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The Other Architecture: Towards a Humanistic Praxis

A way of exploring possibilities – Architecture as a process; Architecture as an event;

The theme proposed by the curators of Beta 2026 invites participants to reimagine possible scenarios through practical interventions on the building of the former Ion Mincu High School in Timișoara, and the surrounding area. In this context, adaptive reuse becomes more than just a strategy for intervening on the existing structure: it represents a practice designed towards transformation, achieved through partial conservation, reinterpretation and spatial interventions capable of unlocking new possibilities and new meanings for the space.

These actions extend beyond the school's building, by means of tactical, playful and performative interventions within the context of the Botanical Park, bringing together spatial, cultural and political practices within a concrete framework. In contrast to the typical critical discourse of biennials, this year Beta proposes a localised practice realised through action - *'In Practice as opposed to In Theory'*. The proposed interventions challenge conventional ways of using the space, reactivate the spatial and the social memory of the place, or introduce symbolic narratives as strategies for critical communication. Both on a theoretical and a practical level, deconstruction and reconstruction become part of the same process of transformation. Some interventions take the form of emergent structures that call into question the pre-established uses of space; others operate through symbolic language, transforming architecture into a tool for communication.

From this perspective, adaptive reuse is characterised by its processual nature, in which the architectural object is not defined as a finished result, but as a process of becoming; the architectural intervention is understood as a structure open to interpretation and capable of acquiring new meanings through use. The concept of architecture as a process of becoming thus emerges as a conceptual consequence of a practice oriented towards transformation.

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This process of becoming involves a great degree of uncertainty, which determines the occasion for critical reflection. The state of indeterminacy creates the possibility of questioning what is perceived as evident, stable or already known and, in doing so, allows for a broader range of perspectives in the interpretive process. Uncertainty thus becomes a condition of producing knowledge, a place in which reality is not accepted as definitive, but can be continually reconsidered and transformed.

Uncertainty or ambiguity work as disruptive strategies or tools for reification (or problematisation) that can alter our perception, just as the *alienation effect* in Brechtian theatre¹ prevents us from losing ourselves in the illusion of performance, challenging us to think critically about reality as a construct that can be changed.

When applied to architecture, the *distancing effect* gives rise to spaces that deliberately subvert ordinary expectations, prompting questions or opportunities for critical dialogue. Rather than offering familiarity, such spaces or objects provoke uncertainty, encouraging users to reconsider their habitual perceptions. Distancing thus becomes a tool that generates reflection, allowing the space itself to function as a medium for awareness and interpretation.

Consequently, the observer of these spaces characterised by indeterminacy becomes an active participant in the production of meaning, a perspective that resonates strongly with Donna Haraway's² concept of *situated knowledge*. This perspective advocates for a collective and democratic understanding of knowledge, in which each individual brings his unique perspective, helping to build a richer and a more nuanced understanding of reality. In contrast to the claim of a universal and neutral perspective, Haraway emphasises the partial, embodied and contextual nature of any act of practical knowledge. Thus, reality is understood through multiple situated perspectives rather than a single, all-encompassing viewpoint. Bringing these perspectives together can foster a more nuanced and a more responsible understanding of the world.

From this critical perspective, the interventions proposed as part of the Beta 2026 Biennale can be regarded as practices that are capable of generating critical responses, framing these architectural devices as *events in space*. In this sense, these interventions can become devices for communication or action, enabling alternative relationships and uses in relation to space.

¹ Brecht, B. (2024). *Dialectică și înstrăinare: Scrieri despre teatru* [*Dialectics and Estrangement: Writings on Theatre*]. Translated from German by L. Ghiman. Cluj-Napoca: Tact.

² Haraway, Donna, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14.3 (1988), 575–599, DOI: 10.2307/3178066.

