

## TOWARD NEW EPISTEMOLOGIES

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This section confronts architecture with reflections on some of its basic principles and long-held convictions, thus challenging the self-concept of the discipline and the practice alike. The contributions advocate for a different conception of architecture. Instead of viewing its task as the production of discrete designs, architecture's contribution should be recognized as a crucial element in the ongoing production of social, political, and environmental relationships.



# An Enactive Approach to Architecture as Intervention

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**Abstract:** Drawing on phenomenology and the enactive approach to cognition, this article drafts the foundations of an approach to a concept of collectivity that I call the »common self« and the »sense« that this form of togetherness enacts. This theoretical framework allows me to answer the following questions in a new light: What does architecture intervene in? Who intervenes? What is the purpose of intervention? In the final section I outline some new »aesthetic practices of reflective co-involvement« and their relation to the concepts mentioned above.

**Keywords:** Transformative Intervention; Common Self; Emergence of Sense; Co-Involvement; Aesthetic Practices.

## Introduction

This article drafts the foundations of an approach to a concept of collectivity that I call the »common self«. Drawing on phenomenology and the enactive approach to cognition, I aim to disclose a framework within which the individual and the common unfold forms of viable coexistence through mutual determination. I understand this framework as a fundamental contribution to the most relevant and all-embracing contemporary question: How will we live together? More specifically: What does architecture intervene in? Who intervenes? What is the purpose of intervention?

The sole aim of this article is to propose a conceptual and theoretical perspective for the practice of architecture understood as intervention. At this stage, to refer to any concrete architectural case and its specific social, political, and economic conditions would be inadequate.

This article is structured in three sections. In the first, I briefly outline the concept of architecture that I take as a necessary condition for the conceptual development proposed. On this basis I answer the first question – what does architecture intervene in? – through an interpretation of the enactive concept of »sense«. In the second, I elaborate on this answer by addressing the concepts of »common self« and the »sense of common self«, and I provide answers to the second question – who intervenes? In the final section I briefly describe the functions of certain aesthetic practices as the ultimate step in addressing the third posited question – what is the purpose of intervention?

This article has been conceived on the basis of insights enabled through research practices that combine and hybridize aesthetic and phenomenological procedures (Arteaga et al. 2022). In this sense the article has been written at the intersection of two aesthetic research projects: *Architecture of Embodiment* and *The Sense of Common Self*. My use of the term »aesthetic practices« does not refer to philosophical practices in the field of aesthetics, but to practices not restricted to the medium of language that systematize actions I denominate »aesthetic actions« (Arteaga 2017a, 2017b, 2020).

## What Does Architecture Intervene in?

The ideas that will be explored in this article take as a point of departure the definition of architecture as *intervention*. Intervention is thus not understood here as a function but as a constitutive feature of architecture. To define

architecture as intervention orients the practices through which architecture is realized toward an exteriority, that is, toward a sphere which exceeds and encompasses architecture. This is the sphere into which architecture »comes in between« – *inter* (between), *venire* (to come). The centrifugal position contrasts with an understanding of architecture as *object design*. Although the design of an object is necessarily inscribed in a field that transcends the object itself and defines its function and significance, once these aspects are clarified the performance of architectural practices concentrates on the conception of the object and the means and procedures of its production. In this case the architectural practices are performed in a *centripetal* way.

Although these two positions are outlined here as being categorically different, they can be conceived as having a complementary relationship. Architectural objects can be designed in order to realize interventions. Nevertheless, architectural interventions can be carried out without designing architectural objects. This implies the possibility of understanding architecture aside from the design paradigm and therefore, aside from a *problem-solving* way of thinking. In this sense, I understand architecture as a field of heterogeneous practices conceived and performed in different media with a constructive horizon and the aim of *transforming through intervention*. To define transformation as the general goal of architecture as intervention reinforces the opposition of this concept of architecture to the notion of architecture as *object design*, whose teleological structure is determined by the resolution of a problem. In contrast to the objectivation of two static states – problem versus non-problem – transformation requires the perception and conception of the instance in which to intervene as a *process*.

