Performative Interiors: Terminological and Theoretical Reflections on the Term 'Performative'

Ayman Kassem

City University
Lebanon

Abstract

'Performative' is an emerging term in architectural discourse. The word 'performative' is able to describe spatial qualities and design approaches. The term is mostly linked to the concepts of open-form, and flexibility which are characters that give the spatial design a strategic aspect as the ability to anticipate and host predicted and unpredicted occurrences, and to adjust to future changes, which also gives architecture the character of an unfolding 'event' in time and in space. This paper seeks to investigate the terminological and the theoretical dimensions of the term 'performative.'

Keywords: performative interiors, flexible architecture, design approaches, openness, strategic design

Correspondence Address: Ayman Kassem, City University, Muhieddine Makkouk Blvd. Abou Samra, Tripoli, Lebanon. Email: aymankassem504@gmail.com

Introduction

The term 'performative architecture' started to be introduced to describe architectures belonging to dynamic environments, indicating to "a shift in architectural theory, from what the building is to what it does" (Leatherbarrow, 2005, p. 9). The performative character is related to scripted and unscripted aspects, predicted and non-predicted events. "The unpredictability refers to how architecture is able to be productive far from the planned program … A play between intentionality and non-intentionality" (Leatherbarrow, 2005, p. 9). The performative project should be able to adjust itself for the unscripted, by being open and flexible.

Signore (2015) defines the performative project through the concept of *open form*, as a project that is designed to be flexible and open for transformations, opposed to the idea of definitive perfect forms of the past modernism where program and form were set and rigidly defined. For Signore in the pure rationality of modernism the user was always a passive controlled subject, while the performative project accepts uncertainty, incompleteness, and openness to events, users' urban and interior improvisations, responding to a complex and changing context (Signore, 2015). In this regard, Graeme Brooker (Personal communication, 2016) indicated that one of the main reasons of the failure of the mass social housing built in the sixties in London is due to the limitation of freedom of the users to adjust the space and to adjust to space. Signore (2015) believes that "The performative project reformulates the idea of design: it produces a shift from the will to predict and program, towards the instigation of the unexpected" (p. 172). In a performative architecture, the un-designed and the unfinished are part of the design strategy in order to allow future growth and development of the project (Signore, 2015).

In the same regards, Hensel (2013) spoke about performance-oriented architectures, as non-discrete spaces, but spaces allowed to participate in changes, referring to Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*:[1]

> Such open work or work in movement is characterized by a deliberate ambiguity of meaning and seeks to avoid conventional forms of expressions and prescribed interpretation. According to Eco, 'open works' must leave the arrangement of some of their constituents to the public or to chance, hence giving these works a 'field of possible orders 'rather than a single fixed one …" (Hensel, 2013, p. 40)

[1]Umberto Eco (1932-2016) was an Italian novelist, literary critic, philosopher, semiotician, who developed his ideas on the 'open' text and on semiotics, writing many essays on these subjects, and in 1962 he published *Opera Aperta*, translated into English as *The Open Work*.

Hensel (2013) interpreted the concept of open-form in architecture in a more literal and physical way, in the sense of a 'non-discreteness' of the built space, where architecture should be "allowed to participate in a wide range of interlinked environmental and ecological processes," instead of being conceived as a discreet and autonomous object. A non-discrete architecture has almost no rupture between exterior and interior, but instead, it has a "gradient of interiority and exteriority" that make the project nested into its context (Hensel, 2013, p. 40). While the non-literal translation of this non-discreteness of architecture is that the spaces should be designed to allow changes, adjustability and the ability to participate, transform and to be transformed by its changing physical, cultural and economic context.

The Performative Turn

The notion of performance started to emerge in humanities, social sciences, and the philosophy of linguistics, in the mid-20th century. Theorising about performance appeared in the 1940s and 1950s with an intellectual movement known as *The Performative Turn*. The performative turn in the humanities and social sciences consists of theorising about performance as a social and cultural element. Performance was used as a metaphor and an analytical tool, and as a perspective for framing and analyzing social and cultural phenomena. Contributed to the movement the anthropologist Richard Schechner who understood performance as a continuum, where not everything is meant to be a performance, but everything, from performing arts to politics and economics, can be studied as performance (Schechner, 2004).

