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New Realism in Architecture: Between Theory and Praxis

Mimarlıkta Yeni Gerçekçilik: Kuram ve Pratik Arasında

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ABSTRACT

This study traces architectural thought that can be characterized as new realistic approaches within the context of multi-dimensional crises that have shaken the epistemological and subject-centered design paradigms and focusing on the associated ontological debates. Architectural approaches that move beyond symbolic interpretations and emphasize the material autonomy of objects, aligning with the ideas of theoreticians like Graham Harman, Manuel DeLanda, and Karen Barad, are examined through the lens of design methodology. Through concepts such as tool-being, intra-action, and assemblage, the study defines multi-layered, resilient, and agentic ontological realms of objects of architecture that go beyond functionality and formalism. Architecture is thus positioned as an ontological becoming situated between object actors, grounded in a realist infrastructure that transcends human experience. In this context, the recent works of architects like Takaharu and Yui Tezuka, Rintala Eggertsson Architects, and Alejandro Aravena, who are considered to articulate this framework, are analyzed. As a result, the theoretical framework of new realism in architecture is constructed as a design methodology that reconsiders design processes in-between philosophy and design methodology, and prioritizes being-in-interaction with nature.

Keywords: Architectural Theory, New Realism, New Materialism, Graham Harman, Manuel DeLanda, Karen Barad

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, yirmi birinci yüzyılın insan-merkezli tasarım paradigmalarını sarsan çok boyutlu krizleri ve buna bağlı ontolojik tartışmaları bağlamında yeni-gerçekçi olarak nitelenebilecek mimari düşünsel yaklaşımların izlerini sürmektedir. Simgesel yaklaşımların ötesine geçen ve nesnelerin maddi özerkliğine vurgu yapan, Harman, DeLanda ve Barad gibi düşünürlerin fikirleri ile örtüşen mimari yaklaşımlar bu bağlamda tasarım metodolojisi bağlamında incelenir. "Araç-oluş", "iç-etkileşim" ve "bileşim" gibi kavramlar aracılığıyla, mimari nesnenin işlevselliği ve biçimselliğinin ötesinde çok katmanlı, dirençli ve etkin varlık alanları tanımlanır. Çalışma, mimarlığı insan deneyiminin ötesine geçen gerçekçi bir altyapı ile nesne-yönelimli aktörlerin arasında konumlanan bir ontolojik oluş olarak konumlandırır. Bu bağlamda çerçeveyi tanımladığı düşünülen Takaharu ve Yui Tezuka, Rintala Eggertsson Architects, ve Alejandro Aravena gibi mimarların son dönem yaklaşımları irdelenir. Sonuç olarak yeni gerçekçi mimarlığın; tasarım süreçlerini felsefi ve yöntemsel olarak yeniden tartışan ve doğa ile etkileşimli varlığını önceleyen bir tasarım metodu olarak kuramsal çerçevesi oluşturulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mimarlık Teorisi, Yeni Gerçekçilik, Yeni Materyalizm, Graham Harman, Manuel DeLanda, Karen Barad

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Introduction

The first quarter of the 21st century, with its successive large-scale disruptions, has revealed the need for new and realistic perspectives that go beyond the 20th century's phenomena focused on economic growth and human experience (Latour, 2018). Prior to this, the global prosperity scenarios centered on scientific and technological advancement, which had been major sources of inspiration for architecture, had lost their credibility, and the postmodern representations that replaced them were met with weariness. From the last quarter of the 1990s onwards, a new theoretical framework began to emerge (Foster, 1996). Architecture began to show signs of a transformation reflected in discourse and practice, indicating that it was slowly beginning to adapt to this new and realistic point-of-view.

These ruptures transformed architectural thought at the ontological level, directing architecture toward a rethinking of objects, entities, and relationships. This transformation points to a terrain where the boundaries between architecture and philosophy have blurred, the solution-oriented foundation of design has moved away from given assumptions, and intellectual activity has become the main discussion of design and production. The design method, which extends design problems to ontological discussions and begins to define itself on a philosophical plane, is concerned with questioning the world in a non-subject-oriented way and using the object-orientations to define the world. In this case, every work of architecture is philosophy with its cultural resonances, political nuances, and phenomenological experiences (Sharr, 2020).

Tan (2025) evaluates various crises such as the political crisis, capital crisis, social crisis, climate crisis, justice crisis, health crisis, gender equality crisis, diplomatic crisis, refugee crisis and ideological crisis under the umbrella of "multiple crises" based on Saad-Filho's (2024). This structure presents a change in point-of-view and creates a unity that connects and makes them systemic. For instance global financial crisis demonstrated that material reality cannot be ignored by revealing the concrete effects of abstract financial models on urban and architectural production, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown how fragile everyday spaces and supply chains are, and the climate crisis has directed design disciplines toward planetary boundaries and carbon-focused responsibility, calling into question the adequacy of human-centered approaches. This period is already being defined as the "age of crises." Furthermore, according to Doğan et al. (2025), the inadequacy of methodologies that attribute problems related to complex systems on a global scale to a small number of factors and emphasize linear relationships and short-term time frames is also observed. When considering the nature of the crises that are faced today, rather than seeking singular solutions, it is necessary to first identify the holistic systems that create these situations. This paradigm also applies to the discipline of architecture. Aravena's (2015) statement that "there is nothing worse than giving the right answer to the wrong question" when discussing design processes highlights how the architecture discipline has transformed into a reactive form that must package problems holistically and produce solutions accordingly.

These tremors create a theoretical plane where both architectural theory and practical discussions intersect with new realism, which emphasizes the priority of objective existence. The conceptual framework to be examined begins with the premise that any communication between humans and objects cannot be reduced to human experience alone; the existence of material actors must also be considered. Within such a framework, architectural practice opens itself to a multi-actor approach that goes beyond the established and, in this context, "reductionist" schemas transcending the dichotomy of form and function. This perspective brings the very fabric of existence to the fore across a wide range of issues, from material cycles to energy use, urban design to interior design. Thus, the architect assumes the position of an agent and interpreter of multi-layered reality, redefining aesthetic values and technical competencies through a theoretical-operational dialogue with reality. This theoretical diversity transforms the architect's role into that of a layered intellectual who navigates cultural, social, and ecological factors from a new perspective.

