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Between Ethical and Police Architects:

Assembling Political Architecture in Parallel to Ranciere's Politics

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Abstract

Architects have mobilized in increasing numbers over the past decades to confront rising inequality. Architecture offers the unique opportunity to materialize critique of society. Paralleling architecture's potentially "political" project, Jacques Ranciere has developed a new conception of politics, the police, the political, and aesthetics. I will approach both topics—"political architecture" and "the politics of aesthetics"—as sets of controversies, as advised by Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT), and try to make them visible. The ethnographic construction will try to present architecture and politics *in the making* between concepts, agents, and objects. The Alley Flat Initiative at the University of Texas will perform the controversies in *motion*, at which point we can begin to measure the velocities of philosophical categories, such as "political architecture," "the politics of aesthetics," and "actor-network theory." Once the measurements are documented, new projectiles can be proposed *in between* the police architectures and the ethical architectures—between police control and ethical criteria. "Crossbench practices" must build on top of the solid concrete of ANT assemblages with malleable disciplinary specificities—*oscillating between critical proximity and critical distance*—while placing new bricks in time and space.

NEW POLITICAL ARCHITECTURES

Many architects in the United States and elsewhere have mobilized in the past decades to combat rising inequality. They yield the disciplinary specificity of architecture to approach questions of spatial injustice. Their motivations developed in response to the political stagnation in academia and architecture theory's abstract distraction in postmodernism, deconstruction, and the continued legacy of architecture as artistic *object.*

I am interested in trying to decipher characteristics of this *political architecture movement* that has developed in the United States. I call it a movement because it has gained significant traction at all levels of architectural production (except, perhaps, the large geo-political scale); political architecture pedagogies have been highlighted as the most admired program in the country;[1] their projects have received world-wide recognition; their instructors have won national design awards and the TED prize; they have taught studios from the Ivy League to the unconventional schools; and they build between the global "center" and the "periphery."

I seek not to celebrate those projects that have been registered above. I have listed the wide range of activities to try and demonstrate how this field is *mobilizing* in new ways, across scales, across social divides, and with new methodologies. However, what is imperative, following Actor-Network Theory (ANT), is to try and understand that the political project of architecture is inherently a controversy, and we must continue to dissect it as one and build upon it with building blocks of controversies. The jury is not out; we ought to encourage critical discourse—in proximity *and* in distance.[2] The architects that will be analyzed here build projects in the United States.

They work at prestigious universities and yet they work in the peripheral spaces of the center, that is, they work in the marginalized populations inside of the boundaries of a country with great wealth.

I am faced with the intuition to describe *why* the architect's are mobilizing their critique in the context of a broader unequal society. However, ANT warns against giving context and opening up papers with a broad societal frame because it can become the very inhibiting frame and it can have no grounded justification. We should not repeat that broad asymmetrical relations unless we can improve upon them through *explaining* them or *revealing* their motion. Latour writes: "Power and domination have to be produced, made up, composed. Asymmetries exist, yes, but where do they come from and what are they made out of?"[3]

I will twist then between these two reductions, between *giving* context and *ignoring* context, by drawing on David Harvey's analysis of undemocratic urbanization of our cities, and by tying to reveal these phenomena in my ethnography later (so just hold off for empirical weight). Expanding upon Henri Lefebvre in his article "The Right to the City,"[4] Harvey argues that huge investments of capital—a large amount of money—has flowed from free market profits into the urban sector. The profits, or the "surplus values," have been reinvested into urbanization, housing developments, and malls, because that is a site of safe investment. The result of the large capital investment in urbanization is the continued merging over time of corporations with government, to a point that some people have called a kind of "post-democratic" situation because no longer are we engaging in an egalitarian political process whereby the people's will is realized

through political disagreement.[5] The huge surplus value investments in the urban sector have integrated business with governments creating political situations that favor corporate interests. The economic logic at play here is dependent upon continuous growth, and so the city must be viewed as a system to continuously grow. People have, therefore, taken a back seat to representative democracy—inequality has risen. Now I want to step into a popular project of grounding statements back in empirical, some may even say scientific, inquiry.