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The Other Architecture takes this premise a step further and poses the following question: *Can this kind of spatial event, with its strongly localised and contextualised character, be utilised or further explored in relation to a social issue?*

The Other Architecture explores the premise of temporary architecture as a potential tool to complement social action, particularly in disadvantaged areas or amongst marginalised groups. In this sense, architectural intervention does not replace social action, nor does it claim to resolve structural problems through spatial means, but rather works alongside it, providing a new framework of material, symbolic and relational support. Its temporary nature allows testing specific situations by creating contexts for encounter and dialogue, mobilising local resources, and establishing forms of visibility and communication. The intervention can thus be understood as a device for situated action, a means by which existing conditions are both interpreted and temporarily modified to enable different relationships, uses and forms of participation, and ultimately to create the opportunity for transformation. *The other architecture* can therefore be understood as a situated practice of transformation that can generate practical knowledge by transforming both the context and the group of people involved in the research.

Crises or situations of social anomie need certain conceptual shifts that involve the abandonment of traditional paradigms and the adoption of emerging perspectives realised through disruptive solutions. Solutions generally draw on a frugal approach, working with most of the resources available in the context, yet manage to bring positive change within these limited means, by employing disruptive and therefore innovative solutions. These devices often employ fragmentation and contradiction as spatial strategies, associating this action-oriented quality of architecture with Bernard Tschumi's concept of the *Event in Space*³, which emphasizes that architecture should not merely serve as a backdrop for social life, but it should provoke action and meaning. As such, the concept of temporary architecture as a structure capable of catalyzing critical discourse aligns with this view of spatial rupture.

These complementary tools within social interventions can be regarded both as critical mechanisms designed to challenge the status quo, and also as alternative educational tools able to foster civic spirit through participation, and the empowerment of the group as change takes place. The innovation and success of this method lies in its ability to engage community members through collective action, thereby fostering new forms of coexistence and solidarity.

The instrumentalisation of temporary architecture for social purposes is a concept based on three disciplines which, through their complementary nature, can give

³ Tschumi, Bernard, *Architecture and Disjunction*. (MIT Press, 1996).

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rise to innovative models within the practice of humanistic social work in situations of conflict, marginalisation or migration: action sociology, through pragmatism and instrumentalism, in relation to temporary architecture; and symbolic communication viewed through the lens of symbolic interactionism.

The Other Architecture – A Humanistic Practice

Critical thinking and genuine collective action cannot exist within predefined frameworks, without the act of critical reflection. Therefore, the simple act of ‘giving voice’ within disadvantaged communities is insufficient without providing a framework for critical reflection. Without such a framework, participation risks favouring dominant power structures. In this sense *The Other Architecture* understands participatory models as forms of ongoing power negotiation, a framework in which marginalised groups become creators of practical knowledge and social transformation.

The values and principles of contextualist-humanist social work have a pragmatic purpose; consequently, the challenge of rehabilitating a social group lies in putting these values into practice within a specific social (and spatial) reality. These methods are grounded in a contextualist perspective focused on mobilising the human and material resources of the community under study.

The preliminary research within a humanist intervention focuses on mapping the resources of the community under study, rather than focusing on its problems.⁴ Every singular perspective is valued by promoting individual characteristics, as a form of strengthening local autonomy and human dignity. The community thus becomes a space with therapeutic and preventive dimensions, stressing the importance of ontological, cultural and political aspects in processes of social transformation.

Within humanistic and contextualistic paradigms, marginalisation and social deviance are results of the absence of an empathetic community capable of facilitating group cohesion and social integration⁵. These empathetic structures are based on fostering a symbolic dialogue that analyses, deconstructs and reconstructs the group’s shared values, through the lens of *Symbolic*

⁴ Ștefăroi, Petru, ‘Paradigma umanistă a asistenței sociale sau scurtă introducere în asistența socială umanistă [Humanistic Paradigm of Social Work or Brief Introduction in Humanistic Social Work]’, *Social Work Review*, 1 (2012), 161–174.

⁵ Rădulescu, S. M. (2015). *Devianță și probleme sociale: Anomie și sinucidere în societățile postcomuniste* [Deviance and Social Problems: Anomie and Suicide in Post-Communist Societies]. București: Tritonic.

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Interactionism. This process takes place through a collective effort of co-creation supported by symbolic language (which can be explored through narrative, visual tools such as emblems, models and, ultimately, temporary architecture), a space or a spatial device that succeeds in communicating and reconstructing shared meanings. In this context, temporary architecture is interpreted as a tool for representation and social intervention, having the capacity to facilitate processes of co-creation and dialogue, whilst also playing a role in representing the community's identity.

