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The Taxonomic Turn: Organizing Architecture as Critique

Published in: Johannes Warda (Ed.), *Beyond Bauhaus. New Approaches to Architecture and Design Theory*, Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net, 2020. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.658>.

The later decades of the 20th century signaled an irrevocable erosion of architecture's capacity to mobilize social change. Such erosion marked not only a disciplinary departure from one given *modus operandi* to another, but also a decisive turn from an epistemic phase-space in which several 20th century avant-garde groups thrived. The former traditional roles of the 20th century's architect as visionary, ideologue, and provocateur; basically an agency of representing and embodying polity, seemed to have been overtaken by the speeds and scales of change in the material worlds wherein these roles are supposedly deployed. The reasonable doubt about extinct genres of disciplinary critique inherited from the 20th century (*manifesto*, *utopia*, *paper architecture*, etc.); particularly their political futility,¹ effected—or so we are led to believe—a growing shift from radical reorientation of the architectural discipline to tactical reorganization of its premises along the divides of taxonomic classifications, such as *images* (Venturi's *duck* and *decorated shed*), *sizes* (OMA's *s*, *m*, *l*, and *xl*), *envelopes* (Alejandro Zaera Polo's $x \approx y > z$, $x \approx y \approx z$, $z > x \approx y$, and $x \approx z > y$), *gestures* (Herzog and de Meuron's *house*, *stack*, *structure*, and *quarry*)² etc., which despite carrying the seed of Durand's *Précis des leçons d'architecture*—in particular as being one of the earliest formulations of the notion of *type*³— still constitute a significantly different template of disciplinary critique from that of the modern project. The transition toward classifications of type cannot be reduced however to

1 Although issuing architectural manifestos witnessed an unprecedented surge towards the end of the 20th century, it was rather their capacity to be weaponized against a status quo that was however reduced to a minimum. Mark Wigley accounts for the fact that »the proliferation of the manifesto form as it's currently practiced acts as prophylactic against change [...] Manifesto as weapon becomes manifesto as anesthetic [...] What is going on now is that the students of architecture are being invited to produce a surplus of manifestos in a kind of parody, a massive unwitting Dada event [...]«

See: Wigley, Mark: »Manifesto Fever«, in: Craig Buckley (ed.), *After the Manifesto: Writing, Architecture, and Media in a New Century*, New York: GSAPP Bools T6 Ediciones 2014, 170. Also useful statistics on architectural manifestos produced during the 20th century in: Van Leeuwen, Andrew. »Mapping the Modern Manifesto: 110 Years of Architectural Declarations«, in: *Arcade* (2014), 34–35, <http://arcadenw.org/article/manifesto-test> [31 January 2020].

2 While taxonomies of *images*, *sizes* and *envelopes* are grounded in seminal literature produced by their respective authors, the lesser-known and -discussed taxonomy of *gestures* comes from a lecture by Jacques Herzog at Harvard GSD, in May 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbIjyVnD3Y8> [31 January 2020].

3 It's widely common to credit Quatremère de Quincy, and to a lesser extent, the abbé Marc-Antoine Laugier for developing the notion of architectural ›type‹. Their *Dictionnaire historique d'architecture* (1832) and *l'Essai sur l'architecture* (1752–3) respectively lie behind much of the contemporary debate on the subject. However, the way Durand approached the notion of ›type‹ varies significantly from how it features in the work of Laugier (as dissected by Durand himself) and in Quatremère's as discussed in Anthony Vidler's seminal article *The Idea of Type: The Transformation of the Academic Ideal 1750–1830* (1977). For one, unlike Quatremère and Laugier, Durand showed much less enthusiasm for the doctrine of imitation. In contrast, he was a fierce critic of Laugier's allegory of primordial hut: a presumably ancient, natural, and thereby, principal model/type from which the essential elements of architecture can be derived. Similarly, the difference is striking when seeing Durand's *type* against a backdrop of Quatremère's assertive Neoplatonism. Whereas Quatremère's type is an original primitive essence, Durand's is rather a systemic tool. So within the scope of this text, I'd argue that the first ›modern‹ deployment of the notion of ›type‹, as both descriptive and generative abstraction of architecture through conceptual and diagrammatic organization, lies with Durand.

