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Editors-in-Chief:

Daniel Koch,

Royal Institute of Technology, School of Architecture, Sweden

Madeleine Granvik

Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Department of Urban and Rural Development, Division of Landscape Architecture, Sweden

Magnus Rönn

Nordic Association of Architectural Research, Sweden

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Manuscripts are to be sent to Madeleine Granvik (Madeleine.Granvik@slu.se), Daniel Koch (daniel.koch@arch.kth.se) and Magnus Rönn (magnus.ronn.arch@gmail.com) as a text file in Word, using Times New Roman font. Submitted papers should not exceed 8 000 words exclusive abstract, references and figures. The recommended length of contributions is 5 000–8 000 words. Deviations from this must be agreed with the editors in chief. See Author's Guideline (<http://arkitekturforskning.net/na/information/authors>) for further information.

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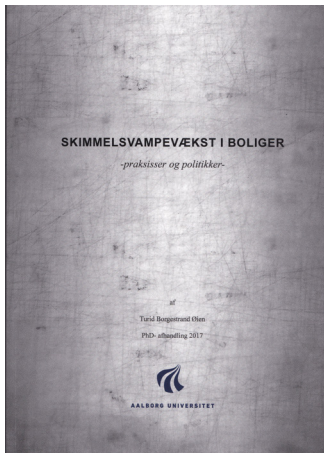
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DISS. REVIEW TURID BORGESTRAND ØIEN: SKIMMELSVAMPEVÆKST I BOLIGER – PRAKSISSER OG POLITIKKER *MOULD GROWTH IN HOUSING – PRACTICES AND POLICIES*

REVIEWER: STEN GROMARK¹



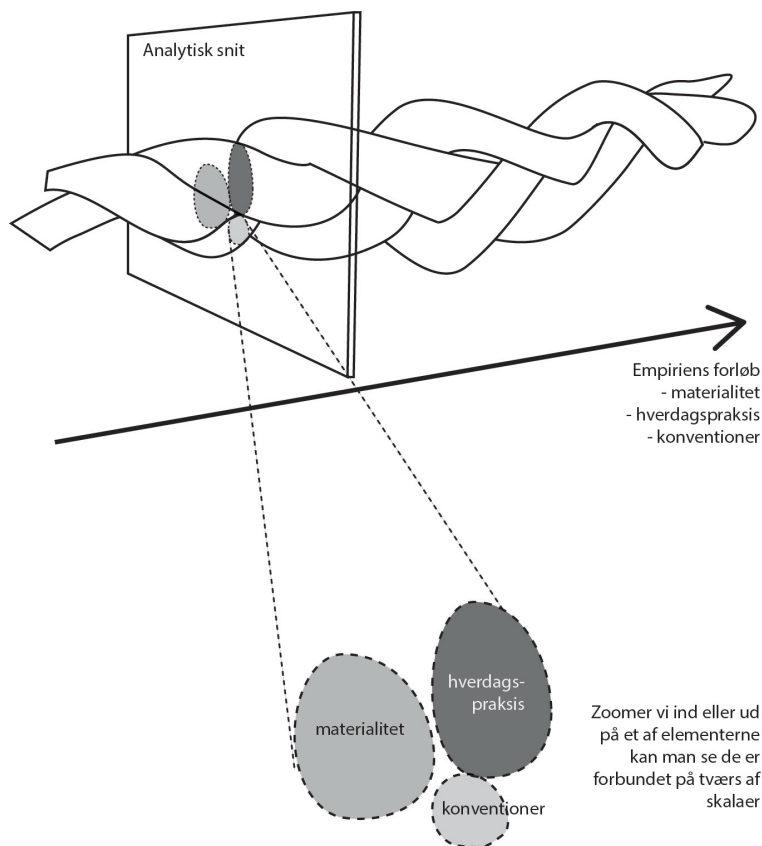
- 1 Sten Gromark, Eli Støa & Christian Clausen were appointed members of the assessment committee. John Krause has provided language check of this text.
- 2 *dry rot, fungus or mildew*,
sw. mögelsvamp

Acting mould in residential network situations

At least from a Swedish perspective you might think that mould in residential environments has ceased to be a problem because of how seldom mentioned – especially compared to the aftermath of the early, optimistic era of ecological building in the 1970s, when many mistakes were made. But there is good evidence that some of the flagships of sophisticated urban sustainability, such as Hammarby Sjöstad in Stockholm, are plagued by mould, sometimes behind facades only ten years in existence. In both the general population and professional circles, Hammarby Sjöstad is sometimes even referred to now as Mould City.

