Communications - Staging the Message. The Architecture of Communication, ResArc PhD Course

Here form is content, content is form.

Samuel Beckett[i]

What comes first? "Technically writing. I first wrote to create credibility for the kind of architecture I wanted to do. Now it has become more diverse. Part of it is to describe architecture's evolving present … Part of it – like the Harvard work – is to prepare ourselves to deal with issues, like the Chinese city, that you can feel are immanent in the practice. Part of it I consider like pure writing, literary, like "Generic City" or "Junk Space". I think that is very confusing to people. I try out different genres, different tones, clinical – Generic City, or hysterical – Junk Space.

Rem Koolhaas[ii]

Today it is important to design and install antennas in the place of the world that are symbolically impoverished by the geopolitics of clichés. Antennas that not only receive but also transmit richer information on the social and cultural conditions of places in which they are installed. Interactive antennas is the most effective means to counter a geopolitics that destroys – as Jürgen Habermas would say – any chance of communicative interaction.

Stefano Boeri[iii]

Contributing to the ResArc PhD course series:

Tendencies-Approaches-Philosophies-**Communications**

ResArc Course on Communication and Media

Umeå School of Architecture, 2013-14

With invited guest professors Els Kuijpers (NL), Barbara Maria Stafford (USA), Michael Rock (USA), Andreas Ruby (DE), Nader Vossoughian (USA), and Roemer van Toorn (SE).

Introduction

This course intends to offer participants in-depth theoretical and practical tools for communication and media production. The project concentrates on the diversity of means of the 'reflexive' tradition that works in the tension between realistic imitation and selfconscious artifice, i.e. between presentation and representation.

With the course "Staging the Message. The Architecture of Communication" we will analyze, discuss, learn, test and develop – with the support of excellent scholars and practitioners from the field of the image, writing, editing, architecture and design (see description of the modules below) – how the form(at) of your dissertation/research – right from the start, and during the development of your research as a whole – can enable you to critically reflect and develop its content through the interplay between content and form; while the chosen and developed form also will enable you to broadcast, (edit, communicate and mediate) your ideas (content) to an audience within our information age at large.

With its special emphasis on the interplay between content & form this course – overcoming the problem that dissertations almost never work as publication, we like to clarify that every relation needs a mediator; that this mediation comes with a form; an aesthetic discourse that by itself already empowers, limits and produces a specific kind of value system that (co)-produces, reworks and mediates the content. Form and content operate always interdependent of each other. Without mediation there can be no communication: Form is content, content is form, say Beckett, and only through a form(at) – and being aware of its consequences – you can start and are able to reflect, curate, edit, produce and direct information in communication to yourself, others and an audience.

With Modernism architects started really to see how important the intimate relation between architecture and publication is. It is of no coincidence that Le Corbusier listed his profession as "homme de lettre"(man of letters) instead of having the name architect in his passport. Le Corbusier was meticulous how through page lay out, the form of type, the genre of writing, photographs, diagrams, sketch books, exhibitions and even promotional material, his ideas could be mediated[iv], but also how these formats could help him to advance his ideas about architecture, urbanism and society in the new machine age. For contemporary architects, such as Rem Koolhaas, writing, making publications, editing journals and designing exhibitions has been inseparable from their practice too. Part of the work is to describe architecture's evolving present, … to prepare ourselves to deal with issues, …to know what kind of architecture you want to do. "I try out different genres, different tones, clinical – Generic City, or hysterical – Junk Space." says Rem Koolhaas. Through experimental forms of architecture communication (books, journals, genres, models, etc.) he discovers what the evolving present is about, and where moments of transformations can be enacted.

Another essential element of the communication course is how your mediated research can establish a pro-active relation with its audience in today's society. In reaction to the virtual realism of the spectacle dominating mainstream media – which prevents a substantive use of word and image, this course deals with the textual, visual (photography, video, internet) and spatial practices that further more refined, complex and argumentative forms of communication and foreground the constructed nature of their messages in order to solicit the active interpretation of the viewer/reader. To paraphrase architect Stefano Boeri we are in need of interactive antennas that counter a geopolitics that destroys any chance of communicative action. It is for this reason that the course focuses on the practices of a narrative language use in text, image, spatial and electronic media with emphasis on the potentialities and richness of the 'reflexive' or 'dialogic approach'. It tries to recuperate the specificity of its progressive and participatory practice – due to its role in the socio-cultural context producing meaning and symbolic values – by concentrating on the editing and making process. Which is to say that the course will introduce a way of directing that structures the collection of information and its editing in such a way that the staging, the 'mise-en-page' of the message gets the complementary sensitivity its content deserves.

