Knowing Occupations: the euretics of very small houses
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Abstract: Of increasing interest to theorists of space and place are conceptions of performance and performativity to provide open, fluid and dynamic accounts of occupation. In this paper, we are interested in how performance and performativity provide ways of understanding occupation in both temporal and spatial dimensions in relation to two very small houses. We begin by looking at the work of Judith Butler and her theorisation of performativity to explore occupation, which has been addressed in spatial discourse to explore more dynamic relations between architecture and the body, however this research has mainly focused on the temporal dimension of her argument. In this paper we argue that her writing is helpful in reconsidering occupation however it needs to be extended to account for embodied subjects' occupations of interior architectural space temporally and spatially. To illustrate our argument we use two very small houses - the ‘Maison-Valise’ (1996) and the ‘Micro-House’ (2001) as case studies. Both houses raise a number of questions about occupation by calling for and legitimating active occupation of space and time, bringing into focus the performative dimension of the built environment. In both of these houses, one virtual, one actualised, embodied subjects in interior architectural space are imagined as iteratively redefined through a reflexive mobility performed in space and time.

Introduction
Of increasing interest to theorists of space and place are conceptions of performance and performativity to provide open, fluid and dynamic accounts of occupation. In this paper, we are interested in how performativity provides ways of understanding occupation in relation to two very small houses. In making this link between theory and design, we are drawing on Ulmer's notion of euretics as a method to make performative theory ‘do architecture’ – by construing the movements, the inventive actions necessary by embodied subjects (whether imagined or actual) to fill the gap between theories of performativity and ‘valise’ or ‘suitcase’ architecture.

We begin by looking at the work of Judith Butler. Butler’s work has recently been explored in spatial discourse. Her work has been used as a way to explain mobile relations between architecture, the body and occupation. We argue that a problem with Butler’s theory is that she presents a subject who is constrained by space yet freed by time. We suggest that this formulation privileges an abstract subject who occupies either space or time, whereas when considering occupation, space and time cannot be separated in this way. Thus, we propose an addition to Butler’s theory that incorporates the complexities of embodiment that require negotiating relations of occupation reflexively in both space and time.

To illustrate our argument we look at two case studies of very small houses - the ‘Maison-Valise’ (1996) and the ‘Micro-House’ (2001). Both houses raise a number of questions about occupation. As the name of the former suggests, they are both examples of ‘suitcase architecture’. On the one hand, like a suitcase, they have built-in pockets, recesses, sliding panels and platforms. On the other hand, the houses are so small and potentially mobile that dwelling becomes literally living ‘out of a suitcase’. In these houses, the ‘suitcase architecture’ hides as well as reveals how occupation is iteratively negotiated and structured, made and remade temporally and spatially, the malleable interiors illustrating the reflexivity of territory
within each. Beyond the interiors, the mobility of the dwellings means that this malleable territoriality operates at a range of scales and time-frames related to each displacement and placement as these architectural suitcases are picked up and moved on.

There are also political dimensions to these mobile houses. While one is for the socially mobile, the other is framed as a means of housing the socially immobile, those for whom occupation may otherwise connote stigmatised appropriation of time and space. However, both buildings call for and legitimate active occupation of space and time, bringing into focus the performative dimension of the built environment and the euretics of occupation. Thus, embodied subjects in interior architectural space are redefined in these projects through mobility, and are literally mobilised through space and time.

**Introduction to Judith Butler**

In recent decades within the humanities there has been a shift away from text, objects and monuments, along with readings of objects as representations of cultural production. Highlighting the processual provides new perspectives across a number of disciplines and is influencing thinking about architectural space, our relationships with it and how we occupy space more generally. Such focus on the dynamic offers the promise of freedom, creativity and escape from essentialised, place-bound identities and this rhetoric has become extremely powerful in our contemporary poetic imagination. However, architecture has historically been located within discourses of form, function and stable understandings of place. Thus, the association between architecture and the performative may at first seem contradictory. However, such historical and metaphorical connotations of architecture and its concomitant associations with stability, power and the sedimentation of subjectivity provides a rich territory for architects, artists and philosophers to question, explore and challenge.

