

ACTING THROUGH MATERIALITIES

This section presents architectural projects that address their material and performative conditions in order to unfold intervening capacities. The examples advocate for, and explore methods of, appreciative preservation, focusing on remodeling, reusing, and repairing. Using a multi-disciplinary approach, they employ a variety of different tools, methods, and practices, producing specific forms of knowledge throughout their practical interventions.

Botanica Urbana: A Project of Critical Urbanism

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Abstract: This contribution discusses the project Botanica Urbana in Hamburg. It has been partly written in the first person, as a reflective exercise, in order to narrate the multiple relations between human and non-human actors which belong to an architectural intervention itself. The first part of the text – *Architecture in its Becoming* – introduces the social and cultural circumstances at the site of the architectural intervention. The second part – *Theoretical Reflection behind the Architectural Intervention* – frames the architectural intervention in its performative moment and within its specific context, »here and now«, as an intervention of critical urbanism, made possible through the emergence of an urban assemblage. The conclusion frames the project Botanica Urbana as a contribution to neo-materialist practices and the theory of »agential realism« by Karen Barad.

Keywords: ANT; Assemblage; Territorialization; Critical Urbanism; More-Than-Human; Neo-Materialism.

Introduction

The project Botanica Urbana began with rescuing a greenhouse from demolition. At first sight this seemed to be merely an affective intervention but it later proved to be an act of critical urbanism, capable of generating a transformative process at the scale of the neighborhood. For years the greenhouse had lain on an urban development area in Altona Nord (Hamburg) and was about to be torn down in order to leave space for a new housing block. When we first saw the greenhouse, almost 400 square meters in size, overgrown and covered with rubbish, we never imagined that in just six weekends (before the start of the demolition phase) we would manage to free the greenhouse, dismantle it, and store it in another place. The greenhouse had been abandoned for 20 years, during which time thick thorny branches had taken over. Through social networks, 100 people were recruited to work together to prevent the greenhouse from being destroyed. The greenhouse is carefully stored now and is in protected hibernation before we rebuild it in March 2025. Then, the greenhouse will be a space for urban gardening, a social kitchen, an open-lab for an inclusive neighborhood development, inclusive culture, and a broader botanical discourse.

Architecture in its Becoming

Altona is a large district that stretches across the western part of the city of Hamburg. The neighborhood of Ottensen (in the southern part of Altona) overlooks the River Elbe. The imposing port area extends on to the other side of the river and serves as a distinctive backdrop to the park stretching along the river. To the north, Ottensen is bordered by Diebsteich, a neighborhood known for its post-industrial character. Diebsteich is marked by industrial warehouses of various sizes in which a variety of artisanal work takes place. The neighborhood on the east side is flanked by a porous row of residential blocks along the railway. With its large warehouses and its proximity to the city, the neighborhood has also attracted major commercial chains and large distributors for the resale of building materials in the last thirty years.

Today, Diebsteich is undergoing a profound urban transformation pursued under the banner of a housing emergency and increased demand for residential buildings. The driving force behind this imposing urban development is the relocation of the train station containing the service from Ottensen to Diebsteich, a decision that in the eyes of a gullible resident

doesn't seem to make much sense, but in the eyes of big real estate, it instead serves as a fertilizer for investment. Through this operation, much of the area surrounding the new station was suddenly supposed to acquire new value, thus becoming the object of a stable financial investment for a handful of large real-estate companies. For a few inhabitants, this political decision represents the possibility of urban development at a neighborhood scale but also carries with it a great destabilizing force. More specifically, it means great transformation at the intangible level of social and cultural stratification.

