

Post-Formations

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Formations – the exhibition for the Australian Pavilion at the 2012 Venice Biennale of Architecture – emerged from a range of issues that have inspired architects to abandon conventional practice models. The exhibition process revealed a desire for practitioners to seek new ways of practising architecture. A desire for greater agency across humanitarian, media, community, manufacturing, artistic and political domains prompted the development of new and unexpected formations for architectural practice.

The profession in Australia surprised us with their widespread support of a project that challenged their practice models. This support suggested that questions posed in 'The Plasticity of Practice' essay that framed the project were bothering them too, revealing considerable anxiety about the marginalisation of the architect in the making of our society. From strategic decision-making at the commencement of a project right through to the contractual arrangements and division of work on individual buildings, the discipline has endured the erosion of its capacity to effect change.

While each of the practices in *Formations* deal with spatial issues, few were engaged directly in the design and procurement of buildings. The lack of traditional built outcomes revealed a second anxiety in the profession about the importance of building. For instance, is it more important to influence the political process as one of the new breeds of design or urban consultants, or through the implementation and construction of extraordinary building? This is the

argument put by pseudo-professionals, such as strategic designers, who discuss the design and procurement of buildings as a secondary or tertiary field of marginal interest compared to the task of solving 'big problems'. But following this logic we would dismiss the maestro violinist for the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra because they are not the orchestra manager or, further extending the logic, an arts administrator. Why is it then that a moderately competent consultant relieved from the production of little more than sticky note arrays and, at best, policy, can exert such influence, while a profession that can deliver a complex object addressing multiple cultural, political, financial and functional issues is increasingly sidelined?

Theory and practice

In the face of contemporary issues, such as climate change, political instability and social transformation, it has been hard to make claim for the agency of an individual building. This situation is worsened by the arrogance of many leading designers who only reinforce stereotypes that architects are dilettantes who have little relevance beyond the consumer of such luxury goods as the buildings they create. If buildings are not to be consigned to a late-capitalist fate as consumer items,

what is it about the way our discipline understands itself that we must repair or redefine?

The answers lie in the multiple levels of discourse around the profession and which inhibit it from a fuller participation in wider issues. In researching this article, *AR* editor Michael Holt provided reference to two essays on Brutalism, one by Reyner Banham and the other by Robin Boyd. Both were well written, broad in scope, deep in disciplinary knowledge and written with certainty. Collectively these essays announced the arrival and demise of Brutalism, while assessing the impacts of the movement on the profession and wider society. It seems impossible to replicate the clarity and confidence of such critical accounts today when pluralism has become an overwhelming assault on any fixed position. Stan Allen in 'The Future that is Now' from *Architecture School: Three Centuries of Educating Architects in North America* (2011) has suggested this pluralist condition is a result of a schism between theory and practice. While this schism could be mapped back to Enlightenment and the condition of modernity generally, Allen believes the current dilemma was forged in the 1980s when architectural theory was widened to include cultural studies and literary criticism. Allen posits Henry Cobb's 1985 Walter Gropius Lecture at Harvard as evidence of the recognition of this schism well before the 1990s. Cobb suggested: '... on the one hand, the academic setting would seem to separate architecture from its vital sources of nourishment in the "real world" of practice, while on the other hand its entrepreneurial, practice-

→ In an attempt to think beyond the singularity of the envelope, Terroir coined the phrase, contextual surface, to describe an approach for projects based in normative ethics. It is based on working with complexity in an age where buildings are explained and justified via slogans ('hedonistic sustainability'), or phenomena (buildings based on mist, coral or bubbles) and then rendered in Sam Jacob's 'stream of Photoshopped incontinence'. Its naming derives from the logic that each project brings the architect into contact with innumerate contexts, which must be prioritised and organised, understanding that the organisation of these contexts is inherently political. That is, to act spatially, all contexts cannot be equal, and those most relevant for a particular project rise to the surface: a resistance to an all-encompassing plurality and an acceptance of the raw contest that emerges in such a negotiation. As Žižek explains: 'the antagonistic tension between different standpoints is flattened into indifferent plurality of standpoints. "Contradiction" thus loses its subversive edge: in a space of globalised permissiveness, inconsistent standpoints cynically coexist ... you ruthlessly exploit natural resources and contribute to green causes – so what?' Žižek suggests that this cynicism is extremely dangerous, suggesting instead that 'to obfuscate social antagonisms is to openly display them'.

As a contextual surface is constructed anew for each project, where the project is itself understood as a constellation of coincident interests (finance, buildability, functionality, public engagement, branding), judgements are required as to how the different relevance of these contexts can be understood in each project. The balance sought in this process is between the manifestations of the overtly political – as in the tradition of architecture for totalitarian states – while also acknowledging that the various contexts around a project are not equal. The contextual surface is a dynamic socio-spatial model, simultaneously forming the design space for each project in the very act of designing it and, in doing so, balances these extremes.