In relation with architecture, Pedro Gadanho understands the performative turn as the influence of performance over other artistic media and disciplines such as architecture. In the sense of reconnecting architecture with traditions of performance art, where architecture is inspiring and borrowing from the performative practices (theatre and performing arts) new dynamics and mechanisms. The performative aspects appear as the participatory in and with architecture, ephemeral spatial practices, the use of flexible structures, the emphasis on the scenic and the experience, etc. (Gadanho, 2012)

Performative and Transformative

> Performance is intentional, if successful, it does cultural work in the world … As a transformational force, behavior performance has the power to restructure social order through the persuasive power of rhetoric and through the redefinition of both audience and context … (Carlson, 2008, p. 10)

In the philosophy of language, John Austin, in *How to Do Things with Words* in the 1950s, introduced the concept of the 'performative utterance,' arguing that "to say something is to do something." For Austin, the speech constitutes an active practice that can affect and transform realities, therefore, language is performative (in Fischer-Lichte, 2015). He also indicated that 'performative' refers to a situation in which a new reality is created. Therefore, the performative has transformative power.

Judith Butler also considered that gestures and behaviours are performative because they can generate the identities they express (Fischer-Lichte, 2015). In the 'speech act theory' which is the central theory behind the notion of 'performance', performativity is seen as the political aspect of performance and its manifestation of power. What can transform reality is therefore performative. In spatial design practice, the concept of the transformative power of the performative is relevant to analyse how a spatial situation can be transformed with the design or the intervention, and how can a spatial project induce transformations in its context and users. For Fischer Lichte, the transformative power means that architecture changes according to uses. The situation will influence and change the people involved. Even spaces that were created to serve certain purposes can be changed by the users or the context in order to be used differently (Fischer-Lichte, 2015). The performative aspect of a spatial solution or intervention is reflected in the transformational force as the power to restructure and transform the context, and the users.

Performative and the Aesthetic of the Un-designed

It is needed here to precise that in this paper, our main interest is to study the spatial flexibility that is provided by the aspect of the unfinished. Therefore, we need to differentiate it from the mechanical flexibility that was promoted by Archigram and Cedric Price (architecture as a machine). The flexibility, the openness and the performative aspects that interest us here are mostly low-tech.

Ayman Kassem

The permanency of rigid spatial constructions is what Archigram's architects tried to fight against, but especially later on with Cedric Price, who with his famous *Fun Palace* tried to promote the flexible, the participatory, the improvisatory, the social and the interactive architecture, that is usually temporary. It is an anti-building gesture, expressed by him when he stated that we should be designing playthings that should last no longer than we need them. In 1984, for the South-Bank centre in London, Price proposed "a raft of balloons forming a canopy of balloons whose height vary in order to accommodate temporary exhibitions underneath." (Obrist, 2013, p. 7). He described the site as "London's last lung on which further permanent buildings should be avoided" (p. 7). The interpretation of this extreme proposal at that time is that full permanency and occupation of space will kill the space. Space is dead when it is rigidly constructed, when it is totally saturated, and when it is fully defined in terms of form, function and program. Cedric Price represented at that time the reaction to the late modernism. The late modernism revealed the poverty of the pure functionalism, by producing projects with rigid mechanisms, that can hardly adapt and adjust itself to its changing context, and its changing interior uses (Leatherbarrow, 2005).

The *Fun Palace* by Cedric Price is an example in which many of the dimensions of the 'performative' are detectable. First, It is performative because spaces are in constant mutation. Second, the performative character is also detectable in the social dimension, participation in and with the context. The responsiveness of the architecture to the social and the cultural needs. Third, the flexibility and the openness of the spaces and the structures, allowing events and spatial occurrences beyond the fixed program. The architecture changes with practices and uses. Fourth, the show and event character found in this architecture. Fifth, while the co-authoring in the process of design, in which different protagonists with different expertise participated in the evolution of the architectural design gives the design process a performative character as well.

The performative character in the *Fun Palace* is found mostly in openness toward the unscripted and the unpredictable, by embedding flexible mechanisms in the project. It was supposed to be interactive and improvisational space to be able to respond to the constantly shifting needs and desires of the users and society, and thus the *Fun Palace* had to have the adaptability for a continuously fluid program as underlined (Mathews, 2006). Another very important factor that is detectable in the *Fun Palace* is the factor

of anticipation within long-term planning, through a fluid program of uses, which emphasizes the strategic aspect in the design process: designing the un-designed for the unscripted events and unplanned future uses. This indeterminacy as the core of the design makes the *Fun Palace* performa*tive* in relation to the notion of event. Such architecture is made to be conceived and thought in 'terms of events in time, rather than objects in space', more like a Dada installation, a performance, or a happening (Mathews, 2006).