This PhD research project by architect Turid Borgestrands Øien is thus easily *justified* by the huge societal costs of repair and reconstruction, and by the untold personal cost of severely diminished quality of life for those whose homes are afflicted with mould². The main research question here is, given how well known and studied this biological phenomenon is in the fields of microbiology, building technology, and health and medical sciences, why is this problem so difficult to handle in real-life residential situations? The ultimate objective for the thesis is to identify ways of handling the problem *in situ* and to indicate potential and appropriate radical renovation solutions.

The most substantial aspect of this work is the massive *empirical* study upon which its findings, conclusions and results are based. Eleven cases, primarily multi-family council housing projects, have been studied and more than forty related semi-structured long interviews have been conducted with local residents and key stakeholders who confront the problem of mould growth from various social and professional positions. In this way the author has acquired a most detailed picture of a strange and paradoxical landscape where the mould serves as an intriguing object of cultural and social negotiation, sometimes in surprisingly drastic, *wild* or *wicked* situations of great complexity.



The most extreme scenario is a so-called “haunted house” (Borgestrand Øien, 2017, p.129, Case 3 – *det forheksede hus*) in which everything goes wrong in a quite unbelievable way. At the other end of the spectrum we have a case in which merely the *fear* of mould and the application of the “precautionary principle” makes responsible people grossly overreact to the potential threat, leading to dire consequences (Borgestrand Øien, 2017, p.140, Case 11 – *forsigtighedsprincippet*). Taken together, these cases demonstrate the potential strength of the empirical material presented here for its scientific objectivity and for opening the door to critical sociological or anthropological interpretations. They also demonstrate the extreme variety, amplitude, and multitude of events studied.

Figure 3 in the thesis present a model over analytical approach in the PhD project.

This close analysis of voices and opinions from involved actors, combined with the attached detailed discussion by the author of mould in its many different forms and conditions, is an extremely valuable testimony from the *field*, and evidence of the seriousness of the problem addressed. These insights are valid for all the stakeholders involved, but they offer a particularly important lesson for the architectural profession – the somehow surprising fact that buildings are constantly ageing and deteriorating over time, as underscored by an emblematic authority on the subject, Stewart Brand (1995). The massive material evidence of the dissertation is a valid and most informative lesson on the pathology of buildings when beset by mould.

The *theoretical orientation* has entirely adopted the actor-network theory (ANT) formulated by the French philosopher of science, sociologist and anthropologist Bruno Latour (2005).³ Together with John Law he is considered the main proponent of this research strategy, which has become quite common in recent architectural research and is advocated also by Latour's colleague and collaborator, the sociologist Albena Yaneva. However, in Yaneva's case the focus is instead on the *mapping of controversies* in architectural projects (Latour and Yaneva, 2008; Yaneva, 2009; 2012). John Law from his position also distances himself from the ANT perspective, questions whether it really could be considered a theory at all, and summarises major critical objections raised against ANT in his fascinating book *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (Law, 2004, p.157). Even one not particularly informed on this theoretical orientation will find it difficult to see how adopting ANT conceptually adds much to our understanding of the phenomenon specifically studied here other than to allow provocative talk about the mould as an *actor in a network*, "...in which both people and things are seen as 'actors'" (Borgestrand Øien, 2017, Summary). The theory does not appear to us to have the proper explanatory capacity when applied to this topic, rich as it is in itself. Thus, one could question whether it is an appropriate point of view in this case or merely superfluous, however well presented to the reader.

3 For a concise presentation of ANT, see also Muniesa (2015).

In fact, Latour also distinguishes the human actor from non-human things and materia by way of referring to the latter rather as *actants*, material components intermediating in social interactions. The mould indeed in this understanding is an actant, radically influencing everyday residential life as well as the often-strained relations between denigrated residents and distant landlords or social housing agencies, with their technicians and maintenance workforce extending all the way up to the political level.

In The Politics of Nature Latour gives a succinct definition of what an actant is. As Latour puts it, actants are anything that ‘...modifies other actors through a series of...’ actions (p. 75). Does the entity modify other entities, contributing something new to the assemblage that cannot be reduced to the other entities in the assemblage, or doesn’t it? If the entity does contribute something new to the assemblage, then it’s an actant. If it does not, then it’s not. It’s as simple as that. There is no weird teleology here that suggests that rocks, for example, have goals and aims. There is no suggestion here that street lamps really do want something. All that is to be attended to in the concept of actants is the manner in which they modify the action of other entities (Larval Subjects, 2011).

