



Delft University of Technology

**The socius of architecture
spatialising the social and socialising the spatial**

Avermaete, Tom

DOI

[10.1080/13602365.2018.1479353](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2018.1479353)

Publication date

2018

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

The Journal of Architecture

Citation (APA)

Avermaete, T. (2018). The socius of architecture: spatialising the social and socialising the spatial. *The Journal of Architecture*, 23(4), 537-542. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2018.1479353>

Important note

To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable).
Please check the document version above.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download, forward or distribute the text or part of it, without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license such as Creative Commons.

Takedown policy

Please contact us and provide details if you believe this document breaches copyrights.
We will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



The *socius* of architecture: spatialising the social and socialising the spatial

Tom Avermaete

To cite this article: Tom Avermaete (2018) The *socius* of architecture: spatialising the social and socialising the spatial, The Journal of Architecture, 23:4, 537-542, DOI: [10.1080/13602365.2018.1479353](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2018.1479353)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2018.1479353>



© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 18 Jun 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 364



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The *socius* of architecture: spatialising the social and socialising the spatial

Tom Avermaete

TU Delft, Netherlands

(Author's e-mail address: t.i.p.avermaete@tudelft.nl)

socius 1, m: (gen plur. *sociūm*), a fellow, sharer, partner, comrade, companion, associate¹

Modern architecture cannot be thought without the social. The very concept of modern architecture came into being at the moment that the domain of the 'building arts' began to be positioned, consciously and explicitly, in relation to ideas of a modern society.² Even the most artistic approaches to modern architecture—from Futurism to De Stijl—have always maintained a firm relationship between their creative experiments and more broadly conceived social perspectives and visions. As a result, the social—as a domain of practice and, especially, as a field of reflection—has played a major role in the articulation of modern architecture and urban design. It has served as a key subtext for how modern architectural culture is defined and comprehended not only by architects and urban designers but also by other actors that are involved in the built environment.

From this perspective, the entire development of modern architecture can also be read as a wide spectrum of theoretical and practical positions taken *vis-à-vis* the social. Michael Hays has defined the outer ranges of this spectrum as either 'autonomous' or 'heteronomous' approaches.³ The first notion

refers to a position that strongly dissociates architecture from occurrences within society. Such a position regards architecture as a self-governing field that develops according to an internal rationale. The second conception represents the complete opposite view and regards architecture as an epiphenomenon, dependent on socio-economic, political and cultural processes for its various transformations. Seen from this perspective, architecture not only represents the society that produces it; it also reconfirms its hegemony and contributes to assuring its continuity. Modern architects—but also commissioners, politicians and managers—have continuously positioned themselves within the spectrum delimited by autonomous and heteronomous understandings of the building arts, alternating between moderate and extreme positions.

The French thinker Louis Althusser offers us a valuable perspective on conceptualising this alternating characteristic in his well-known essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)',⁴ in which he introduces the concept of 'relative autonomy' in order to illuminate the relationship that the cultural realm (including architecture) maintains with the economic, political and social fields. Relative autonomy signifies that none of these realms can be strictly reduced to

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



the others—or strictly determined by the others. In other words, that architectural practice cannot be reduced, for instance, to social and political practices, but at the same time is certainly not disconnected from them.

Althusser argues that this multiplicity of distinct practices exists always and only in a complex formation. Hence architectural practice exists as part of a system of interrelated economic, political, cultural and ideological practices, a formation characterised by relationships of domination and subordination. Moreover, he suggests that, within, there is a formation of 'structural causality' between the practice of architecture and other economic, political and ideological practices. They are structurally related and thus dependent upon one another. At the same time, however, Althusser also insists on the 'relative autonomy' of the different practices. Hence, architectural practice develops according to different logics and rationales than social, economic and political practice. Each of them, Althusser argues, has its singular rhythms of development intrinsic to itself, such that the formation of a practice is always 'unevenly developed', always a complex constellation of multiple contradictions. For architecture, this implies that it has relentlessly to calibrate, in theory and in practice, this relationship to the social, economic and political realms.

Against this background it should come as no surprise that the articles reproduced in this fifth special issue of *The Journal* explore in manifold ways the dense relationship between architecture and its *socius*. That this relation is almost an ontological feature of the built environment becomes clear

from Mary Ann Steane's 'Invisible city: a Jerusalem in the forest?' (*JoA* 12:1 2007). Steane offers an account of the Bielski partisans, a group of Polish Jews who engaged in active resistance to the Germans in the years between 1941 and 1944 from their hide-out camps in the forest. She illustrates how the decision to arrange the rudimentary constructions of the camp along the principle of a 'main street' with a central group of 'public buildings' and a place of assembly, allowed its occupants to imagine and inhabit it as a small town. As a result the Bielski partisans were able to recreate something of the social metabolism of the *shtetl*, a typical small Jewish town or village, and to achieve in the process a collective identity as a working community. This founding of a surrogate urban settlement appears to have been a minimum survival strategy, a basic means of establishing the conditions for social collaboration, as well as for preserving a memory of, and hope for, a proper life. With the example of the Bielski partisans, Steane demonstrates that the connection between the built environment and social meaning is a primary one that survives even in the harshest conditions.

