Spatial Provocateur—Questioning the Status Quo[†]

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Abstract: The continuous challenges that society faces, from civic inequality to intensifying ecological problems, require a responsive contextualisation of the social environment. Responding to existing issues, the *Spatial Provocateur* challenges evolving matters by creating disruptive intervention scenarios and provocative narratives through choreographing immersive experiences of collective interaction. This research seeks to ground the notion of the *Spatial Provocateur* in expanding the social role of architecture. This research investigates the role of the *Spatial Provocateur*, which is increasingly becoming significant in finding alternative forms of spatial expressions to address evolving social matters and raise questions in response to collective concerns.

Keywords: *Spatial Provocateur*; questioning; intervention scenario; provocative narrative; collective interaction

1. Introduction

In the world of artist-architects, there are emerging tendencies towards disrupting the status quo and questioning the established assumptions by blurring the boundaries traditionally created between art and architecture through “spatial creativity” [1]. This is exemplified in the performative works of Coop Himmelb(l)au’s project *Restless Sphere*; Haus-Rucker-Co’s project *Oase No. 7*; and the artist Gordon Matta Clark’s *AnArchitecture* (formally trained as an architect), which involves cutting forms out of buildings as a method of creating spatial order and new forms of architecture [2].

Emerging from this group is a distinctive protagonist role which is termed in this research as the *Spatial Provocateur*. This group challenges conventional social norms by creating disruptive intervention scenarios and provocative narratives of spatial expression through collective interaction. They do so by exploring the relationship between art, space, and social context through choreographing immersive experiences which respond to and initiate social agendas. By these means, they transform the focus of architecture from engineered, programmatic, and economic functions towards a more rhetorical focus on illuminating evolving social agendas.

The *Spatial Provocateur* utilises the radical expressive quality of art to inquire and question the realities that exists in the human-built environment. As stated by Claire Bishop, “Art is understood continually to throw established systems of value into question” [3] (p. 276). The artistic notion of the generated spatial interventions by the *Spatial Provocateur* become a tool to question the contextual environment, to challenge it, to change its traditional structure, and to change its preconceptions. This protagonist challenges conventional social norms by creating disruptive interventions that question the existing realities within space through a produced spatial inquiry.

This research aims to establish the notion of the *Spatial Provocateur* in expanding the social role of architecture through the generated spatial interventions as studied in previous projects and pieces of literature. This research proposes that, within the practice of these protagonists, choreographing scenarios of embodied collective experiences is implemented as an evocative methodology to question the status quo and to envision possible alternatives of space to address critical human matters.

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2. Methods

Understanding the notion of the *Spatial Provocateur* requires a comprehensive study of the development of these protagonists. This research investigates this typology and reviews the history of their formation through extensive literature study. The commencing methodology of this research consists of studying the relevant literature and reviewing prominent case studies.

2.1. Literature Review

The literature review aims to recognise the role that the produced spatial interventions which lie at the cross section of art and architecture play in shaping the *Spatial Provocateur* and how this transdisciplinary knowledge facilitates the understanding of urgent issues impacting society. Also, it aims to identify the overarching commonalities as in “source of themes, materials, actions and the relationship” [4] amongst this group, which creates disruptive tendencies, the shifting of boundaries, and the questioning of established assumptions in architecture.

2.2. Practice Review

In addition, the practice review and survey of critically acclaimed projects aims to identify the prominent practitioners in the field and investigate the underlying factors of the selected practitioners’ projects. This method intends to distinguish the entity of their action projects, which envisions architecture as a medium for cultural engagement and “social design” [5]. The practice review also studies the scenario methods utilised by the *Spatial Provocateur* to recognise how the product of this “trade” [6] of values, tools, techniques, and boundaries within art and architecture has produced unique concepts of spatial questioning through the conducted interventions.

3. Findings

The literature and practice review has led to an innate understanding of the notion of the *Spatial Provocateur*, identifying questioning as a key attribute within their conducted practices. This protagonist explicitly employs “the language of design ... to pose questions, provoke, and inspire” [7] (p. 13). Here, design questions the preconceptions and fundamental assumptions at various levels by re-evaluating the existing design of the space and the behaviour it fosters.

The *Spatial Provocateur* questions evolving social matters by creating disruptive intervention scenarios and provocative narratives through choreographing immersive experiences of collective interaction. Their projects are at the interface between art and architecture, carrying multi-faceted ambitions towards social agenda. As an exemplar, this trait is strongly visible in the *Teeter-totter Wall* installation designed and performed by the artist-architects of Rael San Fratello Studio in 2019, as shown in Figure 1. This project is a counterproposal in response to the US and Mexico border wall. The choreographed scenario was to create seesaws (or teeter-totters) as interaction tools between two opposing sides and invite intuitive participation. In this intervention scenario, “play can be an act of resistance” [8] (p. 114) and a counter proposal in response to the border wall. Here, the seesaws are tools of interaction to generate the provocative nature of questioning in this project. The narrative is to provocatively argue that the border wall presents opportunities for creating new forms of citizen inclusion and social interaction as opposed to an architecture designed for disconnection.

Figure 1. Rael San Fratello's teeter-totter installation (pink), 2019.

In this project, the border wall erected for separation became a connection apparatus between borders. This was a provocative form of spatial intervention to produce possible futures as a response to pressing social concerns. The nature of these types of projects becomes vividly responsive to their context with radical initiatives. The designing of these interventions is carried out by identifying existing challenges and questioning the realities and relationships to create scenarios to inspire action. This creates an experiential platform as a mode of expression to materialize values and question the status quo. Responding to existing issues, these interventions become a means of imagination to “bridge the gap between what was built and what might be built” [9], as stated by Peter Cook, the founding member of Archigram.

This mode of questioning offers new forms of function and behaviour in relation to the environment through the action of the inhabitants of the space. Questioning through architecture produces spatial agency in the designers and inhabitants of space, and “action arises out of this questioning” [10] (p. 155).

4. Discussion

The *Spatial Provocateur* designs spatial interventions that utilise the artistic and the embodied experiential quality of architecture in order to question social matters. Questions posed through space render an opportunity to investigate fundamental experiential and embodiment questions in order to diagnose, to encourage, and to promote conversations on social matters through the medium of architecture. This research investigates the role of the *Spatial Provocateur*, which is increasingly becoming significant in finding alternative forms of spatial expression to examine evolving social matters and to raise questions arising from collective concerns. Responding to existing issues, these works are often temporary in nature but permanent in their influence, spawning conversations and breeding ideas for new projects. Considering the evolving social challenges collectively experienced by society, the *Spatial Provocateur* can occupy an influential position to reveal a landscape of opportunities by designing collective spatial interventions to question the status quo, address shared matters, and envision alternative futures.

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