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On visitor centers, thresholds and the territorialisation of entrances

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# In search of building types: On visitor centres, thresholds and the territorialisation of entrances

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The aim of this paper is to contribute to an actantial approach to building type studies through a study of the visitor centre and its role in contemporary spatial production. The article takes its empirical departure in the intense urbanisation (from a Swedish perspective) of the Scania region, in the southern part of Sweden. Looking at building types in terms of actants implies that different sets of buildings can be abstracted in different ways (and not just in terms of form or function) depending on the effect they have in a certain situation. The proliferation of visitor centres in Scania is by no means an innocent development – these centres have a part to play in the urbanisation process of the region. The article discusses this role as a kind of threshold actant or type, which is further divided into four different subcategories in order to show connections with other sorts of spaces in the urban landscape. The discussion is then used both to highlight the role of visitor centres in recent processes of urbanisation, and to argue for a more open-ended, relational and pragmatic approach to building type studies, with a focus on the role that building types play in society and everyday life.

*Keywords:* building types, visitor centres, thresholds, material semiotics, territoriality

## Introduction

Building types play an important role in society and everyday life. They are actors that can affect the formation and use of urban space on local, regional and even global levels (Schneekloth and Franck, 1994; King, 2004; 2010; Guggenheim and Söderström, 2010). Despite this, building type studies have arguably remained a relatively small and undertheorised field in architectural research, and even more so in the social sciences at large. Building types are often discussed as stable and already categorised entities, but as Koch has recently shown, they are continuously changing, and the stability assigned to them is often an illusion (Koch, 2014). In fact, one might perhaps even describe them as mutable and mobile abstractions held together only temporarily, and at great cost (cf. Latour and Yaneva, 2008). Looking at building

types as evolutionary and ever changing, rather than something stable – as matters of concern rather than matters of fact (Latour, 2004) – raises a number of issues. What is a building type and what does it do? How can we investigate building types as a more fluid phenomenon, i.e. without taking their roles, effects or even their conceptualisations as predefined or for granted?

The aim of this article is to contribute to an actantial approach to building type studies (Guggenheim, 2010; Kärrholm, 2013; cf. Latour, 2005; Hammad, 2002; Sandin, 2009; 2015), through a study of the visitor centre and its role in contemporary spatial production and in the processes of urbanisation. The actant perspective can be seen as related to actor network-theory (Latour, 2005) and material semiotics (Law, 2009), and the basic assumption is that any entity can take on any number of differ-

ent actor roles, and that certain effects (in society or everyday life) can be described through tracing the actors associated with these effects. A coffee break might, for example, be seen as the effect of a specific cup, table, chair, human, etc., that through taking on specific roles in a specific situation (the cup takes the role of the coffee cup, the human takes the role of the coffee drinker, etc.) make the coffee break possible. An actor here is that which brings a difference to a situation and is a role that can be taken on by people, animals, things, ideas, spatial structures, atmospheres, and so forth. Any effect or event is always produced by multiple actors in relation (no one can act totally alone), which means that agency (the ability to act) is always seen as distributed. Furthermore, an actor that shows similar (although not identical) effects in a series of different situations and contexts can be called an actor type or an actant (cf. Greimas and Courtes, 1982; Hammad, 2002). A favourite blue cup might play the role of coffee cup and is thus an actor in this situation; the more abstract notion of 'coffee cup' is, however, a type of actor that recurs in most coffee breaks and can thus be seen as an actant. The relation between actor and actant will be discussed in more detail, being of special interest to building type studies. For now, it will suffice to say that the actant perspective can be especially useful in typological investigations when actors and types are not predefined, but need to be traced, and where effects are at stake rather than intentions, i.e. when we are interested in how building types come to play a role in everyday life.

