

# *Earthly Stage*

*Tracing Architectural Agency  
in the Post-Anthropocene*

Dissertation

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## Problems and Objectives of the Thesis

In 2012, geologist Patricia Corcoran and sculptor Kelly Jazvac collected pieces of melted plastic from Hawaiian Beaches. What they termed ‘plastiglomerates’ were the result of campfires lit on the beach: plastic waste, thrown into the fire or already lying in the sand underneath, began to melt and fuse with the rocks that the waves washed up on the shore.<sup>1</sup> Corcoran and Jazvac interpreted these plastiglomerates as evidence of humanity’s geological significance on the Earth’s environment: beautiful and frightening at the same time, they provide an illustration of the far-reaching anthropogenic scope of the Earth’s climatic transformations.<sup>2</sup>

Meteorologist Paul J. Crutzen and biologist Eugene F. Stoermer described this human impact on the Earth with the term *Anthropocene*: supposedly replacing the Holocene as the current geological era, the concept shed light on the ‘anthropos’ and ‘his’ capacity to alter the planet.<sup>3</sup> The Anthropocene, formulated in 2000, was intended as a warning of the incalculable consequences of human action. And yet, at the same time, the concept also raised the question of the limitations of the epistemological centring of the human being. The subsequent discussions of climate scientists and scholars of the environmental humanities after Crutzen and Stoermer’s proposal thus centred on a different conception of the Earth: the *Post-Anthropocene discourse* fundamentally reconsidered the human-nature relationship, following the aim of developing environmental interpretations outside of human thought patterns.

This doctoral thesis delves into this Post-Anthropocene discourse, focusing on how its theories and philosophical attempts challenged anthropocentric viewpoints in architecture and initiated a different understanding of the architecture-environment relation. Adopting this broader vantage point allows strands such as Actor-Network Theory, Object-Oriented Ontology, and New Materialism to be approached not merely as isolated schools of thought, but as interconnected contributions to a wider development of ecological awareness. Synthesising these post-anthropocentric attempts contributes to understanding the discourse’s emergence, but also the implications and ‘translations’ of these philosophical inquiries into the field of architecture. Several of the Post-Anthropocene’s theories provided speculative

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1 • Corcoran, Jazvac, “The Consequence That is Plastiglomerate.”

2 • Corcoran, Moore, Jazvac, “An Anthropogenic Marker Horizon in the Future Rock Record.”

3 • Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin.”

counter-conceptions to the modernist reading of architectural objecthood. Following these attempts, driven above all by the Post-Anthropocene's idea of non-human agency, allows for an onto-epistemological decontextualisation of the architectural object and its reconsideration as an active participant within environmental processes.<sup>4</sup>

In particular, *Part I – Setting the Stage* focuses on the connections between the discourse and the architectural discipline, asking what potentialities and influences the Post-Anthropocentric discourse has left and continues to leave within the field of architecture, and in what ways these post-anthropocentric theories reconceptualise architectural agency in the context of climate change. *Part II – Performing Bodies* then builds on these questions, reconsidering architecture and its context by exploring how the speculative approach of understanding architecture as a body can shed new light the material consequences of architecture within climate change.

Accordingly, the doctoral thesis follows the objective of (1) explaining the discourse of the Post-Anthropocene and its architectural implications and interrelations with architectural history. It delves into how anthropocentric principles have enforced our understanding of the architectural entity as separate from ecological processes. To challenge this separation, the thesis (2) explores how several theories of the Post-Anthropocene discourse developed counter-perspectives to architecture's objecthood, tracing the early formations of the Anthropocene concept alongside how particular ontological positions can unsettle modern notions of architectural agency. Furthermore, the thesis (3) draws attention to the Earth as the conceptual—and limited—boundary perimeter of architecture. This follows the discourse's call to reconsider our relationship with the very ground we inhabit, a shift in perspective that can foster a deeper awareness of the material and immaterial realities existing besides and beyond dominant narratives of progress and architectural production. Finally, the doctoral thesis aims to (4) expand our architectural vocabulary, providing a novel, speculative, and post-anthropocentric conceptualisation of architecture as a non-human body. Drawing on New Materialist perspectives, this approach aims to foster a heightened awareness of the ongoing earthly processes in which architecture is embedded. The architectural entity then turns into an ecological body among others—which, in turn, aligns with the contemporary tendency in architectural theory to emphasise the material entanglements of architecture beyond the object-boundary.

