Architecture and Urban Studies

An Awkward Kinship

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Document Version
Final published version

Published in:
Nordic Journal of Urban Studies

DOI:
10.18261/njus.2.2.1

Publication date:
2022

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Citation for published version (APA):
Sachs Olsen, C., & Juhlin, C. (2022). Architecture and Urban Studies: An Awkward Kinship. *Nordic Journal of Urban Studies*, *2*(2), 101-107. https://doi.org/10.18261/njus.2.2.1

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Download date: 15. Oct. 2024

Nordic Journal of Urban Studies
Universitetsforlaget
EDITORIAL
Volume 2, No. 2-2022, p. 101–107
ISSN online: 2703-8866
DOI: https://doi.org/10.18261/njus.2.2.1

Architecture and urban studies – an awkward kinship

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Introduction

The relation between architecture and urban studies seems to be one of an awkward kinship, characterised by mutual misapprehension as much as mutual interest (Bille & Sørensen, 2016; Ingold, 2013). Architecture and urban studies have distinct disciplinary origins, divergent practical objectives as well as different modes of operation. The architect, historically and conventionally speaking, works with urban form at the scale of the building or masterplan (LeCorbusier, 1929), while the urban researcher is conventionally the scholar of urban processes in the form of upscale phenomena like place and space, including a broader focus on social structures, practices and processes (Jacobs, 1961; Massey, 2005).

This special issue explores this awkward kinship, focusing specifically on the generative potential of urban research and practice operating in the interdisciplinary space between and across architecture and urban studies. Far from trying to determine possibilities in advance, the contributions in this special issue seek to create connections across the diverse communities of knowledge and practice that constitute "the urban", asking the following questions: What are the practical implications of interdisciplinary collaboration? What might the practices of urban studies learn from the speculative and propositional thinking of architecture? And what might architects learn from the social and economic theorising of urban studies? While critical theory does not automatically lead to a critical architectural practice, what critical approaches from urban studies might have the potential to expand the current practice and politics of architecture, for example in relation to issues of social exclusion and inclusion?

The, sometimes deep, divide between architecture and urban studies (Haarstad et al., 2021) might relate to how each of these disciplines historically structured knowledge and labour. Architecture is at its core a design-led discipline orientated towards (re)making and (re)shaping space. Urban studies, in contrast, is at its core an analytical discipline orientated

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towards description and diagnosis of already-existing social and spatial circumstances. To the sceptical architect, the urban researcher may well appear to be locked down to empirical analyses of "why it is like that" without being able to imaginatively consider "what ought to be done" (Macarthur & Stead, 2006; Campbell, 2012). To the sceptical urban researcher, the architect may appear to be stuck in a rather deterministic micro-scale such that the role of design itself is overstated at the expense of social, cultural and economic context (Andersen & Røe, 2017; Till, 2009).

More optimistically, the architect might think that the urban researcher offers helpful analyses that can inform their practice. And, vice versa, the urban researcher might find that architecture may play a role in positively influencing wider socio-political processes. There is, for example, a growing body of socially-orientated and politically-motivated architecture that goes significantly beyond the designing of material objects and individual buildings (see e.g., Lorne, 2017; McFarlane, 2011). Terms such as "spatial agency" (Awan, Schneider & Till, 2011; Doucet & Cupers, 2009), "practising architecture" (Jacobs & Merriman, 2011) and "caring architecture" (Fitz & Krasny, 2019) situate design practices within the social production of space, which is a key concern for urban studies. This expanded architectural practice foregrounds how design intelligence can be deployed in open-ended, progressive ways to challenge the political economic forces that shape the production and commodification of the built environment.

At the same time, there has been a disturbing sense that architectural work between and across disciplines – grounded in critical, ethical and political debate – is being appropriated and used to deliver instrumental government policy and market-led interests (Rendell, 2015; Andersen & Røe, 2017). To the critical urban researcher, this situation might reinforce a perception of architecture as answering questions rather than posing them and providing market-driven solutions rather than challenging ideological norms. On the other hand, a critical view on the field of urban studies shows that while urban researchers have done much to help us understand and analyse urban problems rooted in market-driven solutions and current ideological norms, the field has been far less successful at imagining hands-on, just and sustainable alternatives (Braun, 2015). Stemming from these contradictions, tensions and appreciations, the awkward kinship between architecture and urban studies can be seen to relate to what Richard Sennett (2018, p.3) tellingly puts forward as "the ethical problem of cities today: Should urbanism represent society as it is, or seek to change it?"

