

# Improvised Making: New Analytical Practices Towards an Uncertain Future

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**The impacts of spatial experience on social dynamics are complex. They happen through the totality of experience, which we cannot always name, describe, or explain. In light of the urgent challenges of social justice, systemic exploitation, and unsustainable practices that are characterizing this century, we need to reassess how we analyze architecture's relationship with societal change. This article argues that new analytical practices must include exploratory, improvisational expressions that can help our understandings of architecture include a more expansive definition of experience.**

**Such creative expressions make the bodily, unnameable aspects of experience sensible, thereby able to be incorporated into our broader analyses of architecture's operation in social life. These improvisational practices are fundamentally uncertain, resisting explanation and the ethical perils of certainty in knowledge-making. Employed in an examination of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Cambodia, these practices helped to create an analysis grounded in the textural expressions and incomplete forces that characterize bodily experience. Taking the form of a charcoal drawing, the improvised expression entered into the analytical process as a framing mediator for the analyst's response to their encounter with the architecture. By grounding analysis in bodily experience, we are able to expand our 'analytical toolbox' and can come to unexpected conclusions about how architecture shapes the way we understand the world. Proposing that an analysis of an architectural project should take shape between improvisational making and thinking, this paper positions architectural analysis as an agent of change; in expanding our practices for understanding architecture, we can better design spaces that support a more connective, open, and just future.**

## INTRODUCTION

The goal of architectural analysis is simple: to find out how architecture does what it does. This can be analyzing the structure, responding to the question of how the building stands up; this can be analyzing its organization, responding to the question of how certain activities relate to each other in space. Each question we ask requires a different mode of

analysis – structural analysis doesn't help us much when we want to understand how the architecture shapes actions. There are, however, questions we can ask of architecture today that cannot be readily addressed through established analytical methods. One such question asks how architecture provokes social change.

It seems simple enough; the relationship between space and social life is one of the oldest in architectural theory.<sup>1</sup> Yet the endurance of theoretical explorations of the topic testify to its challenges, and to the insufficiency of existing analytical processes in addressing it. Aligning with emerging research on the complexity and entangled fluidity of urban life, we can understand that architecture influences society in multiplicitous and perhaps even unknowable ways.<sup>2</sup> When it comes to understanding just how societal transformations are related to the built environment, the complexity can become overwhelming. How can an experience that occurs within and through architectural space transform our sense of the world? What has changed? How? What are the limits of the transformational event; does the architecture end at its threshold or its site boundary or the city; how do our lives relate to our environments; can architecture play a role in changing socio-political attitudes towards each other? The questions go on, almost all of which are open-ended, uncertain, and structured by the inescapable subjectivity of the one asking the questions.<sup>3</sup>

This subjectivity can lead us to draw conclusions from our analysis of space that reflect back our existing attitudes and biases, perhaps even without our knowing. Bounded by our interpretive horizons, our attempts to understand (analyze) the world that we are a part of cannot be extricated from our existing ways of sensing the world, our current distribution of our senses. Yet far from hindering architectural analysis, the embeddedness of the researcher in the world they encounter offers an opportunity to understand how architecture could alter our ways of sensing the world. In a recent discussion with Mark Foster Gage, Jacques Rancière argues that 'emancipation is an exercise of disassociation within this normal play of gestures, attitudes, feeling, and thoughts.'<sup>4</sup> In altering the distribution of our senses, we change our relations with the world, producing a new condition of life – something that is intimately connected to struggles for social change. When dealing then with architecture and social change, the question

becomes not how to make architectural research objective, but how to incorporate the sensory changes that architecture can produce – changes that are reliant on our embeddedness in the world.

As architects and architectural researchers, we occupy a two-fold place in the world: we shape the spaces within which oppressive socialities continue and we make the knowledge of how they operate.<sup>5</sup> The latter is the topic of this paper, which asks what practices can we employ to create new knowledges of architecture's role in changing social dynamics?

This question assumes that it is a worthwhile endeavor to use architecture to address the social challenges we have today – challenges that must be addressed if our futures are to be less violent, exploitative, and unsustainable than they are currently.<sup>6</sup> While the feasibility of the endeavor is arguable, that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, this paper explores how we go about investigating architecture towards developing a position on the relationship between space and society. In it, I argue for a research process that includes improvised, creative action as a key foundation for architectural analysis. Through this process, our analyses can incorporate the unnameable, bodily aspects of experience that are key to any transformational encounter with architecture.

