KULTURALISERINGENS
SAMHÄLLE

Problemorienterad
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*The House of Human & Social Sciences*

If we are to imagine the social sciences and humanities as a building it would certainly not be a harmonious structure, designed by an architect according to stylistic rules and built with solid materials that match their functions. The house of social sciences would rather resemble a crazy *bricolage*, a structure without any clear centre, but with many entrances, built with a mind-bending variety of materials that defy any rules of aesthetics or function. This would be a house from sand and plastic, marble and fishnets, silicon and cast iron; a house that brings to mind William Gibson’s cyberpunk places rather than an ancient Greek temple. Inhabitants of its living room, then, would interact more like dwellers of a Soviet communal apartment rather than visitors to the cultivated Parisian salon of Gertrud Stein. And yes, let us add Tatlin’s turning tower to set this densely inhabited house in motion.

It is only natural that navigating such a hectic place is not an easy task. Just as in Soviet communal apartments its residents, the social science and humanities disciplines, are obsessed with drawing boundaries, asserting their own private identities and black-boxing their neighbours. It is understandable, for resources are scarce, passage points are few and cohabitation is long. Just how often do universities and institutes go bust? How often do new ones open? Unlike in private commerce and industry, academic infrastructure is rather stable. Its expansion comes in waves (the 1970s, the 1990s...) and we have not (yet) seen it shrink. For a scholar, in other words, there is a high risk of ‘getting stuck’ – in a discipline, a university, a department. It may well be the case that energy for innovation is channelled into creating even more disciplines, even more conceptual boundaries, fiefdoms, kingdoms or apartments of knowledge. If one longs for one’s own space it is the only way. For some reason, it seems just too difficult to establish a new university. Consequently, the divides between academic disciplines are drawn and redrawn and not always with beneficial outcomes.

A social synonym of erudition is nosiness: are we not curious what our neighbours are up to? However, delineation and cohabitation demands contain-
Disciplinary boundaries are popular, because they are convenient. One can only be quite certain that overcrowding, lack of politeness and changes do not make for a more comfortable life. There are few shadowy corners into which to retreat. One is constantly exposed to criticism from unexpected directions: opinions can be voiced from the kitchen or bathroom, political science or organisation studies, economics or artistic research. However, I do believe that all these inconveniences may contribute to producing better scholarship: more exciting, more open to detecting blind spots in one's own knowledge. The future of social sciences in general, and culture studies in particular, hopefully lies in such a dense cohabitation and mixture of disciplines, which are not afraid to acknowledge their hybridity. Similarly, the future for a strong research environment lies in the possibility of hiring a scholar on the basis of their expertise and skills, or what they can do well, without requiring the name of a discipline on a diploma. It is rather odd that this practical approach still sounds somewhat controversial in some academic contexts.

There are many ways to encourage communisation of scholarship and perhaps the most popular one has been theme-oriented multidisciplinary departments, such as Tema Q. The size of the population of such departments does depend on national traditions of higher education and research: in some countries academia is more tolerant to interdisciplinarity, whereas in other countries divides can be pedantically guarded. Interdisciplinary departments, then, may get a bit lonely.

But let us take yet another step and think beyond organisation and the formal status of expertise. Let us think about the materiality of a university, a building that actually is a ‘really existing’ house of social science.

It has been noticed by historians of architecture that modern architecture evolved in response to both economic rationality and functionalism related to the uses of the buildings. To paraphrase a recent volume, to live and to die in modernity involves strolling down straight corridors and occasionally turning to enter a little box, an office. Structured around corridors that are lined with
private cells, modern universities resemble monasteries, but also hospitals and modern bureaucratic administrations. Universities are called factories of knowledge and our economy is now supposed to be knowledge-based and creative. However, does the traditional university architecture respond well to the conditions necessary for producing knowledge in the best way? Maybe research institutes are too hospital-like. Private offices, like nursing rooms, prevent bacteria spreading. Being convenient individual spaces, aren’t academic offices places of physical confinement? Should we not allow infection to spread?

Perhaps the most experimental contemporary architecture is reserved for museums and public libraries, the buildings that often are called ‘cathedrals’ of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. I would like to see a new architectural paradigm for houses of social sciences emerging: perhaps, spaces that are not organised via straight lines. Floors, walls and ceilings built from interesting materials and holding promises of individual work places that are not cells. A building situated in the midst of life and not in the outskirts, like cargo warehouses, reduced to input and output flows. Such a house could even be a moving structure. Just like Tatlin’s tower, stirring, interrupting, making people meet, talk, write, and do things together.