

Title	Alternate Currents
Type	Article
URL	http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/6228/
Date	2008
Citation	Till, Jeremy and Schneider, Tatjana (2008) Alternate Currents. Field, 2 (1). pp. 1-5. ISSN 1755-068
Creators	Till, Jeremy and Schneider, Tatjana

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Alternate Currents

Editorial

Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till

Jean-François Prost writes that ‘architects often prefer photographing or showing buildings at the height of their “perfection”, when the presence of time is imperceptible and user-trace absent.’¹

In distinction to this attitude, which is typical of aspirations for autonomy, this issue of *field*: deals with architecture as a praxis that is much more complex and varied than is often portrayed. The essays come out of ‘Alternate Currents,’² a symposium held in November 2008 as part of the Theory Forum series at the University of Sheffield, School of Architecture. The call for papers asked not for answers to the dominant modes of architectural production, but for positions, ways of working and thinking away from the ‘normative’ or ‘mainstream’. Architecture not in the sense of ‘building’ but as something that can be considered, to use Beatriz Colomina’s words, as an ‘interpretive, critical act’;³ something that is inclusive of the user; something that is aware and communicative of all phases of the process of its production; and, something that can alter and change perceptions as well as pioneering new forms of thinking, acting and engagement. This is architecture that desists from any autonomy but rather sees itself as part of a wider social and political landscape.

Over the past decade we have watched in despair as architecture has finally achieved its aimless fate, as predicted by Manfredo Tafuri, of being reduced to pure form. This year’s architecture biennale in Venice is a case in point. Despite its stated aim to display ‘architecture beyond building’ it has, in most cases, led to the throng of ‘star’ architects producing artwork, installations and sculptures that fetishise shapes.⁴

The wordiness of the ‘critical’ versus ‘post-critical’ debate that has so occupied the US theorists has only served to distract from the underlying

¹ Jean François Prost, ‘Adaptive Actions’, *field*: 2(1)(2008): 139.

² ‘Alternate Currents’ was held at the Showroom Cinema in Sheffield on 26th and 27th November 2007. The symposium took place as part of the AHRC funded research project ‘Alternative Architectural Praxis’ and was co-produced by The Agency, one of the School of Architecture’s new research centres.

³ Beatriz Colomina, ‘Architectureproduction’, in Kester Rattenbury (ed.), *This Is Not Architecture*, (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 207-21.

⁴ Cf. David Levene, ‘In Pictures: The Venice Biennale’, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2008/sep/16/architecture> [accessed 16 September 2008].

⁵ For a good summary of this debate see: George Baird, 'Criticality and Its Discontents', *Harvard Design Magazine*, 21 (2004): 1-6. Also online at: http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/research/publications/hdm/back/21_baird.html

⁶ The Camp for Oppositional Architecture held in Berlin (2004) and Utrecht (2006) has recently started to raise and discuss similar questions. See also, AnArchitektur, 'Camp for Oppositional Architecture', *AnArchitektur : Produktion und Gebrauch gebauter Umwelt* (2005), AnArchitektur, 'Camp for Oppositional Architecture. Theorizing Architectural Resistance', *AnArchitektur : Produktion und Gebrauch gebauter Umwelt* (2007).

poverty of architectural production.⁵ However, there have been a number of people operating beneath the radar, taking one or more of a number of positions: the social, explicitly political, feminist, participatory, encouraging self-management, bottom-up, non-hierarchical and/or cooperative. This loose grouping stands in relation to a history of practices that have stood aside of normal professional definitions: co-operatives, the strong social engagement and collaboration of different disciplines in the 1920s, participatory movements in the late 1960s and early 70s, self-managed and organised projects in the late 1970s and early 80s; feminist approaches in the 1980s. Our call for papers attempted to find these often unsung heroes and their documenters, and in so doing address a number of questions. Why we would need such different approaches in architecture? Where would one start? How are they run? How financed? For whom do these practices work for - and whom not? What for? How do they operate?⁶

ALTERNATE CURRENTS

_ a symposium on architecture /
_ organised by the school of architecture / university of sheffield /
_ venue / showroom cinema / paternoster row / sheffield / s1 2bx
_ 9.00am 26th November 2007 to 5.00pm 27th November 2007

**_Alternate Currents is a major international symposium which looks at
_alternative forms of architectural praxis // The symposium will present a range
_of ideas from around the world proposing how to conduct architectural practice
_in new and reflective ways // Many of the speakers start from a critical position
_with regard to the normative models of architectural practice and the values
_embedded in it // From political, social, gender and theoretical standpoints, the
_speakers propose innovative ways of thinking about the future of architectural
_practice //**

_speakers
_ Tessa Baird / Anna Holder / James Wakeford // London /
_ Jens Brandt // Copenhagen /
_ Carolyn Butterworth / Sam Vardy // Sheffield /
_ Jonathan Charley // Glasgow /
_ Prue Chiles / Leo Care / BDR // Sheffield /
_ Pedro Gadanho // Lisbon /
_ Emiliano Gandolfi // Rotterdam /
_ Mathias Heyden // Berlin /
_ Andreas Lang / public works // London /
_ Maria Malard / Ana Baltazar / Renato Cesar Ferreira // Belo Horizonte /
_ Ruth Morrow // Belfast /
_ Andreas Müller // Berlin /
_ Constantin Petcu / Doina Petrescu / Helen Stratford // Paris/Cambridge /
_ Jean-François Prost // Montreal /
_ Colin Ripley // Toronto /
_ Flora Samuel // Bath /
_ William Tozer // London / Melbourne /
_ keynote
_ MOM // Belo Horizonte / Brazil



Fig. 1. Flyer the 'Alternate Currents' Symposium held at the Showroom Cinema, Sheffield, in November 2007.

