

The Meaning of Dissent. Everyday Oppositional Practices in Brussels

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# The Meaning of Dissent. Everyday Oppositional Practices in Brussels

Saskia Gribling

Saskia Gribling is a PhD candidate and research fellow at Politecnico di Torino. Her research focuses on the relation of practices and institutions. Besides, she is teaching assistant in architectural design bachelor and master courses and part of editorial board of *Ardeth*.

saskia.gribling@polito.it

The aim of the article is to trace the effects of architectural projects which are prompted by a strong drive to change or criticise the institutional system they face. It does so, by observing the process that different architectural projects underwent and proposes a reflection on the meaning of “dissent” which is exercised by two observed architectural practices. These, are defined as *oppositional* since they strongly claim to be dissenting to the given institutional system yet find a way to negotiate their positions. Focus of the research are the effects of their actions and narrations. Thus, it outlines how such strong transformative will is carried out in the realisation of their projects and looks at how the meaning of the critical power is translated into the daily action of the analysed practices.

The proposed reflection is built on the results of a compared ethnographical study of two architectural practices based in Bruxelles: BC and Traumnovelle. The research relies on STS ethnographic methods of inquiry and applies them to the study of architectural practices in order to traces the complex net of relations and actions the observed architects have enacted to make their projects happen.

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## Introduction

The aim of the paper is to explore and identify spaces of dissent exercised through the architectural project by architectural practices which have a strong drive of changing the institutional system they act across. The research positions itself within the broader debate around the politics of architecture, artefacts or spatial interventions and investigates ways the architectural project can have a transformative power to enact its critical potential. Architecture is embedded in its reality, and therefore, it cannot be considered outside questions of power and politics: instead, it is part of the dynamic institutional system the observed practices belong to and interfere with. The paper enquires how selected architectural practices, which define themselves as dissenting with respect to their institutional system, manage to translate their critical stands into actions and with which material or immaterial effects. In this sense, it looks for the meaning of dissent in architecture once it is translated into projects.

The architectural project is intrinsically embedded within the political, economic and social context in which it is designed and realised. It is shaped by its context just as much as it influences its surrounding. Thus, the dissent exercised by architectural practices, happens in the middle of things, is never given *a priori*. Nor does the research, which is thus grounded in practice.

The paper is structured as follows. The first paragraph will introduce the reader to what has been defined as the practice turn in architecture (Doucet 2015). It proposes to study architecture in action by investigating oppositional practices that claim to be critical towards their institutional system and manage, or not, to realise their projects. Thereafter, an exploration of the three terms – dissent, institution and practice – will be presented to shape the theoretical framework the research supplies. Building on Italian philosopher Esposito, each practice is depicted as a singular *praxis instituens* that, in the process of institutionalisation of its dissent, challenges the institutional asset encountered. Therefore, in this study, the notion of *dissent* is thoroughly connected with the process of *institutionalisation* of two observed *practices*: BC and Traumnovelle, two architectural collectives based in Brussels, Belgium. The ways the meaning of dissent is traceable in different architectural projects will be discussed throughout a descriptive method of writing, informed by the ethnographic method of enquiry. Its meaning is findable in the effects of their actions. A conclusive paragraph will discuss the experience itself and later place its findings into the broader web of meaning in architecture that the thematic call of the journal addresses.

## A critical ethnography

The research is positioned at the crossing of Science and Technology Studies (STS) and feminist theories connecting feminist material tradition of critical thinking with more than human ontologies and ecological practices. This affects the methodology of inquiry and its ontology: they mutually create a relation with each other and ask for the research to be radicalised in practice. Indeed, the research is framed through ethnographic methods of studying: knowledge production and the search for

problems are always practical and never universal (Stengers 2013). Reality itself does not precede practice, and neither does knowledge: both are intertwined in a net of things, where no ontological definition or status is pre-given. Actors, agencies, objects, practices, tools, materials, researchers always exist within the relations they hold with one another. An STS informed ethnography abandons indeed any sort of binomial oppositional thinking, drifting away the active-knowing subject that unmasks the dynamics of the passive-staying object [1].

