

Trans-mapping the Condition of the Border

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the notion of the 'border' within a trans-disciplinary context. The border is discussed in three distinctive ways: (1) as a notion enabling a discussion about the similarities and differences between disciplines; (2) as a tool to distinguish otherness; and (3) as a specific object of study of spatial conditions in areas of conflict.

The paper will present mapping as a technique for exploring and investigating the multiplicity of contemporary urban conditions. The objective of mapping is to translate small-scale readings of urban conditions into strategies for architectural design. As the architectural object is embedded, and thus constructed, within a particular social and political field, mappings trace the influences and workings of these fields. This urban context dictates the emergence of the architectural object and the daily spatial practices that unfold around it.

A mapping is a collection of data, elements, facts, narratives, etc., within one framework. As it measures the field, the map needs to mediate the differences that inform its construction. The notion of mapping, its meaning, origins and interpretations, will be discussed as well as the idea of 'trans-mapping'. In this context, the word 'trans' would stand for the 'beyond', the 'other side'. Trans-mapping offers a representation of urban conditions without any fixed point of reference, without a hierarchical structure.

The border will be discussed as an architectural element through which social and political ideologies are implemented. The mapping of specific border conditions in areas of conflict (Nicosia, Belfast, and Ceuta) makes these spatial practices visible and have shown how the border is not only a spatial device that introduces separation and segregation, but, more importantly, how it creates specific spaces of encounter. The daily use occurring in these spaces of encounter actually undermines the idea of the border as a hard line of division. The mapping of the border, in the three-fold understanding developed in this paper, is a possible way of solving the dichotomy between the autonomy of the architectural object and the complex web of

influences, conditions and forces that dictate its creation and fabrication.

Trans-disciplinarity

The exponential growth of investigative co-operations and cross-references between disciplines, especially in the last two decades, has not so much caused a confused field of disciplinary knowledge to emerge but rather an increasing need to describe the transgressions of boundaries between the different disciplines and an increasing need to properly define, and thus control, these processes. This overlap between disciplines is not a new phenomenon, obviously, but it does form an urgent presence within contemporary disciplinary practices. The fields of physics, chemistry and biology are a clear example of this phenomenon because, in recent years and under influence of technological developments, they have increasingly shown a shifting, or even break-down, of their disciplinary boundaries. The way disciplines jointly investigate and elaborate upon objects, conditions and contexts and how they practically share knowledge, instruments and methodologies has been termed differently and in a diffused way making the distinction between the different forms of disciplinary exchange and co-operation not always clear. Multi-, pluri-, cross-, inter- and trans-disciplinarity are used to describe them in a rather indistinctive manner.

Cross-disciplinary research, as it is commonly understood, discusses the characteristics of one discipline by using the terms of another, while inter-disciplinary research is research in which several disciplines are involved, each analysing or describing an object or topic under investigation through their own field of expertise. Trans-disciplinarity is a term that is still under much debate. The TD-network, the *Network for Transdisciplinary Research*¹ in Switzerland, gives an account of several of these interpretations, stating that their aim is to complement basic research and that they are "driven by advancing disciplinary research frontiers."² On other occasions trans-disciplinarity is defined as a

combined disciplinary research field aimed at integrating knowledge, sometimes even as a beyond-all-disciplines field of knowledge, in which each member has the same overall and all-encompassing disciplinary knowledge.³ Jane Rendell, while commenting on the interdisciplinary initiatives within the architectural discourse, distinguished the interdisciplinary from the trans-disciplinary approach by emphasizing the critical intention of interdisciplinarity.⁴ The inherent function of a constant questioning of the disciplines themselves is, according to her, an intrinsic part of an interdisciplinary approach.

It is not my intention, in this context, to clarify this matter of trans-disciplinarity once and for all. Rather, I would like to bring forward a definition or interpretation of trans-disciplinarity which can be used as an operative tool within the architectural discourse and I would like to underline this argument by discussing the technique of mapping. Instead of following the definition of the trans-disciplinary as a field that incorporates all disciplines (as the group around Nicolescu would have it), I would like to present trans-disciplinarity as a form of disciplinary research that makes use of other disciplines in order to arrive at a possible re-definition of the very foundations of a discipline. Such a trans-disciplinary approach remains within the field of architectural research practice but tries to develop knowledge, instruments and methods by (partly) stepping outside (or beyond) the discipline. Contrary to the case of interdisciplinary investigations, where a co-operation between disciplines is developed in which the autonomy of each is both guaranteed and respected, trans-disciplinary work suggests the opening up of the discipline for insights, critical tools and working methods from other disciplines, with the possibility that they will be incorporated into the specific practice of the discipline itself. In essence, this is a transgression.

