After the Architects

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After the Architects - A Building, Subjectivity and Time

Leaving the school, I want to understand the relationship between the school building and myself. By using subjectivity as a tool I want to address aspects of architecture I find otherwise difficult to discuss; how the interaction of a building and its users work over time. I've put my ears to the walls, read traces from the past and excavated the different layers of my mind to try to get closer to the effects of an architectural object and the stories it stages. What is a building after the architects?

Thesis Intent

For my thesis project, I wanted to look at how we can communicate different aspects of architecture, focusing on the experiences it evokes. How we can use the tools we have at hand within the profession in different ways than the standard ways of presenting models, posters and powerpoint-like digital presentations. I wanted to investigate the potential of storytelling as a mean of communication and also in creating meaning to the experiences.

I have used this semester as a closure to the education where I felt I've wanted to take a few steps back and look at the bigger picture of what we're dealing with as architects. To leave the top-down perspective we often have as architects and instead look at a building from a bottom-up perspective. By using this school building as a case study object and by really going into the role as myself, an architecture student of the building, I wanted to dissect the building and look at the different aspects of what it is and what it does.

Method

A process is rarely linear. Going into this project, I knew I wanted to investigate the effects of architectural buildings and spaces as well as the way we discuss and communicate them. Storytelling was the title in my mind. But the project had yet to find its core and shape.

Since I wanted to look beyond the most common ways of analysing and describing architecture, the references I looked at and drew inspiration from was not mainly from the architecture sphere. I have tried to be confident in allowing myself a more intuitive, and associative process. The way of working has derived from collecting spur-of-the-moment inspiration and fragments of interest, rather than rationally organizing and executing a linear, more scientific method.

Much inspiration has been collected from essay films, multimedia artists, podcasts on architecture and philosophy, the narrative possibilities of comics, books on architecture education and storytelling as well as talks with students and teachers of the school.

As much as this project has been an attempt to look closer at some of the fundamental aspects of architecture, an equal part of the work has been trying out different ways of approaching the subject and telling the story. The decision to merge some of the work and thoughts I came across during the process in a film proved fitting in the way it allowed me to keep a clear narrative, whilst taking associative leaps and combining a variety of materials. My main conclusion from this is that there are such a great number of possibilities in presenting thoughts and ideas which we as architects may use. To be more active in choosing the ways we discuss, process and present ideas can only gain the outcome and I think it's important to retain the curious approach within the school whilst working outside the educative realm, and not fall into the conventional standards of the profession.
My thesis project's main result was a 20-minute film about the school building from my point of view. I used a range of techniques, such as: photography, film, sound, music, illustrations, 2d-animations and animated physical models, tied together by my narrated voice-over when telling the story of my relationship to the school, trying to excerpt my thoughts, emotions, interpretations and ideas regarding the different aspects of the building.

Also I wanted to work with the form of presenting my work, building an exhibition in the formed acoustics lab of the school. I found this location appropriate since it offered a chance of working with light and sound more freely than the other, more open presentation locations in the school. Also, the room is like a concrete box, where you really feel the material of the space both haptically and sonically.

I arranged bench-like seating volumes along the back of the room for the visitors to be able to sit down and watch the film. Along the back wall was the film projector, sound system and computer mounted, allowing the film to be looped during the exhibition days.

The film was projected directly onto the opposite concrete wall creating a nice conception of the film about the school being projected onto the same school. As the relief shapes of the casting boards in the concrete walls were visible in the projected image, this created a nice extra layer to the film.

The exhibition consisted of objects which worked as excerpts from the film. I used a small rotating motor, an overhead projector with moving objects, speakers, headphones and coloured glasses to add sensations to the objects and make the visitors interact with them rather than just looking at and reading them.

The part of the exhibition that exhibited my working process was set up as my desk in school. I carried the desk, my chair and the lamp down to the room and set them up in a corner of the room. Across the desktop, I spread some of my process material as well as my process diaries and some of my tools. The walls were also covered with some of my process material, similar to how it looked in my room when working with the project.
The voice-over
as read in the film:

A situation. An idea. An outcome. The different perspectives and our individual experiences. This is what it all comes down to.

