

Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

Paper 206

Changing urban designs, tapping new markets:

**The discursive production of professionalism in the
new global cities**

by

Miguel Pérez-Milans[©] (University College London)

m.milans@ucl.ac.uk

April 2018



This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Changing urban designs, tapping new markets: The discursive production of professionalism in the new global cities

Miguel Pérez-Milans, University College London (UK)

Abstract

Sociolinguistic research has paid close attention to processes whereby language and communication get turned into commodities vis-à-vis the expansion of the service industries (Heller, 2010; Heller, Pujolar & Duchêne, 2014) under the conditions of so-called "late capitalism" (Duchêne & Heller, 2012). Continuing with this legacy, this paper focuses on the emergence of "speculative architecture" as a distinctive strand within the professional field of architecture, one that claims to "create narratives about how new technologies and networks influence space, culture, and community [with the aim of] imagining where new forms of agency exist within the cities changed by these new processes" (Liam Young, 2017). In so doing, "speculative architecture" is conceived of here as a discursive space (Heller, 2007) for social performance (Briggs & Bauman, 1992; Hanks, 1987) and capital accumulation (Bourdieu, 1986) in the "new" (globalized) labour market. In an attempt to go beyond just "language" as a product, I examine how a set of discursive features that characterize "doing speculative architecture" get "enregistered" (Agha, 2007) as a "bundle of skills" (Urcioli, 2008), or "commodity register" (Agha, 2011), which then regulates access to material and symbolic resources. This approach is said to illuminate how new professional fields tied to untapped niche markets get discursively constituted through the production of neoliberal technologies of professional subjectivity and subjection (Foucault, 2008), while at the same time shedding light onto the embedded forms of inequality that they contribute to (re)create. Implications of this analysis on the "mobility turn" in the language disciplines are also discussed.

1. Introduction

On 23rd of October 2007, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York hosted an event titled "In Our Time: Radical Design Geographies with Liam Young". On its website, [architecturediary.org](http://architecturediary.org/newyork/events/5633) (<http://architecturediary.org/newyork/events/5633>) publicized this event as follows:

In Our Time is an architecture and design lecture series presenting the best thinkers, makers, and builders of today. This edition (...) introduces the radical new global geographies generated by changes in technology, human migration and the environment. The lecture will be followed by a conversation with Beatrice Galilee and Daniel Brodsky, Associate Curator of Architecture and Design, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The event was echoed in several online platforms of institutions involved in the production of knowledge about architecture and design all over the world, particularly in Europe and the US, where Young is often presented as a "theorist of architecture". He has also been named by *Blueprint* magazine as one of 25 people who will change architecture and design in 2010. The brief introduction of Liam Young's work shown in the publicity of this event in New York still appears today copied and pasted in dozens of webpages announcing Young's exhibitions and talks held at museums and universities in different cities, in between 2007 and 2017. The introduction goes like this:

Liam Young is an architect who operates in the spaces between design, fiction, and futures. He is founder of the think tank *Tomorrow's Thoughts Today*, a group whose work explores the possibilities of fantastic, speculative, and imaginary urbanisms. He

tells stories about the city using fiction, film, and performance as imaginative tools to explore the implications and consequences of new technologies and ecological conditions. Building his design fictions from the realities of the present, Young also co-runs the Unknown Fields Division, a nomadic research studio that travels on location shoots and expeditions to the ends of the earth to document emerging trends and uncover the weak signals of possible futures. He has been acclaimed in both mainstream and architectural media, including the BBC, NBC, *Wired*, *The Guardian*, *Time* magazine, and *Dazed & Confused*. Young manages his time between exploring distant landscapes and visualizing the fictional worlds he extrapolates from them.

This way of doing architecture is packaged by Liam Young himself as “speculative architecture”, which at an interview with an online magazine (NexNature.net, <https://www.nextnature.net/2015/03/interview-liam-young/>) he defines as

an attempt to stay relevant in a context of a city that is always changing”. He goes on: “I use this type of work to think about how, as designers, we could engage with emerging technologies in a much more critical and urgent way. Traditional architecture exists at the wrong end of the technology transfer line. Technology always happens to us rather than being shaped by us. With this type of work we are speculating and acting on the potentials of technology, and being active agents in shaping the development of where it could go and what we could use it for. So, I thought that operating with networks, software, stories and fiction within other cultural forms was a timely and legitimate form of architectural practice.

But speculative architecture is not necessarily concerned with conventional understandings of this label within the social field of architecture. Young himself makes this claim at an interview with another architectural magazine (Strelka Magazine, <https://strelka.com/en/magazine/2017/06/01/what-is-speculative-architecture>):

Most architects, whether they call themselves that or not, have been speculative architects for much of their careers. For example, most competition entries remain unbuilt, and the client never pays for them (...) So, I think the claim in speculative architecture is actually not to say that it's a new discipline, but to legitimize it and formalize it in a way that it hasn't been before. I set up a new Master's programme on speculative architecture at Sci-Arc to try to establish it as a clear genre of architecture and a clear career path, not being something that you fall into because no one will pay you to build anything, but something that is really meaningful — and also critical.

