The arts of attention and Oslo Architecture Triennale

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Abstract

This paper starts from a two-fold observation: firstly, that attention rests at the core of our environmental challenges; and secondly, that by becoming (more) attentive to the modified, transformed, and controlled urban environments in which we dwell, we may be better equipped to attend to these challenges. The paper therefore develops and introduces "an urban attention ecology" that seeks to expand our ability to attend to urban form in ways that open possibilities to critically address and creatively negotiate the ways in which cities are built and inhabited. The potentials and challenges of the urban attention ecology are thought through in a practice-based account of a broad range of critical spatial practices centring around the theme of degrowth. These practices took the form of performances, installations, and other artistic projects that the author gathered, developed and presented as curator of the Oslo Architecture Triennale 2019.

Keywords: attention, architecture, critical spatial practice, degrowth, ecology, urban

Introduction

In his book *The Ecology of Attention* (2017a), the French cultural theorist Yves Citton argues that we need to evolve from an "attention economy", in which attention is quantified and commodified to the profit of narrow financial interests, to an "attention ecology" oriented towards commonly held and articulated priorities. Environmental challenges, he argues, reflect a failure of our mediatic systems to direct our collective attention to the climate imbalance brought about by the continuation of our unsustainable lifestyles. Taking action, he says, depends on our ability to alter and improve our attentional environments. This requires that we first understand how the many different environments to which we are exposed condition our attention in different ways. Citton analyses a diverse set of attentional environments such as literature, advertising, artistic experimentation, television, online courses, credit agencies, political organizations, search engines, live performance and militant gardening. But he leaves out a central one: urban form.

In this paper, I explore how Citton's analysis can be extended to include urban form, defined here as the city's physical characteristics and objects, structure and spatial layout. Key here is to consider how architecture and the built environment condition our attention in certain ways. Despite its centrality to urban politics, economies and life, the cultivation of attention, as a way of seeing and inhabiting the world, remains a neglected and undertheorised domain in urban research. Attention is often marginalised as merely part of the commodified "attention economy", or as a background noise of "the real politics". Yet, urban form constitutes a specific attentional environment that fundamentally affects how we relate to each other and to the places in which we live. In this context, urban form can be understood as a communication network in which we are immersed, foregrounding that the spaces through which our attention moves are not simply subject to our attention, but constitutive of it. Consider, for example, how public space is transformed into an advertising medium, studded with billboards and installations serving as eye-catchers for the attention economy. The logics that today determine this attention economy are, according to Citton, at best unsatisfactory and at worst self-destructive. For example, he observes how what he calls "a security attention regime" directs our attention to mortal threats that have been exaggerated to the great benefit of a few political and commercial interests, rather than to the possibilities for a better life that we might all share on a planetary scale. This becomes manifest in the so-called "military urbanism" (Graham, 2010) that renders cities' communal and private spaces, as well as their infrastructure, a source of targets and threats. The erection of borders

and walls and the increase in gated communities and privately owned public spaces, alongside statues and monuments, further demonstrate how urban form directs and constitutes our attention. Urban form is here physically preventing or channelling movement, serving or expressing certain political or commercial interests and policing different kinds of people in different ways. This paper argues that attending to the needs and challenges the earth is currently facing requires different kinds of attention and relationships between citizens and the spaces we design, construct, and inhabit. To explore how these different forms of attention and relations can be fostered, the paper asks: how can we adapt our way of looking at urban form to identify, question and ultimately transform the power relations, neglects and injustices that are at the root of our socio-ecological predicament?

To answer this question, this paper develops the idea of "an urban attention ecology", defined as our ability attend to urban form so that we may better attend to social and ecological injustices and crises. The paper uses my curation of the Oslo Architecture Triennale 2019 to discuss the challenges and potentials for developing an urban attention ecology in practice. In doing this, the paper brings together a suite of my previous work (Sachs Olsen, 2023, 2022a, 2022b, 2021; Sachs Olsen & Juhlin, 2021). While I have previously discussed the idea of an urban attention ecology (see Sachs Olsen, 2022a), this paper is the first to explore in depth what the urban attention ecology is and the specific role of the arts in developing and promoting it through critical spatial practice. I define "critical spatial practice" in line with the work of feminist theorist and architectural historian Jane Rendell (2006). She defines it as practice located between art and architecture, that critiques both the sites into which it intervenes and the disciplinary boundaries through which it operates. The curatorial approach to Oslo Architecture Triennale 2019 was very much drawing on this practice.

