

When objects seduce : reproduction in the architectural design studio

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«But why at all look at reproduction in a discipline that likes to think of itself as above and beyond fashion, as a discipline of art, not of commodities? »

WHEN OBJECTS SEDUCE:
REPRODUCTION IN
THE ARCHITECTURAL
DESIGN STUDIO
Kim Nørgaard Helmersen

Stories of the role of things in the reproduction of knowledge and power are some of the most archaic and culturally engrained. In «The Lord of the Rings», J.R.R. Tolkien describes the mystical relation between the master and his materialization in the ring, and the power the ring exercises through Man's desire to own it. This desire traps, enslaves and dehumanizes nine kings, forever bound to its destiny. The dark Lord Sauron is killed by King Isildur, but his power lives on with the ring, which can only be destroyed in the fires of Mount Doom, where it was made.

My understanding of the architectural object can be traced to Bruno Latour's enthusiastic and even at times emotional descriptions of our intimate connections with things. He taught me to pay them my respect. Yet, in this essay on reproduction I will betray my usual commitment to Latour and his beautifully liberated things and temporarily put them in brackets. I commit this treason, not as a provocation, and not because I take pleasure in demonstrating my power over things. No, on the contrary, I do this to be able to better explain the power the things have over «me». And in particular, to highlight an important thing about things, namely that they want to be seen and worshipped. They want to be objects of our restless desire of ownership. Like Sauron's ring they «want to be found».

In Latour's quest to free the things of their objectivity, he placed human sensory attraction to objects in the background in order to underline the equality between humans and things to act. In this essay, however, I wish to foreground this attraction to objects as I suggest a return to classic sociology and Emile Durkheim for the analysis of reproduction in the architectural design studio. By doing this, I betray the things by making them static, by holding them in place while bringing their shining effect and reproductive social role under a microscope.

But why at all look at reproduction in a discipline that likes to think of itself as above and beyond fashion, as a discipline of art, not of commodities?

Having looked at studio teaching across architecture faculties in Europe over the last couple of years, I can confirm that the methodological role of the copy in design teaching has gone out of fashion. Yet, it is not irrelevant for a study of reproduction to remember that studio education in the beaux-arts tradition up until 10–20 years ago was strongly influenced by a master-apprentice model, which continues to haunt today's studios like a ghost. It seems to walk the hallways of faculty buildings at night, penetrate walls, and take shelter inside studios where drawings and models magically change form. They suddenly share a number of features that you cannot quite place your finger on. Whilst being clearly distinctive from each other, they look remarkably similar.

While the assessment of rigor — in the form of novelty — in studio teaching has indeed become more rigorous, similarities between artifacts in studios and, in particular, a strong presence of distinctive studio atmospheres can be striking. Gernot Böhme says that atmospheres are «indeterminate above all as regards their ontological status. We are not sure

whether we should attribute them to the objects or environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them.»⁽¹⁾ But since the atmospheres cannot so easily be attributed to the objects or the environment from which they proceed, I cannot help but wonder, is it just me, who experiences these atmospheres? Only me, who finds similarity in the obviously distinctive objects? Is it indeed me, who has been haunted by a ghost?

If we leave aside the possible, but rather unproductive option that it should indeed be me who is haunted by a ghost, then we are left with the other option — that the studio atmospheres can be attributed to the objects or the environment from which they proceed. This leads me to the next question: If that is so, can we then identify and describe some mechanisms behind the (re)production of these atmospheres?

Skimming my notes, I find that the most invariable component to studio education encountered may, in fact, be the so-called «crit» — a mystical social space in architectural education, where the copies are told from the originals; styles contested and replicated; objects becoming architecture. It is not so much the label, the crit, which is invariable across national borders and epistemic communities. Crits can be named juries or reviews as well. It is more the way they look and the way they work. It is the semi-structured socio-spatial composition, the sequence and above all the spectacle that crits have in common. It is the dramaturgy, the ceremonial behavior, the anticipation and the aftermath, the excitement and the anxiety. Crits are the matter of which atmospheres are made, and a wonderful source of reproduction.

