VAGUE ARCHITECTURE AND POTENTIALS OF SPATIAL UNCERTAINTY

Master Degree Project in Spatial Design
Lisa Westergren, Konstfack 2017
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ABSTRACT
The built environment works as a constant manual for our bodies to relate to. Whether we reflect on it or not, it is the stage and the set for our everyday social dramas. What happens if the clarity of how to perceive or how to use a space becomes blurred? As architects we usually seek function, efficiency in usage, readability and clarity. In this project I have instead embraced the vague, the skewed, the contradictory and the in-between. As a method of creating I use chance and intuition. I find inspiration in the phenomena of drag where I discover that vague and undefined space can have a similar way of revealing normative truths as social constructions. Through initiating a dialogue between body and space, vagueness creates an awareness of the architecture that surrounds and shapes us. The vagueness in itself also allows for different interpretations, multiple ways to perceive and make use or not make use of space. By seeing vagueness as an asset it could perhaps contribute to a more diverse future architecture to live in and relate to.
WHY VAGUE ARCHITECTURE?

I accidentally came across a picture of a bus stop shelter at Djurgården in Stockholm some months ago. The shelter had blown over during a storm and now appeared halfway tipped over. Thinking of architecture as a manual the picture intrigued me, and I wondered what it would be like and how it would feel to sit in there, now facing more of the sky than the street straight ahead. I wondered if the shelter and the wood planks attached to the back wall working as a bench would still hold my body, and then if the sitting would be even more comfortable in this laid back position. The picture helped me realize something that I’ve tried to grasp during my studies and my interest in the more ambivalent, somewhat unclear spaces. I realized that when something is uncertain, when something is vague, I become aware of myself – my body and its possibilities and limits. Aware of the built environment, seeing the tipped bus stop shelter makes me more aware of the original one – its purpose, its possibilities and its limits. As a former student of film theory I like to draw parallels between film and architecture and in that sense I think of the original bus stop shelter as if it were the Classical Hollywood film of architecture: clear program, satisfaction, no question for doubt. And this other one – just a small shift – and it becomes the French New Wave or the Dogma Movement of architecture. And, just like the films of French New Wave or the Dogma Movement constantly reminds their audience that there is a film they are watching, a vague or somewhat uncertain space makes me more aware of the relationship between the experience and the built environment, more aware of the relationship between body and architecture – even if it’s just the everyday use of the bus stop shelter.

To see the image, please visit: http://djurgardenshembygdsforening.se/blog/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/busskur_blockhus_CeciliaAden.jpg
BACKGROUND – WHY THIS FASCINATION?

It all started with my own experience of living spaces. I grew up in an old house, part of it built in the 17th century. The house is not fancy, but of course different from the more modern villas, terrace houses and apartments in the neighborhood. As a child part of me didn’t like it, mostly for the plain reason that it was different from the homes of most of my friends. With time I came to like that it was different, all the skewness, imperfections, the mystery of the walls and their different thicknesses and all those in-between rooms with no clear function. I definitely think my interest in transitions and spatial sequences started there. From standing at one point in the house, one can view and see trough six different rooms at the same time. In 2014 when I started my Bachelor Thesis in Interior Architecture at Konstfack I lived in a totally different space, an apartment built in the 60’s during the Swedish housing era called ‘Milionprogrammet’. I remember when we moved in and tried to furnish the apartment, only to soon realize that there merely was one way to place the TV and the sofa, the kitchen table and the bed. It was all measured and planned for of course. The same boxes for the same types of lives.

That apartment and the feeling of entrapment in its pragmatic layout, as well as the knowledge of that layout to be multiplied into thousands of similar apartments only in my neighborhood, became the point of departure for my Bachelor Thesis. My work, ending up totally deconstructing the apartment, can be seen as one way of reacting to the module based, top view controlled, architecture that was significant for that specific building period. The purpose of the work though, was of course not only to critic the already highly critiqued Miljonprogrammet, but to highlight and draw parallels to tendencies of today’s methods of creating architecture. Tendencies that at least from my perspective seem to move towards more module-thinking, more top controlled, more pragmatic and even more standardized architecture. Perhaps we have become too rational for our own good, and I for one definitely miss some of the spatial vagueness and mystery. And within the vagueness, I would say, there is greater potential for different interpretations; more and different ways to perceive and make use or not make use of space; simply more possible ways of living different and more diverse lives.
THE WORLD AS A STAGE

As for a theoretical point of departure for this project, I believe our world to be constructed and changeable. I sometimes think of it simply as a stage and the spaces we live in as the structure and the set for our social dramas. To give these thoughts a context of philosophy I turn to the American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler. Primarily for the discussion about Butler’s writings is the establishment of gender as a construction, and – contrary to an essence, a natural ‘being’ – a staged act or imitation. What she means is that no actor exists before the acting, and herein lies one of the most central conclusions in Butler’s argument – that genders are not, but are made; gender as a performance.¹ I think that Butler’s arguments also can be applied as tools for understanding not only gender performance, but general behavior (performance) in a broader sense. Butler writes: “As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation.”²