The article takes its empirical departure in the intense urbanisation (from a Swedish perspective) of the Scania region in the southern part of Sweden over the last 20 years. The urbanisation of Sweden took off during the late nineteenth century and became more intense during the 1960s and 1970s, which is quite late in comparison with other European countries. From the mid-nineties, the

urbanisation of the Scania region intensified as it developed into a polycentric urban landscape, with important new infrastructure projects such as the bridge to Copenhagen, new motorways, the City Tunnel under central Malmö, and several new railway stations both in the centres and the peripheries of the urban landscape. Along with this urbanisation, major transformations of public buildings and public spaces have also taken place (Kärrholm, 2015). These transformations involve new buildings as well as the reshaping of old ones, including, for example, university buildings, libraries, public baths and museums. Indeed, it can be argued that public institutions play an important but often neglected role in the transformation of public space (a discourse that so far has often been preoccupied with outdoor spaces). One of these publicly accessible buildings is the visitor centre, which can be seen as one of the actors playing a role in the current transformation of urban landscapes. An interesting and relatively new building type, the visitor centre is also representative to some degree of the consumer society of our time. In Scania, the type started to develop in the 1990s; as common in cities as in more rural parts of the region, it is a building type that really marks a kind of regional urbanisation through the domestication, touristification and even production of rural and urban attractions, national parks and cultural heritage sites.

### **Building types and actants**

I would like to suggest that, traditionally, building type studies have been problematic in two ways. Firstly, they have often taken a historical perspective and focused on uncovering ideas and tasks behind certain buildings, rather than studying the role they play as built and lived spaces in society. This point is elucidated by Karlsmo and Löfgren (2016) in their historiography of Swedish building type studies where they also conclude that:

The fact that researchers have had an interest in the functional aspects of architecture does not mean that they have surveyed and viewed buildings in terms of its final material form or practical, situated and everyday use (Karlsmo and Löfgren, 2016, p. 24)

Secondly, building type studies have often focused on either form or function (Forty, 2000; Steadman, 2014; Koch, 2014), i.e. on either *formal types or use-types* (Scheer, 2010, p. 12), on *activity types or built form types* (Steadman 2014, p. 354). Some later texts have sought to overcome this division, but with varying results. Philip Steadman combines the form and the use approach in his recent book *Building Types and Built Forms* (2014), but still keeps them firmly separated, giving every other chapter to each of the two perspectives, thus confirming the division (both in content and form). A more heterogeneous example can be found in the compilation *Elements* published in connection to the Venice Biennale in 2014 under the directorship of Rem Koolhaas (Koolhaas et. al., 2014). The investigated elements – including the façade, stairs, corridor, floor, ramp, roof, toilet, ceiling, elevator, fireplace and balcony – are here used as a way of tracing changes in style, use and effect (etc.), through urban and architectural history. Koolhaas' dissection of architecture into discrete elements – also followed by Foscari in her extensive analysis of Venice (Foscari, 2014) – sets a good example in the way that it contextualises types in culture, use and history, whilst the typologisation itself seems quite firmly based in form. It is an investigation into how certain form elements are associated and elaborated in different ways and thus echoes the basic modernist/postmodernist divisions of form and function, or form and meaning.

This article, suggests the possibility of sidestepping these two problems – the focus on origins rather than effects, and the focus on categories

defined before rather than after the investigation – through an *actant* analysis, where actant can be described as a recurrent type of effect associated with a specific set of actors (Latour, 2005). This sidestepping should not be seen as a total rejection of the former perspectives – the intention is rather to open up a wider study of building types as moving and never fully known targets (cf. Yaneva, 2012, p. 25 ff). Before being named or filed under any specific categories (such as form-type or use-type), buildings make a difference in a situation and become associated with other buildings that have, or have had similar effects. These effects are always co-produced by a series of different aspects or actors, and are always part of a process of formation as well as of a production of meaning. If one, for a moment, stops focusing only on form and/or function as possible categories for typification, one soon realises that the similar effects of a certain set of buildings might actually be abstracted and categorised in a number of other ways as well. An actant perspective thus opens up the field for new kinds of building types, new questions, and might also be a way of showing how building type studies have an even higher relevance to social sciences (i.e. outside architectural and morphological research), than hitherto recognised.

As noted in an earlier article (Kärrholm, 2013), building types are very much a question of territorialisation and can be seen as part of a territoriology (Brighenti, 2010). A territory can here be seen as an effect produced by means of a more or less discrete space and time. Such territories can be produced strategically, tactically, by means of appropriation or through mere association; they might be more or less stable, they can and often do overlap, and could in short be described as a kind of spatio-temporal actor. Public buildings and spaces are often veritable palimpsests of overlapping territories, and although there might be one or several dominating territorial strategies involved, these are always complicated

and sometimes even resisted by more or less temporary territorial appropriations, tactics and associations. From a territorial perspective a building type can be described as a specific *sort of territory*, a territorial actant, produced through associations with similar territories at other places.