Subject-Oriented Philosophy and Architectural History

The 20th century presents an intense intellectual laboratory in which architectural theory becomes deeply intertwined with contemporary philosophy. While the positivist optimism of modern architecture regarded space as a rational extension of industrial production, the subsequent phenomenological approach emphasized the importance of bodily and sensory layers in architectural experience and established an influential background that placed human perception and intentionality at the center of architectural meaning (Seamon, 2018; Norberg-Schulz, 1980). However, this very focus on lived experience often reduced the building to what is revealed through human consciousness, sidelining its material, ecological, and non-human dimensions. At the same time, the emerging ecological thought links the structure-environment dialectic to radical sustainability debates. In this era, theoretical approaches generated ideas about each other, producing holistic discussions and establishing dialogues within the contemporary architectural plane, thus revealing the inherent hybridity of architectural practice[1]. In this way, they have created a cloud of architectural thought that flows into one another and produced stops that must be reinterpreted and confronted.

In the last decade of the century, deconstructivism reads architecture as a text-like but visual narrative set and defines space as a series of signs in which meaning is constantly deferred (Wigley, 1993). This theoretical groundwork has been transformed by architects into design strategies that question the production of fixed meaning in architecture by reading it through formal composition. Fragmented facade lines, broken axes, and unexpected perspectives focus on creating cognitive dissonance in the user and disrupting established reading patterns. Thus, the structure becomes a critical theater stage; the visitor becomes the subject of the "reader-experiences" of this spatial text. Similarly, phenomenologists claim that human consciousness, experience, and action are always intentional, that is, they necessarily orient themselves toward a world of meaning and find their meaning in that world (Seamon, 2018). This framework enriches architectural theory by reconnecting design to bodily and sensory depth, yet its anthropocentric orientation overlooks the building's independent existence, often pushing structural, material, and ecological realities into the background as mere technicalities. This experience-based theoretical framework considers human perception to be the absolute center. The existence of the structure is reduced to certain technical details and even pushed outside of design by being reduced to abstract technical expertise. The relationship architecture establishes

[1] Heidegger's (1967, 1971) notion of "building as dwelling" inspired Norberg-Schulz's (1980) concept of "spatial identity." In this way, the "sense of place" emerges as an existential counter-opening that draws on local values beyond modern universalism. This creates a productive architectural theory within the dialectical relationship between the universal and the modern. Within this productive framework, Structuralism interprets architecture as a sign system based on linguistic codes, while post-structuralist thought pluralizes the mechanisms of meaning-making in design. Foucault's (1977) power-knowledge networks are translated into the urban scale through Rossi's (1984) typological approach; Derrida's (1978) textual deconstruction lays the groundwork for deconstructivist practices. Meanwhile, Merleau-Ponty's (2012) phenomenology of perception merges with Pallasmaa's (2005) The Eyes of the Skin, reinterpreting sensory wholeness through a tactile architectural perspective. In the last quarter of the century, Deleuze's (2006) fluid ontology formed the theoretical foundation of parametric digital with its metaphors of layers and folds (Menşur, 2023). Tschumi's (2000) event-based schemes and Lynn's (1993) topological forms define architecture as processual and relational networks by dispersing fixed type concepts. At the same time, the emerging ecological thought draws on Guattari's (2000) "three ecologies" scheme to link the structure-environment dialectic to radical sustainability debates.

with existence falls behind dramatic gestures that are merely visual and contain no information about their own ontology. From this perspective, even when critiquing the representational order, deconstructivist discourse still anchors architecture to a symbolic plane; the building's existence or, in other words its life, remains silently in the background, independent of the effect it has on the viewer.

This ontological weakness of the subject-oriented approach overlooks the multiple resistances of existence because it discusses design only in terms of sensory and meaning layers. Yet objects exist not only to the extent that they are perceived, but also beyond perception; the energy/matter cycles of the structure, its embedded foundations, or the relationship that non-human entities establish with the structure continue their own narratives even if they are not included in the user narrative. A critical architectural stance does not consider perceptual distortion sufficient on its own but accepts these invisible actors as equivalent entities in design. In this context, the structure ceases to be merely a dramatic stage and becomes a multi-layered field of existence that transcends experience. Each layer—such as the energy of the material itself, physical structures, and ecological interactions realized on a micro-macro scale—gains existence on an equal plane. Thus, architecture acquires an existential resistance in which invisible actors are made visible.

New Realism

Developing as a reaction to the dominance of postmodern relativism, structuralist language-centered interpretations, and social constructivist theses, "New Realism" gained a systematic framework with Italian philosopher Maurizio Ferraris' 2012 work "Manifesto del Nuovo Realismo". According to Ferraris (2012), postmodern narrative presents reality as a fairy tale rather than seeking to understand it or imagine an alternative world to replace it and assumes this to be the only possible salvation. Reality is "data that exists independently of linguistic categories, cultural narratives, or social constructions". This data precedes the subject's interpretation, resists it, and determines its horizon. Thus, New Realism updates the intuitive world of classical "naive" realism with a critical reflex: although reality is given, our forms of access to it are always mediated by interpretation; the reality exists and cannot be fully expressed in words.

Previous realistic approaches often reduce reality to abstract patterns or measurable models. Ferraris (2009), however, works with the concepts of "document," "trace," and "record". He reads reality as a pattern of material traces. Objects are documents with the same ontological status: they arise independently of human will but gain layers of meaning as they circulate in social and technical networks, they do not merely document the situation; they can also influence and alter the reality they describe, transforming into an institutional actor (Ferraris, 2013).

Buildings can be defined as documentary nodes where historical, social, and technical "documents" are concentrated. Thus, space is seen not only as a place that accommodates user actions but also as an environment where conflicting data sets are concretized. New Realism defines architecture as a field that bears its own responsibility for its reality; it counters subject- and experience-oriented methodologies with a material, plural, and resilient ontology, expanding the boundaries of criticism. This perspective establishes a dynamic bridge between ethical responsibility and concrete analysis in design, producing ontological clarity in place of conceptual ambiguity.