So, what if we are playing these roles and repeating ‘the way we are’ and ‘the way we do’ only by the sheer reason that we’ve been playing and repeating it our entire lives? If everyone is imitating, repeating and reproducing themselves, the idea of authenticity and original, the idea of a ‘natural self’, becomes meaningless. And if that is the case, what could that mean to the context of the body in relation to space, both as a social construction and as a physical reality? Could we then, suggesting it to be ‘only’ a play, more easily challenge the script or the set?

But how then does this connect to vagueness and spatial uncertainty? I am back thinking of the tipped bus stop shelter and what happens in me when I look at that picture. I am also thinking of other reference projects that have a similar effect and I ask myself: is it the tension between contradictions in terms of physicality that interests me? Like Diller and Scofidio’s constantly changing Blur Building or Lina Bo Bardi’s Glass House where the construction and the landscape fight over the same space. Physical contradictions as in many works of the artist James Turrell, where you suddenly can get so uncertain about where the wall in front of you begins and ends that you almost lose track of your own body. Or, are these projects just examples that interest me because of their way of engaging and challenging my perception and my body to awareness and in that same action creating a dialogue?

² Ibid, s. 97.
Architecture as a dialogue or a conversation on the other hand makes me think of Sir John Soane’s museum in London and the optical effects, juxtapositions and multiple dialogues between the spaces, the objects, and the narratives on display. It makes me think of the work of the artist Rachel Whiteread, who’s interpretations of everyday space and objects talk and raises questions about time and memory in a to me very direct and bodily way. I find the term ‘non-reconciliation’ and draw parallels to films with open endings and no closure. Like Jean-Luc Godard’s Vivre sa vie, where the main character and protagonist Nana very abrupt gets shot in the last scene. These examples of architecture, art and film all have in common that they raise questions rather than give answers. The architect Peter Eisenman has a famous quote where his says that: “The architecture we remember is that which never consoles or comforts us”, and I can only agree. Thoughts of raising questions rather than giving answers can of course be linked to the work of many theorists and practitioners during history, including the German poet, playwright, and theatre director Berthold Brecht. In the context of dialogue and constructivism, the work of Brecht is of interest to me and about it the following is said:

"Brecht thought that the experience of a climactic catharsis of emotion left an audience complacent. Instead, he wanted his audiences to adopt a critical perspective in order to recognize social injustice and exploitation and to be moved to go forth from the theatre and effect change in the world outside. For this purpose, Brecht employed the use of techniques that remind the spectator that the play is a representation of reality and not reality itself. By highlighting the constructed nature of the theatrical event, Brecht hoped to communicate that the audience’s reality was equally constructed and, as such, was changeable."

To get the discussion back to Judith Butler and where I started, I find an interesting parallel between Brecht’s techniques of making dialectic theatre and what Butler writes about the phenomena of drag. Whether or not intended by the person performing the act of drag, Butler argues that drag as a practice, in its hyperbolic method and mannerist way, reveals and indicates that all gender is an act of approximation and a performance. So I wonder, can these thoughts of drag and exaggerated mannerism, vagueness and bodily awareness come together in spatial practice? Could there be something as a drag space?

3 http://www.ilikearchitecture.net/2013/04/quote-59-peter-eisenman
4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertolt_Brecht
5 Judith Butler, Könet Brinner!: texter i urval av Tiina Rosenberg (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 2005), s. 72.

Sir John Soane’s museum, Sir John Soane 1792–1812.
Vivre sa vie, Jean-Luc Godard 1962.

VAGUE ARCHITECTURE AND THE METHOD OF CHANCE

I looked at the word ‘vague’ and its etymology and found a strong link between ‘vague’ and the word ‘wandering’, which can be defined as ‘Traveling with no preset route’. I found this interesting, and could directly draw parallels between the concept of wandering and how I tend to work – my methods of designing. Thinking more closely of the meaning of wandering, I don’t believe there is something as clear as a ‘no preset route’. If I for example wander in the forest, I might start randomly but chance makes me see different things, like soft moss or nice sunlight, and I might start walking in that direction. That in turn leads me into seeing something else, perhaps an old oak tree, and I might go in that direction, and so on.

