

Ramau at 20: a Danish citizen's experience and point of view

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[Pour favoriser l'accès des Cahiers Ramau au public anglophone, que l'auteur appelle de ses vœux, nous avons fait le choix de publier ce témoignage en anglais. Note de l'éditeur]

Introduction: On the road to Ramau

It all began in 1994. I was in the early stages of a research into the architectural profession, which I understood as a contradictory unity of art, professionalism and business (Albertsen, 1994). I wanted to develop that viewpoint by employing a Bourdieusian framework following the intuition that such a contradictory unity could be conceptualised and theorised as a polarised 'champ', a field of architecture (Albertsen, 1996a; 1998). To get inspiration, guidance and advice I went to Paris to visit among others Monique Pinçon-Charlot and Michel Pinçon. I knew both of them from a longer stay at the Centre de Sociologie Urbaine ten years earlier. They put me in contact with Véronique Biau. During our talk Véronique mentioned the Euroconception project directed by Bernard Haumont, which investigated the forces and tendencies conditioning the conception of architecture and constructions. That sent me on the track of following the future developments of this strand of research. I attended the seminars in 1996, 1997 and 1998 under the heading of "The elaboration of architectural and urban projects in Europe", for which I collaborated with Véronique Biau, Bernard Haumont and Patrice Godier on empirical and comparative investigations of the professions of architecture in Europe by supplying data from Denmark (Haumont, Godier, Biau, 1998: 49, Albertsen 1997). Later on, I attended some of the first Ramau-conferences and in 2004, I was asked to be an international member of the scientific council of Ramau together with Graham Winch, which I gladly accepted.

In this article, I will first say something about my activities in the Ramau-context. Then I will address Ramau as a source of knowledge for a foreigner by asking what I have learnt from Ramau and have found particularly interesting, yesterday as well as today. Third, I will comment upon the organisational idea and practice of Ramau as compared to the Nordic situation. In closing I will allow myself a few comments on the future of Ramau as seen from the outside of the hexagon.

Being in Ramau

My 'being in Ramau' consisted of four types of activities: ordinary attendance at Ramau conferences, session discussant at conferences, paper presenter and member of the scientific committee. As an ordinary participant, I took part in the conference on interprofessionality in September 2000 and in the meeting in 2013 on knowledge and models of sustainable urbanism and architecture. I presented a paper to the conference in 2002 on new professional practices of architects in Europe (Albertsen, 2004) and was a discussant at the 2012 conference on "Les métiers de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme à l'épreuve de l'implication des habitants et des usagers" as well as at the 2014 meeting on "La gestion des espaces bâtis et aménagés à l'heure du développement durable: pratiques, évolutions, enjeux". I have been a member of the scientific committee from 2004 to 2007. My experiences of 'being in Ramau' in these different ways can be summarized as follows.

The conferences were very well organised and meticulously prepared. They had the form of quite traditional academic conferences with several sessions, many presentations and discussions demanding from the audience some well-trained academic patience and perseverance, not least for someone not having the French language as his mother tongue. Nonetheless, they were very informative and fruitful and gave a lot of opportunities to socialise with new people. They also left me wondering if the form was appropriate for a network that includes not only academics but also professionals accustomed to other forms of communication. In my own network of the Centre for Strategic Urban Research (www.byforskning.ku.dk) we have the experience of seminars for practitioners, where more time-space is given to discussions among the audience and between researchers and the audience in small groups. The form of the Ramau-meetings does not seem to have changed much over the last 20 years, which underlines, I think, the central role of research and researchers in the network. This is also reflected in the practice of establishing longer-term research projects for the network and organizing the seminars around the projected themes. From 2002, they have covered a very wide span of topics: expert activities and interprofessional cooperation in urban and architectural production (Biau and Tapie, 2009; Bonnet, 2006); sustainability as a challenge for the professions of urbanism and architecture (*Cahiers Ramau* 7 and 8); the impact of the educational sector on the activities and professions of architecture and urbanism (*Cahiers Ramau* 9) and the relationship between knowledge, research and professional practice (project 2018-20).

As I mentioned, the conferences were very well prepared. I experienced that in the context of the 2002-conference on new professional practices. One year before the event, possible presentations were discussed at a preparatory meeting in Paris July 2001 (I didn't participate), then first

and second versions of extended abstracts/synopsis were distributed. Following that, a second preparatory meeting was held in Paris in October 2001 where these versions as well as the organisation and coherence of the conference were under discussion. Papers were delivered beforehand and circulated at the conference. Especially the preparatory meetings were for me quite unusual. In my whole academic career, I don't think I have come across such care for the quality of the presentations and coherence of a conference.

