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Epistemic Justice in the Design Process

Luce Beeckmans

As part of 'The Persistence of Questioning. Critical reflections for the future: Design Is Ethics?', Luce Beeckmans expresses the need to bring more justice into the design process, among other things by making urban diversity and inequality the subject of the design assignment. Particularly in housing, she argues that redesigning the design process from a justice perspective has the potential to counteract the far-reaching commodification of housing and the gentrification of residential neighbourhoods. What is the transformative potential of architecture with respect to the important social sustainability issues that face cities today? What social contribution can architecture make?

Urban renewal project of the social high-rise district Nieuw Gent in Ghent (demolition and new construction) / Luce Beeckmans

Not in Renderings: Living in Diversity

Open a newspaper or magazine today, and you are inundated with advertisements for new housing projects. Renderings show towering residential blocks that make the urban landscape look homogeneous. Take a look at the project developers' websites that highlight

new residential projects and at a glance, it is clear that they proffer an exclusive and luxurious way of living for higher income groups. To further increase the prestige of the projects, 'starchitects' are showcased in short videos. To attract investors, these websites not only mention the number of bedrooms, but also the return on investment of the apartments.

While there is a lack of affordable housing in most European cities, many urban development projects target a segment of the population that is not actually facing severe housing shortages. Among other things, this is a strategy to prevent middle-class and high-income groups from fleeing the city, important as it is to the financial foundation of cities. In the long run, the settlement of these higher-income groups in redevelopment areas often has a gentrifying effect: rents in and around the project sites rise significantly, pushing existing residents to the edge of the city in search of affordable housing. The same applies to many other programmes that are located on former industrial sites: after restructuring has taken place, they are almost always pushed out. Spaces for manufacturing and small-scale industry, artists' studios, places for urban agriculture, affordable storage spaces, migrant churches and so on are no longer available.

What is also striking is that the people – if any are depicted in the renderings at all – often look very homogenously 'white', vital, young and middle class. We rarely see people with a migrant background, in wheelchairs, adolescents or senior citizens strolling across the visualizations. This representation often contrasts sharply with the demographic diversity of the residents who live and work at or in the vicinity of such projects. As such, they often deny the existing urban diversity and therefore, in a way, are very honest about what the target group of the newly built apartments is. After all, poverty is largely a coloured problem: one that often occurs at the intersection of race, gender, age, functional disablities and so on.

The 'colour blindness' and social near-sightedness rampant in the visualizations of urban development projects is problematic in several ways. Groups that are systematically unrepresented in these visualizations feel that they, literally and figuratively, do not belong in the redeveloped neighbourhoods, even though they are among the original residents. Moreover, there are many correlations between the things architects and urban designers want to achieve and the ways they subsequently visualize them. The fact that architects 'forget' to take account of the urban super-diversity that is a fact of life in almost all Flemish and Dutch cities today in their visualizations is therefore not just a matter of prototypes in databases of drawing programs that have missed the demographic transition of recent decades. To a large extent, these visualizations also reflect the implicit biases and prejudices of the maker-architects who are still very often 'white', middle-class and male. Indeed, today's urban diversity is not yet well reflected in the architects' corps.

To improve this poor representation, authorities such as the Brussels Government are now considering the introduction of guidelines to ensure an as faithful as possible representation of urban diversity in project visualizations. However, the problem cannot be solved simply by adding more diversity to the renderings. We also have to take steps to actually make the 'forgotten' groups feel welcome to settle or continue to live in these areas. We need visionary urban policies and strong urban and architectural commissioning that take urban inclusion as

a major point of departure. Cities must make maximum use of their unique landholding position to tackle the housing crisis rather than exacerbate it, as they often do today, and develop instruments to achieve affordable housing. Urban development projects can and must offer a much greater diversity of housing types. Architects also have a part to play in this, because their normative approach is not only prevalent in the renders, but also reflected in the housing plans and typologies. How can we prevent architects from producing housing and housing estates that are made to measure up with their own housing cultures and dwelling habits and fail to take into account the housing needs and customs of the eventual residents and users in the story? This is perhaps particularly important for groups who never have the chance to take up the role of client: How can their housing needs find their way into the design?

