

## Doctoral dissertation review letter

Doctoral dissertation thesis: *Continuous Space Phenomena*

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### Topic and structure:

The architectural research and design question of space (either continuous/connected, or divided/disconnected) is one of the crucial problems of 20<sup>th</sup> century worldwide architecture. It is relevant also for certain branches of current architectural design thinking, criticism and history/theory. From this perspective, author of dissertation considers a topic featuring a very rich tradition, and inquiry provoking new design strategies. The topic is also relevant for the local context of Czech and Slovak debates concerning space and spatiality, even if reviewed dissertation is not referring to this local context explicitly. Mostly it re-considers a post-World War II international discussions in former Western Europe and USA.

Structurally the dissertation is organized in two major chapters entitled *Evolution of the phenomena of continuous space* and its *Evaluation*. The first part (written on 115 pages) constructs an evolutionary flow of phenomena divided into 4 “generations”, the second part (written on 57 pages + annexes) offers some preliminary comments and conclusions. The evaluation chapter is based on the preceding chapter which in fact serves as an individually re-constructed historical database (or data flow) consisting of many problematic biases, repetitions, omitted phenomena and interpretational sources (e.g. Philippe Boudon: *Sur L'espace architectural*).

From both the title and the structure of this dissertation it is clear that history of architecture is understood mostly as an “evolution” and sometimes even “natural evolution” (pp. 52, 167). Thus, my first question to be discussed during the defence lecture and debate is: **If history is a synonym of an evolution, how can we understand and interpret architectural phenomena which are not evolutionary, but for example re-appearing in different ways, repetitive, timeless, and/or based on ruptures?** For example, the discussion on ornament in 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture (e.g. ornament is a crime /Loos/, or ornament is non-functional /functionalists/, or the function of ornament is re-thought /in the book *The Function of Ornament* by Farshid Moussavi/)?

### The methodology and related problems:

The dissertation defender's background is education and competence in architectural design. Her dissertation expresses considerable interest in selected problems and notions of 20<sup>th</sup> century architectural history and quite brief interest in theory and philosophy. While she studies historical data mostly in primary sources (Giedion's, Frampton's books, etc.) the theoretical and philosophical problems are studied mostly in secondary literature (compendia and readers “for architects”, etc.). Therefore, individual chapters as well as the glossary of terms and concepts are depending on derived statements without a chance to

reconsider them in the context of original author's own thinking and argumentation development (so there is a considerable unbalance between defender's understanding/interpretation of historiographic and theoretical/critical research resources).

The defender studied a very broad and complex professional literature. In the context of architectural dissertation projects and writing it is really promising. The question is, how to relate such a variety of studied approaches over the whole century, because quoted authors are neither thinking in parallel nor in the dialog. Quoted and compiled texts are also in a mutual conflict of presuppositions, methodologies and results. There is no chance to "re-read" them in a one consistent flow of proposed "natural evolution" without mentioning the problems they criticise and change. A more critical and independent approach to the rethinking of studied built and literary sources would help. My next recommendation for a future research would be to study closely, if needed, also primary philosophical and theoretical literature (Husserl, Heidegger, Merlau-Ponty in case of phenomenology, etc.).

As for methodology derived from grounded theory of qualitative research which was formulated in social sciences, some relationships to other methods (e.g. phenomenological interpretation, drawing methods of close analysis and comparison of selected architectural works, etc.) would be needed. It is very surprising for me, that the dissertation contains some very good analytical drawings of selected buildings quoted from studied literature but it doesn't provide any such drawings and diagrams by the author herself. I would like to ask her **why she did not include her own analytical and comparative drawings?** If there were at least few of them, many unsolved problems would become more evident.