Diebsteich is not a destination for strolling. If you live in this area of the city, it is usually customary to go for a walk in the park along the Elbe or to admire the harbor from the Altonaer Balkon. This harbor acts as a *detterritorializing apparatus*, seamlessly connecting you to the farthest corners of the world as ships pass by every day, bringing distant places to your doorstep.¹ Somehow, that corner of the city, which for many Hamburgers is an object of awe and pride, would instead provide me with a great deal of anguish and a sense of oppression helplessness. Every time I gazed at the harbor I was reminded of the effects that intensive trade has on natural ecosystems and political instability across the world. During my walks I had learned to push northward, toward the opposite side. I thought that by moving away from the harbor I could escape that anguish.²

In Diebsteich I didn't feel so entangled with the Anthropocene, so I could stroll lightheartedly among the sheds, informal canopies, and urban voids that characterized its morphology. While first looking at online maps, it appeared to be merely a logistical hub, but frequent visits reveal it to be far more complex and layered. I realized right away that Diebsteich was literally a social microcosm. In a lighthearted manner, I enjoyed examining the layers of additions and extensions added to the sheds over the years, imagining what functions they served within the complex activities of the area. Some canopies served as indicators of outdoor work activities during the warmer seasons, while others functioned as temporary parking spaces for cars awaiting processing. Additionally, the barbecues outside certain

¹ Referencing our entanglement with social and environmental criticalities within our planet, from the micro to the macro scale, I refer to Bruno Latour's *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (2018) and his Actor-Network-Theory.

² When I talk about »anguish« I am referring to the chapter *Fatigue of our Time* in Rosi Braidotti's book *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019) in which she explains how being anguished is a symptomatic component of our way of being in the Anthropocene.

smaller units, which were detached from the sheds, suggest that these areas were frequented at the weekends or outside of working hours.

One day, I lingered to talk with a guy of Turkish heritage, who owned an informal-looking car repair shop (there are many workshops in the area), and who told me about his eviction notice. By the end of the year, he would have to leave his shed, the place where he had spent the majority of his time for the past 30 years. It was him who first showed me that abandoned greenhouse, while he was pointing out all the businesses served with eviction notices. Following that short walk, long enough to smoke a cigarette, he asked me to follow him back to his shed. In a small office he pulled out of a drawer a map indicating a real-estate development that bore no trace of any previous »territorial« formation, but yet somehow hinted at how the corner of a future residential block affected the area on which his shed was located. Later, pulling out a second map, he showed me that the urban development plan drawn up by the Hamburg municipality instead envisioned that place as an area for urban densification and further development of the existing housing stock. The first map he showed me was a graphic rendering of which a »territorialization« conceived ex-novo, as if nothing had existed before, showed no trace of »re-territorialization« and no evidence of any urban development that would have considered the morphological, material, cultural and social stratifications of that place.³

From that moment on, my leisurely strolls were no longer the same, they became true investigations of the blocks undergoing a schizophrenic urban transformation. I found myself increasingly entangled with the urban development unfolding around the future Diebsteich train station. Gradually, I found myself once again overwhelmed by the anguish I thought I had left behind as I distanced myself from the port. In every corner of the neighborhood, I sensed a cloud of dissent and discontent against the strategy for urban development being embarked upon by the city of Hamburg. In the following days I discovered that several artisans, freelancers, and business owners were receiving eviction notifications, while those who were more fortunate had received significant increases in their rent, even before the neighborhood was further developed, just as if it was a gentrification before the gentrification.

³ When I speak of »territorialization« and »re-territorialization« I am referring to those processes of territorial formation and transformation that take place within animals, as explained by Giorgio Agamben in the book *L'aperto: l'uomo e l'animale* (2002).

One afternoon, I joined Paula for a coffee in an unusual spot. We met up at the Buena Vista Social Club, a coffee shop located just off from the train station in Diebsteich. From the outside I could already recognize the various extensions that the original structure had undergone over the years: some temporary solutions, some more permanent ones, and others seasonal, but most of all, one could sense the intricate social connections and interactions that had developed around the place. Each person acknowledged others by name, although the owner, with his sympathies, wasn't the focal point of that network. Instead, various polarities and social intersections were discernible within the kiosk.

As I sipped my coffee, I found myself lost in thought, contemplating how the kiosk with its rooms, tables, and chairs and therefore with its *materialities*⁴ allowed the formation of different networks. In other words, the social relations that passed through the objects of that place. I realized that once the place disappeared, so too would the networks it harbored, which would slowly fade into obscurity. I realized that I had ended up with my thoughts in the *matter* composing that place, contemplating how that matter passively contributed to the formation of the neighborhood's cultural stratifications.

