



## Democratic Social Architecture or Experimentation on the Poor?: Ethnographic Snapshots

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# Democratic Social Architecture or Experimentation on the Poor?

## Ethnographic Snapshots

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Architects are reemphasizing their social mission and creating new forms of 'social architecture,' which has elsewhere been categorized as 'activist,' 'humanitarian,' 'progressive,' and 'public interest.' This present form of social architecture has roots in 1960s experimentation and has been a reaction to professionalization of the discipline and to stylistic postmodernism. It has paralleled environmental consciousness, and has become more relevant with rising inequality due to the global recession and continuing economic instability. The magnitude of social architecture's development is impressive. A 'social architectural' program has been voted by the Deans of Architecture schools as the best education model in the US<sup>1</sup> and the work of socially engaged architects has been exhibited at MoMA in New York.<sup>2</sup> 'Social architects receive national awards, teach studios in the Ivy League, and organize conferences to spread influence beyond their disciplinary boundaries.

As new practices develop, controversies have surfaced regarding the architect's ambiguous relationship to yielding disciplinary power. This paper will present (1) critical perspectives on social architecture, (2) ethnographic snapshots from the field, (3) a geopolitical perspective, and (4) a project where the 'social' is more radically localized alongside social movements like the Right to the City.

### **Nussbaum on Design Imperialism**

'Social' architects apply the word 'social' to their practices to distinguish themselves from and develop a critique of the broader discipline's capital dependent practices, while not necessarily being too particular about the meaning of 'the social.'<sup>3</sup> While this critical process has not always been integrated into practices, debate erupted online when Bruce Nussbaum asked: "Is Humanitarian Design the New Imperialism?"<sup>4</sup> challenging assumptions and outcomes of social designers' visions by presenting Emily Pilloton's *Project H* and MIT Media Lab's *One Laptop Per-Child Project*. Nussbaum asks whether the humanitarian designers collaborate with the right partners in local communities, a question he developed after hearing Indians at a conference interpret humanitarian assumptions as cultural neo-colonialism: "What makes her think she can just come in and solve *our* problems?"<sup>5</sup> *Does imposing aesthetic, educational, or environmental ideology imply imperialism? What happened when the government "perceived the effort as inappropriate technological colonialism" or "Western intrusion?"*<sup>6</sup> Critical debate erupted in response to Nussbaum's questions about the social impact and unexpected consequences of social design, some denouncing Nussbaum while others enhancing the dissection of social design's motivations and methodologies.<sup>7</sup>

Emily Pilloton agrees that often designers practice "fly-by-night" architecture when they "swoop in with their capes and 'design thinking' to save poor folks."<sup>8</sup> But Pilloton argues that Nussbaum "greatly oversimplifies the serendipitous chaos that is humanitarian design," where in her local community, she believes a designer must first be a citizen.<sup>9</sup>

Cameron Sinclair, of Architecture for Humanity, also argues that Nussbaum overlooked the details where "multidisciplinary, multicultural and diverse teams (are) working locally hand in hand with communities on the ground." Sinclair blames the design media for over-simplifying the complex process, and suggests that Nussbaum redirect his critique of imperialism to corporations and government policies,<sup>10</sup> not "pro bono designers."<sup>11</sup> Sinclair suggests that designers should not be "playing defense" against criticism, but march forward and "encourage thousands of designers to create a million solutions to tackle a millions of issues [sic]."<sup>12</sup>

Some people responded to the debate by advising more gentle interventions and criticism rooted in the context. Niti Bahn advocates for humility of the designer and mutual respect between them and the community – so the designer learns alongside the community.<sup>13</sup> Maria Popova found linguistic flaws of the debate too removed from the context and exacerbated by design writers, the “giddy, overeager sidekicks, complicit in disengaging from the very communities in which humanitarian design is meant to be manifest.”<sup>14</sup> No individual can solve contradictions of social architecture, Popova argues, but “cross-disciplinary teams of designers, scientists, anthropologists, linguists, and writers might” be able to function as the “cultural glue” – “inventing new ways of writing, talking and thinking” – between social designers and the communities they serve.<sup>15</sup>

Other critics deepen Nussbaum’s warning of design imperialism, such as Quilian Riano, who defines an imperialist practice as one that is “introduced from ‘outside’ and is not sufficiently grafted to the social, cultural, and productive capacity within a given system.”<sup>16</sup> Gong Szeto asks an essential question: “what is not being asked is what causes poverty” – and applies the metaphor of cancer, that it “will continue to metastasize until you chemotherapy the root cause.”<sup>17</sup> If those causes are not considered – policies, political realities, real markets – then designers will “be in the business of producing bandages to persistent problems that will never go away.”<sup>18</sup>

is it imperialism? the answer is yes ... because shelter is not the ‘only’ thing people need, or playgrounds, or eyeglasses (and yes, these are “things”) - people also need to know that their voices are being heard at the state level, that their homeland is there for its citizens ... it is imperialism because there is a not-so-subtle imposition of an ideological stance that “design can save the world” [sic].<sup>19</sup>

