

Review article

## Before and After AGENCY

'The Agency' research group<sup>1</sup>

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### Before

The conference 'AGENCY', whose critical review constitutes the subject of this article, started with a research group called 'The Agency', initiated in 2007 in the School of Architecture at the University of Sheffield. It arose through the alliance of staff and researchers working in and around the subject of architectural practice and education, taking a critical view of normative values and standard procedures in this area, in order to propose alternatives. The focus from the beginning was how architectural practice and education might evolve.

We offered to host the fifth AHRA International Conference, giving it the theme of 'agency', hoping that the submissions would energise the relationships between the humanities, the architectural profession, and society.<sup>2</sup> While agency might first be understood as the power and freedom to act for oneself, for the architectural profession and research community it also involves the power to act on behalf of others, bringing with it the question of responsibility. Architecture and architects have always tended to become embedded in existing power structures, usually at the service of those in control: this is manifest at various scales, from the body to the building, then on to the city, the continent, and even the globe. To remain in this position opens them to Antonio Gramsci's accusation that they support and maintain the prevalent ideologies of the status quo.<sup>3</sup> The role of architects and academics cannot be neutral: if played out uncritically it reverts to the interests of those in power.

We wanted to explore ways of understanding current architectural needs, possibilities, and capacities for action. Humanities research has a tendency to be too inward looking: 'The Agency' group's ambition was to redirect such work towards greater engagement. We hoped to shift the focus away from the objects and processes of architectural production towards an investigation of their wider context and possibilities. We wanted to learn from the conference contributions what is meant by 'action' in the different contexts of research and practice. We wanted to know what kinds of activities and conditions are relevant, what prevents the reflective exercise of agency in this fuller sense, and what the necessary tactics for action might be. We hoped also to address the big social and political questions in this period of rapid global environmental change.

The conference call invited responses to these two issues: the possibilities for architectural 'practice' as agency, and the current and future agencies of 'survival' of society and the environment.<sup>4</sup> Although this resulted in a large submission of papers, it was immediately evident that the topic of practice had been much more popular than that of survival, which in itself raised questions around the reasons why humanities research continues to neglect such an important topic, and why we resist thinking, writing and acting on this urgent issue.

The conference structure was itself considered and developed as an exercise of agency; it was

not only an academic event but also a social (and spatial) event. The social, spatial and cognitive production intrinsic to the conference was continuous, overlapping, and considered without hierarchy. Spaces outside the conference location, the School of Architecture, were used and transformed in such a way that other users could interact with, and benefit from, the event. The conference was considered at the same time within a research and a pedagogical framework, and was integrated into the teaching curricula of the M.Arch professionally validated course, through dedicated seminars, workshops and assignments. Students had access to information on, and knowledge from, all aspects of the conference and were also involved in the organisation of activities. AGENCY also attracted the engagement of students from year groups and departments other than the particular Masters groups that were taking part in the conference as part of their curriculum.

### **Content of the discourse: notions of agency**

In launching a conference with the question 'What is the social and political responsibility of the architect?' we expected to have a good number of activists as well as practitioners and academics attending. Reports of diverse activities from these fields of architecture emerged in many papers spread across several sessions. They offered new insights into the notion of agency and proposed original approaches to issues of 'practice' and 'survival'.<sup>5</sup> These can be summed up under four headings: urban agencies; pedagogical agencies; social and technological agencies; sustainability, ecology, ethical and aesthetic agencies.

#### **1. Urban agencies**

Papers addressing forms of agency within the urban mostly followed a Lefebvrian line, arguing for the social production of space and the inherent continuity between social, political and spatial agencies. Drawing on case studies and personal experiences, some papers provided interesting responses to

questions from our call for papers, such as 'Where are the ethics of practice located?', 'What are alternative forms of practice?' and 'Should architecture remain a protected profession?'. They concluded that to be both 'public' and 'democratic', space itself cannot be conceived as neutral, but must instead be understood as a product of ongoing negotiation. This is reflected in Chantal Mouffe's theory of 'agonistic politics', which sees public space as a 'battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation'.<sup>6</sup> For us, the notion of agency is essential to this definition of 'agonistic public space'. Such a space is defined by a multiplicity of agencies in continual confrontation and negotiation, in a process that may involve architects, artists, urban planners, policy makers and citizens.

