

COMPLICATING MACHINES: A CALL TO INFECT ARCHITECTURE WITH THE MECHANISM OF ‘POLITICS’

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ABSTRACT

This paper ventures from architecture’s possible and much needed capacity to provoke through its material manifestation a difference of thought.

First, an argumentation is constructed pleading for the infection of architecture with the negotiational mechanism of ‘politics’. This is needed if architecture wants to reach its full capacities of acting in this world – practically; ethically; politically.

With this argumentation in mind, the architectural experiment *Complicating Machine CoMa₀₂* is screened as a set-up, following its possibilities – both functional and para-functional – to its user, the flâneur, the passer-by.



Figure 1: Lower part of *Complicating Machine CoMa₀₁* [Ont-Moetingsmeubel'] 2010

INTRODUCTION

One of (interior) architecture’s major trumps is its pervasive presence in our everyday life combined with a unique ability to embody us, to seize us in encounters. This combination makes it possible for architecture to be truly experimental. We often venture through this world guided by fixed ideas. Experimental practices disrupting these ideas then are like volatile salt, awakening us from pre-programmed thoughts. Through their material manifestation, architectural artefacts can raise questions on how we think and act – practically; ethically; politically. They can explore possibilities and instigate new possibilities to come into being. ‘Artefacts people interact with have enormous impact on how we think. Artefacts do not merely occupy a slot in that process, they fundamentally shape the dynamic itself.’ (Robinson 1994) This explorative paper ventures around this affecting dynamic.

In the educational project *Complicating Machines²* (*CoMa_{xx}*), part of the courses of Interior Architecture at the Sint-Lucas School of Architecture, we devise and build with students experimental-experiential architectural machines on a one to one scale, in the real context of the city. To be short, these machines can be seen as provocative architectures, questioning socio-spatial relationships in everyday life. The studio operates on a scale reaching from prostheses to architectural devices. These *Complicating Machines* are encountered. They are not idealized probing situations outside the world. Just as Sophie Calle’s *Phone Booth*, they are small estranging alterations in public space. They truly experiment, affecting their user, the flâneur or the contingent passer-by.

ARGUMENTING FOR THE MECHANISM OF ‘POLITICS’ IN ARCHITECTURE

In the architectural machine *CoMa₀₂³*, one can distinguish similarities with artefacts produced by other investigative architectural practices. One can for instance discern formal resemblances with the *Community Table*, one part of Wexler Studio’s *Two Too*



Figure 2: Aerial view of Wexler Studio's *Community Table*, part of the work *Two Too Large Tables* 2006

Large Tables in the Hudson River Park, New York. I want to take this *Community Table*, especially interpretations of its being too large, as a venture point from which to construct the central argument of this paper, i.e. the relevance of a complication or infection of architecture with the mechanism of 'politics'. Subsequently, I want to look at the set-up of the experimental device *CoMa₀₂*, an architecture I consider to be infected by the mechanism of 'politics', a designerly mode(l) of inquiry into possibilities.

BRINGING POSSIBILITIES INTO SENSIBLE RELATIONSHIPS

In a first, formal interpretation, Wexler Studio's *Community Table* really is too large compared to every ergonomic standard of what constitutes a 'good' table. Its plane stretches over a distance that hampers normal communication across the table. Furthermore, the orientation of its seating positions is deviant and disturbing. Following the interpretation of Donald Goddard, the table is beyond this physical overscaling, also too large in the sense that it offers 'too many possibilities for interaction and non-interaction, and it is impossible to reconcile so many possibilities, except that they all take place at the same flat, horizontal expanse of the table' (Goddard 2001). The table gathers its users in what Wexler calls unusual pairings. One can try to sit in community, as a form of belonging agreed upon. One can opt to turn the back to that same community preferring splendid isolation. Other, parallel communities might take shape. One may even have no choice whatsoever when some of the available seating positions are already strategically taken. The table ensures not one possibility, it enables or provokes multiple, contingent ones.

Connecting back to Goddard's interpretation, and looking x-ray-wise through the flesh of the *Community Table*, one can thus discern underlying mechanisms. I argue that precisely these mechanisms afforded by the table, are of interest to forms of design such as architecture, if architecture wants to address its full capacities of acting within the world. As touched upon in the above, the mechanisms working through the table are (i) one that affords or provokes multiple possibilities – both action A and non-A –, and (ii) one that brings these different possibilities into sensible forms of relationship – an irreconcilable relationship according to Goddard. So, the mechanisms underlying the design and the design activity are not oriented towards solving



Figure 3: Upper part of *Complicating Machine CoMa₀₂* [Fusion (By) Cooking] 2011

or eradicating the ambiguities and ambivalences raised by the difference of possibilities. Neither the design nor the designers make any such solving effort. Quite contrary, they intentionally seem to advocate remaining within this state of ambiguity and ambivalence, and harvest from its potential.