This epistemological shift touches architectural theory discourses. As Belgian architectural scholar Isabelle Doucet (2015) points out, a practice turn in architecture has affected architectural theory, growingly interested in the everyday and spatial tactics, recognised as the *locus* where critical engagement happens. This attention belongs to the more general realisation of architecture being a social practice with outcomes of this production, which have a socio-cultural nature.

Together with that, recent studies of architectural practices [2] have contributed to expanding the focus of architectural theory from «static object» to a «moving project» (Latour & Yaneva 2017, 103). Notably, British scholar Albena Yaneva firmly applies STS in her architectural research work by following practices and proposing a knowledge built from within (see Yaneva 2012, 2017). Yaneva engages with feminist scholar Donna Haraway's notion of situated knowledge, where the researcher him/herself is relationally immersed in the observed network. She claims to be in the belly of the monster, quoting Haraway (1991) directly, yet she does not accept the possibility of any drive of change suggested by the researchers. Doing so, they would put themselves above the observed, and this is, according to her position, impossible. Therefore, she refuses any critical engagement with the practices observed.

Contrary to Yaneva, feminist thinking brings into a relational ontology power structures and fields of forces; they strive to remain attuned to specific historical and political positions while looking for another order of signification (Haraway 1991). A critical ethnography of architecture with a feminist posture recognises the impossibility of seeing things from the outside and acknowledges the ever-relational chain of events and engages critically with them. It situates itself in the belly of the monster and, at the same time, recognises the field of forces and the power dynamics which have made and constructed *that monster*.

### Institutions - Dissent – Practices

How do the observed practices enact dissent? With a pragmatic take, the research positions itself *in media res* and observes practices which define themselves as dissenting towards the institutional system they encounter. In this case, it is the exercise of a critique negotiated that is, itself, immanent to the institutions. As French sociologist Luc Boltanski (2011) suggests, the question of critique is always intertwined with the institutions it enters with. Institutions and critique are bonded together, and somehow, there is a semantic slippage in the use of the term “dissent” as an expanded definition of the term “critique”, which is, anyhow, exercised by

[1] On the role of an STS position which turns into an epistemological move see Dutch ethnographer Anne Marie Mol (2002) building on Latour's 'We have never been modern' (1993).

[2] See Cuff (1992), Callon (1996), Yaneva (2009) and Lefebvre (2018).

the observed practices. Institutions, dissent, practices: the terms are thus relational with each other since the processes of institutionalisation of the practices are seen as processes of *deformation* of the given institutional order. The starting thesis is then that, by looking at dissenting practices, the paper looks at how this architectural project of deformation happens and has effects. The three terms will be presented singularly discussing how they relate one to the other: this operation will work both as a statement of the meaning given to the three specific terms as their conceptual expansion.

The research embraces a definition of institutions in endless motion and never static; they are artefacts and are not naturally given. Serbian philosopher Petar Bojanić, (2022), particularly, gives relevance to the artificial and architectural aspect of institutions: people craft them through joint, engaged acts and factors that «are able to endure standing together» (Bojanić 2022, 21). Institutions do not precede the social construction of reality; they are part of it. Thus, there is no transcendent or pre-ordered dimension, yet the group's cooperation and engagement are both simultaneous and precedent to it. Institutions and institutional facts exist solely by human agreement (Searle, 2006), but, at the same time, they precede the individuals and individual stands. Accepting institutions as continuously transformable and reconfigurable means seeing their dynamic dimension as vital. Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito (2020, 2021, 2023) has dedicated part of his most recent research to investigating the logic of institutions, which is traceable in what he calls *praxis instituens* [3]. Esposito traces this mutual and affirmative transformation in the Latin locution *vitam instituere*: «humans' lives are both the subject and object of an institutive practice that directs their behaviour, enduring an ordered co-existence» (Esposito 2023, 59). He draws a genealogy of the term and emphasises its ambiguity through time as «the potential vital dimension of institutions» (Esposito 2023, 4). This “institutionalising thought” is adopted as a political praxis and encompasses both order and conflict; in these terms «the whole politics [is seen as] an institutionalisation of the social» (Esposito 2020, 107) and is not messianic or eschatological. To him, the priority is to give back to the ‘Institutions’ operative and bustling attitude, and he does so by bringing back attention to the juridical Latin understanding of the term, stressing the dynamic swerve that the verb *instituere* has compared with the noun *institutio*: according to the roman juridical production, indeed, the verb does not concern only the establishment of certain situations but also their artificial production according to contingencies and necessities (Esposito, 2021). Esposito, drawing consistently on the work of French philosophers Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Lefort (1924-2010), with his passage to a *praxis*, emphasises the «semantic transit [...] from the name ‘institution’ to the verb ‘to institute’». This dynamic and vital tension, given by the verb, is crucial to understanding a relational dimension installed between what is outside the institutions and makes of itself an institutional practice and the inside of institutions. In the process of institutionalisation of the first one, both entities find themselves modified. This *praxis instituens* concerns thus the individual aspect, but above all, the social and political of this dialectical dimension affect both what is institutionalised and what institutionalises.

