Adaptive Actions

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Today's urban experience is defined and encompasses a variety of phenomena that change the way we interact with the city. Mobile and transformable architecture, increasing population displacement, the 'generic city'... These unravel on a large scale and impact on residents' perception of and relation to their environment. Can simple actions, images and ideas such as the hybridisation of conventional and unusual urban realities, 'deghettoisation' or use and assertion of public spaces infiltrate the collective imagination in order to promote identity, specificity and a sense of belonging? The ongoing *Adaptive Actions* project lends artistic voice to marginal causes and alternative urban lifestyles to address site-specific issues related to post-conception and post-production in urban development.

Architects often prefer photographing or showing buildings at the height of their 'perfection', when the presence of time is imperceptible and user-trace absent. Some architectural agencies even control representation, allowing circulation and posting of approved images only. *Now* is the *modus operandi*—priority goes to the image of the building in the present and there is very little concern for its progression in the future. Much emphasis is placed on what must be photographed, celebrated, recorded and published in magazines rather than on users' adaptation of space and appropriation in various form. Very little importance is given to what happens post-conception and post-production: to the life cycle of a building, construction or landscape after being built.

Adaptive Actions operate a shift in focus from representation and aesthetics to the programming of possibilities of use in the built environment. By observing, revealing and sharing residents' adaptive actions, this project aims at encouraging others to act and engage with their environment as well as informing designers on possible extensions to their programme.

Fig. 1. '*Détroit ville résiliente* (Detroit Resilient City)'. Photo: submitted by FNJFP at; www.adaptiveactions.net/action/83.

Can perceptions be altered and change pioneered through simple actions, images and ideas? Can the identification and representation of realities, which have up to now been perceived as improbable or absurd, lead to new urban concepts and construction processes? The ongoing *Adaptive Action*s (currently based in London) throw light on these questions. They explore alterations in the workplace, the home and public spaces in general. The project lends creative voice to marginal causes and alternative urban lifestyles. Imagination and personal creativity's potential to impact on daily life is emphasised, particularly within public spaces. Thus, it indexes and reports on existing actions in

the city and encourages the implementation of new activities, such as the adaptation of architecture, landscape and objects, which unfolds in several stages.

Singularities

In order to document and create an inventory of existing urban alterations, an ongoing survey or call for collaboration, open to all, is announced on the Web and through printed documents. It should be noted, however, that since these realities take place on a small scale, and are often only known to a restricted number of locals, the request for postings is used to accelerate the process. Collaborators register and log in as actors on the website and submit actions directly and instantly on-line, add links, text or comments if desired. By offering a space to share experiences, ideas,

Fig. 2. 'Passage'. Photo: submitted by François; www.adaptiveactions. net/action/19. Fig. 3. 'Passage 03'. Photo: submitted by François; www.adaptiveactions.net/action/44.

Fig. 4. 'Temporary Shelter'. Photo: submitted by François; www. adaptiveactions.net/action/38. Fig. 5. 'Domestic Appropriations'. Photo: submitted by Urban Dwellers; www.adaptiveactions.net/action/85.

types of actions and specific accomplishments, *Adaptive Actions* creates an inventory of alterations rarely visible to the public.

The website's objective is to collate a variety of actions of a popular, theoretical or scientific nature, expressing conflict and cooperation, opposition and composition. The presentation of projects will create a vocabulary with which the collective imagination may express itself through the use of existing structures and will encourage the growth of similar actions.

Assemblage and Cooperation

A programming of events, workshops and round tables in different localities on specific topics create links, associations between actors and actions. The aim as Maurizio Lazzarato would say, is not to neutralise differences but on the contrary to enrich the concept of the common through the existence of these differences.[1] As he argues, the challenge is to find ways to retain this multiplicity, to arrange heterogeneity while maintaining disparity.