Judith Butler’s linguistically-oriented and non-foundational account of gender as performative rather than essential and stable became highly influential within feminism, social geography and art discourse of the 1990s. Her analysis elaborates John L. Austin’s theory of linguistic performativity to capture the ways that gender and sex are continually remade through repeating the norms of sex. Butler’s translation of Austin’s notion of performativity is to an extent a literal application. The enactment of gender is seen as a representation of the speech act. Gender, thus, is recast in Butler’s theorising as an expression, not to inform or convey the truth of one’s gendered identity, but instead one performs gender; gender is accomplished through its very enunciation. As Butler writes “there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performativity constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.” It is the success of this enactment, over time, as a result, which gives the coherency to our sense of self and identity, rather than any ontological truth or fact.

Butler’s theorising on the performativity of gender is complex. It builds from the arguments she weaves together, often from within and across disciplines that have been defined as incompatible, contradictory or at least problematic in their relationships. This problematic dimension, Butler claims, is a strategic textual practice with its own performatve effects. Indeed, her definition of the term performatve itself is far from static. For example, in her first book ‘Gender Trouble’, performativity is described as a repetition of discursive norms. In her second book ‘Bodies that Matter: the Discursive Limits of Sex,’ performativity is reframed as the iteration of a “specific modality of power as discourse.” As a result, in part due to the
complexity and shifting nature of the term, the translation of Butler’s theorisation of performativity into other disciplines has taken on varied meanings.

In contemporary architectural discourse, performativity reflects this variety of meanings and uses. In the main, the language of performativity has entered architectural theory to explore relations of subjectivity and place, ways subjectivity is enacted in place and how place itself is enacted through processes of performance.7 Katarina Bonnevier and Lisa Henry Benham, for example, look to Judith Butler to question assumptions of architecture’s neutrality and to consider how it participates in the construction of norms. Bonnevier also contends, following Butler, that it is no longer important to define what architecture ‘is’ as an object to be located, or as a text to be read, but instead suggests that “architecture’ appears through its performance, through its enactment it comes into being.”8 In this framework architecture is understood as a process rather than as an object. Performativity is also used to question the limits of a textual model, to show that knowledge is also gained through experiential and sensual relations occurring in space and time. This view is exemplified not only by Benham and Bonnevier but also by Renna Tiwiri and Hanne-Louise Johannesen.9 For Johannesen and more recently Neil Leach, the language of performativity enables architecture to escape the confines of ‘identity.’ It also gives another way to describe the ‘betweeness of relations’.10 However, this recent uptake of Butler’s theorisation of performativity within spatial discourse is premised on reading the temporal dimension of her argument, or understanding performativity through the lens of performance.

Butler In her writing makes a clear distinction between performance and performativity. Can one choose to perform identity? Can I wake up in the morning and choose to perform a feminine or maybe a masculine identity? In Butler’s formulation there is no choice, no agency as there is no doer behind the deed. The notion that there is agency or choice is an effect of the iteration of the ‘structures of meaning’ by which we reproduce the norms of gender, and it is these ‘structures of meaning’ that give our identity meaning. Thus performance in Butler’s theorisation is different to performativity; performance is relegated to theatrics; however this is a distinction that Butler seems unable to maintain in her own writing as she iteratively relies on the term performance – to describe how we do identity in place drawing form the promise of performance, as a tactic, that does not lead to representation: it cannot be saved, recorded or documented; it pertains to visceral relations that do not do discourse.11 In the next section Butler’s contradictory model of the subject is explored in terms of the divide between space and time that operates in her work.

Space/time
Butler’s two different ways of thinking about the subject ‘in space’ and ‘through time’ produces a hierarchy between stasis and mobility, text and process where one side of the binary is privileged over the other: space in this formation of the subject occupies a negative position. Yet her writing is heavily indebted to spatial metaphors, in particular when she explains how a subject is constrained. As Walker highlights, on the one hand, the subject in Butler’s text is defined by a spatial metaphor, “where the subject is constrained within a synchronic structure of discursive relations.”12 On the other hand, Butler defines the subject through a temporal metaphor, “where the subject is potentially free to resist the structures within a diachronically-marked moment in the process of reproduction.”13 Thus one can suggest that Butler’s “deployment of space, in its normative understanding, is used to suggest that the subject who exists in space is always constrained, whereas the subject that exists in time is always potentially free.”14 But to divide the subject in this manner, for Walker, merely reflects a mode
of analysis that separates space from time, in order to conceptualize the subject; yet “under ordinary conditions of lived experience, of course, space and time are fused.”

