



8 + 9 = Architecture as harmless practice or ...

Don't ask what architecture can build for you, ask what it can do for you. Don't wonder where you can find a client, ask where you are needed. Don't cover architecture, discover it.

Architecture as harmless practice or ...

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Recently, on my way to the United States, I was interviewed by an airport security officer. She asked me not just the usual questions about my luggage, but also about some stamps in my passport. Stamps from 'dangerous' countries. When I explained that I visited these dangerous countries in order to lecture on architecture, she instantly lost her suspicions and trusted me. 'Have a pleasant trip, Sir', she said.

Apparently, architecture is a harmless rationale for traveling. But the security guard's reaction reveals something deeper. It also underscores that architecture is no longer simply a glorification of a static place, but can just as easily be conceived of as a justification of mobility.

Naturally, this is not just related to motivations behind traveling. It has to do with the mobility of the discipline itself. Architecture has become a universal access code: a mother key that can open countless doors in culture and in society. Architecture might be seen as a powerful kind of strategic intelligence, as a medium for developing cultural concepts, as a mode of thinking, as a tactic for social intervention, as an arsenal for promotional images, as a strategy to mitigate conflict, as a weapon with which to fight a battle, as a metaphor for the rest of the world. Practicing architecture may one day mean having developed the skills in order to preside over this metaphor cleverly.

Architecture as a key that opens many doors. The only problem is that most people behind the doors and most people holding the key don't acknowledge this capacity, or are unable to use it. Equally, the doors sometimes don't know as yet that they are doors that might be opened by architecture. There is an urgent need to find the doors, to engage the people who live behind them, and to convince the people who have these keys to use them properly and courageously.





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A New Brief for Architecture

Architecture holds people together or it separates them. So it was, and so it is. But since the concepts of holding together and separating are changing, architecture should change as well. It is a very simple message, but it is a difficult one to grasp. This is because in understanding this message, the self-conception of architectural schools, practitioners, and media necessarily change, even to the degree of unrecognizability. It is extremely difficult to learn a lesson if it transforms you into someone else. Especially if the change progresses so slowly that maintaining your position can still be rewarding in the short term.

Let's focus here on the necessary courage needed to face the reality of change. For a long time, architecture was a discipline suspended between three entities: schools, offices, and media. Schools produced architects. Architects produced architecture, and media produced its cultural relevance, which in the end attracted new generations to go to architecture schools again.

This clear division of roles no longer exists. Schools not only teach, but are engaged in producing architecture and generating debate to create relevance as well. Meanwhile they easily breed professionals who engage in careers that move well beyond the boundaries of traditional architecture.

Offices that are ambitious and comprehensive are often also powerhouses of new talents, laboratories for experiments and as such, act similarly as schools. They may also start publicity campaigns that organize 'relevance' in its own right.

Perhaps the architectural media are the slowest to adopt new roles for themselves, rarely creating situations that are similar to schools, or engaging with creative practical projects. But there is no principle reason why they shouldn't. On the contrary, in the longer term they even have to, in order to remain relevant themselves. If an architectural medium wants to be a place where ideas reside, it has to be open to the way ideas organize themselves today. To achieve that openness, it must go beyond itself.

For a long time relevance was created simply by following the rules of the game: some magazines updated you with professional information about what happened in architecture: new buildings, new theories. Some maga-

zines updated you on the ways these things happened: technologies, procedures, methodologies. And some magazines informed you about who did it: the personalities. But not much was invested in the question of why architecture happened. A very sad thing, because this is the only question that can get you to go beyond yourself. Because of this omission, it has taken quite some time to figure out that many magazines are busy producing more and more irrelevance. A massive amount of irrelevance is under construction at this very moment. And another amount tomorrow, and the day after...

For some time *Archis* has tried to do something about this. By repeatedly asking architecture, "Why?". And why ask why of architecture? To show architecture differently. By writing about its cultural preconditions. By violating the very concept of architectural journalism, which, most of the time, is a matter of checking your mailbox or answering device, and responding to designers who in turn have responded to their clients. A matter of checking what's going on and acting upon it. An extremely reactive profession, a scripted regime for a very reactive mindset.

Besides asking 'why,' *Archis* has also tried to catalyze the very format of magazine making, by violating the readers' expectations and their passivity to the third degree. We invited readers to invade the magazine. And we devised tools to let the magazine invade their lives with its activist strategy.

Ultimately we tried to violate even more. We evolved to the degree that *Archis* sometimes even escaped the bounds of a magazine. I can assure you, it still contains debate, dialogue, and reflection. In its intense mediation it is a rightful heir to a long tradition. Call it a 'live magazine.' But it might also be school. It might also be practice. Call it dialogue on site; reflection on the spot. And indeed, a way to organize encounters just as schools and architectural projects can.

