Café Fargo

In his book *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour suggests a simple thought experiment to test the relevance and agency of everyday objects in the constitution of larger networks and uses everyday examples such as nails, kettles and speedbumps. We can add buildings to this list of everyday objects, too. Café Fargo is a project that follows this line of thought.

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MOTION: ARCHITECTURE IS NO OBJECT.

> In the seemingly post-critical and post-digital world of architecture, there is a movement afloat to (again) interrogate the discipline of architecture–its representational techniques, its constitution of "elements", the limits of its terminology, and the "principals" of its objects. A productive endeavor, it should not presume that exchanges with other disciplines, discourses, and techniques "negate the project of architecture." In the context of global economies and ecologies, the efficacy of architecture depends on both a certain cross-breeding, and a transposition of its practices and project to other problems of design. Architecture is no longer bound as, nor produces an object.[1]

This motion makes a series of points that might get overlooked by the frequently cited shortcut slogan "Architecture is no object". I would therefore like to start by recapping the distinct points that the above motion makes and address them one by one in this paper in order to develop my position in regards to them, as I agree with some but not with others.

Point 1: Exchanges with other disciplines, discourses, and techniques do not "negate the project of architecture."

Point 2: In the context of global economies and ecologies, the efficacy of architecture depends on both a certain cross-breeding, and a transposition of its practices and project to other problems of design.

Point 3: Architecture is no longer bound as an object.

Point 4: Architecture no longer produces an object.

I suggest examining these statements against the work of the sociologist Bruno Latour, whose thinking forms an important framework to the approach to architecture we have in our practice.

Latour is among a group of sociologists that developed the Actor Network Theory (ANT) as a tool to describe the process of scientific innovation.[2] ANT soon established itself as a more general method to describe hybrid situations between the sciences, arts and social

disciplines, such as architecture. It describes these hybrid formations as a network of interrelated actors, where ANT does not distinguish between the types of actor. Persons, objects or protocols are of equal importance and form together the object of study.[3] Applying this thinking to architecture, we are interested in its practice as a network between buildings, people, objects, methods, protocols, interactions, transactions etc. We are interested in the resulting relationships between us and the physical world. Therefore we understand architecture as a contingent discipline which is in constant interaction with innumerable 'other' agents and agree with the first point of the motion that exchanges with other disciplines, discourses and techniques do not 'negate the project of architecture.' In fact this exchange has quite the opposite effect. In our work, we are constantly trying to set up these intersecting networks and hope that they are powerful enough to create architecture. But, in doing so, we encounter an important dilemma, which is the lifespan of these relationships.

Many contingent issues like program and business plans, for example, are short-lived relative to buildings. This short term view taken in the planning stages results in buildings that are unable to relate to us on the long term. Yet in practice projects are still triggered by a client's brief, program or business plan. The life span of these triggers is getting increasingly shorter compared to the life span of buildings. Examples of architectures that are highly contingent, driven by program and economy, are the big box store and strip mall typologies located in the urban periphery. These buildings are plagued by premature abandonment and demolition. Their physical capacity to endure outlives their program-specific form. They cannot relate to us in any other way than shopping. They fulfill their original program perfectly from an economic viewpoint, but are not able to offer any program-independent qualities that inspire a host of new potential uses. Retail typologies have an average life span of mere ten to fifteen years.

These short lived, flickering "real world" contingencies, I would argue, are forcing the discipline to form a relationship to inhabitants independently from short-lived specific uses, business plans, or cultural developments. Architects should create long-lasting meaning in the built environment within a global economy that operates through business plans that focus on the short-term.

We therefore agree also with the second point of the motion, that *in the context of global economies and ecologies, this efficacy of architecture depends on both a certain cross-breeding, and a transposition of its practices and project to other problems of design*. We see our task as architects not to exclude contingent agents but rather to identify the long term ones. Objects, like buildings, are just more durable means to set up these long lasting relationships and, consequently, I also agree with point three, that *architecture is not bound as an object*, because the object is not a goal in itself but just a means to form these relationships and meaningful networks.

