

Intellectual and professional processes

Alternative Alternate Currents?

Methodologies and processes

I would like to support wholeheartedly William Tozer's proposal of an alternate mode of practice – 'A Theory of Making: Methodology and Process in Architectural Practice', *arq* 12/2, pp. 134–148 – which establishes a way of working that is open-ended and above all shaped by its own production.

It is important to remember that the schism between the architectural profession and academia is already set out through the institutional structures of most universities. Convinced that education must not be separate from either practice or research, indeed – on the contrary – believing in their immensely productive mutual relationship, I founded a design live studio called *Die Baupiloten* at the Technical University in Berlin in June 2003. Early work of the studio was published in *arq* 8/2, pp. 114–127. The course bridges education, practice and research. It enables architectural students to put their research-based designs into practice. Though we concentrate

on small projects we like to think that they have – as Tozer argues with respect to his own similar practice – 'a wide-ranging social, political and cultural impact' because of their experimental character.

In Germany, the majority of academic staff believe that a built project portfolio is the decisive proof of an architect's competence even when applying for the position of a University chair. In that respect Anglo-Saxon universities are far ahead. A number of UK schools, the Bartlett School of Architecture for example, encourage the development of architectural research through the interaction of designing and writing. The development of the PhD. by design will hopefully challenge once and for all the idea of a distinction between professional and intellectual design processes. We might argue that the balancing act which design-based researchers take on through the multiple roles of researcher, designer and practitioner is inevitably extremely demanding. Tozer, however,

convinces us that the roles even complement one another through his alternate practice. His intention to align 'design processes with stated methodologies, and academic and professional understandings of the discipline' could have a huge impact on teaching careers. As soon as future professorships are not decided exclusively on professional large-scale projects, but rather take into consideration the quality of research-based design, 'the rift between the universities and the profession, research and practice, thought and action' as described by Donald Schön might be reconciled.

SUSANNE HOFMANN

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Alternates to Alternate Currents

I applaud *arq* for supporting 'Alternate Currents' and publishing some of the papers on alternative architectural practices (*arq* 12/2). Given the enormous challenges we face, with exponential growth in global population, atmospheric carbon, polar melting, and species extinctions, the profession and discipline of architecture need to reassess our practices in light of such potentially catastrophic changes. But, from the evidence of most of the papers published in *arq*, that reassessment has not gone nearly far enough. We remain, as a field, largely wed to a traditional 'medical' model of practice, one in which the architect works with individual clients to meet particular user needs on specific sites, much as a physician deals with an individual patient's



Immaginare Corviale, a project by Italian collective Stalker/Osservatorio Nomade that engages with a one-kilometre-long housing complex in Rome, one of Emiliano Gandolfi's 'strategies for a better world'

particular medical needs at a specific point in time. The 'alternatives' to this typically involve a shift in emphasis with some architects, for example, giving more attention to users or community input and others putting more weight on formal or procedural matters. Rarely, however, do we question the basic idea of working with individuals or small groups of people on particular projects.

Because of the scale and seriousness of the global problems we face, the traditional 'medical' model most architects practise is necessary, but woefully insufficient. We would not accept it if the medical fields cared about the health of only the top 5 to 10% of the world's population who have the financial means to pay their fees; although that is effectively what architects have done. We have a responsibility to 'Design for the other 90%', as the Cooper-Hewitt exhibition currently travelling in the US puts it, and to do so, we need forms of practice which are very different from those that most schools teach and most firms pursue.

One model might be the architectural equivalent of public

health, in which architects work with Non-Governmental Organisations and nation states to address the shelter, sanitation, and security needs of large numbers of people, through design solutions that have a very low unit cost and probably a high level of recycling of materials or repurposing of products. Another model might be the architectural equivalent of veterinary medicine, in which architects work with biologists and ecologists to preserve vanishing animal habitat and plant communities essential to human and environmental health, through regional planning which overlays the survival rights of other species onto the property rights claimed by humans. A third model might be the architectural equivalent of osteopathy, in which architects work with communities and companies to manipulate the 'musculoskeletal' infrastructure of places to enable people to construct their own environments using local materials and traditional methods.

Such practices may sound odd to us, but they are the kinds of activities needed by 90% of the

human population and nearly all of the other species we don't now serve. We can ignore that demand and become increasingly irrelevant as the problems of our planet overwhelm us, or we can begin to apply the same level of creativity we employ in the design of particular buildings to the design of our practices and of the inhabited parts of our planet. We really do not have a choice.

THOMAS FISHER

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On Alternate Currents

Contributors to the 'Alternate Currents' debate have failed to grasp the fact that architecture can only be measured in terms of buildings. It's no good trusting people in other professions – social workers, politicians, journalists, educators – to be the judges of the value of our buildings. They never will be, because they will always have their own priorities. The great pathetic fallacy in our business is the idea that people in general share the problems of architects; they do not.

