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Practicing Architecture In The Distinction

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Practising Architecture in the Distinction

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Systemic design concerns itself with understanding the difference made by placing and framing boundaries. Systemic practices such as boundary critique and gigamapping provide methods for dealing with the inherent complexity this consideration entails. Similar questions arise in the practice of architecture on both literal and abstract terms, such as determining the edge of a building or deciding who and which stakeholders should be included in a design consultation meeting.

What is unique to architectural practice is that it has the capacity to make the boundary spatial, thus enabling it to be experienced phenomenally. Ranulph Glanville recognises this in his concept of zero space, which is a space between inside and outside, the thickness of walls. For Glanville, zero space was a way of making architectural his thinking, and he worked on distinctions which form the theoretical grounding for the work presented here.

In this presentation, I discuss two architectural design research projects from my practice that tease out the potential of architecture for understanding what is at stake from the placement of boundaries and their relative position to an observer. The projects ask to what extent can architecture, as a form of systemic design practice, lead to new ways of marking distinctions (making and placing boundaries) which resist the reduction of others.

KEYWORDS: systemic design, practice, architecture, distinction, others, otherness, boundary

RSD TOPIC(S): Architecture & Planning, Methods & Methodology

Presentation summary

Position of the observer

Concerns over the position of an observer and system boundaries are key considerations in systemic design and systems thinking. Gigamapping, a systems oriented design method, implicitly incorporates such judgements in practice and in the artefact by drawing out (mapping) the boundaries of multiple stakeholders (Sevaldson. 2011, p.2). In providing the means to externalise boundaries and allow them to co-exist, the gigamap is a useful tool for boundary critique (Ulrich, 1983, 2005) and reflecting on the position of the observer.

Developed as a tool for designers to explore the wickedness of design problems (Sevaldson. 2011, p.2), it is not a surprise that gigamaps on one level are spatial mappings that bring into proximity the vast network of values, facts and boundaries that make up design problems. Offering up boundaries in this way allows for a more tangible understanding of the observer's position relative to the boundary (either their own or of an-other) by implicating them in the act of its production and representation. This is a particularly useful methodology for designers and architects, who are well versed at making spatial connections from representations, for considering what is at stake from the location and relative position of the boundary to an observer.

The two design-research projects presented here ask this question by extending the spatial notion of the boundary such that it can be discussed on architectural terms and assume architectural qualities. Following this, each project fabricates a relational construct which aims to situate the observer of the work into a phenomenal experience with boundaries, particularly those of non-human others. The aim is that by maintaining the difference of others in practice, architectures and system boundaries (as analogues)

could be tuned to the sensibilities of situations that entail non-human others, such as our current ecological crisis. Architectures that work with others on their own terms.

Marking boundaries

Observing can happen from inside or outside a boundary. The space between the observer and the boundary is relative and interdependent. The boundary's existence requires the observer to make a distinction (to mark it), an ontological relativity, while movements to the boundary alter the relative position of the observer and, vice versa, spatial relativity. The process of marking boundaries, and the forms they take, create and frame the values that are swept into the system. In the same triad of Werner Ulrich's eternal triangle (Ulrich 2003, p.334), values, observers, and boundaries can be placed in systemic triangulation for the process of boundary critique (Ulrich, 2017).

Glanville and Varela register this triad in their recognition that there is a difference in the relationship between mark (boundary) and value that is relative to the position of the observer. In the case of the external observer, value is separated from mark by the necessity of drawing another distinction (Glanville & Varela, 1981). In more practical terms, the external observer will only see which parts of the value they recognise from the mark of the distinction. A consequence of this is a form of reduction that can never provide, in their terms, the "grounds of the value" (p. 369). Such grounds are tied to the process of marking a distinction as an internal observer. They distinguish this as a "self-mark of a self-value – that is, as containing nothing, only being itself" (p. 640). The severing between mark and value caused by observing externally is a consequence of the inaccessibility of self-value. A type of value that cannot be articulated but is created and maintained implicitly through the act of marking.