The role of the scientific committee was to actively debate and orient the activities of Ramau. The focus was on structuring and developing the proposals for coordinated research programmes. But it was also forum for broader discussions. From this experience, I remember one lively meeting October 21st, 2005 where, among other things, professionals as taking part in and orienting research (Albertsen, 2005). This took place the day after a working day focalised on “les changements professionnels liés à l'évolution de la prise en compte des destinataires des activités d'architecture et d'urbanisme”, which was proposed as a new coordinated research programme for Ramau. The issue was thematised under the notion of service and concerned among other things the changing relationships between “maîtres d'ouvrage” and “maîtres d'œuvre”, due to new diversified intermediary agencies and the rising difficulties of organising and conciliating such relationships. The overall hypothesis was that the rising demand and diversified aspects of taking the final users into consideration in the whole design, planning and production process of architecture and urban environment produces profound reorganisations of professional relations. The discussion the day after in the scientific committee began with an interesting exchange on the role of the activities of Ramau in relation to the professionals. On the one hand, it was said that the professionals do not read papers, but are fond of continuous learning/education, participate in conferences and publish in the professional press they also read. On the other hand, it was emphasized that one remedy against that could be professional practitioners taking part in research itself. This could help orienting research in directions that could be more relevant to the practical sphere. Here, the user issue was extended into questions of how to make research. What could the role of professionals be, not only in dialogue with future users, but also in ‘dialogue’ with researchers and not least as participants in research? After that discussion we returned to the main issue. Practitioners in research did not become an important Ramau-issue in the following years, but it was developed in programs like POPSU (Prost 2009) and addressed in the 2018-20 Ramau program.

From my experience as discussant, I would like to highlight an exciting session from the Ramau-conference in 2014 on sustainable development. All of the papers that were presented during the session were interesting

and worth commenting upon, but one stood out for me as especially astonishing. It was a paper by Mathieu Bonnefond and others (2014) on the risk of flooding in two cities, Angers in the west of France and Narbonne in the south. The paper and the presentation showed two diverging approaches of the interrelations between water and urban planning which can be formulated like this: Is water understood or problematized as: an actor and mediator which makes things happen, or an object to be pacified and controlled by a direct transposition of rules into practices?

In the latter (modernist) situation urban planning seems governed by the principle: *we must avoid water!* This is obtained by a strict application of rules and a direct transposition of rules into the architectural design of buildings and urban quarters. The consequence is an urbanisation based on slabs and 'brutal' over-elevation, which is unfavourable to everyday urban life. All in all: a situation of mono-principle, mono-professionalism and direct translation.

The principle of the other (a-modern) situation can be formulated like this: *let the water play an active role.* In the city of flooding, water should be treated as an actor with its own behaviour and with its own narrative in the urban project: hydraulicity and its hydraulic models. Water as an actor and its representation must be present from the beginning of the urban project. The city presents itself as an urban landscape that requires the integration of different disciplines in the urban project, especially landscape architecture, not by direct transposition of rules, but through negotiation. Water becomes a mediator that makes things happen (*faire faire*), which gathers different expertises in an inter-professional process in order to "faire la ville et refaire la nature avec l'inondation" as said in the paper.

This was the interpretation I as a starting point for the discussion. Why did I find the paper interesting? Not only because it indicated how such a Latourian interpretation can sharpen the understanding of what matters in the concern with water and urbanity. But also because back home (in Aarhus), I could "recycle" what I learnt from the paper in my supervision of a PhD-fellow who was investigating similar issues (Wiberg 2018). This example constitutes a natural transition to the next section.

Learning from Ramau

One overall issue has left an important and lasting impression on me. It is the importance of understanding the specific professional activities of architects and urban and regional planners in larger networks and that of the conditions of action. This is not surprising at all since this is exactly the main viewpoint and purpose of Ramau. As said in the presentation, the objective of the network is illuminating the fabrication of cities (and architectures and landscapes) in simultaneous examinations of the elaboration of architectural and urban projects, the organisation

of activities, and the professional practices and cultures of the actors in projects. This includes the relationship with clients and future users and with the persons in charge of building the projects and managing them. This also reaches out to larger societal conditions (economical, social, political, regulatory) as well as the overall societal issues and challenges that may occur. It may seem too obvious to mention this general approach as something special, but in fact, I think it is. Much research in the fields of architecture, urban, regional and landscape planning is concerned with the projects as finished entities, and if it investigates the processes of becoming, this is often seen in quite narrow networks or systems of action. Ramau places such narrow 'systems of actors and actions' within larger systems. Hence, the Ramau approach can be summarized as 'systems of action inside systems of action'.