Young adds:

As a speculative architect, I don't design buildings as endpoints or outputs, but I would still argue that what I do is architectural, or at least it's architecture in some form. Instead of creating buildings themselves, I tell stories about cities. The dominant forces of the past that shaped our cities, buildings, and public spaces are now being displaced by technologies, systems, networks, and stacks. Thus, the architect needs to change their model of practice in order to remain relevant. The architect now needs to intervene in these systems beyond shaping the physical building. And that is really about telling stories about how they operate. Speculative architects mostly create narratives about how new technologies and networks

influence space, culture, and community. They try to imagine where new forms of agency exist within the cities changed by these new processes.

Speculative architecture is therefore constructed as an attempt to carve a new professional niche under changing social conditions. Young expands on this further:

I think somehow we all want to be able to effect change at some scale. I don't think the traditional role of architects is going to disappear, but classic architects are going to become a form of luxury item. Louis Vuitton handbags still exist in the world, they serve no real purpose, but we all kind of like to have them. And the role of architects designing crafted physical buildings is going to operate in a similar way. The architectural profession will have to diversify. A speculative architect will tell stories about possible futures, and there will be architects as politicians, urban planners, tech company executives, researchers, writers and performers. The change is just an expanding role of the discipline (<https://www.nextnature.net/2015/03/interview-liam-young/>).

In this paper, I argue that "speculative architecture" is a relevant window to the study of processes whereby language and multimodal communication get turned into commodities vis-à-vis the expansion of the service industries (Heller, Pujolar & Duchêne, 2014) under the conditions of so-called "late capitalism" (Duchêne & Heller, 2012). It offers view to these processes departing from a focus on just "language" as a product, towards a closer look into the discursive production of this emerging professional field. But approaching architecture through discursive lens is far from being a novel perspective (see Cameron & Markus, 2002), and in the following section I detail what in my view are the continuities and discontinuities with respect to what we already know in the language disciplines.

2. Deborah Cameron, and beyond: Speculative architecture, political economy and metapragmatics

In their 2002 book, *The words between the spaces. Buildings and language*, Deborah Cameron and Thomas A. Markus, sociolinguist and architect, draw attention to the significance of language for our understanding of the built environment. In their work, they explore "how language is used, and what it does, in the particular context of writing and talking about buildings (p. vii). As they go: "we argue that the language used to speak and write about the built environment plays a significant role in shaping that environment, and our responses to it" (p. 2). Their key position is therefore that both architectural objects and language are "irreducibly social phenomena, so that any illuminating analysis of them must locate them in the larger social world" (p. 9). However, turning our attention to "speculative architecture" as conceptualized by Liam Young and other contemporary architects provides us with a platform to take Cameron & Markus' line of inquiry a step further, both theoretically and epistemologically.

While aligning with Cameron & Markus' position that discourse and sociolinguistics are suitable language-based angles to account for architecture as a social practice, I departure from an approach that: a) privileges written discourses *about* buildings; and b) aims to identify wider societal ideologies about power, heritage, and the nation as hidden in the linguistic and semiotic choices made by architects as they present their cultural objects. In contrast, I approach "speculative architecture" as a) a discursive space (Heller, 2007) for the production of professional subjectivities through meta-pragmatic discourses about architecture, urban spaces and forms of communication in them; and b) a social field for

genred performance (Briggs & Bauman, 1992; Hanks, 1987) and capital accumulation (Bourdieu, 1986) in which "doing speculative architecture" cannot be detached from the subjectification of new professionals into new moralized types of personhood/citizenship that have exchange value within transnationalized social networks.

Theoretically speaking, this approach to language and architecture requires more explicit attention to political economy. It forces us to examine the re-articulation of conventional models of communication, culture and identity in daily meaning-making practices as traditional forms of social organisation get re-arranged under the restructuring of the labour market in global capitalism. That is to say, this perspective demands a Foucauldian perspective to discourse, following Cameron & Markus' standpoint, but one that draws more centrally on his latest work on the bio-politics of governance and the associated neoliberal technologies of subjectivity and subjection (see also Del Percio, 2017; Martín Rojo, 2018). Following Ong (2006):

Technologies of subjectivity rely on an array of knowledge and expert systems to induce self-animation and self-government so that citizens can optimize choices, efficiency, and competitiveness in turbulent market conditions. Such techniques of optimization include the adherence to health regimes, acquisition of skills, development of entrepreneurial ventures, and other techniques of self-engineering and capital accumulation. *Technologies of subjection* inform political strategies that differently regulate populations for optimal productivity, increasingly through spatial practices that engage market forces. Such regulations include the fortressization of urban space, the control of travel, and the recruitment of certain kinds of actors to growth hubs (p. 6).