But how can we understand and describe the reproductive forces at play in this social space? How can we get more specific about the mystical studio atmospheres, without becoming deterministic and strip them entirely of their mystique? And what about the objects? Well, I promised you Emile Durkheim, so now you'll get him, although I'm a bit shy about it. Because why him? Isn't the subject matter too vibrant and post-modern to grasp from the perspective of a sociologist classic with Social Darwinist tendencies? How can a theory based on studies of tribal gatherings of Aboriginal Australians in the early 20th century help explain spaces of knowledge making in contemporary architecture schools?

I feel confident to re-articulate his theory in the present context for two reasons. First, because the crit in terms of both social organisation and spatial characteristics resembles the ritual of the Durkheimian cult to almost perfection. And second, because his social ritual theory has been pushed further by a number of scholars to explain the dynamics and reproduction of much more dispersed and individualized tribes typical of our globalized, post-digital age.

The word «fetish» from Portuguese «feitiço». And the word «totem» from Ojibwe «(o)doodem(an)» have similar meanings. Whilst fetish refers to a «material object regarded with awe as having mysterious powers or being the representative of a deity that may be worshipped through it»,⁽²⁾ the word totem refers to an object that signifies a kinship group.⁽³⁾ In both cases, the object mediates between the



Bogomir Doringer, *New Year's Eve, Awakenings*, Amsterdam, 2016. Image: Bogomir Doringer



Bogomir Doringer, *I Dance Alone*, Fun House Party, Amsterdam, 2014. Image: Bogomir Doringer



Bogomir Doringer, *I Dance Alone*,
Fun House Party, Amsterdam, 2014. Image: Bogomir Doringer



Bogomir Doringer, *I Dance Alone (Touch)*,
Fun House Party, Amsterdam, 2014. Image: Bogomir Doringer

individual and something «greater», and thus becomes a signifier of that «greater» thing, which makes it sacred. In other words, the attribution of the sacred status to this or that specific object has nothing to do with its inherent characteristics. As Durkheim put it, «A cliff, a tree, a source, a small stone, a piece of wood, a house — in a word, all kinds of objects may be held for sacred».⁽⁴⁾

This interchangeable character of the sacred object, however, does not mean that it is worshipped only for their socio-cultural status or symbolic. Rather, the enchantment happens on the phenomenological level of an attraction to the object's shine, meaning that while the status of the object, and the origin of its shine can be attributed to its symbolic, its effect lies with the power to affect. Sauron's ring looks like every other ring — or thing. Yet it is the most special, the most «precious» of things. Unspectacular at first, its magical power immediately casts a spell upon its spectators, who are enslaved by its enticing beauty. Often unaware of why they want it, they know they want it, more than anything. But this shining power can also repel: the sacred is feared as well as desired.⁽⁵⁾

Noted by Randall Collins (2004), it was indeed Durkheim's intention with his analysis of the components of social rituals brought forth in «The Elementary Forms of Religious Life» (1912/1998) that it should have a wide application. This made it possible for Collins to extract and expand on these ritual components forming the basis for his programme of interaction ritual theory.⁽⁶⁾ He found that the Durkheimian ritual was formed by three stages: The ingredients that go into making rituals happen; the process by which a collective consciousness is built up amongst the ritual participants and the products of the ritual.⁽⁷⁾

On the ingredients side, emphasis is placed on the physical assembly of human bodies. The collective consciousness, which may arise from the togetherness of bodies in space, comes about by two reinforcing mechanisms of shared emotion and shared action and awareness. As a result of these reinforcing mechanisms, on the output side, this momentary collective consciousness can be prolonged when it becomes embodied in symbols or sacred objects, and in individual emotional energy, leading to group solidarity.⁽⁸⁾

This brings me back to the crit, which strikes me as a remarkably ritualized social setting. As I write these words, it is the third week of December. The festive season is waiting around the corner, but as a «rite de passage» to this extensive time away from school, we have the final crits. Under normal circumstances this means that faculty buildings are buzzing with excitement: Hallway posters guiding movement flows between studios; student projects exhibited throughout; an unusually high number of visitors further adding to the density. These are times of heightened mutual awareness and emotional energy, and where social solidarities and sacred objects are re-charged with that «sort of electricity» metaphorically described by Durkheim.⁽⁹⁾ The intensity is extraordinary because multiple crits are taking place at the same time, in close spatial proximity, but let us focus our mutual attention on the indi-

vidual characteristics of the rituals taking place inside the studios and not get lost in the hallways.