Three Perspectives: Harman, Delanda and Barad

Three thinkers who can be defined at different ends of the "realism" spectrum in contemporary philosophy, Graham Harman, Manuel DeLanda, and Karen Barad, propose three powerful approaches to the ontological status of reality that complement each other but diverge methodologically (Table 1). They bring the issue of "external reality," which has been forgotten in the shadow of language-centered critical theories, back to the table. According to Harman (2011), objects carry an overflow that even the most detailed descriptions cannot access; the realist stance is to acknowledge this residual excess and remember that any narrative can only capture a limited aspect of the object. DeLanda (2009) situates reality in temporary intensifications where energies, material flows, and social forces intersect. Claiming that a phenomenon exists depends on the processes that constitute it crossing a certain threshold to produce a durable but always revisable pattern; thus, realism requires drawing a mobile topography that follows variable capacities. Barad (2007), on the other hand, rejects the idea of placing a pre-drawn line between the observer and the phenomenon; reality emerges in the joint production of apparatus, matter, and meaning during measurement. This production is a necessary outcome with both material and ethical binding power. Harman's emphasis on resistance, DeLanda's understanding of dynamic form, and Barad's conception of co-constitutive relationships transform realism into a broad, multi-layered spectrum.

Table 1.
The stances in terms of realism and materialism

	Realism	Materialism
Harman (object-oriented ontology)	+	-
Delanda (new materialism)	+	+
Barad (Agential Realism)	-	+

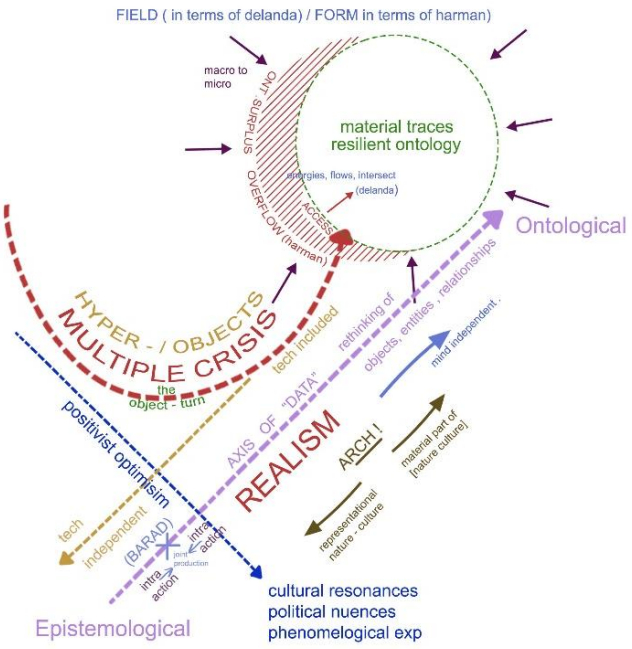
Harman (2017) rejects traditional materialism's tendency to reduce everything to individual particles. Even if objects are composed of quarks or energy bands, their defining feature is their recursive cores, which remain partially closed to relationships. He does not accept the existence of material; according to him, the only thing that exists is form. The existence of material is quite corporeal, but it does not dissolve in physical laws; its ontological surplus resists any explanation. According to him, reducing reality to the level of pure matter obscures its ontological depth; whereas form is the fundamental plane on which existence gains meaning and becomes effective.

On the other hand, DeLanda (2017) argues that a realistic foundation can only be established through consistent materialism; he defines matter not as a passive carrier, but as a constantly forming, interacting, and reorganizing field. He explicitly positions his philosophy as both realist and materialist. In DeLanda's view, any true materialism must assume a mind-independent material. Accordingly, he emphasizes that matter possesses inherent "morphogenetic capacities" — the ability to generate form without any external organizing principle highlighting how physical processes themselves drive the emergence of structure. DeLanda's assemblage ontology complements this understanding of potentiality with discontinuous stabilities in the coming together of heterogeneous parts from macro to micro. Transforming the concept of "assemblage" inherited from Deleuze and Guattari (1987) into a new-materialist evolutionary schema. He defines entities not in terms of essential qualities but through density thresholds and

flow-regulating boundary conditions. The identity of an assemblage is neither less than nor fully reducible to the sum of its parts; for components gain or lose new capacities as the context changes. DeLanda moves beyond linear causality models, placing phase transitions that suddenly emerge at critical thresholds at the center of ontology; thus, reality is understood not as static entities but as continuously re-coordinated clusters of formations.

Barad's "agential realism" transforms matter into an ethically and politically charged activity by transferring the uncertainty principle of quantum physics to ontology (Ağın, 2022). According to her, atoms or phenomena are not pure material objects independent of experimental setups; rather, they produce each other through intra-action involving measuring devices, discursive frameworks, and material fields. These relational structures are not predetermined or arbitrary; rather, they are highly coercive, material-moral necessities (Barad, 2007, 2014). Through the concept of "intra-action," Barad adopts a non-realist but materialist stance that contradicts both Harman's ontology based on the withdrawal of objects and DeLanda's logic of continuous flow. Her agential realism functions as an anti-realist orientation, since existence is not a matter of pre-given independent entities but emerges only through relational entanglements of apparatuses, discursive frameworks, and material fields. According to her, entities are never pre-given, isolated units; reality emerges through the simultaneous co-production of apparatus, matter, and meaning during measurement. In this production, causality is not unidirectional but a feedback loop; meaning and matter are "diffractively" intertwined (Barad, 2014). With such an approach, Barad ties ontology to ethics and epistemology, placing responsibility not only on thought but on existence itself.