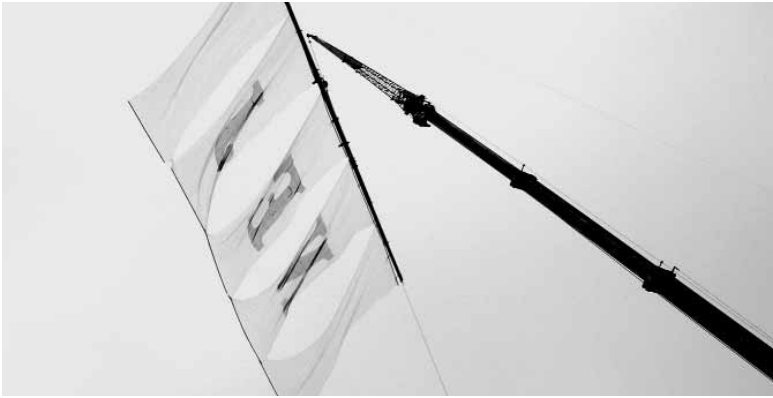
As the world measures things more and more in words, architecture slips back further. Even some of the satellite activities of architects are under threat. A second-rate biography (of which there are many) will get many times more coverage in the mass media through reviews or promotion than a good architecture book (of which there are very few). People with little obvious perceptiveness about architecture, or specialist knowledge, can make a nationwide reputation that outshines that of all but perhaps four or five British architects by writing books about it: look at the author of *The Architecture of Happiness*, for example, cravenly invited by the RIBA on to a Stirling Prize jury, or the comic journalist who has recently written a book which you can see piled up in the shops called *A Lust for Window Sills* and which has been serialised in major newspapers. It is a miserable, lost hope that an alternate current to modern architectural practice can emerge through the collaboration of architects with politicians, with activists, with academics, with technocrats, with journalists or with anybody else other than themselves or other artists and craftsmen.

The political and social collaborations of Emiliano



Pavilion, by Willaim Tozer

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'Nej' (no in Danish), a protest sign in Copenhagen Harbour at the height of a proposed Erick van Egeraat project

Gandolfi's 'better world' (arq 12/2, pp. 125–133) form a better world of politicians and social workers, but not of architects. For us it is a worse world, because such collaborations are a further step in the direction of architecture being measured in terms of something else. It's striking too that Van Heeswijk's work – one of Gandolfi's examples – taught children not about designing but about 'investigating their living environment'. This very phrase is a betrayal of what architects do: designers design. Since words are the dominant currency outside the architectural profession, people will grasp at them and use them; and when buildings are prescribed using literary devices, the essence of design is gone. You might as well try to 'get you a good dinner with reading you the cookery book', as George Eliot's Mrs Farebrother so presciently warned.

The appalling way in which our profession has allowed architecture to be displaced by something else above our own heads was demonstrated at a recent event called 'The Oxford Conference 2008' which set itself the task of 'resetting the agenda for architectural education' but produced little more than a great deal of sanctimonious and unenforceable hot air on the subject of sustainable architecture, suiting a politician's, activist's, way of going about things. It is rather as if the pioneer Gothic Revivalists of the 1840s had all gone to a conference to discuss their work and ended up talking about new building standards and technical innovations – which certainly underpinned much of what they did, but which were of interest to almost nobody at all at the time and had little to do with the revolutionary character of their work.

It seems particularly shocking that this major event on architectural education completely

ignored the recent and scandalous attempt by box-tickers to close the department of architecture at Cambridge University, for that was an event of tremendous significance, the effects of which may well turn out to be devastating to architectural education. If Cambridge had gone down, others would have followed. And yet, if this 'Oxford Conference' was anything to go by you would have thought that there was no problem at all with the obviously absurd idea that an architecture school, the purpose of which is to teach design and practice, should be measured in terms of the production of obscure research papers that almost no one reads. The president of the RIBA, charged with strengthening architectural education, had nothing to say in his Oxford speech about that. Nor did he mention that, for box-ticking reasons, it's now almost impossible for an incoming university teacher both to run an architect's office and to build an academic career alongside it. Indeed, the fact that no one at all appears to have said anything at this conference about the institutional threat facing schools of design in general under this regime tells you a great deal about the prospects for 'alternate currents' that might pull the profession together, or wake it up. Perhaps by definition nothing alternative can ever come out of any conference.

And yet architectural education itself probably has the greatest potential for providing those alternate currents, because it is only there that designers can afford to address the pure nature of design itself. Remember where the underworld, the parallel universe, the anarchical kingdom of architecture reside: where buildings themselves, the materials, the forms, the junctions, the secret language of the details

can be found; things that speak only to those that deal in them, draw them, make them, touch them. Talking and writing about personal experiences of buildings is in there too. Adventure in buildings comes out of buildings, not out of conferences and collaborations. This is the true alternative, the true anarchy: the revolt against the tyranny of words. This is the place you make yourself, pushed by others, prodded by tutors, goaded by your memories, engaged with the built history of the world or indeed its natural places as only you yourself have experienced them, converted into images and then sometimes even walls and spaces. These are what created all the great revolutions in architectural history. You draw a saw across a timber joist and the sawdust comes out like little sparks, not like verbs and commas.

Architects can share these things with others, as we do at Kent in our shared programmes with schoolchildren. We design together with them; we don't investigate their living environment. That way we hope to find allies among people who will themselves become designers, discovering themselves through drawing and designing. Indeed, in the alternative university the architecture students will seduce all the people in the other departments with their pictures and images, their ideas and their models; they will be the front line against the words; they will be the alternate current.

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