See: Durand, Jean-Nicolas-Louis/Picon, Antoine: *Précis Of the Lectures on Architecture: with Graphic Portion of the Lectures on Architecture*, Los Angeles, Calif.: Getty Research Institute 2000.

some simple causality. To argue that rethinking architecture through taxonomies, and as taxonomies, is a subsequent development for, or the antecedent of previous modes of disciplinary critique native to the 20th century is precisely to argue for a *Geistesgeschichte* reading of these taxonomies, a reading which tends to interpret historical evidence as though conforming or reacting to more-or-less conscious undercurrent; a *geist*, which, of course, is not the intention of this text.

On a spectrum that spans a disciplinary binarism (without necessarily embracing it as such) between *project* (a universal theoretical construct) and *practice* (a contingent empirical agency), such taxonomies are definitely more practice.⁴ However, as they are growing into a somewhat regular phenomenon, they have the collective effect of something closer to a project. They are thought to be theoretically stable through geographies and times, and although generally based on arbitrary evidence, they often rationalize their findings into generalizable theory. The turn towards taxonomies has gradually amassed some kind of universal relevance, precisely not by extrapolating previous genres of disciplinary critique, rather by developing new conceptual links (between different people, objects, cultures, places, etc.) that are not only incidentally characteristic of their respective critical practices, but are indeed the recurring essence of a disciplinary tactic. What a taxonomy does in architecture, is that it simulates the effect of a grand theory, without necessarily being one.

In producing ways of identifying and sorting built forms and building practices, a taxonomy assumes a dual function: that of a projective tool that organizes and extends previous architectures, and that of a critical medium that justifies future architectures. Simultaneously a map and design brief that renders the totality of architecture graspable and navigable. When Rem Koolhaas, for example, argues that architecture is small, medium, large and extra-large, it is not as though he is suggesting a simple fourfold division of all built objects. He rather puts forward a way of conceiving of what architecture, as a whole, is.⁵

The flipside of the taxonomic turn then looks like an attempt at reversing a historical profusion of postmodern *petit récits* beyond master narratives of modernism;⁶ an attempt at restoring a shared basis for the discipline. Building taxonomies normally implies forging into coherent continuities a diverse range of concepts and objects; imparting them with an underlying principle, and in so doing, running the risk of

4 Allen, Stan: »Practice vs. Project«, in: *Practice: Architecture, Technique and Representation*, Amsterdam: G+B Arts International 2000, xiii-xxv.

5 Koolhaas, Rem/Mau, Bruce: *Small, Medium, Large Extra-Large*, New York: Monacelli Press 1995, 496.

6 A concept developed by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard to describe the exhaustion of grand historical narratives—primarily that of the liberation of humanity, and that of the speculative unity of all knowledge—that substantiate scientific discourse. In our case, the demise of modernism's grand narratives of autonomy brought with it the need to compensate for absence. »Scientific knowledge« says Lyotard, »cannot know and make known that it is the true knowledge without resorting to the other, narrative, kind of knowledge, which from its point of view is no knowledge at all.« See: Lyotard, Jean-François: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester University Press 2004, 31–37.

exacting anachronistic categories on an ontologically unstable whole⁷—a risk that our pursuit of a principle pertaining to various taxonomies is not either totally impervious to. As such, an architectural taxonomy is deemed ›interesting‹ insofar as it responds to existing disciplinary concerns and engage with previous theory.⁸ It is noteworthy however that the above-mentioned taxonomies also emerged from the uncertainties of these very petit récits themselves. They embraced their own instability as a frame of reference. Fredric Jameson elaborately notes this implicit unstable character of theoretical models of totality produced under postmodernism:

[...] monumental models of »totality,« of an architectonic kind, are reconstructions of those residual fragments in the modern period... The relaxation of the postmodern then determines not a return to older collective forms but a loosening of the modern constructions such that its elements and components—still identifiable and relatively undecomposed—float at a certain distance from each other in a miraculous stasis or suspension, which, like the constellations, is certain to come apart in the next minute.⁹

As though numerating these »undecomposed elements and components« immunized postmodern theories of totality against what Fredric Jameson calls the »prophetic elitism of modernism«,¹⁰ architectural taxonomies of the 20th century were taken with a healthy dollop of skepticism, and deployed as soft gradients against which individual instances would always be misplaced.