To understand how social dynamics are influenced by space – and potentially changed – we need to know something about how we experience the world, and how that experience can be communicated. Analysis is, in this discussion, a process of experiencing the world (whether through interviews, data collection, documenting, or simply walking the site), interpreting that experience, and making that experience communicable so that the knowledge you have gained can be transferred to others. By outlining the nature of experience, we can develop new practices for communicating and interpreting it.

### **SENSING THE WORLD: TOWARDS UNIFYING THE THINKING AND THE BODILY**

We experience the world in complex ways, some of which we can describe, discuss, and identify, and some of which we cannot. Despite Descartes' famous maxim, the body is not a machine controlled by the mind. We make sense of the world both in the mental realm of the 'nameable' and the bodily realm of the 'unnameable' – the division of mind and body is an inaccurate understanding of how we experience the world, and yet persists in the relative neglect of creative action as a legitimate form of knowledge-creation.<sup>7</sup>

Linked to the larger cultural shift in Europe toward this division of mind and body, the dismissal of the crucial role of imaginative making in analysis has left us with representational understandings of reality that orient us within the known.<sup>8</sup> It can be argued that this modern, rational age began with the invention of perspective in the late Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup> Our image

of the world fundamentally changed with perspective, which uses mathematics and geometry to accurately trace how we see the world. Through it, we are able to accurately represent the visual world. While perspective, and the larger scientific method it embodies, is of course incredibly useful, it characterizes a deep divide between art and science, and fails to communicate the world we experience beyond the visual: 'it obscures, rather than clarifies the true nature of environmental conditions.'<sup>10</sup> As the architectural theoretician Dalibor Vesely argues, the true nature of our experience of space is far more complex than perspective implies; it is affective, bodily, uncanny, and inexpressible in words or through geometric illustration.<sup>11</sup> Responding to this understanding, it follows that we need artistic practices which can express the bodily as well as the mental aspects of experience.<sup>12</sup> We need to expand our analytical processes to incorporate both the nameable and unnameable. Without this, we are left describing only a portion of the world – the portion that we already know and can understand.

Traditional analysis relies on naming, on connecting, for example, the connection of marble to ceiling with the experience of weightlessness. The assemblage of these 'known elements' can be surprising, and by investigating their relationships, we can come to reasonable conclusions on how an architectural project manifests the intentions of the architect, or how it affords certain kinds of actions. However, drawing on the extensive legacy of phenomenology and aesthetic theory,<sup>13</sup> we can understand that this kind of analytical practice only grapples with part of our experiences with the world; it does not account for the 'whole of our sensate life ... of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces.'<sup>14</sup> There is an entire realm of experience that is unnameable, but no less impactful than the encounters that we can name and identify. This realm is affective, bodily, and often disturbing; it is uncomfortable and provocative. It is not easily incorporated into existing frames of reference, and due to that difficulty, these bodily experiences stay with us as doubts and provocations, unsettling our lives. In encounters that transform our existing sense of the world, it is the unnameable experiences that carry critical power; it is the unknown that forces us to alter our existing frames of reference in order to incorporate it into our sense of the world.<sup>15</sup>

The architecture we encounter is often not transformative. Our cities are often places that disentangle uncertain experiences in order to 'order' urban life.<sup>16</sup> However it is 'disorder' that we need in our cities if we are to form new alliances, new practices, and new ways of living together.<sup>17</sup> With disorder comes uncertainty, a practice of 'working in the dark' and engaging in the fertility of the unknown – a fertility that can produce new knowledges and practices; transformation.<sup>18</sup> Disorder and uncertainty are unstable terms, and can provoke creative action; these terms characterize the conditions of experience from which transformation can occur. When



Figure 1. Improved Expression from the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Drawing by author.

looking at spaces that contain these lived conditions, we need to develop ways of expressing the nature of that uncertain, unnameable experience. To understand a possible practice for making the world sensible, we can look to creative action, where improvisational making can express the world without simply describing its parts.