The specificity of Ramau: interdisciplinarity and systems of action

Two aspects of this approach seem especially important. First, it widens the scope of issues to be investigated and hence also the disciplines to be taken into consideration, i.e. multi and inter disciplinarity. Thus, the investigation of the relation with clients and end-users has pointed towards the integration of broader questions of 'service' as theorised and investigated in economics and sociology. What is the specific character of the "service relation" in the building sector (May, 2000) and how could it clash with the idea of architecture as (art)work (Camus, 2001)? *Per se* the opposition between architecture as an art and architecture as a service is not surprising. I have detected it in debates among Danish architects too: The concept of architecture "is all about the artistic and inside the artistic, the aesthetical" versus architects are "working in a qualified way so that the expectations of the customer are satisfied" (quoted in Albertsen, 1996a). What seems specific to Ramau is that such questions have been explored much deeper by resorting to other disciplines.

The other aspect is that the 'systems of action inside systems of action' approach is thoroughgoing all and one specific themes of the research programs. This aspect, rather than the themes themselves, seems to be the specialty of Ramau. Let me mention two examples: The question of architectural quality and the question of sustainability.

Architectural quality was a theme of research developed in the Ramau context on the initiative of the profession, and it gave rise to a two day Ramau-meeting in 2005 and to *Cahiers Ramau 5* (2009). However, the question of architectural quality was at that time on the agenda not only in France, but in other contexts. It was, somehow, in the air. At the Aarhus School of Architecture we had two PhD-fellows working on this question, and I was supervising one of them. His project was interdisciplinary; it relied upon two disciplines outside architecture, neuro-aesthetics and

discourse theory (Nygaard 2006). If we compare with *Cahiers Ramau 5*, what strikes me as different from Nygaard is that *Cahiers Ramau 5* frames and answers the question of architectural quality in terms of relations, interactions and differences between actors of different types: designers, builders (public or private), investors, developers, users, administrative and political organizations, etc. (Biau and Lautier, 2009: 18). From a discourse theoretical point of view, Niels Nygaard characterised the term or concept of architectural quality as an “empty signifier” that can be connected to different questions and interests. *Cahiers Ramau 5* shows how different actor’s positions and relations can supply some ‘content’ to this ‘emptiness’.

Sustainability has been a highly prioritised issue of Ramau. It was the focus of the 2011-14 research plan which produced two issues of *Cahiers Ramau* (7 and 8). Again, although sustainability was at that time certainly not a specialty of Ramau, it was investigated almost everywhere in architectural and urban design and planning milieus, and in many different contexts. Even pre-industrial architectural heritage could be investigated under that heading as shown in another PhD thesis produced under my supervision at the Aarhus School of Architecture at the time (Eybye, 2016). The Ramau-specialty was *the approach*. Sustainability was investigated through focalizing on the knowledge and competences required from architects and urbanists, on models of sustainable architecture and urbanism, on the organisational and institutional ways of operationalizing sustainability and on the question of interdisciplinary research (*Cahiers Ramau 7*). The question of services turned up again since sustainability is not only about fabricating the city but also of managing and maintaining it in sustainable ways (*Cahiers Ramau 8*).

Beside this overall, important and instructively exemplified learning from Ramau, I would like to highlight three more specialised fields or themes of research that I have found particularly interesting in the Ramau context: architecturology, atmosphere/ambiances and interprofessionality.

