When I Hear the Word Service I Look for a Crisis

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The rhetoric surrounding service in architecture tends to prioritize the exceptional situations of crisis. Whether the aftermath of a natural disaster, the sudden out-break of war, or the continued marginalization of a community, architecture is most confident in describing its capacity to effect social, political, and economic change in the most harrowing of circumstances. This paper describes the potential consequences of priori-tizing these situations as the primary site of service architecture. It argues that employing Chantal Mouffe's distinction between "us" and "them" might reconsti-tute a politically, socially, and economically engaged architecture in less polemic circumstances.

> "Perhaps never in history have the talents, skills, the broad vision and the ideals of the architecture profession been more urgently needed. The profession could be powerfully beneficial at a time when the lives of families and entire communities have grown increasingly fragmented, when cities are in an era of decline and decay rather than limitless growth, and when the value of beauty in daily life is often belittled. Surely, architects and architecture educa-tors, as well as the organizations that represent them, ought to be among the most vocal and knowledgeable leaders in preserving and beautifying a world where resources are in jeopardy."[1]

THE RHETORIC OF CRISIS

"Urgently needed." "Fragmented... decline and decay... belittled." "Jeopardy." The rhetoric of Boyer and Mitgang signals a world and pro-fession in crisis. Like an S.O.S., this dispatch was sent to no one person in particular but broadcast to those practitioners, educators, and students who might hear. Those who could answer that call to serve had ample opportunity to utilize a professional knowledge base that was both "urgently needed" and inaccessible.

While The Boyer Report would go on to identify what they considered systematic shortcomings, the initiating quote (which not only serves as the launching point for this conference but pre-figures the AIA Best Practices: The Boyer Report: Building Community Through Education[2]) asserts architecture's ability to impact the social, economic, and political

well-being of individuals and communities. It does so, in this instance, by establishing a pretext crisis. That call has become a constant refrain.

10 years after the Boyer Report, Cameron Sinclair took the stage to accept his 2006 TED (of TED Talks) Prize in Monterey, California, and began by stating, "We believe that where resources and expertise are scarce, innovative, sustainable and collaborative design can make a difference in people's lives"[3]. He goes on to list the series of crises and disasters (1999: housing crisis for returning refugees in Kosovo, 2001: mobile health clinics in sub-Saharan Africa responding to HIV-AIDS pan-demic, 2004: Iran earthquake, Mississippi pre-Katrina poverty, etc.) to which Architecture for Humanity responded.

The list of sites, stories, and projects continue, each highlighting a natu-ral disaster, a war crime, a pandemic, a famine, or some other political, economic, or environmental crisis. More importantly, it figures how architecture can ameliorate these problems.

The idea identifies "service" as a special category of architectural practice. "Humanitarian" architecture (particularly Architecture for Humanity's version) tends to reduce humanity to those who need help. While such definitions are not explicit, they are rhetorically clear. To "design like you give a damn" you must address the at-risk, the impov-erished, the homeless, the disadvantaged, and the marginalized. The alternative is clear. To not address these constituents means your design is not socially, economically, politically, or ecologically conscious. You just don't give a damn.

This rhetoric of crisis as call to action is not unique to Architecture for Humanity, nor is it fruitless. Other books (such as Design for the Other 90%, Humanitarian Architecture: 15 stories of architects working after disaster, and Beyond Shelter: Architecture and Human Dignity) fore-ground architecture's consequentiality within the context of extremity.

