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Modern Architecture
as Inextensible
An Actor-Network Theory
Account of Contested Design

1966

1982-1989

2001-2004

2005-2006

I will begin with this provocative, and quite unusual image, of an iconic building that we all know – the Eiffel Tower. Some of you might have heard about the media debates surrounding the "new design for the restructuring of the public spaces of the Eiffel Tower" announced by the French architect David Serero in March 2008. He suggested doubling the size of the tower's highest observational platform. The architect claimed that "his firm's proposal was accepted after an open call, and that the structure is expected to be assembled for the 120th anniversary of the tower construction." But shortly after that, the government-contracted firm that manages the tower – *la Société d'Exploitation de la Tour Eiffel* – stated that the claims of the architect are a "hoax." The communication chief denied that there was ever any call for architects regarding plans to redevelop the top of the monument and that Serero Architects never presented themselves as candidates for such a competition. The media outlets that ran with the story included: *The Guardian, The New York Times, Architect, Bustler, The Daily Telegraph* and *Belfast Telegraph*.

In an interview with me in May 2008, Serero argued: I wanted to do with the Eiffel tower, what Christo did with Pont Neuf some years ago (Yaneva, 2008, May 30). Commenting on this media controversy, he argued: "We had no idea that our project would create such an excitement and will provoke reactions from Parisians and people around the world... Most of the people in Paris ignore the tower. They don't look at it and often cannot really notice it as the city fabric is very dense... It is just a strategy to give attention to this monument" (Yaneva, 2008, May 30).

The suggested alteration of a building with such historical and cultural importance for Parisians provoked a lot of reactions indeed, and provoked a huge amount of criticism within the architectural community and the journalist community, among Parisians and visitors to Paris. Many architectural blogs discussed the suggested extension, journalists wrote numerous articles, and those who were impatient to break the story were later accused of failing to verify the facts. We cannot say if there was a competition or not (or if Serero is simply a PR genius); we cannot say who is telling the truth – is it architect Serero or the La Tour Eiffel society. But the fact is that a lot of groups felt *concerned* by the tower alteration and expressed their reactions as they began gathering on internet blogs and on the pages of various newspapers expressing agreement or disagreement. Whatever the accuracy of the story, it had a positive impact, because it made us rethink the importance of the Tower for Parisians, it made us go back to Gustave Eiffel's biography and revisit the history of the Tower's construction and in particular the controversy surrounding its design in 1889; it made us realize how many actors are involved in its maintenance today; it challenged impact of this building. As a result of the controversy the tower gained new allies and critics.

My interest in architectural controversies began earlier, and more precisely in 2001 when I started working at the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), headed by Rem Koolhaas, in Rotterdam as an anthropologist/sociologist coming from Bruno Latour's school. Rem guided me in the office and the first thing he showed to me was the Whitney table: "This is the project of the extension of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York... this is a table of democracy," said Rem. That was the most important project for him at the time, as he was dreaming to build in "delirious" New York. Later, I found out that the table of models contained not only scenarios for the future development of the building but also bits of history and traces of past controversies surrounding the building. I was eventually to spend two years "living" in this office just like the anthropologist Malinowski spent years on the Trobriand islands, studying the cultural and the specific rituals of an unknown tribe.

The Practice of Koolhaas: the method of observation

On my first day at OMA, I discussed my project with Rem Koolhaas, and he said: *"Tu veux* être *la 'femme invisible'* à OMA? How would you like to observe us? Would you need a room full of cameras to do so?" I was embarrassed, because he tried to translate immediately my intention to do an observation of their everyday practices into architectural terms. He tried to 'architecture' my presence at OMA. Of course it was a joke, a Foucauldian if you wish, because I imagined, just for a second, the panoptical horror of sitting in an office full of monitors overseeing the architectural practices. Then, interrupting me again, Rem added, "It is not a question of offices here." It took weeks of on-going participant observation until I was finally able to unravel the meaning of his joke. They were all invisible at OMA: Objects and architects, foam cutters, sketches and maps, moved together and changed their positions in relation to each other according to the dynamics of the on-going architectural projects.