In my work I usually use a similar method of combining chance, intuition and play. I can for example make up different rules to engage with form and transform spaces, rules that in some aspects free myself from making choices. With the help of intuition (which is based on experience, knowledge, a sense of wanting to change the spaces just enough), I can regain control of and make use of what chance leaves behind. The rules force me to try different things, they force me to allow a certain amount of coincidence, which in turn allows me to see things I might otherwise not have seen. It is as if I need a bit of chance to get my projects going, to keep getting excited about the outcomes and often even surprised. Having said that, it is still the work of me – the selection of rules, which and what parts of the transformations I chose to go forward with and how – that in the end stand as the outcome of my projects. Chance and play is perhaps crucial for my work, but I will at the same time claim that my own spatial intuition, will, knowledge and experience, of course are of even greater importance.

The example seen on the left side is from my Bachelor Thesis in 2014. I started a transformation by making a painting of a space. I then turned the paper around and painted the same image upside down, then turned the paper one final time and painted the image once again. I decided the painting to be a perspective view and transformed and interpreted the uncertainties of the painting into a physical model.

6 https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/vague
7 https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/wandering
POINT OF DEPARTURE

I started this project by looking at modern and historical plan drawings of living spaces on the Internet, different stages and sets, and the point of departure came to be two different houses. Or to be more specific — the plan drawings and other limited information I could find about them. The house at the bottom of the page was built in 1790, and the other one is a modern house, made to order in 2017. I think it is interesting that the two houses have a similarity in layout, yet they are profoundly different from each other. I also think it adds something to the project that real persons actually live in these setups. To me there is something about people’s homes, how people live and what their homes look like that always intrigued me. Living spaces are close architecture, part of people’s everyday life and connected to identity and to socioeconomic and political contexts. The two houses are of course very specific, but at the same time also general in the way I picked them. For example, I just did a simple google image search with the words ‘modern planlösning’ and picked one of the first plan drawings that were displayed.
TRANSLATING SPACE

I started out by redrawing the plans, forcing the hand-drawn 1790's plan into the more exact world of the digital. To make the inexact exact in the 1790's drawing was somewhat interesting due to the blurriness. I transferred the drawings into a 3-d program and extruded them and started to model. Drawing spaces in this 3d program enabled me to see through all layers of what I built at the same time. The merging of lines and the vagueness that appeared in this overload of information intrigued me. Seeing it like that made me reflect on the relationship between me, the architect, and the line, the relationship between the line and the drawing, and the drawing and the built space.
TRANSFORMATION THROUGH DUPLICATION

When I had the 3-d models I made a series of spatial form experiments, transformations through duplication. Here is an overview of them. I first did them and then afterwards tried to see what had happened. I realized that in the 1790's plan I got very intrigued with small shifts, just a duplication and 90 degrees rotation created a whole new world of new interiors. In one plan the middle axis running through the house was exaggerated while the circular elements was enhanced in another. One ended up with a dramatic stage in the entrance hall while another became like a labyrinth and an explosion of small spaces, niches and poche space, and so on. In the modern plan the same exercise bored me a bit, and first when a rotated it more freely I found something that I felt was both different from the original plan yet similar enough to intrigue me.
CLAY MODEL
I picked one of the transformations from the 1790's plan to continue with. I lifted out a part of the plan and did a clay model of it by excavating the spaces from a big block. In the computer I had extruded, and in clay I now did the opposite. I liked the clay because of its lack of straight, clear lines. In comparison with the computer model which is based on lines. I also felt that the handmade, excavated clay model, speaks to the original plan drawing of the house in an interesting way. To have the model as a physical thing also intrigued me to think of the spaces in new ways, especially when I turned it around.
THE MODERN PLAN
Even though I started working with the plan drawing of the 1790’s house, the main work in this Master Thesis consists of a transformation of the modern house. It is by far the most pragmatic and less vague of the two houses, therefore I found it most interesting to continue working with. Only by looking at the plan display I can visualize the whole set in just a minute. It is like a spatial monologue, no surprises and nothing to discover.

I think it is interesting with plan drawings. Working as an interior architect it is not uncommon to only have the plan drawing of a space that you work with. You can be expected to divide rooms and draw walls without even knowing the height of the ceiling. It both says something about the pace we are expected to work in and something about the environments that we draw and build. Looking at this plan I would be very surprised if anything at all wasn’t being built with standardized measurements.

But what is a plan drawing and what information does it provide us with? A plan drawing is an image, a two dimensional representation of a space. And as a two-dimensional image it can presumably only give us information about two dimensions, in this case the x- and y-axis of the space. So, what about the z-axis? The one I normally fill in with my preconceptions about how I imagine the space to look like, how it usually looks like, how we usually do. Embedded in the very existence of the plan drawing there is an actual lack of information, can I somehow take advantage of that?
I have named the following transformation Implosion, which is said to be "A process in which objects are destroyed by collapsing (or being squeezed in) on themselves."

I started by using the one duplication transformation that I found most interesting. From a formalistic point of view I think it enhanced the attributes and properties of the original plan drawing. The hardness and sharpness of the straight lines in the original plan became sharper and more edgy when the turning of the second plan results in both squared and also triangular spaces.