For example: the problem of continuous space. The initial assumption of the dissertation is that a key property of any continuous space is that it allows a human movement. Consequently, any space allowing uninterrupted human movement is therefore understood as a continuous space in architecture. Be it: 1/ any chain of rooms (cells) connected by a hall, 2/ Loos' *Raumplan*, 3/ Le Corbusier's *plan libre*, 4/ Mies van der Rohe's *open space*, 5/ spatial planary intervals of De Stijl, 6/ event spaces by Tschumi, 7/ interstitial and many other spaces by Eisenman, 8/ hybrid spaces of Koolhaas, 9/ Greg Lynn's animated forms and spaces, etc. In other words: author of the dissertation does not differentiate continuous spaces from practically any other space formulated in 20<sup>th</sup> century allowing some sort of human movement that is not obstructed by walls and doors. The problem is, that the possibility of movement per se is neither necessary nor sufficient condition of spatial continuity in architecture. Visitors and inhabitants may move and also may stop in continuous spaces according to their activity. For example: **architecture distinguishes between central and longitudinal spaces: is the character of their assumed continuity the same? And more general question is, why Siegfried Giedion understands Greek temples not as an architectural space but as a volume?**

So, for the case of future research it is necessary 1/ to distinguish continuous space from any other type of space in general and 2/ to differentiate types of continuous space due to the spatial and temporal characteristics of its continuity: e.g. geo/metrical, topological, animated, etc. In that case, by means of a close architectural analysis, it will be possible to formulate *what kind* of movement and what kind of *stasis* continual/hybrid space offers to

visitors and inhabitants. So, my question concerning this is: **what is a difference between conceptual and perceptual/lived/existential space?**

**Questions addressing architectural competition proposals in dissertation:**

The last chapter includes two competition proposals. Namely, first for *The Istanbul Community Market*, Turkey, and second for installation into Montpellier city, France. This last chapter is entitled "Experiments with the notion of continuous space". The text states, that both proposals are "*produced through event spaces and movement scenarios*" /p. 219/. Unfortunately, proposed "*event spaces*" are mentioned too briefly, none of them is described or depicted by more detailed notation showing either the process or the concept of assumed experimentation involved in the design. **Is it possible to show and explain drawings of proposed "event spaces" during the lecture at Ph.D. dissertation defence?** Because from available drawings of *The Istanbul Community Market* it is not clear how/why proposed event may form "*the static component*" of architectural design /p. 219/ if any event in general is characterized by its own spatial extensity/intensity and time progression?

Other questions concerning this project are: **what new qualities of continuous space are attained by the design proposal of a market which "imitates a neighbourhood"?** In what way any urban and architectural cluster may form (a pure) continuous space? Cluster as a spatial organization (pattern) was introduced into 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture by Dutch Structuralists and British Brutalists in 1960's as a critique of premodern and early modern mono-bloc orders... Doesn't cluster situated on "stairs and shafts" of proposed Istanbul market in fact contribute to the search for possibly new relations of continuous, separated, stepped, and cantilevered spaces? All these kinds of space result in a hybrid space as opposed to purely continuous or divided spaces...

**Results and final comments:**

This Ph.D. dissertation is based on quite broad and complex set of architectural works and literature studied by Laila Sabsabiová during her Ph.D. study program in Prague and two study stays in Paris. Two competition proposals designed by her are included to test and implement ongoing research. Reduction of methodology, unformulated hypothesis and problematic delineation of terms and concepts resulted in some more or less problematic preliminary conclusions. In further research, proposed key terms and concepts, methodology and preliminary results should be re-analysed also in contexts of primary literature. Crucial is a shift from studying general space and spatial elements to the inquiry focused more on continuous space's specific types including relations between their elements.

From my point of view the most promising results of the dissertation are those offering historiographic narration re-formulated from defenders' own point of view reconsidering selected socio-political events (general history) as well as events of architecture in a context of questions concerning space in general. The weakest part of dissertation is mixing history with evolution and general space with continuous space in one uncritically written flow. So, the most relevant contribution of this way of retelling the history by now is in defenders' attempt to propose and design her own notions of continuous spaces addressing selected milestones of modern architecture history of spatial thinking and design.

In general, this PhD dissertation is quite promising starting point for a closer analysis and interpretation of studied and other buildings and/or their comparative study. That is why I fully recommend to the dissertation committee to award architect Laila Sabsabiová with Ph.D. degree in architecture at Faculty of Architecture, Czech Technical University in Prague in Combined Study Program – English Branch.

Bratislava – Prague, autumn-winter 2019



Prof. Ing. arch. Monika Mitášová, Ph.D.