Focusing on processes of territorialisation, along with the formation of territorial actants rather than the forms or functions of certain objects, also affects how we see the relationship between the type and its incarnations. In his description of building types, Steadman concludes that: 'Some properties of a type – those by which it is recognizable – are shared between all instances, and may be referred to as essential properties' (Steadman, 2014, p. 354). This idea, that a building type is defined by some common characteristic or feature present in every example of the type, is often repeated in building type theory (see, for example, Caniggia and Maffei, 2001, p. 50; Sheer, 2010, p. 27) but is not necessarily true. If building types are defined by effects rather than properties, it might be that instead of a single property being necessary per se to define a specific building type, that one out of many need to be present. Hillier's and Hanson's biological analogy to the concepts of genotype and phenotype actually comes somewhat closer to what is meant here (Hillier and Hanson, 1984; Hillier, Hanson and Graham, 1987). They discuss genotypes as an abstracted commonality and phenotypes as the actual observed properties, without claiming any direct or identical relationship between the phenotype and the genotype. A building type, as argued in this article, can have a certain set of effects in common, but the concrete properties of these effects, as well as their specifics, do not necessarily have to be similar but may vary within the type. The stabilisation of a certain type might be better described as a fluid stabilisation than a network stabilisation, thus also implying a family resemblance between different

examples, rather than a single feature held in common (Mol and Law, 1994; Law, 2002).

If we see building typology from a territorial and semiotic perspective (rather than through the biological analogies used by Hillier and Hanson, 1984; and Steadman, 2008; 2014) then the relation between the type and its incarnations can be described as a relation between an actant and an actor. In *Reassembling the Social* (2005), Latour writes that: '*any thing*' that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor – or if it has no figuration yet, an actant' (Latour 2005a: p. 71). The actant is thus regarded as more abstract than the actor, but we do not learn much more than that. If we go back to an earlier text by Latour, we find another description: 'We use actant to mean anything that acts and actor to mean what is made the source of an action' (Latour, 1992, p. 177). In fact, there is a lack of consistent distinction between actor and actant across Latour's many texts, which sometimes treat them as synonymous, and other times clearly state some kind of difference, as above. One way of reaching some clarity is to go back to his predecessors within semiotics. In *Semiotics and Language* (1982), Greimas and Courtes quote the French linguist Lucien Tesnière, from whom they have borrowed the term 'actants', in stating that 'actants are beings or things that participate in processes in any form whatsoever' (Tesnière in Greimas and Courtes, 1982, p. 5). For Greimas and Courtes, actants are abstract roles not yet filled with any ideological or semantic investments (Greimas and Courtes, 1982, p. 5ff; see also Greimas, 1987, p. 106–120; Sandin, 2015, p. 92f.). Disregarding the structuralist ambitions of Greimasian semiotics, but following this line of semiotic discourse in the sense of seeing the actant as an analytical concept, reveals it not to be a concrete actor but an actor type; neither is the actant seen as *a priori* category, but is in fact extracted or abstracted from a series of concrete examples (actors) of the empirical world. A food store is a store

that sells food and can be seen as an important actant in everyday life. The role of 'food stores' can be played and incarnated by different actors over time, for example by grocery stores, convenience stores and supermarkets in different parts of the city. A wide variety of places might ultimately be called 'food stores', even though they might be attributed as different form types and/or different use types by building type researchers. In short, a similar actor role can be played by a series of different places and associated with a specific actor type (an actant) that can be simply called 'food store'.

Actants, just like actors, denote things that modify situations and make a difference, and their role is defined together with the associated actors, i.e. the actor is defined by its role in a certain context of actors, or by what Latour calls the network (Latour, 2005). Even though a building type might be black boxed and, for example, symbolised by the school- or prison-building alone, it is in fact dependent on actors of different sizes and shapes; everything from keys, teachers, prisoners, and chairs, to law systems and public transportation. There is no fixed or privileged use, form or scale (Latham and McCormack, 2010), but each effect is the effect of a network whose scale, shape and multiplicity need to be defined empirically. This means that building types are produced and transformed not just in terms of the work done by different kinds of authorities, such as architects, engineers and through building regulations, but also in terms of the ongoing practices and power relations of everyday life.