[3] all the direct quotes from Esposito in the text have been translated by the author from Italian. Same applies for the ones taken from Armando and Durbiano 2023 that will later be presented.

In this relational transformation, how do the observed practices exercise their dissent? Placed in this institutional logic, dissent is seen as the process of deformation of the previous institutional setting, being one of the drivers of the *praxis instituens*. <sup>CD</sup> Tracing back to the *institutio vitae* and analysing Spinoza's work, Esposito (2023) makes us notice that individual's rights coincide with the power they are capable of. Consequently, institutions are not detached from the lives of citizens nor from the social, but are at one with it. Dissent is, in these terms, the singular potential entering in relation to an institutional setting. Institutions do not exclude a conflictual dynamic but are instead its object and its place. Dissent holds a critical potential and transformative power and embeds the institutional conflictual dimension. The term is relational yet conflictual from its very etymology, which derives from the Latin *dissentire* - literally "feeling differently" (Cortelazzo & Zolli 1992); therefore, a dissenting practice establishes itself starting from a comparison, which, in the given case, is the institutional system it hankers to change. Dissent is thus defined as this hanker to change in relation to the institutions, but there is what has previously been described as a semantic slippage from the critique term 'critique' to the term "dissent". Dissent is the critique of the institutions established in their relations. In the conclusion of his exploration "On critique", Boltanski defines the *power* of critique as «its capacity to engage with reality in order to alter its contours» (Boltanski 2011, 150). Institutions are nothing but arrangements, and their bond with the critique invigorates them and makes them engage with reality. If they kept on being the same, holding a conservative attitude, they would not hold that vital urge; vice versa, critique finds a way to foster and affirm itself through the tension exercised at the encounter with institutional instances. To Boltanski, a founding figure of the 'pragmatic sociology of critique', this is typified by «the relationship between practical collectives and institutions, between critical forces and forces of confirmation» (Boltanski 2011, 158). This tension becomes then observable and traceable in the effects of the practical collectives. These collectives, which, in practice, exercise their dissent towards the institutions and negotiate the hanker to change them from their specific position, are the objects of the presented study.

<sup>CD</sup> CARLO DEREGIBUS

Indeed, if the meaning of dissent is exquisitely a "deformation", the consequence should be that any practice is, inevitably, a dissent, precisely because the institution is ontologically moving and instable. Therefore, a practice which is not deformative, at least in a minimum way, is ontologically impossible. In this sense, the "intention" to change (i.e., the critique) is ontologically irrelevant, as changes happens in any case, also due to undesired and unwanted consequences of actions – it is the boomerang effect.

Hence, here the main topics should be how much does a practice deform a system, and, possibly, how much does it deform it toward the direction of the critique. And this would require both framing precisely which is/are institution(s), and measuring somehow the deformations which, I fear, would require an historical perspective.

Architectural practices do not exceed this relation; they are embedded within this institutional logic. The architectural project fully enters into this dynamism: defined as a *praxis instituens*, there is not an institutionalising subject that pre-exists to it. As Italian architectural scholars Armando and Durbiano conclude in their recent publication, the architectural project, on the one hand, cannot exist without an institutional order that establishes it and, on the other, it functions as institutional support: «the power of the project is an instituting power, but, at the same time, the institution is the political transcendent of the project» (Armando & Durbiano 2023, 129). With this position, the thesis herewith presented shares a first ontological definition of the architectural project considered to be «a practice continually solicited by the social and technical phenomena that invest its specific world» (Armando & Durbiano, 2023, 11). Differently, the paper discusses how the architectural practices aim and manage to modify their political transcendent. In other words, how does the architectural project exercise the power of critique? The practices observed are considered oppositional since they do not require frontal or disruptive conflict, but they exercise the ‘power of critique’ in an ordinary and everyday manner. Through their tactics, they fool the given order of things and are exempla of hands-on knowledge (De Certeau 1980). The programmatic intent of these practices is to interfere with the institutional dimension by deforming it.