The architecture of the *Centre Georges Pompidou* by Renzo Piano and Richards Rogers reflects those visions of flexible architecture. On the other hand, *Le Palais de Tokyo* transformed by Lacaton and Vassal is an example that illustrates the performative character in architecture through the aesthetic of the unfinished spaces. It is a project that has adopted the concepts of openness towards the unpredictable, transformable interiors, and the un-designed or the unfinished as part of the design, in order to provide a strategic and performative aspect in the architecture. The interiors of the Palais are open and unfinished and are therefore continuously reprogrammable. The spaces are open to all forms and sizes of arts, events, and performances. The following case also illustrates how the character of the un-finished and the non-designed are intentional parts of the design strategy.

Aravena's Housing Model

It is a case of a project that directly embeds a strategic dimension within its mechanisms giving the project the performative aspect. In 2010, an earthquake with a magnitude of 8.8, followed by a tsunami destroyed the town of Constitución in Chile. 80% of Constitución's buildings were ruined. There was an urgent need to house people. The Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, and because of the lack of funding and budget limitations, decided to build only half houses for everyone and to let them finish the rest themselves (Mairs, 2015). *Elemental*, Aravena's firm, created basic concrete frames with kitchens, bathrooms and roofs, allowing families to fill in the gaps, and continue the shaping of their homes. The project engaged the people in the design of their own homes (Radford, 2015). The strategic and the performative factors appear in the anticipated timeline, and in the evolution or the unfolding of the project.

We are able to dissect Aravena's design strategy into 4 phases, the before, the during, the unfolding and the after. In Phase 1, basic frames and structures were provided for families to continue shaping their homes in order to urgently shelter the dislocated families. In

Phase 2, the provided structures became full completed houses, and the houses started to be inhabited. In Phase 3, the gathering of the inhabited houses created and shaped neighborhoods and public spaces. In Phase 4, these post-catastrophe emergency camps and housings became future permanent towns.

In this project, the performative aspect is present in the design, the construction, and the design process as a strategised timeline. The factors of participation and engagement of the residents also give the project a performative quality. But the most important aspect is that the concept of the 'unfinished' or the 'non-designed' was intentionally taken as a necessary quality in the design. Therefore, several dimensions of the performative are detected in this project. This kind of architecture acts as a performative installation that unfolded and developed slowly through time. The housing model by Aravena, is a project that expresses the 'performativity' in different ways, and with different aesthetics, but the main spatial key-concepts are: the strategic, the unfinished, the reversible, the metamorphic, the participatory, the social, and the non-designed as part of the design, the event-character, the openness, the unfolding, the allowed future growth, the allowed future changes, etc.

Performative and Strategic

'Strategy' is a term that was also present in discourses about the 'performative' in spatial planning. For instance, the social scientists Martin Kornberger and Stewart Clegg tried to demonstrate that 'strategic' is performative, and 'strategising' is a performative practice, within a design process. Therefore, 'performative' can be attributed to the animate (humans, users), the inanimate (architecture, installations, objects), and it can also be attributed to 'practices' (performative attitudes, performative planning, performative processes, etc.). " ...strategizing is performative ... strategizing has to be understood as aesthetic performance" (Kornberger & Clegg, 2011, p. 136). Because it constitutes its subjects and shapes its objects, it has to be understood as aesthetic performance because its power resides in the simultaneous representation of facts and values. The aim was to understand "how the practice of strategizing unfolded in the context" (Kornberger & Clegg, 2011, p. 136).

A practice can therefore be also understood with criteria of 'performativity.' Strategising starts in the design process by taking into consideration the anticipation factor, the openness, the flexible, the unfinished and the non-designed as part of the design program in order to allow future growth or changes in the project. All these performative spatial qualities require from the designer the attitude

of a strategist. 'Performative' can therefore describe a practice, a design approach, and even a mental skill. Kornberger and Clegg (2013) saw that the strategy as a practice provides an analytical framework to study urban or even any spatial design strategy as a performative practice.

