

Generic [modern] Architecture Field, Actor-Networks and Pragmatism

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The modern era of architecture is known for its complex relationship towards industrialized forms of building. On one hand architects have tried to keep up with the ever faster evolution of building technologies and on the other hand architects have tried to differentiate themselves from the generic expression of modern building technology. But no matter what stand architects have taken it seems that they have been marginalized. As Rem Koolhaas puts it, the 20. century has been a losing battle with the issue of quantity¹.

In Denmark there are more than one million detached one-family houses making up 50 % of all dwellings in Denmark. Most of these were built during the last 50 years. Only a very little part of these houses are what could be defined as unique pieces of architecture. You could say that they represent the Danish architects losing battle with the issue of quantity. Most of them are prefab houses, that no Danish architect would actually like to call architecture². As suggested in an American context by Robert Venturi they could even be classified

as 'ugly and ordinary'³

This article aims at discussing, from a theoretical point of view, the problem behind this phenomenon and to suggest what could be done, from a theoretical point of view, to help if not dissolve it, then at least clarify it.

I have chosen to focus on pragmatism in relation to the architectural profession within this article. This relation however does not just come about by itself. It requires some theoretical justification and explanation, which I am about to unfold here. As I see it we have to move from a modern field oriented, through a non-modern actor-network oriented understanding of the architectural profession to reach a plausible pragmatic understanding⁴.

One of the reasons why the ordinary detached one-family house is not an object of great interest to Danish architects seems to be that this kind of building is primarily a result of practical and economical considerations. Considerations, which do not seem to have the highest priority when it comes to defining the basic values within the Danish architectural society. Ins-



tead it seems that a certain view on aesthetics is defining the basic values. A point I will return to.

Architects giving priority to practical and economical considerations could be called pragmatic architects. They deal with the Dirty Realism⁵ of everyday life. Perhaps the pragmatic architect could even be described as Dirty Harry⁶ of the architectural society.

Attempting to understand what it means to be a pragmatic architect implicitly raises the question of what it means not to be a pragmatic architect. What is it that makes pragmatic issues dirty and low. The answer is that pragmatic considerations traditionally are seen as opposed to what is pure and idealistic. This way a differentiated field appears. A dichotomy of practical / realistic issues at one end and pure / idealistic issues at the other end.

This way the architect dealing with pragmatic and economical considerations often does this at the expense of artistic / idealistic consideration. Why is it so? An answer can be constructed with some help from the writings of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

Architecture as field

Bourdieu does not specifically deal with the architectural profession in Denmark, but his writing on the formation of fields within society in general is helpful. Especially his description of the upcoming field

of artistic production. In short he describes how the basic values within the artistic field are defined in opposition to the values of another important field within the modern world – the economical field⁷. In this context differentiation is a necessity.

This means that certain entities of the modern world cannot coexist within the same fields of society. Works of art cannot from this point of view at the same time be artworks and pure results of economical speculation. The other way around an economical document like a balance sheet cannot at the same time be a work of art.

Seen from a modern perspective of architecture this should raise a problem for the profession. How is it possible to understand architecture as one profession if the profession contains both pragmatic and idealistic architects. If the profession is both the field of pragmatic and idealistic actors. As Associate Professor at Aarhus School of Architecture, Niels Albertsen puts it with reference to Niels Prak:

