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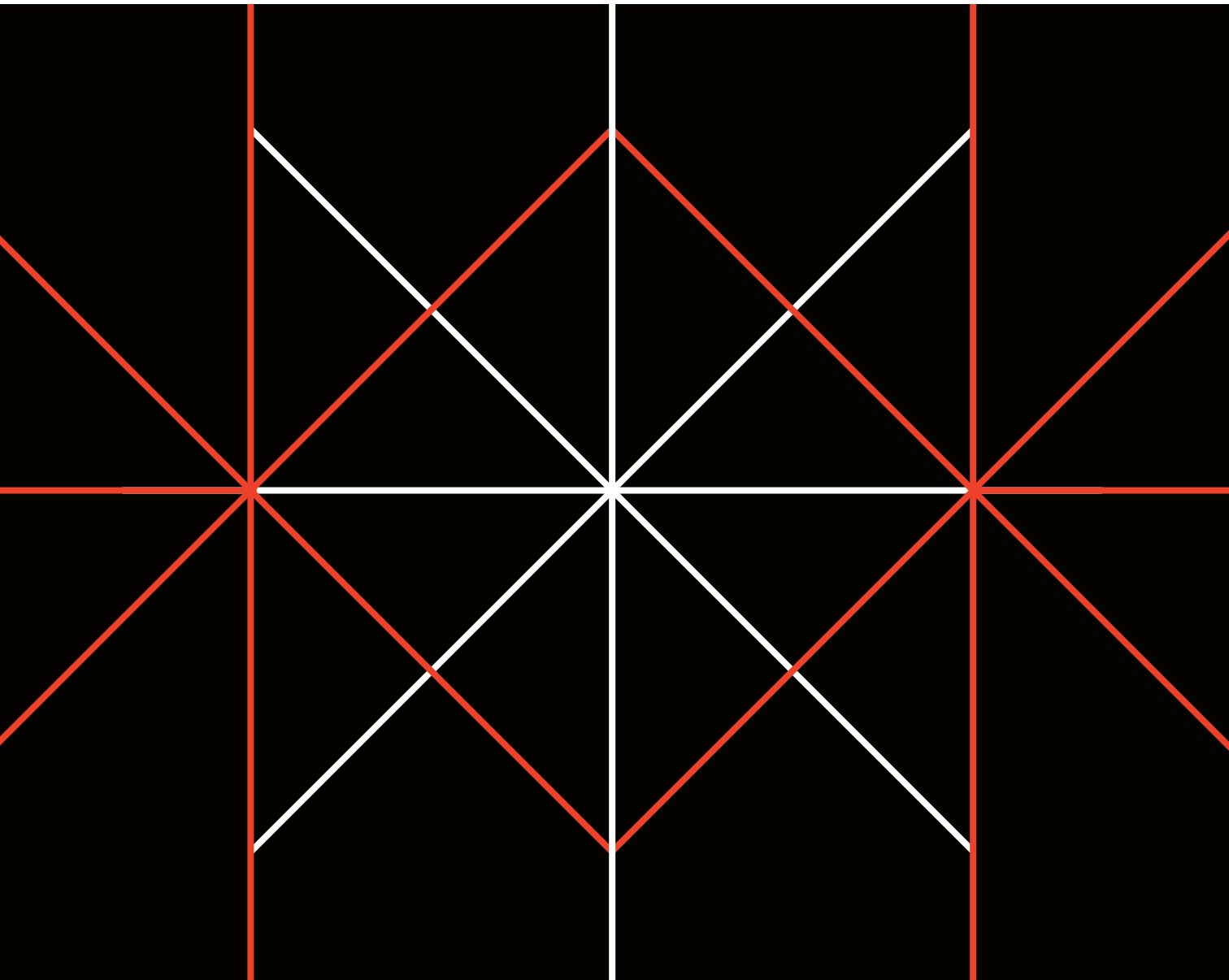

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DASP Yearbook 2023

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PhD in Architecture.
History and Project

Politecnico di Torino
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BETWEEN NORMS AND EXCEPTIONS. AN ECOLOGY OF URBAN PRACTICES