Some proposed actions are conceptualised and carried through collectively. Our shared knowledge and expertise is applied towards accomplishing a creative project, the aim of which is to modify the intended use of architectural and urban elements.[2] This communal project could, for instance, emphasise one existing documented action to give it more resonance and a stronger impact. Some actors might want to pursue, reinterpret, extend, or do variations of existing adaptive actions.[3]

Relational Shift

Adaptive Actions initiates a relational shift. Resident collaboration is an essential part of the process, which involves the hybridisation of conventional and unusual urban realities, disseminating such novel notions as 'deghettoisation', as well as the use and assertion of public spaces through site-specific interventions. This relationship with residents in itself constitutes the first element of this action-research project and is critical to its success. Whilst the instigator may intervene in public spaces, he primarily acts as catalyst. Relationally, the focus is on the concepts brought forward by the instigator rather than strictly on what is produced. It is no longer a question of infiltrating public space but of penetrating the collective imagination. Consequently, the actors themselves become immersed in the infiltration process and act as agents of it. For the relational shift to happen, it must be an expression of the people as an integral part of the context.

The role of the instigator in this particular situation is to encourage a different attitude, initiate a new practice, exchange ideas, share

[1] Cf. Yves Citton, 'Puissance de la Variation, Maurizio Lazzarato', Multitudes n°24 (2006): 187-200; Maurizio Lazzarato, Puissances de l'invention: La Psychologie Économique de Gabriel Tarde Contre Économie Politique, (Paris: Les empêcheurs de Penser en Rond, 2002).

[2] A series of 'open houses' and workshops were organised at SPACE (London) to discuss several proposed actions or contexts of intervention—see Olympic walks and suppers following the 'All Aboard' action; www.adaptiveactions.net/action/46.

[3] Such as Gewuerfel's action 'Building the Future?' which reused the 'All Aboard' action paint to erase pictures taken by this urban photographer of the past and lost Lower Lea Valley in London; www.adaptiveactions.net/action/59.

knowledge and skills. This project explores, promotes and encourages daily actions, ways to stimulate active and committed participation and to challenge organised space, as well as imposed movement patterns, by creating positive tensions, measuring and testing the limits of tolerated appropriation. A multiplicity of actions—like displacing and leaving a chair in an unplanned place can have an impact on our urban lives.[4]

4 See for example, 'All Aboard' action; www.adaptiveactions.net/action/41.

Fig. 6. 'Olympic Perimeter Walk', London, January 2008. Photo: submitted by Adaptive Actions; www.adaptiveactions.net/action/46.

Fig. 7. 'All Aboard', London. Photo: submitted by Adaptive Actions; www.adaptiveactions.net/action/41.

Interstitial Experiments

In Liverpool, one is struck by the quantity of urban plots zoned as 'public lands' but designed to remain in disuse, fenced off. A project with benches entitled, *Public Loitering Area*[5] was undertaken, which aimed at adding an additional element to the fenced-off property—a good example of a punctual space-activating micro-action. The project offered local

5 Adaptive Actions is the continuation of prior research initiated at the Liverpool Biennial 2006—Public Loitering Area; www.adaptiveactions.net/action/21.

residents the opportunity to participate by placing a bench on the land or by proposing a location. After launching this urban action with several benches, others also joined in and installed many other benches on new sites and this continued for nigh on several months after the end of the Biennial.[6]

This project and other adaptive actions are most commonly micro-actions and constitute one form of resident participation complementary to conventional or non-conventional ways of building or to various-scale interventions. Micro, interstitial, actions are needed to complete and activate large structures incapable of, and not conceived for adaptation to constantly changing local realities. They give flexibility to large structures linked to increasingly complicated regulations, legal obligations, etc.

[6] A new phase of this project is being initiated currently by a Liverpool resident on new proposed sites—for news and future details go to the Adaptive Actions website.

Fig. 8. 'P L A: Public Loitering Area'. Photo: submitted by Anonymous; www.adaptiveactions.net/action/21. Fig. 9. 'Use Inflexions'. Photo: submitted by François; www.adaptiveactions.net/action/84.