One could perhaps distinguish between three different ways of studying building types. As previously mentioned, the traditional concept of building type is often defined from a perspective of strategic production (trying to pinpoint some common feature as defining the type), and building type studies have been preoccupied with building types as defined by their 'proper' and established names, such as schools, shops, row-houses, prisons and skyscrap-

ers (cf. Karlsmo and Löfgren, 2016). However, the actant perspective opens up at least two other perspectives: these include typologisations made in ongoing everyday life, such as waiting places, places to hang out or favourite spots (and their socio-spatial aspects); and the possibility of looking for actants not yet categorised at all. This last more speculative approach could include questions such as: where can we find new territorial sorts, what do they do, and what can we call them? Here, building type studies might become a search for analytical or even generative tools, and it is this final possibility that will be investigated in this article. However, we will start on a more traditional note by introducing the visitor centre as a building type and a specific sort of territory.

### **Visitor centres and the urbanisation of a region**

Visitor centres have been described as 'clearly labeled buildings where staff provides information to the public for the purpose of enhancing and managing the visitor experience' (Pearce & Moscardo, 2007, p. 29f.). The visitor centre (sometimes related to other conceptualisations, such as the information centre, the interpretative centre or the welcome centre) is a new and multi-functional building type focusing explicitly on tourists, which became popular in the Anglo-Saxon world, especially the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. The idea of the visitor centre can be traced back to (at least) the beginning of the twentieth century, and has much to do with tourism, the proliferation of cars and the development of new and easier ways to travel. In North America, so-called 'welcome centres' with information for tourists and rest stops for motor tourists had already appeared by 1935 (Pearce, 2004, p. 8f.). Visitor centres are often associated with national parks and building heritage sites, and in Sweden some of the first visitor centres started as *Naturum* ('Nature space' or 'Room of nature'),

<sup>1</sup> An interesting predecessor to *Naturum* was the Swedish recreation centres (*recreationscentraler*) built in connection to recreational areas and national parks, often in forests, in Sweden during the 1950s and 1960s (Qviström 2013).

a concept trademarked by Naturvårdsverket and defined as 'a visitor centre with activities and exhibitions located at several of Sweden's national parks and nature reserves' (Naturvårdsverket 2015). The first Naturum was inaugurated in 1973, taking inspiration from the United States and the United Kingdom, but was no more than an exhibition in a couple of caravans. With Hornborgarsjön naturum in 1986, the project became more ambitious and it was stated by Naturvårdsverket that the centres should be built in a contemporary architectural style and be place specific – soon these centres became prestigious architectural commissions (Isitt, 2013)<sup>1</sup>.

The proliferation of visitor centres in Scania parallels both the rapid population growth that has been taking place in the region since the early 1990s, and the ongoing processes of space-time compression (Harvey, 1999), whereby commuting time becomes shorter and people increasingly travel across the whole of the region. The number of estimated local labour markets in Scania has, for example, decreased from 16 in 1970, to four in 2000, and three in 2008 (cf. Levin, 2008). People travel more and for longer as part of their everyday lives, for work, shopping, recreation, and so forth. The visitor centre was introduced in Scania during the 1990s and built examples of that building type include (but are not limited to): Skrylle naturum (1991), Stenshuvud naturum (1993), Glimmingehus visitor centre (1996) and Äpplets hus in Kivik (1997). By 2000, the concept (*besökscenter* in Swedish) was firmly established and new visitor centres opened, including for example, Söderåsen naturum (2000), the visitor centre for film, Cineteket, in Ystad (2006), the Swedish Pomological Science Center in Stenestad (2008), Kullaberg naturum (2009), Vattenriket naturum in Kristianstad (2009), Domkyrkoforum in Lund (2011), Malmö airport visitor centre (2011), Absolut Vodka visitor centre (2012), Möllegården (2015) at Lund Science Village in connection to ESS (European Spallation Source) and the Max IV

Laboratory, in the north-east part of Lund. Some of these, like Vattenriket (by White Arkitekter) and Domkyrkoforum (by Carmen Izquierdo) are also prestigious buildings in terms of their architecture. The latter, for example, received the Kaspar Sahlin award – the most prestigious architectural award in Sweden – in 2012. Visitor centres, planned but not built (yet), include Uppåkra Archaeological Centre south of Lund and Ale stenar in Kåseberga.