The heteronomy of architecture not only encompasses the socio-practical field, but also the socio-economic domain. This emerges from the text of Didem Ekici 'In praise of poverty: the middle-class dwelling and asceticism in early twentieth-century Germany' (*JoA* 18:3 2013). This article examines the reciprocal relationship between architectural asceticism and capitalist economy by centering on the middle-class dwelling in early twentieth-century Germany. Ekici commences with an analysis of the concept of poverty in bourgeois imagination and

how it was articulated in the Wilhelmine middle-class dwelling. He reveals how middle-class attitudes to poverty were transforming in the context of Wilhelmine design reform and the debates around the architect Heinrich Tessenow's austere architecture in the years leading up to the First World War. The final part of his text focusses on the transformation of the ascetic discourse in architecture in the years of economic austerity during the war and its aftermath. Ekici's text demonstrates how in the German architectural culture of the early twentieth century 'poverty' is relentlessly a reference point, both cultural and real.

That not only practising architects and urban designers actively engage with the heteronomy of architecture becomes clear from the article 'Generative history: Marcel Poëte and the city as urban organism' by Diana Periton (*JoA* 11:4 2006). In this essay Periton probes the work of the French historian and archivist Marcel Poëte who in 1903 became the new head librarian of the *Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris*. The transformation of the library from a passive receptacle of historical documents to an active urban institute occurred in large part because of the role Poëte ascribed to the documents it contained, and the way in which he sought to use them to create a new narrative of the city. Poëte suggested treating the city explicitly as a living organism, that develops not just according to biological necessity, but also through the social aspirations and practices of its inhabitants. In his urban narrative, topography is the physical setting for the city's social 'life'. From Poëte's viewpoint the social practices of 'life' transform the built environment and as such constantly inform the next mutation,

the next stage in the development of the urban organism. Poëte's practice stands as a very early example of how the mutual relationship between the social and the spatial can be theorised.

The choice to connect architecture to specific economic and social standards is obviously not a prerogative of architectural culture. In their article 'Educating Greece in modernity: post-war tourism and western politics' Stavros Alifragkis and Emilia Athanassiou illustrate how tourist architecture became part of a larger political project to introduce a Western concept of modernity in post-war Greece (*JoA* 18:5 2013). They show how the state-run Xenia chain, that developed hotels, motels, travel stops and pavilions but also organised beaches and holiday camps, spearheaded the Government's policy for the modernisation of leisure infrastructure. Alifragkis and Athanassiou argue that these various initiatives became framed and supported—amongst others by the Marshall Plan—within a logic of cold-war politics, which understood Greece's prosperity as a barrier against communist expansion. Tourism thus spurred the country's war-torn economy, but also reweaved its social fabric. The tourist architecture of post-war Greece was not only directed at foreigners but also played a major role in educating the emerging urban middle-class about Western modernity and Americanism in particular.

The relationship between society and architecture has often been conceptualised unevenly. Many canonical histories maintain, for example, that politicians drafted heroic and encompassing programmes for housing, work and leisure that were subsequently 'concretised' by architects in their designs. Architecture features in these histories as

a passive portrayer of political ideas, as merely a mute accommodator of social and political programmes. In my own article 'A thousand youth clubs: architecture, mass leisure and the rejuvenation of post-war France' (*JoA* 18:5 2013) I explore a more active role for architecture. I devise two hypotheses. First, within the context of post-war France the concept of 'youth leisure' did not correspond to a pre-ordained definition of functions or programmes, nor to a well-established set of practices. 'Youth' was a rather new-fangled category that needed to be established and defined—and this took place through intense engagement with architecture. In other words, architects and architecture had an active role in the definition of leisure for youth that reached far beyond an accommodating capacity. Secondly, architecture for the youth often had the function of a laboratory and fulfilled a paramount role in architectural culture. Within projects for youth leisure new architectural typologies were developed and, more importantly, new architectural definitions of urbanity were tested.

In Sheila Crane's article 'On the edge: the internal frontiers of architecture in Algiers/Marseille' we see how the relationship between the built environment and specific socio-cultural codes can become the ground for common histories, both consensual and contested (*JoA* 16:6 2011). Crane focusses on the place of architecture in the charged history of decolonisation that is shared by Algeria and France. She depicts the built environments on both sides of the Mediterranean as sites of contact and contestation, as 'not-whole-frontiers' (Balibar) that are differently perceived from the north and the south but neverthe-

less have been fundamentally shaped by one another. By focussing on the work of the French architect Roland Simounet after independence and his proposed renovation of the Logis d'Anne housing complex in Algiers, Crane demonstrates the degree to which the architectural legacies of France in Algeria and Algeria in France have had significant afterlives that extended beyond colonial rule. As much as late-colonial Algiers preserved traces of its Ottoman past and post-war Marseille retained the defining structures of its *bastides*, architecture in both post-colonial France and Algeria continues to bear the marks of a shared colonial past.