### BC and Traumnovelle

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The oppositional practices object of the study, share a strong transformative will to change the institutional system they are intertwined with. Acknowledging the pragmatic position taken, the objective of the two ethnographical enquiries has thus been to trace the effects observed. Defining the architectural project as the practice that carries it out implies that the types of spatial interventions enacted by the presented practices vary one from the other.

The two presented architectural practices are both located in Brussels, and generally are two ordinary architectural firms of small-mid size in the traditional sense of the term: a professional studio designing buildings and other artefacts. Moreover, the institutional system they are embedded in is roughly comparable: the administrative structure of Belgium, where four distinct planning systems coexist.

At the same time, regardless of being both architectural practices in the extended meaning of the term, their way of being a *praxis instituens* is robustly different as their critique of institutions touches other spheres: BC architects, studies and materials aims at transforming the building sector in the Benelux by nudging as much as possible the introduction of geo-based materials; Traumnovelle aims at changing the dynamics of space through a critical attitude and promotes lectures, exhibition, installations and discussion to achieve this. In both cases, it is not so much the ordinary architectural firm that can be considered as the primary driver of change within the practice, but rather the other activities carried out. Their strong drive to change the institutions become *praxis instituens* at the moment they start looking at *how* to realise their projects and translate their dissenting wills into effects. Together they offer a spectrum of possible interventions encompassing the notion of architectural

project which span from ephemeral interventions, as exhibitions, performances, lectures or other advocacy activities, to ordinary architectural projects, carried out with a peculiar attention to the implementation of alternative materials, and all related activities that concern their adoption within the building sector. The two practices, in their exercise of critique offer a glimpse on possible architectural projects and show, therefore, how the meaning of dissent is findable in broad possibilities of effects: in each one spaces of transition could be found.

The paragraphs that follow have been informed by ethnographic observations which have been carried out for one week at each studio during July 2023. The stories are a collection of interviews, direct observations, study of the archival materials and of different publications available that concern the work of the two firms [4].

[4] The research is part of a larger ethnographical enquiry which has been carried out for my doctoral thesis “Between norms and exceptions: an ecology of oppositional practices” (June 2024).

#### — BC architects, studies and materials

BC stands for Brussels Cooperation and it is an architectural practice based in Brussel, active since 2009. BC compasses three different branches, each one in charge of specific activities: an architectural firm (BC architects), a cooperative that researches, produces and develops circular geo-based, bio-sourced and urban-sourced materials (BC materials) and an educational non-profit organisation which is charge of researching and promoting their developed materials and techniques to a broader public of professionals and students (BC studies). BC is thus a hybrid practice: their work encompasses different activities according to the different aims of the three different entities. The whole practice aims at achieving a radical change in the construction sector in the Benelux by replacing petrol-chemical sources and drastically reducing the carbon footprint of the whole building sector in the area. They carry out different activities since they are fully aware that this systematic change may happen to tackle the same issue from different angles. The architectural branch of the office accepts and works on all kinds of commissions – both public and private – and does not limit its interventions to fully circular projects, yet they strive to use as many materials as possible which are local, geo-based or generally have a low carbon footprint. BC Materials is divided into five main activities, which, all together, contribute to the overall aim of expanding the field of knowledge about geo-sourced materials and its production. These vary from the organisation of workshops – open to students or professionals – that help sensitise and spread the technical or general knowledge about geo-based materials, bespoke production, research in BC laboratories and development of the materials both in the warehouse as outsourced, and design and prefabrication of specific design objects, usually commissioned. One of the declared intentions of these activities is to broaden the market to grow the local capacity of people (both architects and contractors) working with earth-building materials. BC Studies is the not-for profit branch of the organisation which function as a satellite of the other two and works mainly in the education field and awareness campaign activities.