In short, the visitor centre has become a firmly established and increasingly popular building type in Scania over about 25 years, along with other parts of Sweden and western Europe at large (see Figures 1 and 2). A visitor centre can traditionally be seen as a kind of use-type, but of course is not a spatial machine of homogenous use. As soon as we start to look more closely at the building type 'visitor centre', we realise that its name might give us some clues about how a certain set of buildings (under this heading) are related to each other; however, this also hides a series of other possible associations and connections. To investigate this we need to ask more open questions: what does a visitor centre do? What kind of actor roles can they take? The definition above gives us some ideas. A visitor centre manages the visitor experience, preparing visitors and informing them about the 'attraction', and in this sense it stages information much like museum spaces. In terms of movement and its relation to the question of urbanisation, we might, however, want to highlight another role: the role of a threshold, or a kind of territorialised entrance. The visitor centre is a threshold preparing the visitor for a new territory. It implies a boundary becoming a place of its own, and its actor role is to manage visitors with information and directions to the site.

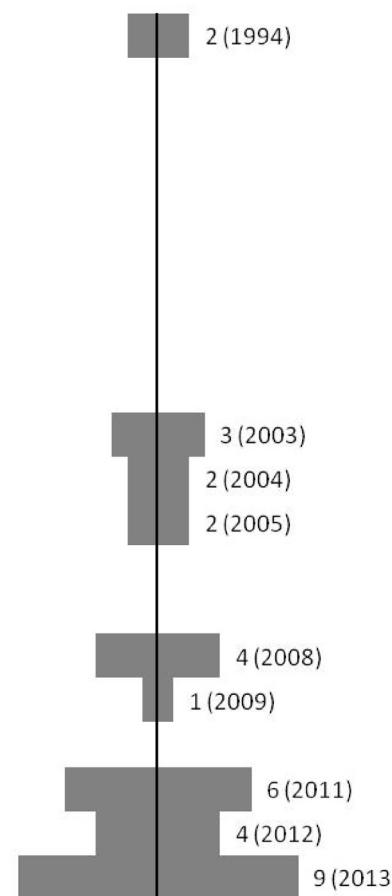
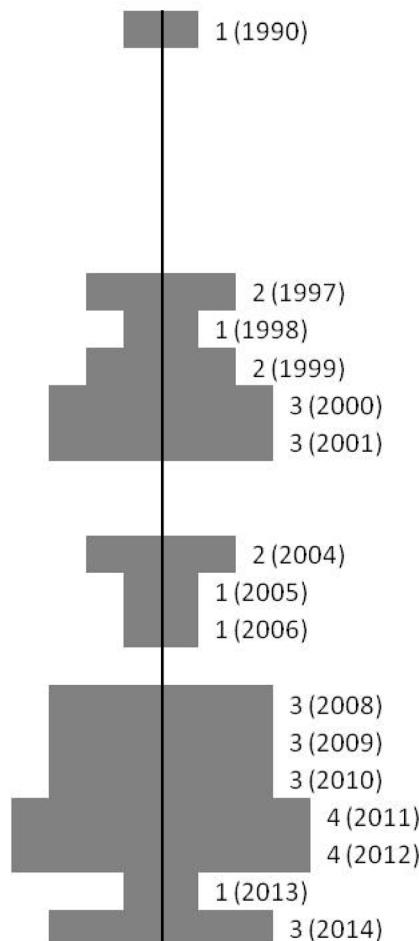
### Some notes on the threshold actant

In 1896, Trumbull published a book called *The Threshold Covenant* which points to the fundamental role played by thresholds and threshold rites in hu-

man culture throughout history (and also as a possible beginning for religious rites in general). Some years later (1909), van Gennep, following Trumbull, more famously discussed thresholds as transition zones (time-spaces), rather than just boundaries, and threshold rites as *liminalities*. These zones allow for the transformation of one social identity into another (van Gennep, 1960). Thresholds and rites of passage are perhaps often associated with pre-modern societies, but the modern societies are of course also as full of liminality.

