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Agency in the Sauna: The Architectural Monument in the Era of the Anthropocene

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Abstract

This article takes the public sauna at Frihamnen, a post-industrial harbor site in Gothenburg, Sweden, as an object of study in order to discuss the architectural monument in the era of the Anthropocene. Designed as a temporary prototype in 2014 by the Berlin based architecture office raumlabor, the building was recently granted monument status by the Gothenburg City Council. This article argues that, in order to respond to the environmental anxiety in current discourse, a new analogy for monument is needed. Building on scholarship from Alois Riegl and Anthony Vidler, the article proposes a theoretical position on the analogy for monument via a critique on the absence of contingency in abstract planning processes. The standpoint supports an analysis of the architecture of the public sauna, which identifies several aspects of agency. The article demonstrates that the public sauna visualizes prospects for spatial design in the context of ecological degradation. Deducing intersections between agency and representation, it proclaims an incentive for shifting the analogy for the architectural monument from body to agency.

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1 - On 26 April 2019, Älvstranden Utveckling AB submitted a decision letter to the Gothenburg City Council with the recommendation to grant permanent status for the public sauna with the motivation that the edifice encompasses a key component for the City to meet the politically adopted goal of facilitating centrally located baths in Gothenburg. On 23 May 2019, the Gothenburg City Council decided to follow the recommendation; the Gothenburg City Council additionally recognized that the public sauna had been the nominee and grand prize-winner of several prestigious architectural awards in Sweden (Älvstranden Utveckling AB, 2019. Kommunfullmäktige Göteborgs stad, 2019).

Introduction

On 23 May 2019, the Gothenburg City Council granted permanent status for the public sauna at the post-industrial Frihamnen harbor site in Gothenburg, Sweden.¹ Designed as a prototype by the Berlin-based architecture office named raumlabor, and granted a temporary building permit in the summer of 2014, it was constructed with reused materials in a communal building-together process, and was intended to last only five years. Composed in topology with surface and columns sharing the same continuum, the object, which stands elevated above the harbor, draws on its patchwork of corroded corrugated steel sheets and oblique window settings to signify the sense of temporality by which it was founded. When the governing body decided to eternalize the building, it committed not only to the administrative processes of amended jurisdiction, but also to the tectonic – and presumably rather costly – undertaking of preserving the structural and material members. This meant making them fit for permanence, while still maintaining the aesthetics of temporality. Committed to keeping the public sauna alive in the minds of future generations, the political body at the Gothenburg City Council shifted the status of the public sauna from prototype to monument. This small structure, as a result, demonstrates the large idea that explorative design may overcome policy procedure as the decision-making principle in urban governance.

What does this new architectural monument commemorate? Since its inauguration in February 2015, the public sauna has become the poster child for the experimental approach to urban transformation that, against all odds, continues to guide the organization of territory at Frihamnen. Dubbed *Jubileumsparken 0.5*, the process began in 2013 as a collaboration between the Gothenburg City Planning Department and the municipally-owned developer company Älvstranden Utveckling AB. The aim was to initiate the long-term process of rehabilitating an abandoned harbor into a centrally located waterfront district. Since then, the actors of *Jubileumsparken 0.5* have persistently discarded conventional master planning for an exploratory planning process, aimed at creating a new identity at the post-industrial site through prototyping (Dahl, 2016). Adopting numerous tactics,



Fig. 1 – The public sauna at Frihamnen, Gothenburg, Sweden. Photo credit: Jessica Segerlund/Jubileumsparken.

from instigating socially inclusive sailing schools, to utilizing the concept of park as a Trojan Horse in city administration, 15 prototypes have been established, each with the explicit purpose of exploring methods and tools that account for the contingent, open-ended, and indeterminate in urban development (Dahl, Dahl, 2016). This experimental approach has caused confusion in various levels of city administration, and has also slowed down the economical processes in land appropriation and real estate speculation, which, according to Pier Vittorio Aureli, encompass the primary powers in city governance (Aureli, 2011: 11-13). Thus it seems rather counterproductive for the City Council to eternalize an artifact whose iconography of impermanence signifies an approach to urban development that undermines the authority of the governing body. But there are other reasons that this political decision is rather difficult to apprehend. Henri Lefebvre discusses architecture and readability, and he argues that “[m]onumentality [...] always embodies and imposes a clearly intelligible message [...] it says what it wishes to say – yet it hides a good deal more [masking] the will to power and the arbitrariness of power