My attention turned back to that room, and to its owner only when he began telling me how his little bar was the neighborhood's meeting point and would be the first to be demolished, without a relocation. The future grand train station, supposedly, would have been conceived as a large non-place, a non-identity, a relational space and, above all, devoid of historical stratification (Auge/Howe 1992). He shared some briefing materials with me, which were distributed by the Hamburg municipality in 2014, and which mentioned a participatory process in the neighborhood. However, it became evident that there was very little actual participation involved.⁵ By now he was despondent and powerless and concluded with mentioning all the protests and even a film shot that told the sequence of events in Diebsteich. In short, he told me about all the efforts made in vain from 2015 to 2023.

⁴ With »materialities« I refer to the reading of the built environment of neo-materialist current. I suggest a further reading of the entry »neo/new materialism« in the encyclopedia the *Posthuman Glossary* (Braidotti/Hlavajova 2018).

⁵ Online article where the urban development is framed as participated process (Stadtportal hamburg.de 2024).

It was precisely in that spot, nestled between the old automobile workshop and the cozy small bar, that the abandoned greenhouse burst back onto the scene. Seated at a nearby table, a group of friends overheard our conversation and felt compelled to share the vicissitudes of the greenhouse, which had been a topic of neighborhood conversation for over a decade since its disuse in the 1990s. They recounted the numerous attempts made to convince the greenhouse's owner to revive it as an urban community garden, all of which were met with rejection. They pointed out that the greenhouse owner also owned the flower shop across the street and he might have discerned the potential for speculation concerning the piece of land on which the greenhouse stood, hence his refusal to grant access to the local residents.

At that moment, Paula and I looked into each other's eyes, and in her gaze, I could read that, like me, she wanted to make another attempt to persuade the greenhouse's owner. But this time, with a fresh approach. It dawned on me that we were both stepping into a new realm of relational dynamics, a bigger network than that we were already involved in. Nevertheless, we resolved to [INTERVENE], this time with a plea to spare the greenhouse from demolition. Over the following days we met the botanist (greenhouse owner) and bargained with him on the ecological issue by explaining that there was no need to demolish the greenhouse because it could be moved and reassembled in another location. Surprisingly, the botanist showed no hesitation and instead expressed his willingness to see the structure assembled elsewhere. His response caught us off guard, but we could understand the affectual value between the botanist and the abandoned greenhouse. Our proposal, which initially appeared as a seemingly insignificant gesture, turned out to be a transformative and creative act of *reterritorialization* within Diebsteich, driven by the desire to initiate a singular process of critical urban design.⁶ From that moment on, we began to take the socio-cultural issue of the neighborhood seriously, discussing a relocation that would consist of an architectural intervention. We began by shaping a *more-than-human*⁷ that considered

⁶ By »critical urban design«, I refer to interventions rooted in the theory of critical urbanism, as defined by Neil Brenner (2009) who posits that »critical urban theory« is commonly employed descriptively to delineate the contributions of leftist urban thinkers, particularly Henri Lefebvre and his intellectual successors such as David Harvey and Manuel Castells, following the events of 1968.

⁷ With »more-than-human« I refer to an act of social justice that considers the involvement of various parties in the process, rather than a transformative process that solely serves the interests of one dominant lobby.

a variety of stakeholders, humans and non-humans, in the ongoing urban transformation of Diebsteich.

It was a Saturday morning in midwinter when we found ourselves on the plot where the greenhouse stood, teetering between the legal and the illegal. The muddy ground bore the tire tracks of heavy transport vehicles. These were probably used to transport gardening materials. It had recently stopped raining or was perhaps still drizzling when we all stood in front of that disused greenhouse for the first time. On that cold Saturday morning, we stood in front of that interesting structure, like those first microorganisms which form on a corpse or decaying body were blooming. We all gathered around an improvised table, built out of artifacts found here and there, and set with a few pieces of bread, some freshly baked croissants and some jam. However, we knew already that we were about to become something different, together with that abandoned greenhouse. Six people on the first morning became ten on the second. The number of people attracted by a plea for help and good sense was growing faster than we expected.