Figure 1.
Conceptual Diagram of Ontological and Epistemological Domains (developed by the authors)



Thus, Harman thinks of matter in terms of the excess of withdrawing objects; DeLanda, in terms of thresholds of intensity of dynamism; and Barad, in terms of performative networks of internal interaction. Together, the three transform the new realism framework into a multi-layered, responsibility-laden, and process-centered spectrum (Figure 1). These perspectives enable a wide range of phenomena—from the algorithmic biases of data science to the accumulation of plastic in ocean currents, from the coordination of autonomous robot swarms to human-animal-microbial ecologies—to be re-conceived as materially resistant structures independent of anthropocentric discourses.

New Realism and Architecture: Concepts

New Realist philosophical debates emphasize that every structure is more than the sum of its materials, program, discourse, and user networks; it remains incomprehensible as a whole due to its "dark core." Therefore, the acceptance that every relationship established with the structure is inevitably partial forms the core of the theoretical framework. Architectural design is no longer a representation of simple ideological inferences that can be clearly read, but rather a material part of complex urban political relationships and proposed solutions (Boyacıoğlu et al., 2025). Realism is read as a result of the encounter between architecture and society, culture, and philosophy (Blagojević, 2014). This theoretical orientation is based on a philosophical ground that does not reduce architectural objects to a network of relationships; rather, it calls for thinking about them in terms of their intrinsic existence and gains depth through object-centered ontologies. Levi Bryant (2011) argues that the sharp distinction between nature and culture in modern thought has rendered non-human elements passive and that this distinction is no longer philosophically tenable. According to him, the world is filled with various non-human entities that can be described as autonomous actors in their own right. Objects are entities that are defined by their effects and continuity. Similarly, according to Harman's (2011) object-oriented ontology, objects are autonomous entities that are not exhausted by their relationships, and true "emergence" is possible through the formation of new and independent entities. To explain this approach, McKim (2014) quotes Manuel DeLanda's list of distinguishing characteristics of emergent entities: A whole must have more properties than the sum of its parts, it must be able to maintain its existence even if its parts change, it must have a feedback effect on its components, and it must be able to produce some of its components itself. In this context, a design continues to exist at different levels even when it is not being used any more.

Architecture is no longer limited to the physical arrangement of space but has evolved into a way of thinking that conceptualizes places where processes, relationships, and interactions take place. This transformation points to the inadequacy of physical interpretations of space and necessitates a conceptual and cognitive approach supported by discoveries in different fields such as new physics, psychology, neuroscience, and philosophical speculation. Objects are no longer entities that occupy space but rather space itself. This understanding, which coincides with Heidegger's spatial analyses, requires architecture to be redefined not as a discipline of space but as a "place of processes.". According to Rollino (2025), an interdisciplinary approach is inevitable for architecture to manage this multifaceted complexity. In this case, architects need more than just diagrammable ideas to manage complex relationships (Gage, 2015). The opposite reductionist approach is not limited to intellectual tools; it also reflects on the way architectural materials are treated. As Coleman (2005) discussed on concrete, reductionist tendencies at both the representational and material levels prevent a sufficient grasp of the complex potentials inherent in the architectural object.

New-realistic autonomy rejects reading the building as merely a tool. The debate on “tool-being” reminds us that the structure cannot be considered equipment that can be consumed and replaced with a new one, like a hammer or a telephone; even when it breaks down and malfunctions, it appears as a profound entity. Not reducing the building to a mere program, circulation, or service schedule can be seen as a design method that understands its withdrawing presence. The building, which goes beyond being a tool, is an entity that negotiates with both the planet and the future, but this does not disable its functionality; it translates it into an open-ended question that translates the object's infinite potential. Buildings begin to emerge in perception as they are prone to unexpected uses in a design, that is, when they are treated as precisely what they were not designed to be, as in Heidegger's theoretical framework (Hale, 2020).

Objects that are withdrawn from one another can maintain a relationship of non-communication. From an architectural perspective, this withdrawal is also evident in the separation of tectonic elements. Architectural spaces gain their uniqueness by separating themselves from their surroundings through connecting elements, and this separation enables them to transcend the ordinary and become carriers of an implicit reality (Weir, 2021). In Harman's philosophy, just as two sensory objects relate to each other only as real objects, like a door connecting two rooms, objects also set a limit on what can pass between them. Therefore, it becomes important to rethink every kind of action as an object. An architectural space becomes a point of contact between two objects as a real object (Weir, 2021).

To unpack this context, four concepts borrowed from contemporary philosophy: tool-being, material/form, intra-actions, and hyper-objects, will be explained in this section. Building on these, two further concepts derived from Harman: zero-form and zero-function, will be introduced and critically discussed for their anticipated direct implications in architectural discourse.

Tool-being

Martin Heidegger (1962), in Being and Time, refers to everyday objects as “equipment” and discusses their mode of being on two levels: ‘handiness’ (Zuhandenheit) and “presence” (Vorhandenheit). Objects such as hammers, pens, or coffee cups fade into the background and become unnoticeable when they are being used because attention is focused on the task at hand. When this invisibility is broken—for example, when the handle of a hammer cracks and loses its function—the tool rises to the threshold of consciousness and is no longer experienced as ordinary but as problematic. This rupture, according to Heidegger, reveals both the user's relationship with the world and the world's way of organizing itself: the moment of failure reveals the hidden order of being. Tools are never singular; each one operates within a network of references interwoven with other tools, purposes, and actions. A hammer cannot be understood without nails or a workbench; together they form a “workshop world.” This network demonstrates that Dasein (being-there) does not merely use objects but also constructs a horizon of meaning with them. By participating in this network, the individual both interprets the world and shapes their own existence.

Heidegger's analysis of tools thus interprets technology not as a purely “external” force, but as a container in which being is revealed. However, as tools become increasingly “transparent” in modern technology, the network of references that constitute them also risks disappearing. In other words, as the tool becomes invisible, the system of relationships surrounding it also fades away. Heidegger's (1962) warning deepens here: technology is not merely the ability to produce objects, but also the manner in which being is revealed. Although vehicles are becoming more transparent today, this invisibility often comes with an increase in the material, ecological, and ethical burdens behind them (Han, 2015). As smartphones, algorithms, data centers, or “sustainable” construction technologies become functionally simpler, their production, energy consumption, labor exploitation, and impact on nature become increasingly complex. Thus, while tools appear to become lighter, they actually begin to carry a heavier burden. Though theory invites us to consider not only the use of the vehicle but also the relationships that make it possible, the historical sequence that has shaped its technological evolution, and its future implications (Kousoulas, 2022).