On a more epistemological note, a performativity focus brings about an analytical apparatus capable of accounting for the metapragmatic activities through which social groups come to recognize a set of discursive or semiotic practices as shared cultural models of action indexically linked to the enactment of specific social personae and associated stances with regard to circumstances, other social actors, or institutions. Existing strands of contemporary work in linguistic anthropology (e.g., Goodwin & Duranti, 2000) and sociolinguistics (e.g. Blommaert, 2005, 2010) offer suitable lens with which to identify such processes of indexical (re)configuration, and in this paper I particularly rely on Agha's concepts of "enregisterment" (2007) and "commodity register" (2011). That is to say, I aim to: 1) examine the very process whereby a set of discursive and semiotic features are enregistered as emblems of the emerging professional field of 'speculative architecture' and the kinds of moral/social values that are associated with it; and 2) identify the linkages between this form of discourse register and the institutional actors and networks that profit from it through turning these enregistered discursive and semiotic features as "bundles of skills", in Urciuoli's (2008) words, which are attributed value within the logic of specific economic markets.

As I will try to show, a theoretical and epistemological angle of this sort leaves us in a good position to ask/address questions such as these: what does 'doing speculative architecture' actually entail? Where and how is it enacted? What categories of personhood and citizenship are staged? How is it circulated and consumed by whom within this emerging social field? What are the networks of institutions and fields of knowledge production that capitalize on its enactment? In what follows I attempt to address these issues by briefly zooming into two specific dimensions, namely: the enregisterment of doing speculative architecture, and the network of institutions that profit from it. I will turn to each of these, in turn.

3. Doing speculative architecture

The production of expertise knowledge about speculative architecture in my corpus data involves different socio-institutional spaces and communicative genres, all of them with Liam Young as the key connector structuring my digital ethnographic enquiry¹. These include: interviews with (online and more traditional) media, public exhibitions and lectures in museums and research institutions interested in architecture and design, and films and other multimodal artefacts produced by and displayed via Think Tanks that either are run by Liam Young in London (*Tomorrow's Thoughts Today*) or collaborate with him in other countries (*Strelka Institute*). Though such genres are communicatively arranged in different ways according to different aims and participant actors, they all have a distinguishing 'interdiscursivity' (Silverstein, 2005) feature: that of a salient social persona that is recurrently performed through practice.

In particular, doing speculative architecture in this corpus of data is recursively performed by enacting the social persona of a professional – in this case an architect – who has a critical stance towards social inequality and is devoted to offering or *imagining* alternative (i.e. liberating) forms of social organization. This social persona is enacted through a set of recurrent discursive and semiotic features that involve: a) the "emplacement of signs" (Scollon & Scollon, 2003) into moving technological devices; b) shifts in production formats and frameworks of participation, à la Goffman (1981), which contribute to the setting up of contrasts between technologies as form of social control and technologies as *cultured* devices at the service of inter-personal relations and stories of joy and love; and c) chronotopical personification (Bakhtin, 1981) of cybernetic networks in the context of narratives that connect actors, (online and offline) technologies, actions (including writing practices) and subsequent inequalities across different spatial and time-related scales.

Example 1 below is taken from the synopsis of a film directed by Liam Young and premiered in IMAX at the London Film Festival on October 8th, 2016. The text, which is co-constructed by different actors involved in the exhibition and displayed on *Tomorrow's Thoughts Today's* website along with a short extract of the film made available by Young (<https://vimeo.com/184429206>), provides an entry point to the jointly staged performance of an speculative architectural product that involves features as in a) and b) above.

Example 1. "In the Robot Skies: A drone Love Story"

Directed by speculative architect Liam Young and written by fiction author Tim Maughan, *In the Robot Skies* is the world's first narrative shot entirely through autonomous drones. In collaboration with the Embedded and Artificially intelligent Vision Lab in Belgium the film has evolved in the context of their experiments with specially developed camera drones each programmed with their own cinematic rules and behaviours.

The film explores the drone as a cultural object, not just as a new instrument of visual story telling but also as the catalyst for a new collection of urban sub cultures. In the way the New York subway car of the 80's gave birth to a youth culture of wild style graffiti and hip hop the age of ubiquitous drones as smart city infrastructure will create a new network of surveillance activists and drone hackers. From the eyes of the drones we see two teenagers each held by police order within the digital confines of their own council estate tower block in London. A network of drones survey the council estates, as a roving flock off CCTV cameras and our two characters are kept apart by this autonomous aerial infrastructure. We watch as they pass notes to each other via their own hacked and decorated drone, like kids in an old fashioned classroom, scribbling messages with biro on paper, balling it up and stowing it in their drones.. In this near future city drones form both agents of state surveillance but also become co-opted as the aerial vehicles through which two teens fall in love.