Interviews and direct observations of the practice have given the possibility to observe from within how the broader aim of changing the building sector in the Benelux is carried out in daily activities divide upon the different branches of the studio. The ethnographic inquiry made it possible

to encounter different ways of negotiating dissent exercised by people working at BC, varying according to the contingencies given by the projects.

One of the threats concerning the use of geo-based materials is that the costs of production may be exceeding the average costs of ordinary materials, making the production of such architecture exclusive and accessible to few. Private commissions, if they exceed an average budget, might indeed threaten to make BC architecture elitist and not affordable. Therefore, the non-written internal deal is that the private project should allow some experimental innovations which would give BC the possibility to use the singular and extraordinary cases as a test bench for ongoing researchers within the Materials and Studies branches.

For instance, the project called “Woodstock” in the Ardennes, has a private client and an undisclosed budget. The project is being built since the end of 2022 and the construction site, at the time of the observation, was still ongoing and expected to be ended in 2025. The building is going to be self-sufficient and mostly geo based or natural materials coming from the area will be used. The building is made by three stone towers [FIG. 1] that are surrounded by a grid of 21x21 wooden beams 40 meters long. The structure has been realised by one of the few construction companies experimenting with hand laid stones techniques, unusual in Belgium. As shown in [FIG. 2] hemp blocks function as insulations for the inner structures.

Non-written rules apply also to public commissions but with different criteria: in those cases, compromises concerning tender procedures or budget happen regularly. These projects are less a field of experimentation but should function as showcases of other ways of doing architecture to the general public. This means that the project may be considered as an exemplum for the innovative use of materials, or for the involvement of stakeholders committed to the implementation of local resources. The project Havenlaan is part of the urban development project of the former port of



[FIG. 1] Saskia Gribling (2023). BC: Woodstock, two stone towers in the making.



[FIG. 2] Saskia Gribling (2023). BC: Woodstock, a detail of the hemp insulated wall.

Brussels; it is commissioned by the Urban Development Corporation (saumsi. Brussels) of the Brussels-Capital Region and would host a new centre for vulnerable drug users. It is a complex project close to the future headquarters of the Port of Brussels. In a consortium with Bogdan Van Broeck, BC Architects and Studies has won the public procurement process and is in charge, particularly of studying the facade and its materials. The choice has been to realise it in wood, to foster a different image of a facade solution, to encourage wood used in the cladding, which, in Brussels - according to the architect interviewed - does not have such a relevant architectural example. For the project, BC designs particularly the facade and explores the kind of wood to use. The facade solution should achieve both an aesthetically interesting and technically valuable result: naturally, wood does not accomplish the fire-resistant class requested by law, and, therefore, BC also researches the types of possible treatments to give the wood. At the same time, they look for stakeholders that could provide materials coming from local sources. The deal is not always straightforward: sometimes a local wood may travel for more than 1.200 km to get treated and then come back which questions the very notion of local sources itself. BC Architects try as much as possible to “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) by accepting each and every time different compromises, calculating the carbon footprint of the potential travel compared, for instance, with the one produced accepting other compromises. In the case of Havenlaan, decision was pending on the company dealing with wood coming from the Sonian Wood Forest of Brussels, Brussel Leefmilieu which was strongly promoted by Brussels-Capital Region, the client.

Other commissions BC has been working on include, among others, LOT 8, the renovation of a former depot building of the French railway company in the Parc des Ateliers in Arles, where the development of the bioregional materials has been studied together with the British studio

Assemble and local stakeholders in collaboration with Atelier LUMA. Or the project Manchester, designed for the local partner U.square Brussels, where the Research and Development (R&D) branch of BC has developed a tailor-made acoustical plaster with cork, hemp and straw, using clay as a binder, which has then been implemented in the design by BC architects. The whole office is also working on the design of their future headquarters, Stadsatelier de Ville, which will be half-shared with a construction company and general contractor, Democo. The project will occur in the Brussels Canal Zone, in the same area where BC is already based. BC highly values the importance of keeping its different “identities” and related activities close together, physically as content or knowledge-wise. Therefore, the production hall [FIG. 3], where all BC in-house production is managed should be at the same level to the R&D branch of the office. Another prerogative of the company is this crucial proximity between who makes the materials and has particular hands-on knowledge and who thinks and researches about their use and implementations. Even though there is a specialisation of the expertise, the boundaries are blurred, and the production is part of the thinking process, not its consequence. Being an expert of rammed earth and natural materials is not a prerequisite to enter in BC Architects, but everyone, after being hired, would get a training workshop in order to make them aware of what the company is doing.