ANT

Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social* is a useful introduction to Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which is meant to rewrite sociology as a science of studying society.[6] ANT is about beginning inquiries from the beginning and constructing knowledge from there. It integrates previously defined concepts *only* within the broader agent and object network. By "an extension of the list of actors and agencies" beyond the boundaries of previously accepted "social forces"[7] The ANT sociologist is encouraged to study at the myopic scale in order to "munch our way through"[8] social controversies.

ANT begins with skepticism of grand concepts such as 'Late Capitalism', 'the ascent of civilization', 'the West', 'modernity', 'human history', 'Postcolonialism', or 'globalization.'[9] Instead, ANT chooses to walk on solid ground where "groups are made, agencies are explored, and objects play a role."[10] The old concepts "remain too abstract as long as they have not be instantiated, mobilized, realized, or incarnated into some sort of local and lived interaction"[11] Also, ANT sociologists consider themselves "on par with those they study."[12] The hierarchy of knowledge must be flattened; we must share language,

theory, and reflection with the living actors.[13]

And the real people on site must be heard! They can "rank themselves as well as the objects in dispute."[14] The task of "collecting statements not only traces new connections but also offers new highly elaborated theories of what it is to connect."[15] Statements are valuable but should not stand alone because there are other "agencies swarming toward them."[16]

Objects provide a unique opportunity to trace a "material network" where there is "no interruption, no break, no gap, and no uncertainty along any point of the transmission."[17] When objects "modify a state of affairs,"[18] we ought to consider that "the intermediaries mutates into a mediator."[19] The object is no longer passive and silent. The object in motion is an *actant,*[20]which allows us "extend the list"[21] of actors and "follow the trails left behind."[22] From these trails, we should be "drawing connections"[23] to reveal the "*in between."*[24] Then, in an ideal situation, we can establish "strings of mediators."[25]

Therefore, in our inquires, we must "make *visible*"[26] the social and try and invent "tricks" to reveal components and interactions.[27] Local and global cannot stand alone, but ANT is about "localizing the global and distributing the local."[28] The sociologist must be a dictionary writer of social controversies, listing interactions, and deploying "clamps"[29] as "checks and balances"[30] to construct the actual network as "point to point connections"[31] of concepts, agents, and objects.

As we begin to construct society in this way, we can try and then connect "the *assemblies* of those *assemblages."*[32] With this data, and only with this conceptual, agent, and object

construction can we “draw on the potentials lying in wait”[33] and attempt “*another disruption of roles between science and politics.”*[34]

RANCIERE’S POLITICS AND AESTHETICS

Now that we have established a method of maintaining empirical regularity of that which we study, I think we should enter into a conceptual controversy on “the politics of aesthetics,” to interpret a philosophy that has developed in parallel to political architecture. In what might usually be used to “give context” to political architecture, here I hope to deploy the Jacques Ranciere’s political philosophy as a controversial set of categories within the broader concept, agent, and object assemblage.

In *Disagreement*, Jacques Ranciere argues that politics has been an aesthetic spectacle since the beginning of political philosophy with Plato and Aristotle—who logically solved the conflict between the rich and the poor (which they believed was the essential social conflict rooted in human nature) with philosopher kings and party politics as a manipulation of the people. Ranciere replaces the common word “politics” with “police” because so-called politics has created techniques to legitimate control by distribute ways of seeing, ways of speaking, ways of thinking, and ways of being—with nothing left over. Ranciere’s project searches for the moment of rupture—what he calls politics proper. Ranciere’s politics begins from the assumption that all people have equal thinking capacity and therefore equal *speaking* capacity to create new worlds of thought; therefore politics, or the political act, occurs in the most pure sense when the egalitarian logic confronts the police logic—when the people demand rights from those who are trying to distribute the sensible. Therefore, in

this conceptual controversy, we might consider that the “distribution of the sensible” has led toa post-democratic or police system developing mechanisms of subduing the properly political under the guise of supposedly post-ideological legal frameworks, technological solutions, and ethical categories.