Just two weeks earlier, two of us had sat on a couch thinking about how we could use digital platforms and social networks to our benefit. After a few proposals we decided to launch an online appeal in order to save the greenhouse, to secure an object which lacked the ability to speak and which lacked the legs that would allow it to leave that much-contested place for good. After an afternoon thinking about our first communication, we decided to post stories on our personal Instagram profiles. Not two hours had passed before some of our friends reposted the stories on their own personal profiles. Four hours later we received dozens of private messages. Although that decision was initially successful, we knew we would have to coordinate the action more effectively, so we decided to set up a Telegram channel on which we provided instructions for helpers, as well as an Instagram page where we posted our daily progress and activities. Within three days the number of participants grew exponentially from 20 to 40, from 40 to 80, and on the third day it reached 100. Within three weeks we had assembled about 350 helpers and activists willing to help rescue the greenhouse. We also organized a fundraiser. We knew we would need materials and equipment that we did not currently have. Posting our appeal on social networks, we noticed that it was no longer only people from the neighborhood who responded, but rather helpers from all parts of Hamburg. The appeal had spread so far as to reach the municipality of Altona and the municipality itself wrote to us asking for more information. They looked at us curiously and at the same

time with suspicion. It was not a conventional urban development practice, but it was simultaneously creative and inclusive. In the municipality offices they didn't really know how to react to the unusual situation. They wanted to help out in their own capacity but the regulations did not really allow for this kind of intervention carried out in those ways.

On a dark and cold January night, we sat down to organize an event to meet all the helpers and co-ordinate the process of dismantling the greenhouse (see fig.1). The following Friday afternoon, the first helpers appeared as the sun went down; many young people, older people and even some children. Potatoes were peeled, carrots were cut, and onions were fried in the pot. At the same long table someone was cutting old bread and chopping fresh herbs, like in one of those situations after a natural disaster where everyone helps each other, where social classes and the division between public and private life are suspended for an indefinite period, we put together the ingredients for a hot soup. Over the next two hours the temperature would approach zero degrees Celsius. We had arranged an event for that evening where we would show the strategic plan for dismantling and securing the greenhouse. We felt the need to convey our vision, to share how, for the next six weeks, this sort of architectural intervention would take place. It was necessary to share ideas, to discuss, to listen carefully and to experience each other's workmanship. For us, that cold evening was an attempt to weld those bonds that had brought us together. At that moment, standing in the greenhouse together, the attempt to prevent producing further waste was the invisible attractor which would allow us to carry out the unusual architectural intervention. A new community was about to emerge around the greenhouse, individuals bound together by common sense and composed of human and non-human actors in a complex set of bonds. We plotted together and planned to disassemble and then reassemble the greenhouse in another place, filling it with new meaning and new life, together with the people who would make that architectural intervention possible.

Just like that mastodontic building of some 7,600 tons in the city of Alba Iulia, Romania. In this case the building seemed to come to life, moving and giving way to a boulevard. I once read about this curious case of performative architectural intervention, a major intervention carried out in the late 1980s and concerning a social-housing building that was moved away. »During the Communist Era in Romania, massive Soviet-style social housing buildings were built everywhere in cities« (Rare Historical Photos 2022). In the specific



1.

Self-made flyer for the first public event. © Flavio Mancuso (2023).

