



**Ardeth**

A magazine on the power of the project

**1 | 2017**

**Architectural Design Theory**

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ardeth/983>

ISSN: 2611-934X

**Publisher**

Rosenberg & Sellier

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 October 2017

Number of pages: 89-101

ISSN: 2532-6457

**Electronic reference**

Albena Yaneva, « Architectural Theory at Two Speeds », *Ardeth* [Online], 1 | 2017, Online since 01 October 2017, connection on 13 November 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ardeth/983>

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# Architectural Theory at Two Speeds

**Albena Yaneva**

## *Abstract*

The article is a presentation of the ethnographic method applied to architecture. The author explains how “slow ethnographers” work when they deal with a building, by focusing on the case of namBa HIPS building by Shin Takamatsu, in Osaka. “Slow” ethnography offers an alternative to “quick theory” intended as a critical theory of architecture that is based on the observation and interpretation of a static object as related to the consolidated spheres of theory and history. Yaneva’s proposal is to start back from the experience of space and objects as built over time: architecture is a process made of cumulative interactions, that unfolds from the design phase to the experience of those who inhabit it, through a continuous intertwinement of human and non-human entities. The study offers itself as a diachronic operation framing the very project as an anticipation of the many velocities to which the project’s transactions are submitted, just as the uses of built space will be: «While working with the speeds, [the architect] does not express or symbolize anything; he simply immerses into the tempo of design and adjusts its different rhythms with engineers, contractors and investors».

**Affiliation**  
University of  
Manchester.  
albena.yaneva@  
manchester.ac.uk

**DOI**  
10.17454/ARDETH01.07

ARDETH#01



Fig. 1.

What are the foundations of architectural theory? How do we gain relevant knowledge about architecture objects and processes? How do we scrutinise design practice as a complex ecology involving actors with variable ontologies, scales and politics? The past decade has seen a renewal of attention towards both the making and the practice of architecture. Both the concepts of practice and project have been rethought many times since the *Architects and Firms* of Judith Blau (1984) and *The Story of Practice* of Dana Cuff (1992) through to recent studies of architectural and engineering practices based on ANT-inspired ethnographies. This trend has shifted our focus from architecture as meaning to architecture as process, from the lives of those who inhabit the cities to the life of material entities such as buildings, streets, urban artefacts, images, scale models, and simulations. Architectural theorists, cultural geographers, anthropologists, sociologists and science studies scholars have engaged in path-breaking research that aims at deciphering practices of design, use and inhabitation, their scalar and ontological specificities, and their public outreach.

To provide answers to these questions, I will visit a building, and I will travel at a longer distance to faraway Japan, and back in time, back to the Eighties when Japanese postmodernism and machinic architecture were trending. I will tell two different stories of this visit narrated by two distinct epistemological figures: the hasty sightseer and the slow ethnographer.

*Slow and quick: epistemology at two speeds*

In the Eighties Félix Guattari met the Japanese architect, Shin Takamatsu, then visited Japan and engaged in dialogue with him. A short and somehow forgotten piece – *Les Machines de Shin Takamatsu* – published in the journal “Chimères” in 1994 bears witness to his fascination with the concept of machine in Takamatsu’s architecture. Recollecting Guattari’s encounter with Japanese architecture, I have become equally fascinated by the architect who inspired his thinking. I grew eager to witness and empirically recount different ways of exploring machinic architecture. The summer of 2010. Following Guattari, I visit Takamatsu’s office in Kyoto. I stroll the streets of different

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Japanese cities to find his buildings and engage in an exploration of the ontology of presence of architectural machines.

Osaka. A hot day in the summer of 2010. Wandering around downtown Osaka to find the iconic Kirin Plaza building of Takamatsu, a strange machinic building catches my attention. The air conditioners look tempting, and here I begin strolling through the building with a different pace of speed; I experience it. Later, I discover, I had actually experienced a Takamatsu building. This is the recently built namBa HIPS building – an entertainment complex poised to become Osaka's newest landmark (Fig. 1). At 280 feet tall, the building houses a variety of entertainment facilities with separate floors for golf, beauty salons, and restaurants. Integrated into an exterior wall of the building is the Yabafo – Japan's first building-mounted free-fall amusement ride. It is seen as the building's main attraction. From 240 feet up, the ride provides passengers with a panoramic view of the city before dropping them down the side of the building at a top speed of 50 miles per hour.