Places and Non-places

In Montreal, Canada, in the late 80s, a Portuguese plaza was designed to commemorate and mirror the character profile of the neighbourhood. Today, virtually all Portuguese residents have moved elsewhere and this very specific cultural space is left as a strange fragment that answers in

no way to the contextual uses of the current residents. In this case and many others, citizen appropriation or actions represent an interesting alternative to adapt buildings to the flow of change and enable activation and meaning in different public spaces. Increased mobility and movement of populations, as well as acceleration phenomena displace people to places that have no personal memories, or personal links to desires… These frequent displacements mean that there is a need for personal appropriation in order to bring character and singularity to spaces, which might be too generic or, conversely, too specific to foster a sense of belonging.

Open Process and Architectural Appropriations Integrated to Future Building:

The submitted action 'Atwater',[7] showing bird feeders installed on the balcony of a large repetitive concrete tower, is an interesting addition; a (possibly) missing element in the conception of this important twenty-five floor, 150-metre-long residential project. Environmental studies have proven that similar towers in urban centres have a negative impact on bird life: they create barriers, disrupt flight patterns and reduce sources of food. This action, the initiator of which is unknown, could serve as an indicator—a sign of an unfulfilled need. It has been integrated into a new architectural project and programme.

Through similar documented actions, *Adaptive Actions* explores and gives value to non-linear, continuous construction processes with phases (conception, production, post production, management…) that allow distinctions to be attenuated and transitions to become less brutal or even non-existent. As Stephen Wright states about art in a broad sense, it's about thinking 'in terms of its specific means (its tools) rather than its specific ends (art work).[8]
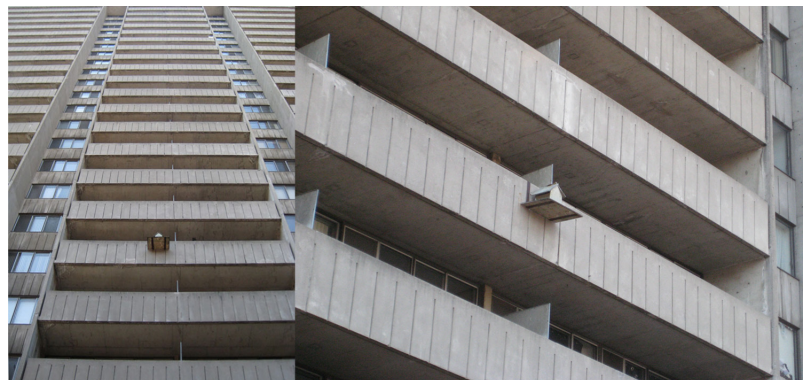

Fig. 10. 'Atwater'. Photo: submitted by Maxpro; www.adaptiveactions. net/action/65.

This new scenario brings non-existent transversal links, accelerated cycles, changed attitudes and roles. Buildings like cities are living entities, changing constantly in unpredictable ways and need to be

7   For further details; www. adaptiveactions.net/action/71.

8   Stephen Wright, 'The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade: An Essay on Use-value and Art Related Practice', Parachute 117 (2005): 123.