Harman's (2002) reading generalizes Heidegger's tool analysis specific to human-centered technical use to a cosmological level, transforming it into a universal ontology. Heidegger's concepts become a structural feature that oscillates between the internal reality and external visibility of all objects. At the center of an object's existence, an independent dark core that escapes human perception is theoretically defined. It cannot be derived from the totality of object relations or representations in perception. Thus, tool-being ceases to be merely related to the moment of use and becomes a principle that supports the idea that every object carries an inaccessible inner reality. This approach similarly repositioned the architectural object. Buildings have an existence not only through their forms or functions but also through their withdrawal. Harman's ontology places the architectural object on a plane that renders it meaningful, autonomous, and inaccessible in its own right. In the context of architecture, this approach heralds a new architectural object that oscillates between a deep, withdrawn field of existence and a phenomenological surface that occasionally becomes apparent. It provides a foundation for architectural theory that evaluates the relationship between aesthetics, function, and existence in a multi-layered way, revealing the zero form/zero function logic in which form and function cancel each other out; the structure is an autonomous meaning and reality that influences its surroundings and cannot be reduced to the relationships it establishes with them or the parts that constitute it.

Material / Form

According to DeLanda (2006), form is not a fixed mold that matter takes externally, but rather the result of dynamic patterns created by singularities and attractive structures that emerge at density thresholds in nature. This approach views form as a process of formation that emerges in conjunction with the internal potentials of matter and environmental conditions. Matter and form are intertwined and give rise to temporary appearances that develop over time, can transform, and may vary depending on the context. In short, it has an emergent structure. However, such structures are neither entirely predetermined nor random; instead, they self-organize through the mutual interaction of matter and environmental influences. In the context of architecture, this understanding removes form from being a draft predetermined by drawings.

In this context, according to DeLanda's philosophy, architectural form becomes a field of creation that must be considered together with matter. The fluidity, density, resistance, and relationships of the material with its

environmental context are among the determinants of form. Focusing on variations of an element rather than its fixed essence is more conducive to understanding its true nature, architectural space also splits into variations in this context. Ignoring the formation processes behind typologies leads to a superficial approach to understanding both design and the world that surrounds it. For this reason, materialist thought reinterprets typology not as a fixed classification tool, but as a dynamic tool for tracing the traces of diversity and transformation (DeLanda, 2010).

Intra-actions

In Karen Barad's (2007) theory of "agential realism," intra-actions are defined as creative processes in which objects, words, technical devices, and bodies emerge simultaneously and together, intertwining ontology and epistemology. According to the theorist, relationships are not established between pre-existing subjects or objects; rather, entities come into being during these relationships, that is, intra-actions themselves, meaning that objects emerge through specific intra-actions (Barad, 2003). As Derrida (1968) argues that meaning emerges through a continuous process of differentiation, deferral, and tracing, in Barad (2007), meaning and matter are redefined at each "agential cut"; this implies that both "what it is" and "how it is" are ontologically and ethically co-constructed.

Barad's (2003) model invalidates the classical distinctions between knowledge, being, and ethics. Reality, unlike Harman and DeLanda, is not an objective external world. It is a structure that is constantly being shaped within relationships. Objects are constructed simultaneously with observation or measurement devices; therefore, knowledge is a performative production that involves moral responsibility. The difference between intra-action and interaction is decisive here: interaction occurs between two pre-existing elements, while intra-action argues that these elements emerge precisely in that interaction (Barad, 2007). Therefore, Barad argues that matter is a substance in its intra-active state. Thus, matter ceases to be a passive carrier and transforms into an ontological and ethical actor.

This understanding is reflected in architectural theory as a new relational, performative, and ethical plane that encompasses cross-sections of internal interactions between users, materials, context, technical systems, and discursive frameworks. In this context, architecture that enables individuals to produce their own meanings and values has vital importance for an approach that goes beyond inclusive and human-centered thinking (Dündar & Boyacıoğlu, 2024)

Hyper-objects

Timothy Morton's (2013) concept of "hyper-objects" reveals the ontological dimensions of global crises. Hyper-objects, such as global warming, nuclear contamination, or capitalism, are scattered and sticky entities that transcend time and space and remain beyond human comprehension. These objects go beyond simply existing as things, encompassing other entities in a holistic manner. According to Baudrillard (1993), objects remain an unsolvable enigma, neither themselves nor capable of self-awareness. Like Baudrillard's, Morton's hyper-object is not reciprocal in its relationship with the human subject; instead, it "takes the place of a dizzying otherness.". With its resistance to knowledge, the hyper-object challenges the limits of both scientific reason and subjective desire.

In Morton's (2018) philosophy, the gap between being and appearance is defined as objects never being what they appear to be. This fragility also encompasses the state of "settling for the sense of reality." Objects are visible, like in Harman, but in essence they are withdrawn, inaccessible structures. The aesthetic experience reveals this awareness: beauty is intertwined with disgust because the experience of the hyper-object is both fascinating and disturbing. Rather than addressing the anxiety of the hyper-object, the situation is merely aestheticized, and the new position of the aestheticized object in relation to the subject is the re-establishment of the non-human as dependent. In fact, what the aesthetic experience says is precisely that the visible is incomprehensible.

Morton's (2018) philosophy questions romantic and anthropocentric approaches to nature. Morton's distinction between "tolerating" and "appreciating" is also important in this context: tolerating is temporarily accepting something within its conceptual framework, whereas appreciating brings with it a sense of wonder despite the shortcomings of the human-centered context. Nature is not a backdrop that serves humans, but an independent reality that coexists with humans.