On this basis I will now address the question posed: What does architecture intervene in? The first and apparently obvious answer would refer to the geographical and material surroundings that constitute the spatial focus for the performance of architectural practices. Architectural practices are *situated* in a two-fold sense. They are performed *on* specific surroundings and *in relation to* specific surroundings. The onto-epistemic position that the architectural practitioner adopts in relation to these surroundings determines a second fundamental bifurcation. On the one hand, surroundings can be addressed within the *realistic-representationalist* paradigm. According to this position, surroundings are material and energetic facts that exist in themselves, independently of the actions of those who inhabit, observe, and work in and with them. Surroundings are, in this case, *mind-independent*. On this basis, practitioners are categorically differentiated from their

surroundings, and the epistemic relationships that practitioners establish with them are based on operations of *representations*. There is no primary continuity between practitioners and surroundings, but a relationship that is established by apprehension through representation, and by formation through intervention. Within this paradigm the answer to the question of what architecture intervenes in is initially clear: A specific topological delimitation of a reality that exists in itself – a piece of reality one can point to by saying »out there«.

On the other hand, the answer to the question of what architecture intervenes in changes radically when formulated phenomenologically. The surroundings appear to be given, that is, to simply be there as affirmed in the realist-representationalist paradigm, but this givenness, observed and reflected through phenomenological research practices (van Manen 2016; Zahavi 2019; Gallagher/Zahavi 2020; Gallagher 2022) reveals itself as the appearance resulting from an encounter between what is there and a subjectivity that operates first and foremost in a pre-thematic, pre-reflexive, and pre-linguistic way. Accordingly, the immediate and unmediated given surroundings, that is, the most primary appearance of an *environment*, of a place (Norberg-Schulz 1979; Casey 1997; Malpas 1999), »the intuitive surrounding world of life, pre-given as existing for all in common« (Husserl 1970: 142), is the result of a process of *co-constitution* involving the appearing environment and the subjectivities that *become aware* (Depraz et al. 2003) of it. A subjectivity that fundamentally performs its *intentionality* (Moran 2018) – its inherent tendency to refer to what subjectivity is not – in an *operative way*. »Operative intentionality« is

»a practical directedness toward the world that is not necessarily present to reflective consciousness, but is instead made manifest in the daily operations of a person's life [...]; [It is] the structure through which a graspable and sensible world first emerges out of the ambiguity of experience, it is the mechanism that furnishes experience with its most original meaning« (McWeeny 2019, 255).

Yet this meaning remains implicit until it is disclosed, for example, through *phenomenological reduction*. Accordingly, operative intentionality allows a subjectivity to tend to its surroundings in a way that reveals the fundamental *continuity* between both by enabling the appearance of the surroundings as a world which »is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of

its making [but] the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions« (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xi–xii). Through the performance of operative intentionality, the subject cognizes in an immediate, unmediated, sensuous, and pre-thematic way simultaneously the world and itself as intimately being-in-the world or, more radically, being-world. Therefore, by adopting a phenomenological perspective, the answer to the question of what architecture intervenes in cannot be expressed by pointing to an objectified piece of reality that exists independently of the intentional acts of those to whom it appears. Instead, what architecture intervenes in is revealed by engaging in a constant reflection that discloses how reality appears in mutual determination with the subjectivities that co-enable its emergence.

The enactive approach to cognition (Varela et al. 1991) provides a model for understanding both the continuity between subjectivities and worlds and the processes in which worlds and subjectivities appear. The distinction between a living being and its surroundings is understood in this approach as being originated by a specific form of *organization*. The living system is substantially identical to its surroundings but differs in its internal organization. This form of organization – called »autopoiesis« – enables a living system to transform its surroundings into its environment or, in other words, to transform »the environment of the living system« into »the environment for the system« (Varela 1991: 85). Varela explains the origin of this transformation as follows: »the autopoietic unit *creates a perspective* from which the exterior is one, which cannot be confused with the physical surroundings as they appear to us observers« (ibid.). The transformation of surroundings into worlds implies the simultaneous transformation of the living unit into a subject, that is, the embodiment of processes of subjectivity. In enactivist terms, worlds and subjectivities arise in *mutual determination*, or, more specifically, they *co-emerge* out of the particular way in which autopoietic units and surroundings interact. In this framework it is possible to posit that an intervention enables other interventions: An intervention in the organization of matter – an intervention not attributable to any specific agent but to the spontaneous dynamics of matter itself – enables a transformative intervention in the topological surroundings of the autopoietically organized matter. »Transformative intervention« can thus be understood as constitutive of the dynamics of life, and in enactivist terms, as a process of »sense-making« – of making sense of surroundings and living systems as worlds and selves respectively.