Lately BC has launched a new brand called *Leem* (the Flemish word for loam), which is in charge of selling the ready to use BC materials: rammed earth, clay plasters, and compressed earth blocks, all using earth coming from urban sites in Brussels. The marketing organisation for promoting the new brand of materials, which BC has already been producing for almost seven years had high priority at the time of observation. In this way, the earth materials for construction change from being a niche market to a growing market, making the prices more affordable to a broader public. To grow its public, rise the production, letting thus decrease the production costs and generally make the leem products affordable to a broader audience is a crucial goal within the studio. Particular attentions were thus given to the promotion and narration of the kick-off event “Upscaling Earth” which has taken place end of September 2023.

The production chain of the materials is part of the design, and that is what BC also teaches in the university courses, named “The act of building”. BC has been leading between 2013 and 2022 the chair “the act of building” at the faculty of Architecture of KU Leuven (Belgium) which has moved since 2022, under the Junior Professorship of Construction and Design at the faculty of Architecture at Aachen University. One of the co-founders, Laurens Bekemans, leads the educational project, together with other co-workers. Both in bachelor and master courses students are taught to think architects being change makers, and through their projects they look for possible ways to have an impact on the construction sector. Discourses around the globalisation of the market, extractivism and the climate crisis constitute the framework or references students are called to act in. In Aachen University the chair has a given room that function as headquarter for the students for the whole semesters. This [FIG. 4] recalls BC own office [FIG. 5] where among drawing, models and books there is also space for materials examples and some testing.



[FIG. 3] Saskia Gribling (2023). BC: the construction hall.



[FIG. 4] Saskia Gribling (2023). BC: the act of buiding at RWTH Aachen University.

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[FIG. 5] Saskia Gribling (2023). BC: office entrance.

Along with those activities, BC explores possibilities of stabilising compressed earth blocks for production with the lowest impact possible, trains other contractors to learn how to develop or use earth materials in their projects, and participates actively in lobbying activities to get earth materials into the institutional norms and technical notes. Co-founder Ken De Cooman actively engages with a private research foundation that carries out scientific research and then publishes the technical files, to whom everyone in the construction sector in Belgium has to be conformed with.

The overall management of BC actives is scattered and variable; therefore, it needs coordination between long-term objectives and short-term actions, and compromises are part of their daily activities. Their hybridity touches both the organisation of the practice as the differentiation of activities, the different projects carried out, as an ever-expanding experimentation with materials. They see the change happen from within and exercise their dissent, engaging with a «performance in action» [5] which is constantly changing and adapting. The meaning of their dissent is thus traceable in the whole complex activities the practice carries out and has, every time a transaction into actions which is always contextual. The overall aim is clear, coherent and leads everything they do as a practice. Yet their dissent finds different declinations of its meaning according to the contingencies encountered in order to become practical.

[5] interview with Ken De Cooman held the 5th of July 2023.

#### – Traumnovelle

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Traumnovelle is a multi-disciplinary self-declared “militant faction” that exercises its dissent towards the institution on different scales of interventions, within a spectrum of activities spanning the curatorship of exhibitions to the realisation of buildings. Since 2014, the collective has comprised three co-founders and a variable number of architects and interns working with them. To stress the collaborative feature of what they do, everything they do falls under the signature of Traumnovelle: the articles they sign, the interviews and lectures they give in arts, academic and schools, the exhibitions they curate or the installations they built, but also, the collective mind is even expressed and stated in the architectural projects they design and build. In 2018, the collective curated, together with Roxane le Grelle, the Belgian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of Architecture: from that renowned assignment, their reputation has been more stabilised, yet their identity is still split, between their dissenting practice, which is usually traceable in some ephemeral interventions - being instead lectures or exhibition and installations - and the ordinary architectural interventions. This gap between the dissent they exercise and the architecture they make could be considered a bicameral partition of the architectural practice. Among the three co-founders and the two regularly working employees’ tasks, management and projects are split. Tasks divisions and control of the ongoing projects is strictly and well organised among all the staff, materials are accessible to everyone through the cloud. This efficacy of the working process is probably one of the factors giving the possibility to fell part of a collective militant brain, regardless the division of the single tasks. It can also be considered one of the practical effects of the dissent exercised by

the practice: experimenting with a strict yet open structure they try to escape a certain “Tyranny of Structurelessness” (Freeman, 1972) which could also cause elitism.