Zero Form

The core formed by the four concepts discussed above reveals the logic of zero form/zero function, where form and function cancel each other out. Harman's (2022) concept of "zero form" points to this non-relational dimension of form. From this perspective, the visible silhouette or style of a building is merely an expression of its deeper essential form; appearance is a manifestation of the object's internal form on the surface. In this context, zero form is the object's formal reality independent of relationships. Similarly, a building has latent layers of form waiting to be discovered in its architectural existence, beyond its visible shape. Although this essential form cannot be fully grasped, it is a fundamental level of existence that shapes the aesthetic and spatial potential of the structure. This concept challenges modernist discourses that view form solely as the "servant of function" or postmodern aesthetic approaches that equate it with visual symbols. According to this approach, architectural form is not merely the geometric organization of the physical shell, but also a mode of existence that cannot be reduced to perception, functionality, or relationship. It represents a core form that is stripped of all qualities but insists on its existence precisely within this stripping.

This idea coincides with Eisenman's (1990) notion of the autonomy of architecture; for Eisenman, the autonomy of architecture is not a purely formal closure, but a necessary critical distance from ideology, function, and representation. In Harman, this position is taken a step further, stating that form is an expression of the object's existence in itself, even before the production of meaning. In this sense, zero form makes the architectural structure's presence meaningful without carrying any programmatic, structural, or symbolic function. Harman's (2017) approach can be seen as a rejection of defining and designing a structure solely through its structural elements, structural systems, or functional program. According to Harman, such an attitude disregards the object's unique integrity and irreducibility. Zero form defines an ontological space, a deep form, where the structure exists without being reduced to its parts, program, or perceptual effect, in opposition to these reductive tendencies. This enables discussion based on their existential characteristics. The visible form of the structure is merely one of the temporary forms that this deep core takes in

the sensory world. The multi-layered and internal reality of architectural form radically redefines both the boundaries of aesthetic judgment and the relationship that architectural thought establishes with the object.

Zero Function

The concept of "zero function" describes the functional impact that a structure has solely through its own existential potential, independent of its defined user purposes or contextual requirements. Zero function points to functional possibilities that have not yet been realized or engaged with, beyond the building's declared program. This demonstrates that the architectural object cannot be reduced to a fixed or singular function and can acquire different functions over time. For example, the transformation of an industrial building into a museum or a residence into an office demonstrates that the building has transcended its anticipated functional boundaries. Harman evaluates these transformations not as random occurrences but as expressions of the building's inherent functional plurality.Therefore, the way to concretize this function is not through the merger of independent terms into a single entity. On the contrary, the opposite gesture is required: the various terms of function should be slightly separated from one another to the extent that the function can be performed without being interrupted (Harman, 2022).

This rethinking of function also undermines the human-centered structure of architecture. Kant (2000) defined architecture as an "impure art," arguing that the aesthetic value of a structure cannot be "pure" because it is always tied to a purpose. Harman (2022), however, proposes overcoming this dependency by "zeroing out function." Here, zeroing out does not mean eliminating function, but rather thinking about it in terms of deep function, stripped of user relationships and pragmatic purposes. The function of a structure can now be considered not only in terms of its use by people, but also in terms of the effects, potentials, and future possible areas of action created by the object's own existence. Thus, architectural objects begin to be thought of not only in terms of their appearance or current use, but also in terms of their latent and irreducible functional qualities that remain even when they are not in use.

Traces of New Realism in the Practice

Although architects do not generally define themselves as part of philosophical movements, their approaches reveal intellectual traces and methodological parallels that coincide with contemporary philosophical debates. Through the practices and conceptual approaches of the architects in question, it is possible to reveal how New Realist philosophy intersects with architecture and in what contexts this intersection gains meaning (Table 2). When zero-form is taken in this context, form ceases to be a shape and becomes a surface, coexisting with matter and overlapping with its ontology. Interaction is incorporated into design as an effect that generates form, and it can be predicted that this generation will continue indefinitely. Reality emerges in a dispersed form between form and essence. Every individual action in form communicates with the whole. In the context of zero-function, function is embedded within interaction and approaches an unpredictable essence. Interaction with each object produces a new function. It defines the relationship between design and the global crisis paradigm (Figure 2).

Figure 2.
Diagram of interactions among object, nature, culture and technology (developed by the authors)

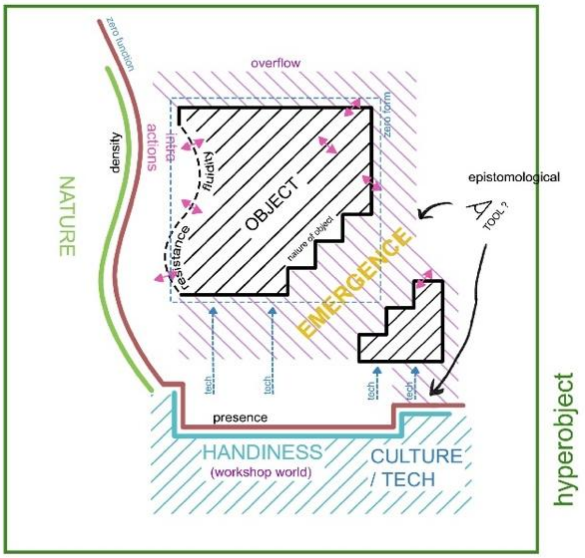


Table 2.
The Relationship of Zero-Form and Zero-Function with Other Theories

	Tool-Being	Material/Form	Intra Actions	Hyper-objects
Zero-Form	Form is no longer a tool. Architecture becomes surface of a surgery.	Form is created together with matter. Their ontologies overlap.	Form can emerge through interaction. This emergence continues over time.	Reality emerges in a scattered form, between form and essence. Each individual action communicates with the whole.
Zero-Function	Functionality is not just about usage. It is embedded in interaction.	The function is determined by the process. It approaches an unpredictable essence.	Functions can be derived from relationships. Each new object produces a new function.	The function includes global effects. It defines the relationship with the crisis.

Tezuka's Kindergartens: Between Nature and Human-Nature

Tezuka Architects' Fuji Kindergarten and Asahi Kindergarten projects reveal the essential dynamics of the architectural object. In Takaharu and Yui Tezuka's (2015) approach, the essence of Japanese architecture lies in those inexplicable intrinsic qualities that emerge when interacting with the environment. Although these essences may not be directly visible, they tend to refer to qualities that have the potential to transform societies and lives.