constantly rethought through all these cycles rather then simply built and demolished. All buildings are initially biased and comply to a specific programme. Buildings should be constantly observed, monitored, rethought, and reworked. Residents, upon intuition and observation, may suggest actions, which, with more means and further discussion, could be progressively materialised.
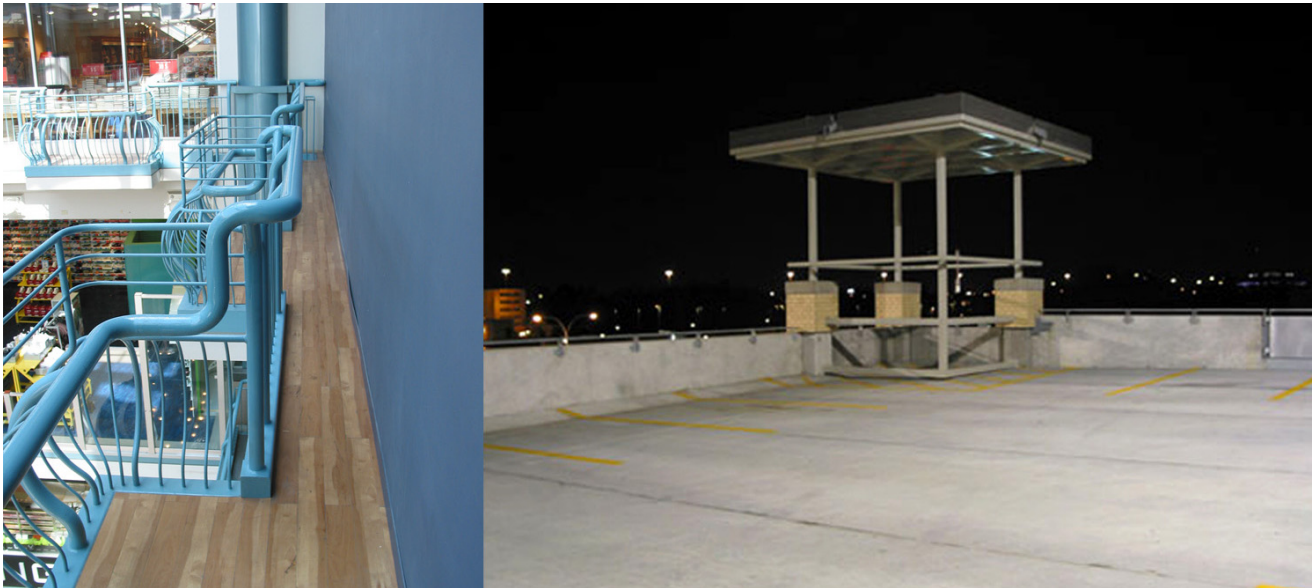

Fig. 11. 'Residual Spaces'. Photo: submitted by Surplus; www. adaptiveactions.net/action/86.

Transformable and Automated Architecture

To facilitate appropriations and allow adaptations, many flexible and mobile attributes are presently explored and integrated into constructions. The conceptualisation of such devices raises many issues and challenges. To what extent should or can objects or devices be contextualised to changing situations, users and new parameters? Moreover, to what extent can they answer the distinctive needs of users, of a programme or specific event? To that effect, various strategies for context-adaptation of devices can be introduced: positioning and setting modes, designs with component-modification or collapsible functions, dimensional variations… However, many transformable devices or construction elements have never been tested or activated by users and many mutative possibilities are symbolic. Many difficulties occur in using units conceived as transformable and adjustable devices. Adaptable elements are often not activated for various reasons: they are overly complicated or non-functional, too time-consuming, unnecessary, or simply do not correspond to the real need for change. Most mutative attributes are utopian and offer little scope for individual innovation.

There are effective risks related to an aesthetic based on ideals of transformation, which can decrease the usage potential; for instance,

pillar-shaped billboards (such as *Colonnes Morris*, a piece of urban furniture often found in Paris and other cities used for advertising) are unusable due to the impossibility of modification, lack of mobility, and an overly complicated design, rendering permanent that which was supposed to be temporary.

In the research project *Adaptive House*, adaptation is on the contrary effortless.[9] Hundreds of sensors survey movement and behaviour and a central computer hub analyses and stores the data and then creates patterns of use. Programming is carried out and adjusted by computers. Temperatures are adapted to body activity: higher temperatures if inactive, lower if very active... To counter current building ineffectiveness, architects are presently inventing and exploring a new self-referential and self-mutating digital and automated architecture that could maintain constant dialogue with its context and the human body; it would necessitate little human participation, input or activation. These pre-programmed buildings constantly survey and analyse users and context (in relation to body rather then intellect), report and implement adjustments accordingly. But how and when will this new environment be effective? To what degree will it be ethical and respect privacy rights whilst forecasting on desired changes?