Butler’s theorization of the subject confined to space initially draws from Foucault’s writing on power in ‘Discipline and Punish’, which links the disciplined body to the process of subjectification. However, in Foucault’s understanding, there is a correlation between forms of “subjectivity, mobile fields of discourse and the material effects of three-dimensional institutional spaces.” Butler, in her analysis, deploys a spatial rhetoric, but disregards actual three-dimensional institutional space, to extract a docile body and its connection with discursive power. Subjectivity is now a correlate of discourse that for Butler has “material effects.”

Butler, through this act of erasing three dimensional space, enacts the historical positing of inside and outside within philosophy, where the object is cast beyond discourse and prior to language. Place is left to haunt her text, hidden within the boundaries of her rhetorical questions, or entrenched within the referential properties of her language, where the real properties of place are replaced by a particular semantic construction that operates in the abstract. Yet Butler also quickly moves to cover this process of editing and erasure. She moves to evoke the gaps in Foucault’s own writing and replace three dimensional spaces with regulatory ideals and psychoanalytical models of foreclosure, models of thinking where time is privileged and place is largely absent.

The present paper argues that Butler’s theory occupies a problematic position within architectural discourse, because of the difficulty posed by drawing on a spatial language in defining an abstract subject who is constrained within a power-discourse nexus yet freed by time. By doing this, Butler reduces subjectivity from negotiating relations of power and place both physically and discursively and instead privileges “the moment in which discourse encloses or subjugates a person’s identity.” For Butler’s subject then, the ability to change or challenge relations are thus reduced to moments of slippage and accident within the power-discourse nexus. Butler forecloses reflective intentionality by arguing that “the disruptions of this coherence through the inadvertent re-emergence of the repressed reveal…that identity is constructed.” This raises a question about the performative turn within architectural discourse that now relies on abstract notions of subjectivity, since the ‘subject’ is not reducible to discursive practices alone in three-dimensional space – discourse is only one constituent. In the next section we look at two projects where the subject actively engages with place through spaces that are designed to be continually made and re-made, that through the occupiers’ performances repeatedly come into being through interactions between the body and architectural interior. It is in this section that we draw out the positive dimensions of this contradictory model when exploring a more complex understanding of occupation.

Two very small houses

In this next section we introduce the two case studies of very small houses - the ‘Maison-Valise’ (1996) and the ‘Micro-House’ (2001) - which are then explored through Butler’s contradictory model of the subject as a way to explore notions of occupation. Both buildings are examples of portable architecture and have been used and discussed as such. These architectural types are framed by a twofold discourse of instability that moves backwards to notions about a nomadic past, and forwards to a present marked by futuristic language that privileges momentary activities and spectacle, where “we are in a continuous state of transience.” Mirroring Butler’s a-spatial subject, Bermudez and Hermanson go as far as to claim that our bodies and minds dwell nowhere, since “[I]n this “outside-in” rather than “inside-
out” life we aim at receiving, absorbing and having instead of externalizing and being.” Of course running through this discourse connecting past and present is a view that portable and transient housing is more fitting for the current times and its ideologies than architecture framed by a language of permanence. For Dietrich such buildings are an embodiment of an evolving philosophy concerning the transience of the human condition as a way to question our relationship to permanence, and especially, architectural permanence. Yet alongside this shift towards a more transient state this interest in portable housing is grounded by the body and the body’s occupation of space.
For Lucas Dietrich “the creators of ‘Maison Valise’ present the ultimate statement in portable, adaptable accommodation: an expandable suitcase habitation that highlights an emphasis on design over site, on multiplicity of functions over permanence.” The architects Claire Petetin
and Philippe Gregoire of the firm TimeZone, designed Maison-Valise as a way to comment on what they see as the ‘rigidity’ of urban landscapes. Specifically, the project was developed to “resolve the difference between the city’s static architectural fabric and the essential transient nature of the human population and experience.”\(^{28}\) For the architects, it is a house that it is not just aimed at the homeless, it is also about “abandoning the strict separation of the domestic space of the home and the public space of the street.”\(^{29}\) The architects hope to see maisons–valises springing up in the developed commercial zones rather than confined to their own caravan park, to re-connect disenfranchised transient subjects with stabilised mainstream society and confront the latter with the real conditions of its existence.