But there is more to do than staging debates. Can a magazine change things, rather than just observe them? Can a medium discover and recover realities, rather than just cover them? Can it help find situations where architectural intelligence is urgently needed, without having a brief justifying an intervention or without people even knowing it? Can it develop a practice of detecting opportunities?

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Take, for example, the road between Ramallah and Jerusalem and its numerous checkpoints. Here, in the checkpoint lines, we found a 'spatially challenging' situation of extreme proportions, a problem that is universally recognized, harsh conditions that cry for innovative ideas. This was a place in which to debate the role of design and attempt to envision ways of coping with the daily and dramatic time loss of thousands of people. Here we used journalism to push spatial intervention.

You may think this is an extreme example, but the world is full of such opportunities for expanding mandates for architecture. We only need the forensic mentality to find them. To find the traces of the future; not to suppress them, but to cultivate them.





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A culture of cross-selling everything

It is one thing to develop an avant-garde rhetoric about the conquest of a new mandate by architecture. To define architecture as an unsolicited cultural force, that can anticipate opportunities where nobody has thought of architecture as protagonist. It is a completely different thing to position this ambition within certain market dynamics that have nothing to do with the avant-garde, but that see architecture as a business, or as a very mundane power play. Yet both the utopian and mundane are perfectly arguable.

Since the beginning of this year, a new era in global politics has begun. As George Bush announced in his inauguration speech for his second term, America is no longer a territory that has to be defended. America has become an idea that should be pursued anywhere, anytime, and any way. Although the reelection of the President of the United States was fought within national borders, the power of this President is becoming virtually universal, deciding not just over the interests of the nation state, but over the concepts, mindsets, and cultural trajectories of mankind. When no weapons of mass destruction could be found to justify the invasion of Iraq post factum, a rationalization was invented that can justify anything: the threat to freedom. This year marks the beginning of a world order that is made up of simple words and the power to define their meaning. America, as the self-proclaimed metonym for liberty, is entitled to pursue its realization wherever it wants by whatever means, for the sake of liberty. So, 'liberty' and 'freedom' were mentioned more than 30 times in an inauguration speech of only a few minutes. America has detached itself from its reality base. 'America', in the name of a concept and for the sake of a concept, can invade anything.

At first sight this observation may sound like a political statement. It is not. It is an anthropological statement. What is true for America can be applied to our entire contemporary global culture. And not just America; many entities now try to occupy and control other entities, to find new markets. To cross-sell themselves. Microsoft, once a producer of digital protocols, has begun to capitalize on its near-monopolies in order to control and monitor many cultural processes, transforming the company from facilitator into producer, bro-

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ker or creator. BP (British Petroleum), which used to be known as an oil company, is redefining itself as an energy giant by calling itself 'Beyond Petroleum.' Rituals, a company for beauty and home products, sells itself as the 're-discoverer of daily life', crafting the lifestyles you want to belong to. Media companies are using their powers to transcend their role as transmitters of information and have become more and more allied to specific interest groups. Search engines become gateways to commerce. Transport nodes are becoming shopping malls. Politicians frequent talk shows and film sets. The pornography industry has started to organize erotic fairs, parties, and festivals aimed at the general public. Marijuana is given as a free gift with a magazine. Philosophers are becoming consultants in high demand. Everything tries to cross-sell itself. Everything invades everything. Sticking to your subject/discipline/expertise/background/identity is suicidal.

So why would architecture remain architecture? Why would its magazines remain magazines and its schools remain schools? One reason might be that if the whole world is messed up, it is always reassuring to be able to find refuge in architecture's stable traditions. But is this architecture's ultimate mandate?

So, what would happen if architecture became part of these same cultural dynamics and really started to reinvent itself beyond its natural limits? What would architecture be if it began to cross-sell itself? What if building would no longer be the destiny of architecture, but just one of its many options?

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Architectural intelligence

As has been said before, a country can expand its self-definition from occupying a certain territory to representing a certain value. This value can then be propagated as being universal. But as a value it might also be defended universally. Then offense is the best defense. One step further, a good defense becomes a matter of good offense. Are you offended? I'm just defending myself!

This sequential argument applies not only to geo-political positioning. It accounts for many parts of our culture. For a long time for example, people believed that a product was a physical object. That materials were always material. Philosophically, people thought that to distinguish certain entities from other entities, one needed to define their exclusive attributes. For architecture that meant the identification with buildings. But not only buildings - for architecture one has also always needed a client, a site, and a budget. As such, architecture has been understood as a response to a given situation, according to certain given trajectories.

But suppose architecture would no longer respond simply to what it was given? Suppose it would not be reactionary, but actively pursue its challenges. That it would not just resolve issues by spatial accommodation, but pose issues by spatial intervention? Suppose an architect would not just do the job, but create the job.

