

Architects as Public Intellectuals: How Far Beyond Can We Go?

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Editorial Summary: The research of Hannah Knoop is methodologically based on political theory, extended by fundamental methods of art history and the humanities. The starting point of her work is the presumption that the work on the design, the architectural activity, also inherits an intellectual dimension and that both the architect as a person understands, and represents the challenge, expectation, and dimension of the so-called intellectuality, as well as that the public grants her this quality. She observes that the quantitative research method in political science is based on three principles: contextuality, processuality, and reflexivity; terms that are quite familiar within the discipline of architecture and which have corresponding connotations. In doing so, she stresses that a critical examination and constant review of this transfer from an established research science to the architectural research field is essential. [Ferdinand Ludwig]

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On Qualitative Research

Looking at qualitative research methods in social science, they can be roughly summarized as being primarily concerned with collecting and evaluating non-standardized data, and thus proceeding methodologically interpretatively and hermeneutically. In particular, the actor's perspective is of decisive importance for the evaluation of the data. It contains the aim of gaining deeper insights into decision-making criteria and motivational structures.

The results and answers have to be interpreted explicitly based on context; thus, this method can also be regarded as reflexive in itself and indicates an inductive approach.

Qualitative research methods in general are extensively used, researched, and further developed, especially in the social sciences. The decisive question is: How to transfer them to architectural research and strengthen

its methods? From the architectural-research perspective, the following aspects of qualitative research are of particular importance: a dynamic research process; the inherent deliberate openness about the results; the exploration of unknown phenomena, resulting in the development of new theories and models, i.e. an inductive approach and the interpretative approach, in which a subject-related understanding is the focus of attention.

The latter aspect, in particular, resonates within architecture and the debate on the perception of users: the basic assumption for research following the interpretative paradigm is that of an interpretative understanding of human experience.

In this sense, interpretative research follows diverse theoretical lines of tradition, stretching from philosophical hermeneutics and phenomenology to Max Weber's concept of an understanding sociology and American pragmatism, to symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and social constructivism (cf. Blatter et al. 2018: 34).

The Concept of Intellectuality

An intellectual person places herself in the cross-hairs by resuming and delivering again. In this sense, architectural activity is an intellectual activity par excellence. In particular, the absorption of what exists is an essential part. The giving away – after a process of production and creation – is then expressed as strikingly visible in the medium itself. In order to produce architecture, it is therefore necessary, on the one hand, to take an intensive look at social themes with an almost seismographic feel for current and future challenges, and, on the other hand, to wisely reproduce precisely these questions in the form of spatially concrete offers or even solutions.

At this moment, it is significant to note the reason why the term »Public Intellectual« is consciously used in this research project.

Architects as Public Intellectuals

The aim of the research project is to investigate the influence, interaction and interrelation of social, political, and intellectual dimensions in architectural discourse and architecture itself.

It invariably concerns the reflection of the spatially concrete space as a fixed reference point. Thus, this space is also the moment of examination for all theoretical aspects. Beyond an introduction and discussion of the concept

of intellectuality, it is necessary to transfer the concept mainly used in the discipline of the humanities into architecture. Within the discipline of architecture, the concept of the Public Intellectual is appropriate, since it expands it through the crucial component of the public sphere.

What is meant when speaking of the public sphere today? – a functional concept, i.e. to »define the public sphere without defining it« [Adorno]; »an ideal; a spatially concrete place; a condition of knowledge« [Arendt]?

The public sphere is regarded as the indispensable foundation of any democratic system, functioning as a political collective and as a political corrective. If we look at this concept today, we cannot avoid asking who creates the public sphere, to whom does its performative power serve, and to what extent is the public sphere created and structured by media technology?

Even in current times, can political movements be observed that have developed their social impact out of an impulse to mobilize a so-called critical mass – especially in the spatially concrete public.

The dimensions of the public sphere that can currently be identified have an immense influence on architectural creation and architects, but how can it be grasped?

In order to approach these questions, it is necessary to build a theoretical framework as a link between the individual phenomena, and to question historical theories to enable reflection on one's own present:

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt pursues several consequent distinctions. In addition to the three basic human activities of Labor, Work, and Action, she analyzes public and private space; natality and mortality; the social and the private; and so on. Looking at the phenomenon of the public, it is noticeable that within Arendt's work »dimensions of the public« exist. The public sphere, which is specifically addressed in *The Human Condition* as a space in which people move, speak, and act, is a »political public«. On the other hand, the public as a precondition for judgement is rather a criterion for perception – thus an »epistemological public« (cf. Bajohr 2011: 8; cf. also McCarthy 1981).

Another important distinction that Arendt explains precisely and summarizes in its historical context, is the original separation of the social and the political (cf. especially »The Rise of the Social«, in: Arendt 1998: 38–49). It is from these distinctions that the interrelations between social and political norms of architecture, and the allocation of space for social and political action and thought in the scopes of architecture and in architectural discourse emerge.

The Medial Public Is Not an Agora

The electronic media offers an unforeseeable possibility for encounters and individual communication on digital platforms as an anteroom of the places of assembly, i.e. the spatially concrete places of the public. In agreement with the sociologist Armin Nassehi, however, it is also important to note that the low-threshold nature of digital spaces has simultaneously led to the de-civilization of communication (cf. Nassehi 2019). At present, it can be observed that this de-civilization, previously explicitly attributed to digital public spaces, is now being retransferred to social space in physical space.