Interacting through symbolic communication fosters the internalisation of others' values through mechanisms of coexistence and adaptation, thereby contributing to the development of processes of reconciliation, reciprocity and solidarity, which in turn creates a mechanism for balancing the individual and collective needs.⁶

In this context, the creation of these temporary architectures through participation and co-creation stimulates collective reflection on the group's identity and autonomy, through direct involvement and solidarity. Thus, co-creation represents a democratic form of practical knowledge by valuing all points of view and by positioning research participants as active agents within their own political status. From this perspective, co-creation is an instrument for the concrete as well as the symbolic redistribution of power, through which we can support collective actions with emancipatory purposes.

Everything starts in question - Practice vs Theory vs Practice

Transformation-oriented practice requires a critical foundation comprising three essential dimensions: the educational dimension (emancipation), the ethical and political dimension (values, power relations, concrete impact on society), and the methodological framework through which theory and practice can be organised into a coherent research system.

The interdependent relationship between situated knowledge and the capacity for transformation is supported by three authors who underpin these three essential dimensions characteristic for a contextualist-humanist perspective. Paulo Freire⁷ provides the pedagogical dimension through his philosophical and emancipatory foundation of *praxis*; Kurt Lewin⁸ proposes the methodology which organises

⁶ Ibid.8.

⁷ Ibid.1.

⁸ Ibid.3.

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theory and practice within a process of *action research*; and Bent Flyvbjerg⁹ introduces the ethical and political dimension within critical research, a dimension focused towards determining practical consciousness, values and power relations.

The concept of *praxis* developed by the educator and author Paulo Freire describes the dialectical relationship between critical reflection and transformative action. In his view, the understanding of social reality cannot be separated from the possibility of transforming it. Practice acquires meaning when it enables people to interpret their existing context and to participate in its transformation. In this way, the relationship between action and reflection forms a cyclical structure through a process of dialogue and experiential learning.

One of the most important aspects of practice in Freire's view is intentionality, meaning framing what exactly motivates and guides action. Practice without intentionality represents a practice without guiding principles. Therefore, the critical pedagogy advocated by Paulo Freire promotes social justice through its emphasis on awareness, which fosters the capacity for transformation.

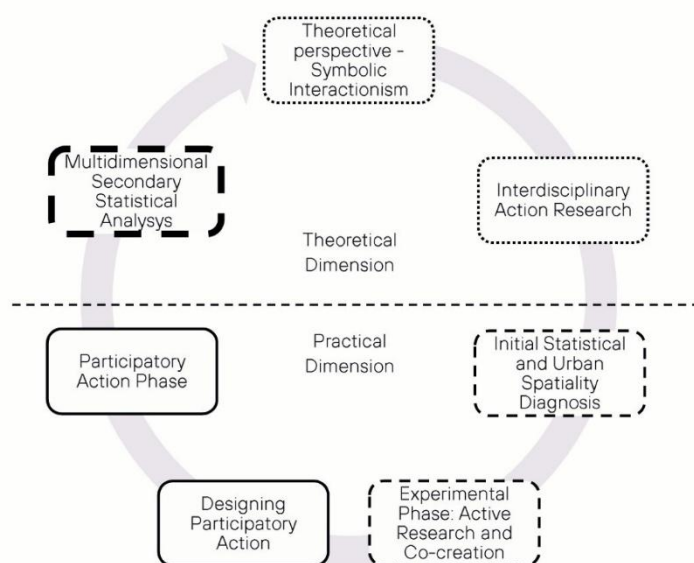


Figure 1 - Credits (Simici, Interpretation of the Action-research model)

From the contextualist perspective outlined earlier, Kurt Lewin provides the methodological structure of transformation-oriented practice. This method also involves a cyclical structure that proposes a dynamic balance between theory and practice, underpinned by the action research model.

⁹ Ibid.2.

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The action research methodology can be represented graphically as an auto-reflective spiral of cycles, comprising the following stages: preliminary research, planning a change based on the preliminary research, taking action and observing the consequences, reflecting on the results, and continuing the cycle, a process that highlights the dynamic nature of practical knowledge.