The Nussbaum controversy raises important polemical questions to begin unraveling the controversies of ‘social architecture.’ *How do architects work locally? How do they work with people? How does vision match outcome?* Following Bruno Latour’s introduction to actor-network theory in *Reassembling the Social*, we ought to begin inquiries by following controversies, and then not repeat “social” assumptions or naive representations, but instead, “find extra vehicles”<sup>20</sup> of explanation. Here I propose stepping into the local to assemble agents, objects, and connections – herein architects, clients, tools, buildings, and relations – which “*trace a network*” so we may be able to measure the velocity of social architecture.<sup>21</sup>

The following ethnographic research was gathered in 2008 during eight months of participant observation of the Rural Studio,

Architecture for Humanity, the Alley Flat Initiative, and others. The ethnographic snapshots are thin slices to represent the intricate processes I observed and recorded between the various community members – architects, students, clients, neighbors – documented with a video camera, audio recorder, and notepad.<sup>22</sup> The critique is not meant to reduce the projects to insignificance, but to deploy a more empirical representation of controversies in order to suggest a projectile for future practices.

### **Architecture as Object**

The Rural Studio is a design build program at Auburn University founded by Samuel Mockbee (1944–2001) and D.K. Ruth (1944–2009) as a reaction to what Mockbee regarded as the postmodern mystification of the architectural process. The goal of the program is to connect students back to place, the construction process, and the role of the “citizen architect.”<sup>23</sup> The studio has constructed over a hundred buildings, which have rightly drawn worldwide attention. I will present two community buildings – one failed and one with an unpredictable outcome – because they were executed with a shortsighted perspective of architecture within a living community and instead simplified architecture to an object.

In 2001, the Rural Studio built the first Boys and Girls Club [BGC] in the small town of Akron as a safe haven for children. In the well known book *The Rural Studio* – which has become the dominant representation of the Rural Studio as social architecture for the poor – Andrew Freear (the current director) said: “‘This is the closest you can get to community architecture.’ He contrasted the town’s involvement in the club’s construction with that of ‘so-called community architecture that is driven solely by architect-developer motives.’”<sup>24</sup> The project was celebrated as a success and the instructor distinguished it from other community architecture projects. The Rural Studio and publication assumed that the project improved the social relations of the community, without asking how well the building functioned, who would staff it, or how it fulfilled their social vision.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, the project failed and could not remain a BGC because the owner decided not to donate the land to the town. Six years after the building’s construction, the building was abandoned – doors boarded up, windows smashed, and site derelict, littered with beer bottles and trash. The Rural Studio had not suitably rooted their process in the social systems of the community.

Five years after this failure a new group of students decided to build a second BGC in Akron only a stone’s throw from the first one. The new students chose land the city owned and were very ambitious by integrating a gigantic wave-like lamella structure to shelter a basketball court aside the building. The group confronted problems when someone stole their tools and the copper out of their building, after which they kept a guard dog at the site. The

building has now been completed and widely published. However, one instructor asked a challenging question about the project:

We know the city owns the property. We know they'll take it over. And the next question is: *Who's going to run that damn thing?* And if they don't get AmeriCorps or somebody in the community to do that, it's going to fail again. And it's going to be this beautiful thing that sits there and dies. And it's very likely that that might happen.

While the Rural Studio learned from its mistakes and integrated them into its process, the instructor wondered whether the process went far enough. The social architectural design process – as represented here in the Rural Studio – was focused predominantly on the object of architecture and was shortsighted because it was not entrenched deeply enough in or did not help establish local groups to implement social improvement.<sup>26</sup>

### **Professional Deficiencies**

Architecture for Humanity [AFH] was founded in 1999 by Cameron Sinclair and Kate Stohr by developing a website and launching a design competition. Eleven years later they have 69 active chapters around the world where volunteers work in their local communities. Their website claims that they “directly benefit” 25,000 people from their designed structures, and their “advocacy, training and outreach programs impact an additional 60,000” people a year.<sup>27</sup> In 2006, Sinclair won the TED prize and \$100,000, which he invested in developing an open source website for architectural services called the Open Architecture Network [OAN] to connect the good will of designers with housing designs.