However, we should commend this dedicated attempt to bring in a sophisticated grid of interpretation, with its somewhat exaggerated vocabulary describing the relation between the biological, material and social worlds, as there are still few examples of this kind. The introduction to this theoretical field is well done and brings us a refreshing yet demanding opening for new ideas. The originality of this *explorative* approach is the audacity to apply this interpretation to the mould, inspired presumably by Latour’s 1988 work on Pasteur as a history of science case, but also on a similar project about marine biologists, fishermen and scallops.⁴ Still it will be difficult to fully convince readers of the validity and appropriateness of the approach as it is applied to the topic of this text. The main *originality* and basic quality and achievement of the approach is the surprising choice to do a *qualitative* interpretation of the mould phenomenon, a topic normally considered a minor biological or merely technical *quantitative* problem. This is breaking new ground for research with similar approaches. As the author puts it,

*The social aspect of the mould problem, in what way the problem unfolds in practice in the interaction with and between human beings, has never been given scientific focus (Borgestrand Øien, 2017, p.32).*⁵

The *methodology* applied is thus characterized by the overly rich conceptualization entered from the ANT perspective, but remains primarily focused on the case analysis. The abductive reasoning is based on the three main aspects of *materiality*, *conventions* and *everyday life practices*. Figure 3 (p. 65) in particular clarifies the mode of dynamic analysis applied and the mandatory *analytical cut* that has been made through the vast and abundant material at hand, conjuring up the virtual space and time frame for the analysis.

A very important concept is the curious character of the mould events presented in the thesis – the utmost *complexity* of the real-life situations and the diversity of local circumstances. This is perhaps one of the most interesting *discoveries* made in the study: “In an observation

4 By related researcher Michel Callon (Borgestrand Øien, 2017, p.41).

5 Translated to English by the reviewer. In Danish: “Den sociale side af skimmelproblematikken, hvordan problemet udarter sig i praksis i interaktionen med og mellem mennesker, har ikke haft forskningsmæssigt fokus.”

of such complexity no absolute conclusions can be drawn” (ibid., p.122). Among mould-infested buildings studied, in one of the cases only one neighbouring building was troubled by mould. Several different kinds of mould can be found in buildings, some more dangerous than others, and one person’s body can react aggressively to the presence of mould while another with the same exposure is left with no negative impact at all.

The general *presentation* of the material of the thesis is very clear, with separate chapters on theory, methodology and analytical strategy. The text on the whole could have been better concentrated with improved economy of expression.

Figures and diagrams are in general well done with perhaps one major flaw: when discussing and referring to the eleven cases, providing reproductions of the apartment plans would have been very informative. For example, when referring to a plan with a windowless bathroom and fixed windows (ibid., p.99) it would be crucial and appropriate to provide the reader with the particular plan configuration as a potential ground for mould growth.

The primary and secondary *research questions* are clearly stated in the beginning of the text and they are then properly addressed in the end discussion, presented as the major result of the research undertaken, which is praiseworthy and not very commonly seen.

In *conclusion*, on the one hand this thesis is a valuable contribution to a more profound, detailed but also disturbing insight into the diverse and drastic effects of mould in residential situations, and on the other it constitutes from a theoretical point of view a refreshing and ambitious attempt to renew the concepts and paradigms surrounding a qualitative case study research on housing.

In a final additional point of reflection initiated by our reading and the following discussions of this stimulating thesis, we might invoke again the very notion of *complexity* as a characterization of our time. How do we best proceed with a study when confronted with incongruent and disperse situations, like that of the mould, that do not seem bound by logic?

John Law opens this discussion in the aforementioned book and calls for a refreshed approach to methodology, referring to the radical change in our perception of the object of knowledge. Bruno Latour, a colleague closely related to Law, introduced the thinking of the influential science philosopher Michel Serres into this kind of discussion very early in his 1992 interview book on Serres. At one point in the conversation he suddenly exclaims, “I am tempted to say that you, you Michel Serres, you are *amodern*, or non-modern...and that we have never been modern...” (Serres and Latour, 1994 [1990]; 1995, p.146).

According to Law, the object of knowledge in the world of Serres formerly had the following initial characteristics while moving from the *solid* to the *fluid*:

The object of philosophy, of classical science, is the crystal and, in general, the stable solid object with distinct edges. The system is closed and is in equilibrium. The second object-model has flowing edges, it is the jet of water, the bank of clouds. It is a system that oscillates within wide margins – but has its own margins.

But while in the *amodern* (cf. Gromark, 2000), complex and excessively imbricated world of today, it can be figuratively described as “a third object” or a *third space* with the following properties:

I believe, I see, that the state of things is more like a scattering of islets in archipelagos in the noisy and barely-known disorder of the sea, islets whose peaks and edges, slashed and battered by the surf, are constantly subjected to transformation, wear and tear, being broken, encroached upon; with the sporadic emergence of rationalities whose links with one another are neither easy nor obvious.⁶

6 Law (2004, p.117) referring to Serres (1980, p.51). Translation from French orig. by Law.

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