

P-L-A-S-T-I-C-I-T-Y

Formations: The plasticity of practice

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"... the concentration on the building as the primary locus of architectural production brings with it certain limitations."¹

— The current fascination with the 'reconstruction' of the architect comes as a direct response to the turbulent forces currently reshaping global contemporary culture. The potency of these forces is expressed by the way in which a professional anxiety embedded in the structural schism at the heart of architecture has been brought to light. By upsetting the relative professional stability of architecture for most of the past century, these changes - in an unexpected form of disciplinary psychotherapy - have forced many architects to question the assumptions upon which the profession and its practice have been constructed. While it is a challenging period for many in the profession globally, this is also a rare opportunity for the discipline as the calcified structures through which architecture has operated for the last century have begun to soften and reorganise.

It is arguable that until recently, the inherent 'plasticity' of practice, or the ability to reshape and reorganise practice, has been one of the least understood, least compelling and least theorised aspects

of architecture. While there have been both market driven and structural causes for this neglect, practices have recently begun to overcome these and explore the potential of this plasticity. Motivated externally by cultural change and internally by a drive to reformulate the agency of architecture within the context of our contemporary built environment, we are seeing new forms of practice emerge. These formations of practice in their turn, are rousing interest and debate around broader notions of the work of the architect beyond traditional practice structures, challenging the nature of the architect, and the profession's education, canon and potentials.

So at this very moment it is pertinent to ask how does architecture, as a profession, construct itself? How do architects structure the most effective models of practice in order to recover the agency of their practice? This query is central to many recent writings on the future of the profession, which address the comparative agency of the architect when operating between traditional and more speculative or unusual modes.

In the introductory essay to their survey, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture*, Jeremy Till et al. describe 'agency' "as the ability of the individual to act independently of the constraining structures of society"². Agency in these terms is understood as the product of forms of practice, which critically and consciously work to "redirect" these societal constraints "by design"³.

That there is potential for greater agency by working outside the strictures of the profession as it is presently constructed immediately offers many professional challenges. In the Anglo world in particular, the title of architect is tightly defined and a suite of professional and regulatory organisations work to preserve and defend the traditionally understood role of architects and the legal definition and obligations of the title. However, architects and their industry bodies have begun to reassess the contemporary context of architecture, and whether these disciplinary boundaries, incorporated in the architectural charters, acts, contracts, insurance regimes and project team relationships, have been drawn too tightly—inhibiting the profession rather than protecting it as intended.

Till notes that professions "rely on this assertion of stable knowledge in order to give themselves authority over others, and so to accept acting otherwise is to recognise the limits of one's authority, and to relinquish the sole hold of fixed and certain knowledge"⁴. And it is precisely this disciplinary stability that has begun to be questioned in the contemporary economic, cultural and environmental context. This process implicitly critiques

whether the very type of professional being defended by these institutions represents the future of the profession as we collectively envisage it.

Considering the idea of agency as a central motivator for the future of practice, two fundamental questions at the core of the contemporary professional dilemma are immediately raised: What can architecture do? And what should architecture do?

Practice offers a conceptually different way to define architecture than the modes we usually rely on, and subsequently provides the possibility for alternate responses to these central questions. The interest in framing disciplinarity in this way acknowledges practice both as an imperative to action (practice as a verb), and the contextual dependency of practice and thus its contingent and relational nature. Practice is necessarily understood by the way in which the practitioner practices to shape the environment and the way the environment in response shapes the practitioner.

Tony Fry argues that: "Practice marks the mind and identity and, in some cases the practitioner's body. It is both owned by and owns this person."⁵ Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu, extends this point outlining the ways in which a practice is a product of what he terms habitus or a "discourse of familiarity"⁶. Michel Foucault also referred to the habitus as those 'discursive formations' formed through the everyday subconscious social and cultural agreements, which become practices "concealed"⁷, which nonetheless frame and structure all subsequent actions.