Sinclair founded AFH in response to “disillusionment” with the conventional design workplace and later realized he was not alone. AFH received so many volunteer inquiries for designers wanting to contribute to the social good that “[they] decided to embrace ... [an] open source model of business. That anyone, anywhere in the world could start a local chapter and they can get involved in local problems. ... All problems are local, all solutions are local.”<sup>28</sup> In 2006, AFH published *Design Like You Give a Damn*, which gave exposure to social architecture and distinguished AFH. AFH integrates humanitarianism with an open source model, which concurrently provides a wide umbrella image for the work they do. They are not a conventional architecture firm that receives commissions, employs architects, and labors through the building realization process. AFH partners with all those willing to get involved in order to maximize humanitarian impact, funneling funding, recruiting volunteers, and encouraging local chapters to organize

In AFH's first projects they struggled to fulfill projects because they had not been trained in the social sector, which led Sinclair to

reflect that AFH “needed more than a great idea to get something built.”<sup>29</sup> Out of AFH’s early struggle, they have emerged to be with international influence in the social sector. The following ethnographic snapshot will present a local chapter of AFH to understand the struggle to begin a social architectural practice because of the discipline’s non-social orientation.

In 2004, a group of young designers met online and decided to organize a local chapter of AFH in a major American city.<sup>30</sup> While none of its members were licensed and few had done any social work, they shared the aspiration to contribute socially to the world. A 30-year-old architecture professional organized the first meeting at a Starbucks with two female graduate students. Each of the first members had directly experienced poverty in some way, and they were first generation Americans. Their motivations stemmed from hearing about AFH and personally identifying with poverty. So the group began meeting in their free time and began to dream about projects.

The members met at cafes, restaurants, apartments, and workplaces to discuss different people’s ideas. The structure was non-hierarchical and everyone was encouraged to speak and present their opinions. The discussions varied between motivations, projects, and partnerships – resulting in little progression and frequently in postponing of work. The group struggled with balancing the volunteerism “in their free time” with the professional practice. In this balance between volunteering and work, between meaningful non-hierarchical volunteering and the professional workplace there was a colossal gap between envisioning and realizing projects. The group had been socialized, educated, professionally trained, and raised in families to move forward on a professional path of personal prosperity. Their pro bono experiences and motivations were considered irrational according to the market logic, and rebellious against the status quo of the society around them, which is why they were so inadequately prepared to practice social architecture and so ambiguously focused.

In its first seven years, the local chapter has not constructed a building, although in 2008 when I researched them they were more organized and determined than ever. They have created a website, architectural designs, outreach, and partnered with other groups. However, AFH’s open source model does not train people to run local chapters. Instead, local chapters are entirely self-guided. The general structure of the local chapter was a copy of the mother organization in San Francisco. Unfortunately, the act of mimicking AFH – as in all cases of “institutional isomorphism”<sup>31</sup> – did not ensure that the local chapter would be able to increase its efficiency in social architectural production. The inability to strategize, develop unconventional goals, and reach those goals, stems from inexperience in the public service sector and the inapplicability of their professional architectural skills; the volunteers

were accustomed to manager-controlled hierarchical working environments. The professional orientation and pressures of being first generation Americans resulted in their confusing navigation between consumption and humanitarian aspirations: “Why am I driving this Lexus? When not too long ago I went down to Bolivia and saw some kid eating out of a garbage can.”

I would love to just do [AFH work] 100% of the time. Unfortunately we have to keep up this lifestyle. ... I’m ashamed to say, I do spend a lot of time bettering myself to some capacity. I want a better home. We all want something more. We almost can’t get away from that. We’re taught that.

The volunteers identify with poverty because as one said, “It’s in the family.” However, due to their professional orientation and their conspicuous lifestyles, they were incapable of realizing their vision, although content that they gave the effort. Constructing the controversy of the local chapter gives empirical perspective to Margaret Crawford’s thesis that the architectural discipline cannot be socially responsible due to ineffective practices and esoteric philosophies.<sup>32</sup>

### **Ambiguous Navigations**

I spent one month conducting participant observation fieldwork on the Alley Flat Initiative [AFI] at the University of Texas at Austin [UT]. I was lured there by Sergio Palleroni’s book and a PBS video called “Green for All,” in which he defines “the responsibility of an architect to be inclusive, to include all things about this world, and that means all communities.”<sup>33</sup> Steven Moore, the director of the Graduate Program in Sustainable Design at UT, received grant funding to launch a sustainable workshop that became the AFI – meant to develop a sustainable architectural prototype. Moore, primarily a theorist, invited Palleroni to lead a design-build studio in order to build the prototype.