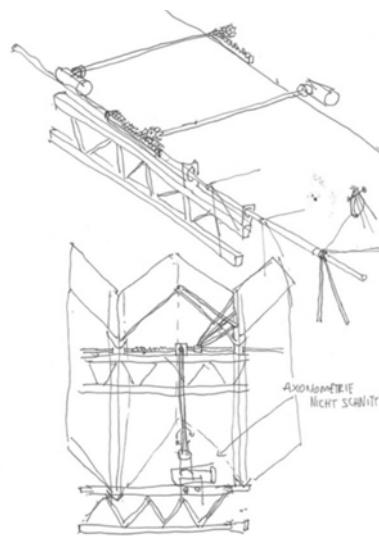
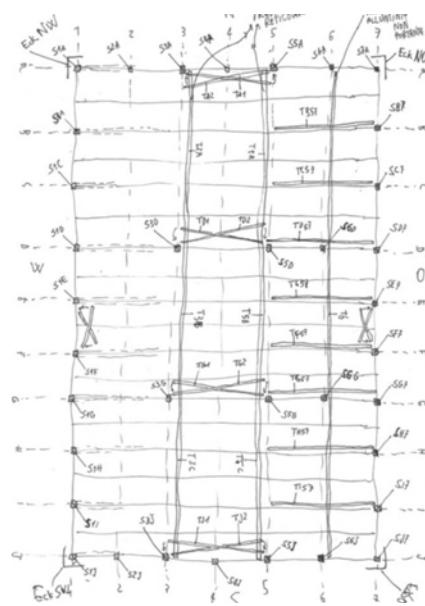
case of Alba Julia, however, one of those social-housing blocks stood right in the path of a future majestic boulevard.

In many European cities during the modernist era, many buildings that suddenly found themselves in the path of major thoroughfares and boulevards were marked for demolition. In Romania, however, particularly in that city, people thought of a different solution. They split the building in half, moved one part across the road using railway tracks and wheels and repositioned it 55 meters away at a 33 degree angle, all within 5 hours and 40 minutes, with residents still inside. Remarkably, one woman's glass of water on her balcony didn't spill a drop.

Unfortunately, there is no further information on the Alba Julia case, nor are there any documents on municipal procedures and the discussions held in municipal offices. Although initially presented as a major construction engineering project, this case informs us of how, whether intentionally or not, the cultural and social stratifications of the place, as well as the interests of the building's inhabitants were taken seriously.

Similarly, the Botanica Urbana project, and therefore the architectural intervention, was about to take on a performative character. The intervention was conceived of through the interaction between the place and the multiplicity of subjects, as well as a series of different tools and machines. It was not conceived on the Cartesian plane but rather as a process of transforming a place in its dynamic act. More precisely, the intervention consisted of the unfolding of a performative act and its incorporation into a situated (here-and-now) body of knowledge; a unique body of knowledge because it belonged to that specific place and to those subjects intervening in that place at that moment.

Furthermore, the architectural intervention consisted of understanding hitherto unknown building systems (see fig. 2), disassembling them into individual components, which would thereafter be cataloged (see fig. 3), and stored. It consisted of understanding the dynamics of that unknown place, the actors who would intervene in that network-in-formation, as well as from where to get the necessary resources for carrying that intervention. As the days passed, scaffolding was built to access the roof, arrangements were made to pack, secure, and transport the components. Just a few days before, some of the local businesses had made various raw materials and equipment available to us. On the building site, different groups were formed to perform different tasks. As the shifts went on, volunteers would pass the knowledge they had gained on to the next helper, the next person



DACHFENSTER. SYSTEM

2.

Sketch of the greenhouse systems. © Flavio Mancuso (2023).

