

This issue of ARQ contains a series of essays that were initially presented at *Alternate Currents*, a symposium organised by the School of Architecture at the University Sheffield in November 2007. *Alternate Currents* set out to address some of the questions that face architectural practice. As the title suggests we were primarily interested in practices operating outside the ‘normative’ or ‘mainstream’. The need for considering new forms of practice is clearly articulated by professional bodies, and in particular CABA and the RIBA. A report by the Royal Institute of British Architects from 2005, for instance, calls for an urgent requirement to “address outdated professional norms and behaviour” and to acknowledge “the diversity of the architectural market.” However, this report offers no suggestions as to how such an alternative model of architectural practice may be structured, what ‘alternative’ means in the context of architectural and building production, or how an alternative model might contribute to the development of contemporary and future architectural practice. The symposium, and the wider AHRC funded research project on ‘Alternative Architectural Praxis’ within which it was set, aimed to begin the discussion as to what these alternatives might be.

The virtuoso formal displays of award-winning practices to some extent disguise the current malaise in architectural practice; with so much visual noise being produced, why, one might ask, the need for an alternative? Le Corbusier’s dictum that architects live in the “extraordinary world of the acrobat” has never been truer as progress is announced on aesthetic and technical fronts in ever-increasing competition to land the next trick. Distracted by these displays of ‘innovation’, we ignore at our peril the production of dross that goes on anyway. But what is common to both the dross and the gymnast is the limit in terms of their ways of thinking and acting. As long as priorities lie in the aesthetic and technical – both aspects of architecture that can be easily commodified – it is all too easy to turn one’s attention away from the social and political aspects of architectural production and occupation. This is most clearly exemplified in the rush to build Dubai and other Middle East feudal states. Architects have abandoned all ethics in these formal playgrounds, turning a blind eye to the near slavery of the imported labour that build them, the unsustainability of

running them and the undemocratic nature of the regimes that support them. Such inequities are hidden under the glittering surfaces of fresh formal bling.

It is faced with examples such as this, with their abrogation of social responsibility, that the need for alternatives becomes more pressing. What became clear at *Alternate Currents* was that many of the alternatives started from a position of challenging neo-liberal values. These are values, of course, in which the short-term demands of the market flatten any longer-term priorities and with this issues such as the environment or the empowerment of the user get ignored. Alternative practice, on the other hand, often brings these issues to the fore. The speakers at the symposium concentrated on alternative methods of thinking and doing rather than alternative modes of appearance. It is all too easy to confuse experimental form with experimental ways of thinking, but in fact the freshest form often issues from extremely conservative regimes. The best alternative praxis, on the other hand, starts with a reflection on the role of the architect, asking how he or she might operate in a manner that serves a constituency beyond themselves. In acting for others, other value systems come into play that far exceed internalized discussions of taste, typology, look and making that architects are so comfortable with.

The response to our call for papers suggested an even wider, and more international, interest in the topic than we had anticipated. The subject areas ranged from historical deliberations, through examples of contemporary practice in European, Latin American, North American countries, to theory and critical pedagogy. The response brought attention to practices based on specific political positions (from Marxist to feminist) or founded on different organisational principles (from cooperative structures to cross-boundary working). What draws these practices together is that their working processes, and the work that emerges, generally focus on a critical and often politicized discussion of the built environment. Some of these papers have now been developed for publication here. Though seemingly disparate in their attitude towards the subject, they are representative of the extensive field within which ‘alternatives’ operate.

Jonathan Charley’s text questions the very use of the word “alternative”; “alternative to what?” he keeps asking and develops an argument for an “alternative to

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capitalism” through “socialist inspired programmes for architectural and urban development”.

Andreas Lang discusses his work with the London based artist / architect collaborative *public works* as an opportunity to realise “highly idea-driven and speculative projects”. He argues that these projects, which are made possible through funding mechanisms particular to the art world, in themselves “establish important precedents which should be seen as relevant architectural models or prototypes”. Too little, Lang notes, is done by the architectural institutions to understand and encourage more of these types of collaborations between artist, architect and user – collaborations which would ultimately lead to a wider and more open understanding of architectural practice.

Emiliano Gandolfi’s text presents a series of examples of contemporary practices that show a renewed interest in the social. Whilst acknowledging groups such as Team 10, who prepared the foundations for such work, he introduces the idea that today each and every project “becomes a sensitization campaign”. By presenting the work of four practices - Santiago Cirugeda, Centre for Urban Pedagogy, Foundation for Achieving Seamless Territory (FAST) and Jeanne van Heeswijk - Gandolfi illustrates how a re-definition of the role of the architect stimulates collective processes, creativity and activism “in order to incite a new political role for architecture”.

By reflecting upon the emergence of the Danish NGO Supertanker / Urban Task Force, Jens Brandt raises the issue of the importance of independence in order to avoid “asymmetric power”. He makes a case for the interdisciplinarity of an organisation in order for it to be more responsive, more inclusive and innovative.

William Tozer defines an alternative modes of practice not through its stated political or social ambitions but in the “intellectual analysis of the profession's processes of design and its implications for building”. By doing so, Tozer argues, the distinction between professional and intellectual design process can be diminished or even removed, and an alternative model of practice established.

Helen Stratford, Doina Petrescu and Constantin Petcou revisit the work of a group of Romanian architects from the 1980s, “Form-Trans-Inform” (of which

Petrescu and Petcou were members). It discusses the group's spatial practices of installations, performance and happenings in order to “question orthodoxies in architecture” and to “protest against repressions under the monolithic Ceausescu Regime” as a way to express political dissent more “poetically than ideologically”. The authors argue that such notions of practiced and performed identities, involving dynamic models of place, are relevant and necessary for re-thinking conventional architectural assumptions and finding alternative ways of engaging with the built environment and proposing alternative forms of architectural education.

What these papers, and others that will be published in the e-journal *field*, show is that there is no one single definition of centre, nor is there any one model for the alternative. But what is clear from even this limited selection is that there are many ways of operating beyond the limited value system of mainstream architectural culture. This is not to dismiss aesthetics and tectonics *tout court*, but to see them always in the service of other ends. In particular there is a need, as these papers often argue, to address the social, economic, environmental and political issues of the day. An architecture that ignores these contexts will be exactly ignored within these contexts, and in this gets increasingly marginalised, limited to producing on the one hand baubles for the marketplace or on the hand subsumed into the instrumental production of dross. In this light being alternative is not about being cussed for its own sake but is actually a means of rescuing architecture from itself.

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