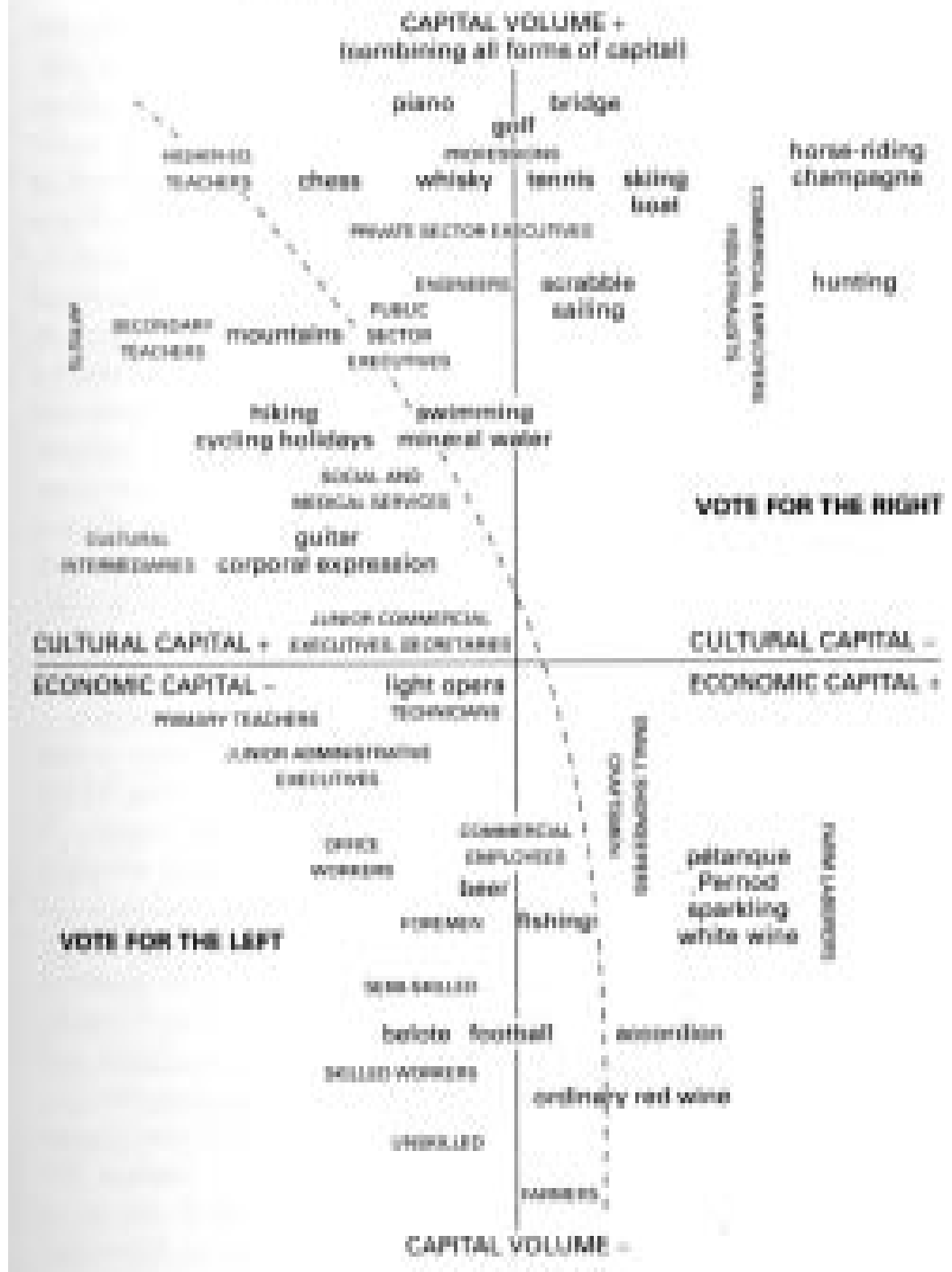
Practical architects treat their artistic colleagues with respect, artistic architects treat their practical colleagues with contempt. Practical architects often express a wish to become or to be regarded as artistic. The opposite never occurs.⁸

I suggested with Bourdieu that the artistic field should be seen in opposition to the economic field. Perhaps a short explanation on the term field as Bourdieu uses it is in place here. Bourdieu writes:

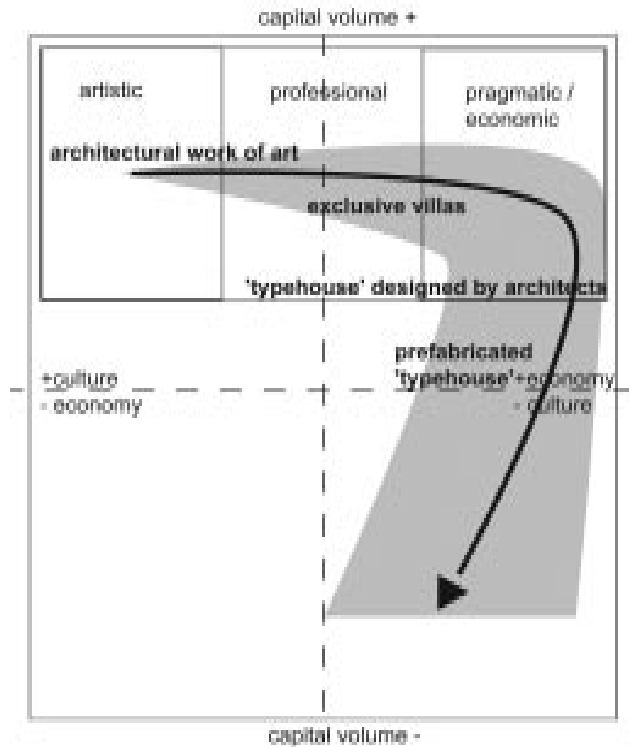
The evolution of societies tends to make universes (which I call fields) emerge which are autonomous and have their own laws.⁹