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4 • I use the term 'onto-epistemological' here in reference to Karen Barad's concept of 'ethico-onto-epistemology,' which Barad proposes as an "appreciation of the intertwinings of ethics, knowing, and being", see Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 185.

## Relevant Current Discourse

The emergence of the Anthropocene concept in 2000 and its subsequent counter positions provide the theoretical and temporal framework for this examination of architecture's agency.<sup>5</sup> The discourse of the Post-Anthropocene is wide-ranging, encompassing a broad spectrum of subdiscourses, theories, and models of thought, from posthuman attempts and ecofeminist thought to inquiries such as Actor-Network Theory, Object-Oriented Ontology, or New Materialism.<sup>6</sup> Common to these substrands, however, is the aim of fostering reconceptions of the environment and its degradation, as well as the questioning of the hitherto anthropocentric modes of thought. In exploring their potential for architecture, the doctoral thesis does not claim to be exhaustive in its scope of literature; rather, the discussed theories exemplify some of the most formative articulations of the broader tendency of post-anthropocentric thought.

Architecture's agency, in turn, has indeed already been addressed by architects. Yet these approaches rarely refer to architecture's *material* agency or link their understanding to the Post-Anthropocene discourse.<sup>7</sup> The doctoral thesis seeks to fill this gap by bringing non-anthropocentric theories in dialogue with architectural theory, especially with regard to the already existing trajectories as they can be traced for example in the work of architectural philosophers such as Catherine Ingraham, Elizabeth Grosz, or H  l  ne Frichot, but also in Daniel Barber's or Kiel Moe's scholarly work.<sup>8</sup> The aim of this dialogue is a close interweaving of existing architectural tendencies and post-anthropocentric ontological concepts to a narrative that provides architectural theorists and other scholars from the environmental humanities with a more comprehensive understanding of architecture's active role within our changing environments. Complementary literature is woven into the individual chapters according to the respective arguments—for instance, the discourse on architectural utopia in the first chapter serves to illustrate persistent anthropocentric thought patterns in architecture.

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5 • Crutzen, Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene'."

6 • For Actor-Network Theory, the doctoral thesis draws on Latour, *Reassembling the Social*. For Object-Oriented Ontology, see Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, and Morton, *Hyperobjects*. For the strand of New Materialism, see Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, and Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

7 • Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, and Jeremy Till have addressed the *spatial* agency of architecture in *Spatial Agency. Other Ways of Doing Architecture*, and John Palmesino and Ann-Sofi R  nnskog, both research fellows on the 'Forensic Architecture' project by Eyal Weizman, investigate architecture's *Territorial Agency*. See Awan, Schneider, Till, *Spatial Agency*; Palmesino, R  nnskog, "Territorial Agency."

8 • Ingraham, *Architecture and the Burdens of Linearity*; Ingraham, *Architecture, Animal, Human*; Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside*; Frichot, *Dirty Theory*; Barber, "After Comfort;" Moe, *Unless*.

## Methodology

The methodological approach of the thesis is grounded in a theoretical synthesis. It integrates concepts from the environmental humanities to construct a cohesive framework for understanding architecture's agency from a non-anthropocentric perspective. A synthesis is always a balancing act, and added value can be found in the arrangement and curation of its individual elements, following the idea that the process of selection itself reveals new insights and creates potentialities that a more exhaustive approach might obscure. This text, thus, seeks not to encompass all possible perspectives or applications but to open up new and creative lines of inquiry that might otherwise remain unexplored. Preceded by a thorough review of relevant literature, it brings together architectural theories, post-anthropocentric ontological models, as well as established concepts from the field of architecture. This approach is not only transdisciplinary in nature but also intentionally focused, as it seeks to transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries and expand the scope of architecture's historiography—an aim that resonates with the complexities of environmental issues highlighted by Post-Anthropocene scholars, calling for a more nuanced understanding of the interconnections between architecture and the Earth's environment.