Premiered in IMAX at the London Film Festival on October 8th, with live music accompaniment from acclaimed electronic producer Forest Swords. Screening with Random Acts on

Channel 4 Mid November 2016.
Directed by Liam Young
Written By Tim Maughan
Starring Maia Watkins and Moe Bar-el
Produced by Dani Admiss
Music by Forest Swords
Sound Design Aneek Thapar
Director of Photography Vini Curtis
Drone Costumes by Jennifer Chen
Human Costumes by Maharishi
Motion Graphics by Zhan Wang
Camera Drone pilot Liam Young
Tethered Character Drone Pilot Denis Stretton
Special Thanks Alexey Marfin
Drones supported by DJI
Commissioned by Channel 4 Random Acts and STUK, Belgium.

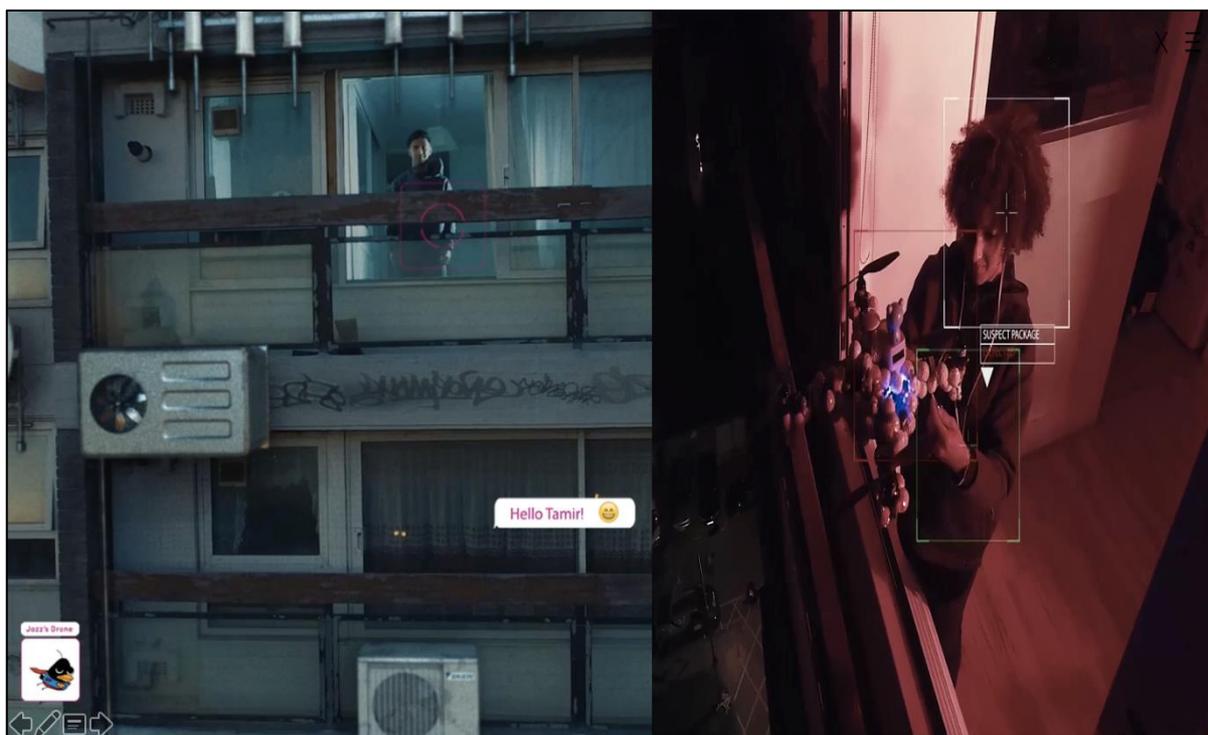
The two teenagers portrayed in the film are positioned both as prisoners, objects of state surveillance who are held in home custody, and as lovers who exchange notes through drones which they have hacked and appropriated for their own socio-emotional purposes. In the former case, the writing practices appear as authored by the drones, thus placing the film spectator in the capacity of a ratified addressee who is engaged in surveillance and monitoring of the individual teenager subjects through side-played communication with the drones (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Drones and state surveillance



As for the teenagers as lovers, they are themselves the authors of writing practices communicating with each other by inscribing notes in the drones that are then passed onto each other by means of hacking the devices' state-controlled patterns of mobility. In this case, the film spectator is placed in the position of a non-ratified participant, or bystander, watching illegitimately their love exchanges, while the drones act as mere animators of the youngsters' messages (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Hacked drones and love stories



The semiotic features mentioned in c) further above – the chronotopical personification of cybernetic networks – are better illustrated in Example 2, taken from a review of a public lecture delivered by Liam Young at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) in Los Angeles (USA), 28 October 2015. The text, written by Julia Ingalls, is published on *Archinect news* (<https://archinect.com/news/article/140004615/liam-young-s-triple-feature-review-of-city-everywhere-at-sci-arc>), a website that contains architecture-related editorials, news, events, competitions and employment information. Thus, the recount offered in this piece provides an instance of how the lecture itself (accessible here: <https://vimeo.com/144835155>) is entextualized (Silverstein & Urban, 1996) within the professional community for which it was performed.