There are two ways of exploring this building, which correspond to two epistemological positions. The first one, is the quick one, the one of the hasty sightseer whose perception of a building will not be better than the one that of a racing car driver travelling across the fields and seeing but only the flitting landscapes. She will visit the building once, will take pictures and produce a quick theory by connecting it with meanings, memories, and stories related to the building's design; these stories will then be connected to key concepts in architectural theory and history. Or she will visit the office of Takamatsu for a day, yes only a day! She will undertake an interview with the star-architect from the 1980s, she will take pictures of the models in his office and enjoy a chat with the younger designers. She will then go back home and reconnect the materials from the quick visits with the contextual materials on machinic architecture, and Japanese postmodernism. The second epistemological position is a painstaking one. The slow ethnographer visits the building every day, trying to understand its ontology by experiencing it, keeping her diary carefully, trying to recognize words and movements in a strange environment. The slow ethnographer will be able to see and experience

a building differently. She will move about, within and without, and through repeated visits, she will let the building gradually yield itself to her in various lights, speeds, and intensities, and in connection with changing moods, crowds of people, and flows of things. Or else, another type of slow ethnography will consist in visiting the office of Takamatsu and witnessing the daily process of design through interviews and ethnographic conversations with all designers; following the process slowly as it unfolds, trying to witness and make sense of the agency of scale models and drawings, and the networks of humans and non-humans deployed in design venture.

*Quick, quicker...*

An instantaneous experience of this building is impossible. The hasty sightseer will flee through the building, take a picture, and hope that the image will provide her with the possibility of coming back and slowly discovering all those features that the swift moment of perception hampered her from seeing. But she never comes back. She believes that she has seen the building all at once, and this belief relies on the assumption that buildings occupy space, and reach us from various points in space as a single simultaneous perception. When she takes a picture of it, she believes that the building is *on* the picture, trapped there, solid, motionless, *in* there. Passing quickly by the building, she can have an impression of it, but hardly an experience of it. When she takes a picture, the building becomes an aesthetic object – a static one. She has some knowledge about Takamatsu, having earlier read different accounts of his architecture, and archives from the Eighties. She conducts the interview mobilizing this knowledge. She makes specific assumptions when setting the questions. She strolls around the office and takes pictures. She sets up the tape recorder: chats in English; silence; chats in Japanese; silence. Her expectations are met. She gets what she anticipated; but isn't that already said in other publications? Yes. The answers of Takamatsu are predictable. They do not add anything new to the writings of Guattari. In the formal setting of a dark conference room, bordered by solemnly displayed scale models and waiting to be photographed, Takamatsu rather stubbornly repeats the existing dis-

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course. Nothing new; nothing unexpected. Our hasty sightseer is now a hasty visitor of an architectural practice in the Takeda suburb of Kyoto. Going home she will become a hasty writer and will produce a quick account of this visit that relies on causalities, on symbolic interpretations, and confirmed discursive expectations.

Embracing the position of a hasty sightseer, she goes back home with an image of a part of the building totality and an interview that confirmed all expectations. Such a swift and partial perception will inevitably limit any theory of it as well. Its interpretation will be analytical and one-sided. Her aesthetic theory will rely on rigid conceptualizations based on principles and ideas (styles, languages, functions, typologies) that are framed outside of direct aesthetic experience. It will be expressed in strict categories of symbols and meanings. The classifications will set limits to perception. The experience of the hasty sightseer is reminiscent of that of an archaeologist who will quickly disentangle the multiple and intricate structures of Takamatsu's design philosophy, of Japanese architecture from the Eighties, of Guattari's concept of architectural machines and will swiftly recollect them through operations of exhumation, identification, classification – rather than slowly excavating intricate meaning from materiality. The hasty sightseer never allows herself the time to become a slow ethnographer. That is why she will begin to replace the missing experience of the building with unrelated notions coming from another worlds – the world of theory, the background of the architect, the society, the period. Her interpretations will arbitrarily define the random equivalent relationships between the building, on one side, and the interpretations produced after it was built, on the other. This will situate the building in much larger circuits of meta-symbols, societies, and cultures.