Trans-disciplinarity within architecture contains elements of a projective practice. When Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting proposed the alternative of projective practices, it was precisely the criticality of disciplinary action that they criticized and tried to overcome: "disciplinarity has been absorbed and exhausted by the project of criticality."⁵ Trans-disciplinary research constitutes a disciplinary 'mirror' because it investigates a discipline via the detour of another, and this approach mirrors tools and knowledge, critically reflects upon them and, simultaneously, speculates about the meanings, significances and possible futures within a discipline. Its possible effect is one of a transformation of the very foundations of the discipline.

An example of a trans-disciplinary work is Daniel Libeskind's *Chamber Works*.⁶ Peter Eisenman has interpreted this work as a 'not-architecture'; as a project that tests the limits of architecture from without. *Chamber Works* opens up a space in which the meaning of the architecture is in need of re-thinking and re-definition. They are a set of drawings that test and question the very notion of architecture itself. The aim of the *Chamber Works*, at least as the author has claimed, has been to look for, but without being able to find any, fixed instruments, elements or strategies with which either to 'ground' the discipline of architecture or, at least, to 'determine' the temporary boundaries that might circumscribe it.⁷ As the *Chamber Works* are not any 'random set of lines',⁸ their otherness begins to define the boundaries of architecture. Essentially, the *Chamber Works* are a collection of traces, as also Robin Evans has stated, 'leaving nothing behind'.⁹ They are traces of a journey, an investigation that attempted to transgress the boundaries of the discipline and once this transgression has succeeded, a self-regulating procedure will come into effect: the discipline will re-organise itself to incorporate the new findings and insights.

Other Spaces

As the practice of architectural research can be situated in between the singularity of the architectural object and the multiplicity of the contexts and conditions that determine its emergence,¹⁰ the idea of trans-disciplinarity is far from self-evident. The mapping of the border, in the three-fold understanding developed in this paper, namely the border as boundary of a discipline; as an indicator of difference; and as architectural element, is a possible way of solving the dichotomy between the autonomy of the architectural object and the complex web of influences, conditions and forces that dictate its creation and fabrication.

Contemporary disciplinary debates emphasize the importance of the boundaries between disciplines as well as perceive the border as a spatial device that distinguishes other-ness. The border is, indeed, an emergent object of study within contemporary architecture and this interest goes alongside an intensified interest in space itself within several disciplinary discourses. The so-called 'spatial turn' in the social and cultural sciences has introduced the notion of space, as opposed to time, as a central concept.¹¹ Denis Cosgrove has argued, in reference to this 'spatial turn', that the concept of space, as it is nowadays being discussed, no longer presupposes

objective space which 'hosts' objects, events and actions. In other words, space is no longer absolute but has become a relative concept: the "... assumptions about order in the world and our capacity to grasp and represent it have been upset by a growing acceptance of alternative spatial conceptions. ... Space is increasingly regarded as lacking independent existence; it comes into being as a function of other processes and phenomena."¹²

We have to acknowledge, however, that this position has a seemingly contradictory characteristic too, as it abolishes absolute spatial boundaries but simultaneously introduces a whole array of new ones. It starts from an understanding that if space cannot be conceived of as absolute, and therefore is a relative concept, knowledge about space is thus restricted and limited as well. The transgression of disciplinary boundaries is bounded or limited by the acknowledgement of this relativity, precisely because it introduces a temporary and non-fixed disciplinary framework. Indeed, disciplines have temporary limits and a critical questioning of these limits initiates simultaneously an experimentation that tries to transgress these limits. In this dynamic process fixed rules form a contradiction in terms because one is 'forced' to initiate an open-ended endeavour anyway.

The global political, ethnic and religious conflicts of the last decade have, obviously, contributed profoundly to the interest in the border. The border is an architectural element through which social and political ideologies are implemented. The investigation of specific border conditions in areas of conflict (Nicosia, Belfast, and Ceuta) make these spatial practices visible and have shown how the border is not only a spatial device that introduces separation and segregation, but, more importantly, how it creates specific spaces of encounter.¹³ As spatial elements, borders are objects that implement a strategic division between two or more entities. It is an object around which a legislative practice unfolds and where transgressions are generally achieved at the price of a sacrifice (or loss). However, borders can also be seen as places of encounter and thus constitute a place of negotiation: "it is a space in which different and contrasting visions, more often than not unequal in terms of power, come into play."¹⁴ This point of view treats borders precisely as the places where one can distinguish the one from the other but also where the one is 'drawing a line' and offering the space to meet the other. The border is then no longer a divisional object, but a spatial field where trajectories of encounter are located and framed. Here, only in the

willingness to transgress the border does one meet the other and expand knowledge.