The Oslo Architecture Triennale is an international architecture festival that has become one of the world's prominent arenas for dissemination of ideas and discussion of architectural and urban challenges. I curated the 2019 edition of the festival with Smith Mordak, Phineas Harper and Matthew Dalziel. We responded to an international open call for curators and won the bid with our idea to curate a festival exploring what we coined as "the architecture of degrowth". The aim was to examine how we might build and live in our cities when economic growth is no longer the goal, and when social and ecological flourishing matter most. To do this, we made the curatorial choice to deliberately break with standard modes of architectural

presentation in which the architectural object and prominent architectural figures are the focus. Instead, we presented critical spatial practices rooted in arts (i.e., installations, fiction and performance).

For some critics, the festival was a failure because these critical spatial practices did not present any concrete plans for how degrowth could solve the world's problems (see i.e. Brochmann, 2019). They lamented that the festival delivered science fiction rather than "viable solutions in the field" (Choi and Austrheim, 2019). These critiques illustrate a key challenge for cultivating an urban attention ecology in contemporary society: today, paying attention to something is predominantly valorized through a certain external purpose – gaining something, finding a solution, solving a problem. This form of attentional economy favours pragmatic politics over political critique and risks leading to a situation in which attempts to challenge or question the status quo is ridiculed and or neutralized through a demand to present concrete solutions. In turn, this change of register, from a discussion of problems to one of solutions, may prevent us from producing an urban attention ecology in which new sensibilities and forms of understanding might enable us to consider the problem at hand in new ways. How, then, to train publics to search for alternatives within the present – to take apart urban form and combine or rearrange elements to form new social and material possibilities? In the following, I try to answer this question by examining how cultivating an urban attention ecology might help us reorient our attention from the narrow focus on short-term solutions towards a long-term commitment to planetary care as the most important perspective for architecture and urbanism in our times of catastrophic social and environmental degradation. This examination is rooted in a feminist-inspired, relational care approach to architecture (see e.g., Fitz et al., 2019). The urban attention ecology is here envisaged as the attentional arts of care, and I discuss how the festival enabled this care approach to emerge through aesthetic experiences and practices.

Care and the architecture of degrowth

In French, the word attention refers both to a capacity to notice something (être attentif) and to a capacity to care for it (être attentionné). Hence, Citton (2017a) understands attention as something that forms slowly through a complex system of care. The notion of care has become increasingly prominent in arts discourse in recent years. To feminist scholar Maria Puig de La Bellacasa care is defined through connectedness and interdependency, as an activity that thinks of "subjects in connectedness with others" (2017, p. 70). Citton suggests that the ecology of

attention is constituted through the attentive performance of this care activity. But Bellacasa is also mindful that caring is a complex and compromised practice. This is well-illustrated in the historical development of architecture.

Historically, the fundamental function of architecture has been to care for the continuation of human life and survival by providing indispensable shelter from natural forces and dangers. Cultural theorist Elke Krasny (2019) points to how modern architecture, despite its historical function, directly contradicts the connectedness and interdependency that is central to care activity. Modern architecture, she observes, is linked to detachment, autonomy and the independent, almost exclusively male, genius. Accordingly, architect and philosopher Hélèn Frichot (2019) observes how the modern approach to architecture demands that the autonomous building is kept in focus, and that shape, form, typology, program and material distribution are prioritized. The result is that the architect's work is positioned outside the realms of connectedness, dependency, social reproduction and care giving. For example, when architecture claims to "pay attention" to social and environmental concerns, these claims are predominantly situated within what Citton (2017a) terms a "managerial ecology". That is to say, these concerns are generally "managed" from above, in terms of standardizations, models, statistics, plans and regulations. Caring for the environment has become about things and products, focusing more on what goes into a building (e.g., materials used) than in monitoring the ongoing and processual relationships with the building's environment, people, flora and fauna. This focus is extremely averse to the relational concerns of care. Feminist scholar Joan Tronto (2019) illustrates the point: when men work and bring home a paycheck, they consider this activity as a form of care. But the paycheck money (while enabling the family to sustain livability) is not itself a form of care. The money needs to be transformed into clean clothing, food, a safe and pleasant place to live. Doing so requires participating in the ongoing relations with those who are cared for. Similarly, the autonomous building does not provide care in and of itself. The relationships between the building, its location and context, how it was built and who it will accommodate or displace, are all aspects that fundamentally affect the nature of the caring that the building does.