Why is the architectural crit an interaction ritual? To a remarkable degree, it contains the ritual ingredients necessary to produce the collective consciousness that leads to group solidarity. And its commonly recognized ceremonial procedures are strikingly similar across various contexts. Most often crits (especially finals) take place as open or semi-open events, which can be joined by outsiders to the core group (the semester student group, the professor, assistant teachers and guest critics) but without the focus of attention shifting. The constant flow of guest participants coming and going, the background noise of chairs being moved around, of footsteps and whispering, does not seem to disturb participants much, who (if they are not taking notes, or in other ways pre-occupied with their smart phones) pay full attention to the stage in front of them set by a student or a group of students, the teachers and the architectural object. And when I say «in front of them», this is not a coincidence. Again, with few exceptions, the social ritual spatializes in a structure where the object is made the center of attention, on stage, in front of the student who faces the audience consisting of a core group and guests, following an internal logic of hierarchy ranging from the teachers seated in the front row, then students, then visitors in the back rows, sitting or standing.

Collins explains such socio-spatial differentiation of rituals along invisible lines of status and power as front-stages and back-stages, where the persons positioned closer to the ritual center of attention — the shining object — take a dominant position to persons positioned more peripherally in the ritual.⁽¹⁰⁾ Upon successful completion of the ritual, when group solidarity, symbols of social relationships, morals and values have been (re)produced, these ritual outcomes hold an internal logic of positions of status and power, which lingers in the individual participants as emotional energy. This means that after high intensity rituals the individual is not only strongly tied to the group, they are also tied to a certain status position within the group, which is of course always subject to change. Besides the distribution of power, also the intensity of rituals changes with variations in the physical assembly, since an increase in density and volume intensifies rituals. This literally means that the ritual intensity of a crit intensifies the more individuals are gathering in the studio.

But what about the role of the object? And what about the low-intensity periods between rituals, when the object's shine is fading, how can individual members be tied to the group then, and symbols reproduced?

The simple answer is that it depends on the frequency and intensity of rituals. If the intensity of the ritual was significant, then it will take a long time before the emotional energy of the participant following the event has faded so much that this participant will start questioning their belonging to the group, its symbols and values. The bigger the spectacle, one could say, the bigger the allegiance. This is partly due to the emotional energy in the individual, but also to

the objects. The stronger the shine, the bigger the power to seduce, and the smaller the need for co-present awareness in rituals to tie the individual to the group.

Everything from a particularly resourceful student model or drawing, to an iconic reference or a contemporary art project, which you just have to know, material objects achieve their seductive shine from their central position in the ritual and the intensity of the ritual charging the object. That means, even on lonesome nights at school; when the hallways are empty and the studios introspective rather than ceremonial; then, the sacred object is still shining, demanding the students' attention and submission. Like Sauron's ring, its sheer presence is enough to allure humans into worship. The seductive object doesn't need methods of copying or a master-apprentice model to secure its reproduction. It only needs its shine.

That means the source of reproduction — the shining object — is causing the reproduction simply because of its shine, and it gets its shine because of its reproduction. When the social inhabits the material, it gets certain qualities, which are not value-free. On the contrary, these qualities have both values and meanings, which can be reproduced solely from an inspiration that might seem value-free in the moment of action. So the question is: what is meaningful and what is worthless? Which values do we want to reproduce and which do we want to transform? Whether we find the social material of which the sacred object is made, desirable or not, achieving an awareness of its qualities and how it has been forged is worth something. And by pointing this out, this essay has provided a bit of that something that is worth something — an attention to the social power of things. An attention quite different to the one I would usually be giving to things. Here, the things have the power to seduce rather than to act. They are mystified rather than de-mystified, made part of a fairy tale of how knowledge and power are reproduced, as they were for centuries.