If architecture can be described as a field in this sense it should have its own laws. Its own basic values defining what the actors should fight for and protect in order to maintain their field. But as mentioned above there might be problems as some architects seem to be pragmatic and others idealistic. However the architectural field seems to exist anyway due to a somewhat clear hierarchy placing the idealists or artistic architects in the top and the pragmatic architects, who aspire to rise in levels, in the bottom of the hierarchy. It

Social Space and Symbolic Space



The detached single family-house inscribed into Bourdieus Space of social positions. The top of the field has been subdivided into Niels Albertsens suggested subfields within the Danish architectural society.



should be emphasized that this is an internal hierarchy. Actually the pragmatic architects might be situated on the same level of power as the artistic ones in the overall space of social positions¹⁰, as Bourdieu calls it.

According to the Danish association of architects DAL, architectural quality is closely related to the manifestation of a convincing artistic idea within the architectural design¹¹. This of course makes it hard for the pragmatic architect to deliver architectural quality. A situation leading to the above mentioned internal hierarchy within the Danish architectural field or society. Niels Albertsen has suggested a subdivision of the architectural field in Denmark. According to him the field can be subdivided into a 1. artistic, 2. professional, 3. pragmatic / economical sub field¹².

'Real' architecture is defined as a quality closely related to art leading to the conclusion that a 'real' architect must also be an artist as determined by the Danish

association of architects, DAL. The architectural illu¹³ as Bourdieu calls it is thus closely related to an idea of art. Architectural quality gained through an artistic idea should as is written in the DAL publication be a result of: ..the conceptual, intuitive and often personal treatment of a given program.¹⁴

Within the DAL publication it is also made clear that besides the artistic ambitions of the architectural creation there are functional, technical and economical considerations to be taken in relation to architectural creation. These last considerations are however what make architecture more, or just something else, than what is often called 'art for arts sake'. The conception of art represented here stages the above mentioned dichotomy between pragmatistical considerations and artistic, idealistic considerations.

The conception of art, which seems to be an implicit part of this discussion is a conception, which bear a strong analogy to the aesthetics of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant.

According to Bourdieu the Kantian aesthetics is the foundation of modern understanding of art. This understanding however has social implications as described by Bourdieu in his book *The Distinction*¹⁵. The Kantian aesthetics makes taste a weapon of class differentiation, because only the rich classes within society are able to appreciate art for arts sake by keeping a disinterested view of the artwork. Taste is not a matter of simple pleasure. The Norwegian sociologist Dag Østerberg writes in his introduction to the Norwegian edition of *The Distinction*:



Bourdieu wants to show, and seems quite successful, that the Kantian aesthetics in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* is a good interpretation of the aesthetics and tastes of certain classes within society – the middleclass and the ruling classes in France and that the lower classes have a different taste of aesthetics and art.¹⁶

The taste of the lower classes cannot be founded on disinterestedness since this class is related to the surrounding world not by choice but by necessity. Østerberg writes:

The popular taste rejects the differentiation between on the one hand the disinterested pleasure and on the other the excitement of the senses. This class does not make a sharp distinction between artworks and commercials. It wants nice things on the wall, beautiful sunsets, immense mountain views, lovely stimulating women and so on.¹⁷

As an interlude to this sociological discussion it is worth mentioning that within the field of architecture the taste and architectural preferences of the low-middle classes have been treated in the second part of *Learning from Las Vegas*, called “Ugly and Ordinary Architecture, or the Decorated Shed”. Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour writes about the behaviour of architects:

As experts with ideals, who pay lipservice to the social sciences, they build for Man rather than for people – this means, to suit themselves, that is to suit their own particular upper-middle-class values, which they assign to everyone.¹⁸

Architect – Schools

The production of art is also submitted to the Kantian aesthetics, according to Bourdieu. This is due to the fact that the cultural production is taking place within the above-mentioned fields. These fields are internally organised according to certain scholastic traditions. One is trained to become an artist in a situation separated from everyday practice, which means that to become part of the artistic field one has to be educated within a closed circle¹⁹ – a school.