Palleroni’s design-build class had a studio and construction component and appeared to be “disorganized” to students accustomed to disciplined instructors who ran conventional courses. Palleroni’s studio departed from the classroom culture because it dealt with “real life,” which Palleroni said, “cannot be theorized.” The studio’s project was to design an awning in Austin, Texas, and a house and greenhouse in Biloxi, Mississippi.

On site the students completed the previous year’s alley flat building. One day they installed a rain screen, with the experienced builders using the skill saw and the beginners using the screw gun. The students incorrectly spaced the panels; they had to unscrew, respace, and rescrew. Design-build is trial-and-error; mistakes are made; lessons are learned. Palleroni explained how



this differentiated design-build from the classroom because on-site mistakes have material and social consequences.

One student said: “There’s a detachment in architecture sometimes as a student. Even though you’re designing for someone you’re kind of just designing something for yourself, something you enjoy, something you think looks amazing.” In contrast, Palleroni’s studio tries “to accommodate the clients’ needs and their intelligence.” However, most students were skeptical of the social architectural model because of its inability to financially support someone. And while there has been a significant expansion in education, social architects have been subsidized by university employment, largely ignoring the economics of sustaining social architectural studio practices.

The AFI began by analyzing the East Side of highway I-35 in Austin to determine how to empower the Latinos who live in the area against the rising real estate taxes as Latinos were being gentrified out of the area. Latinos in Austin had a long history of being displaced by rising taxes – yet they felt Austin was their home – so the AFI attempted to provide a solution so they could stay. Moore and Palleroni’s research demonstrated that the AFI should build additional buildings on the alleys so families could rent the space for supplementary income.

The UT professors developed the AFI with a partnership in the Latino community – the Guadeloupe Neighborhood Development Corporation [GNDC] directed by Mark Rodgers – because “[GNDC] knows people that are in need of housing and who have a depth of knowledge about neighborhoods that we’ll never have. And so our job [is]...to provide them with the technical knowledge and design capacity to help people in the community realize their definition of what their needs are – not our definition.” Palleroni distinguished this process from other design-build programs because he believed the social architect must first serve the community and only secondly the student. The GNDC’s role in the AFI partnership was to ensure that the Latino community’s interests were met and that the housing units remained affordable.

However, the partnership between UT and GNDC did not result in an outcome that everyone agreed with. For instance, Susana Almanza – an intellectual and prominent leader in the Latino community who runs an organization called P.O.D.E.R.<sup>34</sup> – believed the AFI would not empower Latinos against gentrification, but would instead exacerbate the gentrification of Latinos: “Will the concept really help the community? Or is it going to cause more damage than help?” Although the professors spoke about serving the community’s vision, Almanza believed the community process was flawed because it was reduced to a formula: “The community is not involved at the table. We’re just invited after the plan has been drawn and then they say do you like plan A, B, or C. And there is never, NONE. ... You’ve got to pick one of these particular plans.”

Almanza believed that new alley flats would increase real estate taxes in the neighborhoods because they added an additional unit, worsening the Latino's chances of staying.

Rodgers shared Almanza's skepticism about whether the taxes would increase more than the supplementary income. Rodgers, representing GNDC, insisted the unit remain affordable and not only sustainable: "P.O.D.E.R. and everybody else in that neighborhood is going to become totally outraged that [GNDC] and the UT program basically built an alley flat for more gentrifies. And everybody said, 'Whoops.'" Other members of the Latino community had trouble distinguishing aesthetically between the real gentrifies – the developers building in a modern style – and the AFI:

The designs I am seeing are all these ... off-centered architecture. It's just like eh [crisscrossing her arms]. I feel crooked. This is not my mentality. My mentality is linear things. ... And they drive me a little bit crazy because those designs do not fit in with the fabric of the neighborhood's architecture.

With community members interpreting the AFI as increasing gentrification and aesthetically similar to the actual capital-motivated developers: *How can we interpret whether the project supported or imposed on the Latinos? Who were the right partners?*

Rodgers related the academic pressures put on the professors to "a gun that says you need to produce," which makes Rodgers wary: "It's a little scary and I'm watching it very cautiously." Moore defended the AFI's action-oriented stance towards completing projects and justified in their vision because if the Latinos do not "find ways of increasing their own economic capacity – meaning cash flow – they're going to get pushed out" and "become victims of history." Still, Moore remained critical of social architecture:

There is a danger. Not that students fail. But that students fail at the expense of the community. And I find that to be a problem. And if students don't have the broader perspective that's needed – it can become *experimenting on the poor*.