Types and groups in these taxonomies are not mutually exclusive; their defining characteristics are often amorphous. A decorated shed could always be simultaneously a duck.¹¹ Such taxonomies have lesser claim at scientific objectivity or exactitude, inasmuch as they are unapologetically ideological. They emerged in the first place as if surrogates for the grand universal visions of modernisms, however unlike the latter, they remain largely partial, transient, and by far hermeneutic attempts at disciplinary reorganization rather than radical ventures of socio-cultural programming. They espoused the global architectural psyche of their time, abandoning the telegraphic antagonism of avant-garde journals, magazines, pamphlets and posters toward more gentle¹² and retroactive¹³ manifestos couched in rather lengthier and slower formats. Anthony Vidler aptly recognizes this turn as one of discursive nature, aiming rather at »reflection on modes of interpretation and compositional strategies than a polemic

7 Foucault discusses in extensive detail various problems incurred in historical attempts of building empirical taxonomies of type as such. See: Foucault, Michel: *The Order of Things: Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Pantheon Books 1970, 125–162.

8 For example, Alejandro Zaera-Polo modeling his *Global Architecture Political Compass* (2016) after Charles Jenks's infamous evolutionary diagram from *Architecture 2000* (1971).

9 Jameson, Fredric: *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso 1991, 100.

10 Ibid., 78.

11 »[...] We maintain that both kinds of architecture are valid— Chartres is a duck (although it is a decorated shed as well) [...]«, see: Venturi, Robert et al: *Learning from Las Vegas*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1977, 87.

12 Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction* (1966).

13 Rem Koolhaas's *Delirious New York* (1978).

for a new way of designing.« Although he also ascribes it—perhaps under the pressure of none other than the thematic coherence of his essay—to a renewed interest in manifesto as a discursive form.¹⁴ Similarly, Beatriz Colomina speaks of »a new kind of subtle manifesto, a soft manifesto, refusing to define the future yet organizing it into set of points.«¹⁵ This however shows quite particularly in Alejandro Zaera-Polo's *Global Architecture Political Compass* (2016), itself a taxonomy, which seeks to define and categorize emergent political positions in architecture. The simultaneous compass-map shows the different categories of *techno-critical*, *technocratic*, *compositional*, *austerity-chic*, *activists*, *material fundamentalists*, *constitutionalists*, *new historicists*, *revisionists*, *skeptics* and *populists* as overlapping liquid blobs, suggesting lesser pretension of authority. It seeks to »trigger debate«, says Zaera-Polo, »taken as a broad approximation to be discussed and corrected«, and above all, to »initiate a multiplicity of alternative maps.«¹⁶

He further adds,

architecture is no longer a vehicle of substantial transformation but an internal process of thought that may change nothing other than our perception of what happens anyhow, with or without architecture [...] there is so much of everything happening simultaneously that it is almost impossible to develop a critical approach to contemporary work [...] This text is, therefore, an attempt at such theorization.

Furthermore, in his *Politics of the Envelope* he concludes:

it seems unlikely that a revision of the discipline can be initiated without resorting to some form of taxonomy, however precarious and ephemeral it may be.¹⁷

While contemporary spatial theory is grappling with a turbulent mix of migrant flows, cloud cartography, informal urbanisms, infrastructural systems, anthropocenic landscapes, and posthuman geopolitics, none of these seems even remotely actionable in architecture as it is practiced today—yet this is precisely where elected and unelected polities of today seem to be operating. Therefore, turning to taxonomies as architectural hermeneutics lacks in the previous hubris of modernist genres of disciplinary critique. To the contrary, it precisely marks a reactionary modesty in the makeup of architectural politics: at the very moment when the scale of disciplinary challenge has become infinitely larger and faster than the discipline, change becomes a reflective question of perceptual organization, a fallback in attempt to understand that which Zaera-Polo calls »so much of everything happening simultaneously«; a question whose answer is bound to be »precarious« and »ephemeral«. Zaera-Polo does not describe an unfamiliar reality though. It is fairly discernible that taxono-

14 Vidler, Anthony: »From Manifesto to Discourse«, in: Craig Buckley (ed.), *After the Manifesto: Writing, Architecture, and Media in a New Century*, New York: GSAPP Bools T6 Ediciones 2014, 24–39.