Epistemic Injustice and Architecture

Of course, architecture firms have their own economic logic that needs to be taken into account, but the question nevertheless arises whether architects are willing and able to adopt a critical attitude towards the commodification of housing, gentrification of residential areas and financialization of the housing market. Is it possible for them, the executors of such projects, to claim a neutral position in regard to the developments that these projects set in motion on a socioeconomic level at the same time? Can the architects involved in these projects adopt a critical attitude towards the design challenge, the client or the project developer with whom they are dealing and with whom they sometimes even form semi-permanent partnerships? Today, we see architects increasingly assuming a critical role when it comes to developing an ecological agenda for architecture. Or, as professor of urban political ecology Maria Kaika metaphorizes: 'Today's architects act less like Plato's guardians, or as agitators against contemporary mainstream cultural and political life, and behave much more like trains: they only go on rails; they can only follow the tracks and trajectories laid down for them by capital investment. The model of the heroic architect who reveled in opposing authority and public norms and his clients, who would dare to get 'derailed' gave way to the model of the conformist architect eager to follow the tracks, keen to please the client, the public and the authorities.'

In this context, it is interesting to look at recent developments in theory of knowledge production or epistemology. This discipline examines how knowledge is produced: what methods are used, which concepts are useful and what ethical dimensions are involved in the knowledge production process. Today, there is a great deal of discussion about what philosopher Miranda Fricker called 'epistemic injustice' in her book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. This notion refers to the existence of different levels of inclusion and exclusion in the knowledge production process and how people are differentially treated in their capacity of knowers. Some voices are not heard at all, certain processes and concepts are invisible or not properly represented. Power relations play a decisive role in this process, determining what is communicated as important and what is not. Faced with the very unequal opportunities people have to contribute to the (global) knowledge production process, academics like Chandra Mohanty and Walther Mignolo argue that it is high time for an 'epistemic shift'. By this they mean that if we want to achieve a more inclusive form of

knowledge production, we urgently need to disconnect our knowledge production processes from hegemonic, often Eurocentric, knowledge frameworks as well as from their colonial and capitalist starting points.

What will happen if we approach the design process as a knowledge production process and architecture not only as a 'material space' but also as an 'epistemic space'? After all, from the example of the renderings of housing projects we can deduce that they involve different forms and degrees of epistemic injustice. Following French Marxist thinkers, social geographer David Harvey, architect Dolores Hayden and urban designer Edward Soja previously introduced the notion of 'spatial justice'. They use it to point to the need for a just distribution of, and equal access to, quality public spaces, affordable housing and social services across the urban space and its inhabitants. In their work, they extensively problematize the worldwide lack of justice in the production or urban space, especially for vulnerable urbanites and minority groups.

Faced with a multitude of spatial inequalities, the question is what position the architect, as one among many space-makers. Which position does the architect wants to take up and how architects can strive for more epistemic justice in the design process. The question of what epistemic justice means in architecture and urban design is then about which people have a say in the conception and creation of the urban space and which people are excluded. What are the power relations and how are they reproduced in and through the design? Which (normative) concepts do we use and which ones not? In the end, these questions are all about the social role architecture can play and about the transformative potential of architecture in relation to important social sustainability problems cities face today.

Towards an 'Open Architecture'?

In her book *Open Architecture: Migration, Citizenship and the Urban Renewal of Berlin-Kreuzberg by IBA 1984/87*, architect and scholar Esra Akcan investigates an urban renewal project and large-scale housing programme realized in Berlin in the 1980s. On the occasion of the IBA-1984/87 (International Building Exhibition), world-renowned and rising architects from all over Europe and North America were invited to design public housing for the then run-down migrant district of Kreuzberg. Akcan describes the project as one of the last episodes of public housing in the twentieth-century. At the time, both urban designers and architects still believed government-controlled housing could play a major role in the rethinking and improving of the city and society. Her book gives a voice to the residents, often migrants, refugees and what she calls 'non-citizens' (people who are not recognized by the authorities of a certain place, but who nevertheless live and build a life there). In the 1980s, their 'integration' was seen as an architectural project. More than 30 years later, Akcan gives them the opportunity to reflecton the design and construction process, as well as on the manifold adaptations and transformations of the initial designs they executed in their quest to transform their dwellings into homes.