Behind the progressive rhetoric, Rodgers analyzed the professors' value systems that overemphasized "green sustainable designs," which Rodgers then related to the history of modern architects – from Le Corbusier to Mies van der Rohe – of imposing a vision on society:

If you can do these green sustainable designs you're going to change society for the better. So that's a pretty heavy-duty value system to be carrying along. ... Where's the trade off?

The UT professors chose to be design-build architects, which motivated them to take action. *What if the community did not want a building constructed?* Inaction is often not an option, for the architect believes that they must build. The AFI walked an ambiguous line between imposing their own vision and supporting the Latino community, the outcome of which is not easily discernible. *Did the GNDC partnership sufficiently “root” the AFI in the local social struggles for equality?* Almanza criticized the AFI because it resembled racial discrimination under the guise of the current fashion of social or sustainable architecture.

They give it this new term about *sustainable development*. And I just look at them: *Let me correct you right away. We had those communities. You destroyed them. You let a slum like come in. You took away our emergency services. You took away our police service. You let crime and everything come in.* And then you say, *We’re going to do economic development in your community.* All it meant was, *You’re getting the hell out of there.* All it meant was, *We’re going to displace you.*

### **Following Controversies**

As social architects exert an even larger influence on the architectural profession and other disciplines, their methodologies and local alliances need to be continuously reexamined to discourage ineffective and paradoxical practices. The Nussbaum controversy disclosed many weaknesses of social design, however the debate was dismissed by important players in social architecture, and it did not result in critical consciousness coming to be regarded as integral to the social architect’s methodology. By observing the social architectural process through ethnographic snapshots I located three structural failures that could expose the paradox of social architecture – resulting in the opposite outcome of what was intended: (1) the shortsightedness of architecture as object, (2) disciplinary deficiencies, and (3) an ambiguous navigation of values. *How do we gauge success when ‘participatory’ practices are contested by locals?*

My analysis here may reveal a “totally pessimistic way of looking at it,” as one Rural Studio student said. But, as an instructor at the Rural Studio noted, “there’s also a bit of exploitation that happens too. Like imagine someone so poor that they can’t say no to any help. And so that leaves them sort of powerless and they have to sort of have take something.” The analysis here was not meant to denigrate the work of the social architects, but to explore their controversies in order to ask the essential question: *Can architecture provide solutions to poverty?*

## Leaving Solid Ground

Here we leave the solid ground of empirical observations in order to interpret a broader non-local context. I do not think that societal categories should pigeonhole strategies, nor that the broader 'context' here has been entirely "assembled" in the actor-network theory sense. Rather, I hope to expose 'social architects' to theoretical controversies that parallel their visions for social transformation in order to provide turf for them to dig real life projects into.

Social architects build a project as a solution "to a problem which is ultimately socio-political."<sup>35</sup> The irony of social architecture is that it ostensibly takes sides with the people, however, this assumption becomes more problematic upon careful examination of the practice. As in Walter Benjamin's warning – "in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it"<sup>36</sup> – social architects must revitalize their critical foundation and confront contradictions.

Architecture may seem like a problematic site for integrating social critique because architecture has long been entangled with the powerful. Architect's "natural market" is monumental buildings that give symbolic capital to the "domination of the social order" which not only "disguise the operation of capitalist society, but ... make it meaningful."<sup>37</sup> Remembering this legacy, architects ought to remain cautious of their clients and remember that it *is* a possibility *not to design*.<sup>38</sup>

The late twentieth century explosion of deregulated capitalism has exacerbated wealth inequality, which Slavoj Žižek identifies as one of four "antagonisms within historical reality which make [action] a political urgency."<sup>39</sup> One such spatial movement that social architect's might consider as a partner is the Right to the City Alliance. Revitalizing Henri Lefebvre's ideas, David Harvey argues that undemocratic urbanization has become an essential neoliberal capitalist method for reinvesting the surplus values of wealth, resulting in:

new systems of governance that integrate state and corporate interests, and through the application of money power it has ensured that the disbursement of the surplus through the state apparatus favors corporate capital and the upper classes in shaping the urban processes.<sup>40</sup>

Urbanization has been reduced to a partnership between corporate interest and politicians with little attention paid to the interests of the people, a configuration that Erik Swyngedouw labels as "post-political" – in which "expert knowledge" and "technologies of management" have become a systematic formula for representative democratic governing. Representative democracy forces citizens to give up most of their decisions to politicians,

drowning alternative perspectives. Harvey and Swyngedouw have both developed strategies to reclaim the political process. Harvey argues that because the built environment has had such a significant influence on individuals – making and remaking us – we should demand the right to decide how our cities are constructed.<sup>41</sup> Swyngedouw argues, following Jacques Rancière, for a democratic environmental production mobilizing a return to “the properly political,” where the political process is *not* representative but about accepting conflict, disagreement, discussion in *space*.<sup>42</sup> If “space thus becomes an integral element of the disruption of the ‘natural’ order of domination as the place where a wrong can be addressed and equality can be demonstrated”<sup>43</sup> *how can architects design or facilitate the creation of those spaces – without overly reducing the people’s vision?*

