

ANETA MUDRONJA PLETENAC

## SPREADING CULTURE – HOW PEOPLE CREATE SPACE

### RASPROSTIRANJE KULTURE – KAKO LJUDI STVARAJU PROSTOR

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In the introductory part of the book, the avowal and plan of the book, the author presents us with a phenomenological framework for his relationship with the concept of space as defined by cultural geography from mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Referring to a number of authors in the field of "socio-spatial dialectics", but unfortunately without any deeper elaborations and insights, he builds a context in which space, as it is being constructed, simultaneously also constructs. His exploration as such, as he explains, stems from his profession – ethnology. Through describing an encounter with his professor, the author establishes his own professional position in opposition to a spatial vernacular of experience, which he collected through his teaching career and field work. It quickly becomes clear that auto-ethnography and his own experience are the building blocks of this book. With this in mind, his ethnographical journey is not, as some people would believe, a journey through "exotic and unexplored" destinations of the world, but rather "anthropological magic", as he himself calls it, by which he is searching for the knowledge of the quotidian in his experiences. Hence the advice to any reader embarking on the adventure of reading this book: embrace the concepts that the book offers, and try to experience the book through your own auto-ethnographic lens. Phenomenology might help the reader to form his personal relationship with the structure of the book which is divided into four chapters: Can the Real Space Please Stand Up, Defining Space, Creating Space, The Magic of Creating Real Space.

The reader, armed with such an approach to the text, becomes an active explorer of the book, which might serve as an incentive, inspiration and a call for the usage of the reader's own creative force. Maybe that is the main intricacy of the relations in space that this book attempts to reveal. "Spreading Culture" in the title might lead us to discover a possible goal of the author, whose decision to use such a dense, collage like textual structure, which discards linear modes of thought, demands that the reader invents a new reader/writer relationship, while at the same time,

inviting him to actively produce his own book. Through the author's display of how relationships between space and people are built, "Spreading Culture" urges us to physically experience the subtext of "How People Create Space". In such a way, with the reader's engagement in the construction of his own space of thought, the book calls for "the magic of the creations of (real) space", from the last chapter of this book, to reveal itself. The "real" here is put in brackets, which, symptomatically, opens up the basic vagueness of the author's process. Despite many theoretical references, which force us to put the word real under quotation marks, the author is stubbornly trying to defend the reality of space in the empirical part of the book.

Without entering a debate about theoretical references which are plentiful, especially in parts revolving around architectural theory or pedagogical artistic concepts, let us examine the "magic of creating space" of this book through the eye of the reader, and let us venture through the ink on the paper, in search of our own "reality of space". The body of this book, written by the readers and their own topography, is a multi-layered journey which has many different access points. With the author's ambiguity towards the representation of empirical material, the structure of the book calls for a non-linear read, although the author clearly indicates that he wants a hard structure (introduction and conclusion with three subchapters and two central chapters with four subchapters).

The central chapters are called "Defining Space" and "The Creation of Space". In the former, the author separates space in distinct categories, namely corporeality, movement, and borders (natural, as well as, cultural and territorial). In the latter, the author tries to de-territorialize spatial relations, which will later enable him to further debate the space of a night sky, the bottom of the sea, drywall structures and tattooed bodies. By engaging in such a development of the text, explaining space so he could lead it from bodies and human territorialisation to deterritorialization and dispersion, the author implies "the necessity of forming and crossing borders, with

all the magic of the temptation to move across borders".

New spatial relations and a shift from the theoretical view of space that the author talks about are interesting and important to anyone connected with the theory of space in any way, but the experience of the reader's journey can hardly help us clarify some of the more complex theoretical concepts which the book refers to. On the other hand, developing the borders of the imagination of space remains exceptionally relevant for the architectural profession and informs many pedagogical practices of teaching spatial concepts. It would be interesting, for instance, to conjoin the chapter "The Creation of Space", written in ethnographic discourse, with recent architectural pedagogical research developed in the period between 2011 and 2019 during the graduate and post-graduate study of Diane Agrest's "Architecture of Nature: Nature of Architecture" (2019) at the Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture at the Cooper Union in New York City, which resulted in the mentioned book. The research is based on the data collected in environmental studies, history of science, philosophy and art, reviewing the materiality and effects of forces which have impacted land through architectural lens throughout history, and technics of visualisation (drawing and diagram), broadening and transcending the enforced borders of the architecture.<sup>1</sup>

In conclusion, this book is a piece of extensive and personal ethnographic research that calls for a lot of subsequent research. Its main shortcoming is incoherence and poor connection between theory and empirical material, but on the other hand, for the patient reader this is precisely what could prove to be beneficial in opening some important issues. It seems that the author himself understood all the problems by stating that: "A textbook about space gets judged by the time it has spent in the open, as it would be desirable for every book challenged by a wide scope of influences – as well as for every space".

<sup>1</sup> From a book review: <https://www.amazon.com/Architecture-Nature-Diana-Agrest/dp/1939621941> (25.4.2021.)