Like this building for example: Do you know it?

This has been my second home for the last five years.

Now I’m finishing the education here, leaving school to continue working outside these walls.

What is it that I carry with me from these years as tools, references and knowledge. What will this building be to me in the future? Or rather: what will my memories of it consist of?

I remember watching it burn. Standing on the hilltop by the church, looking at the thick clouds of smoke that came rushing out of it. It came as a surprise how emotional it all was to me and I realized that I had tied a personal bond to this building. By the looks of the other students that were there with me, they just realized this too.

When the smoke had settled, a central part of the building had disappeared. The lower pavilion, where we had held most of our presentations, as well as student bars and parties, the nice wood workshop, the ping-pong table, the material shop and the old piano that used to fill the space with quirky tunes. The flames had transformed them all into memories, etched in our minds.

As I’m leaving the school, the whole school is leaving the building. A new one is under construction, about four hundred meters away, up at the KTH campus. It's expression is different, it's context is new. I wonder how this new building will affect the students and their education. And, what will the old school building become when it's emptied of its reason for being?

I picture a tune from the old, now burnt down piano moving trough the empty building. Like a voice of the students that were here and played it. The building was an instrument and the students made the music, which was shaped by the buildings physicality, materials and the sequence of the spaces.

When thinking of what this building is to me, it's like excavating different layers in my mind. I can put on my analytical glasses and look at this place in terms of understanding it's construction, it's pedagogical ideas, the general structure of the plans and how different site regulations and circumstances affected what it became.

I can also wear the historical glasses, seeing traces from students that were here before, sitting in the same rooms as me, thinking of other rooms in buildings so real in the mind, but a total fiction in reality. How the stress and frustration and doubts I have felt so many times in here, probably is the exactly same as what they were feeling.

I can wear the glasses of nostalgia. Remembering events that took place here over the years. Friends I've made. The late nights of working, when the school is ours. Us blasting loud music in the studio space, so tired that anything would make us laugh.

Or I can put on the sceptical glasses, where I see everything that's wrong with the building: How worn down some parts of the building are. How the poorly functioning ventilation system gives us headaches. And how freezing some rooms become during the winter.

A mental image I have of the building, is that it's like a concrete box buzzing with creativity and ideas on the inside. From the outside it is a closed solid, but lifting its lid, a river of ideas, and thoughts flow out.

I think of the 44 years the building has been in use. Since it opened it's doors in 1970, almost 6000 students have studied the whole, or parts of their architecture education here, counting the exchange students from universities all over the world. How many projects and ideas have been created here over the years? And where are they now? Have they rooted somewhere in the outside world, or do they make up an underground universe in the buildings mind bank.

A parallel reality, with alternative worlds. Is this universe of ideas the essence of the building?

At the school library, they show me a collection of student written magazines from the first years of the school. Flickering through them, different images of the school and tone of the students in those days appear. It was all very political. Communist red. Demonstrations and money collections held in support to the Vietnam communist movement, and to the cleaners of the building. The students were quite unhappy with the school, asking the architect Gunnar Henriksson questions about its expression, the height of the windows and other concerns. They made plans and drawings for different interior alterations to the building, most of which were never realized. And neighbours of the building were invited to see the premises and listen to the school architect choir.

This place is a world of sounds. They tell the story of what has happens here. Some sounds are the buildings own fingerprints, timeless in their expression: How rubber soles meet the floors and staircases. Doors slamming shut. The custom built work desks being rearranged in the studio spaces.

But some sounds disappear over time, replaced by others.

There used to be tapping sounds of typewriters here. Student choirs sang, tea meetings with group discussions and demonstrations were held. In the 80's and 90's the school was famous for its big parties, attracting people from everywhere, filling the neighbourhood with loud music.

Today, the scratching sounds of pencils and rulers are replaced by the klicking sounds of computer mouses and keyboards.

At night, only the building’s own sounds are heard. The systems and pipes that make out its life, a grid to life, and a piece of art.

A parallel reality, with alternative worlds. Is this universe of ideas the essence of the building?

But rather than listening to the sounds of the place – the stories that occurred here, one can look at it as a physical object. Because at the same time, it's a machine, a backdrop to everyday life, a grid to life, and a piece of art.