> Strategy could be understood as a process and a practice … Strategizing means developing a (usually big) picture of the future that will frame immediate courses of action ... the future becomes the condition of the possibility for action in the present ... (p. 138)

Strategy as practice relates to the concept of *open-form* by Umberto Eco, and to the 'performative project' as defined by Signore (2015). In Umberto's discourse about the *open-form*, he clarifies that it is not about the arbitrary and totally unpredictable participation of users, but it embeds an ordering and directing of the participation. Therefore, even the *open-form* requires also a strategic organisation of the openness and the participation in the design. Kornberger and Clegg also saw that a strategy does not prescribe or describe the future but it causes this future to come into existence. It allows the future. It embeds the future within the design of a project; "…strategy is a mechanism that enacts the future in the present" (Kornberger & Clegg, 2011, p. 155). These definitions intersect with Signore's definition of the Performative project as the project that opposes the Modernist project by not prescribing neither dictating the program, the present and the future of the spaces, in order not to cause spatial failures. For Signore (2015), the performative project has flexible nomadic mechanisms, and it is open for the changes of the context and the desires of the users.

Performative Design Approaches in Education

Some pedagogical questions can rise here: how to translate these concepts of 'performative design' and 'strategic design' from a pedagogical perspective? How can we teach and promote this kind of thinking? How the concept of the un-designed as part of the design can be translated into education in design studios as an architectural project assigned to students? The start can be simply by teaching the student to accept that - when designing - not everything needs to be totally defined at the early beginning of the design process, not all 'spaces' have yet a function, and that therefore not everything should be designed. Openness, flexible, and the un-designed are concepts to be emphasised in architectural education. G. Brooker, pointed out that part of the role of the designer is to convince himself and the client that not everything has to have a

defined and clear function in the program, and therefore not all the spaces of the project should be necessarily fully designed already.

Within the attempt to reflect on these pedagogical questions, we encountered at the Middlesex University in London–during a residency period as a Guest PhD–a pedagogical model applied at the design studio, in which a so-called *Volubilis* concept was required in a project assigned to students. In its general definition, *Volubilis* is a Latin word that relates to the model of the incomplete, and the evolving. It was noticed that the description of the brief or the handout responds to the concepts of Performative space and Strategic design that we are investigating. The project was assigned to the third year interior design class, for an adaptive-reuse project called Inside-out. The concepts of the *Volubilis* consists of the incomplete, the imperfect and the elastic. Students were asked to apply the *Volubilis* concept in their design strategies for the assigned project. In the following are some extracts from the description of the assigned project:

> From volvo ("I turn around, I roll") … the model of the incomplete, imperfect and elastic space , capable of withstanding continuous innovation and adaptation … They were asked to design a three-phase project lasting 10 years … each stage … the interventions made can be partly temporal but not entirely reversible … Some traces should remain in place to inform the next, in a continuous cycle of growth and change … In order to begin to address this 'situated' context we will be adopting a volubilis approach, taking reference from conceptual models that are incomplete, imperfect and elastic, capable of withstanding continuous innovation and adaptation. Within such an approach, time itself becomes a key ingredient of the design process in order to assist in the development of a strategy that, over the next decade, will look to address the shifting contexts and contents of our chosen site … We will imagine a #volubilis three-phase project lasting 10 years in total; each phase will occupy a specific part of the building and have an independent program of use and reuse. Each stage will be connected, both from a material and conceptual point of view, to the following one. The interventions you make can be partly temporal but not entirely reversible - some traces/pieces/content will remain in place to inform the next, in a continuous cycle of growth and change. …in order to activate a condition of performance, transforming the building into a living space. … The designer is free to think about an occupancy that is able to connect with the keyword #volubilis and #sharing and re-activate the

civic role of the building in the contemporary community The strategy that you'll design to develop your final project … consider three different development phases. … In Phase 1 the space will play the role of a teaser, will address future steps and introduce new use and users (5% of the space) Phase 2 is a pilot and will introduce the strategy, tactics, functions, (30% of the space) that will be consolidating in Phase 3 (100% of the space).[2]

The students were called to think–especially in the first phases–as strategists, designing a timeline for the evolution of the project through a certain period of time. They were required to design a strategy. They had to imagine and propose a succession of phases for the growth and the unfolding of the functions and the design of the spaces. And after that, in the later phases, it was required from the students to choose certain spaces at certain moments from the proposed timeline and to design them. They were also pushed to deal with temporary functions arriving to permanent ones within this timeline, keeping always in mind the economic logic between the phases and the functions. They had to design with the factor of time. The students had to consider lightweight spatial interventions that should lead to more permanent ones. Therefore, this assigned project can be considered as a performative-oriented pedagogical model. It pushes toward the employment of flexible mental sensibilities. This pedagogical model encourages a performative, strategic and anticipatory mental attitude towards spatial design. The brief of this assigned project holds many keywords from the repertoire of the 'performative': the strategising, the metamorphic, the anticipation, the play between the temporary and the future permanency, the unfinished as part of the design, the participatory, and the time factor.