In observing the specific routines that distinguished the OMA from other architectural practices I had no intention to grasp the general rules of the design process; I just wanted to be able to see the details of their day-to-day activities. I wanted to watch the architects draw and handle the models, to see them smoke and discuss the latest development of their projects on the terrace, to listen to their jokes in the kitchen, to feel the pressure in the air when the tall silhouette of Rem appeared in the office; to see all these tiny fragments from the daily routine, and to be part of it. And that is what I did as a participant observer at the OMA, i.e. I followed and described meticulous the design process. To capture this rhythm I used various techniques of observation, which allowed me to stay at two different distances: close to the actors and the course of their actions, intervening and participating in little tasks; and at a greater distance so as to be able to translate and inscribe traces of actions and speech acts.

For many historians and theorists of architecture who had the chance to interview Koolhaas and spend time in his office, lingering more than a day in the practice would be considered a waste of time. For them to explain Koolhaas's design approach or a project like the NEWhitney, it would suffice to refer to the larger theoretical influences upon his design: for instance the impact of Surrealism (Koolhaas, 1978; Vidler, 1992; Hill, 2003) on his early works, or the influence of the Modern Movement, or his rapport with functionalism, or the theoretical influence of Mies van der Rohe or le Corbusier or Russian constructivism (Lucan, *et al*, 1991). Another storyline would be to follow his childhood in Indonesia and his background as a journalist for the Haagse Post and screenwriter, connecting it with his architectural approach and trying to explicate its distinctive features. His fascination with Manhattan and his theory of the skyscraper, of density and congestion would then be explained by his Dutch-ness and the fact that the first settlers of Manhattan were Dutch, recreating their land with nostalgia (Damisch, 1991). And the list of interpretations can be continued; they all revolve around these lines. I find it surprising to see architectural theorists desperately trying to understand Koolhaas's style, idiosyncrasy and strengths by simply referring to his singularity and individuality as a "creator," as if we were to judge him as a seventeenth — century unique genius or to factors outside the realm of architecture — society, culture, class, and gender. Why is it that theorists of architecture are more interested in his big ideas, in the powerful insights, often leaving the design process apart, and even excluding his office practice as being significant for the understanding of his buildings? Why is it that realistic accounts of contemporary architectural practices, of the design worlds, are missing?[1] Why is it that in the prevailing analyses, buildings are interpreted as separated from both the conditions of their making and the design experience of the makers?

A different way to look at the architecture of Rem Koolhaas, a pragmatist one, would aim at understanding the practices rather than the theories and the ideologies, the actions rather than the discourses, architecture in the making rather than architecture made (Yaneva, 2009). That is why I engaged in an ethnography of design. I followed designers at work just like the sociologist of science Bruno Latour did in the 1970s, following scientists at work to understand the production of scientific facts. To understand the meaning of OMA buildings and Koolhaas's architecture, I needed to forget (and to put on hold) the official interpretations and to look instead at the ordinary conditions of experience, to follow the way architects make sense of their world-building activities, to look at the routines, mistakes, and workaday choices. I also accounted for the cooperative activity of both architects and support personnel, humans and models, paints and pixels, material samples and plans, that all constitute the *design world* (Becker, 1974, 1982)[2]. I assumed design was accountable, i.e., that it is pragmatically knowable, not merely symbolic.

