

Foreword: The Routledge Companion to Architecture and Social Engagement

To talk of socially engaged architecture is surely to talk of a given. All architecture is socially engaged. Period. Architecture is nothing without the engagement of everyone involved in its production and occupation – designers, collaborators, participants and users – and this engagement is by definition social because it depends upon human interaction. One might imagine therefore that the history of architecture as process and product would be told through the story of these human interactions, and how they play out spatially. Yet the very existence of this book suggests that narratives of human life are overlooked in the official histories of architecture, and so there is a need to bring them to the surface. Indeed, it may be argued that socially engaged architecture is an irritant to the dominant discourses of architecture and, as such, something that needs to be suppressed.

The reasons for this suppression are recounted through the pages of this book. First is that the history of architecture is predominately told through the history of its products as formal and aesthetic devices. While the production of these buildings at any one time is influenced by the social construction of taste, such external forces are generally discounted in order to promote a smooth, unfettered, narrative of the succession of architectural forms. The second reason for the suppression of the social arises out of the first

– namely that in the concentration on the products of architecture, the processes are left largely under-described. These processes, both in what comes before the building and what comes after in terms of occupation, inevitably involve others, and this multiplicity gets in the way of the myth that the architecture is the manifestation of individual genius. The third reason – well, I could go on and on about the various reasons for the suppression of the social. I and many others have made the arguments elsewhere. More important is to make the argument as to why such a suppression is unacceptable, which is why this book is important and timely.

The main issue is that in the presumed sidestepping of the social, architecture also sidesteps the political. Architecture becomes, in contemporary parlance, post-political. This is an all too convenient position for the profession to take, because it suggests that architecture is in some way a neutral act of formal production, neutral that is to the contestations of the political world. But in giving up any pretence to the political, architecture also gives up any sense of political agency. It thus leaves itself exposed and available to other controlling forces, most notably those of the neo-liberal market. Many of the essays in this book make the point that architecture has abandoned itself to the market, and with this has become complicit in the machinations and exploitations of the

market. Worse than this, it has capitulated to the political forces that present themselves as post-political, most clearly those of the Trump regime and Brexit campaign. One only has to look at the disgraceful statement of support for President Trump released by the American Institute of Architects on the day after the election to see quite how compliant the profession has become to the axes of power.

Most of the essays in this book were written before Trump's election in 2016, but this astounding political event, and that of Brexit in the United Kingdom, gives added urgency to the tenets of the essays, and suggests that the arguments be extended from social engagement to a more explicit political activism. Although these political conditions emerged in the west, they are already having profound consequences on the rest of the world. In the face of such extreme global politics, architecture's post-political turn looks like an abrogation of any broader societal responsibility.

The normal response to a call for architecture to rediscover its social, and with it political, purpose is that architects should not take sides in the political debate. This was the reason given by the RIBA for not committing to one side in the Brexit referendum, when all the evidence pointed to remaining in the European Union as being of clear benefit to the profession. The pretence that architecture is in some way

neutral in respect to political positions superficially relieves the profession of any need for engagement. Decisions are determined by the short-term demands of the client, who now too often is simply the agent of the market, and architecture is reduced to the reification of the processes of capital. But of course every mark made on a computer screen describes in one way or another a social relation. This book is a call for a realignment in the way that we understand the marks and voices of architecture as part of a broader social project. Instead of seeing a plan, section or elevation as set of compositional devices, they should always be interpreted in the context of how they will construct social and spatial relations.

However, before a mark is made, the first necessity for the socially engaged architect is to engage all the voices associated with a project, and to do so in a manner that respects the different forms of knowledge that everyone brings to the table. This implies that what is at the core of socially engaged architecture is empathy – a human quality that has been squeezed out by the divisive and binary rhetoric of current politics. Empathy can be used productively, not just in a personal capacity, but also in a professional one, when the relationship with others becomes a matter of mutual understanding and not of expert imposition.

In turn, the development of an empathetic approach to architecture suggests a recalibration of the values and processes of architectural education. This book has a number of inspiring examples of how educators are reaching out beyond the internalized systems of the academy. Sadly, however, such expansive pedagogic practices remain the exception rather than the norm. Architectural education inevitably edits down the social context of any project: rushed site visits, often abstract briefs with no clear user or client to engage with, and compressed timescales all mitigate against development of the skills required for socially engaged architecture. In addition, the standardized diet of juries, long nights and isolation from other disciplines further consolidates the de-socialization of architecture students as they are admitted into the rituals of the tribe. A move towards a more socially engaged practice therefore needs a distinct shift in the processes, projects and ethos of architectural education. My sense is that this shift is being increasingly demanded by students, but resisted by staff, who feel comfortable in the execution of known systems of power.

The second shift required is within the professional institutions. Initially these were set up as definers, defenders and developers of architectural knowledge, in order to define

the discipline in distinction to others and to amateurs. With this attachment to knowledge comes an ethical responsibility, in so much as knowledge is never neutral, particularly when, as with architecture, it is played out in a social field. However, all the evidence suggests that professional bodies have more or less suspended their ethical stance, aside from very token nods to diversity, inclusivity and sustainability. It is too great a burden to expect individual professionals to always formulate their own ethical response to each condition. But it is a role that professional bodies can and should assume through the formulation of new ethical codes. This will only come through the democratic engagement of their members, and from a collective will to acknowledge the human, social and environmental consequences of architectural production.

A third necessity to establish socially engaged practice is to believe that such practices are possible; to have hope. In the current political and economic landscape it is hard to summon up alternatives; hope is being squeezed. Capitalism's brilliant subterfuge is to present itself as the sole possible mode of operation. The lack of ability or opportunity to think outside of the pervasive economic system limits considerations of social alternatives, and with it spatial alternatives. The dominance of market-led imperatives in architecture means social exchanges are

defined by economic value rather than human value. But right now, as capitalism struggles to adjust from crisis to crisis, we have to allow the invention of alternatives, and acknowledge that there are other value systems beyond those of monetary gain. There is always the potential, indeed necessity, for architects to contribute to the imagining and constructing of such alternatives, because they find their shape through spatial interventions. In this light, socially engaged architecture becomes much more than a subset of architectural practice. Rather, it contributes to a wider debate as to how to escape the democratic deficit and how to imagine new ways of living.

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