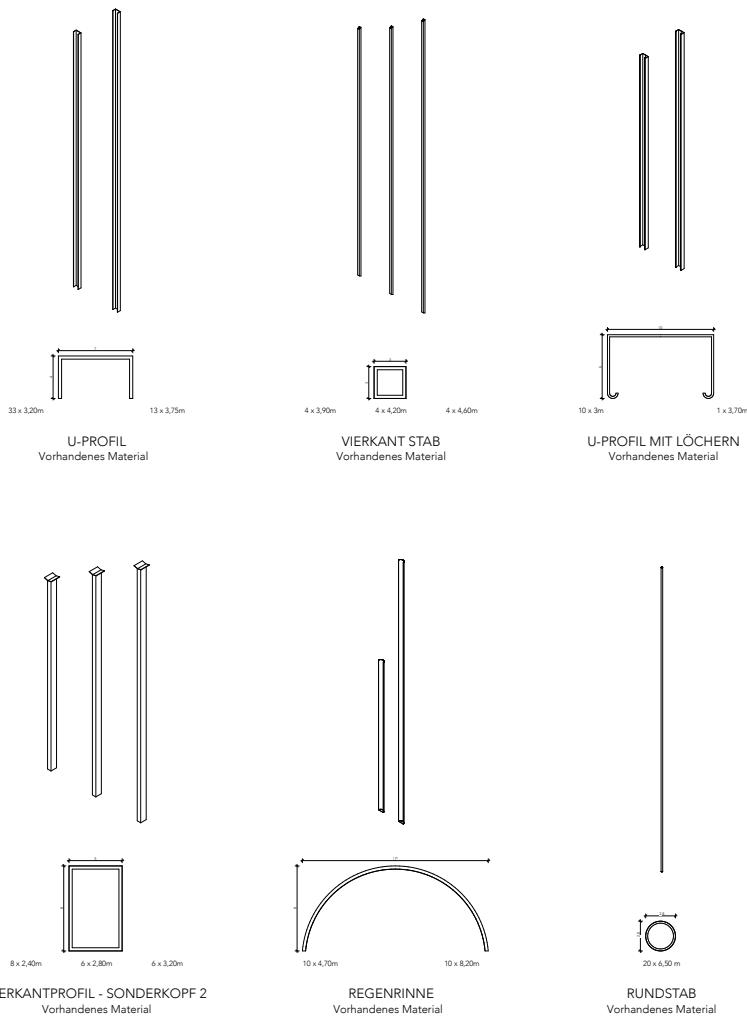
who would arrive. We had planned two shifts, morning and afternoon, for the duration of the whole disassembling phase. For six weeks we witnessed the emergence of an autonomous *assemblage*, composed of a multitude of subjects blended with metal components and glass panels. The building site was sometimes filled with about 40 subjects, with shifts organized on social networks. Digital polls (carried out via *Telegram*) were used to coordinate that ongoing reality, which would then vanish when the last component was transported and would reappear together when the greenhouse was assembled in another place.

Theoretical Reflection behind the Architectural Intervention

This article has been partly written in the first person, as a reflective exercise, to narrate the multiple relations between human and non-human actors that belong to the architectural intervention itself. The project falls among the spatial practices of critical urbanism and is rooted in the theoretical framework established by scholars from the Frankfurt School, notably Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse (McFarlane 2011: 205). In unfolding, it adopts an antagonistic stance toward space production driven by capitalist practices (Harvey 1985; 2014). This contribution delineates four essential steps and necessitates clarification in chronological order: the entanglements, the emergence of a new community as a metaphor for the formation of the assemblage, the territorialization and re-territorialization, and the architectural intervention framed as a neo-materialist performative practice.

Throughout the narrative, there are several references to the term »entanglements«, pointing out how our actions are intricately linked with spatial transformations at the micro as well as the macro scale (Latour 2018). Throughout the text, »entanglements« become key to understanding the built environment, as well as the social stratifications of the neighborhood by means of the »actor-network theory« (ANT) developed by scholars such as Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, John Law, and their followers (Brenner/Madden/Wachsmuth 2011). Likewise, the architectural intervention itself is to be interpreted through ANT and the evolving relationships *between* human and non-human actors within the network that emerge during the stages of approaching and dismantling the greenhouse.

At a certain point in the contribution, however, I shift from talking about entanglements and begin referring to »the emergence of a new community«,



3.

Excerpt from the building catalog with redrawn greenhouse components.

© Thomas Schäctel (2023).

which serves as a metaphor for formation of an *assemblage*. This is a term which is then made explicit as the network of actants becomes the means for a real political act, in which local residents feel actively involved in the urban transformation of the neighborhood, to unfold. The process of dismantling the abandoned greenhouse, guided by common sense and a clear common aim, becomes a site-specific *performative spatial transformation* – made possible through the emergence of an *assemblage*, specifically as a multitude of human and non-human actors whose actions during the performance serve as a transformative intervention. The *assemblage* has to be read within this specific intervention as an »open-ended« network of human and non-human actants immanent to the architectural intervention. The key point of such gatherings is not the topographical relation of bodies in spacetime (grouping), but »what they can do together« (Deleuze 1987). Furthermore, the *assemblage* must not be understood exclusively through their human and non-human actants, but also through the »events« or »happenings« (Tsing 2015: 23) coordinated through the constant exchange of messages on social networks. Relevant, through the succession of such »events«, is the body of autonomous knowledge, necessary for the dismantling of the greenhouse, that was gradually being built, together with the emerging *assemblage*.