#### *Slowing down*

A slow exploration of the architectural presence of the namBa HIPS building in Osaka makes me experience accidentally its machinic effects. Accounting the namBa HIPS building ethnographically leads me to engage in cartography of architectural presence, relying on the trajectories, the events, and the happen-

ings in this building. Here, am I, a slow ethnographer (Stengers, 2011). When I engage in a day-to-day ethnography of the building, keeping my precious diary to hand, I engage in a continuously unfolding process of cumulative interactions; instead of discovering a part of it “at once”, I gradually witness the building growing in front of me and with me. Experiencing the building is complex; its qualities are rich and form a spectrum that can hardly be put into rigid categories. I account for the play of light on a building with the constant change of shadows, intensities and colours, and shifting reflections. A building is never immobile or still in perception. It can be perceived only in a cumulative series of interactions. There is a continuous building up of the architectural object. I visit the namBa HIPS building many times and I describe what I see. I interact with it and with the other people inhabiting the building and keep a diary of these interactions. I practice a form of “site-writing” – a term coined by Jane Rendell. That is, a form of writing that happens between words and things, between writing and speaking, between one place and another; «it is a two-way inscription, dreamed and remembered, of sites written and writings sited» (Rendell, 2010: 151). Inspired by Rendell, and taking the concept outside the field of art criticism, this form of writing involves a double movement to and fro between inside and outside, between the researcher and the work of architecture and suspends what might be a purely subjective judgement. The building cannot make an instantaneous impression on me. It is through a continuous process of interactions that it becomes possible to introduce enriching and defining elements of the machinic nature of namBa HIPS.

As an ethnographer who strolls in the building and wanders around it, I extract speeds from the building. Not meanings. These speeds are not given once and forever. They could not happen on their own. Hidden in steel and glass, wood and concrete, slick and bold surfaces, they conceal in the thresholds, they spy from the corners, they sleep in the shadows of darker and lighter colours. The contrast of materials, colours and textures can awaken them and activate their energies. Diverse means are employed to sense the building gaining rhythm: ruptures of symmetry, discontinuous segments, decentred forms fitted together, a vertical

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slit where the Yabafo structure is placed as part of the façade, the steeply inclined back part of the building as opposed to a flat and open façade. An abyss-like void opens to the sky when Yabafo has moved down, thus inviting the blue Osaka sky to enter the building. I stroll again. If it is all steel, then aluminium would be the material that will make the dark and light grey steel vibrate and produce intensities. In order to obtain this effect of rupture, crossed by diverse transversal elements, the symmetries are systematically derived from the two circles of the façade slot, which become semi-circles when the movement of the Yabafo traverses the building. I witness the pulsations of the façade machine, the vibrations; the subsequent openings of the sky destabilizing the dimensions and forms anticipated by ordinary perception. The slit remains the focus, the attractor of subjectivity. ‘The becoming machine’ can only be obtained, as Guattari argued, through the crossing of a threshold, in the course of which an effect of faciality [*visagéité*] will seize the building in order to make it live, in an animal-animist, vegetal-cosmic manner (Guattari, 1994: 136). The faciality is expressed through the many repetitions of the Yabafo – as a pulsating, virulent machinic core – and different intensities are produced. What matters is the constant succession of slow and fast, fast and slow; that is what makes the building dynamic. What runs with a great speed, then gradually slows down; what runs with a slow cadence, then suddenly speeds up. Experiencing this Takamatsu building and its ‘becoming machine’, I stroll in the building and I follow the people who stroll walk around every day. I do not ask the questions: “What does this big machine-like structure stand for?” “What does it mean?” I just stroll; I follow the circuits; I lend myself to the different intensities of the building rhythms. Nothing is really neutral nor passive. There is something vital, and powerful. The colours, the materials do not say anything either. I witness only speeds; slow and fast, fast and slow. I do not question the meaning. Taken by the fine circuits of this machinic entity, making me immerse into different intensities of flows, speeding up and slowing down, slowing down and speeding up, I just ask: “How does this building work?” “What does it do?” “How and where?” “Who sets it in motion?” “In what cases?” “What are its modalities of action?”