This project is based on caravans observed by the designers in Berlin during the 1990s. The building is by no means singular in its exploration and is part of a series of similar experiments carried out by the architects. Other inspirations for their work include issues raised by Deleuze’s theories of deterritorialization.\(^{30}\) But their series of portable houses are also conceived as an extension of the body and senses. So while the discourse about this type of building, and of Timezone architects specifically, attempts to be futuristic in tone offering possibilities of embracing the transience of fast-paced, ever-changing lifestyles, it is a discourse that is ultimately reliant on the allure of a natural, environmentally friendly and body-orientated form of coexistence.

While Maison Valise remains a virtual project, more recent renditions of this series are starting to find themselves in the realm of the built. In illustrations, the building is shown in its various states of expansion and contraction. The grey metallic casing encloses a more transparent concertina-like material, allowing considerable variations in the dwelling area on a site by site basis. Although the images show a building inhabited by a contemplative woman, the rest of the participants are staged to play out various roles in the process of making the dwelling. These imagined performances of the buildings’ transitory states are marked by the presence of the body in some respects to give a sense of scale. But the roles the bodies are given as architectural mannequins subordinate their relationship with architecture rather than portraying active occupations that bring the buildings alive. These are roles that would seem equally well-placed in Wallpaper magazine as a decorative device - though not dressed in high-end clothing, nor apparently homeless, the best way to describe them would be urban nomads doing architectural cool.

**Project Two: Micro compact home**

![Figure 3 and Figure 4](http://microcompacthome.com/company/)

Although the rhetoric that surrounds the two projects appears quite similar, some distinctions can be made. The Micro-compact home was developed by a team of researchers and
designers from London based at the Technical University in Munich. It was also designed for a different group of imagined clients, namely "students, business people, sports and leisure use and for weekenders." Another clear difference from the TimeZone series of projects is its operation and use. While not as architecturally dynamic as the 'Maison Valise,' it employs understandings of space deployed in the design of aircraft, yachts and cars. It is also claimed by the designers that the traditional Japanese tea-house design has informed the design as well as contemporary advanced technologies. However, similar to Maison Valise, key to the design intent of this project are relationships of touch, active physical use and occupation via the body.

Where Maison Valise looks like the outcome of industrial mass-production rather than a building process, The design for the Micro-compact home is altogether more modest, its intentions shaped by the practicalities of actual use and constructability. In some respects it is a simple box that houses the complex intricacies of the interior of the dwelling, with all of its performative aspects of occupation bringing it alive in the process – a series of planes and volumes formable into various configurations related to sleeping, dressing, cooking, eating, washing, working etc. Yet while it is described as a home, and all that this entails, it is pictured as a house. By this we mean that in representations of the project it is shown as an object in the landscape devoid of inhabitation. However to illustrate the versatility and mobility of the compact home the architects draw on a rendition of Vitruvian man, conjuring up notions of inhabitation associated more with approaching the body as an object of contemplation rather understanding its capacities through use.

**Performative architecture + performativity**

First how can these two buildings be understood as performative? In this section of the paper we argue that the buildings can be understood by reading Butler's work through a lens of performance.

It is also an approach to understanding her work utilised by Leach, Bonnevier and Henry Bentham, and it is this way of reading Butler's work that opens out a way of interpreting these projects as performative. In this understanding of interior architecture, what it 'is' as an object becomes less important, and we focus instead on how architecture appears via its occupation and performance through which its relational qualities as architecture come into being. Following Bonnevier this is an understanding premised on the elements that literally can move, where the architecture can be fine tuned to meet the needs of occupation, within the limits of the architectural devices. In this way of thinking, architecture - through its iterations and changes, through its very mobility, its literal mobility- is open to interpretation...
rather than being confined to normative constraints.\(^{34}\) Of course through Butler’s work the way out of naturalised assumptions, or norms, occurs at moments of slippage in discourse. In this case the moments of slippage occur because in these two projects the built-in pockets, recesses, sliding panels and platforms that hide as well as reveal how occupation is iteratively negotiated and structured, made and remade temporally and spatially, also following Bonnevier that exact repetition is impossible. So while these buildings operate within a particular frame they can still stage something new at the same time.\(^{35}\) Indeed the performer, the occupier of the house, sets the building in motion. The occupants are actors in the building, pushing and pulling, aligning the house to meet the needs of each performance or for performances yet to come, yet to be imagined.\(^{36}\) Both these projects require an architecture where the body is engaged with all of the building’s elements.\(^{37}\) Motion of course is everywhere in both these projects. Moreover the buildings’ actions force what is arguably necessarily present in architecture to a demonstrative extreme. These are two projects where occupation is the building as a performance.