For this to happen, one thing needs to be done first: the redefinition of architecture - shifting it from 'built form' into 'applied architectural intelligence.' Two approaches are important to consider. First it should become acceptable to disentangle architectural intelligence from the objects to which it seemed to be bound forever, as in a symbiotic relationship. This is a conceptual (and emotional!) detachment of architecture from its attribute: the building. Secondly, there must be a reason to believe that this detachment would be a creative and productive act, and that the result of the exercise would be something that would be valued. Enlarging the definition of architecture will not inevitably lead to new tasks for architecture. For that, one needs strong conviction, rhetorical power, good examples, and most of all good propositions that excavate architecture for issues that, until recently, were never associated with it. And here we find the logic of converging architectural practice, archi-





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tectural education, and architectural journalism: these convictions, examples, rhetorics, and associations can only be found in a joint venture of the classical roles within architectural production.

So what is architectural intelligence? It has to do with a certain awareness of spatial order, organization, and the production of meaning. How space can establish social relations, either by connecting or disconnecting individuals, groups, and societies. It also relates to how one could use this knowledge. Intelligence, as all cognitive psychologists know, has to do with perceiving common denominators between seemingly disparate items. This is what intelligence agencies do and this is what individuals do if they try to understand the world. To see patterns, to establish relations, literally to make sense. What is urgently needed is a practice that understands what it is affected by daily: that architecture *happens* much more than that it is built.. If only a little part of all architectural energy would be used to examine these patterns and do something with them, architecture could gain a completely different outlook. As a creative practice that emerges where it can, and submerges where it must. A craft that derives its self-esteem from shaping reality instead of concealing and solidifying it.

Architecture frustrated by building

For a very long time the power of architecture to express and impose the essential features of our civilization by way of elevating buildings and buildings only, remained unquestioned. It is very questionable if this is still the case. Then two ways are open. If architecture has lost its cultural power, much energy can be expended in masking its irrelevance. Alternatively, one also could search for new frontiers in architectural value. Architecture would then no longer simply be an artful and thoughtful variant of the straightforward building, but adopt an additional dimension. It would have to find new trajectories for its practice.

Perhaps the power of that kind of architecture is not facilitated by building, but frustrated by it. Its new frontiers for architectural intelligence imply a mental liberation. Not secretly, as an escape in case of professional failure, but as conscious endeavors to accommodate our creativity in a productive and powerful fashion.

If architecture, step-by-step, has been ex-communicated from the building process, seen in contempt by its very engineers, forced to emphasize its greatness on more and more irrelevant grounds, the time may be near when architecture either dies or resurrects as something else. If meaning has been relegated to decorative detail, then why not detach yourself altogether from the building? Forget about 'fuck context.' The next big thing is 'fuck the building.' Reject the physical shed that has come to hold architecture hostage.

But the first step in contemplating such a nasty proposition is to find out if architectural intelligence has any relevance on its own. How else could this intelligence be applied? Can architecture really survive without the motherboard of the building?

Well, of course it can: with its analytic capacity for all kinds of spatial issues. Architects can think in terms of relations and organize them, temporalize them, dramatize them, celebrate them, smooth them, mitigate them, restrain them, change them, prohibit them, and so on.. It can hold people together or separate them, as it always did, but this time by other means. No longer based upon the adjacency principle, but facilitating new loyalties in a network society.

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cessful marginalization. Architecture might start a life of
its own, denying the building industry its cloak of
respectability.





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Embedded architectural journalism

One can paint a very silly picture of architectural journalism. Just as the architect has to wait until he or she has been asked to do something for a client, the critic has to wait until the architect has done something in reaction to that client. At the end of this communication chain there is a reader who, at best, will react to this reaction to a reaction. Here we have the carousel of emptiness. No wonder architectural journalism belongs to the least respected forms of cultural mediation.

It is very instructive to compare this series of reactivity with the practice of embedded journalism as we have known it since the Iraq War in 2003. Highly graphic pictures were brought to us right from the battlefield. But these pictures were screened - they only rarely depicted the grim side of the story. They resembled a war film more than the brutal reality of war. In taking glitzy pictures journalists became puppets of a fabricated reality. Very much visibility, very little understanding.

It is hardly an exaggeration to apply this description of war-time journalism to the practice of architectural journalism today. The most respected magazines and most authoritative critics are often acting as shameless ghost-writers, dividing their time between writing laudations and boring introductions to architects' monographs. Moreover, they sometimes base their whole careers on those of design celebrities, rather than searching the world for architectural themes bigger than architecture. Is there an escape from this deliberate slavery?

Perhaps it can be found in the very embeddedness of architecture itself. No discipline has more context than architecture. Money, adjacent environment, clients' caprices, philosophies, new technologies, you name it. If that's all very obvious, why not use this embedding to say a lot more about the bedding? He who would produce unsolicited architecture from an ivory tower would quickly be considered a lunatic. She, who does it from the comprehensive expertise as a generalist, will soon become a supreme voice of authority.

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