That architecture has not only the capacity to express existing socio-cultural norms, but, because of its semi-autonomy, can also play a key role in transforming the cultural codes in a society becomes clear from 'Designing the Belgian welfare state 1950s to 1970s: social reform, leisure and ideological adherence' by Janina Gosseye and Hilde Heynen (*JoA* 15:5 2010). In their study, they illustrate how in pre-war Belgium the leisure infrastructure was very much the expression of 'pillarisation', understood as a situation in which different ideological sections of society—Catholics, Socialists and Liberals—each 'serve' their members with respect to housing, health care, employment issues and other areas of life. They argue that with the emergence of the post-war welfare state a new situation emerged in which leisure infrastructure was specifically designed to generate 'encounters' and brought members of the different pillars in contact with each other. Gosseye and Heynen investigate how the cultural infrastructure of the welfare state

became a key player in the gradual decline of 'pillarisation' as an important fact of daily life in Belgium.

Fernando Luiz Lara reminds us that the question of the architecture-*socius* relationship also concerns a conception of architecture as autonomous or heteronomous discipline. In his essay 'Dissemination of design knowledge: evidence from 1950s' Brazil' (*JoA* 11:2 2006) he accounts for the migration of architectural knowledge; not as an intra-disciplinary movement in which information circulates between scholars and practitioners, but rather as a broader societal dissemination which also includes those who are not trained in architecture. Taking as its point of departure the omnipresence of specific architectural elements—such as *brise-soleils* or entrance portals of concrete slabs and metal columns—on thousands of buildings that have not been designed by architects, Lara explores the ways in which architectural knowledge becomes generalised in society. He argues that a generic optimism, steady economic growth and relative stability were the main factors behind the adoption of a modernist vocabulary by the middle class in Brazil. Lara argues that this optimism and the improvement in the Brazilian collective self-image had a two-way relationship with architecture since it was fuelled by international recognition of Brazil's famous buildings and this reflected back into the extensive dissemination of its vocabulary. In other words, the positive image of Brazilian post-war architecture was absorbed not only in architectural culture but in society at large.

The essays in this selection demonstrate that the relationship between architecture and its *socius* is a relentless concern in architectural culture and an

inexorable focus of scholarship. In architectural research this commitment to the architecture-*socius* relationship presents, however, a few theoretical and methodological challenges. First, we are in need of more refined perspectives on how people 'socialise' with built artefacts such as buildings and cities. As a field that constantly hypothesises about the way that people appropriate spaces and cities, architecture possesses, up to the present, a very restricted theoretical and methodological apparatus to approach this reciprocity between the social and the spatial. The research field of material culture might offer us some indices here. In studies of material culture scholars explore how human actors relate to material objects acting in the world. Thinkers such as Arjan Appadurai, Daniel Miller or Jane Bennett, for instance, have developed sophisticated perspectives on talking about 'the social life of things' which also might enhance our understanding of how people relate to the artefacts of the built environment.⁵

A second challenge for future research might reside in the further development of our understanding of the temporalities of the socio-spatial nexus. As both the social and the spatial are non-static realms with their own proper rhythms, how can we conceive of this a-synchronic relationship? In other words, how can the *longue durée* of the built environment be related to the more rapidly changing rhythms of social, economic and political life?

Last but not least, as the social realm becomes in many instances in our contemporary condition 'creolised'—an expression of the diverse origins, fragmentation and adaptation, fluidity and openness of social relations—the conception of the architecture-*socius*

relationship is once more questioned.⁶ To face this new condition, architectural research is challenged to move beyond narrow-minded and reductive concepts and to embrace more complex notions of the social—as unfixed, contested and multiple—and its relationship to the built environment. As the social geographer Doreen Massey has argued:

What is special about place is not some romance of a pre-given collective identity or the eternity of the hills. Rather, what is special about place is precisely that throwntogetherness, the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now (itself drawing on a history and geography of then and theres); and a negotiation which must take place within and between both human and nonhuman.⁷

Notes and references

1. Charlton Lewis, *An Elementary Latin Dictionary* (New York, American Book Company, 1890).
2. This, for instance, is the view of Otto Wagner in his seminal work *Modern Architecture*; see: Otto Wagner, *Modern Architecture: A Guidebook for His Students to This Field of Art*, trsl. Harry F. Mallgrave (Santa Monica, Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1988).
3. See, for instance, Michael Hays, 'Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form', *Perspecta*, 21 (1984), pp. 14–29.
4. *Ideologie et appareils idéologiques d'État (notes pour une recherche)*, *La Pensée*, 151 (1970), pp. 3–38; translated as 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation' by Ben Brewster in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York, Monthly Review, 2002).
5. See, for instance, Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986); Daniel Miller, *Materiality* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2005); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2010).
6. For an introduction to creolisation, see Charles Stewart, *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory* (London, Routledge, 2016).
7. Doreen B. Massey, *For Space* (London, Sage, 2015), p. 140.