15 Colomina, Beatriz: »Manifesto Architecture«, in: Craig Buckley (ed.), *After the Manifesto: Writing, Architecture, and Media in a New Century*, New York: GSAPP Bools T6 Ediciones 2014, 41–61.

16 Zaera-Polo, Alejandro: »Well Into the 21st Century: The Architectures of Post-Capitalism?«, in: *El Croquis*, no. 187 (2016).

17 Zaera-Polo, Alejandro: »The Politics of the Envelope«, in: *Log*, no. 13/14 (2008), 207

mies, ever since their first deployment in architecture, used to be a cognitive retreat in the face of that which is fantastically distorted beyond architectural faculties of the time. Taxonomy hails from old Greek *taxis* »order« and *nomia* »method«, which is in itself derived from *nomos*, a »first measure of all subsequent measures«,¹⁸ bears within its etymological bounds a coping with that to which no order had yet been given.

As histories of architecture—by which is meant here a prevailing modality of reading historical literature by architects—¹⁹ credit the 18th century with a peculiar relevance for organizing things, the first appearance of taxonomies in architecture, as the story goes, is said to be borrowed from 18th century's natural sciences.²⁰ That architecture was first organized into taxonomies, its constituent parts classified in name-bearing types, groups, and kinships (columns, entablatures, and pediments, for example) is arguably a well-known story.²¹ Perrault's *Ordonnance* (1684) Blondel's *Cours d'architecture* (1771-7), and Durand's *Recueil et parallèle* (1801) are commonly held to be, among other things, tools of transferring taxonomic order; instruments of importing rationality—of natural sciences in particular—into architecture; an import which ironically maintains architecture as an internally autonomous discipline in a world increasingly dominated by new episteme.

The missing disruption in this story, however, is that the 18th century was also precisely when classical thought excluded kinship and resemblance as primary constructs of scientific knowledge.²² Sorting architectural instances according to their resemblance to a 'pure' type was already too outdated a practice by the late 18th century

18 The definition cited here refers to Carl Schmitt's extensive discussion of the meaning of the word *nomos*. Schmitt, Carl: *Nomos of the Earth: in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum*. Translated by G. L. Ulmen, New York: Telos Pr, 2006, 67

19 Some of the earliest architectural historians had been originally trained as art historians, others as architects, and these two legacies have an enduring impact on the development of architectural historiography vis-à-vis strategies for how the past can be known, systematized and represented. Very often such strategies follow the general logics of stylistic (dis)continuity, periodization, technique, and oeuvre, in pertaining to the essential question of architectural history's *unit*: »the way a historian divides into workable portions the ›total history‹ of architecture.« A summary of methods and limits of architectural historiography in: Leach, Andrew: *What Is Architectural History*, Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press 2010, 41–75.

20 Anthony Vidler argues that following 18th botanist Carl Linnaeus's taxonomy of the zoological universe, architects regarded architecture, a practice that had been thus far thought in terms of imitation to natural order, as something to be similarly taxonomized. Vidler, Anthony: »The Idea of Type: The Transformation of the Academic Ideal 1750–1830«, in: *Oppositions*, no. 8 (1977), 101.

21 Martin, Reinhold: *The Organizational Complex: Architecture, Media, and Corporate Space*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2005, 17–18.

22 Foucault: *The order of things*, 50–58.

that it was deemed mythical and unscientific.²³ The first attempts to sort architecture into taxonomies were not necessarily effected by some sort of transference from one discipline to another inasmuch as by a reconstitution of episteme: a perceptio-
nal change in both knowledge itself and the nature of what is to be known. In other words, building a taxonomy is, and had always been, an active epistemic effort that aims at designing an information architecture of reality as it is parsed and consolidated into a census of elements pure of all verbal sedimentation, and in so doing, it reinvents the real.

