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**Out of Practice: Towards new theory at the LSA**

**KEYWORDS** Pedagogy, Practice, Ethical, Entrepreneurial, Activism

Abstract

*The 2018 Architect’s Journal review of the LSA student written work, presented at the end of year show, was direct in its critique of subject matter suggesting it made for depressing reading. So what should post-graduate students be reflecting upon if not the state of society in relation to the built environment? In considering the role of theory in architecture, the LSA makes a case for the conversation and study to move beyond the formal or philosophical concerns that have pre-occupied the discourse for so long, and instead seek to interrogate the levers of power in order to understand the wider agency of the architect.*

*This paper reflects on the school’s ethical agenda and asks questions on the importance of societal and political theories that inform the teaching practice. From engaging with catastrophic climate change to the failure of government to tackle infrastructure and housing, the LSA encourages students to challenge and re-imagine practise. Too often the concerns of practice are seen academically as ‘real world’ as opposed to experimental or defiant but which Jacques Attali labels as distractions.*

*In an increasingly connected but hyper-separated global environment we find that the purpose of architecture has morphed into the appreciation of an asset, which in turn has shaped the physical environment. The cost of this approach to those not inside the virtuous circle of investment and return, is an erosion of community, an increase in living costs and the degradation of the environment. We therefore see the act of constructing a relevant written argument, subverted into the form of a personal manifesto, becomes a space to build a call for arms; to construct an alternative world order; to imagine a kinder society.*

*No longer is the debate about style, rather about action. It seems that when it comes to the big questions, education is out of practice.*

*“The problem is one of adaptation, in which the realities of our life are in question.”*

Le Corbusier, Vers Une Architecture, 1927

This paper is a reflection on the critical approach to theory adopted by the LSA and directly references the written work of the 2017/18 student cohort. The intention is both to validate their status as practitioners and to offer an alternative curriculum.

**Architecture or Revolution**

“As for the manifestos, they make for depressing reading and show a student population bogged down by the troubles of today: fake news, climate change and a capitalist property market. There is a desperate call for architects to turn to activism and heal society’s ills, but there is seemingly not much confidence in this optimistic view, which is served cold au plat du jour.”1

The 2018 Architect’s Journal review of the LSA student written work, presented at the end of year show, was direct in its critique of subject matter suggesting it made for depressing reading. So what should post-graduate students be reflecting upon if not the state of society in relation to the built environment? In considering the role of theory in architecture, the LSA makes a case for the conversation and study to move beyond the formal or philosophical concerns that have pre-occupied the discourse for so long, and instead seek to interrogate the levers of power in order to understand the wider agency of the architect. It seems that when it comes to the big questions, education is out of practice.

**Eyes that do not see**

In an increasingly connected but hyper-separated global environment the purpose of architecture has morphed into the appreciation of an asset, which in turn has shaped the physical environment. Reinier de Graaf suggests ‘Architecture, or more precisely real estate, is governed by a simple law: maximising return while minimizing cost’2. The price of this approach to those not inside the virtuous circle of investment and return, is an erosion of community, an increase in living costs and the degradation of the environment. Looking at just one current example, the Spring 2019 issue of the Property Chronicle runs an article on ‘How to earn double-digit returns from Polish property’, noting that leverage should not be described in moral terms which it argues has become ‘fashionable’. It concludes that, ‘used well it (leverage) can be a financial tool to boost rates of return and acquire properties.’3 There is no mention of how this may affect the local context, the people or the environment; and the permission given to not feel guilty demonstrates either ignorance at best or more likely denial of the consequences. The LSA challenges this position which is representative of the ubiquitous belief within the neoliberal system that growth and development are the only drivers of investment. We cannot discuss the practice of architecture without first untangling the relationships between power, capital and governance. It is necessary to reflect on ethical questions embedded within societal and political theories that inform a wide range of behaviours. From engaging with catastrophic climate change to the failure of government to tackle infrastructure and housing, the school encourages students to interrogate and re-imagine different practices. Too often the concerns of the profession are viewed academically as a preoccupation with ‘real world’ problems, unworthy of study, as opposed to the freedom of defiant experiments; though the tide appears to be turning, with critic Jacques Attali labelling this mode of research as a ‘distraction’4.. As Ruth Morrow suggests, the role of the architect is not to assist people towards our own understanding of architectural practice, rather, their own.5 Therefore the architect, both as thinker and practitioner, has to recast their relationship with the planet and the public.