No Final End

Not all future transformations can and should be anticipated and integrated in building production and design. Rather then being planned, they should be given space, a structure to grow, to expand, to take shape. By leaving undetermined and un-programmed spaces in buildings, architects could contribute to their development. Funds could be allocated to future programming of events and possible transformations, which could be coordinated by a group of citizens.
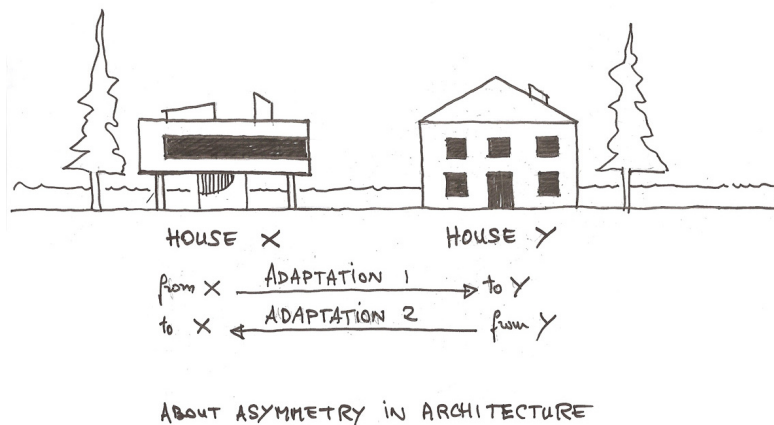
But for buildings to be able to change progressively, more organically without resorting to traditional grand schemes and gestures necessitates an ideological shift. As long as representational space continues to dominate over innovation and exploration, little change is possible. The predominant emphasis on looks over experience, ideas or uses is certainly one of the biggest obstacles to creating a new and alternative architecture. This architecture is less oriented on the final product and more on the 'use value',[10] more on what Anne Querrien calls the building's 'enunciation'.[11] The interest and desires are there but the academic, professional and media pressure limits and controls explorations, restrains exaltation and creative possibilities. How can we go beyond curiosity and amusement and begin to implement and make these changes?

Adaptive actions are often seen as individualistic, personal, fragmentary and spontaneous. Since these actions are unplanned, rarely thought

[9] For further details see Adaptive House at; www.adaptiveactions.net/action/67.

[10] Stephen Wright, 'The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade', p. 123.

[11] Anne Querrien, 'Fabriquer des Seuils à une Troisième Nature, Multitudes nº20 (2005): 13-22.

HOUSE X   HOUSE Y

from X →ADAPTATION 1→ to Y
to X ←ADAPTATION 2← from Y

ABOUT ASYMMETRY IN ARCHITECTURE

[12]   Such as the housing project by Le
Corbusier in Pessac, France. It was
transformed by residents and is presently
being brought back to its original state.

Fig. 12. Pessac by Le Corbusier. Photo: submitted by Bobby; www.adaptiveactions.net/action/75.

Fig. 13. 'Dots versus Demolition D'. Photo: submitted by FNJFP; www.adaptiveactions.net/action/65.

Fig. 14. Roof Dwelling. Photo: submitted by Marie and Jean; www.adaptiveactions.net/action/52.

through globally (i.e. in relation to the building as a whole and the city) they are often considered undesirable, of little value and non-constructive.

Adaptive actions can negatively alter the overall visual effect of the building by creating unplanned additions. However, many user adaptations are positive and form part of the normal evolution of the construction as a nuance or critique of the building, and should therefore, in many cases, be encouraged and reviewed before they are removed.[12] Of course, input from a mediator or coordinator can balance the needs and requirements of all parties, recognising the value of aesthetics, materials, urban and building design, as well as taking into account a crucial element in all of these: usage, which is undoubtedly more efficient when the users' perspective is considered. Very little thought and time are given and budgets allocated to post-production, in order to pursue, improve, activate and adapt constructions for various and changing users.

Resident's adaptive actions prolong the life of buildings by progressively adapting their environments in a number of small, sustainable moves, thus avoiding accelerated or premature degradation, as well as avoiding the need to resort to large, urban renewal projects.