When I feel my nose start running from the chill inside the computer lab in the winter, it's the machine that is failing to keep me warm. When I am arriving to school, leaning my bike against the concrete gable façade, and walking up the stairs, its shape and colours makes up the backdrop to my everyday life here. When us students squeeze past each other in the narrow spiral staircase, or meet up in the central café it forms the grid for the way we move and interact.

And when discussing the building regarding its architecture it is often viewed upon as a piece of art, pretty or not, it’s a neo-brutalist piece of architecture true in its expression.
Now as I’m walking around in the building, I’m looking at it with the eyes of the future. It’s as I’m looking at something that has happened. Knowing that soon, me and everyone else will be out of here I kind of see it as a museum. All these spaces and events that builds on to our reference bank for what a school is, or should be. Or what it shouldn’t be.

So what will happen to this building? Some people want to tear it down, having the ugly-label it always has had, being called the ugliest building in Stockholm.

I’ve heard the owner, Akademiska hus, have plans of turning the ground floor into a food court, with offices on the upper floors.

In the third year of my education, for the bachelor project, some of us worked with converting the school building into an urban building consisting of housing, offices and a public programme by choice. My project included student housing, a rooftop park, open office spaces, and a big public park with exhibition spaces underneath. The idea with these exhibition spaces were that they were there for the whole of KTH to use for exhibiting their work. As a way of opening up its doors to the public and showing all the exiting and fun things that are made up on the campus – secluded from the rest of the city.

Maybe this building could do this, but in an even more direct and organic way?

It’s been great, the way the school has always been open for us students, making it ours to use when and how we like. And how it’s worn down rawness has encouraged us to use it as a canvas, filling its walls with posters, making installations in various places in the premises without having to be concerned with leaving traces or damaging its surfaces.

Couldn’t the students get to use this building as an extension to the new building where they could really try out their ideas? In full scale. If money wasn’t an issue, I think we would all agree that this would be a great way to deal with the building. I can imagine crazy events here where the public is invited to listen to live music in student-run clubs and music festivals. New volumes popping up on the roofs, climbing contests on the façade. Theatre and modern dance performances in spaces built and designed by the students. Exhibitions built and arranged in collaboration with other schools. Temporary student housing built by the students for themselves. A paintball tournament with follow-up evaluation would make the participants experience the spaces a lot differently and see different aspects with them. School classes invited to draw ideas which the students would interpret into rooms and objects. Material and sound workshops. Movie screenings. Pop-up cafes and restaurants. Collaborations with konstfack, mejan and other schools…

But I know… We play by the rules of economy.

Maybe some rich architecture enthusiast would see the great effects a place like this would have on the architecture scene. Instead of building another fancy art space. Making the public engage and realizing architecture isn’t just some self important, elitist profession, but something that is fun, engaging and limitless.

The vastness and complexity of the profession is what is so exiting about it, but it also makes it really important to getting the chance to materialize the investigations and ideas in order to understand what they are.

Some studios in school work with this, for example this fall, a studio in school is building a house for them to use as workspace for the rest of the year. It is located far up at the Kth campus, unknown and unnoticed by most, but for these students, lots of things are learnt by trying out their ideas. They get to work with, touch and smell the materials, and eventually experience the positive and negative results of their building when using it after its completion.

The old architecture school building could do this full on, as a workshop in process, a creative hub of experiments. It would be like a new, alternative culture house that would boost the education, put the school on the map internationally, increase the level of the profession, and make architecture exiting, inspiring and fun.

Because this is what I have been thinking about a lot during my last semester in the school; how to get closer to the architecture we design. What the lines we draw become in reality and which effects and stories they stage.

Because what we draw lives on and creates stories, impressions and memories. We draw the instruments, but do we know what the music will sound like? What are the buildings after the architects?

So leaving this building, I will bring all of this with me.
Film excerpts
The hand book

As a future tool, I have made a handbook with mental exercises, which can help me enter the projects I will be working on through different perspectives and circumstances. To hear, smell and feel the rooms and materials of the spaces. To be aware of the fact that the building may outlive me and exist in future scenarios where the ideals, needs and programs might be different from what they are today.