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beneath signs and surfaces which claim to express collective will and collective thought” (Lefebvre, 1991: 143). Thus for the City Council to grant monumental status to a sauna, which is a building type with a long-standing Nordic cultural tradition, may not only seem politically suspect. It may also counteract one of the City’s core objectives with the Frihamnen transformation, which is to create “room for people to express themselves in socially and culturally diverse ways” (City of Gothenburg, 2012: 12). While architectural form in monumentality signifies fixity, the program of the public sauna signifies instant flux. Referred to as “bathing culture” rather than sauna by the *Jubileumsparken 0.5* project group, its performance and identity proclaims references beyond the Nordic to include any culture that utilizes heated air or steam bath as a method of cleansing and relaxation, such as the Turkish hamam, the Korean spa or the Japanese onsen, among others (raumlabor, 2015). Managed with the explicit purpose of counteracting segregation, the public sauna is, in fact, an instrument for ever-evolving socio-economic and cultural variations. When turned into a monument, the contingency associated with the artifact itself impedes city governance to unify around a set of normative values, which serve to further undermine authority. To understand the monument in this political turn, we may look beyond the obvious reasons for the commemoration of buildings, and instead identify a noteworthy gesture of historical concern postulated by the architecture of the public sauna beyond the premises of local politics. The architectural monument has always been an imposition of spatial order, by which acts of preservation or conservation mediate the practices of history with those of the future. Alois Riegl discussed the monument through three forms of memory-values, which were determined through visual recordings and the notion of age as a method for negotiating conflicts in conservation (Riegl, 1982). Thordis Arrhenius explains that “Riegl saw this visual directness as the future potential of age in a mass-society directed [...] by moods and feelings, Stimmung, rather than rational thinking” (Arrhenius, 2003: 51). The visual became for Riegl what Walter Benjamin may describe as a universal analogy with the “unrelenting confrontation of the [...] past with the present” – a tool for acknowledg-

ing the emotional force of history in his own society of modernity (Benjamin, 1999: 898).

While Riegl's analogy with the visual may be useful in neo-classical discourse, his notion of age does not comply "with the collapse of the classical tradition and the birth of technologically dependent architecture" (Vidler, 1992: 69). Anthony Vidler explores a theoretical context for the architectural monument beyond Riegl's Renaissance tradition by shifting the analogy for monument from age to body. By correlating the idea of the architectural monument with an embodiment and abstract representation of the human body, Vidler proposes a theoretical framework for tracing the idea of monument through the technologically dependent era which, since the advent of modernism, has made a "fundamental break from all theories of architecture that [cater to] classical humanism" (Vidler, 1992: 69-70). Yet his anthropomorphic approach to the architectural monument becomes problematic in a time when critical revision of human authority in planetary processes is sorely needed. The environmental anxiety in current discourse calls for an updated analogy for the architectural monument.

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The Architectural Monument in the Anthropocene

As the architectural monuments in city evolution "not only [are] preserved but continuously presented as propelling elements of development," they entail the empowerment to visualize intersections between the past and the future (Rossi, 1982: 60). In eras of paradigmatic shift, the analogy for the architectural monument should therefore be retheorized through the awareness of change that catalyzes new imaginaries and, by extension, the formation of new discourse (DeLoughrey, 2019). Such momentum implies, today, the Anthropocene.

Theories of the Anthropocene offer a framework for extrapolating environmental concerns. In science, the Anthropocene denotes the present geological epoch, in which humans are the principal cause of permanent planetary change. The *wicked problems* in contemporary culture are all attributed to the effects of human activity, including changing climates, the proliferation of technofossils, the terraforming of land and ocean floor, and so forth (Rittel, Webber,

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1973). Christophe Bonneuil contextualizes the cultural origins and conditions of the Anthropocene in “the stories that the elites of industrial modernity have told themselves – about nature as external and purposeless, about the world as resource, about human exceptionalism, about progress and freedom as an escape from nature’s determinations and limits, about technology as quasi-autonomous prime mover” (Bonneuil, 2015). These stories, which are written and expressed in what Lefebvre calls “abstract space,” began to advance the commodification of resources and intensify the environmental effects of production and consumption in the advent of modern industrialization – and they continue to do so (Lefebvre, 1991). As urban planning proceeds through abstract space, associated practices uphold an intricate web of policies and provisions. Such prescriptive operations obfuscate the opportunities for individuals to let the unpredictable play an active role in the shaping of visionary prospects. Abstract planning opposes therefore the exploratory planning that characterizes *Jubileumsparken 0.5*, where “various urban players [are involved] as early as possible in the transformation processes” (raumlabor, 2020).