Redefining the profession

As outlined, *Formations* was a response to a loss of professional relevance, which has been compounded by the disjunction between theory and practice, resulting in the triumph of managerialism.

Magali Sarfatti Larson in *Behind the Postmodern Facade: Architectural Change in Late Twentieth Century America* (1993) described the paradoxical bind between professional autonomy and heteronomy, exposing the mechanism via which a theory-practice split would weaken the profession, causing it to be vulnerable to managerialist approaches applied from without, noting: '[an] autonomous pursuit of architecture and the heteronomous conditions of its making insert a permanent contradiction into the heart of the profession's practice and even of its discourse.' She purports that disabling effects of this contradiction was manifest in a retreat from the city, for much of the past century, in favour of a focus on the built object; moving 'from the aspiration of "building cities" and instead ... toward the design of single objects, however gigantic or prototypical.' A move towards the service of capital rather than its direction.

Over the past three years, the compacted experiences of a professorship at University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) and research components in the design, organisation and financial and cultural requirements of Terroir's practice in Denmark and Australia have proved illuminating to both questions posed here. Notably, in Denmark the title of 'architect' is not as protected as it is in Anglo countries. Furthermore, qualification as an 'arkitekt m.a.a.' (the specific title of an architectural professional) is immediate upon graduation from a Danish university. That is, no further study, no practice exam and, in fact, no postgraduate engagement with the contractual and material implications of building upon which the legislation relating to the title of architect in Anglo countries has been based. This answers in small part Leon van Schaik's suggestion of a profession founded in spatial intelligence as opposed to building.

Abolishing the divide

The lack of protection of the title 'architect' in Denmark exists in parallel to another seemingly paradoxical condition: the dominance of contractors in the procurement of buildings, especially given the reverence architects receive for their focus on materials and fine detailing. In Terroir's recently completed student housing project (Aarhus, Denmark), and even more comprehensively, in United Nations' World Maritime University project

(currently in documentation, Malmo, Sweden) an architect's spatial skills are complemented by an early involvement of building contractors in the design development phase. In these conditions, there is little place for stand alone theory, as the contest over materials and detailing occurs in real-time around a spatial proposition established at competition stage. Reliance on prefabrication and the assemblage of systems verges on the extreme, positioning the focus on bespoke elements and details with which virtuosity in the profession is associated as not only impossible but also unimportant and even quaint.

The immersion in a culture that repositions the idea equals of the 'architect', as well as materialising buildings so differently to the Australian practices Terroir is accustomed to, happens while juggling the twin roles of 'academic' and 'practitioner'. Occupying dual roles simultaneously is a direct challenge to the duality of academia and practice, or theory and building, thus confirming these are not polar opposites but, as Zaera Polo suggests, two epistemological tendencies within the discipline.

Whether our actions come from theory, practice or the space between, what is certain is the need to focus our attention on restoring the relevance of the profession. Relevance will not be achieved by any means other than a full engagement in the political and economic contexts that surround every element of our built environment. In addressing these contexts we must also remember the power of activism as an agent for change: for without activism realised in publications, marches, protest and civil unrest, society would still be struggling for the provision of equal rights for all; Indigenous rights; or, even from a purely architectural perspective, acknowledging the effects of asbestos. In a managerialist world these major societal changes would have occurred at very different speeds, if at all.

By restoring the momentum of the discipline via a more productive and relevant theory-practice relationship – and by deploying this relationship vis-à-vis processes that make explicit the opposing political and economic forces present in any project, and thus demand a genuine negotiation between them – the discipline can find new relevance. Relevance borne in these conditions necessarily comes with the tensions and disagreements that accompany having something to say. Having nothing to say, or lacking the tools to bring conflicts to light, diminishes our work to the production of elaborate luxury goods for those who are so inclined to commission them. 

oriented character would seem to devalue architecture as a discipline, crippling its capacity to establish a fruitful discourse with other less “contaminated” disciplines within the university.’

Decoupled from the pace of making buildings, the rapid proliferation of new theories about what architecture might be, or can do, soon outpaced material production. Education programs began producing ‘legions of bad novels, bad sociology, bad psychology, bad philosophy and bad movies being presented at juries as advanced architectural “research”,’ according to Alejandro Zaera-Polo. This tendency still exists in a generation of students poorly acculturated in the discipline, due to an education delivered by those who came through and have continued the 1980s dialogue, for which almost anything is more interesting than drawing plans and sections. Consequently, there is a mutual irrelevance between what often manifest as two ‘separate’ disciplines: academic work, which entertains theoretical positions divorced from the practice of architecture; or practitioners who treat anointed masters with a papal reverence. Both approaches disable the critical engagement necessary to advance the discipline.