Ranciere has taken a brave position against the titans of the system, trying to provide what some have called a positive political philosophical strategy against growing economic and political injustices. However, his project has remained in the category of abstract and philosophical, which Gabriel Rockhill has dissected in order to draw a thin line between specificities of conceptual controversy.

Rockhill recounts that Ranciere describes the convergence of politics and aesthetics only for brief moments—in which they are usually separated. Political projects *usually* lack aesthetic quality; and aesthetic projects *usually* lack the proper political mobilization. When a convergence of aesthetics and politics does occur, for Ranciere, this must develop out of *indetermination*, or it ought *not* to have come out of a causal or logical thought. Both of these theoretical absolutisms are criticized by Rockhill because projects *cannot definitively* be reduced to being *either* political or aesthetic, determined or indetermined. Real-life projects are complex, intermingled, and fascinating controversies. For instance, when a protest song is written against war: *Was it determined? Was it really unpredictable? Where does aesthetics stop and the political short-circuit begin? Where does the political end and the aesthetic experience shock?*

The nuance and categories of Ranciere’s project and Rockhill’s dissection could be deduced through

volumes of calculated philosophy—which I am neither trained in deducing nor do I have the time here to unravel those controversies. The point here is to follow two sets of controversial ideas: that (1) aesthetics and politics never collide and that (2) they are indeterminable. Rockhill combats Ranciere's romanticization of indetermination by writing that "indetermination can be as politically dangerous as it can be beneficial because politics does not obey our conceptual categories or our fetishised notions." (Rockhill, 13)

Rockhill suggests we "shift in emphasis" from analyzing the creation of objects, to the "circulation in the social field" of the object *and* it's "reception by a dynamic public battling over the meaning and values of cultural products." (Rockhill, 21) In this, Rockhill attempts to ground Ranciere's politics of aesthetics with a more empirical project, which he renames; "the *social politicity of artistic practices* recognizes that works of art are collective phenomena that are politicized precisely through their production, circulation and interpretation in the social field." 28

REVEALING THE IN BETWEENS OF POLITICAL ARCHITECTURE

In 2008 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Austin, Texas, on a studio at the University of Texas (UT) that was developing The Alley Flat Initiative (AFI). I would like to try and assemble the studio in the most simple ANT sense, whereby I start by constructing the concepts, agents, and objects, and then try to reveal the matrix of interactions. Architecture will not be minimized to a totalizing conceptual category, but will be put in motion by its own components.

The project begins with ideas: design intentions, pedagogical foundations,

and previous publications by the instructors involved. Sergio Palleron and Steven Moore were the main UT professors involved in the project. Before, I arrived on site, Palleroni had said, in a Public Broadcast Service documentary called “Green for All” that the architect’s responsibility is to be inclusive about all things in this world “and that includes all communities.” Before arriving at the AFI, Palleroni had published articles on the architecture discipline and education claiming it’s “in crisis,”[35] and “schools have a responsibility to prepare their students for a changing world and a changing profession,”[36] by developing strategies of “group collaboration,”[37] for instance.

Steven Moore gave students a deeper theoretical conception of their design-build projects by warning, for instance, that “it can become experimenting on the poor, which I have a major problem with. It’s necessary to give students the broader historical perspective that you sometimes don’t get just by throwing students into a situation.”

The design intention for the AFI was to engage students with the Latino community on the East Side of Austin and for the students to, in Moore’s words, “provide [the community] with the technical knowledge and design capacity to help people in the community realize their definition of what their needs are—not our definition.”[38] Moore, in this statement, takes a significant step in flattening the disciplinary hierarchy of architecture, claiming that the AFI can simply support the local knowledge with their technical training.

Now that a few concepts of the AFI have been established, we ought to trace the actors involved, who include architecture professors (Palleroni and Moore), students, clients, and the surrounding community members.

Each group influenced the projectile of the project.