So with this new, imploded plan drawing I started to imagine the new spaces. If the lines didn't have any hierarchy and potentially could be anything as long as they still worked within the frame of the plan, what could the spaces look like?
I started by dividing the plan into different rooms, fragments of space.
COLORS
I decided all the colors in advance. Where two surfaces with different colors meet, the colors were applied in transparent layers creating a third color. I wanted the colors to work as guidance and that by reading the colors you should be able to see the clash and interplay of the two plan drawings implode into one.

I worked with oil colors, applied in thin layers. By painting layers with different colors onto each other it gives the colors a depth, the light doesn’t bounce on the surface, but further in. The colors are therefore perceived as a bit ambiguous and less harsh.
ALMOST-STAIRS

After the colors were set, I began imagining the forms and spaces that the drawing could potentially represent. Just to start somewhere, I decided to start with one of the stairs. I made tests and played with the lines and the shapes. Quite soon I realized that the ones I liked the most was the ‘almost-stairs’. Stairs that directly appeal visually as stairs, but still doesn’t have the real function of a stair. I picked one of them to continue with and making it into a physical model allowed me to play with and test it a bit more.
BUILDING SPACE

While creating the spaces I have worked mostly intuitively and I have moved back and forth between physical and digital model. I have used the plan drawing as a template, just testing heights and angles within the framework of the set top view. The building materials are MDF board, oil colors, tulle and threads. With the MDF and the oil colors I have worked with the surfaces the way I like. With the threads I have played with the notion of the line. I have embroidered it to the MDF and pulled it tight to create order, but I have also let it loose. The tulle I used for its softness and its ability to visually appear and disappear depending on the direction you see it from. With it I have created soft seemingly dissolving surfaces.

What hit me during the sketching was that the rational part of me strongly started to interact. I wondered if that was good or bad, and couldn’t really decide. What was interesting though, was the interplay that started to occur between more intuitive form-finding and rational function seeking. The result is a mix I would say, and I quite like it like that. Sometimes standard measurements appear in the models, like the size of a standard door opening or objects in standard sitting height. Combining dimensions and proportions that resemble spaces that our bodies remember and are used to, spaces that we can relate to, with shapes and spaces that are less familiar are interesting. To me this in-between what we understand and what we don’t understand actually is the most exciting part. The spaces, like the tipped bus stop shelter, also have a way of waking my awareness.

So, I have mixed quite freely between what the lines and the surfaces in the plan drawing have come to represent in my spaces. Lines presumably representing a window in the plan drawing sometimes actually represent just an opening in the wall, just as the lines of a presumed window at another place have turned into a ladder. In the models, the lines and surfaces have been more or less articulated in terms of shape and form, through the MDF board or the tulle. In some space fragments the lines and surfaces are represented only by threads or just by color. It leaves more room left for the mind to fill in itself.
SPACE AS INTERIOR

I have presented the different fragments separately, a bit like objects in a collection, and that's not really how I prefer to look at them. It is first when getting inside the spaces and combining the fragments in different ways that they start to get interesting. By moving and altering the relationship between the fragments the spaces also constantly changes which opens up for a various number of sets to potentially further experience and discover. In the following pages I am simply showing a few images from my point of view and the way I see and experience the spaces – as interiors.
In the Konstfack Spring Exhibition I tried to communicate my project in three different ways – through interior photographs, through drawings and through my models. I placed the eight models, hanging in threads from the ceiling, in the center of the space while I hung three large photos and an MDF board with drawings on the wall.

The photos I showed were to enhance the interior qualities of the spaces I had created, and also to invite the visitors to look closer and interact with the hanging models – not as objects, but as interior space. Through the drawings I presented a way for the visitors to, at least partly, be able to understand the transformation, from the imploded plan drawing to the different model fragments.

The photos and the drawings were necessary to have, but I wanted to direct the most attention to the models. It was important to me that the visitors could be able to walk around the models and experience them from different angles. That is why I chose to have them centered and hanging.

The over 600 meters of blue thread that I used to hang the models became a big part of the installation. With connotations to puppet strings I think the set up added an extra layer to the project, flirting with the notion of constructivism. The threads worked as an extension of the models, within the transformation rules and the set top view. They also enabled the different model fragments to be hanged and exposed in different heights.

When someone walked by fast or touched the models they would start to move and a subtle swing was set in motion. The effect of this movement was that the relationship between the models frequently slightly altered which resulted in a constantly changing composition of space for the visitors to experience.
FINAL REFLECTION

The result of my Master Degree Project is what I call Vague Architecture. It is space that can be seen as somewhat uncertain, ambivalent or skewed, unprogrammed and even irrational. Space that makes room for your body and mind to fill in; that is free to wonder about, free to relate to and free to explore.