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Essay Question

“How has the notion of the everyday informed architectural practice since 1960s? Provide an outline of the key points behind the concept of the everyday as developed by Lefebvre and de Certeau”

Introduction

The concept of the everyday is a double edged sword- a concept so simple on one hand that it is hard to imagine, a world where it couldn't or didn't exist in some form while on the other hand it is a thing so complex with so many elements, it is hard to know where to begin when describing it

It could be argued that if everything within our daily lives classifies as everyday where it is usual and normal, and within architecture this is no exception. However, buildings that specifically embody the qualities which create the notion of the everyday in a successful way- i.e. that they facilitate a person's ability to fully live and experience their everyday life are less usual and not all that exist work successfully for their intended purpose.

The Everyday- A Brief History

“Everyday life is the sum total of every aspect of common human life as it is routinely lived” ¹

Although Henri Lefebvre is credited with the development of the theory of the everyday, and everydayness, and Michel de Certeau for developing these theories into his own interpretation of the everyday, there were a great deal of political and historical factors that need to be taken into consideration when looking at how these theories were arrived at, and how this translates into the way the everyday was and is considered within an architectural context.

¹ Web page: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Everyday_life



(image1) Filmstill from Jean Luc Godard,*Two or Three Things That I Know about Her*, 1966

The notion of the everyday permeated other areas of awareness of society beyond architecture. From a theatrical point of view, the "kitchen sink" drama was becoming established, offering gritty glimpses into characters and situations that were linked to the themes of everyday life. In addition, filmmakers were experimenting with the idea of new ways of presenting stories to audiences. In the film *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, action is shown in real time, with real-time action and everyday events taking place as opposed to a neatly edited product so typical of mainstream productions.

The initial critiques of everyday life offered by Lefebvre were influenced by his own political thinking- he was a member of the French Communist Party and a devout Marxist. For de Certeau, the "events" in Paris in 1968- the realisation of many of Lefebvre's theories became reality when a series of strikes caused a near-revolution- were the catalyst for his study of the everyday.

The Second World War created an immeasurable number of social consequences, one of which was the change in the way many people were housed, and as a result this had an impact on people's sense of community. Lefebvre talks of "moments" existing in everyday life that point to a better future, such as festivals or breaks with everyday constraints- such moments can often be the only elements where communities come together, and certainly in British society, the isolation and lack of leisure time experienced by many people is a factor that is becoming more of a problem, as opposed to Lefebvre's visions of a society more focussed on leisure and personal liberty.

In his book *The Everyday and Everydayness*, Lefebvre examines not only the conscious notion of the everyday and the issues that it creates, but looks at the changes that have taken place in everyday life since the beginning of the modern age. He explains that the cycles that exist (night and day, life and death, hunger and satisfaction etc) are overshadowed by the need to work and the need for consumption. Everyday life can only change when everything within it changes, and angry demonstrations or enjoyable festivals are merely a temporary pause from the everyday. He also points out that people are passive in their choices within everyday life, and questions how much of a "choice" people really have, and how this passivity is directed towards certain sections of society such as women, the young, the old, and the working classes.

De Certeau's book *The Practice of Everyday Life* looks at how people interpret and make their own, the world and culture that surrounds them. The idea here is far more about how strategic and tactical behavior can be used to influence different areas of society from the personal to the commercial, and the effects this has on everyday life.

In its simplest terms, the everyday is “real life”, the “here and now”, and the elements that make up our environment, with the elements of “dramatic attitude” and “lyrical tone” added. I would describe Lefebvre as the “architect” asking the question and providing the answer of what the everyday is, and de Certeau as the “builder” taking a long look at the plan, making practical modifications and going about finding a way to take it off the page and into reality. ²

² Phrases used to summarize the concept of Everyday life. Steven Harris and Deborah Berke, *Architecture of the Everyday*, Princeton Architecture Press, 1997

Examples of buildings and their relationship to the everyday

It would not be unfair to say that most of the time, most people spend the majority of their time in buildings that have been constructed for the purposes of everyday activity, and as such these buildings have been designed and built for this purpose.

However it is harder to say that the average house, apartment or office building has been designed with elements of the everyday in the forefront of the mind of the architect- time, financial constraints, space and other limitations are influential. Below are examples of buildings that specifically represent the everyday within their design and their purpose.

