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THE CONVERSION OF THE PALACE OF THE REPUBLIC, 2004-2005

A TECHNOLOGY OF CHANGING ATMOSPHERES

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ABSTRACT

Gentrification theory deals with the issue of converted buildings. However, it solely offers a diminished reading of the process of so-called aestheticization and of other sensual refurbishments that take place when undesired, decaying buildings are made desirable. Often, this rather ‘mundane’ process remains a black-box. In this paper, a reconfigured attention to atmospheric settings such as converted buildings are, is offered. From an Actor-Network-Theory point of view, it will be argued that when speaking of conversion as a process that transforms buildings one mainly speaks about material-semiotic changes made in the buildings’ atmospheres. Atmospheres in this view are actors of sociality that create their own actor-networks. Translated to converted buildings, thus, Atmospheric-Actor-Networks (AAN) configure how the sensual refurbishment of those buildings takes shape. With this perspective in mind, emphasis is placed on a case study of the conversion of the Palace of the Republic in Berlin in 2004-05 in which the benefits of this atmospheric-actor-network reading of aestheticization is exposed.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I would like to focus on two points: on the one hand, I want to propose a particular reading of the process of aestheticization, a post-modern concept to be found in gentrification studies dealing with the conversion of decaying buildings, the kind of phenomenon my research is about. In doing so, first, I will show briefly the main approaches that exist around this concept of aestheticization. Secondly, I will re-read them from an Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) point of view, highlighting the possible benefits of this effort. On the other hand, I will present an empirical example of the implications that this re-reading of the concept of aestheticization may have. For that, I will zoom in on one of the case studies I am working on, the conversion of the Palace of the Republic in Berlin during the period of 2004 – 2005 (Fig. 1).

OPENING THE BLACK-BOX OF AESTHETICIZATION

Gentrification theory has a particular awareness of declining buildings that become converted. The primary concern of these studies is the focus on the political economy of lower rated neighbourhoods.¹ This account is most prominently to be found in the work of, for instance, Neil Smith called “production-side theory”². Secondly, there is the strand called “consumption-side theory” in which aestheticization is introduced as a concept that is part of a “socio-cultural process” initiated and pushed forward by members of the “creative class”³. Departing from the famous study of Sharon Zukin on “Loft Living” (1982)⁴, in which the idea of re-using decaying warehouses is put forward for the first time, recent approaches drawing upon this line are also to be found, for instance, in the work of Martin Jager and David Ley. Ley⁵ and Jager⁶ both speak of a new middle-class that emerges out of the field of creativity squeezing into lower rated neighbourhoods. Moreover, both authors explicitly touch on the issue of aestheticization. But what is this process of aestheticization about? A very compact explanatory narrative still dominates. In art critic Stephanie Cash’s words: “artists move into otherwise undesirable buildings, [and] usually make significant improvements to their spaces, and their surrounding areas.”⁷

Even if there is much to say about this quote, I only want to stress one point here: If gentrification has something to do with an aestheticization of “undesirable buildings” as Cash names the re-discovered houses, how is this cultural process made up? Why do these buildings become desirable? How can we theoretically grasp the shift between undesirable and desirable buildings? What do these buildings actually ‘do’? And then also the question of the sensual experience as such: What is the flavour of re-using old warehouses, industrial halls or, in a broader sense, ruined spaces about? What makes up the spirit of a neighbourhood, of a district or borough that is desired?

Gentrification theory touches all these issues, however, without rendering the particularity of them. There are two under-researched aspects that I would like to point to. First, gentrification studies resist taking into account seriously the buildings as “actors”. Secondly, aestheticization is a blackboxed process when it becomes diminished to the bare re-development of neighbourhoods. The specific logic of aestheticization, I argue, is not grasped at its core level.

Gentrification theory is primarily concerned with the political economy of built environments undergoing changes when becoming renovated and polished. However, in my view, what accounts for the changes has also much to do with sensual aspects and the particular atmospheres to be explored. Not every building, not every district provides the ground for a successful and sustainable gentrification. There is great space of possible failure. Among economic factors, in my opinion, there are the sensual qualities of a district, the particular atmosphere to be explored in declining buildings that run a whole industry – a sensual driven industry of atmospheres as one might put it.

A RELATIONAL VIEW ON ATMOSPHERES OF CONVERTED BUILDINGS

In my reading of the process of aestheticization in terms of the conversion of buildings, I focus, first, on the buildings themselves and, secondly, on the concept of relational atmospheres – as my reading of aestheticization.

ARCHITECTURE AND SOCIALITY

Recently, architecture has been perceived as a ‘socius’, which is co-existent and co-evolving to the human actor.⁸ Departing from the work of ANT, rooted in the figures of John Law, Michel Callon, and Bruno Latour, I aim to think of architecture as a relational object, one that emerges as an actor assembling other actors (humans, other artefacts) around it.⁹ The built space is a materialized actor, an active entity of interference in ‘social’ settings. It is co-created

by humans and material objects. Architecture, in this view, appears as a “mutable immobile”¹⁰, an earth-grounded artefact¹¹ with the capacity of becoming some-*thing* else due to the fact of association. Thus, architecture is neither enabled to circulate in space - it rather remains stable - nor is it enabled to appear multiple. It is a unique creation in the event of gathering together different actors. However, because architecture is an earth grounded stable entity, it might deal with different programs of uses. To relate this back to gentrification, architecture as a “stable” artefact undergoes changes of uses during its lifetime and moreover, I argue, it is obliged to deal with changes of atmospheres as its primary concern.