The trajectory of this thesis, however, can also be understood as inherently speculative. Speculation means to deconstruct, but also to produce, to go beyond mere criticism, and to create new realities outside of existing paradigms. Following this aim, the doctoral thesis is structured into two parts: *Part I* focuses on the *decontextualisation* of the architectural object from its traditional ontological frameworks. This section begins by critically examining how architectural theory has historically been grounded in anthropocentric thought patterns, using the example of the architectural utopia. By decontextualising architecture from these frameworks and binary modes of thought, such as nature and culture or living and dead, the aim in the subsequent three chapters is to challenge conventional assumptions about the autonomy and passivity of architectural objects. These chapters elaborate on the Post-Anthropocene discourse and explore specific ontological frameworks—Actor-Network Theory, Object-Oriented Ontology, and New Materialism—to consider their architectural consequences. In *Part II*, the thesis shifts towards a *recontextualisation* of architecture through post-anthropocentric and New Materialist lenses, exploring the concept of the non-human body while shedding light on architecture's capacity to facilitate exchanges and engage with the Earth's environment.

As already hinted at by the title, the theatre and its terminology have played a decisive influence in shaping the structure of this work. As James Lovelock, founder of the Gaia Theory, has noted, the words ‘theory’ and ‘theatre’ share the same Greek root, illustrating their common grounds in the act of observation and reflection.<sup>9</sup> The theatre offers a space for speculation, and several of the theories discussed here already draw on theatrical language in various forms and to varying extents. The purpose of this is not to overcomplicate my argument with an additional metaphorical layer, but to provide a guiding framework for the chapters that follow, opening a different level of understanding of the theoretical approaches discussed. The metaphor unfolds across the chapters, from examining the epistemological spotlight historically cast on the human being (*Illumination*), to reconsidering the architectural object as an acting entity (*The Actants*), from questioning nature as a passive background (*Painted Curtains*), to challenging architectural rigidity (*The Fourth Wall*). Part II builds on this foundation, ultimately reimagining the architectural entity as a dynamic body (*Bodies*) acting on—and within—the Earth as architecture’s context (*Atmospheres*). Additionally, the chapters are accompanied by introductory images created using the cyanotype technique made by the author. These images are intended to support the underlying thesis of architecture’s agency, illustrating a transition from the static to the moving, the ‘vibrating,’ as new materialist Jane Bennett called it, or the ‘intra-acting,’ to use Barad’s term.<sup>10</sup>

## Main Outcomes

The outcomes of the dissertation reflect the objectives towards an understanding of architecture’s agency, that is, (1) the explanation of the discourse of the Post-Anthropocene and its architectural implications, (2) the exploration of the Post-Anthropocene’s theoretical counter-perspectives to architectural objecthood, (3) the focus on the Earth as a boundary parameter for architecture, and (4) the expansion of our architectural vocabulary through a novel reading of architecture as a non-human body. *Chapter 1 - Illumination* introduced the Anthropocene concept and examined how anthropocentric thought has historically influenced architecture through the lens of architectural utopia. By criticising the human-centred

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9 • Lovelock, *Das Gaia-Prinzip: Die Biographie unseres Planeten*, 79.

10 • See Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

ideals rooted in Enlightenment thinking, it revealed how these principles have isolated architecture-as-object from environmental considerations. *Chapter 2 - The Actants* shifted focus to the emergence of post-anthropocentric thought and drew on the understanding of non-human agency in Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory. *Chapter 3 - Painted Curtains* shed light on the nature/culture divide and its implications for architecture's relationship with the environment. Focusing on Object-Oriented Ontology, the chapter criticised the historically—and architecturally—embedded view of nature as a passive background for human agency and elaborated on how post-anthropocentric theories placed the architectural actant in the midst of a 'lively' environment. *Chapter 4 - The Fourth Wall*, as the last chapter of Part I, challenged the consideration of architecture as a rigid, static object tied to human temporality. By engaging with New Materialism, it argued for a dynamic understanding of architecture that acknowledges its continuous interactions with the environment. *Chapter 5 - Bodies* built on this understanding and situated the architectural entity within a new Materialist ontology, speculatively redefining architecture as a non-human body that transcends human-centred understandings. *Chapter 6 - Atmospheres* built on this understanding and explored architecture's reconception of the context through phenomenological lenses in this regard, introducing the concept of 'deep phenomenology' to explore the material interconnectedness of earthly bodies.