**The ‘styles’ are a lie**

All students are required to write a Manifesto in place of the traditional dissertation. A manifesto can be understood as affirmation of intention, seeking to reflect and rethink critical cultural norms or societal behaviours, calling for change. We therefore see the act of producing a progressive written argument, subverted into the form of a personal manifesto, as becoming a space to build a call for arms: to construct an alternative world order; to imagine a kinder society. No longer is the debate about style, rather about transformation and action. There is a growing sense among the next generation that global issues such as climate change, neocon politics, pollution and migration must all inform the position of the architect. In ‘This Changes Everything’, Naomi Klein calls for immediate and radical intervention to stem the unfolding environmental disaster, ‘It is a civilizational wake-up call. A powerful message—spoken in the language of fires, floods, droughts, and extinctions—telling us that we need an entirely new economic model and a new way of sharing this planet.’6 As a critique of capitalism and the global economic model, the book is perhaps at its most persuasive when it shows how grass roots collective action, through the use of shared media, is able to affect big change. The education of the architect is moving from developing a personal portfolio with a unique signature, to adopting a political position and developing pro-active strategies in opposition to the dominant development model. The ‘project’, as defined by Ezio Manzini, is a sequence of conversations and actions on the world bringing it closer to what it needs to be, necessitating the act of design.7 This provides a more resilient and meaningful definition of purpose.

**Modern state of mind**

“There reigns a great disagreement between the modern state of mind, which is an admonition to us, and the stifling accumulation of age-long detritus.”8

Re-reading Corbusier’s own treatise on architecture, almost 100 years since the first essay was published in 1921, it is striking to encounter the urgency of his writing and the call for extensive societal change. However, it is his very ideology, concerned with the rejection of history and embracing the potential for a man-made utopia, which has fed the crisis we find ourselves in today; a world choked with concrete construction, enmeshed with sprawling infrastructure and a broken eco-system. It is therefore necessary to recognise that the impact of this instrumental thinking, especially though the act of building, has brought about the Anthropocene era (defined as the geological age of significant human influence on the planet’s geology and ecosystem). For William Bellamy, this offers up an opportunity, as never before have we been so aware of the interconnectedness of the systems on earth9.  It allows for a renewed understanding of our relationship to the presence of all living and non-living phenomena. The discourse of deep ecology implies the interconnectedness that affects our climate and natural cycles. In developing this theme the reconceptualization of nature is at the heart of Maelys Garreau’s work, where she argues we must abandon and destroy our idea of nature as an endless resource and instead encourage a new ethical vision which encompasses a multiplicity of realities.10 She suggests that the architect is replaced by a ‘gardener of the earth’ who adopts an anarchistic approach propagating a new environmental culture in order to seed new bonds with nature. Implicit is the sense that the man-made world is not immutable and that an alternative form of exchange is drawn up between species and agriculture that changes the transactional value of ownership.

**Architecture is stifled by custom.**

“We are waiting for a dissident group to liberate us from the crushing humiliation of neoliberalism – which delivers only poverty, peonage, crisis and austerity”.11

The re-activated architect operates a multidisciplinary practice. Their work is to reveal accountability, to critically read the city and to offer alternative versions that are more equitable; addressing the political and destructive forces at work. New practices emerge as critiques of the existing patriarchal model, employing a high degree of collaboration, networking and sharing experiences. As Josh Fenton points out, ‘There is a need for us to continually reiterate our political position as architects – not in terms of parties or alliances, but with our engagement with issues that affect the public.’12 It is surely significant that it took 16 year old Swedish schoolgirl Greta Thurnberg, self-styled climate change warrior, to activate a global awareness campaign that has resulted in hundreds of demonstrations globally. From her first solo protest in the Summer of 2018 she progressed to addressing a meeting at Davos in January 2019 and the UK Government in May 2019. She talks of how people are desperate for hope and is honest about the scale of the problem.