However, 'opening up' by admitting different possibilities to the table and then, as in Goddard's interpretation, 'closing down' by stating that the nature of their relationship is one of irreconcilability, is passing by too hasty the potential of this table. Before any statement can be made on an irreconcilability or on its antithetical tenet of harmony, a time exists in which these different possibilities appear in parallel and touch or affect one another, within the same horizontal expanse of the table. It is this time of tension that constitutes the fertile ground, enabling the new to come into being. This through adding up possibilities to possibilities forging new possibilities; adding up experiences to experiences forging new experiences; adding up interpretations to interpretations forging new interpretations.

INTRODUCING TO ARCHITECTURE THE NEGOTIATIONAL MECHANISM OF 'POLITICS'

How then to term these mechanisms we are venturing around? The one producing different possibilities (i) and the one relating sensibly these possibilities (ii). Or do both mechanisms in fact form one and the same? At this time, I want to introduce to the argument the terms 'negotiation' and 'politics'.

In a paper presented at a previous *NORDES* conference *Making Design Matter*, we ventured from the question by means of what kind of design attitude we as designers could regain our full capacities of acting within the socio-spatial constellations that relate people and world. A table assembling people is arguably one of the very basic versions of such a constellation. We argued that a 'critical questioning design attitude inducing the dynamics of negotiation' (Liekens & Janssens 2011) is needed. This inducement of the

dynamics of negotiation needs further elaboration.

In his book *Architectures of Time*, Sanford Kwinter touches upon the mechanism of ‘politics’, positively identifying it in both the social as the subjective realms as being ‘nothing more than the production of new possibilities’ (Kwinter 2002). Kwinter sees this production of new possibilities as an urgent task for architects and architecture, in fact for society as a whole. He states that ‘setting out to think about novelty, or “the new”, might provide a way to revive our presently atrophied capacities of acting – practically, ethically and politically – in this world’ (Kwinter 2002). Kwinter also exposes the danger lurking in our interpretation of the morphogenetic relationship between the possible and the real, often seen as a relationship in which the possible is (only) a prefiguration of the real, not a negotiation on the real. Following this kind of morphogenesis, as we often do, would reduce the space of possibilities to a ‘sad and confining world already formed and given in advance’ (Kwinter 2002). There is more to be harvested in the production of possibilities. Beyond translating possibilities into realities, architecture can be ‘politics’, bringing and maintaining us in experiential positions from which negotiational processes sprawl.

The strong interrelation between ‘aesthetics’ (I consider architecture to be a part of it) and ‘politics’ constitutes the leitmotif of Jacques Rancière’s philosophy of *Dissensus*. According to Rancière, both these human activities are forms or processes of dissensus. Their interrelation is defined by the fact that both have to do with ‘reorienting general perceptual space and disrupting forms of belonging’ and that both operate through ‘a contingent suspension of the rules governing normal experience’ (Rancière 2010). The essence of the ‘political’ is ‘the manifestation of dissensus as the presence of two worlds in one’ (Rancière 2010).



Figure 4: Upper part of *Complicating Machine CoMa02 [Fusion (By) Cooking]* 2011

Connecting the above back to the *Community Table*, the processes of negotiation between the different possibilities taking place, maybe even demonstrating, in the same flat, horizontal expanse of the table, are such a form of dissensus, making different worlds present in

one. Forms of belonging – communities – are not left unquestioned and are threatened by claims of other possibilities – deviant forms of belonging, the other. The rules governing normal experience, e.g. the agreement that tables are made to certain standards, serving known phenomena such as normal conversation and hence distribute their users according to these standards and known phenomena without residue, are suspended.

It is noteworthy that Rancière makes a clear distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘police’, and this certainly relates to architecture and all other forms of design. Architecture can be a ‘policing’ activity, or a ‘political’ activity. ‘Police interventions in public spaces consist primarily not in interpellating demonstrators, but in breaking up demonstrations. [...] It consists, before all else, in recalling the obviousness of what there is, or rather of what there is not, and its slogan is: “Move Along! There is nothing to see here!” The police is that which says that here, on this street, there’s nothing to see and so nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space for circulating is nothing but the space for circulation. Politics, by contrast, consist in transforming this space of “moving-along”, of circulation, into a space for the appearance of the subject [...]. It consists in re-figuring space, that is in what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it. It is the instituting of a dispute over the distribution of the sensible’ (Rancière 2010). As ‘political’ activity architecture problematizes and affords the new to come into being, as ‘policing’ practice architecture affirms the normal state of things.