Within the different fields the universality of the production of the field is protected. An example of this

can be seen in the above-mentioned DAL publication, where the artistic idea of the architectural product is secured by “the conceptual, intuitive and often personal treatment of a given program”²⁰.

This approach protects the architectural field from other competing fields. One has to be familiar with the scholastic traditions within the architectural schools in order to know what is meant by the phrase: “...the conceptual, intuitive and often personal treatment of a given program”. Bourdieu writes about this phenomenon:

Most of the human works that we are accustomed to treating as universal – law, science, the fine arts, ethics, religion and so forth – cannot be dissociated from the scholastic point of view and from the social and economic conditions which make the latter possible. They have been engendered in these very peculiar social universes which are the fields of cultural production – the juridical field, the scientific field, the artistic field, the philosophical field – and in which agents are engaged who have in common the privilege of fighting for the monopoly of the universal, and thereby effectively of promoting the advancement of truths and values that are held, at each moment, to be universal, indeed eternal.²¹

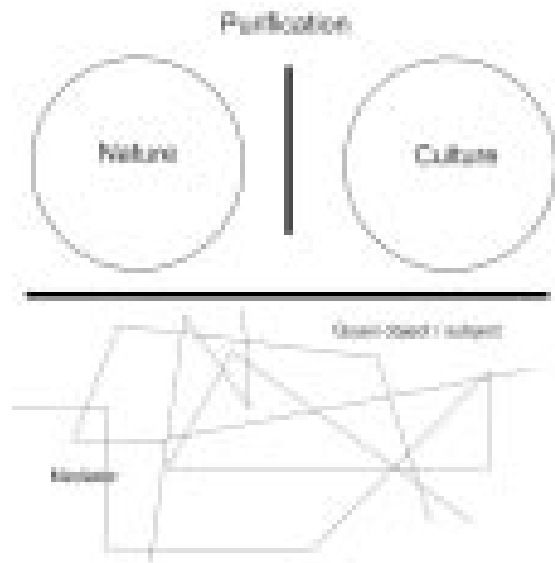
The scholastic education among the different cultural fields are according to Bourdieu aiming at maintaining that power which is given by the universality of the products produced within the fields. This fits with the impression that architects maintain their field of practice by pointing to the universality of their architectural products. Architecture can only be produced by an educated architect.

Using the Bourdieuvian perspective on architecture only makes it very clear that architects dealing with pragmatic issues are not the ones setting the agenda for architecture. Instead they are more or less ignored when it comes to settling the basic values within the architectural field. Architecture is primarily about artistic issues. Issues, which should be seen apart from necessary and secondary considerations such as functionality and economy.

Non-modernity – Architecture as actor-network

Following Bourdieu also means accepting his theoretical framework. Taking his empirical work into consideration it is hard not to accept his arguments²². But nevertheless I would like to widen the scope and use another French sociologist, Bruno Latour, to discuss Bourdieu and his critique of the Kantian aesthetics in relation to the social structuring of society.

Following Latour we have to make a Copernican contra revolution against the Kantian view of the world, where the subject projects its categories on an indifferent world, which only exists in it self²³. In stead one has to start focusing on what is between the subject and the world in it self. Not as an empty vessel of



information, but as something in itself. Something, which makes it possible to create the impression of a subject standing opposite a world.

According to Latour we have become so used to the idea of subjects and objects living in separate realms, that we actually believe this situation to be the true foundation of our world. Latour however points out that this is a modern construction which deliberately forgets that subjects and objects are in fact constructed and held in place by what is between the two extremes.