⁷ See also, Garry Stevens, *The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998).

Silke Kapp, Ana Paula Baltazar and Denise Morado of MOM find one answer to this when they argue in their essay for *field*, along the lines of the work of the Australian architect and sociologist Garry Stevens, that the discipline's main rationale 'has always been the design of buildings for the representation of power, and not the design of pleasant spaces for all.'⁷ For them architecture is about the latter; it is about 'the transformation of space by human work' and is neither concerned with size, scale or function but with everyday spaces such as 'dwellings or unpretentious public facilities.'

This statement suggests a fundamental ideological and political shift, namely the move from product to process, with the knowingly naïve sentiment of 'pleasant spaces for all' standing in active confrontation to architecture as a tool of exclusion and architects as executors of this exclusion. The architect(ure) of process is a role of active engagement and active directing; it is about taking a lead yet at the same time relinquishing control. It is about having an imaginative vision, but executing it in the name of others.

Alternate Currents aimed to begin a discussion as to what precisely a position like MOM's can and does mean for the production of architecture and its occupation.

Being 'different', 'alternative' or 'experimental' have become catchwords amongst architects in order to distinguish oneself from the many other offices offering architectural services, and to gain access to new marketplaces. Against this essentially expedient move, *Alternate Currents* was interested in practices that are engaging self-critically with their own role as architects and with the wider role of architecture within today's society. This issue of *field* publishes ten contributions to this discussion, with a number of others published in *Architectural Research Quarterly*.⁸

⁸ *ARQ* 2 (12)(2008).

Tessa Baird, Anna Holder and James Wakeford examine interviews they conducted with Part II graduates in the UK about 'values' and 'frustrations' students had encountered during their formal education and whilst working in practice, the course of practice taken, architectural interests outside of paid employment and each interviewees architectural agenda. Eeva Berglund provides a historical sketch of Women's Design Service, an organisation founded in the 1980s in London with the intention of working towards a better built environment for women by 'helping them get involved in design and planning, doing research, lobbying and giving advice.'

In their essay entitled 'Site-Seeing: Constructing the "Creative Survey"', Carolyn Butterworth and Sam Vardy look at the unchanged nature of the architectural practice of the site survey and how techniques from relational

art practice can offer an ‘alternate creative survey’ which will open up and provoke new relationships between the user, architect and the site itself.

Prue Chiles and Leo Care explore their own work as part of the Bureau of Design Research (BDR) at the School of Architecture, University of Sheffield. The BDR is somewhere ‘between a research-based consultancy, a Project Office and *something other*’, and addresses the need of architects for ‘finding a way in.’ It does this through making design and regeneration processes accessible to communities and to students through ‘tested and innovative *tactics of engagement*’, as well as by bridging the gap between community/city, academy and practice.

Mathias Heyden’s contribution is a call for bringing activist & architectural practices, university work, and political & economic discourse into an imminent and productive exchange in order to reinforce direct-democratic and sustainable potential in the built environment.

Silke Kapp, Ana Paula Baltazar and Denise Morado of MOM (Morar de Outras Maneiras) explore ideas of how to ‘overcome the production of space as “reproduction of the social relations of production”’ by drawing upon the informal production of space in the Brazilian *favelas*, the work of Lygia Clark and their own practice.

By discussing Leon Alberti Batista and examples from her own work, Ruth Morrow investigates whether the loss of his appendix to *On the Art of Building in Ten Books* ‘may have been fortuitous’ since it ‘leaves a void in which we can continue to examine and re-imagine our own individual practice and “the services” we offer.’ Being strongly situated within the ‘who’ (the parameters of her own persona) and the ‘where’ (the context from which she operates: one material, one strategic and the third academic), Ruth emphasises the importance of a ‘critical space to practice creatively.’

Andreas Müller discusses the role of the ‘fundamental protagonist’, the user, in architecture. Starting with Giancarlo de Carlo’s statement dating from 1969 that ‘the intrinsic aggressiveness of architecture and the forced passivity of the user must dissolve in a condition of creative and decisional equivalence’, Andreas explores Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*, the German Werkbund’s publication *Lernbereich Wohnen* and Ottokar Uhl’s *Democratisation of Aesthetics* in order to reinvigorate the ‘promising potentials of participation.’

Jean-François Prost presents his project *Adaptive Actions*, which operates a ‘shift in focus from representation and aesthetics to the programming of possibilities of use in the built environment.’ *Adaptive Actions* is a collection of examples of alterations by residents to their home, their workplace or public space—all observed, revealed and shared

with others. Jean-François acts as the instigator who provokes and promotes such actions.

Finally, through a series of interviews with ‘non professional designers’ (three couples who chose to not employ an architect for their respective house extensions) Flora Samuel traces these people’s design aspirations, decision-making processes and their satisfaction with the end product thereby highlighting critically the current perception of architects by the public.

As important as these papers were the discussion that the symposium generated, especially among the students at Sheffield, was in some ways more significant. Their education explicitly addresses the social and political aspects of architectural production, but the students sometimes express frustration that there are too few role models of people actually walking the talk. The symposium provided a window into a world beyond formal gratification, architectural dross or self-absorbed discourse, and for this we are immensely grateful to everyone who contributed.

Acknowledgements: The symposium *Alternate Currents*, on which this issue of *field:* is based, was conceived and organised by Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till as part of their ongoing research project: *Alternative Architectural Praxis*. We are indebted to AHRC for funding this work. Thanks to our fellow Agents at Sheffield for support and chairing of the sessions, to Bea Munby for organisational help and to all the fifth year students who engaged so fully in the symposium and debate. Finally, this issue of *field:* would have been impossible without the scrupulous editing of Nishat Awan.