The hope that contemporary space might still contain, or at least negotiate, an element of the profoundness of others has been formulated by Michel Foucault: "Now it may be that contemporary space has not yet lost those sacred characteristics (which time certainly lost in the nineteenth century), in spite of all the techniques that assail it and the web of knowledge that allows it to be defined and formalised."¹⁵ He develops a model for space in which these 'other spaces' are incorporated. The practices of exclusion and neutralisation that unfold around borders are political strategies that at least bring difference into a spatial framework. The daily use, occurring in these spaces of encounter, actually undermines the idea of the border as a hard line of division.

The bridging of differences, whether happening within the framework of disciplinary boundaries or in the context of spatial border conditions, can become a question of technique, in this case the technique of mapping. Susan Buck-Morrs describes clearly how Walter Benjamin thought it was inevitable that the distinction between art (which includes architecture) and politics is rendered meaningless via the emergence of mass media. With the merging of these two realms, what becomes important is how the line between the realms is transgressed. What results are two possibilities: either the representation of reality slips into political propaganda, or it focuses on the technological forms themselves by illuminating both their emancipating potential and the political realities that distort their effects: "The choice is between political manipulation or technical awareness. The latter politicizes not so much through an elaboration of the deficiencies in the present social order as through demonstrating that this order constrains the means that already exist to rectify them."¹⁶

Mapping the Border Condition

Mapping is a highly significant technique with which to explore and investigate the multiplicity of contemporary urban conditions. As stated earlier, an architectural object is embedded, and therefore constructed, within a particular social and political field. Mappings measure the characteristics and influences of these fields and trace the parameters of their spatial operations. In a way, the urban context and the daily spatial practices that take place in them determine the emergence of the architectural object, so

the objective of mapping becomes the translation of small-scale readings of urban conditions and spatial practices into strategies for architectural design. This projective aspect of mapping, the fact that every mapping contains indications of past and future, is also the argument of James Corner when discussing the relevance of mapping: "The conditions around which a project develops originate with what is selected and prioritised in the map, what is subsequently left aside or ignored, how the chosen material is schematised, indexed and framed, and how the synthesis of the graphic field invokes semantic, symbolic and instrumental content. Thus, the various cartographic procedures of selection, schematisation and synthesis make the map *already* a project in the making."¹⁷

Every mapping is "as much a prospective unfolding of future possibilities as it is a recovery of a particular history."¹⁸ It becomes the simultaneous site of that which has already taken place (the postscript), while at the same time providing the potential for what is yet to come (the projection). A mapping is a collection of data, elements, facts, narratives, etc., within one framework. As it measures the urban field, the mapping needs to mediate the differences that inform its construction. The opening of the debate to otherness and difference also means a reconsideration of the notion of 'measure'.¹⁹ Measuring will take on another meaning once the 'stick to measure with' has become an unclear element, or even an imprecise instrument. Moreover, if space has become a relative concept, than we can no longer be interested in an objective or objectifying taking of measure, but would need to rethink the measuring of spaces.

The 'Passagen-Werk' project is an important example with respect to the considerations of measuring and mapping as well. As Benjamin tried to apply the technique of montage to his philosophical construction, this radical break with traditional philosophical constructions opens the possibility of taking mapping out of the objectifying tradition, as it has been present since the developments regarding representation since the Renaissance.²⁰ Such a form of mapping, defined here as 'trans-mapping', tries to get across or in between objective and subjective representation. It would offer a representation of urban conditions without any fixed point of reference, without a hierarchical structure.

At this particular point, the important question becomes whether trans-mapping can start to look into other acts of cartography than the objectifying one, as an Foucaultian attempt to look at the otherwise, at those moments and developments within history that have been silenced, or simply been rejected as being relevant. Did Jacques

Derrida have a point when he heavily criticised Michel Foucault on this 'otherness', stating that the quest for otherness cannot actually succeed,²¹ or are there map(ing)s, both in history as in contemporary practices, that speak this language of difference, containing a measuring of relative space out of which the practice of trans-mapping might develop? Jacques Lacan located the origins of speech in the Other, in the complex process of mirror and mirroring.²² Trans-mapping, similarly, measures the territory and the other(s) and its complex construction is simultaneously self-reflective (that is not to say self-referential) and a means of communication with others. In other words, as it lies in between the monologue and the dialogue, it speaks simultaneously to itself and of itself.