Latour has treated this phenomenon in his book *We have Never Been Modern*²⁴ from 1993. In this book he refers to the French philosopher Michel Serres concept Quasi-object. A Quasi-object is what is not fully an object and not fully a subject, but what lies between the two. What constitutes the two. Latour writes:

The explanation we seek will indeed obtain Nature and Society, but only as a final outcome, not as a beginning. Nature does revolve, but not around the Subject/Society. It revolves around the collective that produces things and people. The Subject does revolve, but not around nature. It revolves around the collective out of which people and things are generated. At last the Middle Kingdom is represented. Nature and societies are its satellites.²⁵

In opposition to Kant and also Bourdieu, Latour does not seek a philosophical offset in an insurmountable division between subject and object. And he definitely does not seek to patch up this division, which he claims has wrongly occupied western philosophy through out the last, at least, 400 years²⁶. Within the Latourian world there may be subject and object, but these are constantly 'infecting' each other turning into quasiobjects and quasisubjects.

In order to describe this world Latour uses the term ANT (Actor Network Theory). The main idea within this theory is that human subjects are not the only actors who can act. Things and animals also act. Human society is stabilized and developed through an ongoing interaction between human and non-human actors²⁷. The theory can be exemplified through the architectural practice: In order to reach a good, stabilized project an architect involves many sketches and models. He uses a computer, perhaps a drawing table, pens, rulers and so on. He uses books and photos for inspiration. The number of implicated actors could be expanded endlessly. This endless number of involved actors, both human and non-humans make up a large network, which is in fact Latours point. Any product is a stable state within a network of ongoing interaction.

Latour in short wants to question the idea that we are in fact modern. He claims as I have just tried to show, that we have never been modern, and that philosophy based on this assumption is basically wrong.

This means that the production of art, following a Latourian view, is very much a question of interestedness. A situation with no clear boundaries between subject and object²⁹.

Non-modern pragmatic aesthetics

The empirical research that was made during my PhD. study³⁰ indicated that the architectural practice is very much a non-modern practice. If this is true it seems odd to let the Kantian aesthetic set the values within the architectural society in Denmark. To overcome this another aesthetic could be introduced. The problem is however that Latour does not offer his own non-modern aesthetics.

If I should suggest another aesthetics that could help establish a non-modern normativity within the architectural practice it would be a pragmatic aesthetics³¹. To use a term from Bourdieu I would suggest that the architectural *illusio* should be based not on the Kantian aesthetics but on a pragmatist aesthetics. This kind of aesthetics is found within the American philosophical tradition. For my thesis I used the book *Pragmatist Aesthetics – Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* by Richard Shusterman³². The aesthetics represented here is based on the American pragmatist John Dewey. Shusterman refers to Dewey's point about the role of art:

For art's role is not to deny the natural and organic roots and wants of man so as to achieve some pure ethereal experience, but instead to give a satisfyingly integrated expression to both our bodily and intellectual dimensions, which Dewey thinks we have been painfully wrong to separate. Art's aim 'is to serve the whole creature in his unified vitality'³³

According to Dewey we have been painfully wrong to separate our intellectual and bodily approach to art. A separation, which has as earlier pointed out, taken place within the Kantian aesthetics. Dewey's dissociation from the Kantian aesthetics is closely related with the purely rational approach to art represented here. Art should not just serve a disinterested, cognitive experience, but serve the whole living creature according to Dewey.

The pragmatist aesthetics of Dewey is part of a larger attack on the rational understanding of our world, separating a priori the faculties of man into different realms. This understanding is in fact an afterthought, which has wrongly been turned into an a priori fact according to Dewey. A point very close to the Latourian critic of rationalism.

The pragmatist aesthetics tries to combine what the rational aesthetics divides. Remembering Østerbergs point about the difference between intellectual pleasures and pleasures aroused by need and lust it seems that Dewey could not disagree more:

Dewey's aesthetic naturalism, aimed at 'recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living', is part of his attempt to break the stifling hold of 'the compartmental conception of fine art', that old and institutionally entrenched philosophical ideology of the aesthetic which sharply distinguishes art from real life and remits it 'to a separate realm' – the museum, theater, and concert hall.³⁴

According to Shusterman, Dewey's views let him to seek a clash with the dichotomy between high culture and popular (low) culture. A clash which could also be described as a clash with art understood as truth opposed to art understood as experience³⁵. This kind of clash is an obvious provocation to the established art-world since the autonomy of art, as defined within the artistic field, would collapse if all kinds of experience could lead to art. According to Shusterman this however is Dewey's point. Sports, parades, fireworks, popular mass media, bodily- and domestic ornamentation and all the colourful sceneries experienced in every city are all examples of aesthetic experiences which enrich our lives, apart from the aesthetic enrichment found in the existing artworld.