Figure 3.
Fuji Kindergarten, 2007, Tezuka Architects

Fuji Kindergarten building takes an approach that constructs the form and function of the architectural object with reference to human primal tendencies. The continuous rotational movement offered by the circular plan coincides with children's innate desire to move, while the building's highly perceptible "form" actually implicitly invites this activity (Figure 3). The permission to climb trees and the support of this action with safety nets demonstrate that the architecture offers a behavioral environment (Figure 4). Here, the tree itself goes beyond being a landscape element and becomes an object that instinctively invites climbing. Thus, this structure associates the deep form of the architectural object with movement patterns embedded in human bodily memory, while also reproducing its deep function in evolutionary and pedagogical terms. Tezuka's architecture thus transforms into an object-formation relationship that explains function through the fundamental experiential codes of humanity. This approach demonstrates that architecture can in fact be shaped by the essence of an object; here, the essential reality of the human is reflected as an inherent determinant of the form and function of architecture.

Figure 4.
Fuji Kindergarten, 2007, Tezuka Architects

Figure 5.
Asahi Kindergarten, 2016, Tezuka Architects

The wooden columns used in the Asahi Kindergarten structure are narrative objects that carry layers of meaning inherent in the deep form and deep function of the architectural object, this time with a completely different ontology. Following the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, these 400-year-old cedar trees, selected as "wet wood" bearing the material traces of the disaster, were used in the reconstruction of the school that had been destroyed. As Tezuka puts it, these columns are the narrators of an epic story that will be internalized over time. Here, the architectural object transforms the traumatic events of the past into a story that touches the body, appeals to the senses, and unfolds over time. In this sense, the column expresses much more than the experiential quality of the architectural object; the meaning it carries as a real object is revealed in the relationship users establish with it. The columns in this structure are an example of deep form, that is, a multi-layered structure shaped by experience. At the same time, deep function works as a plot that gives children a sense of spatial security, belonging, and learning (Figure 5). In this sense, it intuitively reproduces the essence of the architectural object.

Aravena's Artificial Forest: Being with Hyper-objects

Aravena (2014), referring to the tsunami events in Japan, states that it has been proven that resisting the power of nature is futile, and proposes solutions that are in harmony with nature rather than rigid barriers against natural disasters. In this context, he proposed an artificial forest belt between the city and the sea in Constitución after the 2010 tsunami; instead of concrete walls, trees disperse wave energy through friction, laminating the water and preventing flooding. The local community highlighted the recurring flood threats each year, the decline in public space, and the inability to access the river due to private property, thereby shifting the focus of the design. The resulting forest both reduces flood risk and creates public access to the river by transcending private property boundaries.

This green belt is an example of "material democracy," signaling the democratic sharing of natural materials for the public good by expanding the city's limited public space (Figure 6). This forest proposal, intertwined with multi-layered ecological and social relationships, also contains a new communication proposal with these hyper-objects, as it is a decentralized part of both climatic and spatial networks. Additionally, Aravena's approach aligns with Morton's "dark ecology" framework, which defines the invisible intertwining of nature and society. It does

not portray nature as an exalted, distant, and controllable entity but rather as a direct, threatening, and inherent reality. This reality differs from the one commonly perceived by society or the public; the reality of nature is not one-dimensional. When one considers the processes influenced by natural cognition, it becomes clear that this reality is multi-layered and inexhaustible. Finally, Aravena's statement in his presentation that "all these forces must be transformed into form" reveals that architecture is a direct reflection of deep socio-ecological functions, i.e., an inevitable manifestation of the deep form/deep function interplay.

Figure 6.
Sustainable Post-Tsunami Reconstruction Master Plan in Chile, 2011, Alejandro Aravena

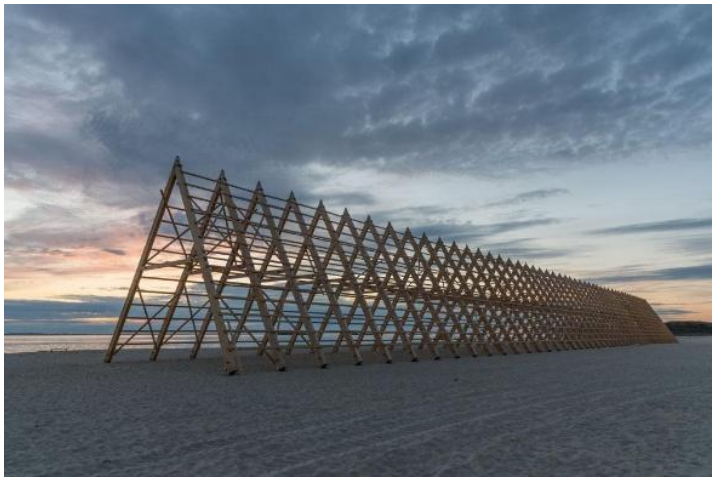
Rintala's Racks: Democracy of Architectural Materials

Another example is Sami Rintala's direct interaction with materials, traditional techniques, and local heritage, intertwined with a background of nature-culture singularity. The tools used by Rintala in design and construction are holistic tools that embody cultural memory and directness. Design and construction are not separate tasks but a whole. His architectural approach aligns with the desire for direct contact with tools; tools maintain their ontological and sociological existence within a holistic framework of meaning. Rintala (2010) emphasizes the "authentic stimuli of materials on the human body" and carefully avoids "pure white abstraction." In this context, Rintala's practices emphasize that the structure is not a passive object that serves humans, but rather an entity that interacts with materials, nature, and culture. Such architecture questions the idea that "humanity is the sole subjectivity that gives meaning to the world"; everything under its roof possesses an immanence beyond mere use (Betsky, 2017).