The *Stack*, which is an operative and diagrammatic model of technological totality proposed by American design theorist, Benjamin Bratton, offers a convenient grounding for this argument. The Stack maps the urban and political geographies of today's world, along with the technologies that make their architectures possible into one planetary-scale model: an accidental megastructure taxonomized into six *platforms* (*user, interface, address, city, cloud* and *earth*) where each is understood as a systemic conglomerate in its own right comprising of various technical and architectural devices.²⁴ While Bratton's taxonomy comes as a design proposal for a new political geography more suited to the era of planetary-scale computation rather than the current Westphalian model, he uses it to procedurally make legible a technological reality so vast and so opaque to be elucidated by a single theoretical gesture, or even a combination of gestures. He writes

our description of a system in advance of its appearance maps what we can see but cannot articulate, on the one hand, versus what we know to articulate but cannot yet see, on the other.²⁵

The Stack is both a cause and effect to extraordinary organizational forms of complexity that constantly solidify polities, economies, and cultures, the very fabric of reality, in their own image. Mapping the Stack, tracing its internal dependencies, and giving specific names to its platforms, is no mere act of description, rather a conjectural leap, an attempt at being a »first measure of all subsequent measures.«²⁶

Itself a long-standing organizational model in various technical fields, the Stack is perhaps less alien to taxonomies than what one may think. As with every taxonomy,

23 Durand in his *Précis des leçons d'architecture* (1802) already showed the fallacy of Vitruvius's allegory about human proportion as the origin of Classical Order. Whereas much of Renaissance authors evidenced the rationality of classical architecture by illustrating hierarchical affinity in relation to ancient or divine exemplary type (as it is the case with Classical Orders according to Vitruvius) the Neoclassical rationale sought to establish universal orders based on inherent identity and difference between types, without necessarily referencing an external ideal. Order, as an 18th century's notion, could only be established by analytical comparison between several architectural objects internally with regards to their measurements and their relative position within such order. Durand, Jean-Nicolas-Louis/Picon, Antoine: *Précis Of the Lectures on Architecture: with Graphic Portion of the Lectures on Architecture*, Los Angeles, Calif.: Getty Research Institute 2000, 81–82.

24 In this scenario a *user*, human and non-human, when cohered to an *interface*, they together provide a synthetic image of an *address* within the physical and virtual landscape of a *city* that lies in turn within the geographic archipelago of the *cloud* running on the consumption of *earth's* resources to animate all of the above.

25 Bratton, Benjamin: *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2016, 14.

26 Ibid., 41–43.

Bratton's Stack recasts previous taxonomies, and provides for new ones to come. In particular, Bratton leans on Alejandro Zaera-Polo's taxonomy of architectural envelopes to further develop his own argument for software envelopes.²⁷ In his notes, he even entertains adding a fifth category to Zaera-Polo's taxonomy.²⁸ Whereas Zaera-Polo's schema is limited to the political effects of architectural envelopes, Bratton's Stack combines architectural with other software urban-scale envelopes, where they together produce the fuzzy medium that make and unmake publics in ways similar to what Gilles Deleuze describes in his *Postscript on Societies of Control*:

where one would be able to leave one's apartment, one's street, one's neighbourhood, thanks to one's (dividual)²⁹ electronic card that raises a given barrier; but the card could just as easily be rejected on a given day or between certain hours; what counts is not the barrier but the computer that tracks each person's position —licit or illicit— and effects a universal modulation.³⁰

Being allowed or denied access (to one's own bank account, to a migrant destination, to an e-book, etc.) here is an event mediated through different forms of software, rather than physical envelopes.

