The re-construction of sustainable architecture. Sociotechnical practices in design work

The main aim of the study is to reconstruct the concept of sustainable architecture in the discourse organizing the system of architecture and in design practice. In the project, I want to understand the specificity of architects' work in Poland against the background of current European tendencies concerning this concept and answer the questions about how this idea is understood, applied, and transformed, how it "works" in architects' everyday work, affects their design decisions, and what tools and for what purposes they use to turn the concept into reality. Based on actor-network theory and autopoietic social systems theory, the knowledge of sustainable architecture and the ontological status of the concept is not a starting point for me (buildings are not sustainable because they implement sustainable architecture assumptions), but an endpoint that can be traced by looking at how objects are enacted as sustainable.

The paradigm of sustainable design is present in policies, and strategies, but also in legal acts and rules of architectural competitions around the world. In the public debate, the term "sustainable architecture" even functions already as a black box, a concept objectified by parameters and certificates, framed by visual representations, systems of values, knowledge, and practices. However, there is a lack of in-depth research on the process of producing such architecture. Social studies on architecture also tend not to analyze the problems that architects, and other actors involved in the design process face in their everyday work when trying to materialize the assumptions of sustainable architecture in practice. This, in turn, may be of crucial importance in the context of implementing sustainable solutions in the system of architecture, which today generates 40 percent of energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, and which is also a kind of instrument for meeting challenges related to climate change or Sustainable Development Goals. It can be seen, among others, in the New European Bauhaus initiative established by the European Commission, in which sustainable architecture is supposed to be an end in itself (through its quality, durability, and aesthetics), but also to contribute to achieving climate neutrality in Europe.

The study aims to fill this gap in social research on architecture and is divided into 2 main stages. In the first stage, I will reconstruct the process of sustainable architecture production in architectural discourse and analyze the most important controversies surrounding this concept. By analyzing the content (texts and statements from individual interviews) and visual material (mock-ups, visualizations), which make up the broader discourse analysis, it will also be crucial for me to map the main actors involved in this process and the mechanisms of generating and negotiating this concept as a new structure of meaning in the system of architecture.

In the second stage, I will explore how the "tribes of architects" work on sustainable architecture projects. The study involves ethnographic research (participant observation, individual interviews, dyads and focus groups) in design studios in Poland, as well as study trips to foreign studios renowned in the field of sustainability (e.g. Belgium, Denmark, Spain, or Portugal). Relating the results collected in Poland to current European trends is particularly important as the idea of sustainability is less widespread in the Polish architectural community and society compared to highly developed countries. Such an approach will allow me to study architecture in action and interpret various design, legal, technological, and financial strategies in the sociotechnical enactment of sustainability. During this stage, I will pay less attention to ideologies and theories in the system of architecture, and more to the specific practices of architects. Thus I will be interested in how and if the idea of sustainability is relevant to their everyday design work, how it influences their decisions, and how different actors involved in the design process "translate" the specialist knowledge and assumptions of this concept, how they understand it, fill it with meanings and apply and transform it in practice.

The main outcome of my project will be the preparation of two chapters of my doctoral dissertation and at least two articles for peer-reviewed scientific journals. Reconstructing the process of sustainable architecture production, describing the factors that intertwine and sustain it, and observing the practices of architects will allow to formulate in-depth conclusions about the system of architecture, and recommendations for the design process and frameworks (e.g. competitions) for the successful implementation of sustainable buildings, for example within the New European Bauhaus on the national and international level.