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Architecture and the Spaces of Information

Ruth Blacksell and Stephen Walker

This issue has grown out of a conversation about interdisciplinarity. Our respective interests, in architecture and editorial design, have served as an underpinning and allowed us to refer to these separate disciplinary categories. However, our main concern has been the opening up of a new territory that exists between the two and refers also to other areas of the visual arts and social sciences.

This new territory stems, to a large extent, from a particular art historical period between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, where practices and discourses of art moved away from the idea of object-based work towards conceptual works, which might be situated in contexts beyond the conventional space of the gallery. What has interested us about artworks from this period is how their “art contexts” often appropriated and interrogated architectural or editorial space^[1] and how, in turn, these appropriations evolved into new types of contemporary practice that might be described as art, architecture, editorial design, or all three.^[2]

The connection between architectural and editorial space is often addressed within architectural discourse in terms of the representation of architecture within published documents, or via the relationship between social environment and media environment. So an additional characteristic of the new territory we refer to is the

progression of these spatial environments in both architecture and publishing from the physical (and static) to the virtual (and dynamic).

A significant feature of this trajectory is evidenced by the adoption of the vocabulary of information architecture as a means for artists and art discourse to articulate these new spaces for practice. This responds to Marshall McLuhan's assertion that "Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a *knowledge of the way media work as environments*."^[3] As McLuhan's insight hints, these new forms of practice have required the understanding and appropriation of an entire mediating context and structure: a different way of engaging the spectator as a participant who no longer has to be physically positioned in proximity to the work, existing now as "reader" or "contributor" rather than "viewer" within this expanded conception of the exhibition space.

As a reaction against the medium-specificity and objecthood of modernism, and following the appropriation of mainstream publishing channels by Pop and Conceptual Art practices, institutional contexts have witnessed, for example, the emergence of a type of contemporary engagement that utilizes editorial strategies and text-based formats across print and – increasingly – digital publishing platforms. Conventional institutional spaces, such as galleries, museums, libraries, and publications, have had to assimilate new concepts and forms of practice, which have led to, amongst other things, the reassessment of curation and exhibition as a form of publishing and an expanded notion of social spaces, distribution networks, and archives as places where a practice might reside.

The broader relationship between artists, architects and editorial designers is arguably changing as a result. Some architectural and design practices have been quick to mobilize these new platforms, redefining and extending the scope of their own practice to incorporate these spaces of information and mediation. Recent architectural scholarship enjoys and expands the complexity of these relationships, as exemplified by Marian Macken's work on *The Book as Site* or Jane Rendell's *Site-Writing*.^[4] This more propositional work builds on a small but significant cluster of loosely related writing that announced the growing interest amongst architectural and design historians in architecture's overlooked relationship with publishing, including *This Is Not Architecture: Media Constructions* (2002), a collection of essays edited by Kester Rattenbury; Beatrice Colomina's revisionist history of modernism *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (1994); and Adrian Forty's *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (2000).^[5] As Forty reminds us, although the mediation of architecture has (until recently) been largely overlooked, the importance of the extended environments produced by such mediation were certainly considered during earlier periods of history. Indeed, he begins his introduction to *Words and Buildings* with a consideration of John Evelyn's *Account of Architects and Architecture* (1664), where Evelyn

makes a distinction between four kinds of architectural persona: *architectus ingenio*, *architectus sumptuarius*, *architectus manuaris*, and *architectus verborum* (the architect of words).^[6]

What we are looking at here is an historical lineage but also a recent transformation that has opened up a new plurality across art, architectural, and design discourse. This is embedded in constructed contexts/environments that can broadly be described as “spaces of information.” Our ambition for this issue has thus been to draw together contributions that engage with this territory, referring to practices and debates that demonstrate this transformation, as well as the social and cultural changes and opportunities for work and scholarship that this has opened.

Our proposed themes for the issue were drawn from questions about the relationship between these spaces of information and their materiality and/or active contexts. We were interested in articulations of physical architectural and editorial space, and descriptions of how these have been radically expanded into digital contexts. How, for example, have they complemented or challenged the ways in which disciplinary discourses are undertaken? What new forms of cross-disciplinary critique are required to articulate these engagements? and what are the opportunities or limitations for discipline-specificity?

In responding to these questions, the contributors have provided original examples as well as demonstrating multiple points of thematic, disciplinary, and processural connection. Tim Gough, Marian Macken, Igea Troiani, and Alison Kahn have, for example, undertaken separate close readings of the relationship between architecture and its representation vis-à-vis the printed and the digital document, whether in terms of format (two- or three-dimensional), layout (typographically linear or multilayered), or precise content (static or dynamic, or what Troiani and Kahn refer to and claim as positively “undisciplined”). Their references to experimental architectural book and folio formats, which might also be described as manuscripts or models, are aligned with reflections on the experience of the reader/viewer/handler, as well as broader theoretical and philosophical trajectories ranging from McLuhan’s depictions of “hot” and “cool” media, through Derrida’s “constellations” to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “assemblage.” They point to specific examples and archival collections and, importantly, use these to make future predictions about the evolving form of published architectural discourse and the academic book.