The original contribution of the doctoral thesis, thus, lies in the illustration of the emergence of the Post-Anthropocene discourse, particularly by outlining the three most influential strands of thought that have shaped the architecture-environment relation from a non-anthropocentric viewpoint. Actor-Network Theory, Object-Oriented Ontology, and New Materialism each offer their own take on non-human agency. Tracing these and other non-anthropocentric approaches within a single piece has been helpful in understanding how they reconceptualise the environment and, ultimately, architecture. They questioned the modern container schemata historically—and still frequently—associated with architecture in the Western context. Beyond scholarly engagements with these theories, however, one must also note a more implicit, less immediately discernible impact, emerging from architecture's broader engagement with issues surrounding climate change—manifest, for instance, in the reinterpretation of architectural history and a renewed attention to material concerns.

Furthermore, what can be traced throughout all Post-Anthropocene contributions is an *earthly* understanding of the environment. The earthly, that is what I understood as both the Earth and earth: on the one hand, the Earth as the unique habitat in which we are able to live,

and on the other hand, the earth as the soil and fertile ground of nonhuman agency. Whereas the onto-epistemological theories of the Post-Anthropocene might have focused on abstract explorations of reality, they have indeed also accelerated the development towards a more complex and multiscalar material understanding of the environment. This shift has revealed the vulnerability of architectural bodies and the interdependencies in which Western architectural practice remains embedded—dependencies not only on colonial expansion and cheap labour, but also on material flows and their environmental consequences. The thesis thus contributes to a growing recognition of accountability within architectural discourse, one that resonates with emerging climate justice efforts challenging capitalist extraction and material degradation. Another important contribution, however, emerged through the rereading of utopia through anthropocentric lenses in the first chapter. This analysis revealed not only the latent anthropocentric structures underpinning utopian discourse, but also demonstrated how such anthropocentrism is intrinsic to architectural thought.

Finally, the doctoral thesis developed a novel theoretical framework, reconceptualising architecture as a non-human body. This framework highlighted how architecture actively participates in environmental processes, providing a new language for understanding architecture's material agency and earthly entanglements. This speculative approach can be of particular value for architectural theorists, but also for practitioners and scholars within the environmental humanities who seek to expand their understanding of architecture beyond anthropocentric frameworks. It provides the foundation for further transdisciplinary discussions on architecture's agency within climate change, contributing to a broader rethinking of the material relations in which architecture is embedded.

## Potential Further Research

Further research arising from this dissertation could pursue both practical and theoretical directions, for instance, by deepening the focus on materialities and production processes, or by examining the climatic entanglements that shape architectural practice. Future work could aim to bridge the gap between Western architectural thought and indigenous knowledge systems—an issue that this dissertation could only touch upon in chapter five. Similarly, historical investigations into material relations, particularly within the context of colonial studies, could provide valuable insights into the ways in which architecture has been, and continues to

be, implicated in global systems of extraction, power, and environmental transformation. For the sake of narrative consistency and clarity, several subtopics have only been briefly addressed in this dissertation, including life cycle assessments or legal actions against corporations in the pursuit of climate justice. In-depth case studies and further research could provide a stronger foundation for the theoretical exploration of the concept of the non-human body, supporting both its conceptual justification and potential applications. At the same time, these examples highlight the need to examine the practical implications of the architectural body: its agency within regulatory frameworks and its role in shaping spatial justice. Thus, the dissertation does not merely propose a speculative framework but also has the potential to inform interventions in material and legal domains. Whether in terms of material sourcing, construction ethics, or policy interventions, architectural climate justice is an emerging field of investigation—one that will become increasingly crucial in addressing the uneven distribution of climate impacts and responsibilities within the Earth's environment.

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