Whether advocating for architects' abilities to assess and survey build-ings in the aftermath of a disaster (as suggested in AIA Handbook for Disaster Assistance Programs[4]) or provide shelters for displaced inhab-itants (Make it Right Foundation), crisis has become a precondition to service. The idea of crisis may be localized by an event such as an earth-quake, flood, war, or famine. It may also address a less discrete crisis by identifying the conditions of a marginalized community, at-risk youth, or a blighted neighborhood.
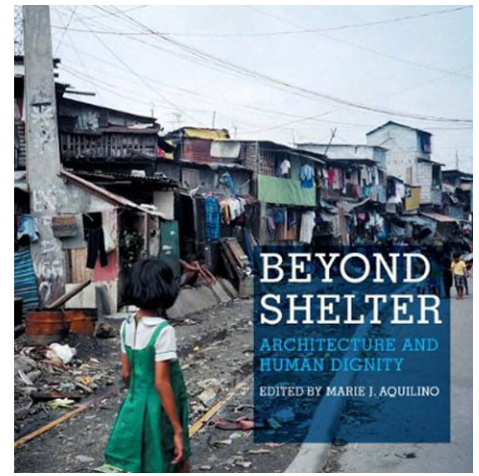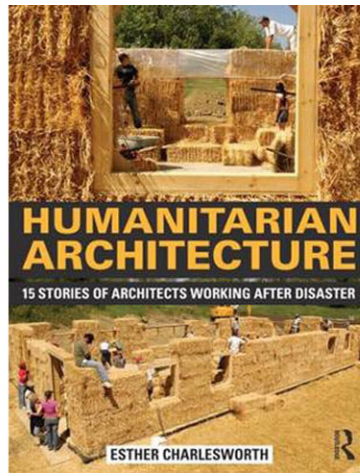
Figure 1: Book covers for *Design Like You Give a Damn* (Metropolis), *Humanitarian Architecture* (Routledge) and *Beyond Shelter* (Metropolis)

Such endeavors are surely commendable. Not only does this work serve people who sometimes desperately need architects, it also provides material evidence of our capacity to do good. Additionally, it gives students an explicit way to envision their social and political consequentiality. Cameron Sinclair, in describing his architectural education announced, "Many architects seem to think that when you design, you design a jewel... whereas I felt that when you design you either improve or create a detriment to the community in which you are designing."[5] *Design Like You Give a Damn's* rhetoric gives students both an uncomplicated version of empowerment and allows they participate in that movement through design competitions. Sinclair's testimonial draws clear, and false, divisions within the practice and education of architects. Furthermore, it provides a sharp division between designers and those we serve.

THE PARADOX OF US AND THEM

In each of these scenarios, the notion of service is qualified by identifying a particular relationship between architects (us) and those we serve (them). They (the marginalized, the bereft, the incapacitated, the at-risk, etc.) need our help. Again, there are a great many moments when this relationship is legitimized by exceptional conditions where the expertise and legal status as a profession render architects uniquely qualified to intervene. However, the particular framing of us and them is not the only relationship between architects, their clientele, and their constituents.

For Chantal Mouffe, the division between us and them is a political one, one at the heart of democracy. "[D]emocratic logics always entail drawing a frontier between 'us' and 'them', those who belong to the 'demos' and those who are outside it. This is the condition for the very existence of democratic rights."[6] She continues by identifying how different forms of this division coincide with different ideas about consensus, about dissent, about procedure, and about pluralism. Such conditions, though formally organized by "politics", persist latently as "the political". She writes:

> What I call "the political" is the dimension of antagonism—the friend/enemy distinction. And, as Schmitt says, this can emerge

out of any kind of relation. It's not something that can be localized precisely; it's an ever-present possibility. What I call "politics," on the other hand, is the ensemble of discourses and practices, institutional or even artistic practices that contribute to and reproduce a certain order.[7]

Defining an "us" and a "them" is always potentially an exercise of power, attenuating a political dimension. We and they might exist as adversaries, as partners, as skeptical but peaceful neighbors, etc. However, returning to artistic practices, Mouffe argues:

> One cannot make a distinction between political art and non-political art, because every form of artistic practice either contributes to the reproduction of the given common sense—and in that sense is political— or contributes to the deconstruction or critique of it. Every form of art has a political dimension.[8]

Every form of art either reaffirms the status quo, or critiques it. In this way, all art has a political dimension. Political, feminist, or critical artistic practices are not exceptional categories. Artistic practices can either support and reproduce the conditions of their own construction (in reference to gender, politics, economics, etc.) or critique them. The presumption of indifference and innocence are preempted by consequence.

Mouffe's indictment is echoed by Rosalyn Deutsche, one of her interviewers, "That's why I, like many artists and critics, avoid the term 'political art': Precisely because it asserts that other art—indeed art per se or so-called real art—is not political, 'political art' is a powerful political weapon, one that is routinely deployed to ghettoize art that avows the political."[9]

The idea that the category of "political art" ghettoizes politically conscious art is significant for "service architecture". This is specifically troubling when the ability to serve requires the pretext of crisis. As demonstrated in the rhetoric exemplified by, but not unique to, *Design Like You Give a Damn*, the "marginal", the "blighted", and the "at-risk" are those we should serve (if we give a damn). But is this the only, or even primary, opportunity for service?