The proposition by Troiani and Kahn for a radical new architectural research space, situated within editorial documentation, is inspired by an ethnographic and social sciences methodology that is audiovisual, bodily, interactive, participatory, and archival. This connects with the contributions of Ruth Blacksell and Andrew Hunt, which, although framed by art history and criticism, situate their accounts in relation to precise socio-political contexts.

For these Blacksell and Hunt consider reconfigurations of the art gallery space against expanded notions of the library, the archive, and the publishing network. In referring back to the utopian 1960s' ideas of the architect Claude Parent, Blacksell presents a contemporary appropriation of his work incorporated into an exhibited example of editorial publishing. The ways in which hosting environment, architecture and publishing practice serve to dissolve disciplinary boundaries and activities of production, spectatorship and reception are considered here against expanded notions of multiplatform interactive spaces and ideas of infinite open-endedness.

Similarly, the commissioning strategy and specific works, referred to by Hunt in his account of Focal Point Gallery, demonstrate the potential for architectural space to work as a core component of an ethically and politically motivated curatorial vision. Here, the building, the commissioned works, and the printed gallery publicity are used collectively to set local narratives against ideas of permanence, and to contrast these with dynamic and transient digital environments and social networks.

Laura Salinas, Paul Coulton, Nick Dunn and Ana Bonet Miro continue in this vein with their own engagements with social space as "architectural" environment and their use of games theory and methods of play as a means to describe the potential for user interaction and mediation. Salinas, Coulton and Dunn describe the use of a method of *détournement* to highlight the differences between real and virtual spaces and the behaviors and social interactions they support. Likewise, Bonet Miro cites a Situationist use of the same technique in the establishment of the printed document as a "site" of information, capable of expanding and fictionally intensifying an architectural vision. Her description of Alexander Trocchi's *Sigma Portfolio* and Joan Littlewood's *Bubble City* pamphlet, as "ludic sites of information" for a mobile Fun Palace Programme, refer again to architecture as a multi-sited media event, projected into multiple social networks and locations.

In their own reflections on the Fun Palace, Tim Anstey, Katja Grillner, and Rolf Hughes have – as is the case with most architectural historians – focused more on Cedric Price's contribution to the project (and particularly his architectural drawings and visualizations), noting how Price "began to suggest the traditional architectural drawing was no longer sufficient for the action of producing architecture." Importantly in our context, they go on to assert that the intention of this Fun Palace project was "to re-design an invisible topography of contractual and institutional conditions that surrounds architecture as object,"^[7] thus situating Price in a post-World War II lineage that contested the ground on which architectural action takes place, proposing that this should be considered as a *field* and not as a *bounded object*.^[8] This resonates with the parallel move in art history and criticism, exemplified by Rosalind Krauss's essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1979)^[9] which was motivated by related concerns over the ontological status of art, and

a perceived need to rethink – or expand – received categories of art criticism precipitated by new art practices emerging during the 1960s.

Alongside these moves, the late 1960s also witnessed challenges – or expansions, to stick with this term – to the received understanding of the author (as genius) and reader (as recipient). This was set out most famously in Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" (first published in English in 1967 in the *Aspen* issue that followed the McLuhan box, featured in our frontispiece).^[10]

Yet despite these multiple examples of new approaches to the practice, theorization and historical understanding of the spaces of information, the architectural writer Charles Jencks proposed in 2002 that "Architecture stays in one place, while its meaning travels between the covers of books."^[11] In his essay in the same collection, Alan Powers reviewed what he saw as the historical importance of book publishing for architecture, and went so far as to forecast its enduring role as the gold-standard of communication:

The printed book was used to communicate architecture as soon as it became available in the late fifteenth century, and is still being used today. Its dominance may be threatened by new types of medium, but some of its characteristics are likely to be copied in other media that may replace it. For the time being, no other media confers such intellectual respectability whatever its shortcomings may be for communication.^[12]

Tim Gough's article in this issue presents a sustained critique of Powers's essay that we will not repeat here, but it does provide an important link that returns us to McLuhan's meditations on media. For McLuhan, different media operate in fundamentally different ways: the "new types of medium" anticipated by Powers will not copy the operation of the book, nor will they simply take up familiar social and cultural roles established and supported by print. Even from his vantage point in the 1960s, McLuhan was able to understand that the electronic age would operate in a fundamentally different way compared with the Gutenberg era. As Gough emphasizes, "electronic media are not typographic in their operation."