The environmental concerns of architecture amount to economizing our resources in order to sustainably reproduce our unsustainable lifestyles. In consequence, the industrially objects populating our urban environments, and promoted by commercial advertisement, "dramatically fail to 'bear' the knowledge necessary for us to

reorganize our individual and collective lives into more sustainable forms" (Citton, 2018, p. 5). Hence, to reorganize our lives, he argues, what is needed is not only other types of (architectural) production and consumption, but also other types of knowledge and, most of all, other forms of attention. What is needed is to redirect the increasing alignment of all our human attentions on the sole finality of financial profit towards a new arts of attention. Promoting an architecture of degrowth could be seen as such an attempt.

Degrowth, as an idea and movement, requires that we re-evaluate the relationships that connect us to one another and to our environment. It demands that we challenge the perceived apolitical consensus of sustainable development and economic growth (Kallis & March, 2015). The ideology of growth is here seen as continued colonial relations "with a pretence of generalized betterment" (Demaria et al., 2019, p. 439), while securing a resource expansion that only benefits the rich minority of the world's population. Degrowth, in this sense, is not a material process of lowering consumption, an irrelevant demand for those who are living below limits, but it is about cultural transformation that aims to re-establish livelihoods, relationships and politics around a new suite of values and goals, focusing on the commons, equity and redistribution. Degrowth highlights that environmental damage is a question of culture, with implications for how we treat each other and the planet which are much more embedded and deep-rooted than a managerial ecology that only addresses how to reduce carbon emissions. Cultivating our attention in this context, is about asking how attention can be reoriented and inserted into practical frameworks of care that promote a relational approach to architecture. In the following I examine the potential of critical spatial practice to enable this form of attentional reorientation.

Reorienting attention through critical spatial practice

Critical spatial practice describes a broad range of activities that seek to reshape the built environment in counterhegemonic ways. These are practices that encourage active and creative participation in shaping the spaces of everyday life that have been unevenly affected by capitalist development. An iconic example of critical spatial practice is the work of the London based arts collective PLATFORM. Founded in 1983, the collective has pioneered artistic work that questions and unsettles understandings of cities (and specifically London) by uncovering elements that are hidden or buried. This could be by proposing to restore lost rivers, by excavating the pre-history of the city, or by tracing international flows of trade, finance and investment. Geographer Doreen Massey (2007, p. 206) notes how PLATFORM

provides "an engaged attempt to rearticulate relations". Their performative events, many of which involves walking through public space in the city, enable novel ways of conversing about the interconnectedness of cities, of re-imagining city spaces collectively, and opening them to critical reflection and debate.

Inspired by PLATFORM, we, as curators of the festival, wanted to use critical spatial practice to promote an urban attention ecology that would foreground a relational approach to urban form in Oslo. As is the case in most European cities, neoliberal urban policies have fuelled a transformation of urban space and landscapes in Oslo, leading to changes in the social composition of the city centre (Andersen & Røe, 2017). This is particularly evident in the transformation of the city's waterfront, Barcode, through spectacular architecture and urban design. While the goal was to create a waterfront for everybody to use, research (see e.g., Røe, 2015) has demonstrated that Barcode is becoming an area designed for well-off inhabitants, tourists, visitors and investors, and to a lesser degree the lower classes of the city and socially marginalized groups. As planning scholars Raul P. Lejano and Erualdo R. González (2017) observe, there is a tendency for planners to project an imagined community onto a place and to direct economic growth and change toward the same. Invariably, they argue, this turns attention away from the existing community, effaces it, and unravels the social fabric of everyday life. Citton (2017a) calls this way of relating to the world "an attentional regime of projection".