General Information

Course responsible and contact persons:

1) Roemer van Toorn: roemer.vantoorn@arch.umu.se
2) Assistant to be announced

Structure

The course consists of three seminars (each three days long: Wednesday, Thursday and Friday) and takes place at the newly established Art-Campus and Architecture faculty in Umeå. The course is headed by Roemer van Toorn and developed in close collaboration with experts from the different fields of communication and media. Each seminar – module – will be devoted to one specific framework (see below) and will include introductionairy and specialized internal and public lectures besides working sessions where we discuss the readings, your blog, analysis of communication projects and discuss possible form(at)s of your research content.

Participation

Before each seminar begins participants will be expected to upload blog posts to the communication course website. For each seminar a collection of readings, and possibly projects to analyze, will be made available to all participants on the website. Besides critical comparative analysis of projects, in the sphere of communication, critical readings provided and their interpretive blogs, we ask each participant to "form(at)" his/her own research according to the knowledge and experiences s/he gained through the seminar. Besides preparing work in advance for each seminar, work will be further developed, produced, discussed and reviewed in collaboration with the guest professors present.

Examination

Active participation in the seminar is required, including the submission of 3 blogs on the website and reworking of own research (it can be an article, the draft dissertation, video, photography, or other media that are an essential part of the research) during the three modules. After, and during the last seminar we will also work on a final presentation format.

Content of the 3 course modules (seminars)

Module 01 - Cultural Production's Gearbox
With Els Kuijpers and Roemer van Toorn

Working, as cultural producers do, in the tension between thinking and making, between theory and practice, between presentation and representation, presupposes linguistic awareness and requires a deliberate staging of the message. Focusing on narrative strategies and methods, media and language uses of critical sense making from different cultural fields – literature, fine art, architecture, communication design, and film. Els Kuijpers will sketch a history of mentalities in which attitude gets form under changing socio-economic conditions. Roemer van Toorn will outline how thought in architecture (theory) over time developed and through what kind of formats it emerged. PhD research is a rather recent development in architecture, what to think of research as dissertation, examples how it can be done, and what kind of formats of thinking influences the practice (what are canonical examples, what are its channels of broadcasting, and where do we stand as academia (examples).

Els Kuijpers is publicist, educator and curator design and visual culture, and teaches design history and theory the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague, NL, and exhibition design theory at Artez, Institute of the Arts, Zwolle. Publications i.e.: Ootje Oxenaar, designer + commissioner, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam.

Roemer van Toorn is the Architectural Theory Professor at the Umeå School of Architecture, From 1993 till 2010 he has been in charge of the History and Theory program and was Head of publications at the Berlage Institute. He has been the editor of several issues of the annual publication Architecture in the Netherlands, as well as an advisor of the magazine Archis (Volume), Hunch, Domus and Abitare. Roemer van Toorn published The Invisible in Architecture (1994), in collaboration with Ole Bouman; His photography work has been exhibited in Winnipeg, Los Angeles and was part of the exhibition Cities on the Move curated by Hou Hanru and Hans-Ulrich Obrist. Currently he is finishing the forthcoming text and photo book the Society of The And with a grant from Architecture In Effect (Formas) research fund.

Module 02 - The Visual Significance of Imaging, and the Diagram
With Barbara Maria Strafford, Nader Vossoughian and Roemer van Toorn

"We have lost faith in the creation of good images; we have no confidence that good looking can be agreed upon or fostered (…) What we need is a new direction of visual scholarship that is always driven by the need for understanding and alert to potential use." says Barbara Strafford. In order to frame such a new theory and practice of imaging, Barbara and others plea to revive the practice of visual storytelling - essayistic and performative in character - by (re-)using and (re-)developing artistic models and visual methods to counter the view of cognition as dominantly logo centred. Seeing is about recognizing that information cannot be separated from the manner or style of its display: the enlightened observer patters and constructs reality through dynamic interactions. What is the role of statistical information, what is the role of mapping, and how can it be represented, what communicative role has the diagram, etc.