When raising controversies of the political architectural process, Palleroni defended his project saying that “you cannot theorize real life.” And Moore described how if the Latinos did not develop a strategies “of increasing their own economic capacity—meaning cash flow—they’re going to get pushed out.” The project attempts to find a solution by constructing architectural projects that can be rented to provide supplementary income. Moore went on to say they could “become victims of history. It’s just that’s how economics works in a liberal democracy, meaning liberal capitalist democracy.” In this context, the political architect wanting to support the people, could not be indeterminate and had to support some kind of progressive *action.* Otherwise ambiguous terrain of indifference and inaction would disrupt their chances at staying, as it did generations before them.

Students participating in the AFI had very diverse responses to the project. Some felt inspired, as is usually celebrated about such projects, that they feel that their lives are changed and that they are inspired to “do good” and “change the world” for the rest of their lives. Unfortunately, this celebratory representation does not follow through to all students, many of whom felt more ambivalent about the political architecture process because it did not provide a realistic model for future employment and project development. The students were not being trained in non-profit economics development, and non-profit architecture firms are very rare. How could they make money? Did the projects really resolve a social injustice? Student opinions varied significantly.

Clients were also couched in a phase of ambiguity. The alley flat initiative client was grateful to receive the project, as are most clients. They cannot believe a miracle happened to them, that an architecture professor arrived to their door, chose them, and gave them free design services. However, the AFI client also wondered why the house was going to be so expensive for the small square meters involved. And she did not believe in the broader vision of the AFI because of the economic structure of the project (external funding and overinvestment up front in more environmentally sustainable materials). The client appreciated the project and architects' effort, but was not bought by the broader vision. What does it mean when the client calls into question the political vision of the architect?

During the construction, the client was uncomfortable with the haphazard construction practice of informal student construction. For instance, the air gaps between wood siding on a rain screen confused the client due to irregularly spaced gaps. The client, unaware of the air flow technique of the rain screen, questioned how the students were assembling the components of the house. *Can there be a reciprocal learning environment between the student and the client, between the architect and the community, between the specialist and the citizen?*

The UT professors forged an alliance in the Latino community before beginning their work in the neighborhood. Almost all architecture programs working in a political and fieldwork-based process partner with a community organization as a first step towards rooting their projects "in the community." However, often the partnership often exacerbates the assumption that the architecture fulfills the community's wants. Whereas,

perhaps the negotiation between the non-profit and the architects resembled a *representative democratic practice,* not necessarily one that mobilized the properly political that Ranciere theorizes.

The community organization inside the East Side that represented the Latinos was the Guadeloupe Neighborhood Development Corporation (GNDC) led by Mark Rodgers. Rodgers ensured that the project remained affordable. Over time, however, he became skeptical of the intentions of the AFI, because he felt it tended to emphasize ecological sustainability at the expense of affordability. Rodgers kept a watchful eye on the process to ensure it maintained the affordability projection because this was the criteria that the GNDC required to maintain the community partnership. Rodgers did go further, however, to recognize that architecture projects have to navigate multiple sets of values: “It's social architecture. It's the idea that you design in a way to transform society into a better society. And I think we have a lot of that going on. That's really what it is. 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.”

Susana Almanza visited Steven Moore’s class while I observed the classroom. She was a local Latino activist and intellectual that ran an organization called PODER, which represents People Organized in Defense of Mother Earth and her Resources. She provided the most controversial perspective on the AFI and other development projects occurring on the East Side. First, she interpreted the model of participatory democracy utilized by the professors – giving options between designs A, B, C or D. However, as Almanza said, “it’s never none.” Almanza went on to

criticize 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.*

When a community member begins to interpret the political architects practices as one who enforces the "police order" of a particular "distribution of the sensible'—*how we should interpret this process?*

Now we must consider the objects involved in the project. The architects were building a home in East Austin when I observed their project, and one day cutting wood and putting up siding. The choice of materials distinguished the AFI from conventional contractors because they salvaged materials and tried to reuse wood instead of purchasing it, partially because of their limited budget, and also because of the environmental ethic of reusing instead of buying new. The unusual materials provided a unique avenue of experimentation and exposure for both the students and clients to unconventional approaches to housing construction.