That we tend to relate to the world through an attentional regime of projection also in our daily lives, is illustrated through a tendency to filter stimuli through a number of criteria that defines what we are sensitive or insensitive to (certain smells, certain views, certain patterns and so on). This enables us to navigate and feel at ease at the places we are in because we can attend to the same things wherever we are. The extreme version of this form of attention, however, is the projection of power through a colonizing mission, which deletes local features only to impose the colonizer's standards. It can be argued that the standards characterizing neoliberal urban policies, such as those directing the development of Barcode, belong to what Citton calls a "capitalistic valorization" (2017a, p. 150). This is a hegemonic mode of evaluation which measures the value of a good or activity based only on its capacity for maximizing the profits of an investor. The consequence is an approach to urban form that neglects relational concerns based on forms of interconnected knowledge and practice (i.e., cultural memory, local experience, environmental and multispecies

justice) in favour of the valuation of things that capital can "see" (spectacular buildings, foreign investments, high-earning resident etc.).

Instead of pointing fingers at the master narratives and hegemonic capitalist order, we wanted the festival to foreground possible alternatives to the status quo. That is to say, rather than promoting degrowth as "the right alternative" or revealing some kind of ultimate truth about the capitalist order, the goal was to actualize people's own sense of criticality. Curator and cultural theorist Irit Rogoff (2006) argues for the specific potential of the arts in this regard. She points to how the arts may enable people to produce criticality through inhabiting a problem and "living things out" rather than by analysing them. According to her, this has a hugely transformative power because it highlights that while we may be capable of directing our attention to the problems that we see in the world, we are nevertheless also living out the very conditions we are trying to change or come to terms with. Experiencing this embodied contradiction is not about resolution but about generating a heightened awareness and enable people to access a different mode of inhabitation.

Citton (2017b) similarly points to the reading of literature as an example of an aesthetic experience that fosters a heightened awareness through a regime of attention centred around immersion. Reading is about diving into worlds that are originally alien. He compares this immersive attention with a travellers' first arrival in an unfamiliar city where she doesn't know the language, customs or standards and must find her way on her own. Since she is not the master of the environment and might not even know the rules of the games played by the locals, her attention consists in an attitude of multidirectional and open-minded vigilances: dangers and rewards can come from any sides so the attention is intense but also wide and unfocused. The goal of immersion then, is not to reach a final explanation or "truth" of something. Rather, it is to confront our pre-existing forms of knowledge and certainty with something radical alien, which will help us refine and improve our possibly reductive and oversimplified worldview.

In order to reorient the attention through critical spatial practices that focused on immersion and embodied criticality, we did not present the ready-made solutions in the form of architecture models and plans that are normally put on display in architecture festivals. Instead, we replaced the traditional architecture exhibition with a series of critical spatial practices that were oriented around three geographical and conceptual *sites:* The Library; The Playground and The Theatre. It is to these three

sites, and their role in fostering an urban attention ecology through critical spatial practice, that I will now turn.

The Library

The choice to create a library instead of an architectural exhibition was partly rooted in the idea that libraries are important sites for citizen involvement and social transformation (Goulding, 2009). By decommodifying and democratizing goods and knowledge, libraries promote ideas of equality and emancipation. *The Library* was filled with lendable items that visitors could weave their own personal knowledge and experience of the architecture of degrowth from, onto and around. The items were gathered through an open call for existing or speculative degrowth ideas and projects in the form of "lendable items that empower citizens to engage more deeply with creating and experiencing architecture" in order to "challenge and shift the boundaries of what is considered permissible, desirable and possible for architecture and urbanism" (Oslotriennale, 2018). The items took many different forms, including books, furniture, tapestry, paintings, tools, compost, plants, games, devices and material samples. What they had in common was that they were all oriented around the basic tasks of sharing responsibilities for caring for our world. The figure of the autonomous and detached modern architect was here to be replaced with a focus on architecture's "dependency" (Till, 2009) on the many others that have a hand in the (re)making of the built environment.

The Library presented many different approaches to care. Focusing on caring for residents and neighbours, an installation of letters called *Inventory of Experience* by Bart Decroos and Laura Muyldermans, encouraged visitors to write an "inventory of experience" (Perec, 1997) of their homes, and proposed ways in which these could be included alongside the more technical inventories and surveys involved in architectural project briefs. The project *Away* by the artist James Carey, highlighted the maintenance labour required to keep *the Library* running. Foregrounding the labour of care required to maintain a building, the project presented ten glass vessels of waste material produced and collected during the festival, alongside an audio commentary that featured interviews with the cleaners working in *the Library*.