In order to answer this question, we might return to Mouffe's ideas about us and them, especially when we are different. She argues that democracy's accomplishment is that it is not only able to deal with
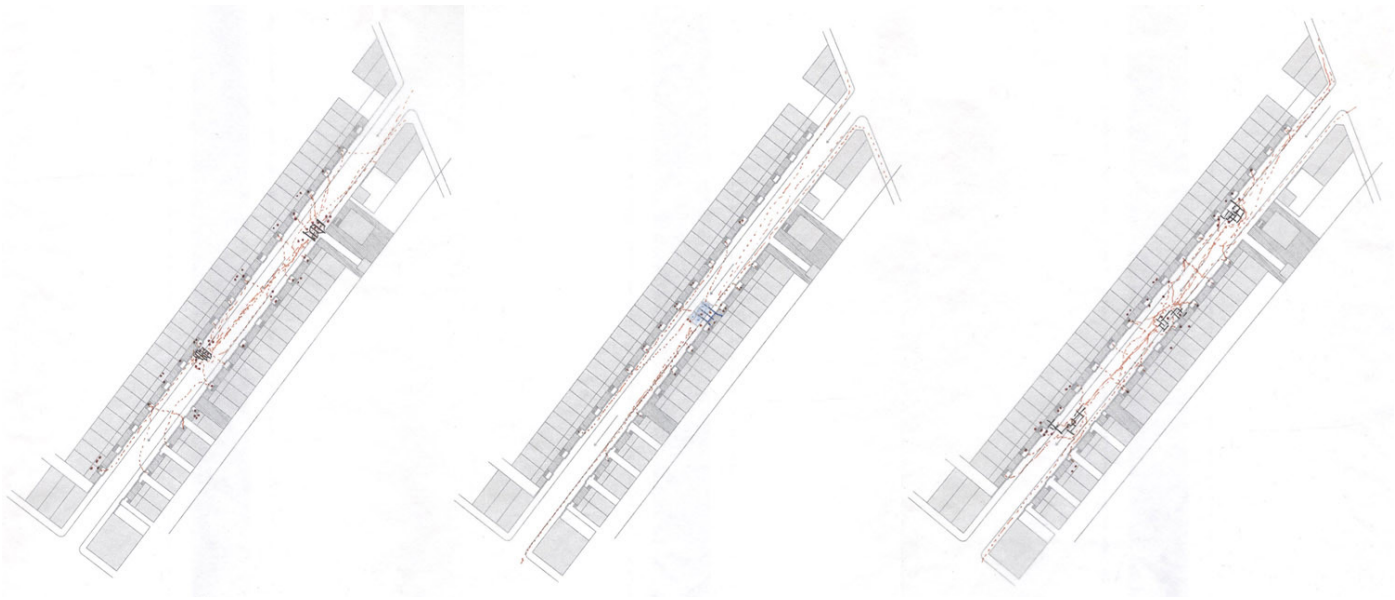
Figure 2: Initial studies of scale/distribution/location studies and anticipated movement and gathering

difference, but able to mobilize it. Pluralism, the multitude of "us"es and "them"s, is not something to resolve. She argues that contemporary conversations about consensus misunderstand the significance of plurality.

> This is indeed the case with the many forms of liberal pluralism, which generally start by stressing what they call the "fact of pluralism", and then go on to find procedures to deal with differences whose objective is actually to make those differences irrelevant and to relegate pluralism to the sphere of the private… This is why the type of pluralism that I am advocating gives a positive status to difference and questions the objective of unanimity and homogeneity…[10]

For Mouffe, the goal is not nullify the differences essential to pluralism, but to mobilize them. Her framing of democracy and pluralism as a paradox pivots around this point. If service, rather than confirming the already made identities of us and them, provided an arena in which we and they encounter each other and shape those identities, then service may serve a productive, rather than simply an ameliorative, function.