The IBA project was conceived at a time of rampant discrimination in housing legislation and of anti-migration policies. Architects that stepped into the project displayed varying degrees of complicity, irony and subversion. In the IBA-Altbau neighbourhood, one group of

architects mobilized residents' organizations, supported squatters' initiatives and involved refugees and guest workers in the design decisions through a democratic process. Akcan describes how this group discussed and negotiated conflicting and complementary claims of neighbours concerning each building, went door-to-door to gauge housing needs and budgets and hired translators to plan the construction and temporary relocation process with the residents.

Although the architects' individual design ambitions sometimes got in the way of the participatory and democratic design process, Akcan also notices the seed of what she describes as an 'open architecture' in the IBA housing programme in Kreuzberg: 'Open architecture is predicated on the welcoming of a distinctly other mind or group of minds in the process of architectural design.' According to Akcan, 'open architecture' can be associated with 'flexibility and adaptability of form, collectivity and collaboration, multiplicity of meaning, democracy and plurality, open-sourceable design, the expansion of human rights and social citizenship, and transnational solidarity. Open architecture goes against the grain of the neoliberal ethos of the open market that closes boundaries for the majority, and it is not synonymous with network architectures.'

Akcan claims that the pursuit of a form of 'open architecture', equivalent to the 'Open City' concept introduced in the book of the same name, is the translation of 'a new ethics of hospitality into architecture'. She refers to a radically different design method and concept, in other words to another epistemology, in which collaboration is central and in which architects share their decision-making space with the users and residents of a site. By doing so, designers also explicitly or implicitly question the preconditions of the design assignment and even rewrite the contours and ambitions of the design project. Working in the current context of urban housing crisis and 'super-diversity', it seems urgent for architects to take up a critical role again, to re-politicize the housing project and make the architecture of housing again a concern in the public debate, as architect and theoretician Nadir Lahiji also advocates in his book *Architecture Against the Post-Political: Essays in Reclaiming the Critical Project*. This appeal to architecture to, once again, take up a social role and act as an agenda-setter is not new in itself. Plenty of avant-garde architects, like Le Corbusier or the Bauhaus architects, tried to break with the past by depicting a new project for the city and via architecture. Therefore, the fact that architecture seeks to meet urgent social challenges does not need threaten the autonomy of the discipline, on the contrary, it can give rise to innovation and provide a new ground for its *raison d'etre*.

How, then, can we concretely contribute to epistemic justice in the design process?

VOICES

If we want to democratize the design process and make it more inclusive, it seems important to question the idealized position of architects as author-experts by seeing them as 'only' one of many space-makers. This broad view of the way space is made could question and undermine the hierarchical and unequal relations in the design process. The architect-expert would no longer be the only one to control the design process – this could be concetualized as a co-creative knowledge production process that welcomes the co-ownership of many

other actors. This means that a whole set of urban actors are welcomed to have a say in the design process: from policymakers, civil society organizations, users of the development site, project developers, activist voices, local residents to the 'end-users' or residents. The latter group is hardly or not at all consulted in the design process of many (social) housing projects today. Their participation is not evident in public housing in any case, but it is nevertheless not impossible to achieve, for example via focus groups. This way, the design process is (partially) collectivized and democratized and the diverse group of (future) residents is involved in design decisions.

This radical redesign of the design process can ensure that architects develop more empathy for the needs of a particular location or city and that the premises of the design meet those needs. Today we see this ambition in Flanders and the Netherlands in numerous innovative practices that look for new forms of housing and co-housing, such as housing cooperatives, Community Land Trusts (in which individual property rights are combined with collective land ownership) and new forms of public and social housing in which residents also have a voice and can claim ownership. In the 'Project Together!', the city and university of Delft under the supervision of Darinka Czischke are looking for new housing forms and coalitions that are based 'on principles of inclusiveness, sustainability and long-term value development'. Although architects already play a part in some of these projects, we often see that there us a focus in this projects on housing governance and that the architecture of housing somewhat stays at the backgound of the discussion. Architects have, however, a potential important role to play in materialising this innovative thinking in novel housing typologies.