Many items in *the Library* focused on how architecture starts with what is already present in the world around us, rather than the "power of projection" and "capitalist valorization" of entrepreneurial urban policies. For example, one of the larger items in *the Library* was a reading table which was constructed as part of the project *Shelter*

for one stone, one tree, two people and four birds by the artist Kalle Grude. The table raised questions around how architects, in the process of building, care for nature and other living beings (animals, plants, trees) involved and affected by the building process. Another example was the installation *Logistics* by the architecture office Lilla Sthml. The installation invited visitors to *the Library* to become custodians of a pine by bringing home a bag of seeds and with it the responsibility for the time and effort it takes to grow a single pine tree. Through such projects, *the Library* explored the architect's responsibility for the entire process of building, from the sourcing of materials and the environmental impacts of these processes, to caring for the people (workers, residents, neighbours) involved along with concerns around what has been displaced and how the building will be maintained.

Another project in *the Library* was *nanotourism* by the architects Aljosa Dekleva and Tina Gregoric. The project grapples with the socially and environmentally destructive travel encouraged by city and regional municipalities seeking to grow their tourism economy. In response, *nanotourism* promotes a creative critique of conventional tourism by suggesting a participatory, locally oriented, bottom-up alternative. Essentially, *nanotourism* is about the tourist experience in itself, on a smaller and more detailed level (hence "nano" meaning very small, minute). It is about focusing on the smaller, day-to-day aspects of a destination, providing small-scale embodied activities instead of undertaking a distanced and superficial one-way observation. In *the Library,* this idea of *nanotourism* was manifested in the KSEVT Hotel Suit that highlighted the immersive and embodied focus of the tourist experience. The KSEVT Hotel Suit is a wearable suit suspended from the ceiling and allowing visitors to sleep in any building, suspended in mid-air like an astronaut. In doing so it provides an embodied experience of accommodation that is quite different from the traditional hotel experience. By making the everyday strange, the suit broke with standardized tourist experiences as commodified escape attempts, providing instead a possibility to see everyday space and activity from a new perspective. In similar vein, the book *From Subtraction* by the architecture think tank n'UNDO proposes that "doing" forms no part of the architectural project, rather "undoing" and "redoing" are the only strategies available. True architecture, the book argues, can be found in simple and everyday interventions, such as orienting a chair to contemplate the landscape.

Finally, in lieu of the traditional exhibition catalogue, *the Library* presented a book of fiction titled *Gross Ideas: Tales of Tomorrow's Architecture.* The book presented a series of fictional short-stories written by, among others, authors, poets, activists,

engineers and architects who had been invited to explore "the buildings, institutions and streets of the near [degrowth] future, glimpsed through the lens of fictional characters, places, and cities" (Harper, 2019, p. 2).

In combination *the Library* and *Gross Ideas* positioned architecture as a site of interplay between material and perceptual worlds, where concepts cohere, forces pull and attract, and things, discourses, subjects, and objects are framed, contested, and brought into being. The visitor, then, is not introduced to stable and premade degrowth worlds, but are encouraged to immerse themselves in unfamiliar territories that defamiliarize the everyday and thus might provide new insights and perspectives on what we normally take for granted.

The Theatre

Alongside the immersive installation of *the Library,* we curated a theatre programme titled *the Theatre.* As part of this programme, we presented critical spatial practices oriented around artistic and participatory performance. The idea of *the Theatre* was, in part, inspired by the architecture historian Anthony Vidler. In discussing Palladio's renaissance theatre in Vicenza, in which the built three-dimensional versions of the streets of Olympus into its stage, Vidler observes how "the building of the streets inside the theatre brought the space of the real into the domain of the ideal, the memory of the one allowing the observation and perhaps the critique of the other" (Vidler, 2011, p. 18). *The Theatre* accordingly presented critical spatial practices in which the possible (or "ideal" in Vidler's term) could be an instrument for exploring the real.