How do we identify us and them, not as adversaries, or lesser versions of ourselves that need our help, but as those different from us? What kind of service could architects offer in that context?

The following section describes a design/build project within this context.

THE BLOCK PARTY BUILDING PROJECT

Block parties are a quintessential form of gathering for the city of Philadelphia. Both locally sponsored (such as Mad Decent and the Summer Block Party at the Piazza) and neighborhood organized parties permeate the city in summer months. They are so common that the city's Streets Department has streamlined the permitting process, providing online forms for approval, and requiring only a $25 processing fee

(for weekends and holidays) and a petition signed by 75% of households on the block. Exempt from these blanket approvals are arterial roads that serve multiple bus lines and blocks that require emergency access (adjacent to police station, fire station, and hospital entrances). *City Paper* reported that in 2012, the city received more than 8,000 requests for block parties; 7,116 of those were granted. For the Fourth of July weekend alone there were 216 permits granted.[11]

This ubiquity also abets diversity. Some block parties serve as family reunions, others as neighborhood celebrations honoring the community's recent high school graduates, others simply serve as an opportunity to pull grills onto the street and invite friends over.

In the summer of 2013, I conducted a design/build workshop at Temple University that used the event of a block party to examine the relationship between temporary social spaces and the material apparatuses that supports them. Students examined precedents in temporary, mobile, nomadic, and informal construction techniques and their capacity to support different programs, lifestyles, and communities. As a design/build project, students constructed one-to-one mock-ups to understand materiality, structure, and mobility. Through these exercises, they identified material opportunities relevant to the block party and built prototypes of the designs. The project culminated in a block party organized by the class and supported by our own intervention. Most significantly, the work was situated in the community in which we all work and live.

Temple has a long history, for better or worse, of being seen as a commuter school for Philadelphia. However, under the presidency of David Adamany from 2000 to 2006, that mission changed. In 1995, 39 percent of the incoming freshman class was from Philadelphia. By 2004, that number dropped to 27 percent.[12] Current Temple policies continue this trend, attempting to attract out-of-state and international students. For the incoming freshman class of 2015, students from Philadelphia accounted for only 19%, half of what it was 20 years ago.[13]

These changes, to be clear, were implemented for and have achieved a number of positive gains in terms of raising academic standards,

Figure 3: Construction of bays, canopy, and troughs

promoting faculty and student research agendas, and increasing the diversity of the student body. However, it has had an unintended consequence: today's Temple students are no longer necessarily seen as Philadelphians.

This growth has also strained relations with the neighborhoods adjacent to the main campus. The transition from a commuter college to a residential college has spurred private development specifically targeting students in the surrounding community. As noted in the Philadelphia 2035 plan for the Lower North district of Philadelphia:

> As the district's population declined, Temple University's population grew. As of 2010, almost 28,000 students were enrolled at Main Campus. Of those, about 11,000 lived on or near campus. A shortage of University-owned rooms has led developers to build almost 2,000 units of housing in the last ten years.[14]

The rapid growth of the student population concentrated in areas around campus tended to produce adversarial relationships as even attempts to curb or manage this growth have been met with suspicion by some residents. After Darrell Clarke, President of the City Council, tried and failed to implement a ban on new student housing for the area in 2011, he proposed a Neighborhood Improvement District funded by a property tax on non-owner occupied spaces. In a public meeting about the proposed NID residents voiced concern:

> "The North Central NID is really nothing more than the Temple Area Property Association taking complete control over our neighborhood," said Vivian Van Story, a North Central resident and founder of Community Land Trust Corporation, reading from prepared comments at Thursday's hearing. "With the power to tax, they will decide the future of our neighborhood and not the residents of North Philadelphia."[15]

This resistance was fueled in part by the image of Temple students who "leave trash on the street on non-collection days, carry on loud parties into the wee hours, and generally disrespect the people who've lived in the neighborhood all their lives."[16] This image is exacerbated by the absence of any opportunity for residents and students to see each other in any other way. The recent expansion of Temple's recreation facilities in an attempt to improve campus life minimizes the students' need to find, or support, these resources in their communities.