#### **2. Pedagogical agencies**

A number of papers approached the question of critical pedagogy in relation to both practice and education. Still important in this context are Paulo Freire's influential writings such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This book, originally published in 1972, challenged educational practices which, almost forty years on, are still in operation not only in schools of architecture but also in educational institutions more generally. Presentations emphasised how critical pedagogy can be understood as a negotiation, both challenging institutions and at the same time giving a voice to contradictory and conflicting interests. This reinforced our belief that agency in pedagogy presents an opportunity to see the studio as a place for communication as well as a locus of collective knowledge production.

#### **3. Social and technological agencies**

Against a background of increasingly pervasive technologies, issues of negotiation and communication were also an important theme in papers that addressed social and technological agencies. Considering the impact of information and micro technologies on the individual, these illustrated the



Fig. 1: Snapshots from some of the fringe events, including the 'Community Design Centres in the USA' exhibition, book launches, seminars and workshops, 'How Yellow is Manchester?' presentation and exhibition, informal discussions, meals, and music. Used with permission of the photographers, Florian Kossak and Ben Oram.

links between identity and agency. By accepting the body as a site rather than an object and repositioning its importance within the technology debate, we can understand Elizabeth Grosz's assertion that such understanding can empower: 'Our agency comes from how we accept that designated position, and the degree to which we refuse it, the way we live it out.'<sup>7</sup> We must heed Grosz's warning; 'The Agency' group takes the view that agency is exercised most fully when we can strike a knowing balance between acceptance and refusal of the forces that contribute to our identity.

#### **4. Sustainability, ecology, ethical and aesthetic agencies**

Responses to sustainability in the humanities have had to deal with the entrenched views that so-called ethical architecture is somehow in opposition to architectural aesthetics, or that it makes its own aesthetic category, or needs its own totalising theory. While many papers were highly theoretical, they suggest nevertheless renewed focus on the possible transformation of issues of human practice and human survival.

The AGENCY conference has made the need for a collaborative approach to issues such as sustainability even more apparent. Only through such a comprehensive approach that rejects the traditional separation of our discipline - and in effect our problematic distance to related or neighbouring disciplines - can we hope to achieve some kind of meaningful discourse on sustainability and to generate agency within this field. We acknowledge the need for developing the discourse around ecology and sustainability, but believe that agency can only be achieved through and within practice and its transformative action. 'The Agency' group prefers to think of agency as about the need and desire to act here and now, to inhabit our environment differently, to practice relating to alterity, and to do this in the ordinary, everyday and multivalent encounters in the world.

#### **Beyond the discourse: examples of agency**

Complementing what we found through these emerging insights and approaches, the most striking responses to the questions we had set out came in the keynotes, given by architect Teddy Cruz, architectural theorist, feminist and political activist Leslie Kanes Weisman, and artist John Jordan. All three speakers had been approached because of their own work, and together they demonstrated a commonality of issues relating to the exercise of agency in architectural, academic and artistic practice: Teddy Cruz questioned the role of the architect in activating agencies of subversion across political, social and economic borders - considering the border itself as agency, as a space traversed by flows and informal transgressive actions. As an architect and planner, he proposed a logic of subversion and penetration of the border by urban and architectural actions and policies. Leslie Kanes Weisman explored challenges for architects and citizens to exercise agency in the years to come and argued that 'universal design' is crucial to the establishment of an architectural ethos within which the design of all aspects of our environment can encourage agency. In the final keynote lecture, John Jordan reflected on the changing dynamics of activism and authority, and emphasised both the pressing urgency for action and the political potential of activist groups to exercise their own agency through consensually organised, high-profile events demonstrating the power of long- and short-term spatial events to bring about social and political change.

#### **Fringe events: creating a framework for agency**

Alongside the presentation of academic papers, a fringe programme was developed to provide a forum for discussion and for broadening potential interactions. The fringe events included a number of exhibitions, book launches, a series of seminars and workshops led by keynote speakers and delegates, exhibitors or curators, as well as informal discussions and meals [fig. 1].