Saskia Gribling

Cycle
36° - CRT/DAD Co-funded Grant

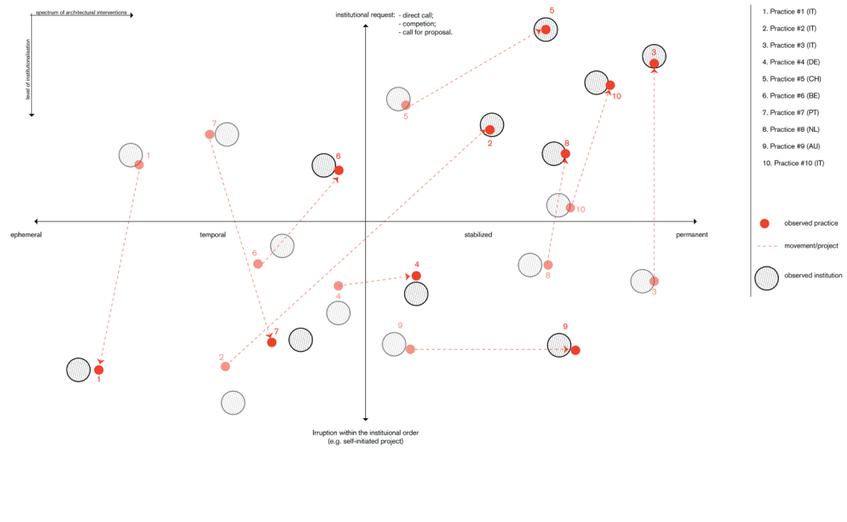
Year
2020 - 2023

Supervisors
Alessandro Armando, Lidia Gasperoni

Research Group
Theory of the Architectural Project

The thesis investigates the encounter between emergent architectural practices and institutions and explores the transformative power and the critical potential of the architectural project. It does so by looking at architectural practices which strongly claim to be 'alternative to' the given institutional system and at how they negotiate their positions, focusing on the effects of their actions. Indeed, to realise their projects these collectives have to enter into relation with the institution they claim to be alternatives. Hence, they are considered non-institutionalised actors who manage to intervene in the urban space and actually transform it, getting, at the same time, through what could be defined as a process of institutionalisation. As stated by Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito, this process generates a constant tension between the inside and the outside of institutions and shapes what it encounters: what is outside, before institutionalising itself, modifies the previous institutional set-up by challenging, expanding, and deforming it (Esposito, 2021). Therefore, the research aims to present and discuss possible architectural practices that create this deformation as a project. The practices that are the object of the study happen in spaces across the spatial and architectural realms. Through the inquiry, the research places them in a spectrum of references where the gradient of possibilities shifts between the performative arts, different temporary and ephemeral uses, and more formalised architectural projects. Methodologically wise, it observes ethnographically the different strategies and tactics used by the architects to make their projects happen, as the complex assemblages of documents, emails, drawings, and messages they produce. Doing so, it considers "the politics" of the observed practices by proposing a study of the networks and the concerns involved in producing their projects. Hence, it positions itself among the broader debate around the political effects of artifacts and, more generally, within the exploration of the relationships between society, politics, and technology, looking at infrastructures, artifacts, or any (material) spatial intervention being considered a *medium of politics* (Easterling, 2014).

Architecture exists in the world, and at the moment it is enacted, it has effects on it. The research explores ontological questions regarding what an architectural project is and whether it has transformative power or critical potential. Possible trajectories for architectural and spatial practices would be suggested by considering where the effects of different analysed projects happen and if the projects have altered and modified the dynamics in the space or, rather, the space of the dynamics. Drawing on the work of feminist scholars such as Haraway (1991), Stengers (2013), and Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), the research is based on the crossing of science and technology studies, feminist theories, and environmental humanities connecting feminist materialist tradition of critical thinking with human and non-human ontologies and ecological practices. Thus, the inquiry positions itself within a relational ontology that sees the architectural project as affected by the word and explores spaces of possibility also to affect it. It starts acknowledging this double movement, which is always relational, ***affecting*** and *being affected by*, yet happens with different intensities. The possibilities of one of the directions of this movement have been called transformative power and critical potential because they are exercised by the analysed practices in different ways - shifting within a spectrum of actions that encompasses ephemeral interventions as material and physical transformations. All the analysed practices share a strong hankering to change the given institutional set-up, and the research observes and discusses their actions and their effects. It looks at ordinary actors who can snick into vacancies - on a normative, physical, administrative layer. What happens in the faults created when those architectural collectives, defining themselves as dissenting, enter in relation with administrative institutions? Those moments have been recognised as the picks of tension where exceptions and norms meet in a constant negotiation between the practices' own positions and institutional stances.