The first successful AFI building was relatively small, a housing unit for the client's brother, but rather expensive because of its high quality insulation to allow it to register in the sustainable building registry.

A component of the architecture as object was that of its aesthetics, which was designed by the students with guidance from the architecture professors. This resulted in a design that appeased a certain architectural language. However, some surrounding community members considered the aesthetic as “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.”

Even the political architecture classroom functions inside the confines of the conventional architecture institution with a specific set of disciplinary tools. While they *did* partner with GNDC and meet the clients, they still intensively focused on conventional architecture tools and processes: drawings, models, renderings, critiques, and so forth. *How can an architectural methodology achieve its supposedly “political architectural” vision without completely adjusting its disciplinary tools?*

On the construction site, architecture students jumble together all of their tools into one: they place computers on work tables, they search through their Computer Aided Design drawings for dimensions, and they juggle between hammers and saws to build projects.

On a larger scale, the interstate freeway that divides Austin provided a significant feature of the city that influenced its development. In the first phase of major gentrification in the city, during the 20th century, the freeway became the dividing line between the center and then the periphery. The Latinos were dispelled to the “East Side” of the freeway. Now, however, in this later phase of economic

development, the freeway is more significant for as a sign of progress, where now the East Side is being further developed. *How does the freeway mediate change?*

ANT concerns itself with assembling concepts, agents, and objects, so as to try and interpret the space *in between* the various controversies. I hope here, with the list of factors, the making of political architecture is *made visible* to some degree.

MEASURING VELOCITY AND NEW PROJECTILES

Actor-Network Theory and Ranciere's categories in the "politics of aesthetics" can both help us interpret the velocity of political architecture. I follow a number of interpretations of art and politics in my future projectile for political architecture. First, as Rockhill has identified, I think we cannot either *directly cause* or completely *remain indeterminate* towards political architectural strategies. I think that we cannot consider politics and aesthetics as separate realities that remain separate. Instead, I think that the continued experimentation and development of new techniques and connections *between disciplines*—can help projectiles that perhaps relate the inherently aesthetic project of architecture to more properly political ends. Markus Miessen, an architect and theorist, has considered the category of architects that balance between antagonistic politics and disciplinary specificity as "crossbench practitioners," which I would like to consider as an oscillation between "critical proximity" and "critical distance." I agree with Latour and Yaneva that we need a photographic gun to *study* the animation of buildings, but we need a new micro/macro-scopic tool set to interpret and navigate various targets inside the architectural battlefield.

[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.

[2] I am drawing here on a paper by Bruno Latour called “Critical Distance or Critical Proximity,” XXX.

[3]Latour, 43-44.

[4] David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review* Sept/Oct 2008.

[5] Swyngedouw, "The Antinomies of the Postpolitical City,” p. 609.

[6] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

[7]Latour, 87.

[8]Latour, 140.

[9]Latour, 186.

[10]Latour, 87.

[11]Latour, 169.

[12]Latour, 34.

[13]Latour, 87.

[14]Latour, 232.

[15]Latour, 232.

[16]Latour, 196.

[17]Latour, 229.

[18]Latour, 71.

[19]Latour, 202.

[20]Latour, 202.

[21]Latour, 72.

[22]Latour, 203.

[23]Latour, 107.

[24]Latour, 244.

[25]Latour, 109.

[26]Latour, 207.

[27]Latour, 79.

[28]Latour, 219.

[29]Latour, 204.

[30]Latour, 261.

[31]Latour, 132.

[32]Latour, 260.

[33]Latour, 246.

[34]Latour, 251, emphasis added.

[35] Sergio Palleroni, "Building to Learn/Learning to Build: Collaboration Between a Mexican Community and American Architecture Students," *Oz: Beyond Aesthetics,* Vol., 28, (2006), 4-7.

[36] Sergio Palleroni, "Building to Learn/Learning to Build," 4.

[37] Sergio Palleroni, "Building to Learn/Learning to Build,” 4.

[38] Ibid., (12:22).