But it is the fourth point, that *architecture does not produce objects*, which does not necessarily follow from the argument of the motion. Architecture, as a network as well as the result of relationships between the agents of this network, depends on the help of objects. We just need to look at our environment to see how objects are constantly produced to keep our culture afloat and to maintain the performed figuaration of all agents. Objects are ceaselessly produced by architecture, as a side effect so to speak, and the efficacy of architecture depends on them. Here I would like to refer back to the work of Bruno Latour, and his focus on exactly that agency of objects. In his book *Reassembling the Social (2007)*, Latour proposes a simple thought experiment to demonstrate the relevance and agency of everyday objects in the constitution of larger networks. He uses everyday examples such as nails, kettles and speedbumps and I suggest that we can add buildings to this list of everyday objects, too.

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> Thus, the questions to ask about any agent are simply the following: Does it make a difference in the course of some other agent's action or not? Is there some trial that allows someone to detect this difference? The rather common sense answer should be a resounding 'yes'. If you can, with a straight face, maintain that hitting a nail with and without a hammer, boiling water with and without a kettle, fetching provisions with or without a basket, walking in the street with or without clothes, [...] are exactly the same activities, that the introduction of these mundane implements change 'nothing important' to the realization of the tasks, then you are ready to transmigrate to the Far Land of the Social and disappear from this lowly one. For all the other members of society, it does make a difference under trials and so these implements, according to our definition, are actors, or more precisely, participants in the course of action waiting to be given a figuration.[4]

It is this question that we should ask ourselves as architects when we evaluate the role of the primary object of architecture: buildings.

Following this line of thought I'd like to present a small project that emerged out of this desire to design a space organized around more long-lasting spatial qualities, rather than being tailored to a specific short-lived program. When we were asked to convert a derelict former convenience store into a café, we focused on defining architectural form through the approach described above rather than the specificities of a café. We pursued a building that sets-up a relationship with its users in the long term. The project stands as an example of architecture designed to appeal to our instinctive responses to temperature and seasonal changes.

Figure 1: Exterior photo Cafe Fargo.
Photo: Florian Holzherr

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To form space through energy is an age-old principle. For example, a bonfire offering warmth and light in the center of a cave or yurt, the utilization of bodily warmth of animals to heat a farm house or the central hearth where one could retreat to in winter.

The space of the former corner store [Fig.1], built in 1929, is a monolithic brick addition to the corner of a three-story brick house built around 1880 located in a residential neighborhood of Buffalo, New York.

Typically, when building a hospitality space, a large amount of the construction budget goes into mechanical systems that provide a uniform indoor climate throughout the year. We took the opposite approach and transformed these invisible mechanical services into two experiential architectural elements. We built:

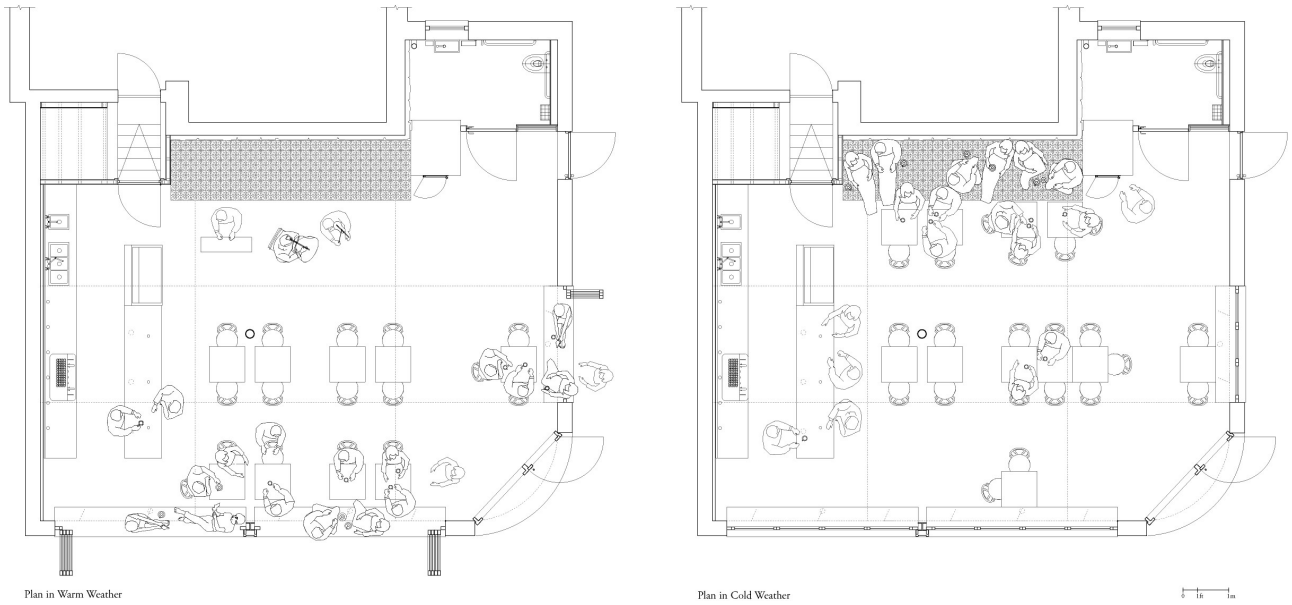
1) Extra-large operable windows and skylights that provide natural ventilation and passive cooling, and