The shaping of practice then must be something understood as having a two-way effect: a practice is shaped by the practitioner, but a practitioner (and a discipline) is also shaped by a practice.

Acknowledging the relational nature of practice in this way affords practitioners the capacity to construct their own unique disciplinary 'field of enquiry' through creating and nurturing networks of connections. These connections reach out to and organise other disciplines, institutions, consultants, clients and stakeholder groups, both of a standard (disciplinary) and non-standard (non-disciplinary) variety. Operating through the plasticity and contingency of these active relationships, practices as *formations* in this sense activates the architect as a designer of situations of agency and potentiality, engaging political, cultural and economic factors as opportunities for real innovation not limited by traditional practice boundaries. It is this capacity to dynamically reconstruct practice and its continual reformulation that we understand as the plasticity of practice.

As the profession at large has been rattled by recent environmental and economic events, this foregrounding and redesign of practice has become a matter of urgency. Thomas Fisher has even noted that, "architectural practice, in short, has become one of the major design problems of our time"⁸. Developing a similar rhetorical position as Bourdieu, Fisher goes on to tackle the issue of design itself:

*"By defining design in the narrowest and most conventional terms, such as giving form to an environment or objects, we have created an unnecessary obstacle for ourselves, limiting the application of our knowledge and, not coincidentally, limiting the influence of our discipline. If, instead, we see design as the finding of solutions to difficult and complex problems, then the notion of designing architectural practice becomes comprehensible, part of a continuum of design thinking that need not stop with our own offices or even our own discipline."*⁹

This focus on broadening the idea of design to include the redesign of practice itself is where many contemporary developments in this field differ from a range of alternative practice experiments in the 1960s and 1970s, which sought to challenge the norm as a form of resistance by positioning practices outside the discipline. Whereas those practices did much to change our thinking about the potential of architecture by stepping outside practice as it had been understood, the contemporary focus on the redesign of practice – from the inside – suggests a different type of engagement and agency. This significant shift from utopian alternatives to re-engineering practice itself is an important tenet of Fry's claim for the potential of "re-directing" practices:

*“Design can be made a leader of redirection. Not by falling back into offering utopian forms that spark or express a spirit of a new age, a Zeitgeist – the error of the modernists – but rather by developing and adopting a diverse cluster of effective and strategically deployable actions within the remit of re-directional practices.”*¹⁰

Conceptually, formations of practice suggest a different understanding of the very form and structure of the practicing entity, in that it becomes formed or designed in concert with the development of a specific project. In this way, the intellectual and spatial drivers of practice, those traits particular to architecture, remain essential. It is then through the construction of formations of participants in relation to this core knowledge and its instrumentalisation in uniquely formed contexts, that practice begins to redirect itself and open opportunities to reconstruct the terms of its effect in the world.

Jonathan Hill addresses the issue of disciplinarity in relation to architecture, reminding us of Mark Cousins’ proposition that “trying to define architectural knowledge is like pouring water into a colander”¹¹. Hill credits the difficulty in defining the discipline of architecture with Cousins’ notion of architecture as a weak discipline, involving “not just objects but relations between subjects and objects”¹². In this sense, Cousins too leaves questions of disciplinary boundaries behind and instead considers the relational aspects of architecture and its practice as the locus for innovation.

Looking outside the architectural profession, those companies and practices that have escaped disciplinary definitions have made whole new markets for themselves, and in doing so, many have come to dominate contemporary culture. For example, the four horsemen of contemporary digital culture – Google, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter – have all to some degree found a way to shirk the bonds of traditional disciplinary thinking and invent their own marketplaces, their own cultures of work, their own interpretation of the world which they promote and into which they operate.