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Fig. 2: Exhibition and book launch of *Urban Act*. Photocollage by Ben Oram. Used with permission of the photographer.

While these were initially labelled 'Fringe Events', with connotations of the marginal or extreme, it can be argued that these events were actually crucial in forming a framework for AGENCY that was different from most academic conferences. The events allowed for an engagement beyond the temporally limited, and often passive mode of a paper presentation, allowing the conference topic of agency to be more tangible. Exhibitions have additional means to engage audience and presenter alike that go beyond representation of the topic in the form of exhibits. The temporal aspect of an exhibition offers a longer and repeated engagement, potentially allowing for a deeper and more multilayered reflection on the presentation material. This can include the very production of the exhibition itself.

In the context of AGENCY the shift to the collective production of the exhibitions was an approach most explicitly exercised through the production of the *Community Design Centres in the USA* exhibition by An Architektur and Mathias Heyden. An Architektur and Heyden used the student seminar (also a designated Fringe Event) to produce and install the exhibition in collaboration with architecture students. The theoretical discourse of the seminar and the practical work on the exhibition were thus brought together in order to combine practice with theory, arguably a crucial prerequisite for the exertion of agency. An Architektur and Heyden tested here a mode of producing the exhibition through the active participation of its intended visitors - the students - making the visitors agents and producers, rather than mere recipients of the exhibition. This is in line with a 'creative process of participation, both individually and collaboratively, [and which] is suggestive of the way that participation leads to an expanded field of architectural practice' discussed by Peter Blundell-Jones, Doina Petrescu and Jeremy Till.<sup>8</sup> This mode of participation goes beyond forms of performative display, or more generic forms of visitor interaction with exhibitions that are often confused with participative exhibitions

but ultimately leave the recipient in a passive role. A truly participative exhibition gives the recipient some (or all) command of crucial aspects within the exhibition, including the formulation of the curatorial concept, the production of exhibits, the selection and arrangements of exhibits, or the re-interpretation and re-arrangement of single exhibits or of the exhibition as a whole.

Among other exhibition events of the fringe programme was the exhibition and book launch of *Urban Act*, which presented a European research project on alternative urban activism of which the School of Architecture and members of 'The Agency' had been partners.<sup>9</sup> This exhibition and book launch took place in one of the architectural studios of the school, allowing the creation of a discourse between academic research, alternative practice and architectural education, ultimately aiming at broadening the students' understanding of these topics [fig 2].<sup>10</sup> The exhibition *Interdependence Day* presented the Interdependence Day (ID) project, set up to test new ways of framing global environmental change and sustainability issues. The ID project and the exhibition aimed at prompting ideas about how the world could not simply be described differently, but also spotlight ways in which the intensifying interconnections allow for new forms of agency.<sup>11</sup>

### After

The call for papers for the fourth issue of *Footprint* echoed our own interest in the notion of agency.<sup>12</sup> We wanted to see what was 'out there', wanted to go beyond the typically internalised academic discourse where the context was also the object.

Yet what we learnt was that a topic such as 'agency' was not immune to the hijacking of academic opportunism. Whilst this was not surprising, it made us 'agents' realise that affiliation with the AHRA defined much of the context for participation in the topic and discourse around it. We felt as if our ambitions for the topic and creativity around the



Fig. 3: More traditional format of academic panel sessions and keynote addresses. Used with permission of the photographers, Florian Kossak and Ben Oram.

notion of a conference were hampered by expectations of setup and timing: parallel sessions followed by panel discussions followed by keynotes. We made efforts to escape the more corporate institutionalised spaces and did so successfully with the fringe events. However, the lecture and meeting rooms made available by the University and used for sessions and keynote presentations were our fallback position when other settings proved too difficult to organise or were simply not available. Spatial arrangements affect discussions; in particular they can affect ways in which one can interact or feel included [fig. 3]. We have been left therefore with some regret of not having extended our 'spatial agency' more outside of the University and of not having engaged more with the city and its inhabitants. This has remained an important aspect of our agenda for future action.