Mario Carpo's work on printing and more recent technologies makes a related, but wider, point to provide an analogy with contemporary digital fabrication techniques.^[13] He asserts that we are now closer to Medieval than Renaissance processes of production (manu- as opposed to machino-facturing in a strict sense), with the emergence of digital one-off or mass-bespoke objects beginning to alter the relationship between designer, maker, and user. In contrast to the linearity, sequentiality, and uniformity characteristic of both mass-production and linear printed text (with its associated conventions of diachronic reading), electronic media arguably facilitate and advance more complex, non-linear, and more active modes of interaction that

operate with open temporality. This calling into question of received wisdom about the priority and sequencing of architecture and the spaces of published information has significant epistemological and ontological ramifications.

Several contributions here make direct or implicit reference to the Wunderkammer, or cabinet of curiosities: the epistemological challenge that this example provides to more ordered (“disciplined”) institutions of knowledge has some resonance with the modality of exploratory, expanded reading we can enjoy with electronic media, or with increasingly cross-platform information environments. However, we must not just look backwards for examples to make sense of the now. Useful historical parallels can be drawn to be sure but, as the various contributions here demonstrate, by working between art, architecture, and editorial design, between practice and scholarship, this issue of *Architecture and Culture* challenges us to consider the broad contemporary trajectory of changing relationships between space and information as they take up ever more complex spatial dispositions.

Ruth Blacksell is Director of the MA in Book Design, Department of Typography & Graphic Communication, University of Reading; and Research Fellow, Faculty of Art, Design & Architecture, University of Kingston. Her research falls into two connected areas: the use of typography, acts of reading and contexts of publishing in practices of 1960s/70s’ Conceptual Art; and Contemporary (post-Conceptual) publishing practices and evolving interdisciplinary territories in contemporary art, architecture and design. She has published internationally and organized a number of public facing events on these themes.

Stephen Walker is Reader in Architecture, Sheffield School of Architecture (SSoA), The University of Sheffield, and Director of the Graduate School. His research interests are broadly informed by art, architectural and critical theory and examine the questions that such theoretical projects can raise about particular moments of architectural and artistic practice. He has published widely on the artists Gordon Matta-Clark and Helen Chadwick.

Notes

1 For example, see the practices of Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Smithson, Dan Graham, and Lawrence Weiner (amongst many others), as well as the curatorial/editorial engagements of those such as Seth Siegelaub, Lucy Lippard, and Art & Language.

2 These date back to 1960s’ engagements like that of *Bau* magazine, featuring Hans Hollein’s mission statement ‘alles ist architektur’/‘everything is architecture’ (1968) and are now evidenced by practices such as *The Serving Library*, which exist as

- expanded physical and virtual sites for editorial publishing; *Bau: Magazine for Architecture and Urban Planning*, issue 1–2 (1968). Available online: <http://www.servinglibrary.org/>.
- 3 Marshall McLuhan, *Aspen*, number. 4 (1967): added emphasis.
 - 4 Marian Macken, *The Book as Site: Alternative Modes of Representing and Documenting Architecture*. Ph.D. thesis, Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney, 2012. Abstract at http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/8400/1/01m_macken_2012_thesis.pdf; *idem*, "Binding Architecture: Drawing in the Book." *Architecture and Culture*, 2, no. 2 (2014): 225–43; Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).
 - 5 A slightly longer list, arranged chronologically, includes Beatice Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1994); Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000); Mario Carpo, *Architecture in the Age of Printing: Orality, Writing, Typography, and Printed Images in the History of Architectural Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Kester Rattenbury (ed.), *This Is Not Architecture: Media Constructions* (London: Routledge, 2002); Tim Anstey, Katja Grillner, and Rolf Hughes (eds), *Architecture and Authorship* (London: Black Dog, 2007); Andrew Higgott, *Mediating Modernism: Architectural Cultures in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2007); and Mario Carpo, *The Alphabet and the Algorithm* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).
 - 6 John Evelyn, *Account of Architects and Architecture* (1664), appended to Fréart de Chambray, *Parallel of the Antient Architecture with the Modern*, translated by John Evelyn (London: Tho. Roycroft for John Place); cited in Forty, *Words and Buildings*, 11
 - 7 Anstey et al., *Architecture and Authorship*, 24.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, 10.
 - 9 Rosalind E. Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." *October*, 8 (1979): 30–44; repr. in *idem*, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 276–90 (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1985).
 - 10 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author." *Aspen*, numbers 5–6 (1967); see also Michel Foucault's 1969 lecture *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?*, published in English as *idem*, "What is an Author?" translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, 113–38 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977).
 - 11 Charles Jencks, "Post-Modernism and the Revenge of the Book." In *This Is Not Architecture: Media Constructions*, edited by Kester Rattenbury, 174–97 (at 176) (London: Routledge, 2002).
 - 12 Alan Powers, "The Architectural Book: Image and Accident." In *This Is Not Architecture: Media Constructions*, edited by Kester Rattenbury, 157–73 (at 157) (London: Routledge, 2002).
 - 13 Carpo, *Alphabet and the Algorithm*; *idem*, *Architecture in the Age of Printing*.

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