Fisher describes these unique conditions:

*“This transformation has been described by several thinkers as a series of shifts: from a mechanistic world view to one of organic flows; from an urge to dominate nature to one that seeks a balance with it; from mass production to mass customisation; from large bureaucratic organisations to smaller project-based operations; from specialised jobs to versatility; and from professional autonomy to participatory teamwork.”*¹³

What if this weakness of relations between subjects and objects, or the plasticity of architectural practice itself was understood, in a move of intellectual aikido, as a strength? More directly, in the words of John McMorrough, “the disciplinary argument is no longer capable of sustaining the development of architecture and should no longer be continually propped up ... Instead, architecture needs to creatively dismantle its own fortifications.”¹⁴

Given the many organisations with stakes in the maintenance of or advocacy for the disciplinary status quo, this suggestion would appear highly contentious and difficult to address until one considers that these boundaries are already being bought down by pressures from outside the discipline, despite the significant effort required to maintain them. As Alejandro Zaera-Polo writes:

*“During the last two decades we have witnessed a substantial reformulation of the political stance of architectural practice vis-à-vis the development of global capitalism. As a result of new conditions through which cities and architecture are produced, the politics of architectural practice have changed, but their impact on the discipline has not yet been fully theorised. The increasing complexity of global developments—the distribution of power within the world economy, the transnational competition between cities, the development of world-wide environmental policies, the growing importance of media as a political force, the increasing presence of private agents in the provision of services and infrastructures—are redefining the politics of architecture and urbanism.”*¹⁵

Thus, Zaera-Polo articulates how this shifting context has resulted in the contraction of the discipline over the past 40 years resulting in a loss of agency. When the environment within which our profession operates is shifting as dramatically as it is today, how and where one draws those disciplinary edges requires debate, adjustment and in some cases wholesale renewal.

This is the same conundrum faced by a range of disciplinary institutions today that realise they are defenders of disciplinary models whose relevance to a shifting context of practice keeps changing, and in fact requires constant conditioning and adjustment of the terms under which that disciplinary knowledge can be executed.

In the case of architecture, the historically simple exercise of building has given way to a highly managed process that relies on an exponential increase in required knowledge and therefore on the involvement of consultants who have specialised to address increasingly complex technical, logistical and legal frameworks. Within architecture’s own domain, the project manager, the place-maker, the branding consultant, the futurist, the strategic designer, the marketing specialist, the code checker and specification writer are all areas of specialisation that carve the discipline up into smaller and smaller specialisations and challenge the understanding of architecture as a holistic practice. This flood of new ‘consultancy types’ have marginalised the work of the architect within what had been the architects’ own professional domain. Jonathan Hill explains this fragmentation and how it has affected the profession:

*“Specialisations divide space among them and act on its truncated parts, setting up mental barriers and practico-social frontiers. Thus architects are assigned architectural space as their (private) property, economists come into possession of economic space, geographers their own ‘place in the sun,’ and so on.”*¹⁶

What Cousins, Zaera-Polo and Hill all circle around is the dilemma faced by a profession which has instinctively sought ways to avoid professional risk, but paradoxically is having its boundaries redrawn from the outside. Simultaneously, architects are required to work in more profoundly complex contexts than have been known historically, making the authority of the architect and their precise role no longer clear.

Over 20 years ago Magali Sarfatti Larson wrote convincingly of the structural root of this paradoxical bind in the profession between autonomy and heteronomy.¹⁷ Larson noted that the “autonomous pursuit of architecture and the heteronomous conditions of its making insert a permanent contradiction into the heart of the profession’s practice and even of its discourse”¹⁸—a contradiction which characterises the very dilemma of the contemporary practice.

Recently, Philip Nobel also characterised the fracture in the profession as a split between those practices that in the post-war period made a choice to form around either the notion of the creative practice or the commercial practice and their inherent position on the acceptance or otherwise of professional risk. The effect has been to establish a market based on a choice of professional with whom the client could “share their dreams”, or a practice who could “get the job done, on time and cheap”. Ultimately, “by limiting practice to a dualistic stereotyping that has proven effective in the marketplace, by choosing a strategy that flatters clients’ vanities or eases their fears, architects only reinforce an insidious divide”¹⁹

Framed in another way, the autonomy/heteronomy paradox and the creative/commercial divide continues to inhibit the development of the discipline, unable as it is to resolve these structural failures which lies at the heart of its disciplinary DNA. Both the profession and the academy have generally failed to recognise or discuss this context, leaving the discipline in a situation where, as Sylvia Lavin suggests, “architecture has no contemporary theory of practice”²⁰ at all.