#### **IMPROVISED WORKS: FOUNDATIONAL PRACTICES FOR ANALYSING TRANSFORMATIVE ARCHITECTURE**

Through creative action we can make the unnameable experience of the world sensible, communicable in its own way.<sup>19</sup> These works are not didactic, explaining to us (naming) what has happened. Instead, they are open, indicating possibilities; they are forces that provoke us and ground the way we think about our experience of the architecture.<sup>20</sup> These works are not analytical in-and-of themselves, but are nonetheless key to the analytical process. They offer an unstable, dynamic mark that ‘opens us up’ to new ways of thinking about and sensing the architecture in question.<sup>21</sup>

The process of making these dynamic, provocative pieces is necessarily improvisational: they cannot be made with a specific end in mind. While underexplored in architecture,

improvisation is well understood as an artistic practice and has been employed in dance, music, literature, film, painting, and drawing. Improvisation is central to the practice of South African artist William Kentridge, whose animated drawings embody his practical epistemology of ‘leaping before looking.’<sup>22</sup> Kentridge is not ‘drawing something’ but marking and unmarking a canvas while engaging in a specific territory.<sup>23</sup> This territory can be an event, theme, history, image, encounter. For Kentridge it is often his home of Johannesburg, Africa, the mines, histories, atrocities and hope. He grounds his practice of making – acting and moving with material - in this territory, and in so doing, he creates uncertain, open pieces that resonate with and articulate that territory in new ways. This rearticulation is a redistribution of how we sense the territory, and pushes us to change how we conceive of it. Guided by a kind of oneiric improvisation, this work is bodily and, when applied to an architectural territory, can help us to create new ways of seeing, thinking, and analyzing the architecture.

When introduced into the analytical process – the process of connecting certain elements and characteristics of the architecture to certain outcomes – these improvisational works keep our conclusions in motion, forcing us to account



Figure 2. Stills from the making of the improvised drawing. Drawing and images by author.

for the uncertain, fluctuating, and provocative marks that are, as intoned by the improvised work, present within the architecture. This work orients our analysis within a field of uncertainty, acting as a sensory mediator that grounds our thinking on the architecture in an expanded definition of how architecture impacts us. This expanded definition includes both bodily and mental experience – a unified definition of architecture’s relationship with the world. Through an engagement with improvised works, our analyses can become ‘untethered’ from what we already know; we can develop new knowledges between architecture and the transformation of society because our ‘toolbox’ is expanded, augmented by the presence of bodily experience, as communicated through the improvised work.

In my analysis of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Cambodia, I experimented with this expanded analytical toolbox (Fig. 1). Working between an improvisational practice of drawing, and a more traditional analytical practice of interpreting the architecture, I approached the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum asking how, if at all, the architecture communicates its violent past, and if in its method of communication, it supports future practices that resist the repetition of violence. The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh was the site of S-21, the central interrogation facility for the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979. Today it stands as a memorial and museum to the 18,000 people tortured there, and to the Cambodian Genocide more generally.

Made by marking and unmarking a large canvas with charcoal, a work took form that was grounded in my experience of the architecture. It was made shortly after I visited the space, enacted through the improvisational process of making without making-something (Fig. 2). I did not ‘read’ the drawing in order to analyze the space, but it nevertheless found its way into the analysis. Given its non-didactic nature, the work rejects explanation, and is instead an accompanying provocation, an indication that informs but does not tell us what the architecture is doing with those who encounter it.

The analysis that arises with this improvised practice works tangentially to it. Indeed, the following summary of my analysis can be understood as one part of the broader practice of research, of which the other part is the made work. It is a piece, a fragment of research, a position staked out using the knowledge that something happened, but without any certainty of what that was. My experience of the space was transformative; disturbing and unsettling. I argue that the bed-rooms in Building A are at the center of that disjunctive, uncertain experience (Fig. 3). Contained in banal architecture, we find room after room of single beds, rusted, with continuous flooring drawing the single-loaded, open air corridor together with the interior spaces. The beds were used to torture people; the floors beneath them are broken, stained, marred and marked with time and action (Fig. 4). Oscillating between encounters

with atrocity, presented through the material scratches and rust of the beds, and banal normalcy, presented through the unremarkable corridors and familiar spaces, the experience of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum brings together seemingly disparate forces, assembling the horror of genocide into a continuum with the everyday. It is this disjunctive resonance that I argue is the foundational characteristic of the architecture, and is the primary communicative framework through which the project expresses the Cambodian Genocide. Taken in consideration with existing literature on communal violence, justice, and identity, I further argue that the architecture resists the perpetuation of violent socialities because of this disjunctive resonance.<sup>24</sup>

