Amended 28.07.18

Title

**Out of Practice: Research in and out the Business of Architecture**

James Soane / Director of Project Orange

**Researching Research**

*“Judgement of architecture is deferred to the market. The ‘architectural style’ of buildings no longer conveys an ideological choice but a commercial one.”1*

What is practice based research and how does it relate to the business of architecture? This is a question that interests Project Orange. While it is commonly understood that architects undertake research in the form of learning about new technology or discovering the latest specification, it is generally under the umbrella of Continual Professional Development (CPD). As the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) notes, CPDis a requirement for all chartered architects in order to stay competent, professional, capable and resilient as an architect. Members are expected to engage in thirty five hours per year that are logged. The core ten topics include subjects such as: health, safety and wellbeing; business, clients and services; legal, regulatory and statutory compliance; design, construction and technology.2

The perception that the profession is only interested in technical know-how supports a situation where the CPD curriculum excludes new kinds of knowledge and critical reflection. Yet few of the core subjects deal with the wider societal impact of architecture; how and why design matters and the values it embodies? It is therefore imperative that architects develop research strands in order to challenge this narrow compliance culture and to test their intuition.

**Research through reflection**

The distance between academia, as symbolised by the rarefied preoccupations within schools of architecture, and the world of professional practice have polarised. This split is characterised by a sense that educators find the reality of practice and contingency surrounding the process of building rather mundane, while offices see schools as indulgent, teaching little to prepare young graduates for challenges ahead. Yet architecture is at critical point of change and it is vital to redefine working methods, conversations and the drivers of practice. In order to understand what Project Orange represent the directors initiated an inclusive piece of reflection by asking each studio member to research and write up an area of personal interest, with reference to projects that they have worked on in the office. The challenge was to see whether a cohesive document could be produced whose authorship was genuinely collective while holding up a mirror to the studio bridging the gap between process and outcomes, academia and practice. The starting point, therefore, was not to try and graft a theory of practice onto the work, but rather to set up a positive dialogue between architects and a wider audience in order to develop a conversation.

**The Process**

A project to make a ‘zine’ or pamphlet was tabled in 2009 via a presentation to the studio, inviting everyone to contribute, which soon became PO Box. The format gave permission for staff to openly reflect on a particular aspect of work they have recently engaged in. Dr Matthew Barac, then a senior lecturer at London Southbank University, was invited to offer guidance, encouragement and academic perspective to the team, while the design of the publication was generated in-house. Initially there was some resistance from the staff who saw it as an extra-curricular chore, who said it was like being back at school again; which in some ways was intentional. As the project took shape it became clear that most people were enjoying the task, and that having two ‘tutorials’ with the editor was enriching and taken as valuable personal development.

**PO Box 1 / Untitled / 2010**

“And so we have PO Box. Such an impulse to reflect can signal many things; here it indicates and office that is coming of age. On the cusp of maturity Project Orange has begun to get to know itself better…”3

The introduction suggested Project Orange is not interested in radical theory and does not have a singular mode of practice; the studio instead sees its projects as narratives or stories, which collected together make a body of work. While this remains true, one essay from the first book jumps out as a prescient nudge towards rethinking ‘green’ issues. In ‘The carrot versus the stick’ studio member Abi Tuttle argued that the rhetoric around sustainable architecture needed to be recast in a new light; one that is less about technical solutions and more about an understanding of the environment as a whole. While noting that regulations provide minimum requirements, they hardly inspire the radical change required. There is a critique of the instrumental ‘green machine’ movement and an appeal for ‘cradle-to-cradle’ thinking that attempts to reconceptualise design as a virtuous circle of material re-use. It is a call for action, and one that Project Orange have taken time to develop, but looking back it is clear this piece of work was an important catalyst in the development of the practice.

Following the publication, the zine was shortlisted for the RIBA Presidents Medal, against Foster and Architecture 00, legitimising the initiative and demonstrating small companies can create impact. PO Box was also presented by James Soane at the 2012 “Theory by Design” conference at the Artesis School of Architecture in Antwerp, whose premise was to suggest that contemporary architectural theory is typically constructed by academics and within academia with few connections to practice. The sympathetic audience discussion reinforced the intellectual disconnect between established modes of teaching and research with live projects and gave impetus to the PO Box initiative.

**PO Box 2 / Questions of Representation / 2014**

“Each piece of text is seen as an opportunity to criticise and understand the nature of representation and the relationship between what is drawn and what is built.” 4

During the three year period since the first research project there had been a increased demand by clients for architects to produce photoreal renders. Brought about by a new wave of tech savvy graduate employees as well as more powerful software, the company was uncomfortable with this simulated reality, so decided to structure PO Box 2 around the question of representation. What does drawing mean today?