It was therefore inevitably the spaces in between the more controlled events and the externally motivated and deliberate interstices that allowed the possibility for encounter, and that formed moments of difference and otherness where dialogue and discourse was both practiced and challenged. It was there that agency at the conference unfolded. And it was there that agency was at its most powerful. We, the organisers of the conference, had set up ourselves as 'agents', a group bringing together other individuals or groups of people with similar interests - thereby enacting agency. Whilst some of the participants were invited following the call for papers, those that participated in the fringe events were invited directly and it was there that we could inform and direct debate. We deliberately attempted to counter the static nature of the institutional setup with the dynamics of encounter, by acting as initiators and enablers. Formal sessions were broken up by informal presentations, by lunches and dinners that were open to everyone. We, as 'agents', determined the framework of discussion by asking how we should inhabit our environment, and how and where we should practice. In short, we have not

only *spoken* about agency during the conference but also *performed* agency.

Because the conference was also part of the educational curriculum of the School of Architecture, the invited speakers and specialised public also met and engaged with a large group of students. These encounters not only helped to bring theoretical discussions back to practical ones, but also questioned the relevance of theory and how theory could and would potentially inform practice and education, addressing the big social and political questions of our age concerning survival and the environment. Agency starts with and in education and it is our understanding that it is the power of theory to generate change. What is not so clear, however, is what this actually entails. It might mean a radical reconsideration of the architectural curriculum, architecture and the profession. For too long, architects have been too detached from the world, from the everyday. They need to develop a willingness to understand with responsibility how things work or do not work in the 'real' world rather than just quickly capturing the essence.

The conference has provided some clues as to how contemporary practice can be informed by theory and vice versa. It is this symbiotic relationship of giving and taking between theory and practice, between education and the profession, which the notion of agency supports. *Agency* is not about the theorising of architectural production, but about the critical evaluation of architectural processes, concepts, and techniques that operate in the contemporary world.

The tensions and contradictions between the multiplicity of political and economic forces, environmental change and degradation, social justice and disenfranchisement, requires a reconfiguration of our potential agency as architecture practitioners and researchers. This kind of agency, in recognising that it is an issue of relations and responsibilities in

a fragile multivalent world, distinguishes itself from defining master strategies, consumer-driven imperatives or a commentary on the doom and gloom of impending disaster. Instead it seeks alternatives and allows for imaginative and transformative interventions in our technologically- and globally-mediated world. This is potentially, in different ways and in different spheres of activity, the work of 'The Agency, Transformative Research into Architectural Practice and Education'.<sup>13</sup>