The Theatre opened with the theatre performance *Society under Construction* by the German theatre group Rimini Protokoll. The performance took place at the main stage of the National Theatre in Oslo, which was turned into a construction site with scaffoldings, sandhills, piles of bricks, construction containers and so on. The audience were taken on a tour around the construction site, through which a series of encounters unpacked and laid bare the social and ecological costs of growth-based development through real-life stories of personal failures, convictions, interests and doubts: a Romanian construction worker talks about illegal employment and existential angst; the former head engineer for Berlin's BER Airport reconstructs how he became a scapegoat for the government, for supposedly designing a default smoke-extraction system; an architect questions the use of glossy computer generated images to sell visions of the future to wealthy clients and developers; an

economist warns a government delegation from Ethiopia against copying the urban development of Singapore; a lawyer from Transparency International details cases of corruption in the Norwegian construction industry that resulted in poisoned forests and contaminated drinking water. The stories not only told what happens in the construction industry but, more importantly, combined with drama they offered the audience opportunities to participate through imagination, emotions and desires.

While, as Frichot (2019, p.7) observes, the mainstream orientation towards architecture "is usually taken on frontally, with the architectural object in view, looming forward from an indistinct background", the performance shifted this frontal attention to an attention focusing on architecture's facilitative background. What emerges from this shift in perspective is an architecture in the midst of things, emerging from a contingency of events across complex social, political, economic, ecological, technological and material fields. The stories in the performance worked as condensers of attention, providing small scale models of the construction industry, which was vicariously explored from the inside, through the attention and emotions of real-life characters. Citton refers to this facilitative background as "the second material ground" (2017a, p. 199) of the environments that condition our attention. Normally, we do not see this second material ground: when we inhabit urban space, we see buildings and streets, not the master plans and labour of construction that underpin them. Yet, Citton argues, it is only by adapting our ways of seeing and our intelligence to this second material ground, that we will be able to unite the ecology of attention with a real attention to ecology, planetary care and the interrelations between humans, non-humans and their material environments.

The programme of *the Theatre* also consisted of the participatory performance project *Factory of the Future* by the British performance maker Zoe Svendsen. The project used applied theatre to collaboratively produce future scenarios for a post-oil and post-capitalist Oslo in which human and ecological justice and flourishing are favored over economic growth. I have discussed this project in more detail elsewhere (see Sachs Olsen, 2022b), but in this paper I will focus on how the project fostered what Citton calls "a joint attention" (2017a, p. 113). Joint attention means to be attentive to what occupies others, which to Citton is a relational concern that is fundamental to care.

Joint attention requires that participants set aside pre-programmed routines and preconceptions in order to collaboratively work things out as they go along. Citton

compares this to the skill of conversation: "everyone has learned to participate in a conversation – where no one knows in advance what their interlocutor are going to say" (p. 88). Accordingly, the project was not about materializing the single idea of Svendsen as the performance maker. Instead, the project was developed in several stages as a form of relay in which "the baton" was passed on between participants in different stages of the project. The first stage was developed in close dialogue with residents in Oslo, who were encouraged to dream about the transformations they would like to see in the city. In the second stage, these dreams were developed into a series of baseline scenarios that informed several workshops where professional actors along with planners, architects and developers imagined the transformation of the existing social and economic infrastructure and built structures of Oslo in order to accommodate these scenarios. In the third stage, the actors worked with Svendsen to improvise stories about everyday life in this transformed future. These stories were filmed as a series of video portraits and were displayed throughout the festival period as an installation at the Norwegian Centre of Design and Architecture.

As Svendsen explains it: "[The project] is not about generating a single future that I and my collaborators will determine beforehand, but the idea is to shape that semi-invisible structure in which people can imagine and think […]." And she continues: "So, this is important for the process: that it is not just about other people's outcome, but that everyone share an understanding of what we are inventing."

The Factory of the Future did not develop one specific ideology for how one should live in the future, but rather conditioned an attention to open-ended and speculative processes that explored how one potentially could live under radically changed social and economic circumstances. When encountering the final installation, the audience had to draw their own observations and conclusions without the reassuring presence of an authority or principal narrative to defer to. This way, they were invited to explore creatively their own perceptions and experiences of various degrowth scenarios. Important here was that the project started from the premise that the transformation to a radically different future had already happened, rather than getting stuck in questions about how this transformation had come about. Hence, participants and audiences were immersed in the possibilities that the transformation enabled.

A similar approach was taken in the performance *We should all be dreaming* by artist-activists Maryan Abdulkarim and Sonya Lindfors. Here, the audience was invited to spend time, listen and dream together in a format that was a mix of

collective think tank, choreographed gathering, performance and a meal. Focusing on the radical potential of dreaming as a deliberative, restorative and subversive practice, the performance centred on Afrofuturism and speculating about what could be otherwise: what if colonialism did not happen? What if Africa was the centre?

