

Negotiated Territory

“Let us move from the era of confrontation to the era of negotiation.”

— Richard Nixon

Every instance of design entails negotiation. Whether by the deformation of a structural span, the limits of a construction budget, or the changing opinions of a building committee, design must accommodate material, economic, and cultural forces. Rather than understanding only the compromise of half measures and mediated expressions that only partially reflect the absolutes of its component elements, instead it should be understood that design itself only exists in a state of mediation.

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NEGOTIATION

The relation of design to the world around it is one that tests the limits of correspondence between knowledge and contingency. If design inherently exists in such a state of compromise, then the question is, how does design conceptualize the position from which it operates? That is, how does the discipline of design frame its efforts to elicit, allow, or preclude the inevitable confrontation with factors external to our control? These negotiations extend far beyond the accounting of inert forces, and run the gamut of inter-personal arrangements from overtly political institutional machinations to myriad prosaic exchanges that inform each and every circumstance in the provision and practice of cities, landscapes, buildings and objects.

TERRITORY / FORT / PRISON

In the marketplace of professional identity, design is that of expertise, defined by possession of some core knowledge and being adept at the particular thing of design, a knowledge not only of forms, but of the processes of formation. This territory of design is a kind of fort - in that it is that area that defines the terrain upon which we operate and defends that terrain from outsiders; it gives a precinct to its efforts, defining what design is as opposed to the efforts of other fields. But in one sense the idea of design is a fort, a protective shell around the profession's identity,

it might be similarly understood as a prison, a restriction of the domain in which to operate, a locking down of potential. Facing a changing landscape of economic and environmental issues, mobility is key, especially where the services offered may no longer be asked for, or needed. In such a fluid condition, a reified definition of what design is, or is not, seems an artificial constraint.

HOME

The opportunity at hand is to redefine the domain of design not as a fort, and not as a prison, but as a home. A home is a place you leave from and return to, it offers both starting point and security. As a model for design, home offers a residence for the core competencies of design's legacy: its tools, formats and procedures, but it also provides the security to leave its confines (for a while). This to and fro conceptualizes a broader notion of engagement for design, not as lofty goals of social utopianism, but as an act of dialogue and exchange into new circumstances, new insights, and new possibilities. Perhaps the reverse is true as well; instead of dressing up design in the trappings of the consensus (compromise for the sake of compromise), instead design should invite the other into its home, hosting, as it were, the negotiations. Such hosting could offer a dialogue-driven process and avert the specter of authority and authorship associated with design, of which many in the public are highly skeptical.

Of course there is no origin of design, nor a definitive conclusion, it is not a place or a thing, but a cascade of relations. The grounds of design will be displaced, but also shared, it is an opportunity to be part of a world in, and of, design. What is reality, after all, if not the ultimate negotiated territory? ♦