Other fundamental aspects of this architectural intervention are the processes of *territorialization* and *re-territorialization*, understood as continuous processes of material world-making. Within the narrative, these processes embody the materialization of a network, in which its actants, through their constant engagement with the greenhouse, contribute to the spatial transformation and therefore the *re-territorialization* itself. In other words, a genuine social *sympoiesis* emerges among the multitude of human bodies that enable the creation of a new territory. Drawing on Donna Haraway's concept of *sympoiesis* (the breeding process between cells and microorganisms), I endeavor to construct a more-than-human understanding of the architectural intervention, its process of *re-territorialization*, and therefore move beyond the classical way of thinking:



4.

Dismantling process. © Flavio Mancuso (2023).

»Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means ›making-with‹. Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing [...]. Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company« (Haraway 2016: 58).

The *re-territorialization* in the case of the project Botanica Urbana occurs through the becoming territory of all human actors involved in the performative spatial transformation. In the narrative, explicit reference is made to this condition in the passage that reads: »we stood in front of that interesting structure; like those first microorganisms which begin to form on a corpse or decaying body were blooming [...]. However, we knew already that we were about to become something different, together with that abandoned greenhouse«.

Finally, it is necessary to explain the manner in which the architectural intervention is carried out and how it is understood as a neo-materialist practice: [intervening] as a dynamic act in its becoming, that does not come from standing at a distance but rather from a direct material engagement with the real world (Barad 2007). I firmly believe that we are in a moment in which architecture has the opportunity to explore its *diffractive* potential, to incorporate *differences* and the plurality of methods for intervention.

However, reflecting on the etymology of the verb »intervene« helps me to categorize the project Botanica Urbana as a neo-materialist spatial practice within its specific context. The verb [intervene] means to intentionally become involved in a difficult situation in order to improve it or prevent it from getting worse. The etymology of the verb [intervene] comes from the latin [interveniō]; inter- (»between«) + veniō (»come«) in English it might be seen as »come-between«. With its embedded dynamism, this verb could allow us to move toward to the concept of transformative spatial practices. According to Karen Barad's notion of performativity within scientific practice:

»A performative understanding [...] takes account of the fact that knowing does not come from standing at a distance and representing but rather from a direct material engagement with the world« (Barad 2007: 49).

Interacting and intervening in physical space and critical contexts opens up possibilities for a radical practice of experimentation (see fig. 4). Furthermore, it opens the way to possible futures, which without a physical interaction in space would be difficult to imagine. In her writing and experiments on quantum physics, Karen Barad explains:

»reflection is insufficient; intervention is key: ›Don't just peer, interfere.‹ According to Hacking, our ability to effectively intervene provides the strongest case for realism [...] in his account, intervening (i.e., experimenting) rather than representing (i.e., theorizing) is the basis for realism« (Barad 2007: 50).

Barad elaborates upon Hacking's critique of representationalism in the theory for agential realism within the field of quantum physics research:

»experimenting and theorizing are dynamic practices that play a constitutive role in the production of objects and subjects and matter and meaning. [...] theorizing and experimenting are not about intervening (from outside) but about intra-acting from within, and as part of, the phenomena produced« (ibid.).

For Barad, knowing, thinking, measuring, theorizing, and observing are material practices of intra-acting within and as part of the world.

The project Botanica Urbana, its materialities and its way of becoming architecture, can be seen as a more-than-human architectural intervention, in which creative strategies, new technologies, social networks and human and non-human actors are closely welded to the ground within the place in which they intervene. Such a performative spatial transformation like the project Botanica Urbana means talking about truly inclusive design in this daunting moment called the Anthropocene.

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