In considering the profession of the architect Tom Badger writes in ‘The (Ir)Relevance of Architecture, ‘If we are prepared to get rid of the image of an architect as a ‘visionary’ and focus on more normative forms of design and knowledge generation, we can re-establish the weakened relationship to society and the construction industry’13. He also raises the uncomfortable truth that most buildings are constructed without the hand of an architect, which further reinforces the notion that architecture is a subset of construction. So the protectionism that the profession offers, and so closely guards, is the very thing that prevents open access and best practice. Joe Walker, in the ‘Sceptical Spiritualist’, calls for an open discourse so that the tools of the profession can be shared.14

**All the values have been revised**

It is no longer possible to discuss the concept of space without considering its value, ownership and status. Yet, as Alice Hardy notes, the commodification of space has led to a lack of collective participation and communal enjoyment.15 She is optimistic that provocations are being made through digital activism, tapping into the ability to process big data in order to empower local citizens as well as designers. Underlying this approach is a belief in a more representative democratic system that values societal integration in order to make cities inclusive and accessible to all. There is a move from the power of the individual to the power of the crowd.16

Our relationship with technology is a further concern; the virtual space many inhabit also has its own architecture, power structures and politics. The internet of things has embedded itself into the fabric of our lives; harvesting our data and controlling our information channels contributing to societal atomisation and creating a disconnect from the physical environment.17 Fraser Morrison concludes that if everything is seamless and streamlined, there is no room to pause; and that a disconnected world is a way of reclaiming territory, time and space.

When Jane Jacobs wrote that cities can provide for all citizens only when they are created by everybody18, she opened up a discourse that discredited top down thinking characterised by the master plan and private development. The act of commoning, has come to represent a framework for co-creation and communal action. Pointing to the importance of ‘mingling’ in public space, Maxim Sass argues that core values are shaped by surroundings and encounters.19 The market is not equivalent to a client who represents an inclusive public. Collective decision-making protects the interests of the many and leads to a new public place-making mode of practice.

**There exists a new spirit**

‘The reasons why students decide to study architecture are many and varied, but there is often an underlying desire to contribute to the notion of common good”20

The impact of these conversations on the education of an architect is to provide a framework that sees architecture as part of a system that is transformative. As activist George Monbiot argues, discredited narratives cannot be discarded, they need to be replaced with a new narrative.21 The students on this programme have begun to exchange ideas, to critically question their trajectories and to tell a new story. They have thoughts about what they believe to be importantand have engaged in ethical discussions prompted by the ecological crisis.

“I will pursue architecture which encourages well-being and the role of space-as-care-giver.”22

**Footnotes**

1. Christine Murray, *Degree Show Review: London School of Architecture* (Architect’s Journal, 26th July 2018)

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3. Ben Habib, *How to earn double-digit returns from Polish property* (The Property Chronicle, Spring 2019)

4. Jacques Attali, *A Brief History of the Future* (Arcade Publishing, New York, 2009)

5. Ruth Morrow, *Architecture from the Dogs.* Radical Pedagogies, Ed D. Fraud, H. Harriss (RIBA Enterprises, 2015), p. 135.

6. Naomi Klein, This Changes Everything (Penguin, 2017), p. 105.

7. Ezio Manzini, *Politics of the Everyday* (Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 37.

8. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (Dover Publications, 1985)

9. William Bellamy, *Solidarity: A call to Nature* (LSA Manifesto, 2018)

10. Maelys Garreau, *Manifesto to become a Gardener of the Earth* (LSA Manifesto, 2018)

11. Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of Silent Majorities* (Semiotext(e), New York, 1983), p. 44.

12. Josh Fenton, *Ruskinian Property* (LSA Manifesto, 2018)

13. Tom Badger, *The (Ir)Relevance of Architecture* (LSA Manifesto, 2018)

14. Joe Walker, *The Sceptical Spiritualist, Looking for purpose in Practice* (LSA Manifesto, 2018)

15. Alice Hardy, *Whose City?* (LSA Manifesto, 2018)

16. Indy Johar, *(Retrieved from https://provocations.darkmatterlabs.org/financing-civic-futures-a3a6075f31c4)*

17. Frazer Morrison, *Nowhere to Hide* (LSA Manifesto, 2018)

18. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Vintage Books,2016), p. 238.

19. Maxim Sass, *Public Sector Service* (LSA Manifesto, 2018)

20. Nelli Wahlsten, *Blurring Boundaries* (LSA Manifesto, 2018)

21. George Monbiot, *Out of the Wreckage, A New Politics for an Age of Crisis* (Verso, 2017), p. 91.

22. Vojtech Nemec*, The Street Level Bureaucrat* (LSA Manifesto, 2018)

*Illustration*

*LSA Manifesto Covers*