Linking this practice of Afrofuturism to the festival was important to us as curators in order to question and challenge the racialized, sexualized and classed divisions of power that have characterized the modern development of architecture. As Krasny (2019) observes, the idea of Architecture with a capital A as it was discursively shaped by Western thought has excluded spatial practices performed by Indigenous people, people of colour, women or workers, which has resulted in a deeply colonial mechanism that annihilates nature and everyone and everything, that existed on and with the land previously. In exploring these issues, *We should all be dreaming* offered wider reflections on the problems of abstract, universalizing and alienating development and as well as an implicit critique of degrowth discourses.

Many people in the Global South do not feel affinity to the word degrowth, seeing it as one more intellectual term arriving to them from Europe, insufficiently sensitive to their realities (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). There is an important difference between frugality as a choice and frugality as a social condition. Similarly, the climate crisis discourse of an end-of-the-world emergency risks over-simplifying and generalizing the issues at hand. Indigenous cultures have, for example, lived through exactly the socio-environmental breakdown now predicted by climate scientists several times over. Yet, critiques to development articulated in the Global South and alternative and/or Indigenous projects promoting alternative life-worlds have much in common with the degrowth project. Hence, in order to avoid unintendedly creating new forms of intellectual domination, degrowth practitioners need to learn from thinking and practices in the Global South when conceiving of radical transitions. Central here are non-anthropocentric/nature perspectives including the multiple meanings of time(s) in the South. Accordingly, *We should all be dreaming* provided a deliberative setting that called for an alliance between plural perspectives rather than a homogeneous model for transformation. In this context, Afrofuturism worked as a practice of recentralizing and decentralizing our attention through a performance that moved towards eco-poetic relations, presencing and atmospheric sensitivity, ecological tunings and mindful practices. The performance furthermore illustrated how an openness and joint attention to plural perspectives can be rehearsed through

performance in order to expand possibilities for shared relations of care and meaningful exchange.

The Playground

The third site of the festival was *The Playground*, in which the streets of Oslo was turned into a playground through the critical spatial practice of an immersive audio walk. Focusing on the notion of "play" as a method for leaving space for the unplanned, the emergent and the playful in urban development and architecture, the audio walk challenged the desire for controlling uncertainty and complexity in urban development and planning processes.

In the audio walk, a group of 30 "listeners" was guided through the streets of Oslo by "the voice of the future". Each listener was equipped with headphones in which different voices expressed different concerns, perspectives and visions for the areas through which the group walked. These voices were recorded in a series of public workshops and interviews with residents and users of the areas within which the group walked. The audio walk furthermore pushed the listeners to interact with the urban environment in ways which resist pre-determined functions and norms of behaviour. They were, for example, asked to freeze and stand completely still in the middle of busy shopping street; they were encouraged to dance in a public square; and they were invited to walk backwards through a new urban development. These playful interventions challenged the tendency by planners and architects to treat the city as a manageable object to be controlled in order to reduce risk and uncertainty (see e.g., Marris, 1987). Here, planning becomes an active force in defining appropriate urban practice and pre-determining the social and material function of objects and buildings: a bench is for sitting, not sleeping on; a train station is for people on the move, not for people seeking shelter; and so on. Most of us are often oblivious to the exclusionary mechanisms that this control of urban space represents as we are not in need for a place to lie down and rest our body in urban space. But cultivating our attention to such "invisible" exclusions are key for producing more socially just cities. Citton (2017a, p. 114) foregrounds the importance of developing this form of attention through what he calls "attentive listening": "you shall do your best to make yourself attentive to what preoccupies the attention of the other, and to concretely rectify what is concerning them (without judging its abstract validity). As with compassion, care assures the passage from attentive sensitivity to attentive action".