Urban planning theory is a scientific discipline in that it draws on empirical data and observations to interact with the complexities in urban culture (Choi, 1997; Marcus, 1993). While we cannot do without science and reason, as Bruno Latour argues, “we must both broaden and limit the reach of the empirical sciences” (Latour, 2018: 78). As policies and provisions depending on empiricism are referred to *a posteriori*, they fail to process the uncertainties and ambiguity that surface beyond the *status quo* of conventional practices. This lack of contingency becomes problematic, primarily in the light of climate crisis, because, as Jonathan Barnett clarifies, “[t]raditionally city designers had been able to assume that the natural environment was a stable background for their work, its forces understood and controllable through engineering [but today] the climate of the earth has become far more dynamic” (Barnett, 2011: 3). To increase contingency in the building of cities, it is crucial for architects and urban planners to explore tools and methods feasible to formulate *a priori* hypotheses in the politics of territorial

organization. Latour discusses the apprehensive relationship between territorialization and industrial modernity, and he states that it is “a question of attachment, of lifestyle, that’s being pulled out from under us, a question of land, of property giving away beneath us” (Latour, 2018: 8). Rania Ghosn and El Hadi Jazairy share Latour’s critique, and they deploy the architectural drawing “for projecting alternative forms of organizing life” (Ghosn, Jazairy, 2018: 13). The two architects state that representation “is both an aesthetic practice and a political one,” and they argue that “those concerned about climate change must make the Earth visible again in political consciousness” (Ibid.: 23). Latour is also explicit about the importance of political awareness in the Anthropocene, and he argues that “the crucial political task is to distribute agency as far and in as differentiated a way as possible” (Latour, 2014: 17). The concept of agency is central in Latour’s scholarship. He argues that “information from the social and physical world is translated into objects to give them agency to act in the place of people” (Martin, 2005: 284). Such performance provides a link to the architecture discipline, where the architectural monument is an artifact with agency to mediate historical protocols and future rituals. Thus, a synthesis of Latour and Ghosn and Jazairy suggests that the analogy for an architectural monument in the era of the Anthropocene should bring into representation – into aesthetics and politics – the agency that tends to be rendered opaque in abstract planning process.

The Architecture of the Public Sauna

The new monument at Frihamnen can be utilized to extrapolate intersections between representation and agency in the era of the Anthropocene. The edifice is erected on a pre-existing offshore platform, and thus is accessible only through a footbridge. The platform is a historical maritime element for the mooring of cargo ships, which facilitates a program that links land and water activities. Its use value vanished when the industrial harbor ceased to operate. Reconceptualized into the foundation for the public sauna, the updated purpose of the offshore platform at Frihamnen intersects with its naval references to usher in new meaning for industrial artifacts in maritime space. It

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Fig. 2 – The co-creation process at Jubileumsparken 0.5. Illustration. Courtesy of raumlaborberlin.

provides an aesthetic reference to the distribution of program in the midst of a harbor basin. The anchoring of the building at an offshore mooring system not only establishes an original location for raumlabor's sauna, more importantly it is a comment on the role of architecture at the waterfront. Local governments – from Hong Kong to San Francisco to Gothenburg – are currently engaged in the rehabilitation of industrial waterfronts. While the economic benefits of such enterprises are well known, the opportunities to investigate new intersections between building and water are too often neglected. While conventions in jurisdiction and construction management tend to discard creative interpretations of habitation at the water's edge, the foundation for the public sauna suggests novel approaches to organizing life by extrapolating alternatives to the land and water dichotomy. Recasting the memory of an industrial artifact, it gives architecture agency in urban processes to explore new sensitivities to the particular configuration of a maritime site, and to test such sensitivities through design and construction.

A design principle of *as found* is present throughout the design of the public sauna. Draped with reused and corroded corrugated steel sheets, its stealthy figure proclaims a tectonic quality that, at a distance, renders it difficult to distinguish from the surrounding decay of harbor elements. Consequently it operates in a contradictory dichotomy of concealed landmark and iconic architecture, simultaneously striking and a bit unsettling. Designed with architectural expertise, the construction was pursued as a communal 'building together' event, where the general public teamed up with the architects to erect and clad the structure. This co-creation process gives architecture agency to reduce abstraction in city governance by shifting public participation in urban development from planning to doing.

While the building form in topology and tectonics of the sauna instigate a disparate, almost haphazard, impression, the great care in detailing and craft, as well as the nifty leveraging of site-specific qualities, reveal

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Fig. 3 - Birch trees
and the promenade.
Courtesy of smog-
studio.

Fig. 4 – Architecture for rising sea water levels. Courtesy of smogstudio.



The system of elevated walkways, which morphs into the footbridge and spans across the quay, imply a distinction between architecture and nature.

a design approach that is far from arbitrary. The small gathering of birch trees through which the visitor passes at the entry point have, for example, been carefully selected in order to benefit from the site-specific atmosphere created by the birches' white trunks and foliage. Incorporated in the *promenade*, they supplement the experience of the quay, which through decades of neglect has deteriorated into post-industrial aesthetics. The system of elevated walkways, which morphs into the footbridge and spans across the quay, imply a distinction between architecture and nature, while exposing the perceptual and climatic conditions of the site.