Among the three co-founders, Léone Drapeaud is full time project manager for Perspective.brussels – the Planning Agency that works for the region. Traumnovelle is her hobby, so she mainly joints the activities of the studio after working hours, roughly in the late afternoon. Regardless her not-formalised engagement within the office, she is recognised as one of heads of it, and decisions are not taken without her participation. During the observation period, three summer interns were employed at participating at two competitions for the European Europe: each afternoon Léone would «join the office as a consultant» [6] to give them feedback and actively participate in the brainstorming sessions [FIG. 6].

[6] interview with Léone Drapeaud held the 11th of July 2023.

For instance, between 2022 and 2023 Traumnovelle has participated in the research and development of the exhibition ‘Style Congo. Heritage & Heresy’ held in Brussels at CIVA (Centre for Information, Documentation and Exhibitions on the city, architecture, landscape and urban planning in the Brussels-Capital Region). The exhibition proposed a decolonial lecture of the so-called ‘Style Congo’ in all its manifestations (being international expositions, Art Nouveau expressions, installations, paintings or buildings) coinciding with the colonisation and exploitation of the Congo by the King of the Belgians Leopold II. Mainly, Traumnovelle has developed the research “Congolisation” to show the influence of Congo on Belgian Architecture and early modernism. Among the three co-founders Johnny Leya has been the one actively following the exhibition development, researching within the CIVA archives the Congolese presence within the Universal, International, and Colonial Exhibitions [FIG. 7] and presented with 3D reconstructed images of the pavilions. Aim of the proposed installation by Traumnovelle was to propose another reading of the archival materials, not considered as static objects, *relicts* but rather as guiding light to read the future, would tell me Johnny Leya, one of the co-founders. The exhibition is one of the proofs of a possible immaterial effect achieved by a decolonial (thus dissenting to an institutionalised way of conceiving history) project in architecture. During the exhibition time, Urban.brussels instagram account posted pictures and a description [FIG. 8] wherein they claimed the active engagement of materials and labour forces coming from the realisation of many Art Nouveau famous buildings. In particular together with LAB AN, Hotel van Eetvelde, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, would have been tour guided with the specific lenses of decolonial thinking, highlighting the active extractive role of the art and architectural movement in the colonisation of Congo.

Since 2021, Johnny led the course ‘Design et Politique du multiple’ at the Master in Editorial Policy held at the *École de recherche graphique* (ERG) in Brussels, where students research the “politics of artefacts”, specifically referring to Winner’s publication of 1980 in order to debate around whether to read or not a straightforward political intention translated into the design and built of artefacts. Both Johnny and Léon are the spokespeople of Traumnovelle, together or on their own. As public person they are often invited to give lectures or public speeches in

Architectural schools proposing to students their dissent as a posture to be other architects [7].

But «Traumnovelle does also architecture» [8]. Manuel León Fanjul, the third of the three co-founders, is in charge of carrying out the office's ordinary architectural projects. He is the know signing them, talking with the clients and constructors, going to the construction sites [FIG. 9] Visiting the site of a renovation and expansion project for a medical centre in Charleroi and looking at the foam insulation they had to dismantle, he commented with such an ironic joke about the discrepancy between the two realms, teasing about the slip between the different activities of the office. Indeed, analysing their work, it becomes clear how the activist and dissenting practice, which is embodied in the lectures given and the installations designed, is also supported by ordinary architecture. The biggest architectural assignment the office has been working on since 2018 concerns the design renovation and development process of the headquarters of A6K, a start-up incubator in Charleroi. Throughout the years, Traumnovelle has designed the project and followed its realisation, and has had the opportunity to follow a project which is still expanding and thus keeps on needing an architectural development of the spaces. In this case, the challenge of the design finds the spaces of critique and negotiation of dissent «in the poetics of space and its added values» [9], with what could be defined as a phenomenological attitude of the architects that gives meaning to the spaces through a formalistic approach.