As a form of attentive action, the audio walk explored the city as a collective act of social existence by insisting on accommodating "other" uses and functions of urban space. The idea of turning the city into a playground here relates to what media critics Eric Gordon and Stephen Walter (2016) points to as an emerging design paradigm that they call "meaningful inefficiencies". This paradigm seeks to challenge the efficiency paradigm in urban development by giving users the option to play within and with rules. Play can here be seen as an action that has the potential to overflow the confinements and rigid structures in which it is taking place, generating joyful, emergent, and unpredictable results. In similar vein, feminist scholar Donna Haraway talks about why play is essential for politics in the context of climate change: "We need to develop practices for thinking about those forms of activity that are not caught by functionality, those which propose the possible-but-not-yet, or that which is not-yet but still open" (Weigel, 2019).

Play can here be understood as a form of "dépense" (expenditure) as defined by the French intellectual Georges Bataille (1984 [1933]). "Dépense" is the expenditure of energy that is not required for the conversation or reproduction of life. According to Bataille, humans only require a limited amount of energy to survive, yet additional energy is available and so this must be used up non-essential activities. Examples of this excess expenditure include cultural activities such as the rituals and makings of funerals, pyramids, cathedrals, and music. These activities constitute non-utilitarian expressions of society, and thus might be labelled un-productive, waste-full or futile to the capitalist system. However, they are nevertheless essential for human and societal development. They are what keeps human societies together.

The problem is anything non-utilitarian is difficult to justify in contemporary society. Austerity, political uncertainty, war, pandemic and climate crisis conspire to create a sense of emergency where things must be expended only with utmost consideration and necessity. Citton (2017a) calls this an attentional regime of constant alarm. He points to how the media accordingly attempt to draw our attention in terms of scandals, crises, disasters, and shocks. This regime subjects us to a constant state of distraction which structurally keeps us from collectively addressing more long-term issues which loom at the horizon. Furthermore, this regime leaves little room for devoting our attention to nurturing the social rituals and activities that are not contributing to solving crisis or growing the economy but that are nevertheless central for bonding with each other and enriching our lives in ways that are not material. By fostering an attentional regime of immersion through attentive listening and the

embodiment of playful and non-functional appropriations of urban space, the audio walk insisted on nurturing an urban attention ecology centred not on constant crises but on cautious care.

Conclusion

As this paper has shown, the cultivation of attention may help us attend to relationships between buildings, nature, peoples, objects and imaginations. In this way we may unite an urban attention ecology with real attention to planetary care and to the interrelations between humans, non-humans and their material environments. Yet, an urban attention ecology offers no guarantee for a harmonious world. It is a privilege to have time to pay attention and attending to something or someone might involve suffering for others. The complex nature of attention necessitates an ongoing critical engagement with the terms of its own production and practice. In short, it demands that we ask: what am I attending to, why, and at what cost to whom?

By forming and promoting an urban attention ecology, the critical spatial practices discussed in this paper have highlighted the need for establishing spaces and environments that foster such critical engagement. As mentioned in the Introduction, these efforts are not unproblematic. Critical engagement that refuse to provide any concrete solutions might appear to be of limited worth in isolation from more pragmatic concerns about what to do and what ought to be done. However, as de Leeuw et al. (2017, p. 157), citing Marx, argue, it is in fact a certain lack or underdevelopment of an idea which provides a space and opportunity for its very opposite, such as a breakthrough and a direction forward. In other words, it might be exactly a space of the still undefined and unknown that might provide the most emancipating and innovative spaces. This is because when spaces are not fully imagined and materially realized, they provide the opportunity for ascendance and for new relationships to emerge.

Pragmatic solutions risk seeing things in isolation, while the critical spatial practices presented at the festival worked as an "attentional ecosystem" that aimed to increase the ability of the public to become attentive to interrelations. "Being attentive" is here understood as an activity that constitutes its own end, demanding what Donna Haraway terms an "unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning" (2008, p. 36). Citton argues that this form of curiosity is about learning to valorize and be astonished by everything that exceed

the categories and anticipations through which we set about grasping them. This implies training our ability to think beyond the status quo, and in so doing enabling us to imagine, communicate and construct and endless variety of socioecological worlds that ultimately broaden our scope of actions. This reorientation of our attention need not entail turning away from pragmatic and policy agendas. Rather, it may help us move towards an urban attention ecology - a wider vision that, by foregrounding connectedness, dependency and care giving, rather than economic production, growth and progress, can provide a context for pragmatic policy debates and raise fundamental and often neglected questions about cities, urban space and architecture, about processes of urbanisation and societal transformation, and what they might become.

About the author

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