Example 2. "Liam Young's triple feature: review of "City Everywhere"

A presentation about a world that is increasingly mediated by screens and digital conceptualizations of space on three screens with digital conceptualizations of space is not just meta: it was the engaging and immersive format of Liam Young's lecture/performance Wednesday night at SCI-Arc, "City Everywhere: Kim Kardashian and the Dark Side of the Screen." Young's fair warning to the packed lecture hall that the live sound mixing of his narration and syncing of three separate video feeds might go awry turned out to be unnecessary; the presentation was flawless while simultaneously visceral, a kind of Purple Rose of Cairo experience for architectural discourse. The pervasive reach of the internet makes us all actors in this particular film.

Young's presentation was a quasi-fictional tour of "a city that is hiding in plain sight," which is to say the current urban and mental space(s) that we inhabit thanks to the reality of digital mediation (...). While it's tempting to file that incident under the Darwin Awards, Young layered in a disturbing series of examples of how the digital has gradually come to redefine the physical, even for those who can read a road sign. He showed footage of a student project of the making of an entirely fake island: fake geo-mapping with photos and reviews, fake Wikipedia entry, even a faked scale model of a favela-like hillside community that could be filmed against a green screen and then broadcast on the internet, live, to allow people to check up on it in so-called real-time.

The innocuous nature of this fakery, this trust we inadvertently give to our search engines and bookmarks and algorithms, was echoed on two of the screens with a roving satellite map search that highlighted various "landmarks" on the earth's surface, including a giant face in a mountain ridge in Canada and what appeared to be a Firefox logo in some agricultural fields. The images were real and not real; they were, or rather are, captures from the boundary of the unfurling digital present, a place that increasingly governs our physical reality, our economy, and our understanding of our own desires.

Young displayed images of Facebook's central server warehouse for all of the site's photographs, which is located in a nondescript town in Oregon. Young noted that instead of a cathedral or a library housing humanity's treasured information, the architecture of the digital age is kept in a "tin shed." Indeed, Kim Kardashian, who Young invoked not even as a person exactly but rather as the most popular assemblage of personas in our digital age, was the ideal docent for this dehumanized territory, taking shopping trips for genetically altered goldfish and snapping selfies of underpaid iPhone assembly workers in China. She did break the internet, after all: it's fitting she would be the guide for the digital era's perpetual reassembly/reformation/transformation.

As recounted in the review, the persona of Kim Kardashian allows Liam Young to construct a narrative throughout the lecture that foregrounds a portrayal of the global society as mediated by technologies in ways that contribute to human exploitation. In the context of a highly stylized multimedia-based performance, this personification of the digitized world functions in the course of the lecture as a driver towards connecting social actors' actions and social consequences of these actions across space-time, transcending nation-based territorialized representations of space. As Young puts it in the course of this public performance:

She is a creature that leaves in the network; she's an animated media system. She's not just her physical self but to understand Kim, also to understand us in the architectures and places we inhabit you've got to look, not only at our physical and digital space, but at the shadows we cast across the planet in the electronic spectrum....

Such discursive practice is indeed conceptualized by Liam Young on the website of his Think Tank *Tomorrow's Thoughts Today* as in connection with a necessary critical attitude the defines the very genre of speculative architecture, in its attempt to uncover global unequal relations of labour that are concealed by the normalized spatiotemporal disconnection of actors and actions at a global scale. This critical mentality also applies to Example 1 in which Liam Young warns us over the potential use of technologies for social control.

But the enregisterment of doing speculative architecture as a cultural model of action that is emblematically linked to the social persona of a critical architect does not only involve a select group of members engaging (off- and online) with Liam Young's lectures and exhibitions. It also concerns a transnational network of institutions that capitalise on the production and consumption of this discourse register within specific nationalized economic territories. The following section addresses this particular issue.

4. Discourses of criticality, and the re-territorialization of profit

Speculative architecture and its emblematic association with discourses of criticality does not only feature in talk from and about Liam Young; it can also be found in descriptions of Master degrees offered in university faculties of architecture worldwide. For instance, in the UK, the University of Greenwich offers a 2-year MSc Advanced Landscape and Urbanism that encourages students to develop inventive and speculative approaches to the design of cities, landscape and territories. The programme overview shown on this university's website elaborates on this approach (<https://www.gre.ac.uk/pg/ach/advlandurb>; accessed on 6 April, 2018), linking up speculative projects, a preoccupation with contemporary challenges faced by contemporary urban cities (including globalisation and social inequality), and the imagining of future landscapes:

The MSc Architecture, Landscape and Urbanism encourages students to develop advanced and speculative approaches to the design of cities, landscape and territories. It promotes strong design methods and the integration of new and innovative technologies to address the challenges facing contemporary cities, such as urban growth, climate change, globalisation and social inequality. The programme is designed for students of architecture, landscape architecture, engineering and related disciplines, who wish to enhance their academic, intellectual and professional skills. The programme interrogates the growing influence of landscape on urban, social and ecological processes. It provides a platform from which to address the conditions of contemporary urbanism, such as extreme environmental events, shifting economic agendas, new forms of public space and the transformations to urban infrastructures. And it employs advanced design techniques and innovative methodologies to develop speculative designs, strategies and interventions. The programme centres on the design studio, where students are introduced to innovative approaches in landscape architecture and encouraged to develop design speculations for future landscapes and cities.