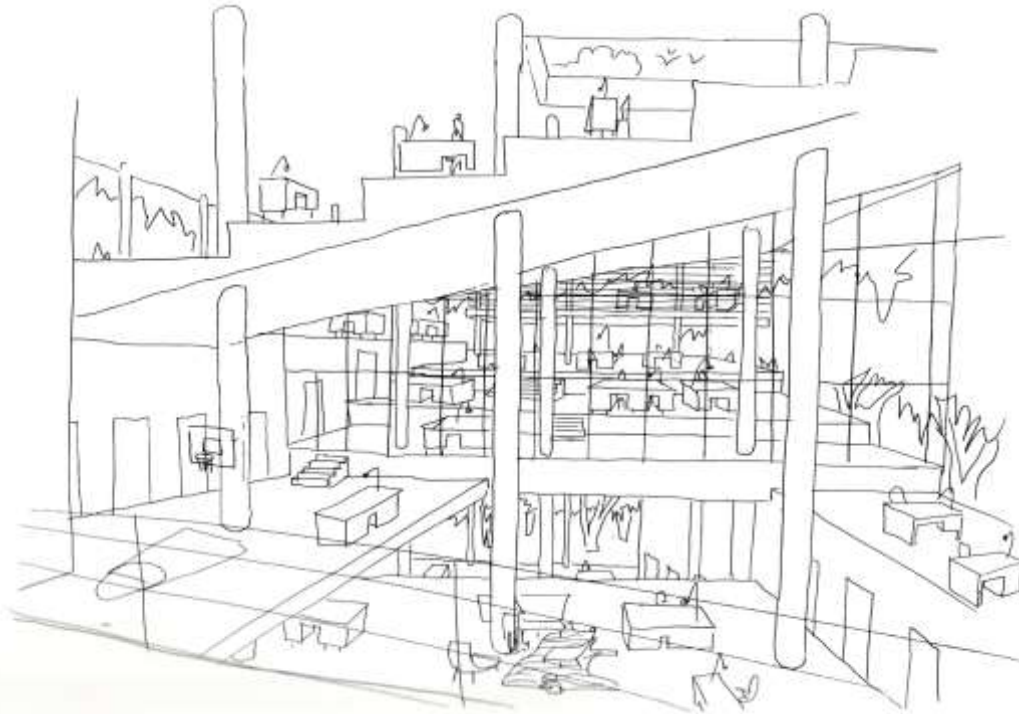


Analysis 1:

Robin Hood Gardens- London (1966-72)

Alison & Peter Smithson

These constructions were built to house local people and provide them with a better standard of living than they were previously used to. The people that they were intended to house were no doubt very much living in the everyday due to their social status and backgrounds. The central mound intended to enable residents to look out onto a communal open space that facilitates their children's play and offered the residents the opportunity of shared social ground. The walkways that provide access to the homes were built with an increased width to again facilitate social interaction between residents. On paper the key ingredients of this building offered the people of the everyday the opportunity to live their lives in the most productive way possible- a (then) modern home with modern facilities being a major improvement on the outdated housing it intended to replace. This blend of a building with its design ethos firmly within the idea of providing social interaction and a sense of a community, added to better living conditions for its residents, is a perfect example of everyday thinking at the time of design. Hindsight obviously provides many answers about why the different elements may not have worked in the way that they were intended, but the ideas of providing and facilitating a better everyday life are at the heart of this design.

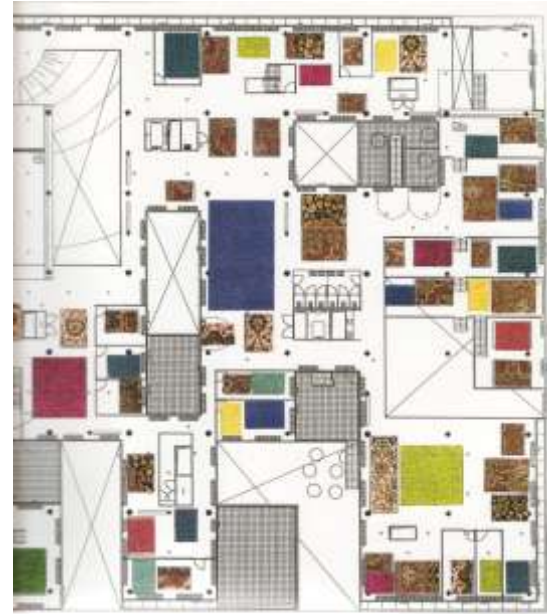


everyday life they already had.

Analysis 2:

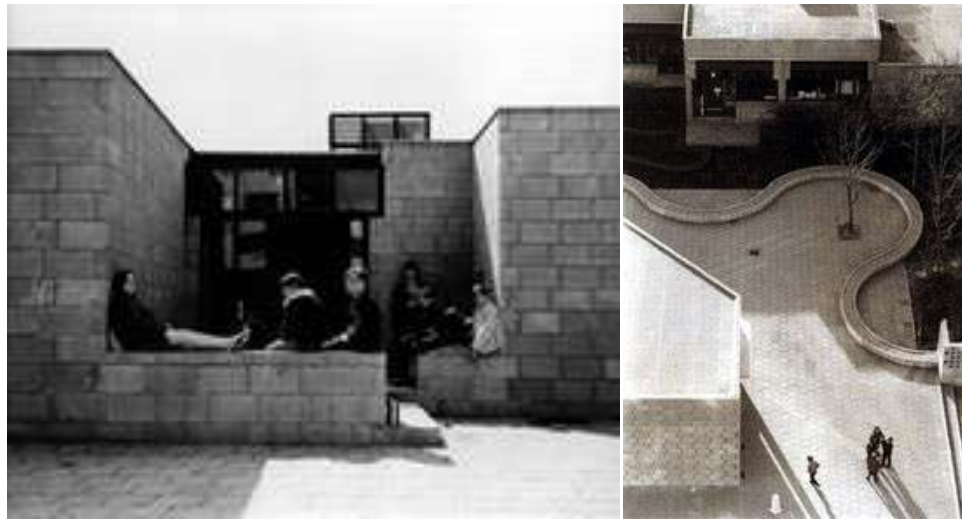
Villa VPRO- Hilversum, The Netherlands (1997)