Preliminary research involves a multidisciplinary team that determines a qualitative social and spatial research design. This stage serves as a structure for defining the research topic and will therefore examine the values identified during fieldwork. It is a process in which all the values identified during the research are operationalised – that is, translated into concrete actions through both theoretical and interventional strategies. The next stage is planning a change, which involves a strategic research design, where communication, participation and co-creation are fundamental. These processes of communication and co-creation are facilitated through symbolic communication, using alternative tools such as metaphor, storytelling, emblems, or other tools that can facilitate the critical discussion of sensitive social issues. This stage also involves exploring possible spatial interpretations of the values identified during the preliminary research, using tools of symbolic communication (models, drawings, collages, theatre, etc.). The action stage is when the spatial device is tested in context; observation is mandatory in this process and it always involves the community. Observation and reflection are iterative processes through which the spatial device adapts and transforms, whilst remaining constantly open to new needs identified through research. The cycle continues until change occurs.

This perspective therefore proposes the operationalisation of the action research model in the form of an adaptable spatial device, conceptually designed upon systems of meaning that are specific to the social context under study.

The third essential dimension to humanistic research is introduced by the author Bent Flyvbjerg, who critically analyses the relationships between power, values and action within critical research. His concept of *phronetic social science* draws upon social sciences methodology, urban planning studies, political analysis and Aristotelian philosophy, where he borrows the concept of *phronesis*. The author argues that the mere existence of a participatory process does not guarantee its democratic nature, hence the need to assess how decision-making authorities define problems and solutions, and how power is distributed within participatory interventions.

Bent Flyvbjerg developed this research process over a period of fifteen years as part of a major urban regeneration project initiated by the municipality of Aalborg, Denmark. Within this project, the author applies the phronetic principles to urban regeneration projects, emphasising the importance of adapting to and understanding the specific nature of the context. In this sense, *phronesis* represents a sensitive form of contextual knowledge gained through practice, and

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also a capacity to transform this context by questioning the relationship between knowledge and power. Research must therefore promote democratic practices by making a mandatory reference to values, interests, power relations and the consequences of every practice. From this framework, the following questions become essential: (1) *Where are we heading?* (2) *Who gains and who loses, by which mechanisms of power?* (3) *Is this development desirable?* (4) *What, if anything, should we do about it?*¹⁰

Accordingly, temporary architecture serves as a tool for raising questions, as it becomes a space for negotiation between different forms of knowledge, interests, values and possibilities for action. Its temporary nature leaves it open to testing and renegotiation.

The political and ethical dimension of the phronetic approach is particularly important for participatory action research, as it introduces an additional critical dimension into the cyclical research methodology. And that is the fact that reflection on practice concerns both the outcomes of practice, but also the way in which power is distributed within the research group, and the values achieved through change.

Leave no one behind! - The Other Architecture | Architecture for the Other

The Other Architecture explores the conception of using temporary architecture seeking to represent social issues concerned with marginalization. These structures embody an ethic of architectural discourse that broadens the significance of these spaces by viewing them as complementary tools within social actions oriented towards emancipation. This approach is based on learning by doing, with the intervention understood as a device for situated action through which existing social and spatial conditions are reconfigured with the aim of fostering the autonomy of marginalised groups. *The Other Architecture* represents an approach that values plurality, that is, the coexistence of multiple voices and realities, regarding contradiction as a possible starting point for critical discourse and the process of transformation.

Indeterminacy is both an aesthetic quality of these spaces and their spatial programme, determining transitory spatial practices that are in a state of constant transformation or relocation. Indeterminacy requires a cyclical structuring of practice and research precisely because it is carried out from a perspective that views solutions as iterative rather than definitive. Their experimental nature

¹⁰ Ibid.2.

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provides the basis for testing new forms of interaction, where differences, tensions and conflicts could be negotiated and addressed through participatory practices.

The Other Architecture does not merely refer to architecture for ‘the other’, that is, the marginalised, but to the possibility of a situated practice that constantly redefines its boundaries through its encounter with a fragmented social context, thereby consolidating the role of temporary architecture as an instrument of emancipation by integrating its political, social and ethical dimensions within a critical practice.