

Conception (*begriffliche Praxis*)

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COLUMN A



Members of the project office run by Assemble Studio are working on their presentation model for the interim colloquium of the cooperative review process Building a Proposition for Future Activities. Here, the process of model making operationalises generosity as conceptual practice. Photo taken by Fran Edgerly, Assemble Studio.

“You can't do an analysis without first conceptualizing the problems you're dealing with. And this conceptualization requires critical thinking and constant verification. First of all, we must clarify what I would call the 'conceptual requirements'. By this I mean that conceptualization must not be confused with a theory of the object. The object to be grasped conceptually is not the only validity criterion for concept formation. We must also know the historical conditions that motivate a certain kind of conceptualization” (Foucault 2015, 82).

ABOUT COLUMN A

This text problematizes how and where conceptual practice in project management takes place and references methods, tools, theories and discourses pertinent for Project Management in Urban Design's Play methodology.

What's what: conceptual practice in Project Management literature

The internationalization of project management standards follows the promise of installing and maintaining quality in business processes. Comments on project phase 0: project genesis or conception, call for project managers to actively promote coordination and decision-making processes. "In this context, the obligations of the client or liabilities of the project manager must be clearly and unequivocally clarified and contractually established as early as possible" (AHO e.V. 2006, 23). However, Abram and Weszkalnys (2013) have shown that this is never a flawless process. Consequently, practices such as moderation, mediation and facilitation are occasionally important (and in regards to project finances considered priceless) during project conception and, sometimes, phases of re-conception. The difference between concept and actual object enables the negotiation of meaning. What it means to live, work or relax today is highly dependent on socially, culturally, economically and historically specific circumstances. The same goes for meanings of intimate vs. public, home vs. shelter, expensive vs. low-budget, modern vs. historic. Rules, regulations and professional ideas and perception equally vary depending on specific contexts. Consequently, project management must actively enable conceptual practice in projects. "The conception of the project is the basis of the decision-making process of the client and thus of further joint action with the project manager and other project participants" (AHO e.V. 2006, 24). All pertinent information for the project conception must be assembled and displayed consistently and clearly. This includes the project's goal(s) and motif, the identifiable project elements and relations in the project's operationalizations and operations. "It is important to describe the expected impact of all project elements relevant to the fulfilment of the project objectives for the purpose of meeting the demand" (ibid).

Criticism and horizons

Project management language and its operationalizations have been criticized for being meaningless, universalizing and thus anti-worldly (Easterling 2014). At the same time scholars in urban studies more and more frequently undertake efforts of readdressing key concepts of their own practice and, in the case of Stuart Hall or Colin McFarlane (see video below), have aimed to reposition conceptual practices beyond the "enclave" of urban theory with the promise of a more mundane conceptual practice (Zeiderman 2018).

"How we go about theorizing global urbanism matters should be debated; but our debates are not separate from a world in which people everywhere are asking and answering both global and urban questions. ... It must not be allowed to drown empirically grounded scholarship that pays close attention to the social lives of concepts like the "urban" and the "global", and the work they do in the world" (11).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2RaiAORKks>

McFarlane, Colin. 2018. "No Title Obtainable." In *[Re]Form: New Investigations in Urban Form*. Harvard GSD.

Zeiderman tells the story of what happened when the field of anthropology experienced a similar crisis to the one urban studies appears to currently be in. Some anthropologists ...

"accepted that the theoretical question of defining (and defending) the 'culture' concept was perhaps less important than the ways in which the concept was being defined (and defended) far beyond the pages of their academic journals. These anthropologists relinquished their professional claims to conceptual ownership and got on with the task of understanding how 'culture' was being constituted and contested out in the world" (2018, 10).

The world's most intellectual architecture practice (🤖) argued in a similar fashion in their book/exhibition *Content* (see video below).

"Languages grow and mutate as any other complex system does, with the occasional nod to Darwin and a tip of the cap to the Reaper. ... Let the following antiglossary impeach a few terms that have decayed to the point they stagger zombielike and even pestilent, across the thoughtscape of the profession". (Millard 2004, 88)

In manifesto-like fashion, OMA argues for a relational conceptual practice where positions and thus authorship claims are provisional. Such a practice contains the promise of coproduction across disciplines, statuses and stakes in a project: if we conceive of positions and claims as provisional, attention can be geared towards the relationality of producing them, which again stresses the contextual relations within which positions and claims are coproduced.

Content

“If a building or building-idea or book has content, conveys content, disseminates content, then it is a container: in other words, it is close to nothing. It is certainly no organism, nothing with signs of life. It is defined by its empty capacity, like the massive nondescript atrium of the Hotel Interchangeable, the space designed to impress rather than to live ... give life. Artists lost something when the market made them content providers. OMA offers its Content and its content under full and cognizant erasure. We stress, again, that this list [of terms and definitions] is an act of impeachment, not conviction: authority in language belongs to the open forum, not the self-appointed arbiters. And, having sounded an awakening bugle-blast, we're more than content to let reveille turn into jazz, step aside for someone else's solo, and the let the cleansing jam session begin” (ibid., 91).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_OXkbBxNYw

Koolhaas, Rem. 2004. “Content.” AA School of Architecture, February 17.

Can what seems to be a horizon for scholars in urban studies and (intellectual) architectural practices provide remedy for Project Management?

