed to strategies: tactics are the short term ways of doing that allow you to keep relevance in a fast and continuously changing situation (environment-worlds or habitat?). Strategies have the long-term connotation close to that of a masterplan or the "horizon" a company might draw to align its employees.

Unthinking is the process by which surveyings and gleanings produce an understanding of both the subject of study and the specific way of studying. In other words, to make these communicable and reflective. Unthinking makes explicit the modes of valuation and production as they surfaced through surveying and gleaning: to think what was unthought. To think unthinkables by accepting, as Harraway suggests, the unavailability of categorical thinking, implies that what was left unthought before will have to become thought now, and supplied with a narrative of its own.

Then, in order to establish an ecological practice relevant to the site, we will have to maintain a cyclical iteration through surveying-gleaning-(un)thinking in order to describe with increasing awareness and precision the matters concerned. It is essential to sustain this process of continuous explicification, because an ecology of practice is, as Stengers (2005, p.3) points out, a 'non-neutral tool' which implies taking decisions that should be defended only by reference to the entangled surroundings.

Design aproach

As of the scale of the building and the curative stance we are aiming for, we sense the importance of leaving the master plan and its totalising character on the side. Rather we will spot some crucial spaces in the building that are worth taking as a series of points of departure. Naming them will be the first step (i.e.: the entrance, the central garden, the gallery). Regarding these key points in the building we will address them with bold interventions : cuts in the buildings, connection with the basement, openings towards public spaces etc. The goal being to intensify their definition and playfulness with a careful attention to detailing. The designed stability of these spaces will be balanced by a different approach on the less exceptional spaces. These latter will allow for small interventions at the scale of what a human can do. Replacing window frames, moving panels, adding insulations or partition walls, changing the floor etc… These two ways of designing refer to the dual character of our position. In fact we are sometimes looking at the building through the lens of an architect, and sometimes through the lens of an inhabitant keen on doing bricolage.

Conclusions

At the end, our attempt at applied ecosophy, the design and research together, should be able to answer for four things. Firstly it needs to find ways of representing the qualities facing extinction as a consequence of Scheikunde's demolition. This needs to include the display of how these technicities came to be and what material they rely upon, so they can be referred to by their constitutive practices and objects. Simultaneously, it needs to display how they cannot survive Scheikunde's creative destruction by displaying the mechanics of Obsolescence so that this label can be revealed as not-absolute. Secondly, it needs to justify by reference to the interrelated qualities themselves which are to be kept, fostered, let be or removed. It needs to explain which heterarchy is beneficial to this location, which envelopes could or should constitute it, why and how. Thirdly, it needs to produce a disciplinary architectural representation that enables the project to engage with the act of building and the development of the urban tissue. And lastly, we need to guard continuously our own position as ecological-creative practitioners, reflecting and externalising how we avoid the traditional methods that we have been taught and how we resist a gridding of the Real by reductive superimpositions.

Designing then is synonymous for engaging with the surroundings, with our own particular Real, and researching is the continuous check and balance of our applied ecology: making sure we are not dressing up conventional architectural practice in false ecological cloaks. Ultimately, this would lead to a viable transvaluation of Scheikunde's creative destruction that we can defend with a transparent display of its own narrative. This narrative should deconstruct strategically the narrative of obsolescence so its reductive current can be resisted decisively.

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