Francesca Murialdo, one of the instructors of this course, defined the performative space as a space that is commissioned to generate and stimulate new functions; space that is able to stimulate constant synergies. She also noted that the notion of specialization is similar to the architectonic typologies, which is almost not valid anymore and doesn't work. In her opinion, to face the complexities of given spatial projects, it is not quite required to be an expert in all fields, what is required instead, is the capacity to gather the necessary knowledge, and to know where to ask and whom to ask for information. Murialdo, therefore, points out that the designer cannot know or be everything. He cannot develop all kinds of skills, because it does not make sense. But curiosity is the motor of creativity, there should be contamination of knowledge. These are the requirements to have

[2]Naomi House, Benjamin Koslowski, Francesca Murialdo, Peter Thomas, #INSIDEOUT Staging Community I AD3101,, Middlesex University, London, 2016.

Ayman Kassem

a strategist attitude that produces strategic spatial solutions, and creates performative architectures and interiors that are flexible for

changes, and that are able to produce short-term and long-term changes. The metamorphic, the anticipated, the unfinished as part of the design, the openness, the transformative power, and the participatory, are the constituents of a strategic and performative approach to spatial design.

A Mental Performativity

Performance and performative are characterised with a semantic width, and the repertoire of the performative in architecture–in terms of spatial qualities–is wide. What can be stated in these regards, is that architectural performativity means the ability of the space to perform different roles, while the mental performativity in spatial design practices means the ability of the designer to play different roles. Therefore, a performative and strategic mental skill is not about being the designer, the financial expert, the scenographer, the curator, the engineer, the technician, the social scientist, the humanitarian, the environmental expert, the artist, the philosopher, etc. But it is about directing, organising knowledge, anticipating changes, curating the process, but it is mostly about strategising. Thinking the spatial project and the design process through criteria of performance and performativity reformulates the idea of design and puts in crisis the classical concept of creativity of the architect. This paper encourages deeper reflections and research regarding this psycho-pedagogical discourse

References

Carlson , M. (2008). Perspective on performance: Germany and America. In E. Fischer-Lichte (Ed.), *The transformative power of performance: A new aesthetics* (pp. 1-10). Oxon: Routledge.

Fischer-Lichte, E. (2015). Performativity and space. In S. Wolfrum & N. Frhr.v.Brandis (Eds.), *Performative urbanism: Generating and designing urban space* (pp. 31-37). Berlin: Jovis.

Gadanho, P. (2012). The performative turn. Retrieved from https://shrapnelcontemporary.wordpress.com/2012/02/24/the-performative-turn/

Hensel, M. (2013). *Performance-oriented architecture: Rethinking architectural design and the built environment*. London: John Wiley & Sons.

Kassem, A. (2017). *Metaphors of performative-oriented architectures: Exhibitions, installations, interventions*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Politecnico di Milano.

Kornberger, M., & Clegg, S. (2011). Strategy as performative practice: The case of Sydney 2030. *Strategic Organization, 9*(2), 136-138.

Leatherbarrow, D. (2005). Architecture's performance unscripted. In B. Kolarevic & A. Malkawi (Eds.). *Performative architecture: Beyond instrumentality* (pp. 5-20). New York: Spon Press.

Mairs, J. (2015, November 30). Refugee tents are a waste of money, says Alejandro Aravena. *Dezeen*. Retrieved from https://www.dezeen.com/2015/11/23/refugee-camps-cities-of-tomorrow-killian-kleinschmidt-interview-humanitarian-aid-expert/

Mathews, S. (2006). The Fun Palace as virtual architecture: Cedric Price and the practices of indeterminacy. *Journal of Architectural Education, 59*(3), 39-48.

Obrist, H. (2003). *Re: CP.* Basel: Birkhäuser.

Radford, T. (2015, November 23). Refugee camps are the "cities of tomorrow" says humanitarian-aid expert. *Dezeen*. Retrieved from https://www.dezeen.com/2015/11/30/alejandro-aravena-humanitarian-architecture-refugee-tents-waste-money-emergency-shelter-disaster-relief/

Schechner, R. (2004). *Performance theory.* New York: Routledge.

Signore, T. (2015). Who said performative? Towards a critical posture. In S. Wolfrum & N. Frhr.v.Brandis (Eds.), *Performative urbanism: Generating and designing urban space* (pp.169-176). Berlin: Jovis.