Systemic practices of boundary critique, such as the gigamap and systemic triangulation, flip between internal and external observation to systematically account for the blind spots of each position. In the case of human-centred systems, this is an intuitive state of flux as it is likely to be easier to assume self-value of an-other if the other is human or addressing human goals. Although an element of reduction is unavoidable from drawing the distinction externally, the difference between value in mark to value from mark is less. Our capacity to consider the other is increased when

the other isn't too other. The design projects that follow construct ways to increase that capacity when this may not be the case.

Still Life: Architecture on the table

Other/ness

Recognising others and maintaining otherness is desirable as it encourages collective and collaborative action and resists acts of domination, colonisation and suppression. "Still life: Architecture on the table" is a design-research project that unpacks the definition of others that is specific to this project and teases out the productive possibilities for maintaining otherness through the fabrication of still-life images and two objects made for a still-life scene.

A still-life element can act as a further analogue to architecture and system boundaries because it shares the capacity to assemble and make sense of a multitude of worlds in a way where the assembly is more telling than its constituent parts. One of the many intriguing things about a still-life element is that it calls to our attention the familiarity of quotidian objects (others) with such a peculiar intensity that they become simultaneously unfamiliar (Bryson, 1990). This situation exposes the observer to the otherness of others through the uncanny realisation that objects (others) are not exhausted by their relations. This is where I place the specific notion of other that is relevant to this work, described by Graham Harman as "Other means to be irrecuperable in any relation: that which is Other must remain partly mysterious to me; if not, then it has been fully objectified by my means of knowing it" (Harman, 2020, p. 180). Otherness is the surplus of an-other, the part which withdraws from direct access.

The consequence of this is that observing others is always external. If, however, we turn our attention to the act of marking the distinction, there stands the potential of steering action while maintaining the otherness of others before the distinction is made.

Making conversation

The uncanny is still life's access to the productive space of being in the distinction. It works by unpacking and working backwards from the assumed distinction of the

objectified object. Taking the form of a conversation, it occurs in both practising and experiencing a still life. Common to both these situations is that the conversation takes place through an interlocutor that is ‘other’ to both participants, the picture plane. The interlocutor provides the means for each-other to maintain the situatedness of their position, a boundary that conveys and locates.

The image, Still Life 1 (Figure 1), is the first fabricated interlocutor that brings this boundary into phenomenal experience. It consists of a focal stack of 26 separate photographs, producing an image with a deep depth of field. Subtle adjustments in the image created by photo editing techniques and the imposition of digitally scanned objects and painted overlays create a paradox between the proximal condition of the scene and its perceived depth and location relative to the position of the observer. This results in the observer being situated on both sides of the boundary (picture plane) simultaneously. They are both in and out of the distinction. This idea is explored further in project two.

Objects 1 (Figure 2) and 2 (Figure 3) are three-dimensional interlocutors deployed directly into the scene of the still life. These table-specific objects are designed and fabricated precisely to re-organise and interrupt the scene by activating assumed tendencies within the existing boundaries. By comparing the predicted affect with the observable affect, the observer can calibrate themselves and the interlocutor accordingly to contribute towards the steering of the distinction without determining it.

In both instances, the interlocutor is a distinction in itself, in the act of mark(ing) a/the distinction. The resulting set of interdependent distinctions is akin to Glanville’s terms of the “self distinction”, the “other distinction”, and the “transfer distinction” (Glanville, 1990, p. 4). The purpose of the transfer distinction is “ is that it allows a self to say of an other that it is an other” (p. 4). This recognition is what I have referred to as maintaining otherness, which the interlocutor (transfer distinction) holds in play. Fabricating the transfer distinction brings this phenomenon into something that must be experienced, as opposed to written about or represented, which would entail some form of reduction. As a result, the medium of the distinction is synonymous with its nature.

Figure SEQ
*Figure * ARABIC*
1.

Figure 1. The first fabricated interlocutor.

Figures 2 & 3. Three-dimensional interlocutors deployed directly into the scene of the still life.