The notion of liminal space was further developed by Victor Turner who also suggested that liminal states are beyond a structured social order which might make them less powerful in some

senses, but at the same time freer (Turner, 1982; cf. Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003). The visitor centre might be an example of a threshold culture, strategically managing the entrances to heritage sites, the city, museums, railway stations, lobbies, scientific venues, and so on. The rites of passage include ticket sales, waiting for guides and fellow visitors, collecting and dropping off headphones and maps, toilet visits, the buying of retail goods, snacks and coffee, security checks, etc. In this sense, the visitor centre can be seen as a threshold actor: 'it prepares an entry', for example by giving directions, by forcing directions upon the visitor, by taking a fee, and so forth. It also represents some kind of at least weak liminality, whereby one is found

**Figure 1 (left)**

Battleship graph (cf. Steadman 2014: 361 f.) showing number of mentions of "Visitor centre" in articles in *Architect's Journal* (data from 1903–2014).

**Figure 2 (right)**

Battleship graph showing number of mentions of "Besökscentrum" (visitor centre) and "Naturum" in the Swedish journal *Arkitektur* (data from 1901–2014).

in a state of limbo and with freedom of choice: 'shall I buy a ticket or not?', 'what parts should I visit?', 'should I take the guided tour or not?'. The architect and researcher, Stavros Stavrides, has pointed out that: 'Thresholds create out of distances a nearness without which differences will never be able to constitute themselves as mutually "others"' (Stavrides, 2010, p. 67). The visitor centre is part of a territorialisation process, as well as of the production of an inside and an outside. It is a domestication and a stabilisation of the attraction as a territorial association, thus making the distinction between the attraction and its surroundings more clear.

The concept of threshold has similarities with the concept of interface (Hillier and Hanson, 1984). Interface was used early on to describe the spatial relationship between inhabitants and strangers (Hiller and Hanson, 1984, p. 17), but has also been used to describe the relation between different kinds of inhabitants (Hiller et. al., 1984, p. 66), to discuss spatial structures of building types (Markus, 1993; Koch, 2013), and lately also to analyse purview interfaces (Peponis, 2012). The concepts of threshold and interface are interestingly related, but it is important to keep them apart. Interface is, for example, often used to discuss spatial structure with a focus on different kinds of inhabitants and/or visitors. Threshold has its focus on meaning rather than space, and thus might also depend on more temporal and mobile features rather than just built structures. Thresholds are also associated with territorial transgression and transformation, and therefore do not necessarily include different categories of inhabitants, but might, for example, also include the different states of mind of a single person or even the transformation of things.

\*

Although the visitor centre is perhaps a fairly obvious example, there are of course many other places that act as thresholds. Could we even talk

of a threshold type, or perhaps several sorts of threshold types? Based on readings and site visits to the visitor centres of Scania mentioned above, four tentative sorts, or actant roles, that the visitor centres can take on are suggested. These do, however, also show clear associations with other sets of buildings, thus illustrating how a predefined set of buildings always already points towards new possible sets and types.

Firstly, a visitor centre can represent a form of *capture*. In retail, one sometimes talks of captive markets to describe a situation where the customer does not have a lot alternatives in his or her shopping situation, but can only choose whether to buy or not. Captive markets are often used to describe retail spaces hosted inside other spaces, such as airport malls, railway-oriented retail, and museum shops (Lloyd, 2003). A visitor centre is a captive market when the centre must be entered in order to access the destination. The visitor centre becomes an obligatory point of passage located between the arrival point and the destination point. In most cases, these points of passage are combined with a shop or a café, following the spatio-temporal logic of *the mall* – an in-between time-space of waiting and/or circulation set up before important anchors and destinations points. As in a mall, you can select your own activity (what to buy and visit) and your route, so long as you are kept inside a continuous environment of consumption. One example of this kind of visitor centre is Äpplets hus in Kivik, which contains a shop, a restaurant, a museum and a garden, all mixed together in a place of circulation.

Secondly, the visitor centre can work by way of standardisation and *unification*. By establishing similarly designed spaces as entrance points to attractions, people recognise them and might also feel a certain comfort and sense of security. In this sense, the visitor centre might work like a chain store or franchise retail, or like different kinds of traffic territories (bus stops, pedestrian crossings),

**Figure 3**

Domkyrkoforum, Arken book store and Lund Cathedral, as seen from Kyrkogatan (photo by author).