The transposition of go to project management literature into Urban Design's Play methodology renders differences in the worldliness of conceptual practices visible. While go to project management literature positions the above described necessities of conceptual practices in phase 0 and thus at the very beginning of a project, Urban Design's Play methodology includes a conceptual practice in the phase How to Play which follows Coming into Play and precedes Play and Understanding the Play. This takes into account that projects never occur ex nihilo but are grounded into an unfolding existing situation. In relation to Actor-Network Theory this can be grasped as

“a decidedly empirical understanding of ethnography, which bases conceptual practices on empirical observations and descriptions and wants to make empirical phenomena [and actors] speak for themselves, without reducing them to certain [a priori] concepts, while at the same time being aware of their own situation, including their description”. (Wieser 2012, 115)

Project management is not ethnography, yet in Urban Design's Play methodology, these network-assembling or field-configuring practices termed “tracing” – remember ANT's great heuristic maxim Follow the actors! – offers a prolific operationalization for conceptual practices

transpositioning aspects from Coming into Play into How to Play where project managers are called to generate and find integrative motifs in projects.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qj3nda5e3x0>

“Politics” as assembled by Actor-Network Theory in relation to the problematisation of the urban. Kien, Grant. 2017. “Actor network Theory: machines and authority.” Serious Science, August 10.

Conceptual practices in a project public setting go hand in hand with the allocation of work packages and responsibilities across current and future project partners. In some cases, this may result in project partners experiencing personal or even departmental futility or overloads and a priori positioning practices by powerful or claiming to be powerful actors and concomitant Conceptual practices – think the never-ending debate of public vs. private in the allocation of provision of services such as housing, health care or education or “race” in Stuart Hall’s or “density” in Colin McFarlane’s work cited at the beginning of this text.

Can ANT’s “tracing” approach be transposed into a conceptual practice, which circumvents a priori and thus often dead end and myopic concepts? Schüttelpeltz (2008, 239) argues that “ANT’s weaker theory disposition of a mere heuristic is better equipped than all the stronger theories and histories in its operationalization [of conceptual practice], for it deprives the ontological soil of the asymmetrical association of causes and consequences”. For Project Management in Urban Design and the transposition of Coming into Play into How to Play this means that every disciplining strategy goes hand in hand with an opportunity of enabling.

“Conceptual practices in project management are concluded with a proposal for a decision, which clearly describes and justifies whether and which options for action can be considered under the projected framework for meeting the requirements. In the case of complex projects, it can be expected that individual project goals or their weighting will change considerably in the course of the search for the most favorable solution for meeting the requirements [– How to Play]. The proposed decision ends with the recommendation for the further procedure, if necessary, after previous iterations [– Understanding the Play]” (AHO e.V. 2006, 24f). Here, again and again – after completed iterations of all phases of the Play methodology: Coming into Play, How to Play, Play and Understanding the Play – the question is whether the previous work results allow a follow-up of the project in its current and projected framework conditions.

How do you actually practice conceptual practice?

We have already stated that due to the vagueness of “concepts” in project management, complex projects often call for moderation, mediation and/or facilitation when conceptual practice comes into play. The basis of these practices and professionals performing them is that project-based work and its management always require media. Media here signifies everything that has necessary mediation agency: artefacts (Gantt Charts, architecture models), gestures, clothes, demeanor, things (door closers), complex systems (Aramis) Media only become media in operational use. ANT's anti-reductionist heuristic makes it possible to empirically trace organizational processes with media by exploring how actors mediate, communicate, i.e. get together, negotiate and translate.

Résumé

The first paragraph of this text contains references to scholarly work that has shown that the current problematization of the situatedness and the horizon of conceptual practice in urban studies signifies an interest to go to the knowledge of actors. The second paragraph outlines a decidedly intellectual architectural practice and a reference to jazz in order to move forward in an open forum style conceptual practice. Both are more about care and affection than about profits and self-worth maximization. Go to project management literature encourages project managers to actively move forward with conceptual practices during different stages of project management.

The following aspects are often relevant:

Translate between colloquial and highly specific languages, keep relations traceable for all actors in the project. Babbling about standards and the ways we have always done it is too often accepted unquestioned. How things unfold in space over time entails contingency.

Make use of the volatile attention span in open forum discussions, be prepared and on point, let the forum do the work, no project is a solo show, trust the intelligence of the forum while understanding that powerful actors will try to manipulate discussions according to their motif.

Take great care about the documentation and communication of conceptual practice. At best, locate the documentation and communication in a forum like situation. Documentations produced in retrospect to the actual conceptual practice often entail a breath of bias.

Be transparent about the framework, consequences and project relations of a particular conceptual practice. Outline future possibilities and necessities to revisit the results or interim results of a particular conceptual practice.

Trust your own methodology! It's design and realization will have significant impact on the project's success. Keller Easterling (2018) has forwarded a similar line of argumentation in her synoptical publication Medium Design. Medium Design is a process of creating a set of interdependent actions, whether it is a protocol, a switch, or an interplay. “It's a creation of chemistries, chain

reactions, and ratchets,” writes Easterling. “It is less like making a thing and more like having your hands on the faders and toggles of organization.” She often compares medium design to playing pool, “where knowing about one fixed sequence of shots is of little use. But being able to see branching networks of possibilities allows you to add more information to the table and make the game more robust” (Zolotoev and Gromova 2018).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7RhIK9OIAE>

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