Some architects teach design as a democratic reaction to the unwarranted growth of post-political capitalism and root their projects not only in local partnerships, but in social movements. Dan Pitera – professor at University of Detroit-Mercy – works at the Detroit Collaborative Design Center [DCDC] in a city that is “undergoing an apocalyptic urban transformation.”<sup>44</sup>

We work under the premise that to fabricate architectur[e] ... is an activist endeavor that is often ignored or unconsciously pursued. Design *supports* or *disrupts* the actions of individuals and the actions of the institutions that culture has formed.”<sup>45</sup>

Pitera roots this process in local chains of knowledge to enhance the popular dictum “give a voice to those who do not have voice” – to “amplify the diminished voice” in an “extensive workshop process.”<sup>46</sup> The community chooses the outcome. *Are architects willing to consider that they may not “create anything new ... [but] establish different connections between existing ‘things?’”*<sup>47</sup> Pitera’s critique is upon the profession – “we must mistrust our ‘art’”<sup>48</sup> – and broader capitalist growth logic – “the life of a city does not fit within this paradigm. It includes not only expansion, but also shrinkage.”<sup>49</sup> Pitera identified antagonisms in the capitalist city and developed strategies of empowering communities while retaining a “mistrust” of their process.

Thomas A. Dutton is a professor at Miami University of Ohio who runs a design build program called Over-the-Rhine [OTR] in Cincinnati, Ohio. He has developed a 30-year relationship with the Over-The-Rhine People’s Movement, rooting the student’s education and social architectural process in this movement – a progression beyond standard model of ‘identify problems and prescribe technical solutions’. Their process “‘engages with’ a community rather than providing a ‘service for’ one.”<sup>50</sup> Again, like

Pitera, Dutton redefines the classical participatory rhetoric and architectural tools:

Any critical practitioner of architectural design or discourse who does not locate himself or herself on the global social battlefield – as a strategist, that is, not a *map drawer* but a *drawer of lines of march*, a generator of structures for knowledge for social action – will be among the first intellectuals to serve the hegemonic class.<sup>51</sup>

*If architects aspire to build social architecture, how ought they to reconsider the discipline?*

To make architecture is to map the world in some way, to intervene, to signify: it is a *political* act. Architecture, then as discourse, discipline, and form, operates at the intersection of power, relations of production, culture, and representation, and is instrumental to the construction of our identities and our differences, shaping how we know the world.<sup>52</sup>

While architecture is an unusual site for social projects, it also provides a unique opportunity to materialize critique, especially on the local level where there can be “connections between all spheres of life (production, consumption, politics, culture) inside concrete ‘lived spaces’ and *dissident territories*.”<sup>53</sup> Along with Dutton, Marcelo Lopes de Souza tries to prevent a political project – in this case, the Right to the City – from losing its political edge. De Souza suggests that the Right to the City should mobilize within a radical pragmatic paradigm of three levels: “sometimes ‘*together with the state*’ (for tactical reasons, and always in a very cautious and limited way), but above all ‘*despite the state*’ and essentially ‘*against the state*’.”<sup>54</sup> The local level provides a starting position for the broader emancipatory politics of tomorrow. Even Latour, whose actor-network theory is criticized for appearing a-political at times, optimistically asks: “how could any political action be possible if it could not draw on the potentials lying in wait?”<sup>55</sup> We must draw on possibilities lying in wait, while of course, not, as Dutton warns, be “politicizing students;” or as C. Greig Crysler advises: “critical pedagogy must acknowledge its dependence on – and ambivalence toward – the hegemonic discourses and institutions it seeks to disrupt.”<sup>56</sup> Cornel West also writes that an alternative practice must not ‘result in a mere turning of the tables.’<sup>57</sup>

Connections must be drawn between local projects in different places, while architects should continue experimenting with democratic practices that question their own disciplinary skills and the broader society so as to bridge the paradox of social architecture. The architect is a professional image maker, and I am afraid that up to this point, “we are not dealing with a longing

for real equality, but with the longing for a proper appearance.”<sup>58</sup> For social architects to fight for real equality they need to root their practices in local interactions, social movements, and new democratic processes of environmental production.