The ultimate architectural concern for Bratton pertains to what does, or does not, remain of architecture after delegating the programmatic organization of social connection and disconnection of populations, things, and information in space and time—traditionally, if also hypothetically, a function of architecture—to technical software and hardware. The political program that simultaneously produces, and is produced by, such delegation is not only a matter of traditional architectural envelopes, and traditional politics thereof, but also of the machines and systems that are themselves *politics*.³¹ Mapping these politics requires the universal addressability of »every ›thing‹ therein that might compute or be computed« in one taxonomic totality: an information architecture that engulfs the planet in its entirety. Such a task, while architectural in nature, has never been thus far a normative part of any architectural design theory.³²

27 Software (per Bratton) is now tasked with structuring flows of social organization that had once been the assignment of architecture under modernism, and as such qualifies for new theory of envelopes.

28 In his notes, Bratton proposes an *elongated wedge* (probably $x > y \approx z$) such as the Berlin Wall or the Israeli Security Barrier: a pure geopolitical interface cleaving an absolute inside and outside without hosting any regular interior program within itself. Bratton: *The Stack*, 167; 408.

29 The »dividual« is a concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari that refers to a physically embodied human subject that is endlessly divisible and reducible to data representations via the modern technologies of control. Deleuze, Gilles/Guattari, Félix: *A Thousand Plateaus*, London: Continuum, 2012, 376.

30 Deleuze, Gilles: »Postscript on the Societies of Control«, in: *October* 59 (1992).

31 Bratton: *The Stack*, 43-44.

32 Ibid., 191.

While this may partly explain much of the renewed interest in architecture as a historical depository of metaphors, toolkits, and tactics for building totalizing schemas, it also complicates architecture's relationship with time. Architecture, weighed down by its own slowness, is inopportune position from which to build a taxonomy of everything. In his essay *Everything is Already an Image*, John May explains that

the specific conception of time embedded in a technical system is inseparable from the forms of thought and imagination it makes possible or impossible.

In other words, as memory is externalized, saved and cumulated as culture, the storage speed of the medium, in this case architecture, is decisive for the forms of consciousness with which it is associated. According to May, one of the inadequacies of architecture as a recording medium lies in that it had been surpassed by the speed of that which it tries to record, a condition that characterizes architecture's transition from orthographic systems built on linear historical time to postorthographic systems enmeshed in »real time« that relates the present to »all possible futures at once.«³³ Austrian philosopher Armen Avanessian and British writer Suhail Malik however offer a different reading. They propose that as the leading conditions in our societies today are becoming those of systems, infrastructures and networks rather than individual cultural agency (such as that of architecture), historically inherited semantics and politics based on it are no longer sufficient to explain the present or predict the future. Further, the linear and causal path connecting past, present, and future becomes convoluted and at times reversed rather than multiplied as in May's argument.³⁴ Examples used by Avanessian and Malik include *derivatives* that use the unknown future price of an asset and the risks involved therein to draw profits against its present price, *preemptive policing* intended to apprehend crimes before they are committed, *preemptive personalization* which uses algorithmic procedures to pre-order in the present items a customer will actually learn that they need in the future, and so on. For Avanessian and Malik, this *time complex* is a structural condition of complex societies, rather than a predicament specific to the transition to postorthography.

As such, it is becoming increasingly common for established architectural firms to set themselves in a speculative relationship with a past future that we have already exceeded. One recurring manifestation of this is architectural research-arm subsidiaries, that also pass as internal specialized units—although with separate identity and mission from their mother firms. They operate in fields as diverse as market research, management consultancy, and strategic planning (AMO of OMA, est. 1998), branding and behavior design (GXN of 3XN, est. 2007), simulation and information management (BIG IDEAS of BIG, est. 2014), and digital solutions and data technology (UNSense of UNStudio, est. 2018). While often avoiding the designation ›architect-

33 May, John: »Everything Is Already an Image«, in: *Log*, no. 40 (2017).

34 Avanessian, Armen/Malik, Suhail: »The Speculative Time Complex«, in: Armen Avanessian/Suhail Malik, *The Time Complex. Post-Contemporary*, Miami: Name Publications 2017, 7.

ture in order to facilitate a strategic relationship with more diverse markets, they are often depicted as though outposts set in conceptually leading time zones with respect to their mother firms. They are supposed to occupy a frontal position in time wherein the knowledge they produce is supposed to go back and inform decisions taken by their firms. On the other hand however, as architects' authorship over urban form is more than ever relegated to the hands of management consultants, such as IBM, Cisco, PwC and McKinsey³⁵—basically corporate sovereignties with means to author and organize complex and large systems that operate in what Avenassian and Malik call the »pre-future«—it is perhaps too facile to counter for this by deploying corporate pop-ups within more-or-less traditional architectural firms.