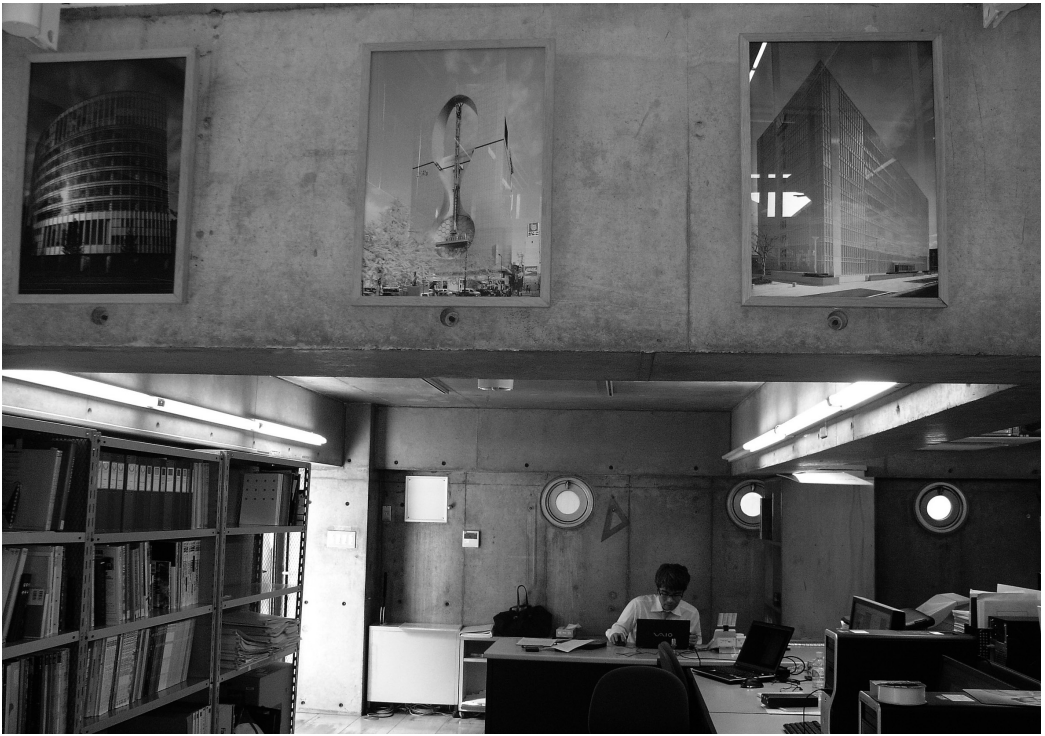


Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

The machine-like building does not symbolize anything. The movement does not mean anything. The setting in which I am strolling while writing these lines does not say anything. It works.

If the hasty sightseer relies on existing past or recent archives of the building she can quickly connect to a history of events and meanings, as a slow ethnographer I rely on the diagram of the building as a configuration of forces and fields of energies that shape the way that I experience it. The machine-like building does not symbolize anything. The movement does not mean anything. The setting in which I am strolling while writing these lines does not say anything. It works. What makes it work is the network of light grey metal modules that set disjunctions, outline colour contrasts and speeds, and the reversible game of transformations, of reactions, of inversions, of inductions, of slowing down, and speeding up; the moving core of Yabafo includes the disjunctions and distributes the connections. That is, a strange life circulating in the building, a vital force. Speeds. Not meanings. That is what we get from the building. Races of pace, speeds, accelerations, intensities, a twinge of new velocity, turns, degrees of swiftness. Speeds flow from all the materials used by Takamatsu: metal, aluminium, decorative tubes and steel brooches, parallel bars, metallic adornments, and glass. Takamatsu extracts the speeds from the contrast of materials, from their different surfaces and colour shades.