Without the improvised work forming the analytical ground for this analysis, finding the presence of seemingly disconnected forces within the architecture would have been very difficult. The analysis would have been a process of trying to put an uncanny, disruptive experience of both horror and banality into a simplistic equation of ‘this space’ resulted in ‘that response’. In reality, there are no such easy explanations of how the experience of space produces responses. My written analysis approaches that simplistic equation, but stops short, arguing only that there is a kind of response, a disjunctive one, that may be found in similarly disjunctive elements of the architecture. By using the improvised work as part of the analytical process, my written analysis of the space was able to take on nuance, responding to both the effects of the improvised work and the architectural experience, finding resonances between the two communicative forms. Through these resonances my analytical writing could identify elements of the architecture that could be a ‘source’ of the resonance. Harsh, short marks may resonate with the scratches of barbed wire on plaster walls; it is a process of ‘sounding’ the works together that can result in unexpected leaps of thought that link together the importance of cracked floors, courtyard air, and rust to the disturbing nature of the architecture.

To give an analogy, we can say that each communicative form has its own note. Architecture, improvised work, and thought analysis. Each note sounds slightly different to each of us. We have heard the note of the architecture, and of the improvised work, and our task is to find (think) the best note to accompany them. To find that note, we need to ‘tune our ear’ to the sounds of both the architecture and improvised work. This ‘tuning’ is where we engage in detail with the architecture, exploring what ‘sounds’ different pieces could make when played together (the bed and the tiled floor for example). We engage with the improvised work, finding motions and movements in it. We find figures coming together and pulling apart: what do these marks capture? Smoothness, abruptness, roughness, rapid coagulation, slow disintegration; the marks have no answers for us, but give us intonations that resonate with, for example, the ‘sounds’ we find in the bed-floor elements. By using this back-and-forth



Figure 3. A disjunctive experience of the beds in Building A. Images by author.



Figure 4. Details of the floors beneath the beds. Image by author.

*The Analysis takes shape between the nameable, Thought Expression of the space, the Project itself, and the un-thinkable Improvised Expression.*

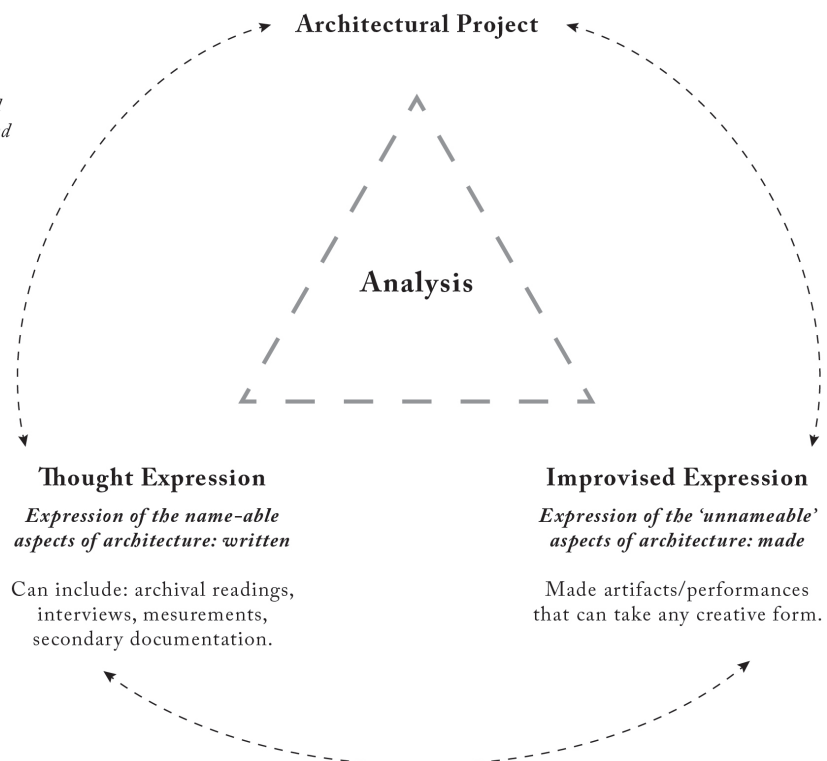


Figure 5. Diagram of an improvisational model for research creation. Image by author.

practice of sounding the improvised work and the architectural work, our thought analysis—the last ‘note’—can take shape. The thought analysis, in the traditional form of text, still seeks to ‘make sense’ of the architectural experience, but it does so by listening to the architecture, the pieces we can name and identify, and the improvised work; it incorporates an expanded sensory realm. Together, these three practices help us to analyze the architecture within a horizon grounded in not just nameable, thought experience, but in unnameable yet expressible bodily experience—which is a foundational realm of transformation.

