

A WORDPLAY ON ARCHITECTURE AND PLAY

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Abstract: Starting with a wordplay on the relation between architecture and play, this essay constructs a logic of categorization which corresponds to the active play agents and agencies as well as the tripartite architectural actions of creation, operation, and 'reception'. However, this rational categorization is only constructed to be destructed later in the essay. Through a reading of the example of the Wunderkammers, the article argues that the relational operativity of play suspends our conventional modes of categorization and language. The essay refers to the common approaches on the topic of the relation between architecture and play and suggests that their deficiencies are resulted from the fact that they do not take such a quality of play seriously.

Key words: architecture, play, wordplay, language, Wunderkammer

A WORDPLAY

I'll start with a wordplay!

First, by making all possible combinations with these four words: play, architecture, in, of; and second, by reflecting on what each linguistic combination implies.

1. **Play of architecture:** The emphasis in this linguistic combination is on the act of playing. The word play, which is a noun that implies a state, can be easily transformed into a verb here, i.e. *playing*. This emphasis on the operativity of the word play is brought forward through its positioning at the beginning of the combination. The combination *play of architecture* enacts the operativity of architecture and puts it in relation to the operations of play. It challenges the conventions of 'function' or 'program' in architecture. *Play of architecture* implies that the architectural construct, the project or the outcome of an architectural thought, activates play and assures its continuity through its operations. *Play of architecture* therefore implies that the play agent is the non-human agent of the architectural construct.

2. **Architecture of play:** *Architecture of play* can imply two different conditions. In the first case, architectural construct is the outcome of the playing of the architect. Through playing, the architect constructs the models, drawings, or any other kind of outcome; play is the force behind the creative process and the architect is its agent. Similarly, a child (or even an animal) in the process of making-playing is also an example of this state. When a child is making sandcastles, the sandcastle is an architectural construct which is created through the playing of the child. *Architecture of play* challenges the conventions of the act of designing in architecture. In the second case, architectural construct is fabricated through the playing of the 'user'. The space of architecture is either (re)constructed physically through actions of adjustment, manipulation, appropriation, and the like, or virtually through operations of fiction or imagination. In both conditions, *architecture of play* implies the play agent is the creator-player.¹

3. **Play in architecture:** Similar to *play of architecture*, the term play can be easily replaced by the verb *playing* here and the emphasis is on the act of playing which is accentuated through its positioning at the beginning of the linguistic combination. However, the usage of the preposition *in* instead of *of*, attributes the operativity of play not to the architectural construct but to another agent. The mind immediately constructs this other agent—which is missing in the combination—to be the human (or animal) agent who is in architecture and 'using' it. Therefore, generally speaking, this combination places the emphasis on the actions of the 'users' as they initiate and/or sustain play through their actions of playing. Architectural construct is either providing the grounds which suggest playing or is irrelevant to, or even conflicting with, the play experience (e.g. children playing in a house or in a hospital). *Play in architecture* challenges the conventions of usage in architecture. The play agent is the one who is conventionally known in architecture as the 'user'.

4. **Architecture in play:** In correspondence with the *play of architecture*, *architecture in play* implies that the architectural construct is in a state of playing. The state of playing is attributed to the architectural construct. Although *architecture*

in play reveals the operability of architecture as well, it does not retain much emphasis on the play operations as *play of architecture* does. Regardless of this difference, architecture in play implies that the architectural construct is the agent which activates and sustains play. This combination can correspond to another category as well. Similar to architecture of play, it can also imply an architectural construct which is created in (through) the state of playing which is performed by the agent of the creator-player.

THE AGENTS OF PLAY

Based on this logic the chart below can be constructed.

Phrase	Agent	Agency	Type of architectural action
Play of architecture	Architectural construct	Play of the architectural construct	Operation
Architecture of play	Creator-player (architect)	Play of the architect	Creation
Play in architecture	'User'-player	Play of the 'user'	'Reception'
Architecture in play	A: Architectural construct B: Creator-player: the architect	A: Play of the architectural construct B: Play of the architect	A: Operation B: Creation

Regardless of their respective particular differences and overlaps, these four linguistic constructs connote the question of agents and agency. At first glance they imply the dominant human and non-human agents in relation to the initiation, activation, and sustaining of play in relation to architecture.