Architecturology

For many years, I have been following the development of the discipline of *architecturology*. One example: together with Jerker Lundequist (1942-2015), professor of design methodology at KTH, Stockholm and with the help of professor Philippe Boudon, I edited an issue of *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research* in English, which contained translations of articles and papers by professor Boudon and his colleagues (Albertsen and Lundequist, 1999). Against this background, it has been particularly interesting for me to follow the ways in which the architecturological approach has illuminated some Ramau themes of research. Investigating the cases of l’Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris and the Palais de Justice

in Caen, Caroline Lecourtois (2009) analyses the concept of architectural quality mobilizes some pertinent spaces of reference (scales) to open fields of investigation :

- How can the perception of architecture be looked upon as a cognitive ‘re-designing’ of the architectural space?
- How can the users’ conception of quality be understood not as use-value but as perceptive representation?
- How can such representations be strongly and negatively ‘out of tune’ (my expression) with architects’s conceptions, even though, after some time, the former can converge towards the latter as the building becomes integrated into the everyday lives of citizens and the developments of the built environment.

On sustainability, Caroline Lecourtois (2015) explored the most pertinent spaces of reference in some texts on ecoquartiers and the different ways these references turn up in spatial design operations. The pertinent spaces of reference (economical, geographical, technical, architectural model, neighbouring, social, visual and temporal references) were resorted to in 10 different ways of operating. The article clearly shows how architecturology can illuminate the highly differentiated character of sustainable design. There is no such thing as a simple concept of eco-design, and the referential space of architectural models is only one among others. This “fits” very well with the overall finding of *Cahiers 7* that there is no such thing as “the model of urban sustainability” (Debizet and Godier, 2015: 277). This said, it comes as a little surprise that ‘sustainability’ does not offer some resistance to the general conceptual apparatus of architecturology. The reason may be that some of the categories of spaces of reference (economical, geographical, technical, social) are very general and comprehensive as classificatory devices. Despite this, the descriptions of sustainability measures that were implemented are very illuminating and detailed. They might have resulted in some sustainability-generated reconsiderations of the basic conceptual apparatus of architecturology.

Atmosphere/Ambiance

In the second half of the 1990s, the concept of atmosphere/ambiance caught my attention. I wrote a couple of articles (Albertsen, 1996b; 1999), but from the early years of 2000, I became preoccupied with other things. Only later on, from about 2008-9, the interest in this issue exploded in the Danish context. I directed two PhD-projects: one on atmosphere and architectural heritage (Ventzel Riis, 2014) and one on atmosphere and design (Kinch, 2014). I organised an international PhD-research course in 2012, I resumed writing (synthesised in Albertsen, 2013) and became, in different ways, involved in the Ambiances network (ambiances.net). Looking back on the issues of *les Cahiers*, I discover that I

have not dedicated to the contributions to this field of research (Terrin, 2006; Amphoux, 2006; Balaÿ and Siret, 2009) the attention I should have devoted to them. Actually, reviewing these articles today, what strikes me is that my own focus on the phenomenologico-aesthetic conception of atmosphere could have been influenced and put into wider perspectives by considering not only the technological perspective on ambiance (Terrin, 2006), but also the ways production of ambiances may be dependent on conscientious considerations in the early phases of design, and how things can go wrong, if ambiances are not co-constructed by users, builders, and designers (Balaÿ and Siret, 2009: 67). This said, I certainly also can subscribe to Pascal Amphoux's philosophico-poetic notion of Ambiance as an irreducible, relational and dynamic concept in need of interdisciplinarity, intersensoriality and intergenerationality (different and dynamic forms of representation and expression) in order to represent/express (*repress*, one might say, or *rexpressent!*) the "incommensurable heterogeneity of the physical, social and aesthetical" elements that make up Ambiances (Amphoux, 2006: 59). In my view, this perspective is very much in tune with my own idea of 'gesturing atmosphere' I developed a few years later (Albertsen, 2012). Amphoux's little article is still very fruitful to be thought over and to think with.

Interprofessionality

My third interest, the concept of interprofessionality, was addressed in *Cahiers Ramau 2*. At that time (2000) there was a very active debate on interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity and so-called Mode 2 research (Gibbons et. al. 1994), and relations between professions were often considered as relations of competition and struggles over jurisdictions (Abbott, 1998). In this situation, interprofessionality came as a perfect eye-opener. This concept pointed towards investigating forms of cooperation and coordination, the paths of negotiation, organisational development and confidence-building processes between the heterogeneous professions with their diverging ontologies (Evette, 2001). But for me, interprofessionality has since then moved somehow into the background in the Ramau context, while on the contrary it emerged in the foreground in other areas such as health and social care. It might be interesting to have a second look at interprofessionality 20 years later.