We draw the instruments, but do we know what the music will sound like?

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Preface

When designing a building, it is easy to look at the project only in terms of the challenges at hand; the site regulations and complexities, the programmatic demands, the basic concepts concerning form and approach, and practicalities of construction, economy and time.

The program of the building gives a hint of the lives that will be lived inside it, but it is easy to forget the true reality of this. After you have designed the building and it is built, the setting you are a part in creating will affect the lives of a numerous amount of people for many years to come. It will start to live its own life and be the canvas for a world of events and emotions to come.

This handbook is a tool for you as a designing architect, to help you enter the future worlds in and around the buildings you design, to aid you in the decisions along the way of your work.

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1. The sounds of the site
2. You as the cleaner
3. The essence of memories
4. The next door neighbour
5. The building as an object
6. Imagine the lifespan
7. On the headlines
8. The crime thriller
9. In utopia
10. In dystopia
11. The blind walk
12. After the world war
1. The Sounds of the Site

Go to the site of the project and close your eyes.
Listen to the sounds that surround you.
Identify and sort out the sounds in your head
What will this place sound like when the new building rises here?
Which sounds are added?
Which sounds are subtracted?

2. You as the Cleaner

You are the cleaner of the building. For twenty years on from now, you will enter the building every Monday and Thursday morning at six o’clock.
Walking through the empty building in the pale morning light, which traces of the activities here are spread across the tables and floors?
How does it smell?

3. The Essence of Memories

Depending on the type of building, or place you are designing, think of your own home/office/favourite cafe/favourite museum, or whatever it is you are working on.
Think of the place/building while not being present at that location.
What is the essence of your mental image of that place?
For example, has it got to do with a specific atmosphere of light? Do you connect the place with a certain tone of color or material? Is it a sound ambience that comes to mind, or an event you link to the place?
Now imagine the building you are working on:
You live in the building, or use it, for ten years. One night, the building burns down to the ground.
What is the essence of your memories of the place?

4. The next door neighbour

You are an elderly woman living in the neighbouring building. Your granddaughter calls you up on the telephone. She is studying architecture and is curious about your view of the new building across the street.
What are your general thoughts of the new building outside your window?
Is it dull, modern, adding life to the streets, illuminating the block at night, blocking the view, attracting new types of people to the area, how do they move and sound?
5. The building as an object

You, as an architect (not the architect behind the building) meet another architect whom you know from your years of studying together at architecture school, at an after-work mingle. You have just visited the new building and you ask if your friend have heard about it.

How do you refer to the building in one sentence? (“Have you seen the new building at……………, you know the …………………………….”)

6. Imagine the lifespan

For how many years do you think your building will exist? For twenty, fifty, a hundred, two hundred years? More?

For how long will it remain relatively unchanged?

Which alterations do you think will be made to it when it is eventually altered?

Will it be reprogrammed? Will there be extensions added onto it? Will the facade be changed/modernized?

7. On the headlines

Fifteen years after the buildings completion, it burns down.

How will the newspapers and tv-broadcasts summarize the building when describing this event?

DAILY NEWS
BIG FIRE ON X-STREET

8. The crime thriller

Imagine a film. A dark crime thriller. A detective is chasing a serial killer. She is finally on the killer’s trail. It is a dark, rainy night. The serial killer breaks into the building. The detective follows. She enters the building and stops to listen. The only sounds she hears are the muffled sounds of the outside rain and the buildings own sounds. She moves slowly, with suspense through the dark, empty building.

How are the spaces perceived? Which are the sounds?
9. In utopia

Picture your own utopian vision of the area surrounding the building fifty years from today. What is the city, the village, the neighbourhood or the landscape it is situated in like then? Is it unchanged, densified, livelier, car-free, etc?

How does your building meet this scenario?

9. In dystopia

Picture your own dystopian view of the area surrounding the building fifty years from today. What is the city, the village, the neighbourhood or the landscape it is situated in like then? Is it unchanged, densified, polluted, enclosed, heavily trafficked etc?

How does your building meet this scenario?