The NEWhitney

The particular case I have worked on at the OMA was the project for the extension of the Whitney museum of American Art in New York – the NEWhitney. The Whitney museum is a small museum in Manhattan located on Madison Avenue between 74th and 75th streets. It was designed by the Bauhaus-trained architect Marcel Breuer together with Hamilton Smith and built in 1966. The building was discussed on the pages of various newspapers and specialist art journals in the 1960s, and the protagonists in the architectural debates included: architectural critics, the museum's neighbours, museum professionals, architects and ordinary New Yorkers, artists, passers-by, neighbours, non-human actors, American art, and from 1966 on, visitors. They gathered around the scaffolding of the building during its construction, and its barely visible granite grey fabric provoked controversial reactions *in situ*. The protagonists in the controversy were concerned by two aspects of the building: "its upside-down structure" and its "windowless character." Hated and debated in the 1960s, once built, the Breuer building became a beloved modernist icon.

In the 1980s Michael Graves was commissioned to design an extension of the Whitney museum. He suggested demolishing the brownstones adjacent to the Breuer building and building a replica of the Breuer and a huge structure overarching the two buildings. Graves presented three different schemes (in 1982, 1987, 1989), but they were all controversial and failed. A decade of controversy accompanied the post-modernist proposals of Graves. The controversies were labelled by the *New York Times* as being "the biggest battle in the architectural galaxy." They enrolled a large number of heterogeneous actors and re-connected them differently through its trajectory: community groups, gravitation laws, clients, museum professionals, historical buildings, architects, zoning requirements, street walls, museum philosophy, preservationists, American artists, the architectural community (divided in two camps), neighbours association, city planning commission, and the city board of estimate.

Twenty years later, another star architect – Rem Koolhaas – was commissioned to design the long awaited extension. The proposal by Koolhaas, called NEWhitney, grows out of the small footprint into the zoning envelope, keeping a distance from the existing buildings, and that is what gives it an unusual shape, a shape reminiscent to a "dinosaur," according to architects from OMA. In this ensemble, each of its three parts would be subject to modifications and would become to a certain extent renewed: the Breuer building would be restored; the five Madison Avenue brownstones would be altered comprehensively, and the domestic space re-configured for the purpose of displaying art. Also, there would be an entirely new Tower Building. Therefore, the Whitney extension was viewed as a means of reconfiguring and reorganising the existing museum and the adjacent buildings, rearranging the extant spaces and reinventing the museum's program,

instead of creating *ex nihilo* an entirely new museum building. Yet, in the Koolhaas design, the Whitney extension would re-conceive entirely the existing Whitney building.

What was it about the Whitney building that provoked so many reactions, good and bad, at the time of its construction and at the time of its extension plans? Why did those extension plans repeatedly fail? What kind of actors responded to the museum's actions and claimed to speak on its behalf? We cannot answer these questions along the traditional three planes: the aesthetic plane of architectural practice, the institutional plane, and the plane of societal context. On the aesthetic plane, in spite of the fact that the Whitney building has its own aesthetic strength and logic, we cannot continue to argue that it simply reflects the specificities and the challenges of the Modernist style, and in particular the International movement. In planning for its expansion, three architects painstakingly struggled to answer clients' briefs and communities' concerns by a set of distinctive design moves. We cannot ignore these design struggles and simply explain the building as mirroring the differences in their individual creative approaches, backgrounds, styles and visual languages. Yet even though the design process of extending the Whitney museum unfolded according to its proper logic in each case, architectural critics still try to explain the reasons for the final rejections of the Whitney addition projects by referring to the chronic identity crisis of the cultural institution itself — the institutional plane — and engage in causal explanations relating to the museum's history. This plane is to be avoided as well. While architectural projects develop according to their own competitive logic, they can also be associated with their political contexts — the societal plane — in this case, the cultural and the political climates of the 1960s, 1980s and the first years of the 21st century, and accordingly the extension plans can be interpreted as mirroring shifts in politics. Yet, the analysis of the Whitney projects resisted blatant causal explanation of design with social and political factors.