Accordingly, a crucial concept in the enactive approach to cognition is »sense«. Evan Thompson points to the centrality of this concept in expressing the constitutive connection between »autonomy« (and the resulting »identity«), »sense«, and »world«: »Life is [...] a self-affirming process that brings forth or enacts its own identity and makes sense of the world from the perspective of that identity« (Thompson 2007: 157). Nevertheless – so far as I know – no explicit definition of the concept of sense can be found in the enactivist literature. As an initial attempt to outline the enactivist meaning of the term »sense«, I propose the following formulation: *Sense is the operative presence of the viability of the living units' actions*. Let me try to clarify this definition. Living beings are not foreigners in the world. They develop not so much *in* the world but *with* the world. They co-emerge with the world that they inhabit and that, accordingly, is co-constituted by and co-constitutive of their process of inhabitation. Worlds and subjectivities are not independent entities extrinsic to one another, but inseparable phenomena that emerge in and by virtue of a radical *mutual dependency*. For this reason, the living being's actions are originated and performed as oriented, certain, and self-assured enough to maintain their flow. They seem *able to be continued* as long as the living unit exists as such, or, in enactivist terms, as long as it maintains its *identity*, that is, the operative presence of itself, for itself, as itself. Thus, its actions appear as *viable*, that is, as *making sense* in its temporal continuity and in continuity with the actions of others and with the world that they all share. Nevertheless, the appearance of viability is not explicit but inherent in the actions themselves. It is *operative*: It in-forms the living being's actions *from within*, that is, from the inner dynamics of their generation and performance.

The actions of living beings always result from the coalescence of a mesh-work of contingent agencies found on both sides of the topological delimitation of the living unit. Therefore, every action is *collective*, meaning it is carried out by the living unit to whom the action's authorship is exclusively attributed, by other living and non-living units within its existential domain and by the lifeworld that they share. The dynamic and relational structure of the living being's *being-with-the-world* appears to be *senseful* to all implied agents and therefore endowed with the inherent possibility of continuing. It appears to be *viable*. Accordingly, I posit that sense is the continuously emerging operative presence of the quality of viability of intertwined actions performed by interconnected human and non-human agents, originated by

the dynamics of life – life being radically, intrinsically, and ineluctably a *life in common*.

This concept of sense provides the basis to formulate my answer to the question of what architecture intervenes in. I postulate that architecture intervenes in the continuous *emergence of sense*, of which architecture is a constitutive agent. This being the case, the previously formulated outline of the concept of architecture can be specified further: Architectural practices are systemic settings of intentional acts that intend to influence the emergence of sense within which the practices themselves *take place*, thus co-enabling the emergence of *new trajectories of sense*.

## Who Intervenes?

In this section, I draft my incipient ideas about two concepts I am devising: the »common self« and the »sense« of common self. I do so to provide answers to the question that titles this section.

Basically, the concept of »common self« delineates a variety of the coexistence of individuals. Accordingly, the point of departure – the individual self – is the essence of the perspective – individualism – that the concept of common self needs to override in order to be defined and aims to override through its definition and practical realization. To countermand individualism in this case does not mean eradicating the concept of the individual by substituting it with a concept of the collective. Instead, I propose to redefine the concept of individuality through its organic integration into a higher-level organization. Accordingly, I do not intend to dissolve the individuality of the practitioner architect, but rather to propose that potentially all agents involved in an architectural endeavor can relate to one another in such a way that enables the emergence of a *common perspective* enacted by the common self they may enable.