Involving residents in the design process is also a way to question the normative views of designers themselves as it could help them gain a better (intersectional) understanding of the way in which certain (capitalist and neo-colonial) power systems affect residents in different ways, depending on their position at the intersections of race, gender, age, disability and so on. In this co-creative design process, it is of the utmost importance to create the right environments and formats in which such conversations can (literally) take place, to ensure that some groups do not feel excluded from them from the outset. To detect new housing needs and be able to incorporate them into the design, Amsterdam architecture centre Arcam under the supervision of 'architect in residence' Lyongo Juliana organized a workshop with numerous urban actors on what an 'inclusive housing plan' could possibly look like, examining ways in which the changing population compositions can give rise to changing design briefs.

IMAGES

An inclusive and democratic design process can result in a more 'open architecture', but this also requires a different reprentation of the architecture. Faced with the static and flat representations of buildings from which the agencies and dilemmas of the design process seem to have been erased, authors such as Bruno Latour and Albena Yaneva argue that there is a need to generate more 'earthly accounts of buildings and design processes'. Rather than removing the controversies, the different claims on the built space and the everyday

occupations and the appropriations that take place during the design and construction process from the visualizations, they must literally be brought into the picture.

In her book *Diasporic Agencies: Mapping the City Otherwise* researcher Nishat Awan also argues that the standard ways of architectural representation are in crisis today since they homogenize and flatten the diversity of human experiences. In contrast, she proposes a form of mapping that, as opposed to erasing differences, aims to gain a better understanding of the different uses of and claims to space that exist in a given place. 'Other' spatial agencies and uses remain often overlooked and invisble during the design process, for example because they do not fit into existing institutional and legal frameworks. The challenge is to use the spatial drawing skills that many architects possess to document the 'messy reality' of the built environment and subject it to meticulous analysis. In this context, Japanese studio Bow-Wow launched a practice called 'Architectural Ethnography', which uses drawings and visualizations to explain how buildings are (or will be) experienced in an embodied way, how different groups use (or will use) the buildings differently and what the temporality of certain space uses is. This architectural ethnography of the 'messy reality' of the built environment should serve as a basis for further design; and shouls subsequently not be erased from it in the final representations.

WORDS

While the visual is a powerful medium to communicate beyond the limitations of language, it is also important to reinvent the conceptual apparatus of architecture. Many of the terms and concepts used in architecture today are normative without necessarily wanting to be so. There is a need to question existing taxonomies and conceptual categories in architecture because they are, sometimes unintentionally, exclusive. Architect and researcher Menna Agha gives the example of the concept of 'informality', which in her view 'must be seen as a marker of institutional blindness, and evidence that the state epistemologies cannot comprehend bodies that exist outside their realm'. Much of what legislation dismisses as 'informal' are actually attempts by marginalized groups to build a life in a context of oppression or precariousness. Moreover, the rigid dividing line between informal and formal is much less present in reality and many spatial practices take place in the space in between.

Once we, as architects, find the right words to name these practises, we may be able to deal with them in a more productive way than by ignoring, romanticizing or simply operationalizing them in design practice, which is what often happens today. This also requires an awareness of the (colonial) connotations that are attached to certain words so that we avoid to, perhaps implicitly, reproduce (colonial) power relations when using them. Such a new vocabulary also transcends a smooth discourse on diversity and cohabitation, like the one that was occasionally used at the last Venice architecture biennale, 'How will we live together?', but rather aims to express the complexity of these issues. By visualizing the layeredness of urban space in the design process (IMAGES) and by recognizing a plurality of space-makers and giving them a voice as 'experts' (VOICES), we can arrive at a new conceptual framework to which the residents of today's cities could better connect (WORDS).

info

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