Entering the office of Koolhaas to learn about the on-going process of design, I was gradually led, together with the designing architects, to open the black box of the design of Graves and the black box of the Breuer Whitney. As OMA architects found out by tracing its historical complexities, the Whitney has an amazing "career," rich in controversies. To gain access to the repertoire of actions accompanying the Breuer and the Graves plans, they studied the building's history, the variegated attempts of architects and urban planners to extend it in a particular way, and how various actors talked on behalf of the building. Instead of providing a linear account of the Whitney's architecture from Bauhaus to Koolhaas, based on a comprehensive historical investigation, the OMA architects thus embarked on a retrospective analysis of the past, engaging in a process of interpretation of the Whitney museum, and its performance, and recollecting the Whitney trajectory, or its *building career* (to use another expression popularized

by anthropologists) (Appadurai, 1986; Tamen, 2001). Put another way, in order to understand the NEWhitney, I also had to unravel its history of design controversies.

Following the process in which the NEWhitney models are made one can witness three major requirements that conditioned the design experimentation on its shape: (1) "not to neglect the Breuer Landmark," (2) "not to demolish the adjacent 'historically valuable' brownstones," and (3) "not to exceed the zoning envelope." The same "not to…" requirements had been in place for the offices of Breuer and Graves, and subsequently shaped their design. Going back in history, to the time of Breuer and Graves, to see how these architects answered these questions and interpreted the Whitney, and, then, coming back to the Koolhaas office, will allow us to follow a nonlinear time vector, moving gradually through back-and-forward steps. Recollecting the Whitney of Breuer and the Whitney of Graves against the backdrop of the recent design schemes of Koolhaas, one must rely on the assumption, shared by designing architects, that buildings are pragmatically knowable.

As had been the case in the alleged extension of the Eiffel tower, the controversy triggered by the extension of the Whitney involved a staggering number of actors and resources (even of actors and resources that are not concerned with matters of design, nor educated to judge design issues), and new associations can be traced among them. Compelling both allies and critics to write letters of support and complain about the design, the Whitney building became a full-blown actor in its own right, as various parties spoke on its behalf and interpreted its "inner" needs and nature. The more people spoke against and in support of this building, the bigger the crowds of visitors and passers-by; the more the resources and allies locally available increased, the more of a *social* did the design become.

Following the controversies, and the many detours in the architects' intentions to extend this building, we are no longer confronted with merely one static modernist object, but an object plus its anticipated extensions presented as design plans, plus a variety of other actors: museum professionals, artists, New Yorkers, passers-by, critics, planning commissions, zoning regulations, etc. The Whitney building thus turned into a multiple object, an assembly of contested issues: the brownstones' destructibility, the zoning rules, the neighbours' vulnerability, the narrowness of the site, the museum professionals' fears, the perennial Breuer building's intractable presence. At first sight a simple technical, or aesthetic object, the Whitney became a socio-technical, socio-aesthetic, socio-political issue; from a built (and then largely forgotten) monument to modernism, it became potentially extendable; if originally taken for granted, it became contested. In the end, the Whitney must be seen NOT as an autonomous, emancipated, or coherent modernist object standing "out there" on Madison Avenue, but as a complex ecology, a network of connections. Every extension project, every design plan, is a trail that makes us reconsider what a

building really is, recognizing that many factors combine to produce it. Even though it displays all the attributes of a self-contained entity, the Whitney also shows that sometimes the "social" evolves from the panoply of mobilizing actors implicated in the "drama" of a building's contested architectural history, rather than residing outside and above the institution.

Thus, I argue that a building cannot be defined by what it is and what it means (a number of structural and programmatic features or symbolic meanings), but only by what it does: what kind of disputes it provokes and how it resists attempts to transform it in different periods of time. To understand the Whitney, it is not enough to question the specific figurative languages of its architects, or the social contexts of its design plans. One should consider the whole process of transformations of the building in design: how it acts, resists, affords, compels, challenges, mobilizes, and gathers different communities of actors. Such an understanding of buildings can bring more awareness of the ways architecture is made and how it takes part in the making of the social.

1 → For sociological analyses of architectural firms see the research of Judith Blau (1984).
2 → I am following here Becker's (1974, 1982) understanding of the world of art as a cooperative activity.

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