### Notes

1. Members of 'The Agency' research group, based at the School of Architecture, University of Sheffield, who have contributed to this article are Peter Blundell Jones, Florian Kossak, Doina Petrescu, Tatjana Schneider, Renata Tyszczyk, and Stephen Walker.
2. The AHRA (Architectural Humanities Research Association) was founded in 2003 in an attempt to foster humanities research in architecture in the UK and overseas. It aims to promote, support, develop and disseminate high-quality research in the areas of architectural history, theory, culture, design, and urbanism. (See <http://www.ahra-architecture.org/>) [accessed 15 March 2009]
3. Gramsci named two types of intellectuals, traditional and organic; he observed the role both played within existing power structures, but argued for the potential to transform these roles for different socio-political ends. See: Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), for example p.10 and 43.
4. See conference website: <http://agency.group.shef.ac.uk/> [accessed 15 March 2009].
5. Speakers included: Adam Sharr (Cardiff), Amy Gilley (Blacksburg), Ana Paula Baltazar and Silke Kapp (Belo Horizonte), Andrea Wheeler (Nottingham), Andrew Powell (London), Charles Walker (Auckland), Cristian Suau, Katarina Mrkonjic and Fernando Ayala (Cardiff), Dana Vais (Cluj-Napoca), Daniele Vadalà (Messina), Darren R. Deane (Nottingham,) Flora Samuel + students from Bath (Bath), Georgeen Theodore (Newark), Gerry Adler (Canterbury), Gordana Fontana-Giusti (Canterbury), Graham Livesey (Calgary), Helen Mallinson (London), Ines Weizman (London), Jianfei Zhu (Melbourne), Jon Goodbun (London), Karin Jaschke (Brighton), Lisbet Harboe (Oslo), Maria Theodorou (Athens), Mark Dorrian (Edinburgh), Mason White and Lola Sheppard (Toronto), Megan Evans (Melbourne), Meike Schalk and Apolonija Sustersic (Stockholm), Adam Cowley-Evans and Melina Gianakakis (Plymouth), Mick O'Kelly (Dublin), Paul Emmons (Blacksburg), Phoebe Crisman (Charlottesville), Priscilla Nogueira (Belo Horizonte), Richard Coyne (Edinburgh), Richard Lister and Thomas Nemeskeri (Toronto), Richard W. Hayes (New York), Sam Vardy (Sheffield), Soumyen Bandyopadhyay (Nottingham), Stefan White (Manchester), Stephen Cairns (Edinburgh), Steven Thompson (Blacksburg), Supitcha Tovivich (London), Susanne Schnorbusch (Berlin), Tahl Kaminer (Delft), Victoria Watson (London), Wanda Dye (Arlington), Wiwik D. Pratiwi and Dhian Damajani (Bandung).
6. Chantal Mouffe, 'Some Reflections on an Agonistic Approach to the Public', in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), p. 805.
7. Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press (Writing Architecture Series), 2001), p. 22.
8. Jeremy Till, Doina Petrescu, and Peter Blundell Jones (eds.), *Architecture and Participation* (London: Spon Press, 2005).
9. Other exhibitions included 'How Yellow is Manchester?' by Dougall Sheridan; 'If I could redesign London I would...' by Sarah Wigglesworth Architects; and 'Design with Research in Mind' by the BDR-Bureau of Design+Research.
10. See the related book *Urban Act: A handbook for alternative practice*, ed. by aaa-PEPRAV (Paris: aaa-peprav, 2007). This can also be found on: <http://www.peprav.net/tool/spip.php?rubrique30> [accessed 15 March 2009].

11. The Interdependence Day project emerged at the intersection of an extended programme of action research on media, publics and environmental change by Joe Smith and the interdisciplinary architectural design teaching, research, and art practice of Renata Tyszcuk. The project has developed into a partnership between members of the Open University's Geography Department, the University of Sheffield's Architecture Department and nef (new economics foundation). See: [www.interdependenceday.co.uk](http://www.interdependenceday.co.uk) [accessed 15 March 2009].
12. The AGENCY conference has helped to define a further agenda for 'The Agency' as a group. The current research structure at the Sheffield School of Architecture, similar to many other schools, has divided research activity into four distinct areas - humanities, building sciences, design, and process. 'The Agency' group has been a deliberate attempt to bridge this divide and to incorporate members of all four research groups. Since the organisation of AGENCY, members of 'The Agency' group are continuing to explore ways of collaborative working, theorising and writing. Following the *Footprint* call for papers, this article was co-authored by members of 'The Agency' as an exploratory process that provided for further discussion and consideration of the issues, an extension to the exercise of agency begun with the collaborative processes of conference organisation. The production of articles such as this one, further publications and the development of inter- and transdisciplinary projects and networks have resulted in the establishment of a Research Centre called 'Agency', within the School of Architecture as a forum for further discussions, projects and events.
13. For example, after PEPRAV (European Platform for Alternative Research and Practice in the City, see [www.peprav.net](http://www.peprav.net) [accessed 15 March 2009]) we will participate as partners to RHYZOM, a European network that will investigate local conditions and related forms of practice and cultural production.

### Biography

'The Agency' is a research group based at the School of Architecture, University of Sheffield. Its name refers to the group's research that is active, engaged, and outward looking. The strapline 'Transformative Research into Architectural Practice and Education' expands this idea, by stressing the word 'transformative' to suggest a research activity that both creates and responds to shifting conditions. The group functions as an agent within and between the fields of research, practice, education, and civic life. Founding members include: Peter Blundell Jones, Prue Chiles, Florian Kossak, Doina Petrescu, Tatjana Schneider, Jeremy Till, Renata Tyszcuk, Stephen Walker, Sarah Wigglesworth. Cristina Cerulli and Rosie Parnell have joined the group in 2008.