How then might the characteristics of a more supple conceptualisation of practice attempt to resolve these issues? Till rails against the form and character of traditional architectural practice and contends that a new form of practice, based on contingency or the role of situated knowledge would have greater agency and relevance in the contemporary professional environment.

*“First, because ‘we might become answerable’, situated knowledge implies that we take responsibility for our ‘enabling practices’, and positions them firmly in the political and ethical arena. Secondly, situated knowledge sees opportunities in the particular and does not look for problems to be solved in the universal scheme of things—just as the landscape architect Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown, when looking at the untamed estate of a new client, would not ask ‘So what’s the problem?’, but instead would propose ‘What are the capabilities of this place?’. Situated knowledge works with the particular, but this is seen as a strength and not a weakness.”*²¹

The profession continues to struggle with these developments, reacting conservatively in response to the erosion of its disciplinary autonomy by insisting in many cases even more strongly that the professional boundaries of architecture be protected lest we lose even more ground to the project managers or be pushed to greater specialisation—a strange tendency given the architect’s inherent advantage via training to be effective within participatory frameworks. This is explainable only when the autonomy-heteronomy paradox is located within the decision-making process about the future of the profession. For, while specialisation has increased the effectiveness of some selective specific players, it has paradoxically further eroded the scope and agency of the profession as a whole.

In the face of an internalised disciplinary conservatism, the question would always be how one could posit an alternative in a way that could seriously challenge these conditions. By questioning the very foundation of the profession itself, Leon van Schaik²² has mounted perhaps the most persuasive challenge to the contemporary profession proposing that architecture as a profession, was constructed around the wrong body of knowledge. By foregrounding skills in building management as opposed to spatial thinking,²³ van Schaik suggests the professional was mistakenly conceived, a grave error which has led to the continuous and unrelenting loss of architecture’s agency ever since.

While van Schaik has suggested a recasting of the discipline, Fry challenges the “adequacy of disciplines as organisational

regimes of contained knowledge” more generally²⁴. He notes that disciplinary thinking “by its very nature is exclusory, and this has a limited ability to comprehend and engage (the) relational complexity”²⁵ of our current professional circumstances. Subsequently, Fry argues for redirective practice as a meta-discipline. In the space staked out by these positions, van Schaik and Fry frame the potential for an entirely new understanding of architecture.

Zaera-Polo’s thesis is that the profession’s loss of domain and subsequent loss of agency can be resisted by focusing on the envelope of a building – the only part that remains firmly in the architect’s control – as the space for agency and political action. While this position has a logic when considered in the context of current practices and the political economy within which they are situated, the limits of the envelope to effect substantive structural change within the discipline are all too clear.

However, cracks are appearing within the discipline as we know it, and unexpected areas of potential are developing. Between the cracks, practice models are reformulating by explicitly reframing their architectures goals and intentions and consequently those with whom they practice. These practices are intentionally re-engaging with a broader set of issues beyond the capacity of normative practice in the hope of retrieving a greater agency for the profession as a result.

Although the terms of engagement are still provisional, these new, more and less radical, practice formations have begun exercising their unique forms of relational

intelligence and constructing elaborate and powerful collaborative infrastructures. In a move contrary to much common (commercial) wisdom of the moment, these practices are redeveloping the role of the architect as one which shapes a holistic position on our built environment, what Nobel refers to as a “general practice of architecture”²⁶, rather than just on architecture as building. These new forms of architectural practice have been materialising in spaces that sit around and between the usual modes of architecture, as architects, dissatisfied with the current retreat into a nasty type of disciplinary victimhood or calcified artist/commercial stereotypes, reconsider what it is to practice and why one might do it in the first place.