Barbara Stafford is the William B. Ogden Distinguished Service Professor of Art History at the University of Chicago. She is the author of Good Looking, Artful Science, Body Criticism, and Voyage into Substance (all published by MIT Press). Her work establishes a new research agenda in what may be called the "visual sciences".

Nader Vossoughian is a curator, critic, and theorist whose research interests center on the relationship between politics, knowledge, and the city. He has recently contributed essays to European Modernism and the Information Society; Otto Neurath's Economic Writings; and Josef Frank 1885-1967 – Eine Moderne der Unordnung. His curatorial credits include "Urban Disobedience: The Work of Santiago Cirugeda," and "After Neurath: The Global Polis," the latter of which took place at Stroom den Haag earlier this year. His first book, Otto Neurath: The Language of the Global Polis was recently released (based on his dissertation). Currently, he is a lecturer at the Museum of Modern Art and an assistant professor of architecture at the New York Institute of Technology. His articles have appeared in Bidoun, Metropolis, Design Issues, Volume, the Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, and Transnational Associations.

Module 03 - Design Criticism and Practice: a Non-Smooth relationship
With Michael Rock, Andreas Ruby and Roemer van Toorn

Emphasizing the necessity of research and process Michael Rock proposes a methodology of 'design as thinking': "It's not what you say, but how you say it (…); the content should not drive the organization of the work. Content doesn't resolve what makes our work ours. At a later stage we will inform you what the exact content of the seminar will be like.

Michael Rock is designer and partner in the design studio 2x4 New York, associated partner in AMO, and Director of the graphic architecture project, Columbia university graduate school of architecture, planning and preservation, New York USA. Publications i.e.: The designer as an author. His office, together with Susan Sellers was in charge of the ANY publications (its journal and ANNY book series), and designed for instance the routing and information system of the CCTV by Rem Koolhaas in Beijing.

Andreas Ruby is an architectural critic and theorist. Andreas and Ilka Ruby set up the agency "textbild" as a production facility for publishing architectural books, magazines, and essays; curating exhibitions; and consulting architects. Based in Berlin, Textbild is predominantly committed to contemporary architecture and design and they write essays, design books, curate exhibitions, and organize symposia for a wide array of institutional and cultural clients. Andreas Ruby is a frequent contributor to international art and architecture journals, and also writes for the daily press.

Key Dates (preliminary schedule)

September 13, 2013, (time will be announced) at KTH Stockholm.
Communication Course Introduction
Introduction of the course and pre-course assignment will be presented by Roemer van Toorn during the Philosophies course in Stockholm.

October 16, 17 and 18, 2013, at the Umeå School of Architecture.
Module One – by Els Kuijpers and Roemer van Toorn.

November 13, 14 and 15, 2013 (exact dates to be confirmed*), at the Umeå School of Architecture.
Module Two – by Barbara Maria Stafford*, Nader Vousoughian* and Roemer van Toorn.

January 22, 23 and 24, 2014 (exact dates to be confirmed*), at the Umeå School of Architecture.
Module Three – by Michael Rock*, Andreas Ruby* and Roemer van Toorn.

* Right now we are inviting these guest professors and fixing the dates in November and January.

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[i] Samuel Beckett in Our Examination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress, p. 14, Faber and Faber (1972). Beckett is speaking of Finnegan's Wake: You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to read - or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. Joyce's writing is not about something; it is that something itself ... Here is a savage economy of hieroglyphs. Here words are not the polite contortions of 20th century printer's ink. They are alive. They elbow their way onto the page, and glow and blaze and fade and disappear."

[ii] Beatriz Colomina in conversation with Rem Koolhaas: The Architecture of Publication, Rotterdam, February 2007, AMOMA Rem Koolhaas, Theory & Practice II, El Croquis, nr. 134/135, 2007.

[iii] Stefano Boeri, Architecture and Geopolitics, Domus 901.

[iv] Le Corbusier wrote more than 79 books, catalogues and pamphlets, 511 articles, edited 55 issues of journals, designed exhibitions, worked closely with photographers, and filmmakers.