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Architecture

Work
Founded in 2008 by the School of Arts, Culture and Environment at The University of Edinburgh, the Journal Architecture & provides a platform for innovative ideas in design and research practices. The Journal is a themed publication, with each issue featuring a select topic set in conjunction with that of architecture. The aim is to understand the diversity of relationships and interactions that continue to broaden the field of architecture, while offering readers a mix of perspectives on the implications of such exchanges.

Each edition appears in print annually and is circulated to selected venues worldwide. Volume 01 considered the theme of Architecture & Property. Volume 02 considers Architecture & Work. This theme takes on poignant significance in light of the current global financial turmoil. We open the next conversation by asking how work, in all its varied meanings, is situated within current architectural thinking and related fields of enquiry. To engage such questions, we have invited Mark Janson-Beck (Professor of History, Theory, and Criticism at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Department of Architecture in Cambridge, MA, USA), whose work includes the recently published book, A Global History of Architecture, for an extended contribution.

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Working Collaboratively: A Conversation about Contemporary Praxis

ABSTRACT

Working collaboratively is arguably an essential shift in architectural practice as the complexity of contemporary projects involves multiple agents in the conception, construction and use of architecture. This has been emphasized by recent government rhetoric. Mass collaboration has been identified as a transformative global force of the last decade, most notably in knowledge and information publishing, communication and creation.

This paper presents a structured conversation on changing understandings of collaboration, and the realities of collaborative methodology in architectural work. An experimental collaborative methodology was used; writing by conversing, recording what is said and transmogrifying it – and then structuring but not over-editing the resultant dialogue, at times using remote collaborative technologies. The concept was to experiment with the subject matter, in pursuit of tactics, rather than explicit knowledge: "learned by doing … rather than by acquiring rules for doing."

Ideas of the platforms and structures necessary to support "creative" collaborations are advanced and tested, and a vocabulary of key terms is developed. The conversation extends to reflect on the role of the architecture profession in supporting or enabling collaboration in architectural works.

Keywords: Collaboration, Work, Profession, Creativity, Compromise

CONVERSATION

Anna Holder: I'm interested in how changing understandings of collaboration might affect future processes in architectural work. Web 2.0 and the related interest in mass collaboration have been widely discussed in the media, especially their applicability for public agencies. Prior to Web 2.0, collaboration implied face-to-face meeting in small groups; it has become, certainly within the IT industry, more associated with the harnessing of a faceless crowd working on a project which is then openly accessible.

Will the present generation of architects apply these principles to their practice – or will embedded business models and professional norms stymie such a shift?

George Lovett: I don't see why changing modes of collaboration shouldn't be applied to architectural work, however, I believe that fundamentally the best kinds of collaboration are based on relationships.

AH: Yes, what I value about collaborative working is that people gain feedback into their own praxis.

GL: I'm not sure that this could be the case with open source, crowd-source projects where mass collaborators are putting in and not getting feedback.

Thinking about mass collaboration specifically in terms of design raises another critical question: Don't architects need a change in their thinking to operate in this way? "Intellectual property" and "creative ownership" will need redefining. Egotism and pride could be powerful stumbling blocks. Adopting the different technologies and tools associated with the Web 2.0 movement may help overcome these obstacles by offering more comfortable channels for collaboration.

I think there is considerable distrust of "collaboration" in architecture. As diploma students, a friend and I executed our thesis design project collaboratively. People are curious about the process but also sceptical. The inference is that each piece of architectural work has only one author. Perhaps faith in collaborative processes demands experience of successful collaboration?

AH: That surprises me, because even in typical, hierarchical architecture offices there is a vast amount of collaborative working, with many people inputting to each drawing, each document. Different design qualities arise throughout the process. The process of creating drawings is an interesting example. Drawings are often executed over time, by more than one person. In the process of making a design visible others apply techniques, conventions and standards revealing problems and the design alters.

GL: I would consider that "light" collaboration. The process admittedly has multiple contributors but little dialogue. Discussion and a specific methodology are essential elements of a true collaboration. Developing that methodology is critical to how you work with others, different for each person that you work with and each project. Only by creatively, or even playfully, developing that process will the execution result in something unexpected, exceeding what could have been done by working in parallel but in isolation.
Take the case of a building project – do the contractors, subcontractors and architects see the work as collaboration or an orchestrated sequence of contributions? That attitude will affect both the process and the resulting architecture. Maybe the key distinction is one between collaboration and contribution.

Another important factor in my experience of collaborative working is compromise; a word with negative connotations. I would argue that compromise is not something to regret in design, that it’s a skill to be handled creatively. In architectural practice, and certainly with public projects, it’s inevitable that something will be “taken away” from the designer at some point. But that can be constructive, generative in many ways. Similarly, when you’re working with a constrained urban site, it’s those constraints that inform the creative approach. A skill of a good designer is to turn compromise to their advantage, provoking their abilities to enrich the outcome.

AH: That is part of the need to step away from an attitude of “the architect’s idea” as a pristine, unchangeable thing. That approach is something that has been embedded through architectural theory and education in the last century, the “cult of genius.”

AH: I was thinking about the “mass collaboration” movement, the free data and making the sharing of ideas and knowledge more professionally acceptable. How might that be applied in the case of multiple-authored, collaborative architectural work, within the current culture of practice? If collaborative modes of working are to be embraced by architects – sharing knowledge more freely and sharing authorship with other professionals, or non-professional actors – then how does this fit in with the idea of the architecture profession, which tends historically to the protection of specialist knowledge and to maintaining knowledge silos? Will practitioners step away from the profession or will the profession embrace these changing ways of working?

GL: As a practitioner I sometimes feel “the establishment” seems slightly irrelevant. If a truly collaborative approach to architectural work and to creative control is adopted I’m as intrigued as to what happens to the “canon” of architectural history, when all of a sudden each building isn’t designed by “an architect”. It would fundamentally change the understanding of architectural history.

AH: In terms of the way the industry works now, issues of risk, and the litigious culture of the building industry would be the main barrier to creative, transformative, risk-taking collaborations. Would there be any way for the profession to enable more of this kind of collaboration?

GL: At a recent conference, a client representative from a local authority was emphasising their recognition of collaborations between architects and other creative professionals – artists, landscape architects, graphic designers, and others – in architectural work, indicating their perception of the “added value” of buildings resulting from a collaborative creative process. However, the necessity for local authorities to engage in a very proscriptive procurement process has led to architects winning jobs who have no more than a “token” interest in collaborating with other professionals. It is very difficult to quantify a productive, creative collaborative process, and thus difficult to identify and select such a team.

AH: That is something the profession could address. If clients are identifying a need for collaborative architectural work, how might we better define it, and how can clients ensure “quality” in a collaborative process?

SUMMARY

Distinct notions of contribution vs. collaboration were during this conversation in a way that was not predicted, challenging each of our presuppositions. In conjunction with our discussions of compromise and dialogue the vocabulary that we have outlined will be pushed to further develop collaborative methodologies in contemporary architectural practice. The roles of both individuals and institutions in this process merits further debate. Our position is that a true collaboration is a process of creative cyclical development where participants input into specific projects but also benefit from the way processes feedback into their own practice.