Mirror in the bathroom

Zero space

Glanville developed zero space in response to a revelation he describes in his anecdote of visiting the Mayan site of Palenque in Mexico (Glanville, 2010). The temples have extremely thick walls, which are said to embody the mathematical concept of zero, that is, “a number with unique qualities, neither negative or positive” (p.3). Consequently, the wall becomes a space in its own right; he states that upon entry, “you stepped into the space of the wall, the “zero space,” the space between inside and outside” (p. 4). Zero space is, therefore, a type of transfer distinction (Glanville, 1990), an interlocutor.

The interlocutors established in the first project brought the boundary into phenomenal experience. Mirror in the bathroom is a design project that thickens and expands the transfer distinction to the extent that it becomes inhabitable, like Glanville’s zero space. A consequence of this is a literal increase in the scale of the work, from the painting to a room. This allows for more tangible conclusions to be drawn on the implications of maintaining otherness in practising systemic design and building architectures.

Thickening boundaries

Sited in a bathroom of a flat in London (Figure 4), this project is a conversation between six others, namely, the room, a bathroom cabinet, a vase with flowers, a still-life painting, a LiDAR scanner and an observer. As an assembly, they construct a complex array of intersecting worlds. Of particular interest to this conversation are the LiDAR scanner, the mirrored cabinet door, and the observer[1]

LiDAR scanning is a three-dimensional surveying process that uses a near-infrared wave and a camera to capture the geometry of a room or environment. The scanner measures the time it takes for an emitting wave to hit an object and return to the scanner. From this, it calculates the distance of that object relative to the scanner and produces a digital representation of it in what is known as a point cloud (FARO, 2020, 1.5-1.8) (Figure 5). When the beam hits a reflective surface, it measures a virtual space beyond the mirror that is relative to the image on the mirror. In most instances, this is seen as a problem requiring further sensing to overcome (S.W.Yang, C.C Wang, 2008). The robotically formed, mirrored door employs this perceived error and inverts it to become a generative design tool for possible architectures. New spatial formations that use and extend the existing architecture,[2] creating with it new types of space and matter.

The geometry of the panels (Figures 6 & 7) is a negotiation between the virtual space of the scanner and the physical space of the present. Parts of the surface address the bathroom and its function as a cabinet door, such as the flat areas for observing yourself and surfaces for locating fixtures. Other surfaces are designed such that when the beam of the scanner hits the surface from a very similar location[3] to the observer,

[1] The Scan, a project by Thomas Pearce, Protoarchitecture lab/Prof. Bob Sheil, ScanLAB Projects and SHUNT use the same protagonists to similar affect, for a performative piece with the Central School of Speech and Drama. https://thomaspearce.xyz/the-scan

[2] There four different mirrors for the cabinet, each with their own proposition.

[3] The scanner is sited 120mm to the left of the typical (human) observer position. This is a subtle move that registers the parallactic condition of the two spaces.

the incident beam cast into the mirror forms a new virtual architecture with a defined edge.

In this construct, the mirror is and creates a type of zero space between the physical present reflected on the mirror and an-other depicted in the mirror. Both observers, the scanner and the human, can't access the true richness of the construct as it lies in the simultaneous experience of both spaces (on and in), which each only has partial access to. To design and build worlds to which you do not have direct access is a strange thing to do. The practice of designing from within the distinction, for the space between distinctions (which is a distinction in itself), admits to not knowing and of ever knowing the true measure of the space being designed.