The Awkwardness of Interdisciplinarity

An abracadabra word, interdisciplinarity has long been seen to conjure magical potential to tackle urban challenges but all too often affecting little actual change (Hawkins et al., 2015). As debates around the practices and possibilities of inter-, trans-, cross- and multi-disciplinarity gather pace, advocates subscribe to whatever flavour of disciplinary relations suits them with an enthusiastic delight: who would not want to be interdisciplinary? Sceptics, however, question the emergence and wider import of such movements, often born from concerns with instrumentalism and social accountability. This ambivalence points to the need to think more carefully about the politics and practice of interdisciplinary work in terms of how it might be better understood as widening our perspectives on urban challenges rather than directly changing cities in and of itself. The potential of interdisciplinarity in this regard is to demand that we, whether as architects or urban researchers, operate between and at the edge of our discipline(s) and in so doing question the ways in which we usually work. Accordingly, we are encouraged to call into question what we normally take for granted, that we question our methodologies – the way we do things – and our terminologies – the words we give to the things we do. This is by no means an easy task and might very well put us in awkward positions.

As the psychology professor Joshua Clegg observes in his article *The Importance of Feeling Awkward: A Dialogical Narrative of Phenomenology of Socially Awkward Situations* (2012), most people experience awkwardness in terms of tension, discomfort, and anxiety. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that an experience of awkwardness is often accompanied by a strong desire to somehow redress or resolve the awkwardness. Hence, the awkward situation is transformed either by avoiding it or by directly addressing it and attempting to resolve it. According to Clegg, avoidant responses are associated with a magnification and extension of the effects of awkwardness while direct responses are associated with a re-established sense of social harmony. He interprets these findings to suggest that feeling and expressing awkwardness focuses attention and intention on social relationships; when these feelings are expressed, others can take them up and become invested in the social transformation they engender.

In a similar vein, architectural historian Jane Rendell (2015) argues that interdisciplinary work within architecture is not only critical, ethical and political, but also emotional: it is difficult, not only materially and intellectually, but also physically, because it often involves coming up against invested positions situated at the heart of institutional power structures. And if that is not demanding enough, one also has to consider the affects associated with exchanging what one knows for what one does not know and surrendering one's competence and specialism for the fear of inability and the associated dangers of failure. She concludes that interdisciplinary work between and across architecture produces a destabilising engagement with existing power structures, "allowing on the one hand the emergence of fragile forms of new and untested experience, knowledge and understanding, and on the other those more unwelcome feelings of anxiety and ambivalence" (2015: 131). If interdisciplinarity can be defined as the making of relationships between one discipline and another, then one might argue that the very work of interdisciplinarity is configured around the process of making relationships, continuously confronting the question of what it means to relate to, and therefore recognise, an "other".

The contributions in this special issue confront this question from different perspectives. Ese and Ese – an interdisciplinary author team consisting of an architect and a sociologist – scrutinise how interdisciplinary collaborations between architects and social scientists are achieved in practice. By defining and relating useful terms such as discipline, profession, interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity, Ese & Ese explore the disciplinary roots of the awkward kinship. They note that, despite the increasing demand for, and provision of, interdisciplinary services, there has been very little research on the practicalities of interdisciplinary work between architects and social scientists. A key challenge for interdisciplinarity in practice, they note, is the lack of a clear definition of what this means. Interdisciplinary efforts between architects and social scientists range from the colonisation of the professional field of "the other" to the barring of "the other" from certain tasks. This in turn sustains interdisciplinarity as an imperative rather than a meaningful innovation. Ese & Ese thus diagnose a gap between discourses celebrating interdisciplinarity and the practical realities and experienced benefits of actually doing the work. Accordingly, the findings of their study point to the tensions, conflicts and limitations of the so-called boundary work between the disciplines, but still also attest to a belief in a generative creative friction that might hold "big potential" for expanding work practices and perspectives.