2) A large-scale, wood burning *Kachelofen* (masonry heater) which serves as the radiant heat source for the space [Fig.2].

These elements emphasize the distinct pleasures of summer and winter and critically question the dictum of a uniform indoor temperature. The pleasures—or the experiential dimensions—are independent from any specific use, business plan or program.

Hardwick Hall (Derbyshire, 1590-97) stood as a case study for our project. This building features a dynamic inhabitation pattern, in which occupation is constantly moving between

Figure 2: Close up of masonry heater fire box. Photo: Florian Holzherr



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its large fireplaces in winter and back into large bay windows in summer. The British architect Peter Smithson describes the performance of the building:

> The organization of the house was based on the available coal. In this part of England coal was produced at the time. Fuel found formal expression in the organization of houses, so that in winter you have screens around the gallery against the fireplaces, and in summer you moved into the bay windows.[5]

Peter Smithson describes Hardwick Hall here not as an autonomous object, but rather, as a dynamic network of agents which far exceed the extent of the building. The interaction of the sun path, window sizes, coal mines, unpredictable daily weather and the changes of season altogether form architecture, or as Latour would say, they produce the figuration of agents that we call architecture. Although Hardwick Hall performs in this larger network of agents, without the building, this network would not exist. Ultimately, the network ceases to exist without the expansive coal infrastructure and economy of its day.

Similarly, with Café Fargo we developed the project to set up an instinctive relationship between the weather patterns and seasonal changes of Buffalo, as well as the building and its inhabitants. We unfolded the space of Café Fargo between the extra-large operable sliding folding windows at the perimeter wall for summer ventilation and the large-scale *Kachelofen* at the core of the space. The heater wraps around the interior corner of the older house, where café patrons can huddle against the radiant cement surfaces [Fig.3]. The café space could be literally as small as the surface of the heater bench in winter while extending to the entire city in summer. Café Fargo enters into an intimate relationship with the seasonal patterns and the daily weather. Weather is invited to play a direct role in the formation of space. Or, as Latour would say in the ever-changing figuration of the involved agents. Spatial boundaries—in the case of Café Fargo spatial boundaries are largely boundaries of thermal comfort—are constantly renegotiated to find their current spatial figuration and continually changing equilibrium. This approach is quite different from current building practices, where a sealed building envelope and mechanical services (forced air heating and cooling) form a stable demarcation of space, be it in summer or winter.

The *Kachelofen*, as the most ambitious intervention at Café Fargo, deserves some closer description. A *Kachelofen*, or "tiled heater," is an ancient heating technique in which heat from the exhaust smoke of a wood burning fire is absorbed into the thermal mass of long flues lined with refractory brick. The stored heat is radiated into the space over a time

Figure 3: Plans of the café space, indicating the changing inhabitation patterns in warm and cold weather

period of twelve to twenty-four hours. A short, clean wood burn is free of soot particles or creosote. The long flue run also allows for high efficiency, as only a small part of heat energy is lost through the chimney. Our masonry heater demonstrates innovation in three key areas: its material assembly, its scale, and its visual and haptic prominence in the design of an entire space.