Both buildings call for and legitimate active occupation of space and time – what they get to be as architecture is not possible without the lived performances of their occupants, whether as imagined virtually or in actuality - bringing into focus the performative dimension of the built environment. Thus, embodied subjects in interior architectural space are re-defined through mobility, just as their subjectivities are mobilised in and through space and time. However within Butlers writing the subject has no agency, however through a performative reading the point of addition is that these spaces are occupied by subjects who negotiating space, but also occupy multiple positions and have the ability to actively make meaning about context. However, normative relations of occupation are also made evident. It is also in representations of these buildings as objects sited in particular landscapes are to be inhabited by a certain ‘class’ of bodies. Butler outlines how some bodies are named outside of the process of intelligibility and framed as abject bodies.\(^{38}\) Accordingly, we could argue that certain types of bodies are unable to be made visible because they are unintelligible within the parameters of architectural discourse (written and visual material). It is clear that a spatial territory is being delineated in these images between bodies/subjects which are “intelligible and occupy liveable zones” and body/subjects which are un-intelligible, who occupy zones that are “unliveable” and “uninhabitable.”\(^{39}\) Moreover, these images reiterate that within architecture and interior architecture there are zones of occupation that rest on the ability to comply with normative ideas of subjectivity, of bodies as well as spaces. Norms are thus re-inscribed through these images between bodies and architecture. But according to Butler, the constraints upon the subject in terms of “abjection and psychic unliveablity” are clearly an operation of spatial norms that bring identity, subjectivity and architecture into being. Thus we could also read Butlers theory in terms of these projects in terms of how the subject is once more constrained by notions of space.

**Contingent conclusions**

These two projects offer a way of understanding occupation as performance tends to defy representation: notwithstanding the images of Maison Valise that illustrate the shortcomings of representation in this regard, occupation cannot adequately be saved, recorded or documented; it pertains to visceral relations that do not do discourse.\(^{40}\) The promise of the performative is that it enables us to question the internal structure of representation itself. However, it is also clear that norms of signification still operate in these buildings in the way that social and spatial relations are aligned through images used to represent them. Relations
between the body and architecture are marked as separate and distinct, with certain types of bodies separate and distinct from architecture, and with certain types of bodies being associated with this kind of architecture. From this position and central to our argument is the suggestion that while there is a need to insist on anti-essentialist conceptions of the body and architecture, at the same time there is a need to understand that these “categories are materially real and occur within matrices of power relations.”

We are thus arguing for a composite of theories of performance and performativity to provide a richer performative account of how bodies occupy space through assemblages of the discursive, the material and the more ephemeral domains of movement and time. Indeed, a euretics of architecture embodied in time and place.

Endnotes
3 James Loxley goes as far as “ to say that her recasting of performativity has been influential would be to understate the case by several orders of magnitude; it has generated voluminous commentary and protracted debate, and had a huge impact on the theory and politics of identity in general as well as an extensive range of academic disciplines. Loxley, J. (2006). Performativity, Abingdon ; New York : Routledge, p. 113. Nelson, L. (1999). Bodies (and spaces) do matter: the Limits of Performativity.’ Gender, Place and Culture, 6 (4), Hemmings, C. (2005). Telling Feminist Stories.’ Feminist Theory, 6 (2), pp. 115-139.


18 Judith Butler argues that subjects are constituted by a power immanent to social discourse, particularly the discourse of psychoanalysis. Thus in Butler’s description of materialization, the subject is located within the disciplinary powers of regulatory ideals and also within a psychoanalytic model of foreclosure, yet, in this very process she deletes the question of space and of architectural space from this intersection.


30 *Richardson,* P. (2001) *XS.*

31 *Richardson,* P. (2001) *XS.*

32 This has also become a popular way of reading Bulters work even though she has even stated that this is a mis-reading of her ideas of performativity.


38 Thus the language of intelligibility, for Hekman, is able to tie together a body that is docile and prohibited by normative possibilities and a body that is defined in terms of self and other in regards to the symbolic economy of philosophy.” *Hekman,* S. (1998) ‘Material Bodies’, in Donn Welton (ed), *Body and flesh: a Philosophical reader,* Massachusetts Blackwell Publishers, p.68.

39 *Butler,* J. (1993) *Bodies that matter,* p. 3.


References

Images