Critical stances on interdisciplinarity go hand in hand with critical stances on participation. Both Ese & Ese and Baxter, a practicing architect and architectural scholar, point to the increasing institutional demand to involve citizens in architectural processes, creating a need for interdisciplinary collaborations between architects and the social sciences. For Baxter, to work between the disciplines of architecture and urban research is ideally to work critically with questions of power and to critique institutional contexts. Focusing on the Urban Living Lab as a presumably ideal environment in which to nurture relations between urban research and spatial design, he identifies a lack of critical scrutiny of the assumptions, ideologies, power relations and epistemologies that underpin such participatory platforms. Such critical scrutiny, he argues, is urgent given the spread of Urban Living Labs globally as a powerful tool in the context of knowledge production and innovation processes. To enable a mode of critical (self-) questioning in this regard, Baxter argues that spatial design has much to learn from critical approaches developed in urban studies, in which questions of power and politics are central concerns. Hence, bringing together urban research approaches and spatial design practices, he outlines a novel and hybrid approach to critical spatial design praxis within Urban Living Labs. However, a critical reading of the way Urban Living labs are used to promote a neoliberal agenda, and in a self-critical reading of the practice-based research project with which the paper deals, the author shows how participation runs the risk of reproducing the power asymmetries and injustices it hoped to overcome. The way out of this, Baxter argues, is not achieved through interdisciplinarity unless we move from Western epistemologies rooted in solution-orientated modes of action and rational, instrumental and linear ways of knowing, and towards decoloniality, ecologies of knowledges and new modes of situated un/re-learning.

Geirbo et al. have more faith in the ability of urban design to promote inclusion through what they identify as an "interdisciplinary pragmatism" in which architects, designers, planners and social scientists share a sense of urgency and obligation to come up with solutions to critical and complex urban challenges. Presenting cases of urban design projects in Medellín, Colombia and Beirut, Lebanon, they seek to demonstrate how urban design can accommodate multiple expressions of interests and identities and provide a common ground for interaction between different social and cultural groups. Key here is what they identify as an "interpretive flexibility," pointing to the capacity of urban design to inspire practices, attract users, or set in motion processes that were not an expected or intended outcome of the design. Such interpretive flexibility, they argue, is the outcome of the, already-existing, collaboration and mutual exchange between architecture and urban studies. Hence, they do not identify an awkward relation between architecture and urban studies but focus instead on "the critical need for practical interdisciplinary collaborations [that] overshadows the contemplation of disciplinary dynamics" (Geirbo et al, this issue, pp. 143).

Exemplifying many of the issues discussed in the three articles, the commentary articles concerning the work of Secretary and Carlberg call for universal standards to prevent the instrumentalisation and ethical challenges at stake in both participation and interdisciplinarity. Represented by housing "in the aggregate" and by the "social bricks" of welfare institutions, both the architectural office (Secretary) and the social scientists (Carlberg) point to how disciplinary boundaries and political agendas get in the way of providing universal rights through the built environment. By arguing for basic structures such as standards, laws and regulations as ways to secure equality and well-being, they remind us that interdisciplinarity is also about acknowledging that neither architects nor social scientists operate in a vacuum. To Secretary, it is the sheer quantity and standardisation of housing that forces the discipline of architecture to re-engage with the city as a whole rather than as made up of individualised homes. Carlberg, in a similar vein, point to the need to use knowledge about what makes people thrive in and through the built environment to influence the market – in their case leaders in the social welfare sector who act as property developers – to demand more of architecture. Carlberg's work with welfare architecture, and the general interest in Universal Design, which they see as the backdrop for the increasing demand for interdisciplinarity, supports Secretary's bold claim that if we insist on conceptualising our disciplines and their products as unique, the capacity to design for social equality will suffer accordingly. Both commentary articles, in unison with Baxter's call for more ethical forms of collaboration, show us that it is not "only" a question of working well together, but also a question of the politics of structures of production.