**Figure 4**

Domkyrkoforum (with its lantern overlooking the church towers) and Lund Cathedral, as seen from Domkyrkoplassen (photo by author).



lowering the threshold to new attractions by staging them in a familiar type of way. This 'familiarity by design' seems, for example, to be an intentional strategy when it comes to the series of new Swedish Naturum (like Vattenriket in Kristianstad), many of which are built by the same architectural firm (White Arkitekter), and advertised via books, pamphlets and websites (Isitt, 2011; 2013).

Thirdly, the visitor centre can work by *overlapping edges*. The notion that edges are often preferred areas in which to stay and dwell, was observed by the sociologist Derek de Jonge in the late 1960s – something he referred to as 'edge effects' (Magnusson, 2016, p. 149 and p. 257). One kind of threshold is established through the production of new overlapping territories between the attraction and its environs. This approach can be associated with pavement cafés, outdoor restaurants or even rest stops (and their overlapping spaces of nature and traffic infrastructure). A threshold is not just a territorial border but can in fact be composed of several different and overlapping borders. This threshold actant works by establishing new territorial productions, binding together different spatio-temporal claims. The visitor centre at Skrylle is a case in point. Here a series of new territorialisations overlap the entrance area as well as the forest, through activities such as outdoor gyms, small exhibition areas, a playground, campfire areas, running tracks, a café and an outdoor restaurant. Another interesting example is Domkyrkoforum (2011), a visitor centre for Lund Cathedral that is woven into the urban fabric with one entrance opening onto the main street, one entrance and a lantern facing towards the Cathedral and Domkyrkoplassen (the Cathedral plaza), and another entrance accessible through a pre-existing book store. The centre contains an atrium, a café, information screens, a lecture hall and smaller museum spaces (showing pilgrimage routes in Scania, archeological material, etc.). The visitor centre is not built in direct connec-

tion to the attraction, but across the public plaza just south of the Cathedral. Adding more activities to an existing city block, it helps to populate the street and the plaza; and in direct contrast to the interior world produced in malls, the building has a strong focus on its surroundings, reaching out both visually and through its entrances to the surrounding spaces (see Figures 3 and 4).

The fourth way in which a visitor centre can work is through forming a *stretch*. One obvious example is the airport with increasing security checks (whereas an older example might be the church porch with its weapon house). Koolhaas et. al. describe the security spaces of the airport as a specific type – 'the stretched door' – and how a seemingly never-ending number of separate checks come with an airport that 'becomes an endless door stretching out ahead of travellers' (Koolhaas et al., 2014, p. 634). The stretch, much like the capture, works through an obligatory point of passage. In visitor centres, this kind of threshold is quite commonly found in popular and commercialised tourist attractions with guided or partly guided tours. *The Warner Brothers Studio Tour: The Making of Harry Potter*, in Leavesden outside London is a typical example. The tour is made up of several stages, first a lobby, then a waiting space, then a movie, and then a guided room, before the visitor is allowed to walk more freely, and finally exits through the large gift shop. This kind of visitor centre is not (yet) so common in Scania but there are some minor examples. One such is Barsebäck, a closed-down nuclear power plant, where one must see a movie, pass through security checks, go through a clothing change and so forth before entering the tour. Of course the stretched door is not limited to visitor centres, but can also be found in museums, underground stations, airports, railway stations, parking houses, shopping malls, and so on.

The actant perspective not only allows for recurrent effects to be traced to other material

configurations than the building itself, but also for the possibility that any building can take on multiple actant roles, i.e. can be typified in any number of ways so long as these types can be associated to actual effects in everyday life that recur in different times and spaces. The four different threshold actants are thus of course just examples, and many more can probably be found. Here, the focus has been on how visitor centres as a threshold space mediate between an inside and an outside. If we were to change this focus, for example to investigate the strategic ways in which the visitor centre stages its attraction, the actant roles would be completely different. It should be noted that most visitor centres can take on several, or perhaps even all of the four actor roles mentioned above (to a greater or lesser extent), depending on the situation. The point is that different visitor centres can, depending on the trail of actors that we follow, be associated with other types of buildings and spaces than the one at hand. This kind of enquiry can open up a proliferation of different typologisations that have bearings on, and can help us investigate, the ways in which our built environment (and the everyday life that comes with it) is transformed.