The highly fragmented nature of this pluralist, contemporary period contrasts with the Banham and Boyd era, where a slow and steady shift from one paradigm to another could be registered over time by bodies of work, manifestoes and critical reflection. Theory and practice were intertwined as new styles were identified, each with its own formal and spatial repertoires and political and cultural agendas.

Patrik Schumacher’s 2008 text, *Parametricism as Style—Parametricist Manifesto*, is an example as to one of the many attempts to intervene in this increasingly fragmented situation. Schumacher advocated for Parametricism as a new style in the tradition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This strangely historicist approach has numerous faults, not least of which is the near exclusive focus of digital design on technique. The perils of this approach are now evident in the digital design programs started with fanfare by key international schools in the 1990s, but which now struggle for relevance beyond exhibition installations. However the most disturbing aspect is Parametricism’s lack of participation in the political questions that surround architectural production. Richard Goodwin has labelled this focus on truth in the processing of data as a sinister, hyper-Modernist project that ignores political or social responsibility in favour of the processing power in the

machine to negotiate parameters as a display of virtuosity in itself.

The Teflon politics of contemporary architecture cannot be blamed on Parametricism alone, when arguably the most popular agent in the contemporary discipline, Rem Koolhaas, has made a virtue of surfing flows of capital. OMA’s positioning has made it acceptable to marginalise any form of ‘critical practice’ as a nagging irritant at the periphery of the discourse. OMA’s acceptance of any politics by which capital is accumulated has been cleverly shrouded in a series of contradictory pronouncements to reassure as to the fact that, for example, CCTV would lead to cultural change within Chinese state media or that the building might ‘kill the skyscraper’ – claims which are forgotten or readjusted by the time the projects have been built and fees banked. Such focus has resulted in major commercial success through its suitability to one of the primary tendencies of contemporary capitalism – the managerialist doctrine.

The rise of managerialism

In a recent letter to the *Quarterly Essay*, Barry Jones lamented the rise of managerialism in politics that has resulted in the deskilling of those in government and the replacement of professional expertise with expert managers, who have little disciplinary knowledge. In a letter that includes a broadside at Public Private Partnerships (PPPs), Jones suggests that managerialism is an attack on democratic processes, given that many decisions are now made without public disclosure or debate. So too in architecture, where connoisseurship has given way to managed design processes, where inputs lead to outputs and the politics of the spatial acts undertaken in these conditions are rarely questioned.

Managerialism has so infected the way we practise that it has become a recognised methodology, practised by OMA but even usurped in effectiveness by Koolhaas’ alumni Bjarke Ingels (BIG), who can convince clients that no problem is unsolvable and no contradiction too great to the design process. However as Kieran Long warns in the December issue of *Arkitekten*, Ingels’ ‘yes is more’ slogan is predicated on a non-critical, ideology-free rhetoric that is hard to counter given its optimism. Yet Long notes that while this might be a worthy experiment in high level political participation of the ‘big tent’ variety, made famous by former British

Prime Minister Tony Blair, current projects evidence the risk of subsuming one’s agenda to the needs of developer, dictator or state, so long as they pay the bills.

As the discipline continues to be questioned for its efficacy and relevance, the most successful architects adopting managerialist approaches focus on the consumption of values as opposed to their creation. Indeed, Slavoj Žižek (*Architectural Parallax*, 2009) suggests that everything we do is political and that basing work in a simplistic ideological frame is problematic, suggesting that any ideology can be transformed into a consumptive act; for example, the provision of sanitation in Africa and South America by a Starbucks Foundation is contingent on purchasing Ethos water, Žižek explains: ‘This is how capitalism, at the level of consummation, integrated the legacy of 1968, the critique of alienated consummation ... we do not just buy and consume a product – we simultaneously do something meaningful, show our care and global awareness ...’ A similar case can be found in architecture, as large offices now refer to themselves as ‘studios’ – a disingenuous naming that refers to a mode of practice, but acts as a decoy from the reality of brutal corporate behaviours and anti-competitive practices. A disconcertingly important point is that rarely do projects produced by these ‘studios’ actually advance the discipline.

Materialising politics

How are we to resolve both the theory and practice disjunction and to find a method of engagement with the political economy that releases us from an impotent consumption by managerialist processes? Žižek reminds us that normative ethics must guide our actions, a prescriptive focus essential to a discipline centred on materialisation. Alongside this, Alejandro Zaera-Polo’s early writings for *El Croquis*, insisted on a materialist critique in architecture, while also including a strong political bias; a position best exemplified in his seminal text from 2008, *The Politics of the Envelope*, written as his practice was working on a range of retail projects, especially in the UK. Searching for agency in the highly managed and over-consulted context of British practice and procurement, Zaera-Polo radically posited the envelope of a project as the element where architects could be sure to operate with minimal intervention and thus where the political agenda must be deployed. →