To conclude, the notion of the border, as presented here, enables a discussion about the similarities and differences between disciplines, and is thus an appropriate notion for discussing trans-disciplinarity. Additionally, in a particular mirroring, the border is also a spatial (architectural) element through which social and political ideologies are implemented and where a space of encountering others is formed. In his discussion of 'other spaces', Michel Foucault developed the idea of heterotopia as a term that might describe this 'other space'. Foucault states that this space does not lie outside our society; nor is it located outside our field of knowledge or thinking. It is located within, or rather in between, and it contains "the depths of that virtual space which is on the other side of the mirror."²³ The characteristics with which Foucault describes the heterotopia are remarkably related to the investigation of space via mapping. In fact, his six characteristics of heterotopia come very close to the essence of the map itself. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to deal with them at length, but the third, fourth and fifth principles have an immediate relevance in this context: "The heterotopia has the power of juxtaposing in a single real place different spaces and locations that are incompatible with each other"; "Heterotopias are linked for the most part to bits and pieces of time, i.e. they open up through what we might define as a pure symmetry of heterochronisms"; and "Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that isolates them and makes them penetrable at one and the same time."²⁴ As it is understood here, a trans-mapping does not only contain heterotopias but is itself a heterotopia. A trans-mapping thus traces the space of encounter in the hope that the Other will be measured as being the same without erasing the differences.

Notes

- 1 The 'Network for Transdisciplinary Research' is located in Bern and was launched in 2000 by the Swiss Academic Society for Environmental Research and Ecology (SAGUF) and taken over by the Swiss Academy of Sciences (SCNAT) in 2003. Since 2008 the 'td-net for transdisciplinary research' has been a project of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences.
- 2 See: <http://www.transdisciplinarity.ch/e/Transdisciplinarity/>, accessed on March 20th 2009.
- 3 See, for instance: Basarab Nicoluscu, *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity*, New York, 2002.
- 4 Jane Rendell, 'Architecture &', in *Pattern, Haecceity Papers*, volume 1, issue 3, Fall 2007, p. 3.
- 5 Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, 'Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism', in 'Mining Autonomy', *Perspecta* no. 33, p. 73.
- 6 Daniel Libeskind, *Chamber Works; Architectural Meditations on Themes from Heraclitus*, London, 1982.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 9 Robin Evans, 'Traces that leave nothing behind', in K. Michael Hays (ed.), *Architecture Theory since 1968*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.)/London, 1998, pp. 482-489.
- 10 See: Lukasz Stanek and Tahl Kaminer, 'Introduction', in *Footprint – Delft School of Design Journal*, inaugural issue: *Trans-Disciplinary*, Autumn 2007, p. 2.
- 11 See for instance: Barney Warf and Santa Arias (eds), *The Spatial Turn; Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, London, 2008.
- 12 Denis Cosgrove, 'Landscape and Landschaft', in *GHI Bulletin*, no. 35, Fall 2004, p. 58.
- 13 Inge Boer, *Uncertain Territories; Boundaries in Cultural Analysis*, Amsterdam/New York, 2006.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 15 Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', in Neil Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture; a Reader in Cultural Theory*, London/New York, 1997, p. 351.
- 16 Susan Buck-Morrs, *The Dialectics of Seeing; Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.)/London, 1989, pp. 140-142.
- 17 James Corner, 'The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention', in Denis Cosgrove (ed.), *Mappings*, London, 1999, p. 216.
- 18 Daniel Libeskind, *Between Zero and Infinity; Selected Projects in Architecture*, New York, 1981, p. 80.
- 19 James Corner and Alex S. MacLean, *Taking Measure Across the American Landscape*, New Haven/London, 1996, pp. 25-37.
- 20 See: Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Louise Pelletier, *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge*, Cambridge (Mass.)/London, 1997.
- 21 Roy Boyne, Foucault and Derrida; *The Other Side of Reason*, London, 1990, pp. 80-87.
- 22 Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness; A Philosophical Reading of Lacan*, Cambridge (Mass.)/London, 2007.
- 23 Michel Foucault, 'Of Other spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', in Neil Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture; a Reader in Cultural Theory*, London/New York, 1997, p. 352.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 354-355.

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