The point is that the richness of the aesthetic experience is the most important here, no matter if the source of the aesthetic experience is produced within an autonomous artistic field or is a result of some amusing popular event. Shusterman refers to Dewey's understanding of an aesthetic experience:

– That which refers to a memorable and ultimately satisfying episode of living, one that stands out from the

humdrum flow of life as 'an experience' by its 'internal integration and fulfillment' reached through a developing organization of meanings and energies which affords 'a satisfyingly emotional quality' of some sort.³⁶

And further:

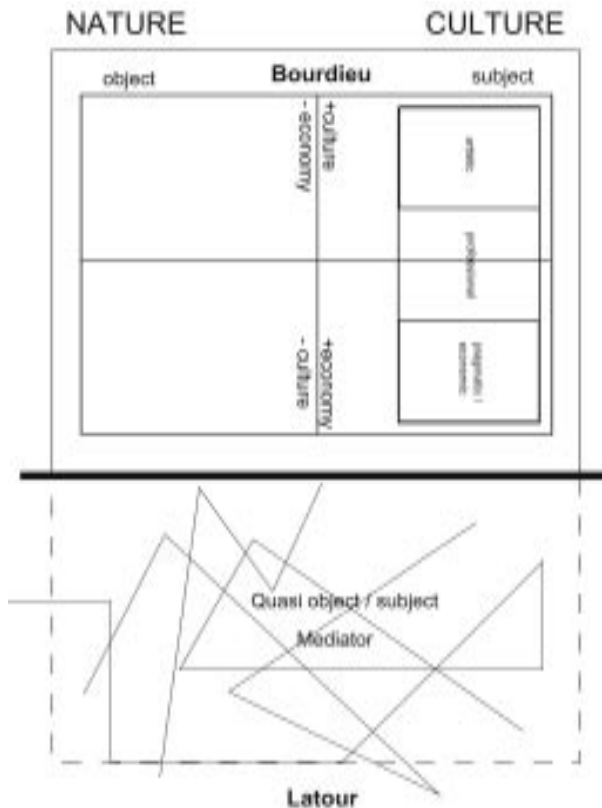
....art's special function and value lie not in any specialized particular end but in satisfying the live creature in a more global way, by serving a variety of ends, and above all by enhancing our immediate experience which invigorates and vitalizes us, thus aiding our achievement of whatever further ends we pursue.³⁷

It is important to understand that Dewey do not want to replace 'high art' with the products of popular low

culture. Instead it is the coexistence of the two, which is the common wish of both Dewey and Shusterman. Shusterman wants to show that aesthetic qualities are not just found within the established artistic field, but also within the popular culture, which makes up a large part of most peoples everyday life. It is important not to judge about what is art and what is not art and instead focus on the aesthetic experience aroused by what ever is approached.

A pragmatist approach has to be unprejudiced and without irony, which in the world of architecture means that all structures should be met with an open mind. It is essential that what ever is approached arouses what Dewey describes as.

.... memorable and ultimately satisfying episode of



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living, one that stands out from the humdrum flow of life.

As I see it the first step to be taken for this to happen is to create a theoretical justification like the one I have tried to construct here. As Shusterman writes about creating space for new artforms:

There must be a possible space for this work or genre in the sociocultural field of art. But theoretical justification can help create that space and extend art's limits by assimilating previously unaccepted forms into art's honorific category.³⁸

One of the places where this extension of arts limits could take place is in the artschools and when it comes to architecture in schools of architecture. It is important to emphasize that the *illuso* of fields defined by disciplines is imposed on the social actors during their education. Hence the connection between Schol... and school³⁹.