The four stilts that elevate the pinnacle of the sauna provide a critical comment on development practices in areas of rising seas. To address potential flooding scenarios, the City of Gothenburg has drafted a regulation that requires all new development to be built at a minimum of 2.80 meters above the current sea water level. While the 2.80 measure may be quantitatively contextualized, it fails to provide incentives for innovation in form and program. It does not stimu-



Fig. 5 – The interior of the public sauna. Courtesy of smog-studio.

late socio-economic mobilization, nor does it act as impetus for adaptable life forms, or catalyze resilient interfaces between fluctuating lifestyles and materialized urban fabric. While the 2.80 measure remains an abstract instruction, the four stilts give the public sauna agency to act on the radical shifts in human performance and interaction that will be required in the light of rising seawater levels.

The correlation between post-industrial aesthetics, topological form, and off-the-shelf building accessories, such as the lighting armatures, the industrial staircase, and the chain-link fencing, sequentialize the *promenade* aloft the structure and toward the elevated place of heat sessions, which reside about 6.5 meters above the sea water level. The interior stands in stark contrast to the exterior. Walls covered with light-colored wood shingles add softness, and signify a secluded space. The shingles' pattern guides the gaze through the windows, which have been positioned to synchronize a sense of privacy with views of the outside world, exposing the climate and the harbor activities. The intimacy of the interior caters to raum-

2 - The design and management of the public sauna is curated by *Platsbyggnad*, the main actor of *Jubileumsparken 0.5*. Serving as the mediator between planning, design, social sustainability, and community involvement, *Platsbyggnad* adopted the "Open Calls" and the "Parkrådet" as operational tools to cater for social and cultural inclusiveness in design and management practices (Göteborgs stad, 2017).

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labor's strategy of reinstating public baths as "intense place[s] for social gatherings in our cities [...] not only for relaxation and sport but also for politics, discussion, business deals, eroticism, hedonism and crime" (raumlabor, 2015). The design and management of interior space has been curated to avoid social and cultural differentiation – those being gender, race, religion or income – which gives the architectural program agency to act on equality measures in urban development.²

Concluding Statement

Architectural monuments throughout history have served to remind us about past social and political dramas, and about the urgency of historical references in the shaping of future scenarios. Perhaps the architectural monument in the era of the Anthropocene may prompt contingency in the collective agreement on rules and values, which will be essential for the necessary restructuring of urban planning and development praxis. The rather recent history of sustainability practice, for example, demonstrates that the conventions in policies and provisions, such as the zoning code and the master plan, tend to fail the agents of change by greenwashing the signifiers of sustainability (Jarzombek, 2008). Thus we need occasions that project alternatives to the *status quo* in urban process. The recent granting of an architectural monument in Gothenburg's waterfront rehabilitation does not necessarily provide such incentives. On the contrary, as we have seen in multiple rehabilitation projects, the eternalization of antagonizing artifacts may even serve to amplify conventions and commodify resistance. While such risks certainly also loom at Frihamnen, the bending of rules implicit in the design and administration process provide confidence. Even as the objective of the sauna was to attract public support, its aesthetics do not draw on mainstream culture to signify environmental concerns. Instead, it utilizes the agency of building form to visualize prospects for architectural design in the context of ecological degradation. According to Bruno Latour, this is the crucial task for governing bodies in the era of the Anthropocene (Latour, 2014: 17). Thus the building becomes a shapeshifter of politics in the quest of redirecting the traits from certainty to contingency.

While the contradictory relation to power remains problematic in the concept of monument, as Hen-

ri Lefebvre so thoroughly demonstrates, the act of mediating the practices of history with those of the future continues to imply an important role of historical artifacts (Lefebvre, 1991: 143). To provide adequate connotation, the analogy by which information is transferred ought to express both a vision for collective unity and be a tool for realizing those ideas. The environmental contingency inherent to the Anthropocene proclaims such apprehension, thus encompasses an incentive for shifting the analogy for monument from body to agency. Drawing on the amended status of the public sauna at Frihamnen, we have seen how representation in architectural design may gain possible impact on ecological measures in urban planning and development. Hence the introduction of performance, which calls for new momentum in urban development praxis by the fact that city administration will be required to continuously ‘participate’ in the monument by its need for constant maintenance. The materiality of the sauna, like the birch trees that form its entry, must be tended, cared for, which becomes part of its agency. Serving as an unexpected and small-scale monument of the resistance to abstract planning processes, the public sauna at Frihamnen demonstrates that environmental responses in contemporary discourse will not necessarily unfold through quantitative codes and systems, but rather through radical approaches to tectonics and process in the shaping of space for human use.

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