Formations establishes a view that is consciously expansive and intentionally encumbered by the complexities of contemporary cultural, economic and social flows, recasting the space of architecture and its future agency as a site of disciplinary re-imagination. Thus, the focus on practice formations, as things with connections²⁷, rather than on a disciplinary output, explores a shift in the way in which we might define our professional boundaries, eschewing the defensive position of autonomy for one of patterns of practice.

The concept of ‘formations’ is therefore focused precisely on designing the very constellations of practice that address and leverage the contingent and projective situations of a practice’s plasticity.

By focusing on practice structures we have the potential to reach beyond the novelty of the object, focusing instead on the agency of practice and how this agency was put into effect. Formations then describes an approach to the dynamic of practicing structures that captures a capacity to effect change in domains that extend through and beyond the traditional architect’s focus on building. What these formations enable is an effect at a political or cultural level that is rarely possible from the confines of the conventional professional structures and approach.

Formations challenges not only our current relationship to our individual practices of architecture but the structuring of our discipline through an understanding of the structuring of ‘us’ by the practices we employ. This allows us to grapple with some questions of practice that have been sidelined by architecture for too long, and which are essential to the future positioning of the discipline.

Formations in this sense, contributes to a growing body of work about the future of the profession as a whole and the type of professionals and practices which it constructs. In this light, Formations activates the very plasticity of practice as a key locus of disciplinary agency. By focusing on practices rather than objects, Formations suggests an alternative to the ways in which we conceive of architecture and the potentials of practices that take place in the name of architecture.

- 1 Awan, Nishat; Schneider, Tatjana & Till, Jeremy. *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture*, Routledge, London, 2011, p. 27
- 2 Ibid, p. 30
- 3 Fry, Tony. *Design Futuring: Sustainability, Ethics and New Practice*, Berg Publishers, New York, 2009, p. 47
- 4 Awan, Schneider & Till, p. 31
- 5 Fry, p. 19
- 6 Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1972, p. 18
- 7 Fry, p. 19
- 8 Fisher, Thomas. *In the Scheme of Things*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006, p. 93
- 9 Ibid, p. 93
- 10 Fry, p. 50
- 11 Hill, Jonathan. *Immaterial Architecture*, Routledge, London, 2006, p. 29
- 12 Ibid p. 52
- 13 Fisher, p. 1
- 14 McMorrough, John. ‘Ru(m)inations: The Haunts of Contemporary Architecture’, in A Krista Sykes (ed.), *Constructing a New Agenda; Architectural Theory 1993-2009*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2009, p. 469
- 15 Zaera-Polo, Alejandro. ‘The Politics of the Envelope: A political critique of materialism’, *Volume*, vol. 17, pp. 76-105
- 16 Hill, p 52
- 17 Larson, Magali Sarfatti. *Behind the Postmodern Façade: Architectural Change in Late Twentieth Century America*, University of California Press, London, 1993.
- 18 Ibid, p. 14
- 19 Nobel, Philip. ‘Introduction’, in K. Holden, G. Pasquarelli, C. Sharples, C. Sharples & W. Sharples (eds), *SHoP: Out of Practice*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2012, p. 32
- 20 Lavin, Sylvia. ‘Practice Makes Perfect’, in A. Krista Sykes (ed), *Constructing a New Agenda: Architectural Theory 1993-2009*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2010, p. 450
Lavin writes, “Architecture has no contemporary theory of practice. There are theories of architecture but only shoptalk about buildings. In fact, most architects think of professional practice as antithetical to theorisation and resistant to be construed as a theoretical object.”
- 21 Till, Jeremy. *Architecture Depends*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 60
- 22 Van Schaik, Leon. *Spatial Intelligence: New Futures for Architecture*, John Wiley & Sons, Richmond, 2008.
- 23 Ibid
- 24 Fry, p. 55
- 25 Fry, p. 55
- 26 Nobel, pp. 31-43
- 27 Latour, Bruno. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2004.