Texts such as these may point to an already institutionalised body of knowledge about speculative architecture in a social field that is directly concerned with the production of professional subjects. However, it is worth coming back to the case of Liam Young with the aim of tracking more closely how this process happens "on the ground" within a given network of actors and institutions that is invested in the production, circulation and consumption of the discourse register of "doing speculative architecture". And Strelka Institute is a perfect venue to do this (<https://strelka.com/en/home>).

Strelka Institute is a non-governmental institute based in Russia. It is publicly presented as driven by "an experimental approach, offering a multidisciplinary academic programme". Its Board of Trustees include members of Public Council of the Ministry of Culture in Russia and founders of Russian-based development companies, Funds and publishing houses. The Institute's website features Liam Young's work on its Strelka magazine section (<https://strelka.com/en/magazine/2017/06/01/what-is-speculative-architecture>), together with his Think Tank *Tomorrow's Thoughts Today* and his London-based (and British Council-supported) studio *Unknown Fields*. On its mission section, the Institute's website states the following:

Student research and design at Strelka is always focused on the City, but the research tools used can be adopted from various disciplines, including sociology, economics, architecture, political and cultural studies. Education at Strelka is free of charge and

all students receive a monthly scholarship (39 200 rub monthly) that covers living costs. The programme is project-based, each year taking a different format - previously students were allocated to research topics and studios. This year participants of the course work on a theme of 'Hybrid Urbanism', forming groups and projects independently through Strelka's educational process. Architects and researchers from top companies like AMO, McKinsey, MIT, Hyper Island, The Why Factory, the 'Meganom' Bureau, Alexander Brodsky, Arch Daily and many others have taught, given lectures and consulted students at Strelka. Since 2012, Strelka has been listed among DOMUS magazine's top-100 best European Architecture and Design schools. Strelka has also been rated as one of the best spaces for learning by World Architects on-line magazine.

The connection between professional training and the labour market is more explicitly stated on the "after Strelka" section of the same website, where it is claimed that

Strelka aspires to create a better future that largely depends on the development of human capital. Strelka graduates go on to collaborate with city administrations and are employed in various government departments and agencies, such as the Russian Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Transport; they head architectural competitions and work for Russian and international architectural firms (AMO, Herzog&De Meuron, Bureau 'Meganom', Wowhaus, Alexander Brodsky); they are also to be found contributing to key online and offline media as authors and experts as well as writing books. Strelka alumni is growing in size and influence, and this year's class will expand its reach.

The development of such a "human capital" is channelled through the hosting of entrepreneurial talks on how to invest and set up startup companies in urban businesses, but more specifically via two English-medium postgraduate programmes at which Liam Young has taught together with other architects based in Europe and Russia. These programmes include a MA in Advanced Urban Design and a 5-months programme called "*The New Normal*"; they explicitly aim to the training of professionals that can apply European and American expertise in emerging markets within developing countries where urbanisation is happening rapidly, with focus on China and Russia. The overview to the MA programme rationalises it in these terms:

How does urban design work in unstable social and economic contexts? Why do developing countries need city transformations? What are most advanced methods for urban design? Strelka Institute's joint Masters programme in Advanced Urban Design with HSE Graduate School of Urbanism is aimed at the next generation of Urban Designers, combining the best of the Russian Academia and the cutting-edge experimental project-based education. The MA is based on Strelka Institute's five-year experience in experimental education and embraces best interdisciplinary and international learning practices in urban design. In this two-year programme students explore ongoing dynamic urban growth in unstable economic contexts and study advanced urban design methods. The programme introduces students to the contemporary European and American design theory and practices, while at the same time offering operational toolkits for application of this knowledge in the new markets. It helps to understand the specificity of research and design work in highly volatile conditions of the cities in Russia, South Africa and the CIS, providing competencies beyond traditional urbanism. The programme offers unique expertise in

doing projects and research in developing countries and economies in transition – places where most urbanization and suburbanization is happening nowadays. By studying Russian cities, students will have an opportunity to explore key patterns of urbanization traceable in cities of similar unstable contexts. This will allow them to get experience of integrative planning in situations when all systems of urban governance and regulation are going through continuous and not always logical transformation.