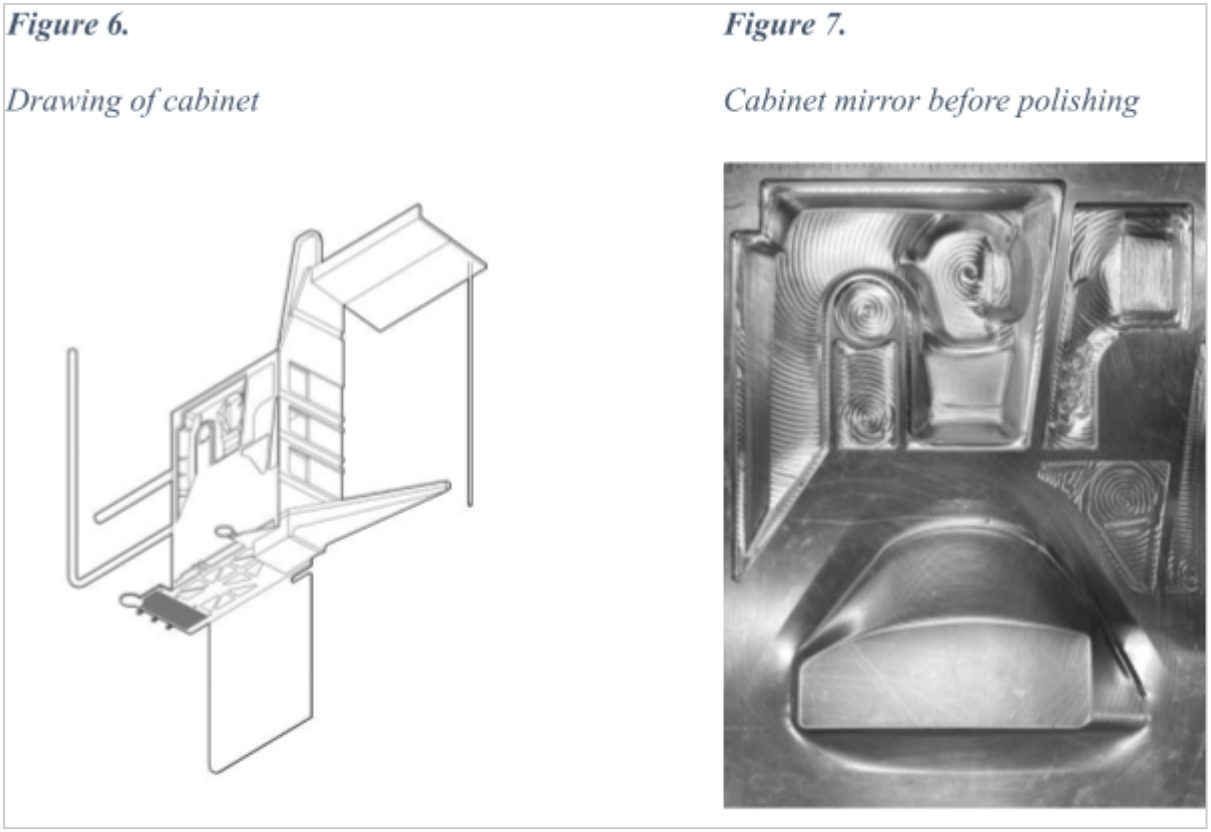
Figure 4.

Bathroom site photo

Figure 5.

Point cloud of Still Life 1

Figures 4 & 5. Thickening boundaries.



Figures 6 & 7. The geometry of the panels.

Practic/e/in/g the distinction

This presentation came to the design projects by first recognising the spatial phenomenon of the gigamap (Sevaldson et al. 2011) and how it implicitly incorporates questions concerning the boundaries and positions of the observer in the context of systemic design. In elaborating on the relative nature of the observer and the boundary, the notion of value was introduced through Glanville and Varela's work on distinctions and Ulrich's eternal triangle (Ulrich 2003, p.334). One of the key ideas developed through the presentation was that the reduction that occurs as a result of marking distinctions external to the distinction – brings to light the surplus of others. Seeing the maintenance of others and their otherness in distinctions as something that could potentially need new ways of acting, the two design research projects generated

practices and methods for doing so and framed the position of the work against Glanville's concepts of "transfer distinction" (Glanville, 1990) and "zero space" (Glanville, 2010).

A systemic design practice of distinctions was established that sought ways to bring the distinction, or boundary, into an architectural proposition such the boundary could be experienced. The experience of experiencing the boundary allows for more nuanced questions to be asked of boundaries through co-constructing other distinctions with them. These conversations and the distinctions they make require them to be experienced phenomenally, as any attempt to draw, represent or say them would reduce them to the terms of the communication. As such, this is a type of being in the marking of a distinction, where the mark is not made, nor ever could be made, just practised. Rather than stifling action, the projects aimed to demonstrate that this way of practicing-in the distinction can lead to new spatial and material possibilities and ways of knowing worthy of experiencing.

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