I understand the common self as an *autonomous system*. Francisco Varela defined the constitutive traits of an autonomous system as follows:

»In an autonomous system, the constituent processes (i) recursively depend on each other for their generation and their realization as a network, (ii) constitute the system as a unity in whatever domain it exists, and (iii) determine a domain of possible interactions with the environment« (Varela 1979: 55).

Whereas the way an individual body realizes these principles has been exhaustively described through the theory of autopoiesis, the question to be addressed here is this: How does a common self realize these principles?

The components of a common self are human and non-human living units. Non-living entities, such as the materiality of a terrain, can be involved in the dynamics of a common self, not as constitutive components of the system but as elements of its environment. In the case of the common self, the »constituent processes« are in principle the actions performed by each individual system. Nevertheless, this is the point where the individualistic paradigm can begin to be dismantled. According to this paradigm, individuals have their own singular and independent behavior. One condition of possibility for the conceptual and practical realization of the common self is the idea that the situation *with* which any individual action occurs co-determines the origin and course of the action. Thus, in a strict sense, there are no individual actions. Each action is not only embodied but also *situated*. The situation is not a mere stage on which the individual plays but an inalienable enabling condition for its acting. The concept of a common self as an autonomous system constituted by individual systems draws on this idea and affirms that the actions of individuals within the system are »the constituent processes« of the common self and therefore »recursively depend on each other for their generation« as Varela proposed.

In the groundbreaking paper »Participatory Sense-making: An Enactive Approach to Social Cognition« (De Jaegher/Di Paolo 2007), the authors demonstrated that *interaction* conditions individual actions. Furthermore, building on the phenomenon of »coordination between coupled systems« they regard interactions as »processes extended in time with a rich structure that is only apparent at the relational level of collective dynamics« (ibid. 490). Observing the coordination emerging from interactive processes it can be seen that the origin of a variety of *interdependency* (Garcés 2022: especially 16 and 42) can be expressed in terms of *mutual conditioning between systems*: The actions of individuals are conditioned by their interaction, whereas the specific »patterns of coordination« (De Jaegher/Di Paolo 2007: 492) emerging through interaction are conditioned by the individual actions. Furthermore, this variety of interdependency can be described in enactivist terms of *co-emergence*: The specific way in which the particular actions of individual selves interrelate enables the emergence of a new phenomenon – *coordination* within interaction – whose arising conditions the actions that enable its emergence. The constituent processes of both the individuals that compose

the common self and the common self that arises through their interaction co-emerge. This abstract formulation can be found in innumerable concrete cases: A child does not perform the action of talking in the same way in conversation with her parents, her teacher, or her classmates; an athlete does not run in the same way when she runs alone, with other athletes, or in a football game. Similarly, an architect who understands her practice not as the design of objects but as intervention in a co-emerging environment does not practice in the same way when she works with a single client, when she builds in northern Germany or South Africa, or when she is commissioned by a big investor or engaged in a joint building venture. In all these examples, continuity and difference can be asserted. The child, the athlete, and the architect maintain certain characteristics of their way of talking, running, or designing throughout the different interactions, and they vary them adaptively within each situation. Individual and collective systems *coexist* according to a logic of co-emergence. In most of these cases interaction is not necessarily achieved through a *contract*, that is, through an agreement between units that connects them without inducing the emergence of a new system, and therefore without altering but rather reinforcing their independent singularity (Garcés 2022: especially 33–45). Furthermore, the connection between individuals is *not constructed* through the conscious and deliberated actions of individual selves. These forms of interaction might *emerge* through *immediate and unmediated contact* between individuals and might be maintained through the *contingent agencies* of individual actions actualized as *coordinated interaction*.

If interaction is then triggered and maintained by an intention, that is, with a purpose, this intention should be performed *operatively*, that is, *without a purpose* (Arteaga 2014). The common self that emerges out of spontaneous forms of interaction is not »an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making« (Merleau-Ponty 1962: xii). A group of individuals cannot produce it intentionally, that is, on purpose, mobilizing an *object-oriented* intentionality. If they intend to establish a common self, they will have to *suspend* their intention in order for the common self to emerge. This does not mean that they should stop acting and become passive. On the contrary, the individual selves should begin to act in such a way that facilitates the inherent dynamics of a coordinated interaction to co-determine the processes enabled by the autonomy of their own selves. This occurs, for example, when a speaker stops delivering a speech in order to become an *inter-locutor*, that is, someone whose speaking is *interdependent* with the words