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### Notes

1. Kelly Minner, ‘2011 United States Best Architecture Schools: Architecture Deans Survey’, *Architecture Daily*, May 26, 2011, [http://archrecord.construction.com/features/Americas\\_Best\\_Architecture\\_Schools/2011/schools-1.asp](http://archrecord.construction.com/features/Americas_Best_Architecture_Schools/2011/schools-1.asp).
2. ‘Small Scale, Big Change’, <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1064>. Andres Lepik, *Small Scale Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010.
3. The conversation analysis of Harvey Sacks provides a valuable perspective into the meaning of ‘social’ as a modifier of architecture in the phrase ‘social architecture;’ and Bruno Latour’s *Reassembling the Social* explains how the word ‘social’ is vaguely applied to contexts without a specificity of the people, objects, and connections involved. See: Paul Jones and Kenton Card, ‘Constructing ‘Social’ Architecture: The Politics of Representing Practice’, *Architectural Theory Review*, Nov. 2011.
4. Bruce Nussbaum, ‘Is Humanitarian Design the New Imperialism: Does our desire to help do more harm than good?’, *Fastcodesign*, written on July 07, 2010, <http://www.fastcodesign.com/1661859/is-humanitarian-design-the-new-imperialism>.
5. Nussbaum, op. cit.
6. Nussbaum, op. cit.

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8. Emily Pilloton, 'Are Humanitarian Designers Imperialists? Project H Responds: Not all American designers are leaving the country to do good', July 12, 2010, <http://www.fastcodesign.com/1661885/are-humanitarian-designers-imperialists-project-h-responds>: written on July 12, 2010.
9. Pilloton, op cit.
10. 'Architect (*who they can easily interview/contact*) designs building (*in an interesting location*) that improves X (*insert systemic issue of poverty here*).' Cameron Sinclair, 'Admiral Ackbar, It's a trap! – How over-simplification creates a distorted vision of Humanitarian Design', written on 07/08/2010, <http://www.cameron Sinclair.com/index.php?q=node/74>.
11. Sinclair, op. cit.
12. Sinclair, op, cit.
13. Niti Bhan, 'Post-Colonial Design Blowback: the challenge facing the global design industry', *Perspective*, July 16, 2010, <http://aaltodesignfactory.fi/blogs/nitibhan/2010/07/post-colonial-design-blowback-the-challenge-facing-the-global-design-industry/>.
14. Maria Popova, 'The Language of Design Imperialism', *Change Observer*, May 29, 2010, <http://changeobserver.designobserver.com/feature/the-language-of-design-imperialism/14718/>.
15. Popova, op. cit.
16. Quilian Riano, 'Humanitarianism and Humility', *Design Agency*, August 8, 2010, <http://www.dsgnagnc.org/search/label/Humanitarianism>.
17. Gong Szeto, July 12, 2010 (4:05p.m.), comment on Susan S. Szenasy, 'Why Bruce Nussbaum Needs Emily Pilloton', *Metropolismag.com*, July 12, 2010, <http://www.metropolismag.com/pov/20100712/why-bruce-nussbaum-needs-emily-pilloton>.
18. Szeto's comment here parallels a comment made by a Rural Studio instructor about the 20K project they have going on: '20-K houses are Band-Aids. They're Band-Aids on like a head wound, like a serious head wound, which is not the answer.' Gong Szeto, comment on Susan S. Szenasy, 'Why Bruce Nussbaum Needs Emily Pilloton',
19. Gong Szeto, comment on Susan S. Szenasy, 'Why Bruce Nussbaum Needs Emily Pilloton',
20. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 131.
21. Latour, op. cit.
22. The quotations without references in the following ethnographic snapshots were from personal interviews.