Architect Emma Elston suggested, in ‘Rules of Representation’, that architects need to challenge the conventions implicit in drawings; the idea of perfection, minimal inhabitation and order, using them instead to reflect a familiar world. The piece referred to the collage nature of the studio’s approach to drawings, that attempt to show a more tangible reality, from sketches to the colour coded drawings the author had developed for an Indian Hotel.

My own essay concluded that through the process of thinking and writing the collective continues to nudge, uncover and reveal different ways of thinking and designing. This was presented at the 2014 Association of Architectural Educators (AAE) conference in a paper titled ‘Education in Practice’5. Despite some seeing the publication as non-academic, conversations around how practice can share their own critical position shaped the direction of the conference. This further raised the issue disseminating and sharing research; while in academia you either ‘publish or die’ practices tend to be very protective of their research, particularly when the outcomes are not overwhelmingly positive, with the consequence that learning from other practices’ is very rare.

**PO Box 3 / Housing, House, Home / 2016**

“PO Box is not just about starting focused conversations but poking the beast, irritating the oyster, cultivating unique thought and expression from their mighty young workforce.” 6

The publication was developed during the first operating year of the London School of Architecture and it is clear that the agenda of the school is reflected in the ambition of the publication. Titled ‘Housing, House, Home’ staff were encouraged to think about the housing crisis, the agency of the architect and whether the profession in some ways complicit?

The most original piece of writing came out of conversations between architect Billy Sinclair and editor Gem Barton, who encourages new forms of creative writing within architectural discourse at Brighton University. Here the piece was a fictional conversation in two parts that serves to highlight the differences between clients with money, where design is only about delight, and those with fewer choices where design is presented as a negotiation with minimum standards and resources. The conversational text cleverly draws attention to the conflicted role of the architect when it comes to homemaking.

**Community of Practice**

This research project of writing and refection has flowed into the ‘Critical Practice’ teaching at the London School of Architecture (LSA) where instead of producing a cookie cutter dissertation, the students are invited to develop a manifesto for their future selves. It is a chance to examine their own values and trajectories. As one student noted: “The manifesto was crucial to me. The first time I could spend some time to sort many of my thoughts about architecture and try to position myself as an architect and really asking myself why I am doing what I do.”

What began as an experiment is now embedded within the studio culture and the fourth edition on the ‘Value of Architecture’ is underway. Perhaps the most significant outcome is that it reflects a practice that Carlo Ratti refers to as choral architects7. That is working together as a team whose thinking is fully accessible and open source in order to generate new research out of practice.

**End Notes**

1. Reinier de Graaf, *Architecture is now a tool of Capital*, Architectural Review, May 2015, Vol 1419, P43

2. ‘RIBA CPD Core Curriculum’, accessed 26 June 2018: <https://www.architecture.com/education-cpd-and-careers/cpd/cpd-core-curriculum>

3*.* Dr Matthew Barac, *PO Box 1 Editorial,* Sept 2010

4*.* Jane Tankard*, PO Box 2 Editorial,* August 2014

5. James Soane, *Education in Practice*, AAE Conference Living and Learning, University of Sheffield, Sept 2014

6. Gem Barton*, PO Box 3 Editorial*, July 2016

*7.* Carlo Ratti*, Open Source Architecture,* Thames and Hudson (London), 2015, p.120

**Illustrations** *(these can be placed anywhere in the text)*

1. PO Box 1 cover, 2010. The first research ‘zine’ edited by Dr Matthew Barac was shortlisted for the RIBA research awards.

2. A pair of collages prepared for the new Glasgow School of Art competition exploring dynamic spatial relationships.

3. PO Box 2 cover, 2014. Issue 2 chose to explore themes of drawing and representation, reflecting on different modes of communicating.

~~4. ‘Rules of Representation’ double spread featuring the Zone Hotel project in India.~~ *Not able to use as takes up too much space*

5. PO Box 3 cover, 2016. Looking at questions of housing, this issue explored a broad range of themes from design and standards through to societal and ethical concerns.

~~6. Home/Work essay by Billy Sinclair including his illustration showing the study plan of his fictional character.~~ *Not able to use as takes up too much space*

7. Project Orange discussing new projects over lunch in the studio. 2016. Photograph by Alex Sarginson.

**Biography**

James is an architect and teacher, setting up Project Orange with his partner in 1997. The studio is research-led with a diverse range of approaches. He is Director of Critical Practice at the new London School of Architecture and in 2016 acted as co-editor and contributor to a new book titled ‘A Gendered Profession’.