Political theorist Hannah Arendt maintained an idealized idea of the public sphere as a Greek agora: an arena of discourse in which the free and the equal compete with each other in the competition of words, and in the presence of their whole person, so that they are judged by those physically present. This ideal can by no means be transferred to the media public sphere; it is not structured along the lines of the agora. In actual Internet communication, speakers do not appear as whole personalities who could be dismantled by the civilized reference to their self-contradictions. Rather, their speech exists in the form of freely floating fragments of language that are instrumentalized for political purposes.

This leads to the compelling conclusion that the task and activity of the architect must be understood as the action of a public intellectual.

How Far Beyond Can We Go?

The research topic has to be explored in exchange with other disciplines. In addition, it is a topic that questions our common notion of theory and practice, written or spoken word versus built architecture, in this clear distinction. The concept of the word »language« must be understood as broadly as possible, namely in its actual sense as a »form of expression«. At this very moment, built architecture as a form of expression is to be placed on an equal level with the word expression – and of course vice-versa.

This approach additionally encompasses a specific perspective: namely that of the architecturally reflected search for a meaning, in order to be able to penetrate the aesthetic expressiveness of architecture with an intellectual architectural approach.

Methodologically, the research is based on political science and the methods of qualitative research, extended by fundamental methods of art

history and the humanities. It is therefore a presumption that the work on the design, the architectural activity, also inherits an intellectual dimension and that both the architect as a person understands and represents the challenge, expectation, and dimension of the so-called intellectuality, as well as that the public grants her this quality.

The Understanding of Meaning as a Core-Category

One of the theories upon which this research is particularly based, is Hannah Arendt's political theory, as it provides a thought-provoking basis with a definite architectural-theoretical relevance for the discourse on the built, spatially concrete space. This is the case, as there is no question that the public cannot be thought of without the dimensions of the political and social. They are the point of origin for the interrelation of social and political norms of architecture opposed to giving space to social and political action and thinking in the spaces of architecture and in the architectural discourse. With Arendt's understanding of the concept of plurality, she also offers a base for our contemporary debate on coexistence, as the diversity of people in their respective uniqueness is guaranteed precisely by the reality of the common world: in the political space, the Arendtian space of appearance. This space is spatially concrete: people meet each other in speaking and acting. In doing so, they not only communicate the content of a message, but themselves as well. If this plurality is destroyed, a loss of the world and a radical isolation within a mass society inevitably follows, in which the Arendtian animal laborans dominates as way of life.

The fact that the intellectual dimension is to be included in the survey can initially be justified with the hope that, as much as the concept of intellectuality in general, and even more so in the specific case of architecture requires a critical introduction, it could be the connection between politics, sociology, and architecture. In light of the fact that the question of architectural research appears more topical than ever, it is being discussed in a variety of ways and in the context of various methodological and programmatic issues; a look at the intellectual dimension of architecture holds the potential to fruitfully complement the artistic, creative, technical or processual view of the discipline and its research. In addition, it is important to dare to build a bridge across disciplines to philosophy, political science, and sociology.

Furthermore, the term also attracts attention in the general discourse and its various levels of meaning. In particular, the current political and

social debate seems to have taken a like or dislike to this term, from which further stimulating potential for a discursive and conceptual debate in all the sub-areas used for consideration can be derived; the relevance and explosiveness of the topic presented becomes apparent.

On Qualitative Research in Political Science

There are well-established methods to follow and, within qualitative research, precise definitions on how, where, and when to collect data. Yet on closer inspection, there arise methodological challenges, such as a low number of cases. This leads to interviews that go into much more detail and reach a depth that would not be possible within quantitative research. The advantage is that results can be better generalized.

However, there is no doubt that a research structure and argumentation must be repeatable and comprehensible. This is, of course, a precondition for all research work and ultimately serves the purpose of traceability in connection with the legitimate question of relevance.

The qualitative research method within political science can form a meaningful foundation for research projects in – historically speaking – young architectural research. A prerequisite for this is the critical examination and constant review of this transfer from an established research science to the architectural research field. The qualitative research method in political science is based on three principles: contextuality, processuality, and reflexivity. These terms are quite familiar within the discipline of architecture and have corresponding connotations. As such, they can also be transferred to the political-theoretical context – and again, vice-versa.

Contextuality: The meaning of social and political phenomena can only be understood by including the context in which they occur – context is key. In this respect, we often speak of a naturalism of interpretative research, which aims to investigate phenomena in their »natural« environment, and systematically considers the contextuality of statements and actions.

Processuality, Openness, and Flexibility: Interpretative research usually follows a circular research strategy in which – instead of starting with hypotheses which are then tested – theses and theories are developed from the empirical material (induction) and, if necessary, are re-examined (abduction). This sometimes requires »on-site flexibility«, i.e. the competence to

adapt the methodological design, the methodological procedure and the theoretical references to the requirements of the field, the research situation in the course of the research process, or to change.

Reflexivity: The researcher is seen as a constitutive part of the research field. The researcher is significantly involved in the production of the data (Blatter, et al. 2018: 37).

Epilogue

How far beyond can we go? It is possible to go beyond – and it is necessary to do so in the case of a broader survey with a broad understanding of architecture as a discipline.

The traceability of any investigation is and remains crucial. In this context, it is helpful to take a close look at the methods of qualitative research and to draw conclusions about the case studies in one's own research on the basis of the numerous case studies within the discipline of political science. In this context, it is of decisive importance that vague or even subjective views are critically evaluated.

If this starting point is made consciously within the research design, the potential that qualitative research holds can be fully developed, and the deliberate openness in the methodology can be applied.

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