The linkage between the training provided to tap (i.e. profiting from) these emerging markets in nation-based territorialised spaces framed as “developing countries” through “European” and “American” design theory and practices, on the one hand, and the persona of a speculative architect as described in the previous sections, on the other, is more clearly stated in the description of the “*The New Normal*” programme:

The New Normal at the Strelka Institute is a three-year speculative urbanism think-tank, a platform for the invention and articulation of a new discourse and new models. Each year Strelka admits 30 students from around the world to a 5-months postgraduate programme as part of this longer initiative (...) The New Normal programme focuses on research and design for the city and explores opportunities and challenges posed by emerging technologies for interdisciplinary design practices (...) The New Normal 2017/18 is designed for young designers with diverse backgrounds: architecture, urbanism, film & cinema, interaction design, software design, humanities & social sciences, game design, economics, and more. The programme redesigns urban design to include not only architecture and infrastructure, but also experience, interaction and economics. During the intensive 5-months programme students will work in small teams to research and develop original speculative interventions and platforms. Urban design projects include spatial plans, but the Strelka programme also emphasizes strategy, cinema and software. The Program takes place in Moscow and includes research trips within Russia and to China.

In fact, The New Normal programme concludes every year with a public presentation of students’ projects, all of them presented in multimodal performances similar to those by Liam Young reported further above. As explained on a section of the website where the artful presentation of the projects of the 2016/17 academic year can be accessed:

The 7 projects developed not only come to different conclusions about what is to be done, they start from quite different premises about how an answer or solution might be articulated. Some began as risky speculations and became quite practical propositions for infrastructural intervention. Others started with concrete history and found that a poetic cinematic language would provide the most direct expression of what is most at stake. All of them are urban projects, but not necessarily in the conventional sense of that term. Each resists a ‘normal’ urbanism in favour of one that is more integrative, more generous, and which seeks a new home in the great outdoors of our shared uncertain future.

These projects are far from just being artful performances, though. They showcase the potential of the programme in developing applications with economic relevance in specific geopolitical locations, as shown in Example 3 taken from the site on which one of these projects is presented. The site shows a simulation of a tool that is devised to create a futuristic decentralised governance to manage circulation of goods through the Arctic, for when this

region is completely melted and made available as a key route for global commerce. The video is accompanied by a written explanation of the tool, which is partially reproduced below.

Example 3. Projects, tools and global commerce



SEVER [SVR] is location-based cryptocurrency whose value increases with the degree of latitude at which it is used. It is conceived as a speculative intervention into the contested territory of the Arctic. Scientists are unanimous: climate change in the Arctic is irreversible, and the melting of the polar ice cap is now unstoppable. Perhaps the most vivid manifestation of the Anthropocene, this rapid and disruptive transformation is giving birth to a new ocean, across which the globe could be thoroughly rewired. The prospect of an open Arctic draws competing interests to the region: geopolitical tensions are on the rise, while the risk of an environmental disaster lures over the horizon. Opposing this new wave of quiet colonisation, numerous NGOs and rights groups demand that the Arctic be regarded as a sanctuary, and as such be left untouched. Yet, given the scale of change that an open Arctic ocean would bring to the world's balance of power, such an argument is all too easily dismissed by key geopolitical players and stakeholders; as such, it is ultimately ineffective. SEVER emerges as a tool to bring about desirable and sustainable Arctic future(s). Its location-sensitive protocol is designed to foster exchange and cooperation across a networked Arctic economy, and to have a positive geo-engineering impact on the regional ecosystem. As a scalable, blockchain-based infrastructure for decentralised exchanges and governance, SEVER would lay the ground for the development of an alternative model of globalisation, first tri-alled in the new Arctic frontier. Specifically, the project explores the urban consequences of this alternative model of Arctic development through the case study of Murmansk.

In sum, the provision of the forms of expertise that constitute key emblematic features of the discourse register of "doing speculative architecture" emerge as a "bundle of skills" (Urciouli, 2008) with exchange value within this transnational network of actors, institutions and economic markets: they allow new professionals in the field to occupy new market niches in emerging or yet-to-be urban spaces.

We shall now move to a final discussion in which I return to the language disciplines more specifically.

5. Final notes: On the much-touted uncertainty in the language disciplines

Much of the sociolinguistic literature focused on the commodification of language has devoted its attention to communication practices within the space of the service industries, for these are representative of the economic restructuring that has been brought about by the conditions of late capitalism in the last few decades. Away from what is often termed as the "Fordist" (i.e. factory-based) form of economic production/distribution/consumption, these new industries have re-arranged the spatiotemporal organisation of labour relations as well as the normative forms of knowledge and associated moral/social categories about language, culture and identity that come with them (see Duchêne & Heller, 2012; Heller, Pujolar & Duchêne, 2014). In this paper, however, I have tried to build on this well-established tradition by shifting the attention to the social field of professionalism.