Generically speaking 'an agent is a being with the capacity to act, and "agency" denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity'.² Many contemporary debates which are formed around the notions of agent and agency were in response to the question of intentionality in relation to the agent's actions. Following Aristotle and Hume for some thinkers—such as Elizabeth Anscombe and Donald Davidson—the term agency denotes 'the performance of intentional actions' while this view has been criticized by many others who 'argue that the exercise of agency may be entirely spontaneous, in the sense that an agent may initiate an action for no reason and without prior intent'.³ The critique of reducing the notion of agency to human will and intentionality can be traced in the works of Brian Massumi and Jane Bennet, amongst others.⁴ The problem of an agent's relation to intentionality is a philosophical question which remains untouched here. An agent is simply the body that activates a force intentionally or non-intentionally which can be human or non-human, and agency is the condition of manifestation of such forces.

Recently, as a response to the over-rationalization and commercialization of architectural practice, the notion of play has become a recurrent topic through which

architectural theoreticians, practitioners, educators, and students challenge such issues. Generally speaking, the body of research which exists on the subject of the relation between architecture and play can be categorized in two distinct approaches:

The first category of approaches considers play as a mode of creation or designing where the architect is the agent of play (i.e. *architecture of play* and *architecture in play*, where *in* implies *through*). This approach is common in architectural education, especially in experimental design studios where play becomes a methodological approach through which the students can overcome the conventions of designing. A study in this category is the 2013 book *Interpretation in Architecture: Design as a Way of Thinking* by Richard Coyne and Adrian Snodgrass. Other examples in this category are studies which take gaming as a method for designing, where the rules of the game—and not play—are predefined and the participants play the game to achieve a final outcome. An example is Ekim Tan's PhD thesis *Negotiation and Design for the Self-Organizing City: Gaming as a Method for Urban Design*. These approaches may become problematic if they tend to instrumentalize play in order to achieve goals beyond playing itself, which is contradictory to a quality of play. Play's intention comes from within. Moreover, the predefined rules may limit the unpredictable outcomes if they are not chosen sensitively to the indeterminacy of play which is its other quality.

The second category of approaches considers play as a mode of 'usage' of space where the 'user' is the agent of play (i.e. *play in architecture*). This approach is the most common approach towards the notion of play in architectural discourse, one which results to or is resulted from the conventional understanding of a playground and is highly problematic. A conventional playground is a place which provides the facilities for playing and where playing is still using. One example of this approach is the 2007 book *The Ludic City: Exploring the Potential of Public Spaces* by Quentin Stevens. Stevens analyzes the appearance of different accepted types of play such as skating, public performances, etcetera, in the urban space. He explores the typologies of spaces in the city where these activities are more likely to happen.

As it turns out, the notion of play has been barely studied in relation to the operationality of architecture, where architecture is the active agent and play is the active operation of an architectural construct: i.e. the *play of architecture* and *architecture in play*—architecture in the state of playing.

I would like to propose a hypothesis, one which I elaborate further in detail in my PhD thesis, namely that the deficiencies of each of these approaches may be the result of the fact that they have been done in isolation. In fact, the liminality of play teaches us that *play of architecture*, is not so separate from *architecture of play*, *play in architecture*, or *architecture in play*.

THE WUNDERKAMMER

To somewhat substantiate this claim, I have taken the example of *Wunderkammers* here. These 'cabinets of curiosities' are the spectacular architectural constructs which date back to colonial Europe and were materialized through the assemblage of objects which were brought together from multiple geological, archeological, spiritual, or artistic sources.

Wunderkammers are both actual and virtual spaces that simultaneously activate and are activated by playing. In other words, play operations are both the cause and effect of such spaces.

Play is initially activated when the collector encounters the unfamiliar and untimely object which he⁵ is unable to easily posit within his conventional modes and categories of thought and language. The syntax systems that are available to him are suddenly suspended. His curiosity and imagination are instead activated.