Traumnovelle is known for its dissenting posture, yet they are learning to accept institutional controversies from the building sector to foster their research activities. This is, at first, because of an economic need to survive as a young emerging architectural practice, but also a way to separate their activist actions from the compromises that need to be made once they are practising as architects. The meaning of dissent of their 'militant faction' is thus traceable in the ephemeral interventions. With what could be defined as a critical attitude, Traumnovelle aims at changing the dynamics of space rather than the space of the dynamics.

[7] see for instance 'Uselessness' (Politecnico di Torino 2020) or 'How to become an Architect' (TU Eindhoven 2023).

[8] interview with Manuel León Fanjul held the 14th of July 2023.

[9] interview with Léone Drapeaud held the 11th of July 2023.



[FIG. 6] Saskia Gribling (2023). Traumnovelle: designing for competitions.



[FIG. 7] Saskia Gribling (2023). Traumnovelle: designing for competitions.



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urban\_brussels Vous avez été nombreux depuis le 6 mai 2023 à visiter l'hôtel van Eetvelde inscrit au patrimoine Mondial de l'UNESCO. Grâce aux travaux de restauration/rénovation et à l'ouverture du LAB-AN dans le cadre de l'année Art nouveau 2023 pour la promotion du patrimoine matériel et immatériel vous pouvez découvrir les matériaux utilisés par Victor Horta, architecte du bâtiment. 🙌

Lors des visites organisées dans le cadre du LAB-AN vous pourrez identifier et comprendre les liens entre les matériaux issus de la colonisation du Congo belge ( bois exotique, ivoire, etc.) et appréhender le contexte de leur mise en œuvre.

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10 July 2023

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[FIG. 8] Saskia Gribling (2023). Traumnovelle: changing the dynamics within space.



[FIG. 9] Saskia Gribling (2023). Traumnovelle: visiting a construction site.

## Conclusions

The article is part of a larger research that investigates the transformative power and critical potential of the architectural project. The research is generally positioned in the broader discussion about architecture and politics and intellectuals and power. Of these discourses, the meaning of dissent, and how this latter is traceable in architectural actions is an urgent question. Having taken a pragmatist position, the research enters in conversation with scholars who previously have applied STS inspired ethnographic observations to study of everyday practices, their actions and the effects. The novelty of the approach lays down in the proposal of looking at the practices through the lenses of dissent in relation to what have been defined as processes of institutionalisation.

BC and Traumnovelle are to be considered as two particular examples of a generalisable tendency of emerging architectural practice that are oppositional towards the institutional system they face and yet fully embedded in it. © In this sense, the meaning of their dissent is traceable in their actions and constant negotiations. It does not adhere to a pre given form of architecture. Their dissent is *in media res* and, therefore, could not be made universal. Nevertheless, the research suggests that by tracing the actions of architectural practices there are some recurrent patterns in their way of being *praxis instituens*. In everyday actions, the practices find a way to sneak into grey zones of institutions and negotiate their transformative power and critical potential. These grey zones could be framed as being vacancies in the institutions, or soft zones that allow the practices to interfere. These niches of interference are contingent and made by constant compromises which are fully part of the architectural competences, yet, show possibilities of transforming the discipline and its profession. It is thus by looking at the practices in their daily exercise of a immanent critique, and at the effects of their actions that the meaning of dissent could be traced.

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Considering my previous comment, I confess I cannot understand the meaning of dissent of those two firms. Indeed, if the meaning is the deformation of the institution, we should understand if, and how much, the institution(s) have been impacted, as I mentioned. If, on the contrary, the meaning is the affirmation of a cultural position opposing the mere technical practice – possibly defining a difference between architecture and building practice – then the meaning is not in the dissent, as the described action happen precisely inside the boundaries given by the institution. There are no laws against hemp or wood, nor against a reflection of the Congolese influence: hence, the described dissent practices seem to be just cultural positions and self-promotional tactics, maybe with good intents and good results but from the radical dissent expressed, in different ways, by Cedric Price, Paolo Soleri or, even more, Colin Ward.

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