and gestures of other interlocutors engaged in a dialogue. In this example the intention to say something can be maintained but must be performed in such a way that it is said in interdependence with interlocutors. Thus, the common self implies the subtle, implicit transformation of a local, delimited *world* – emerging through the dialogue and the situation with(in) which it takes place – into a *self* – emerging through the operative interweaving of individuals' actions. The emergence of a common self implies the *autonomization* [German: *Verselbstständigung*] of a world, that is, becoming autonomous and therefore a self of the world of the interacting individual selves.

This being the case, a common self preserves some fundamental characteristics of a world as outlined by Merleau-Ponty. One of these basal features is »anonymity« (Garcés 2022: 22, 90, 136–137, 151–152, 157–174). According to the principles of an autonomous system, the system's constituent processes »constitute the system as a unity in whatever domain it exists«. The emergence of an autonomous system implies the arising of a self-standing unit endowed with operational closure, that is, the constitution of a *self*, and therefore of an *identity*. It is important to emphasize that this identity emerges spontaneously and only by virtue of the unfolding of the system's performances. It is neither a constructed nor a superimposed identity. It is not a contraposition to, negation of, or delimitation from other identities. Furthermore, the identity of a common self – attending to its hybrid status of self-as-world – remains subtle, implicit, and thus non-objectivized. The presence of the common self's identity is *operative*. The common self is not an object that can be delimited, identified, pointed to, and named. It is *anonymous* and *aniconic*: It eludes representation in linguistic or visual media and thus any sign-based expression. It is pre- and proto-phenomenal: It can be *sensed*, intuitively realized, but neither perceived nor addressed discursively. It is present on a sensorimotor and in an emotional dimension. It appears and unfolds *aesthetically* (Arteaga 2017a, 2017b, 2020, 2023).

The common self finds one of the sources for its emergence and maintenance in a twofold manifestation of absence on the level of the involved individual selves: their *finiteness* and *unfinishedness* (Garcés 2022: 39, 116–117, and 168). These complementary features of singular autonomous systems may reinforce their presence and increase their agentiality through interaction. Individual selves are limited, that is, constrained by the actual embodiment of their form of organization. At the same time, they are aware, at least to a certain extent, of the potentialities beyond their multi-dimensional boundaries and of the possibility to overcome them, at least partially. The tension

between these two poles – finiteness as constraint and unfinishedness as the potentiality of its release – informs and maintains the interaction of individuals without destabilizing and threatening their identities. Accordingly, the emergence and the maintenance of a common self depends on the positive feedback between the dynamics of the coexistent autonomous system and the capacity of the common to partially overcome the finiteness of individuals, and therefore to displace the horizon of their unfinishedness.

This dynamic balance between coexisting selves – individual and common – adds to the constitutive *precariousness* (De Jaegher/Di Paolo 2007: 487) of any autonomous system and brings forth a continuous state of *fragility* and *vulnerability*, which manifests more clearly and persistently on the level of the common self. The common self is highly fragile and vulnerable because it pivots on a successful performance of the interaction between individuals, that is, on the interaction becoming a framework for a dynamic that sense-makes with and for them. Another factor of fragility and vulnerability of the common self consists in a lack of protection that implies the absence of an objectified set of rules or some form of reification – such as the formulation of an explicit identity. In this sense, the fragility and vulnerability of the common self resembles the genuine fragility and vulnerability of the organized organic matter – partially neutralized by the spontaneous generation of resilient bodies endowed with protecting boundaries – and more evidently of the worlds that the organic selves enact. A third factor that contributes to reinforcing these qualities on the level of the common self is the partial and temporary slackening of certain self-protecting mechanisms of the individual selves. This reduction is necessary to achieve a degree of co-involvement and interdependency through interaction, but this implies that the individual selves expose themselves to the dynamics of a coordinated interaction that they cannot control as the precondition for a common self to emerge. Consequently, the common self structurally embeds the vulnerability of its enabling conditions.

