Practicing Actor-Network Theory
– ANT as a research approach for the study of architecture and the built environment

7,5 ECTS

Given by KTH and Lund University in cooperation (November 2015 to January 2016)

How can so-called Actor-Network Theory be put into practice as a research approach in studies of architecture and the built environment?

What could an 'ANT approach' imply for how we design, conduct and report on research?

Even though originally conceived already in the mid-1980's, so called 'Actor Network Theory' (ANT) has in recent years become increasingly popular as a research approach in the social sciences. Constituting far more (and far less!) than a regular social theory, it could be argued that ANT in practice rather amounts to a set of suggestions regarding how to perform research, thereby constituting just as much a methodological approach as a theory. Today, ANT constitutes a broad church of research practice, which nevertheless to some degree is unified by its interest in and focus upon irreducibility, materiality and non-relativist relationality.

Areas of research that have been explored by researchers working within the emerging ANT tradition are the mutually constitutive relations between humans and non-humans (machines, animals, technologies, etc), the construction and agency of knowledge, the process of innovation – and how technologies stabilize the social world. ANT is perhaps also particularly suited as a research approach for the study of architecture and the built environment because of its insistence upon taking into regard how human actors both radically shape and are shaped by material and spatial configurations.

Purpose & Aims

The purpose of the course is to give the participants an opportunity to engage with classic as well as contemporary texts in the broader ANT-tradition and to explore how they could apply an ANT-approach to research in their own work and field of interest. The focus will therefore be methodological and the participants will have the opportunity to:

- Gain an understanding of the ontological / epistemological basis of ANT
- Learn about the methods commonly applied in ANT research as well as the methodological considerations underpinning them
- Grasp how ANT has developed as a research approach in recent decades
- Experiment with designing their own ANT-inspired study, based on their own research interests and experiences

After completing the course the students will have the ability to independently plan and design a research study inspired by the ANT-approach, and also to discuss the merits and shortcomings of pursuing an ANT-based research design with regard to the question at hand.

Examination

The students will receive their grade based on active seminar participation and a final memo which will focus upon the students' ability to independently plan, design and reflect upon the strengths/weaknesses of conducting an ANT-inspired study related to a topic of their own choosing.

Course design

The course will consist of three one-day (lunch to lunch), intensive workshops with individual reading and course work before and in between.

The course responsible teachers will be Jonathan Metzger (KTH) and Mattias Kärrhom (LU). Guest-teachers include Gunnar Sandin (Lund University), Barbara Czarniawska (Gothenburg University) and Gillian Rose (Open University, UK –[T.B.C.]).

Literature (preliminary list, subject to change)

Latour, Bruno (2005). Reassembling the social: an introduction to actor-network-theory. Oxford: University Press

Law, J. & Hassard, J. (red.) (1999). Actor network theory and after. Oxford: Blackwell. [selections]

Murdoch, J. (2006). Post-structuralist geography: a guide to relational space. London: SAGE. [selections]

A selection of articles including:

'Classic' ANT-texts:

Callon, M. (1986). Some Elements of Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of the Saint Brieuc Bay. Power, Action, and Belief: A new sociology of Knowledge?.

Czarniawska, B. (2009). STS meets MOS. Organization, 16(1), 155-160.

Law, J. (1992) "Notes on the theory of the actor-network: Ordering, strategy, and heterogeneity." Systems practice 5.4: 379-393.

Mol, Annemarie, and John Law. "Regions, networks and fluids: anaemia and social topology." Social studies of science 24.4 (1994): 641-671.

Contemporary 'ANT':

de la Bellacasa, M. P. (2011). Matters of care in technoscience: Assembling neglected things. Social Studies of Science, 41(1), 85-106.

Mol, A. (2010). Actor-Network Theory: sensitive terms and enduring tensions. Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie. Sonderheft, 50, 253-269.

Munk, A. K., & Abrahamsson, S. (2012). Empiricist Interventions: Strategy and Tactics on the Ontopolitical Battlefield. Science Studies, 25(1).

Venturini, T. (2010). Diving in magma: How to explore controversies with actor-network theory. Public understanding of science, 19(3), 258-273.

Bruno Latour and the anthropology of the moderns, special issue of the journal Social Anthropology, 21(4), November 2013.