The play mode is extended to the collector's actions of creating the *Wunderkammer*. He starts arranging the objects. A taxidermized crocodile can easily sit next to other taxidermized animals as they are taxidermized animals, it can be placed on the same shelf next to a vase as they have the same height, or it can be categorized together with a toy because they are both green. However, it is rather difficult or even impossible for him to construct an all-encompassing order which can be applied to all objects. For instance, if he decides to order the room according to the function of the objects, how can he posit the new wooden piece he found in his

recent trip to Africa? He does not know what it does, he should therefore rearrange the space again. The wondrous unknown objects guarantee the sustaining of the collector's play.

The state of play is extended to the operations of the architectural construct. The crocodile which is organized with other taxidermized animals operates radically different from the crocodile juxtaposed with a toy. Similarly, a shelf which contains multiple taxidermized animals operates differently from a shelf which is ordered according to height. Therefore, the collector's playful actions of arrangement and rearrangement affect the operations of space. Moreover, the inability of the collector to place the strange object results in the object's place-lessness or misplacement which affects the chosen ordering system. The wondrous object makes the ordering system vulnerable and operative as it does not allow the ordering system to be fixed. The space of the *Wunderkammer* is constantly operating through play even without the collector (its 'architect') being there anymore. The wondrous object sustains the continuation of play through the operations of the architectural construct. The play of the architect extends to the play of the architectural construct.

The state of play also extends to the 'reception' of the space by the 'users'. The visitor of the *Wunderkammer* or the viewer of its depiction is not a passive receiver anymore but an active agent who reconstructs the space. The operations of arrangement and re-arrangement are happening for the person who encounters the *Wunderkammer* as well. One is constantly reconstructing the space through imagination.

The condition of the extension of play, however, should not be understood as a linear process. There is never a force which moves directly from the architect to the construct and finally to the 'user'. To affect is to be affected, therefore the path of a force is never a linear path. As Deleuze writes in his study on the Nietzschean concept of *will to power*: 'each time we point out the nobility of action [...] we must not forget that reaction also designates a type of force'.⁶ Indeed, the 'capacity for being affected is not necessarily a passivity but an affectivity, a sensibility, a sensation'.⁷

In fact, in *Wunderkammers* the agents of the collector, the space of the room, the renaissance visitor, and the 21st century person behind the laptop, and the strange object, are all engaging in highly relational operations of play. Neither the agents nor the agencies are independent. The *play of architecture* is not so separate from the architecture of play, the *play in architecture*, or the *architecture in play*.

The study of play in relation to architecture, and the study of play in relation to any other topic for that matter, should be sensitive to this relational operativity of play. Play teaches us that it is not approachable through the conventional modes of categorization and language. How can the tripartite architectural actions of the design-'function'-'use' be treated separately? A state of intoxication, as Nietzsche would have said, always accompanies play which should be considered seriously, at least through the body of knowledge that is produced on the topic.

NOTES

1 Non-lively creatures can also be part of this category which brings the discussion to the discourse of artificial intelligence. However, creative play is simply taken as a form of action which - at least still - belongs to the living creatures.

2 Markus Schlosser, 'Agency', in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition); Edward N. Zalta (ed.), online: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/agency/> [accessed: 20-05-2020]

3 Ibid.

4 See: Brian Massumi, 'Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation' (2002); Stanley Fish and Fredric Jameson (ed.), (Series title: *Post-contemporary Interventions*); Durham and London: Duke University Press. and Jane Bennett, 'Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things' (2010); Durham and London: Duke University Press.

5 The pronoun 'he' instead of 'she' was intentionally used here as *Wunderkammers* were generally male spaces created by the male aristocrat collectors after their travels around the world during colonial times. The wealthy women practiced a radically different mode of playful collecting through the creation of dollhouses. The dollhouses were cabinets consisting of miniature objects which were usually crafted specifically for the dollhouse. For an example, see the dollhouse

of Petronella Oortman who was the wife of the Dutch silk merchant Johannes Brandt.

6 Gilles Deleuze, 'Nietzsche and Philosophy', 1983 Translation by Hugh
Tonlinson, New York: Continuum, Original edition: 1962, Nietzsche et la philosophie,
Presses Universitaires de France, p. 42.

7 Ibid., p. 62.