Back to the practice of Takamatsu, we know what questions to pose. Asking an architect “Why do you do this?” has no meaning, no importance. We should rather ask: “How do you do this?” and “How does this building work?” His discourses might turn around issues of meaning and symbols, as they did in the hasty visit of the office, but while designing he will be experiencing different speeds and moves (Figs. 2 and 3). When projecting and sketching a movement, Takamatsu speeds up and slows down and he wants this to happen in the different successions of dark grey and light grey metal surfaces of the building-to-be. Just like the visitors strolling in the building and wandering around it, the architect is to extract those speeds from the building in the process of drawing and designing it (Yaneva, 2005). They are not given once and forever. They could not happen on their own. While working with the speeds, he does not express or symbolize anything; he simply immerses into the tempo of design and adjusts its different rhythms with engineers, contractors and investors.

The slow ethnographer can gain an experience of the building that will be the product of her continuous and cumulative interactions with its world. It is this rich experience of the vast range of the building qualities that will form the core of her interpretations; this should be the only foundation for architectural theory. A building experience should be expressed slowly in adjectives that will narrate the physical conditions of its perception; the large spectrum of building qualities cannot be recounted in a rigid repertoire of categories and fast concepts. Historical and cultural information will throw light on the building, but will not substitute the understanding of the architectural object in its own qualities and relations. Its interpretation will derive from the world of a building that “opens to interpretation” because of its own activities, from its immediate presence.

Exploring the namBa HIPS architectural presence as a slow ethnographer I find out different spatial and temporal parameters that are able to generate properties and inform differently about the intensities produced. Experiencing slowly the building would mean following series of events, internal resonances and movements. We can find in its organization different spatio-temporal dynamisms, confrontations of spaces, flights of time, syntheses of speeds, directions, and rhythms. The namBa HIPS building appears as a field composed of differential relationships that define each other reciprocally in a network; there is a distribution of singularities, of differences, of intensities, of trajectories. The building is not immobile. It does not express anything. It works, and its meanings vary according to the distribution of properties manifested in its process of working.

Judging a complex object like the namBa HIPS building as an aesthetic and static object would require the hasty sightseer to embrace an authoritative way of speaking on behalf of established principles and reference to the works of other leading architects, of other buildings of this style or period, of architectural Theory. Such a way of interpreting the building relies on quick images taken by the hasty sightseer and fast interviews, archives and accounts. It will treat it in its rigid aesthetic form and will have a limiting direct response in perception. When we say a building expresses Japanese culture or embodies politics,

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we rather think about a stable form that would reify subjective meanings.

The slow ethnographer engages instead in an inquiry into the architectural presence of the building that can only be understood in meticulous studies of the specific works of architecture. The object of the ethnographer is far from being stable; it appears rather as a dynamic map of all the trajectories and events it triggers; and it changes according to different speeds. The epistemological practice will rely on the posture of the slow ethnographer, where presence and immediacy are crucial. That is, a process of creative and immediate engagement with the present that will make us immerse in assembling and reassembling all human and non-human ingredients that a building is made of.

This type of research epistemology will lead us towards a better understanding of the architectural work, its qualities, forces, and events, its different materials and textures, the noises, the accidents, the runners traversing it, the dramas in its premises. As witnessed here in the short story of the ethnographer, the apprehension of the machinic nature of the nam-Ba HIPS building grows from the architectural object as it enters into the experience of slow observation by interaction with her own knowledge and sensitivity. Thus, experiencing and describing an object does not derive from objective standards nor is it the outcome of purely subjective impressions and feelings. When conducted in an architectural practice, slow ethnography helps us to witness the difficulties and the unpredictable turns in the process of its design and invention (Houdart and Minato, 2009; Yaneva, 2009; Loukissas, 2012). It opens the inquiry to situations where subjective and objective are again not stable but multiple and changing; a situation where all distributions are possible.

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