MVRDV



them of the

This building provides its inhabitants with solutions to a wide variety of their social and practical needs. Many aspects of everyday life can be carried out within this one building. Work, play, exercise, relaxation, eating, entertainment- all these things happen here. The primary purpose of this building is as a place of work- and by the addition of these other elements the architects have cleverly created an environment that encourages greater productivity of the workforce by offering them so many exciting solutions to the problems that spending a day working in an office brings. Additionally, the building encourages those within it to want to spend longer periods of time there because of the facilities to be taken advantage of. It minimises the amount of time that its users would otherwise need to spend to travel between the many buildings it encompasses- there is no need to drive from the office to the gym to the restaurant to the cinema. I see the design of this building as devious, tricking its users into a sense that they are benefiting from such beautiful surroundings with so many facilities, whilst the underlying concept is one that provides employers with a tool to squeeze more from their staff- taking them away from a sense of family and community elsewhere as they need not be anywhere else due to the facilities on offer here. This points to a different kind of everyday for these people, one which centres on just one place, where the patterns of daily life are different because of the influence of the environment they are in. The benefits are sold as positive, and it cannot be denied at some level that there are many benefits, but there is a sub-conscious repercussion upon other areas of everyday life by providing just one building for so many purposes.



Hertzberger, Exterior for the *Montessori School*, Delft, Netherlands 1960-66

(images 6&7)

Analysis 3:

Montessori School- Delft, The Netherlands (1960-66)

Hertzberger

This school by its very nature embodies many elements of the everyday but not just in the actual sense. Being a Montessori school, there are elements of the everyday being instilled in the children at this school at an earlier age than those children in more conventional education systems- there are requirements for children to perform daily duties of a domestic and practical nature that

perhaps lead them into a greater sense of awareness for the everyday. From an architectural point of view, the building has been designed with the facilitation of interaction and communication as an equal to learning. The entrance hall has areas for children to spend time together in a social sense, and each classroom has been given an identity and a sense of individualism by the class, enabling them to see it as their space, much as an adult would do with their own home. Within classrooms, children are offered the opportunity to focus on different types of work in different areas of the room, with work areas at different heights, whilst the teacher is still able to oversee the progress of the class. The underlying concept here is that the children are being taught in a different way than the “usual” which means that as adults they may have different goals, aspirations or work ethics, which in turn may allow them to pursue lives that are not ordinary- not everyday- in other words, the concept of the everyday providing an ability of understanding that has the possibility of leading to changes in the everyday that those involved experience.

Conclusion

Since the everyday became a concept that was consciously influential to architecture, its interpretation and practical implementation has been varied and far-reaching. The everyday in an architectural context is something that the majority of people will have some experience of, consciously or sub-consciously. The influence that the concept of the everyday has had within our society is undeniable but I would argue that not enough has been done to implement the missing elements of the everyday life into mainstream architecture, and that conceptual theories and ideas can often translate badly in a practical sense- an architect's idea of providing areas for social interaction etc may not fulfil their designated purpose correctly in practice. Added to this is the change in people's expectations of themselves and their lives- the rise of consumerism, the need for "fame" and "celebrity", and the (British) obsession with owning and renovating property for financial gain as opposed to personal development points to a sub-conscious dissatisfaction with the everyday, and that whilst as a concept it is perhaps not as publicly acknowledged as it could be, at some level people are aware of the everyday and the inadequacies that it provides them, not only architecturally but in all areas of life.

End notes

¹ Web page: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Everyday_life

¹ Phrases used to summarize the concept of Everyday life. Steven Harris and Deborah Berke, *Architecture of the Everyday*, Princeton Architecture Press, 1997

List of Illustrations

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- 2** Alison& Peeter Smithson, Robin Hood Gardens-London, (1966-72)
- 3** Interior Alison& Peeter Smithson, Robin Hood Gardens-London, (1966-72)
- 4** MVRDV, Interior drawing for office building, VPRO, Netherlands 1997
- 5** Textures for VPRO MVRDV, Interior drawing for office, Netherlands 1997
- 6** Hertzberger, Exterior for the Montessori School, Delft, Netherlands 1960-66
- 7** Hertzberger, Exterior for the Montessori School, Delft, Netherlands 1960-66

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