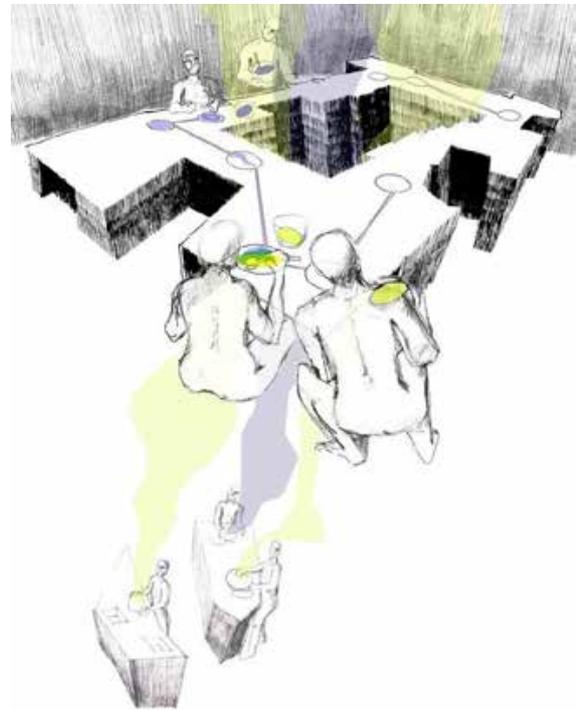


Figure 5: Possibility sketch of *Complicating Machine CoMa02 [Fusion (By) Cooking]* 2011

OUR EXPERIMENTAL DEVICE *CoMa₀₂*: AN ARCHITECTURE INFECTED BY THE MECHANISM OF 'POLITICS'

The term 'political' in relation to architecture might bring to mind burdened references. As in the above, 'politics' here is rather seen as the production of possibilities, a production situated in the real, connecting to everyday human activities and behaviour. *CoMa₀₂* is about the micropolitical level where our actions, mediated by artefacts, enact specific relations to others, to speak with Martín Avila.

The basic idea for *CoMa₀₂* rose from combining observations. The observation that the neighbourhood where it is built is coloured by food and food culture(s), but also that these cultures appear separated, in shabby eateries peeled from every ritual or more ritually in the private interiors. The observation of a will to partake in public life. The observation of institutionalized initiatives in the city to fuse by means of cooking. In these initiatives, every friction is avoided: harmonious cooking with minority groups under the sterile neon light of community houses.

CoMa₀₂ introduces besides normal – functional – assets of a table also estranging assets, running in parallel, and mingles these. Anthony Dunne's 'para-functionality' comes to mind. 'The prefix 'para-' suggests that such design is within the realms of utility, but attempts to go beyond conventional definitions of functionalism to include the poetic' (Dunne 2005).

CoMa₀₂ is built in a multicultural and bustling urban neighbourhood. It comprises two floors. The lower floor is a cooking place, or better, it consists of several cooking places: different meals can be prepared at once. The cooking place is not private, yet claimable. The doors of the building enclosing the device are removed, disclosing the interior to the adjacent public space. Over the cooking places, a giant sculptural cooker hood is constructed, segmented because of the protruding beams dividing upper and lower floor, composing tubes through which the sensation of odours and fumes reaches the seated people in the upper floor. These tubes structure the figure of the upper floor table. However, the table is too large and gathers its users in unusual pairings, as described above for the *Community Table*. Moreover, the upper floor has three gradually heightening levels, affording or forcing the people at the table to choose between three different and culturally tinted postures, from cross-legged to more 'Western' postures, with or without chairs. Combining this with ideas of different physical and mental forms of community in the rituals of eating, the table mirrors the composition and working of the neighbourhood itself. From the surface of the

table, dishes are scooped out and the whole surface is varnished with an acid-resistant varnish, which is off course handy in any public space. However, some of these dishes are interconnected by means of scooped-out gutters. The gutters do not coincide with the 'natural' autonomy of the pairings afforded by the table, the gutters disrupt these pairings. There might be an agreement on sharing food, but juices might start to run from unwanted directions.

The 'however-s' in the above show an infection of the encounter with *CoMa₀₂* with noise, deviation, friction, chance, difference even some degree of 'user-unfriendliness' (Dunne 2005). Normally considered uninvited guests at the table and in design processes, these notions instead become valuable elements in the constitution of a main generative dynamic: that of 'politics'. *CoMa₀₂* does not 'police' its uses and users: it provokes uses as forms of dissensual, 'political' activity. What might happen is open, not known or wanted in advance.

CoMa₀₂ is an experimental model or set-up situated in the everyday real, a set-up from which the negotiational dynamics of 'politics' can take off. It sets the table and invites for the feast of difference to commence. I described in the above the constraints set by the table. I'll leave the interpretations of what could happen at this table to the imagination of the reader.

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¹ organized at Sint-Lucas School of Architecture Ghent by Johan Liekens and Karel Deckers, involving students Ellen Fievez, Jens Lippens & Sanne Delecluyse and all other students of the studio, third bacheloryear Interior Architecture 2009-2010.

² 'complicating machines' is coined as a term by John Rajchman in Rajchman, J. *The Deleuze Connections*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press books.

³ organized at Sint-Lucas School of Architecture Ghent by Johan Liekens, involving students Liselotte Delobelle, Siska D'Hondt & Maxine Morel and all other students of the studio, third bacheloryear Interior Architecture 2010-2011.