In summary, a common self is an autonomous system whose constituent processes are the patterns of coordination inherent in an interaction between individual human and non-human selves. Accordingly, the common and the individual selves that enable it through their dynamic interdependency establish a relationship of co-emergence. Due to this structure, the form of presence of a common self holds characteristics of an emergent world so that its identity eludes a sign-based expression: It is operative, anonymous, and aniconic, highly fragile and vulnerable.

On this basis, the third condition for a system to be autonomous, and thereby the main question of this section, – who intervenes? – can be addressed. The constituent processes of an autonomous system »determine a domain of possible interactions with the environment«. An autonomous system enacts its own domain of significances. The autonomous unit *makes sense* of its surroundings, or, to be more precise, enables the emergence of sense through its interaction with its surroundings. From the point of view of the autonomous system, this process can be described as the development of the system's own *perspective*. I propose that the common self, due to the interdependent coexistence of individual selves that maintain their own autonomy – and therefore their own perspectives – enacts a *first-person-plural perspective*. The emerging collective self-enacts its own sense: The *sense of the common self*. The world emerging from the interaction between the common self and its surroundings responds neither mainly nor exclusively to the dynamics of the individual selves, which can originate a first-, second-, or third-person-*singular* perspective. Beyond these individual varieties, the common self brings forth *one* unique and radically new perspective. The common self, being one autonomous system, enacts neither multiple perspectives nor a simple addition of single perspectives but one singular perspective that expresses its collective origin. The capacity of the common self to bring forth this perspective endows it with an *agency of radical transformation*. Radical, because this agency is located in the primary source of the world to be transformed: The *operatively sensed sense*. On this basis, as an answer to the question posed: A common self is the agent that intervenes; it intervenes in the process of emergence of sense that itself co-enables – the sense of common self and it intervenes from the perspective that it itself enacts.

### **Aesthetic Practices and the Purpose of Intervention**

A specific variety of aesthetic practices that I am conceiving and practicing can accomplish a twofold function in relation to the emergence of common selves and the realization of the architectural interventions they might conduct. I call this variety *aesthetic practices of reflective co-involvement*. These practices should be able to neutralize forms of action conceived and performed within the individualistic paradigm (Garcés 2022: 85, 124). A detailed description would exceed the scope of this article. Nevertheless, I would like to provide a glimpse into their foundations and functions. Their first function consists of facilitating the necessary degree of co-involvement

or interdependence of the individual selves in their interaction to allow a common self to emerge. To this end, aesthetic practices of reflexive co-involvement aim to induce a change in the dynamic disposition of the practicing bodies so that their sensorimotor and emotional skills are intensified, while skills supporting will-based, target-oriented, and language-based processes of logical construction relying on previously generated knowledge are temporarily neutralized. Consequently, the individual selves are increasingly able to act in a non-self-centered field of non-hierarchically distributed agencies. Acting in this way – *acting aesthetically* – the individual self can engage spontaneously with the dynamics of interaction without feeling the need to protect its own identity, and therefore facilitate the emergence and maintenance of patterns of coordination that enable a common self. At the same time, acting aesthetically allows the individual selves to expand their sensuous awareness and to become increasingly able to *operatively sense* and thereby *reflect the sense* that the common self they enable enacts. To become reflexively aware of the sense of the common self is the second function that these practices can fulfill.

Knowing now what might be the genesis and structure of a common self, the instance in which it may intervene, and the way in which the co-involved individual selves may act in order to enable its emergence and become aware of the sense it enacts, a final question can be formulated: What might be a purpose of the interventions carried out by common selves? At this stage only a generic and succinct answer can be provided. I propose that the purpose of architectural interventions realized by common selves is to *disclose new intelligibilities* (Arteaga 2020) toward a *sustainable life in common*. This means that architectural interventions realized by common selves might aim to contribute to the emergence of new and alternative *trajectories of sense* that would sediment in new and viable visions and meanings of the environment, of its inhabitants, of the ways of inhabiting it, and of the practices needed to do so. I therefore believe that framing the practice of architecture through the approach provided in this article – a radically embodied and situated approach – may contribute to realizing the fundamental transformations needed to provide operative answers to that most acute question: How will we live together?

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