Like Bryant's theoretical approach to material democracy, Rintala emphasizes that wood is a "democratic material" for northern countries. This emphasis brings with it not only accessibility but also the possibility for everyone to contribute fairly to its production. Rintala treats material as an active and meaning-making part of the design process. His approach, which he defines as "material democracy," is one in which material carries value through its cultural, spatial, and emotional connotations, and constructs space through both its aesthetic and structural qualities based on this value. In Rintala's architecture, the material used transcends its functional role and "subjectifies" itself through the relationships it establishes with other actors—humans, nature, landscape, and animals.

As Bryant (2011) puts it, such an ontological approach transcends the nature-culture divide, making non-human forces visible within various object collectives. Rintala also reveals these collectives in his projects, where elements such as a structure's placement in the landscape, its symbiotic relationship with surrounding living beings, or the resistance exhibited by the material worked by the craftsman are decisive in the design proces.

Figure 7.
SALT Festival Installations, 2014, Rintala Eggertsson Architects



In Rintala's projects, the focus is on craftsmanship that emphasizes an understanding of materials. The temporary structures designed specifically for the SALT Art Festival were constructed using a craft derived from the traditional fiskehjell (fish drying rack) structures of Northern Norway (Figure 7). This demonstrates how architecture's ontological approach connects with local production techniques and the continuity of craftsmanship. In Rintala's architecture, material becomes more than an aesthetic or structural decision; it becomes a tangible entity that carries cultural memory and shapes physical experience. Wood is the material representative of place, of a relational connection to the past, of tactile memory, and of a shared heritage among communities. The form of the design, borrowed from a tradition that is not given, gains meaning not only through the connection it establishes with local memory but also through the way it guides users' spatial experience. Architectural production is a multi-layered intervention that carries cultural continuity, material experience, and sensory atmosphere together.

Figure 8.
SALT Festival Installations, 2014, Rintala Eggertson Architects

Wood, used in SALT structures, is a material being that appeals to the senses and defines the experiential layers of design. Contrasts such as “dark and light,” “cold and warm,” and “openness and closure,” which are frequently encountered in the project, are a spatial narrative tool in Rintala's architectural approach. These contrasting elements—the texture of the surface, the permeability of the sections, or the balance of shadow and light within the structure—stimulate the user's physical and mental sensations. The aim is to magnify the material experiences created on a small scale and reflect them in the space through architecture (Figure 8). Thus, the SALT project brings together traditional craftsmanship with a contemporary experiential interface, allowing the presence of wood to be felt as an atmosphere and memory. Within this context, a new-realist architecture, as Morton puts it, seeks not to hide hyper-objects but to make them visible, to directly incorporate them into the design. Within this new visibility, deep form and deep function exist in a structure that connects humans with the non-human, preparing them for the world of objects, adapting them, and inviting them in.

Conclusion

Theoretical approaches remove architecture from being merely a representation of functional requirements or formal images and transform it into a field of thought that can be positioned ontologically. In this context, architecture is defined by its multi-layered relationships with existence. Buildings now possess a new ontology based inter-subjectivity that cannot be reduced to human perception and use, that is, their own “modes of being”.

In this ontological plane where the categories of form and function have “zeroed each other out,” it is necessary to consider the latent existence of space, its potential for formation, and its resistant materiality. At this point, the acceptance that everyone's relationship with the structure, from the designer to the user, is inevitably partial brings with it a space of determination that will fundamentally transform the act of architecture. Because the entirety of a structure cannot be fully grasped by any subject; every approach, every experience, every mode of use reveals only one aspect of the object. The architectural object always contains an ontological dark core that is an “excess,” that is, something that transcends appearance and function (Table 3). This should not be confused with a phenomenological experience; rather, it should be thought of as a new fissure that allows reality to emerge.

This acceptance distances architecture from being seen as a controllable, closed, and completed system; instead, it positions design as an open, relational, plural, and continuous process of interaction. Thus, architecture is neither reduced to a purely instrumental object of utility nor to an iconographic shell of experience. Instead, structures are reinterpreted as resilient ontological entities that interact with their surroundings but cannot be reduced to them, interwoven with actors. In this perspective, form and function are no longer absolute and fixed design goals; they are deep ontological starting points that emerge through their absence. Design is understood as an object-oriented creative process jointly produced by human and non-human actors (materials, climates, topographies, machines). In this sense, architecture becomes a form of thinking about being, that is, an ontological field of operation. Thus, new-realist and material-focused approaches enable architecture to transcend its human-centered boundaries, question nature-culture dichotomies, and reevaluate architectural objects as interactive actors. This theoretical transformation forms the basis for a new way of thinking in many areas, from architectural education to design methods, construction processes, and environmental responsibility.

Table 3.
Architectural Approaches on Zero-form and Zero-function

Case	Context	Function (Zero-function)	Form / Material (Zero-form)
Tezuka Architects (Fuji & Asahi Kindergartens)	- Post-disaster memory, community attachment. - Linked to Tool-being (withdrawal, hidden depth) and Material/Form (autonomy of matter).	- Play-based pedagogy, spaces constantly redefined by children. - Adaptability and bodily memory as functional depth. - Intra-action visible in the entanglement of bodies, trees, and architecture.	- Circular plan of Fuji and tree integration → body-memory relation. - Asahi’s 400-year-old wooden columns → material trace, narrative continuity. - Matter carries ontology beyond immediate appearance.
Alejandro Aravena (Constitución Forest Project)	- Flood/tsunami risk, governance of public space. - Linked to Hyper-objects (large-scale, ecological entanglement) and Intra-action (community + environment).	- Socio-ecological infrastructure: absorbs natural risks while redefining public space. - Collective adaptability, governance, and ecological agency. - Human and non-human entanglement demonstrates intra-action.	- Artificial forest belt blurs natural/artificial boundaries. - Form operates at hyper-object scale, embodying ecological presence.
Rintala Eggertsson Architects (SALT Installations)	- “Material democracy,” cultural continuity, and craft traditions. - Linked to Material/Form (sensory contrasts, autonomy of matter).	- Transformation of the fish-drying rack typology into a stage. - Shows evolution of social practice and reuse across time. - Intra-action between community use and crafted structure.	- Wooden rack structures, light–shadow, warm–cold contrasts. - Highlights material agency and sensory diversity as deep form.

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