In particular, I have placed the locus of analysis in the forms of professional knowledge, subjectivities and networks that accompany the development of the new global cities where, as Ong puts it (see section 2 above), market regulations favour "the fortressization of urban space, the control of travel, and the recruitment of certain kinds of actors to growth hubs". I have done so by drawing on the epistemological perspectives of linguistic anthropological work on indexicality of language (Agha, 2007, 2011; Urciouli, 2008), as these place researchers in the language disciplines in a privilege position from which to describe the ways in which those forms of knowledge, subjectivities and networks are actually constituted and made sense of through daily discursive practices in situated (off- and online) social domains.

This angle has revealed the ways in which a set of semiotic/discursive features get enregistered as a recognizable cultural model of action (i.e. emplacement of signs into moving technological devices, layering of production formats and frameworks of participation to foreground contrasts between technologies as form of social control and technologies as *culturated* devices at the service of inter-personal relations, and chronotopical personification of cybernetic networks to connect actors, technologies and inequalities at a global scale). In the examples discussed, this shared conventional model is then emblematically linked to the social persona of a professional speculative architect who operates at a global and digitally de-territorialized scale driven by a critical attitude (i.e. a concern with social inequality and with searching for alternative forms of social organization). Furthermore, the approach outlined above has identified linkages between the institutions, actors and economic markets that are involved in the production, circulation and consumption of such enregistered practices as exchangeable forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) within specific territorialized markets.

The implications of these findings are vast for us researchers interested in language, communication and culture. The production of professional forms of personhood linked to technological de-territorialized spaces that operate selectively in territorialized national markets reveals a process of production of citizenship that is shaped by the logic of a globalized (but variegated) labour market that is nodularly constituted through the selective layering of de-territorialized and nationalized cultural spaces (see also Springer, 2016). Keeping with Ong (2006):

As an intervention of optimization, neoliberalism interacts with regimes of ruling and regimes of citizenship to produce conditions that change administrative strategies and citizenship practices. It follows that the infiltration of market logic into politics conceptually unsettles the notion of citizenship as legal status rooted in a nation-state, and in stark opposition to a condition of stateless. Furthermore, [neoliberalism]

articulates citizenship elements in political spaces that may be less than the national territory in some cases, or exceeds national borders in others" (p. 6).

This, I believe, speaks back to contemporary work on globalization and the so-called "mobility turn" in socio- and applied linguistics in which uncertainty is often conceptualized as the only source of destabilization of modern-based forms of linguistic, cultural and identity organisation. In contrast, the analysis in this paper shows how the production of culture – by means of engineered subjectivities and cultural models of action – can also be anchored in changing globalized political economic configurations that shape labour markets differently depending on the specific local conditions (e.g. European and American actors/institutions as producers of de-territorialized technological forms of expertise knowledge that are then applied into the growing economic territories of developing nations such as China and Russia). In other words, my account introduces elements that should make us researchers in the language disciplines be cautious about treating uncertainty as just the starting point of our inquiry.

NOTES

1. I refer to digital ethnography in a vague sense for now, capturing a sensitivity to tracing the links between Liam Young's public performances/interviews related to speculative architecture, including the online reactions to these, over a period of 10 years from 2007-2017.

References

- Agha, A. (2007). *Language and social relations*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Agha, A. (2011). Commodity registers. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 21(1), 22-53.
- Blommaert, J. (2005). *Discourse. A Critical introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Blommaert, J. (2010). *The sociolinguistics of globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241– 258). New York: Greenwood.
- Briggs, C., & Bauman, R. (1992). Genre, intertextuality, and social power. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 2(2), 131– 172.
- Del Percio, A. D. (2017). Engineering commodifiable workers: language, migration and the governmentality of the self. *Language Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S10993-017-9436-4>.
- Duchêne, A., & Heller, M. (Eds.). (2012). *Language in late capitalism: Pride and profit*. New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *The birth of biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, ed. Michael Sennellart. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Goodwin, C. & Duranti, A. (2000). Rethinking context: An introduction. In C. Goodwin & A. Duranti (Eds.), *Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon* (pp. 1-42). Cambridge: CUP.
- Hanks, W. F. (1987). Discourse genres in a theory of practice. *American Ethnologist* 14(4), 668– 692.
- Heller, M. (2007). Distributed knowledge, distributed power: A sociolinguistics of structuration. *Text & Talk* 27(5-6), 633-653.

- Heller, M. (2010). The commodification of language. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39, 101–14.
- Heller, M., Pujolar, J., & Duchêne, A. (2014). Linguistic commodification in tourism. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 18, 539–566.
- Marcus, T.A. & Cameron, D. (2002). *The words between the spaces. Buildings and language*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Martín-Rojo, L. (2018). Neoliberalism and linguistic governmentality. In JW. Tollefson & M. Pérez-Milans (Eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Language Policy and Planning* (544-567). Oxford: OUP.
- Ong, A. (2006). *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Silverstein, M. & Urban, G. (Eds.) (1996). *Natural histories of discourse*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Springer, S. (2016). *The Discourse of Neoliberalism: An Anatomy of a Powerful Idea*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Urciuoli, B. (2008). Skills and selves in the new workplace. *American Ethnologist* 35(2), 211-228.