It is within this context that students began building their block party. In the first meeting, students brought photographs and plans of the streets on which they lived. We discussed the physical characteristics of the block (street length and width, rowhouse typologies, etc.) and its connection to the urban fabric. Deciding on a block in the city's Germantown section, the students, with Block Party Petition in hand, went to meet their neighbors and discuss the scheduling of the block party. While this part of the process began to familiarize students with not just the physical layout of the street but also its residents, I asked them not to ask the

Figure 4: Snapshots from the block party

residents what the students should make for the block party. I argued that part of our goal was to contribute to the vibrancy and diversity of activities. While we should be aware of the others around us, we need not simply cater to them.

Students began by studying the length of the street and speculating about the scale and distribution of their installation. The initial plans and sections examined the potential to concentrate, cluster, and evenly space the material, and in so doing, considered the ways they prompted different types and scales of gathering. Different activities, such as eating, drinking, playing, and conversing began to vitalize these material deployments. They also suggested the potential for scheduling cooking and performing to differentiate the intervention's use in the afternoon and evening.

The students decided to concentrate their work into a single, linear installation that would coordinate food preparation and play under a long canopy. This organization would allow disparate activities to be mediated by a set of horizontal and vertical surfaces while consolidating the action to increase its liveliness.

The students decided to construct the intervention as a series of vertical fins to support the canopy. The structural bay gave rhythm and division to the sets of activities they hoped to promote. A bench ran the length of the installation and was differentiated by programmatic anchors. Toward one end, three large troughs were filled with water for splash pools and one smaller trough was filled with ice to hold drinks. At the opposite end, a table and additional bench served as a space for eating, card games, and food preparation. The heaviness and integrity of the water-filled troughs provided structural support for the lighter vertical members and canopy above. It also provided enough space for the quick paced and loud play of children and the slow and quiet space of adults eating and talking in close proximity.

The project served to test students' projections about how their work would foster particular kinds and durations of gathering. They were excited to find a number of their ideas played out as hoped. Children ran and splashed in the pools as they grabbed a drink and ran down the street, only to return a short while later to splash again. Parents tended to stay longer than their children, as they sat down to talk with the students and their neighbors as they ate lunch. However, the hot summer sun proved too intense for their light canopy, and they improvised by covering the structure with a tarp they had used for transportation to provide additional shade.

The project changed over the course of the day, not only because of the students' scheduled events, but also because of their neighbors. A local DJ set up his station next to theirs, prompting a space for dancing adjacent to the installation. As the night progressed and the children went inside, the activity moved from one end of the installation to the other, now providing a space to listen to music and watch the dancing.

As this was a temporary installation, the students repurposed the modules for post-block party use. Two of the splash pools were emptied and taken as planters for the students' homes in South and West Philadelphia. The table and two bays of canopy were taken by a resident to provide a picnic table for the grill in his backyard.

CONCLUSION
In this paper, and through the Block Party Building project, I've tried to argue that service, especially when qualified by crisis, frames an exceedingly narrow set of circumstances and agendas in which to intervene.

It limits our ability to envision how architecture contributes to broader forms of political, economic, and ethical practice.

This paper has been careful to not undermine the good works done by architects who intervene in moments of crisis, who serve marginalized communities, or who contribute to the welfare of neighborhoods in the aftermath of disaster. Instead, it has tried to argue that the aggressive rhetoric surrounding those works may be counterproductive. The Block Party Project, I believe, fits in a broader notion of service that embeds architectural practices within existing cultural practices. Certainly, the project could have been framed as one of crisis, where the university's explosive growth had stirred economic and racial tensions. However, such a framing might have cast students in a wildly different light, suggesting they adopt a compensatory or defensive position. Catering to the requests of the community would have been a service.

In the project, as it was carried out, the architectural object did not necessarily serve the residents. Instead, it provided a space where students and residents would come together. A positive view of students was not guaranteed. The students could have reinforced every negative stereotype the residents might have had of them. As it happened, they did not. However, it was not because the physical thing they designed did something the residents already wanted. It provided a space for us and them to encounter each other without the pretext of crisis, of the marginalized, or of the at-risk.

Instead, it asked students to understand themselves as part of a community—a community made of residents and students—without erasing the difference between the two.

In Chantal Mouffe's terms, it gave students and residents a space to question, reconstitute, and redraw "the 'frontier' between us and them."[17]

ENDNOTES

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