The final contribution to this special issue is a book review, by Backsell, of Keller Easterling's newest book Medium Design. The book contributes to this issue's exploration of interdisciplinarity by helping us understand why it is so difficult to reshuffle our cultural habits when deciding what constitutes a solution or a problem within our fields. This difficulty is indeed reflected in the articles in this special issue. The authors all point to the problems arising from confronting analytical problematisation with solution-orientated modes of action, a knot which they all struggle to unravel without falling into disciplinary binaries. Ese & Ese (pp. 119, this issue), for example, show with the words of their interviewees how "the social scientists amassed information and problematised issues, architects looked to find singular solutions." Similarly, Baxter (pp. 135, this issue) reflects on the Urban Living Lab by questioning its solution-orientated approach which did not leave "enough time to unpack and unlearn its own practices and the political context in which it was operating." Easterling's book, Backsell argues, suggests a way forward by emphasising a tacit know-how that we all possess and which might help us resist simplified binaries and dichotomies between right and wrong, left and right, discipline and non-discipline. To do this we have to take the time to look for undisclosed dispositions and latent potentials that are dormant in the periphery of our knowledges and practices. Key here is to be able to navigate complexity rather than constantly trying to reduce it.

Towards New Academic Practices of Urbanism?

Throughout the special issue, we find the recognition that the awkward relationship between architecture and urban studies requires that we confront and address issues to do with criticality, decoloniality, interpretation and flexibility. These issues are fuelled with a desire to understand more fully, and more problematically, the interdisciplinary space between the two fields. In turn, this requires us to articulate new and collaborative definitions of urbanism. Perhaps nowhere has this task felt more pertinent and at times more urgent than across the field of urban studies, where interdisciplinarity is increasingly being formalised through new research centres, funding schemes and the naming of new fields, such as the urban humanities (see Cuff et al., 2020). Yet, while this work is already happening in practice, as the articles in this special issue demonstrate, finding the formats to accommodate such disciplinary liminality within an institutionalised academic context seems to be more of a challenge.

In assembling this special issue, we experienced this challenge in relation to the participatory and representative space created through this journal. We wanted to include peer reviewed articles by architects and urban researchers alike but stumbled upon another awkward relationship between the two fields: the question of what "counts" as scholarly writing practice. Peer review is important to subject an author's work to the scrutiny of other experts in the field in order to advance it. But for some creative practitioners, such as architects, there are concerns around the double-standards of a research culture founded on a so-called "textual imperialism" (Hawkins, 2021: 142). That is, a culture which risks undermining creative practice's claim to knowledge production by almost always requiring the production of a specific kind of text – an introduction, a methodology, a literature review, a discussion, and a conclusion. Many of the contributions by architects that we received for this special issue challenged this structure and thereby also questioned the relationship between practice and other forms of research, insisting on the legitimacy of conducting research through their practice. In so doing, they explored how writing could be "different" than the imagination of the "academic" writing which is much more established within the field of urban studies.

While we fully support the endeavour to challenge settled forms of knowledge production and styles of academic writing, it turned out to be difficult getting these papers through the peer review process. This difficulty points to the need for the social sciences to provide more opportunities to experiment with content and form in academic writing. The growth in so-called "experimental spaces" within mainstream social science journals (i.e., Emotion, Space and Society's "creative interventions" sections) attests to this need. However, much more work needs to be done to tailor the peer review process to cater for a variety of formats and alternative claims to what counts as academic knowledge production. Such work is beyond the scope of this special issue and the capacity of this journal. Hence, we addressed the challenge by presenting fewer articles in the format of a peer reviewed article and increased instead the number of articles in a commentary format to accommodate a broader diversity of approaches.

Noting the challenges not only of interdisciplinary collaboration but also interdisciplinary publication might be an appropriate way to close this introduction – not only because these challenges are very real but also because in the pages of this special issue there are significant and meaningful disagreements about how the awkward kinship between architecture and urban studies should be understood, and from where, by whom, and in what ways efforts of cross-fertilisation and collaboration should be generated. We invite you to read this special issue with this sense of disagreement in mind with the hope that the convergences, tensions and gaps in the issue are themselves productive of new relationships, thoughts and practices at the intersection between architecture and urban studies.

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