23. Samuel Mockbee, 'The Rural Studio', *Samuel Mockbee.net*, 1998, viewed on 05-26-11, <http://samuelmockbee.net/work/writings/the-rural-studio/>.
24. Dean, Andrea Oppenheimer and Timothy Hursley, *Rural Studio: Samuel Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002, 145.
25. Suzanne LaBarre, 'Life After Sambo', *Metropolis Magazine*, July 22, 2009, <http://www.metropolismag.com/story/20090722/life-after-sambo>.
26. Of course, the Rural Studio has a history of working with HERO, a non-profit in Newbern. However, the Rural Studio has remained autonomous from HERO and even developed friction with the organization because HERO has concentrated on providing housing, such as Habitat houses, whether or not appealing to high architectural aesthetic quality.
27. *Architecture for Humanity*, May 23, 2011, <http://architectureforhumanity.org/about>.
28. Sinclair, Cameron, Stohr, Kate and Architecture for Humanity, *Design Like You Give A Damn: Architectural Responses to Humanitarian Crises*. New York: Metropolis Books, 2006, 2.
29. Sinclair and Stohr, *Design Like You Give A Damn*, 12.
30. I have disguised the identity of this local chapter. This chapter website has been removed from the internet as of 05-26-11. AFH also removed the group from their 'active chapter list.' Active Chapter list, <http://chapters.architectureforhumanity.org/chapters>, 05-26-11.
31. Paul Dimaggio and Walter W. Powell, 'The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields', *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 48, No. 2, (Apr., 1983): 47-160.
32. Margaret Crawford, 'Can Architects Be Socially Responsible?' in Diane Ghirardo (ed.) *Out of Site: A Social Criticism of Architecture*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1991, 31.
33. Sergio Palleroni and Christina Eichbaum Merkelbach, *Studio at Large: Architecture in Service of Global Communities*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004. 'Deeper Shades of Green', *PBS-DesignE2*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjX7ejAKsTg&feature=channel>, (2-24-10).
34. P.O.D.E.R. in Spanish means Power and stands for People in Defense of Mother Earth and her Resources.
35. Slavoj Zizek, 'Architectural Parallax: Spandrels and other Phenomena of Class Struggle', May 26, 2011, [http://www.lacan.com/essays/?page\\_id=218](http://www.lacan.com/essays/?page_id=218), 05-26-11, 2.
36. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 255.
37. Robert Gutman, 'Architects and Power: The Natural Market for Architecture', *Progressive Architecture* 73, no. 12,

- (1992): 39–41; Gary Stevens, *The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998, 86; Paul Jones, 'Putting Architecture in its Social Place: A Cultural Political Economy of Architecture' *Urban Studies* November 2009, vol. 46, no. 12: 2519–2536.
38. Margit Mayer, 'Social Movements in the (Post-) Neoliberal City', London: Bedford Press, 2010, 42.
  39. G. William Domhoff, 'Wealth, Income, Power', *Who Rules America?* May 26, 2011, <http://sociology.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/wealth.html>. The other three 'historical antagonisms' are the ecological catastrophe, the privatization of intellectual property, and the privatization of biogenetics. Slavoj Žižek, 'How to Begin from the Beginning', *New Left Review*, 57, May-June, 2009.
  40. David Harvey, 'The Right to the City', *New Left Review*, Sept/Oct 2008.
  41. Harvey, 'The Right to the City', 37.
  42. Erik Swyngedouw, 'The Antinomies of the Postpolitical City: In Search of a Democratic Politics of Environmental Production', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Wiley Blackwell, vol. 33(3), 2009: 609.
  43. Mustafa Dikeç, 'Space, politics, and the political', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 2005, volume 23: 183.
  44. Dan Pitera, '[Mis]-directed Residue: Appropriation of Alternative Public Space', *James Stirling Memorial Lectures on the City: Research Proposal*, viewed online May 26, 2011, [arch.udmercy.edu/dc/pdf/AltPublicSpace.pdf](http://arch.udmercy.edu/dc/pdf/AltPublicSpace.pdf).
  45. Dan Pitera, 'Architecture Held Suspect: Notes on Design and Collaboration.' *OZ: Beyond Aesthetics*. Manhattan: Kansas State University, 2006, 41. Emphasis added.
  46. Pitera, op. cit.
  47. Pitera, op. cit. Emphasis added.
  48. Pitera. op. cit.
  49. Dan Pitera, '[Mis]-directed Residue', 1.
  50. Thomas A. Dutton, 'Engaging the School of Social Life: A Pedagogy Against Oppression', *Activist Architecture: A Field Guide to Community-Based Practice*, (unpublished: 2008).
  51. Dutton and Mann, 'Modernism, Postmodernism, and Architecture's Social Project', 20.
  52. Thomas A Dutton, Lian Hurst Mann, 'Modernism, Postmodernism, and Architecture's Social Project', *Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices*, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 1.
  53. Marcelo Lopes de Souza, 'Which Right to Which City? In defence of political-strategic clarity', *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, Volume 2 (1), (May 2010): 323
  54. Marcelo Lopes de Souza, 'Which Right to Which City?' 330.
  55. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 131.

56. Cornel West also writes that an alternative practice must not 'result in a mere turning of the tables.' Thomas A Dutton, 'The Hidden Curriculum and the Design Studio: Toward a Critical Studio Pedagogy', 178; C. Greig Crysler, 'Critical Pedagogy and Architectural Education', *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 48, No. 4, (May, 1995): 208–217.
57. Cornel West, 'Race and Architecture', *The Cornel West Reader*, New York: Civitas Books, 1999, 456.
58. Slavoj Žizek, 'Architectural Parallax', 8.