Analysis, in this model for research-creation, exists in the space between the architecture in question, our nameable experience of the project, and our improvised expression of the architectural territory (Fig. 5). Moving beyond a more traditional analytical model that is a two-character process between the project and the researcher (and their often expansive references, both qualitative and quantitative), the tripartite model offers an analytical practice that is unable to come to definitive conclusions, and which incorporates bodily, unnameable experience into its tentative resolutions. This makes it a methodologically significant model for research creation, and is particularly relevant when trying to understand how architecture could shape social dynamics, which occur in entangled and complex ways that are both nameable and unnameable.

### INCONCLUSIVE CONCLUSIONS: WHY UNCERTAINTY IS A NECESSARY PART OF THE ANALYTICAL PROCESS

Uncertainty works to ensure our best intentions aren’t undone by our unseen biases that are, by nature, grounded in our unfortunately violent world.<sup>25</sup> It seems somewhat paradoxical to argue that uncertainty is a necessary part of the analytical process. Yet, as I have intoned throughout this paper, uncertainty is something to embrace, a force that fosters critical thought in a world that seems intent on continuing an exploitative and violent status quo.<sup>26</sup>

Both as an intention behind our analyses, and as a characteristic of our arguments, uncertainty is a fertile concept that opens us up to the possibility that we may not have all the answers, that we may not be right. William Kentridge often talks about the antiauthoritarian power of the ‘less good ideas’ that draw us into the critical act of coming to our own conclusions.<sup>27</sup> Such inconclusive intentions provide a foundation for the emergence of new practices and ways of living together—practices that are necessary to develop and cultivate if we are to have any hope of addressing the unprecedented challenges of the 21st century.

It is towards these new practices and ways of making knowledge that improvised making moves us. By including creative uncertainty as a necessary part of our analytical processes, future analyses of architecture may be able to expand the

horizons of how we understand architecture’s role in social dynamics. With these expanded horizons can come new architectures that may actively shape a world that is less accommodating to dehumanizing ideologies which stifle life’s creative capabilities and incarcerate our abilities to form new, strange alliances with each other. Ultimately, that future relies on our ability to broaden our existing perspectives and to create conditions for new knowledges to emerge.

### ENDNOTES

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4. Mark Foster Gage, *Aesthetics Equals Politics: New discourses across Art, Architecture, and Philosophy* (USA: MIT Press, 2019), 12.
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6. Ash Amin, “The Good City,” *Urban Studies* 43 (2006): 1009–1023; Simone and Pieterse, *New Urban Worlds*.
7. Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production* (USA: MIT Press, 2004), 58.
8. *Ibid.*, 107.
9. *Ibid.*, 109–173.
10. *Ibid.*, 58.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York, USA: Columbia University Press, 2008).
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15. Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Built Upon Love: architectural longing after ethics and aesthetics* (USA: MIT Press, 2006).
16. AbdouMaliq Simone, *Improvised Lives: rhythms of endurance in an urban south* (USA: Polity Press, 2019), 24; Sendra and Sennett, *Designing Disorder*, 21; Simone and Pieterse, *New Urban Worlds*, 31–59.
17. Simone and Pieterse, *New Urban Worlds*; Sendra and Sennett, *Designing Disorder*.
18. Simone, *Improvised Lives*, 93.
19. Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 3.
20. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (USA: Harvard University Press, 1989). Drawing primarily on literature, music, and phenomenologists such as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Eco describes the ‘open work’ as a creative piece that disturbs conventional views of the world through incompleteness and indeterminacy which in turn cause a rearticulation of our capacities for meaning-making (what Rancière might call a ‘redistribution of the senses’).
21. Creative practices are, however, becoming more commonplace in research across several disciplines largely because they are helpful tools in making new knowledges. See for example: Dana Cuff et al., *Urban Humanities: New Practices for Reimagining the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020); Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, ‘Minor Literature in and of Artistic Research’, in *Artistic Research and Literature*, ed. by Corina Caduff and Tan Wälchli, (Boston: Brill, 2019) pp. 49–62; Jessica Bradley and Lou Harvey, ‘Creative Inquiry in Applied Linguistics: Language, Communication and the Arts’, in *Voices and Practices*



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27. Kentridge, *Six Drawing Lessons*.