Architectural theorist Keller Easterling explains that rather than singular architectural forms, consultancy giants and management policies around the world nowadays foster reproducible urban products, brands and systemic recipes set within modular technological, infrastructural and logistical arrangements that make up the infrastructural space of our reality. This infrastructural space is in itself the fruit of networked action-forms: routines and protocols for sourcing, delivery and consumption of labor and materials, as well as a vast array of technological, financial, planning, and management solutions. Taken together, the infrastructural space and the action-forms which make it possible, they consolidate an extra-human agency in the form of a spatial operating system that does not merely facilitate the architecture of the world, it is rather *itself* the architecture of the world.³⁶ However, this operating system that Easterling tries to depict is not at all something immediately legible, she explains:

Information resides in the technologies—from telecommunications to construction—as well as in the declared intent or story—from decentralization to stealth. Yet information also resides in a complex of countless other factors and activities. All these activities, taken together, lend the organization some other agency or capacity—a disposition—that often escapes detection or explanation.³⁷

In the place of Easterling's not-so-easily detectable »disposition«, Benjamin Bratton uses the metaphor »blur«, to describe that which gaps the oscillation between a present that cannot be fully described yet, and a future whose impact can already be imagined. He says:

It may be that our predicament is that we cannot design the next political geography of planetary computation until it more fully designs us in its own image or, in other words, that the critical dependence of the future's futurity is that we are not yet available for it!³⁸

35 More details about consultant-driven urbanism is found in Rory Hyde's report in Al Manakh / Volume, see Hyde, Rory: »Measuring the Presence of Consultants«, in: *Volume 23* (2010), 161.

36 Easterling, Keller: *Extrastatecraft: the Power of Infrastructure Space*, London: Verso 2016, 14.

37 *Ibid.*, 112.

38 Bratton: *The Stack*, 15.

While Bratton suggests an investment in such blur; in mapping its emergence for what it is, and pose it as a design problem, rather than an unalterable fate, British artist and writer, James Bridle, however, takes it for what he believes to be a »new dark age«. He writes in the first few pages of his book with the same name:

The abundance of information and the plurality of worldviews now accessible to us through the internet are not producing a coherent consensus reality, but one driven by fundamentalist insistence on simplistic narratives, conspiracy theories, and post-factual politics. It is on this contradiction that the idea of a new dark age turns: an age in which the value we have placed upon knowledge is destroyed by the abundance of that profitable commodity, and in which we look about ourselves in search of new ways to understand the world.³⁹

While aptly diagnosing the problem: the impossibility of a human-centric information architecture of everything, a taxonomy of omniscience, and to act meaningfully upon it, Bridle's conclusion welcomes this cognitive limitation as an inevitable condition that must be grappled with. He concludes that

the ability to think without claiming, or even seeking, to fully understand is key to survival in a new dark age because, as we shall see, it is often impossible to understand.⁴⁰

Bridle's statement reflects an existential threat that has to do with human agency: our inability to understand the need for, and enact change. However, and by the same token, his new dark age harbors this threat as a tactic for a rather romantic, if also futile, downscaling of the problem back to human cognition: at least we understand that we cannot understand. While Bridle's diagnosis is evident, his recipe falls back to a genre of humanism ill-suited for the challenge.

Contrary to Bridle's statement, perhaps the taxonomy we need, unlike any taxonomy we previously had, must cater for our limited cognitive capacity. The taxonomy to come is evidently of networked intelligence, built by more than individual human agencies, and it necessarily paints previous architectural attempts of taxonomic reorganization as obsolete.

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³⁹ Bridle, James: *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future*, London: Verso 2018, 12.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 10.

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