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Easterling, K. (2014). *Extrastatecraft: The power of infrastructure space.* Verso Books.
Esposito, R. (2021). *Istituzione.* Il Mulino.
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Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017). *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds.* University of Minnesota Press.
Stengers, I. (2013). Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices. *Cultural Studies Review*, 11(1), 183–196. https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v11i1.3459
Yaneva, A. (2017). *Five Ways to Make Architecture Political: An Introduction to the Politics of Design Practice.* Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

The research explores the complex ecologies of these practices and proposes a reflection on their intervention possibilities. These practices differ in ontology, scale, and politics (Yaneva, 2017). They have been chosen because they have a secure narration of their being "alternative to", and they are considered to have a powerful irruptive potential and transformative will. The research shows how some of them may go beyond the habitual by contesting and modifying the given institutional set-up, while others reproduce prevailing logics and regulations. *Are these actors in or outside the institutions? What does it mean to propose a project with a strong will to transform (urban) space from a specific dissenting position? How are the actors able to realise their projects? What happens in their process of institutionalisation?* By answering these questions, the research positions itself with a pragmatical take and follows ethnographic methods applied to the study of architectural projects. Indeed, neither reality itself proceed the practices nor knowledge, but both are incorporated into daily events and activities (Mol, 2002). The consequences of embracing such a position touch both the methodology of inquiry and the ontology behind it: these mutually create a relationship with each other and ask for the research to be radicalised in practice.

On the one hand, there is the aim to understand possibilities of how not embrace the *status quo* but rather to engage with architectural practices that may transform the institutional system they operate in; on the other, there is the will not to put distance between the object of study and the knowledge behind it, and not to create a level of separation between the analysed practices and the discourses around them. Ten practices have been observed in-depth, and a conceptual diagram places them within a possible spectrum of interventions according to the project they have enacted. On the horizontal axis, these interventions could span from being performative, ephemeral, and temporal to more permanent and stabilised architectural projects. The analysed practices and their projects also move on a vertical axis according to their level of institutionalisation, which both considers the mandate which let the project be initiated: whether it has been a direct call, a competition or an open call, or, on the opposite side, a self-initiated mandate, which left more level of freedom. This movement helps in detecting the level of irruption within the institutional order. All the selected exempla of *"praxis institutes"* differ from one another in their relationship with the institutions and the related manifestation of dissent. Moreover, their realised projects diverge in the scales and the temporalities of interventions; consequently, they constantly negotiate with the institutions from their specific position, which is always relative and never absolute. The transformative potential is thus to find both in the engagement of the subject exercising the practice as in the theoretical work that observes and traces it in a network of concepts that could contaminate both the practices themselves and the conventional world surrounding them. The observed architectural practices suggest transformative power within given methods and tools to explore the critical potential of the architectural project.

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COLOPHON

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“The PhD Program in Architecture. History and Project (DASP) was born out of two long lasting traditions of doctoral level studies and research in the area of Architecture at Politecnico di Torino. The PhD Program programmatically investigates the complexity of architectural cultures starting from the multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary interweaving between the history and the design of buildings, cities, territories.

On the one hand, in fact, urban and architectural composition and technology of architecture favor an interpretation of the project as a tool for measuring the stratifications of theoretical elaborations, technical innovations and modifications of built environment.
On the other hand, the historical disciplines for architecture and the city, far from a local vision and thanks to the cooperation with other histories (the economic, social, anthropological and aesthetic ones), trace paths that can be traveled by architects and urban planners, but also by other humanities scholars, such as philosophers and linguists”

Marco Trisciuoglio

(from the document Proposal for the accreditation of doctorates - a.y. 2023/2024, presented to the Italian Ministry of University and Research on June 5th, 2023)

DASP. PhD in Architecture. History and Project

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