ATMOSPHERES OF CONVERTED BUILDINGS

In my view, when speaking of conversion of buildings one speaks about the processes of changing atmospheres in buildings. Thus, conversion means not only to re-use a building disconnected from its former (typological) program of use as it has been argued elsewhere.¹² When occupying, renovating, or re-enacting “undesired buildings” they become desirable because their atmosphere changes in a specific way.

In the currently popular field of affect theory¹³ philosopher Gernot Böhme points to the existence of architecture through the lens of atmospheres.¹⁴ In his view, atmospheres attune humans with built space. They are “quasi-objective” entities as he puts it. Distinguished from theories of continental aesthetics, what makes this account appealing for this analysis is its direct neighbourhood to Michel Serres, and the ‘figure’ of the “quasi-objectification”¹⁵ which fits with the theoretical architecture of ANT.¹⁶ For Böhme, architecture is turned space (‘gestimmte Räume’) of quasi-objective kind as it is not an independent entity. Architectures’ atmospheres are situated in-between subject and object, they are neither “pure” subjectivity (as for instance inner feelings) nor “pure” space (as for instance the mere arrangement of materials).

Atmospheres are co-created by both material arrangements and humans' inner states. In Böhme's words:

“Atmosphere can only become a concept, [...] if we succeed in accounting for the peculiar intermediary status of atmospheres between subject and object. [...] This 'and', this in-between, by means of which environmental qualities and states are related, is atmosphere.”¹⁷

From an ANT point of view, atmospheres are quasi-objects because they neither belong to the sphere of artefacts nor to the one of humans. Atmospheres are actors of sociality because they are created by the interplay of both. The shape of atmospheres depends on who is involved and how. In doing so, atmospheres create their own actor-network when gathering together different sensual qualities of subjects and objects. Thus, I call buildings' networks atmospheric-actor-networks (AAN). Therefore, the enactment¹⁸ of a conversion of those artefacts deals with a change of a buildings' atmospheric-actor-network.

Through the lens of Actor-Network-Theory atmospheres of architecture are highly sensitive entities. The change of one actor involved might change the whole atmosphere. The attuning of a collective between the particular affordances¹⁹ of the built environment, the materiality of materials, the humans attached to this, and possibly also weather conditions or other situational interferences enact the atmospheric actor network of built space. The atmospheres of architecture are, thus, not pre-given but created by the actors involved. An atmosphere might change on a temporal basis. However, in a lot of cases there are also stabilized technologies²⁰ of architectural atmospheres to be mentioned. In case of gentrification, this might be, for instance, a homely loft in a former industrial hall – a quite successful atmospheric technology and a model of imitation. Atmospheres might also appear as less copied entities, which would be the case in settings that are not translatable into another collective attachment. Suburban container buildings, for instance, do not become part of gentrification programs

because they do not offer any sort of atmospheric quality that might relate to the idea of the “gentry”.

ARCHITECTURAL ATMOSPHERES OF DECLINE

The decline of converted buildings plays a particular role when atmospheres become enacted. In fact, decline is an actor, too. I would like to briefly touch on the notion of history. In my view, declining buildings contribute to “The History of Space” as the title of this conference indicates, in a specific way. Drawing upon the work of Tim Edensor and his book *Industrial ruins*²¹, declining things exist beyond the classificatory sense of ‘a’ historical texture. Ruined things, in fact, play and mix up biographical textures of their being, such as converted buildings do, when put in atmospheric practices. I would like to zoom in on my example to clarify this point.

THE CONVERSION OF THE PALACE OF THE REPUBLIC

The conversion of the Palace of the Republic, the most prominent cultural hall of GDR in Berlin-Mitte is introduced here as a declining building in which the change of atmospheres can be dismantled and tracked in elements (Fig. 1).²² In detail I will introduce the actors that make up the atmospheric setting. The Palace-case does not fit directly in the scheme of gentrification as it is merely ‘one’ building, not a whole neighbourhood. However, I aim to introduce this building as a “showcase”, as one of my interviewees (PO) puts it, for buildings becoming temporarily converted by the ‘creative class’ before demolition takes place. It was an undesired building that became desirable over a particular period.

Since the fall of the iron curtain in 1989 and the closure of the Palace in 1990 the architecture of this cultural hall had been under debate. In fact, the materiality of the building was mantled by sprayed-on-asbestos, which was commonly used in the 1970s, the time of

erection of the Palace. However, by the end of the 1980s, asbestos was discovered as a harmful technique. Thus, the removal of the asbestos took place from 1998 until 2001. It transformed the architecture into a ruin, a skeleton made of steel and stone.