11. The blind walk

You are blind from birth. It’s afternoon. You are slowly walking through the building, one hand gently brushing against the wall.

How are the walls perceived when experienced with the palm of your hand?

How does the floor feel and what sounds does it make when walked upon?

Which sounds fills the spaces you move through?

12. After the world war

The third world war breaks out. An atomic bomb wipes out most of the surrounding city/area of your building. The area is evacuated. Air raids pulverize most of the neighbouring buildings, but somehow this building remains unharmed.

After the war is over, your building is the only building left from the 2000-era in the whole country. Everything in the building remains as it were on the day of the war outbreak. The building is soon decided to be turned into a museum as the only remain of a twenty-year period of buildings.

Which are the objects and traces of the lives that were lived inside the building?

What will be said about the building concerning style, construction, material and plans?

Which traits are typical of the time it was built in?

Which traits are untypical or even original?
The exhibition
Depending on the context and the perspective from which we are experiencing something; what we see is different. Also, what we see is colored by who we are, since we’re all looking through the lenses of ourselves.

How many projects and ideas have been created here over the years? And where are they now? Have they rooted somewhere in the outside world, or do they make up an underground universe in the buildings mind bank - a parallel reality with vast, alternative worlds.
On the outside the building is a closed solid, but lifting its lid, a river of thoughts and ideas flow out. This stream of creative energy has always run wildly through it. Is this the soul of the building?

A building is a world of sounds. As the shapes and materials of its spaces interacts with the people using them, their sonic fingerprints are revealed. The character of the sounds of the people using the spaces are influenced by the programs they allow, their sequence and the shifting pace of the day.

Sounds have a direct impact on our senses, triggering stress, tranquility, and associations and is maybe harder to filter out than the visual aspects of colors, shapes and light. The important role sound has in creating atmospheric moods in films is as evident in all parts of life. By listening to a building, many aspects of it are revealed. So feel free to plug-in to the architecture school building and listen to the sounds it produces.
Feel free to put on the analytical glasses and “read” the building. The pedagogically honest construction visible in the facade and the general structure of the spaces are effective in their simplicity. “Knowing” and understanding a building affects the way you look at it. What to some people is simply a closed concrete facade, is to those familiar with it a combination of constructive, spatial and aesthetic arrangement with different parts of the similarly expressed exterior of the building representing different parts of its interior logic.
For the first two years of my education, up until the fire, I had frequented the lower atelier and workshop that the flames consumed. Once a week, me and Alexander stood in the material shop located here. There was a bar, an important hub these first years for getting to know one another over a can of beer and some music. The ping-pong table by the bar had seen its better days, but remained a constant companion for some fun and loosening up stiffened student necks. There were two couches by the bar that allowed coffee breaks in a slumped-down position and afternoon naps. The out of tune piano siding them sometimes filled the venue with quirky tunes; a student releasing a load of frustration or a soothing lullaby. All of this, along with the rooms where we held our first and generally all project presentations and vernissages, as well as the workshop were lost in the fire. Still, it is all etched in my mind. The image of these rooms is so vivid, that I still visit them frequently. I am sometimes surprised when entering the courtyard, by the appearance of the red tent and the barracks. The image in my mind, the memory of these places, is still the reality.
A process is rarely linear. Going into this project, I knew I wanted to investigate the effects of architectural buildings and spaces as well as the way we discuss and communicate them. Storytelling was the title in my mind. But the project had yet to find its core and shape.

Since I wanted to look beyond the most common ways of analysing and describing architecture, the references I looked at and drew inspiration from was not mainly from the architecture sphere. I have tried to be confident in allowing myself a more intuitive, and associative process. The way of working has derived from collecting spur-of-the-moment inspiration and fragments of interest, rather than rationally organizing and executing a linear, more scientific method.

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The student-written magazines from the first years of the school reveal a sense of the tone of the students and the concerns of the time. Realizing these pages are merely some traces of thoughts from a relatively small selection of students and brief span of time, one can paint a mental image of the range and force of opinions the building has raised over the years. The constant act of assessment and critical reaction to one’s context is maybe extra evident when it comes to the relationship between architecture students and a building designed for them.
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A link to the film:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4BU0o6WBzI

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