### In search of building types

To conclude, two points can be drawn upon to summarise the discussion. Firstly, it is important to stress how and why building types can be described as actants. The proliferation of visitor centres in Scania is by no means an innocent development; these centres have a part to play in the urbanisation process of this region. In short, they have an actor role, and since they are built entities with a recurrent and to some extent similar effect, also an actant role. The effect relates to an urbanisation of nature and rural attractions, a touristification of different buildings (churches, factories, science institutions, etc.), where different attractions are made easily accessible for the circulation of consumers. This develop-

ment thus goes hand in hand with the development of the consumer society and the transformation of existing objects and experiences into consumables (for better and for worse). In this case we are dealing with the categorisation, territorialisation and typologisation of neatly packed time-space. By producing neutral and unified entrance spaces at formerly less accessible points in the urban landscape, thresholds are lowered, attractions become clearer and more transparent, territories are stabilised. It becomes easier to anticipate and know how to enter these spaces, and one can be sure of being given proper information about the attraction and what to expect from the visit: no surprises, no awkward uncertainties (in this way working like a machine for easy and predictable movement, much like the corridor, a different kind of threshold, cf. Evans, 1978). Through the concept of the threshold actant, an alternative way of categorising visitor centres has been suggested in order to better describe their effects in the context of urbanisation.

Secondly, whilst the threshold actor seems a fruitful way of investigating the role that buildings usually referred to as visitor centres play in current processes of urbanisation, further enquiry quickly leads into a subdivision of this territorial sort. Four actant roles have been suggested: *the capture*, *the unifier*, *the overlap* and *the stretch*. These roles show further ways in which different sets of buildings might be typified and how they play related, yet different roles. This illustrates how it might be useful to differentiate and possibly destabilise not just the 'visitor centre' type, but also how these roles can be used to connect to other built types and produce cross-connections between different building types, thus also suggesting new actants/types.

The increase in threshold actants, both in terms of sort and number, can be seen in parallel with a development described by Frank Lloyd Wright as a *city à la carte* (Fishman, 1990). The *city à la carte* makes it possible for (some) individuals to assemble

a personal city. It thus becomes a less conspicuous variation of the 'fortress city' and its gated communities, where some can enjoy a 'neutral' or 'frictionless' mobility through an urban landscape that others find fragmented or splintered into a mosaic of largely inaccessible spatio-temporal pieces (Graham and Marvin, 2001). However, as Stavrides has noted, thresholds might also carry the potentiality of emancipation; a city of enclaves, or borders, can become a city of thresholds, which allow the transformation of identities, experiences and borders (Stavrides, 2010). The threshold is also a form of condenser, or as Quentin Stevens describes it:

A threshold is a point on the boundary between inside and outside that can be opened [...] The threshold is a constrained site which gathers people together, channelling their movement. Focusing their attention and forcing them into close contact with others.  
(Stevens, 2007, p. 153)

The threshold might also be a potential place for meetings and transgressions. This is related to how the urban landscape is territorialised and divided into different species of spaces. Building type studies have, through a kind of classificatory analogy, been related to biological studies of natural species (Steadman, 2008, p. 21-30). They have thus often been categorised with little overlaps, i.e. each species has its own box and its own well-defined relationship to other species. The elusive concept of species was, however, always a problematic one, even for Darwin, because it seems to hide one of the important insights of evolutionary theory: that the world seems to be about the production of difference; life is a difference-machine (Deleuze, 1994). Herein lies why material semiotics might be a better starting point than a classificatory analogy (based in a Linnaean paradigm). To study how new species evolve, we need concepts and perspectives that

allow us to see and to some extent take measure of this difference. The argument here is that the actant perspective could be such a possibility, to study a certain type of building and see how this is also full of differences – differences that by necessity also keep producing ever-new similarities. The threshold actant, or the threshold type, is such an example. It is both more general and more specific than the visitor centre, and the four suggested threshold actants are alternative 'species' that help us see new connections and associations, new synchronised, yet trans-spatial power relations produced through the built environment. Although this study started from a traditional point of view, i.e. focusing on an established and well-known building type such as the visitor centre, the subsequent work reassembled this type into different actants. One might, however, also imagine an even more open search for building types. Some territorial sorts do already exist but have not yet found a more stabilised or built form, whilst others form interesting but yet nameless alliances and actant roles together with other sorts. To study building types is not just to redraw relations between already existing categories, but also to question old typologisations and search for new ones.

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**J** In search of building types: On visitor centres, thresholds  
**O** and the territorialisation of entrances  
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**S** Kärrholm, M.

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