Our experimental masonry heater uses a previously untested material assembly. Whereas standard masonry heaters use hand-made, thick ceramic tile (*Kacheln*) cladding and a clay-based interior mass, this heater is built from precast, cement-based refractory material and cement tiles. The conductivity rate of the cement tiles was tested, and the particular mixture of the precast refractory cement panels used to line the flue was developed, tested

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Figure 4: Precedent setting scale of the masonry heater bench. Photo: Florian Holzherr

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Figure 5: Blurring of Inside and Outside. Photo: Florian Holzherr

Figure 6: Magnet holders allow for ever-changing lighting patterns. Photo: Florian Holzherr

empirically, and optimized by the mason and engineer. The materials for the heater cost a fraction of what hand-sculpted *Kacheln* costs, which allowed us to experiment with the heater's dimensions at a larger than usual scale.

The scale and geometry of the heater are also notable in the experimental heater construction [Fig.4]. For it to act as a large-scale seating element in the space, the body of the warmed bench has a length of 15 ft and a depth of 4 ft. The horizontal flue run is looped inside the bench with a total length of 30 ft, making it the longest horizontal flue run in a masonry heater in North America. The draw from the chimney must be consistent and powerful in order to prevent exhaust smoke from stagnating in the unusually long flue. This strong draw is achieved without a fan—no mechanical assistance is required. The surface temperature ranges from around 105°F to around 70°F.

The masonry heater is the organizing principle of the space and, as a long, generous and warm bench, it is a powerful experiential element. It is not hidden in a mechanical room, but rather, placed at the center of the room to be heated. The large size and the warm surface provoke questions about how masonry heaters might not only heat a space but also, organize space and lead to new building typologies.

The perimeter of the space consists of the large-scale folding and sliding windows with thick oak sills extended into benches. The habitable perimeter blurs the barrier between inside and outside; opened-up, the space feels like a covered outdoor patio space [Fig.5].

The space between the windows and the stove provides an open seating area for ever-changing seating patterns in lockstep with current seasons and weather conditions. Custom designed lights are held-up on the old tin ceiling with magnets, and allow for the lighting patterns to change in accordance with different seating arrangements throughout the year [Fig.6].

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Because the space offers three different seating options at different heights—the window-sills, the chairs and the heater bench—we designed a height-adjustable table. The tabletop, fixed to a tripod base with a threaded rod, can be spun like a piano stool up or down to adapt to the different seating heights [Fig.7].

To set-up architecture designed to appeal to our instinctive relationship to temperature and seasonal changes, we had to closely work on an object level. The project involved the transformation of a number of everyday objects to allow them relate to each other as well as to the larger network of weather patterns and seasonal changes. For example, the size of operable windows, the size of window sills, the height of table tops, the magnetic fixture of pendant lights and the use of a masonry stove all facilitate modification based on seasonal needs. At the same time, we had to continuously switch between the different disciplines of architecture and engineering and work closely with a mason and civil engineer—a detail that further underscores point 1 and 2 of the motion (*exchanges with other disciplines, discourses, and techniques do not "negate the project of architecture*." and that *the efficacy of architecture depends on a certain cross-breeding*).

We looked, for instance, closely at the performance of everyday objects like furnaces, ducts and AC units to translate them into the masonry heater and the operable folding façade. In its entirety, the café space acts as mechanical services in the form of a space; the project could be understood as literally inhabiting a furnace or AC unit. To refer back to the initial question about whether or not architecture produces objects, I would like to make use again of Latour's earlier thought experiment: "If we can say with a straight face" that inhabiting the space with or without our object interventions would be the exact same event, then we can say that architecture does not produce objects anymore. For all the other members of society, it does make a difference … and so architecture still has to produce objects as a means to set up our relationship to the physical world.[6]

ENDNOTES

1. The full motion set by the moderator.
2. Bruno Latour, Jonas Salk and Steve Woolgar, Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts (Los Angeles: Sage, 1979).
3. Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)
4. Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 71.
5. Catherine Spellman and Karkl Unglaub (Eds.), Peter Smithson: Conversations with Students (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005).
6. I am paraphrasing Latour's thought experiment in: Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 71.

Figure 7: Table top adjusts to distinct seating heights. Photo: Florian Holzherr