The asbestos removal indeed was the interference that brought into view the building as a possible site of conversion. According to my interviewees, one did not recognize it as a venue for creative projects in the 1990s, as there was not a particular atmospheric affordance for the group of people that should transform it later on. I interviewed the main organizers of the events. One of my interviewees (SR) put the non-recognition in a nutshell: “well, the palace stands around fairly empty, just unused. And, moreover, not just unused but also unknown. One was cycling around this building mantled by the traffic. But none of us had an imagination, what was actually inside this house?” However, once the building was freed from asbestos, this would change as the architecture’s acknowledgment changed. The building was transparent. In fact, this skeleton venue attracted performance arts and music, visual arts including photography as well as business event management of public and private corporations. Over a period of two years in 2004 and 2005 the Palace became a re-enacted cultural hall, a declining building already facing its demolition. How did it come that the acknowledgment for the undesired and unknown building changed? What was the particular atmosphere about?

A “VIRTUAL RITUAL” IN THE CONVERTED PALACE

Turning around and playing with the buildings former typological program is in fact the most crucial aspect that makes up the unique changed atmosphere of the converted Palace. The converters explored the built space and its matter sensually and developed a new program of use step by step. They finally ended the former GDR-program of use and then brought in a new one. One of my interviewees (ML) called this process of creation a “virtual ritual” in respect to the particular biography of the building. The GDR program of use aimed at inheriting cultural events

such as official ceremonies of the government, great concerts or theatre plays, but enabled also private ones like weddings or birthday parties. It also provided venues for leisure time such as pubs and restaurants as well as a disco and a bowling centre. The converters of the skeleton drew upon this biography and contrasted the former program of use explicitly when they re-used the building.

In fact, there were two major unfoldings of this 'virtual ritual'. On the one hand side, it follows what Michael Guggenheim puts as the 'from-to-poetics'²³ of conversion. A former staircase of the Palace of the Republic, the "Foyer", was re-used as an event space. Or, the former Great Hall in which conferences and political ceremonies took place was re-used as a site of adventure when the converters created an in-house architecture. In both cases the shape of the stairs of the entrance hall or the tribunes of the Great Hall were still visible. Deliberate emphasis was placed on the material change itself: from a former space of the Palace to a converted space of the now. On the other hand, there were the 'as-if-poetics' of conversion, as I call them in reference to Guggenheim, to be found in the reinvigoration of a bar venue. The former nightclub of the Palace changed its venue. In the first period of use, it was located on the lower ground of the Palace. In the conversion period, it became re-installed in the "Foyer" including all elements still available from the former nightclub. "As-if-" one would visit the former nightclub again.

In fact, it was all about being inside the Palace exploring the matter of materiality, the 'already-there', and of sensing the historical texture of the materiality beyond classificatory boundaries or stable scripts. It was a site of testing the excess of materiality which converters turned into specific atmospheric sets, for instance the virtual ritual to be found in the from-to-poetics and the as-if re-enactments. In total, the test created a new schedule of events professionally organized, a play with the former sensual programs of experiencing the building. Thus, conversion was not only a change of program of use, but apart from that, a play with it and a change of the building's atmosphere.

This figure of the “virtual ritual” is just one out of many to be explored in this case. Here it was in fact the interplay of an asbestos freed building facing its demolition, the biography of this building including the former typological program of a cultural hall, and the purposes of the converters. All together enacted this material-semiotic setting. By now, the Palace of the Republic has been finally demolished. Nowadays, the “Schlossplatz” faces a completely changed atmosphere.

TOWARDS THE RESEARCH OF CHANGING ATMOSPHERES

To relate this reading of conversion back to the beginning of my paper, it is an attempt to offer a different reading of the process of aestheticization and how it is enacted and held in particular places. When speaking of the aestheticization of buildings through conversion, one speaks about a change of the atmospheres of those sites. A change of atmospheres is characterised by a different sensual interpretation and handling of actors (artefacts and humans) involved. Tracking converted venues such as the Palace through the lens of atmospheres from an Actor Network Theory (ANT) point of view challenges the black-box of a diminished attention to undesirable buildings becoming part of new atmospheric settings. In this view, the practices of converting buildings often to be found in the ‘creative class’ are more diverse than one might assume in the first place. Beyond pre-formulated schemes, the changing atmospheres of converted buildings are made by the particular logic of material-semiotic settings I aim to explore in my work.



Fig. 1. The Converted Palace of the Republic in Berlin-Mitte, Spring 2005, © Hanna Steinmetz

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. See Neil Smith’s early influential article Neil Smith, "Toward a Theory of Gentrification a Back to the City Movement by Capital, Not People," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 45, no. Autumn 4 (1979): 538–448.
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23. I borrow this term from Michael Guggenheim's discourse analysis of conversion, see Michael Guggenheim, "Without Style: The Other Side of Architectural Discourse," in *Manuscript (unpublished)* (London 2010).