Comparing Ramau

As far as I know and seen from a Danish/Nordic and wider international perspective, Ramau is above all a unique example of a sustained effort over 20 years to gather and publish the work of researchers who explore and investigate the interlinked transformations and developments of competencies and professions, the plurality of actors and the ever changing

challenges facing professionals of design, production and maintenance of our built environments. Launching 2-3 years research programmes, inviting contributions from different research milieus, careful planning of conferences and publications, I don't know of anything similar in the realm of urbanism and architecture; Neither do I know an effort over such a long time in simultaneously coherent and differentiated ways. Let me just compare with two examples of coordinated research in the Nordic countries.

My own context, the Centre for Strategic Urban Research, celebrates its 15th anniversary this year (2019); One might think it shows similar strengths of perseverance with Ramau but this would be a misunderstanding because the Centre has not been centrally focusing on investigating the professions in their broader contexts, and the group of researchers belongs to a limited set of 3 institutions within Copenhagen University, Aalborg University and the Aarhus School of Architecture. Each year, the Centre organises a one-day seminar for practitioners on a specified and actually relevant theme ("The City and the Sea" in 2019), which relies on on-going or accomplished research within the Centre, but these meetings are not grounded in common 2-3 year research plans comparable to the Ramau research strategies.

In 2006, I participated in an evaluation of 10 years of Swedish architectural research (Forty, 2006). The Swedish research authorities followed our recommendation to coordinate the research activities of the dispersed research milieus in the Swedish institutions and to increase the fundings. The outcome was a huge program of state funded inter-institutional coordinated research with two "strong research environments": one on architectural theory and method and one on "Architecture in Effect: Rethinking the Social in Architecture" (architecture in effect.se). It is striking that the latter coordinated program has not been focalised on the profession in its broader context of systems of actors. One project only (the one on the role of education in socialising the professional architect (<http://architectureineffect.se/people/bergstrom>) raises this issue. Furthermore, this program has been limited to the 2011-2017 period.

Compared to these two Nordic examples, the uniqueness of Ramau can be specified a little more. The specificity is not only that Ramau has persisted for 20 years with different research programs investigated from the point of view of a common, transversal approach. It is also that this has happened in the form of flexible networks between a variety of research milieus rather than through stable inter-institutional partnerships. Flexible networks can be fragile, but weak ties may also be strong as Granovetter analysed in a paradigmatic sociological article (Granovetter, 1973). In Ramau, stability and flexibility have co-existed in the network form of research (see also the article by Laurent Devisme in this issue).

Ramau future

So Ramau is, as I see it, unique in its sustained network-mediated research on the professions of architecture and urbanism in their broader contexts of actors, societal conditions and shifting challenges. Seen from an in-between position of outside observer and inside actor, Ramau should certainly continue in the future to investigate on how new challenges will force the professions to transform themselves and how they can cope with such forces. Not only for the sake of French research and French professions, but also for the sake of showing the outside world how such research can be approached and implemented. This recommendation also goes for the other networking activities of Ramau, which I have not touched upon here. This raises the question of the international perspective and accessibility of the activities and outcomes of the Ramau network. Especially in the beginning, Ramau was very good at integrating international /European comparisons into the research work. Later on, Ramau seems somehow to have turned back, to focus on situations in France. There may be many good reasons for this turn towards the hexagon, but it has – paradoxically perhaps – made the question of internationalization even more important. Ramau has not proven any ability to “speak” beyond French-reading/speaking audiences. This is really a pity, precisely because of what I have already said: the internationally unique character of its activities and publications. A lot of people could learn a lot, but architectural and urban researchers and professionals in e.g. the Nordic countries generally don’t even know the existence of Ramau; And when they do the language comes as an insurmountable barrier. While I was a member of the scientific committee, I proposed that Ramau could try something like the *Revue Française de Sociologie*, which publishes selected articles in English. Cairn info also publishes dossiers of articles on specific themes in English. Something like this could, I think, enable Ramau to internationalize much more. The richness and pertinence of Ramau’s activities and publications deserve a much wider audience. May the publication of this article in English be a reminder!

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Notes

- 1 In a good-humoured and creative moment during a workshop at the 3rd International Congress on Ambiances in Volos (2016), Pascal Amphoux and I came to baptize such amalgamations of representation and expression *rexpression*. This, I now suggest, could be developed into a continuum between a pole of *rexpression* close to pure expression and a pole of *rexrepresentation* close to pure representation; for both of them, 'purity' is a pure idealisation.