Architectural schools should perhaps try to see themselves educating students into a non-modern world, where the architectural production is not only aimed at high art, but also at generating memorable and satisfying episodes of living. Education should not emphasize that pragmatic issues are dirty and low as opposed to pure and idealistic issues of architecture. Instead it should be emphasized that both pragmatic and idealistic issues are part of the same network making up the ongoing impression of a world.

considerede to be something else than architecture.

3. Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, MIT, 1997 (org. 1972) p. 128
4. See: Anders Toft, *The Generic House – an investigation of Architecture seen through the ordinary detached house*, unpublished AAA, 2001
5. Erik Nygaard, *Arkitektur i en forvirret tid, Internationale strømninger 1968–94*, Christian Ejlers, 1995, p. 181
6. Boris Brorman, *Arkitekten nr. 2*, Arkitektens Forlag, 2002
7. Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason – On the Theory of Action*, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 84
8. Niels Albertsen is referring to Niels Prak, *Architects: the Noted and the Ignored*, John Wiley & Sons, Bath, 1992p. 15

This however should not lead to the impression that Bourdieus modern world of fields does not exist. Instead it should lead to the impression that the Bourdieuvian perspective is only as a partial picture of a larger non-modern world as presented by Latour.

Returning to the question of generic [modern] architecture

Returning to the problems I lined out initially I think it is plausible now to claim that I have drawn up the line for a new aesthetics, a new theoretical framework for the architectural *illuso*. An *illuso* founded on a pragmatist aesthetic instead of a Kantian. An inclusive instead of an exclusive aesthetic if you like. And this is exactly the point that making space for the 'ugly and ordinary', detached, single family-house or just generic, modern architecture in general within the Danish architectural field requires an inclusive aesthetics. One that allow architects to deal with both fine art and popular culture within the same field of practice. I believe this to be the only way to avoid the ongoing loosing battle to quantity.

Notes

1. Rem Koolhaas, 'What Ever Happened to Urbanism?'; in S, M, L, XL, 010 Publisher, 1995, p. 961
2. This attitude is derived from the title of an architectural competition held back I 1997. The title was: The detached one-family house as architecture. A title indicating that the detached one-family house is normally
9. Pierre Bourdieu, op. cit. 83
10. Ibid. p. 5
11. Arkitekturpolitisk Handlingsplan, DAL, 1996
12. Albertsen, Niels, 'Arkitekturens praksis – habitus, felt og kulturel kapital', i *Videnskabsteori – sådan relativt set*, Danmarks Universitetsforlag, 1997, p. 145
13. Pierre Bourdieu, op. cit. p. 76–77
14. Ibid.
15. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinktionen – En sociologisk kritik af dømmekraften*, Det lille forlag, 1995
16. Ibid. p. 15 (writers translation from Norwegian to English)
17. Ibid. p. 15 (writers translation from Norwegian to English)

18. Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour Learning from Las Vegas, MIT, 1997 (org. version 1972), p. 154
19. Gary Stevens, The Favored Circle: The Social foundations of Architectural Distinction, MIT Press 1998
20. Arkitekturpolitisk Handlingsplan, DAL, 1996 (writers translation from Danish to English)
21. Pierre Bourdieu, Practical Reason – On the Theory of Action, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 135
22. I am referring to the empirical work behind The Distinction.
23. Bruno Latour, Pandora's Hope – Essays on the Reality of Science Studies, Harvard University Press, 1999, p.16
24. Bruno Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993
25. Bruno Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 79
26. Bruno Latour, op. cit.
27. Bruno Latour, Bruno Latour, 'On Interobjectivity', in Mind, Culture, and Activity: An International Journal, vol. 3, no. 4, 1996
28. Pierre Bourdieu, Distinktionen – En sociologisk kritik af dømmekraften, Det lille forlag, 1995, p. 14
29. Bruno Latour, op. cit.
30. See, Anders Toft, The Generic House – An Investigation into Architecture Seen Through the Ordinary Detached House, Aarhus School of Architecture, 2001 (Unpublished).
31. I have discussed the connection between ANT and pragmatism with Michel Callon, Bruno Latours colleague at CSI, Paris.
32. Richard Shusterman, Pragmatist Aesthetics – Living Beauty, Rethinking Art, Blackwell Publishers, 1992
33. ibid. p. 7
34. ibid. p. 13
35. ibid. p. 18, 29
36. ibid. p. 27

