Drawing Outside the Lines: Towards a New Discipline of Public-Interest Architecture

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Referring to his "seriously addictive online game of creativity"[1] PIJIN.NET, Cape Town, South Africa native Maciek Strychalski explains, "Ultimately, the system belongs to the users."[2] Co-creator of PIJIN.NET ("pigeon dot net") and a co-founder of its progenitor, street-based art collective the Suburbanists, Strychalski here invokes only his website, but his virtuous statement alludes to the variegated political questions attending any urban planning process. Central among them, "what does ownership entail?", "who bestows it?", "how is it bestowed?" In 1975, community design forerunner Randolph T. Hester established that the more community members inhabit a space, the greater their "symbolic ownership"[3] of it. "And if a person not only uses the space but has participated in the acquisition and design, or redesign, of the space, his sense of owning it is again increased."[4]

Drawing from Hester's "symbolic ownership" and the informal interventions undertaken by the Suburbanists and their hyperspace scion PIJIN.NET, this paper proposes a form of public-interest architecture derived from collective, grassroots practices. Specifically, it aims to offer what this new mode can bring to bear on the process of architecture and urban planning to ensure that the "users'" relationships with the "system" and each other foster not disaffection but social capital- and community-building. To answer this question, I will first describe the current conditions—real and ideological—that inform my planning practice. Simply, the conviction that the built environment can and should galvanize the creative impulse and attendant expression in its community members, and that such expression is the forebear of informal po-

litical action. An introduction to the Suburbanists and PIJIN.NET follows, as does a meditation on the phenomenological dimensions reified in their works that uphold Hester's concept of "symbolic ownership" to which the Suburbanists plainly subscribe. The paper concludes with a set of policy recommendations meant to support a facile and meaningful transition into the new public-interest architecture practice.

THE CONDITIONS FOR A NEW PUBLIC INTEREST ARCHITECTURE

We know this much: the built environment is more than the land use-prescribed arrangement of buildings; it comprises, per Heidegger, our essential "dwelling" and "gathering" spaces, our "existential foothold."[5] Acknowledgement of the *genus loci* mandates it is the environment that gives rise to meaningful architecture, not the other way around. This affirmation of architecture's indispensable role in shaping our realities likewise obliges "revolutionary" acts of "tolerant"[6] interrogation of the current environment. We must recall Louis Kahn's thoughtful plea: "What does this building want to be?"[7]

Thomas Fisher's assertion that "public-interest architecture" is not a niche milieu, rather a promising redefinition of the practice, "so as to free ourselves from our traditional, limited roles and to empower ourselves to make the contributions that we believe designers can and should make,"[8] reflects a contemporary sensitivity to Kahn's timeless question. After decades of blindfolded urban design, the insertion of Randian expressions of man's indomitability—martinet edifices forsaking nuanced, articulated ex-

pressions—into little (or large) tabula rasa lots with passing regard for context, we are left with stultifying cities: lackluster, alienating, and most troublesome of all, unadaptable to change, particularly change marked by natural or social catastrophe.

It is with the revolutionary, existential examination of context and the promise of an "expanded"[9] architecture that I turn to the work of the Suburbanists and PIJIN.NET, proposing a public-interest architecture that includes the very low- and high-tech: informal, artistic street interventions and social networking media. More than their built environment counterparts, these organic and ever-evolving strands are recession- and catastrophe-friendly (if you will) in their cost-effectiveness, unfettered as they are to the logistical concerns consequent to land use and construction. Moreover, they are most valuable for their easy transitions between diverse modalities and their ability to foreground and encourage community participation, discourse, transparency, patronage, education, and sustainability, phenomena essential to the practice of intelligent and sensitive city-making and, not least, democratic ownership.

Why do I proffer the simulacra of urban art and online media as components of the new public-interest architecture? Gordon Matta-Clark once remarked, "One of my favorite definitions of the difference between architecture and sculpture is whether there is plumbing or not."[10] In many ways, the differences attributed have underscored each practice's self-imposed limitations and weaknesses. "Public art" often connotes single, isolated structures, most of which are found in cities' financial centers. The truly avant-garde interventions tend to suffer from limited reach to even smaller audiences. Likewise, the architectural feats bestowed on cities by the world's "starchitects" are hermetically sealed boxes of glory, unmindful of society. Make no mistake, they are (usually) splendid achievements, but they privilege assertions of generational triumphs over engagement with or meditation on the quotidian experience.

A marriage of the avant-garde intervention and specialist architecture, however, confers upon their whole an influence greater than the sum of their parts. Our public-interest architect now wields the legitimacy of her expertise and concomitant political relationships, as well as the artist's irreverent

curiosity and necessarily boundless canvas. She upholds Peter Aeschbacher and Michael Rios' constructive social change through a "claiming of space" that incorporates "spaces of recognition," wherein people "assert their roles and responsibilities in defining shared claims and rights;" "spaces of engagement," where "emerging models of democracy provide new arenas for collective action;" and "spaces of materiality," the "major component of the creative commons that reflects civil society's values."[11]

First, the customary caveats. The Suburbanist collective case study is particular: its actors, location, and conditions specific to their Cape Town context. It is unrealistic to assume their "derelict"[12] acts can be replicated elsewhere without modification; indeed, any attempt would be a defeating negation of the *genus loci*. By contrast, PIJIN.NET's strengths lie in its flexible and adaptable interface. However, and while much less dear than construction, investment capital and resources for the site remain elusive. Indeed, this paper's source materials for PIJIN.NET are advanced versions of funding proposals.

THE SUBURBANISTS AND PIJIN.NET

The vigor with which Andrew Putter, art educator and co-founder of the Suburbanists; Maciek Strychalski, former student, fellow Suburbanist, and co-creator of PIJIN.NET; and their colleagues sought to create such spaces of recognition and materiality, and spur engagement in and about them identify them as philosophical kindred spirits to Aeschbacher and Rios. The modest troupe's members, convened by Putter, their friend and former art teacher as part of his postgraduate Education research, embraced the equal parts challenge and opportunity to heal, in what way they could, their Cape Town suburb's "dangerous streets, shattered nuclear families, and high rates of drug abuse."[13] Beginning with no capital aside from their own "art-specialist" imaginations and aspirations to "forge connections between realms normally kept separate,"[14] the band of eight embarked upon an urban adventure, "drifting," à la the Situationists, through the streets of their neighborhood. These "aimless wanderings…full of vivifying surprises,"[15] proceeded to inspire a profusion of creative output: collaborative sketchbooks, neighborhood-based typography, temporary graffiti tags called "paste-ups," a series of architectural award-winning, "real world space-making"[16] online social networking sites, and ultimately, PIJIN.NET, a

fully-realized MMOG ("massively multiplayer online gaming") social networking website.

Cape Town, as with all of South Africa, is beset by its unjust history and subsequently ineluctable social ills. The physical condition of the group's suburban neighborhood attests to its troubled history. "Driven by the need to alleviate social division in South Africa and its intrinsic distresses,"[17] they determined to work *with* the raw materials of their suburb rather than acting against them. The following section constitutes an examination of essential urban phenomenological dimensions—community participation, discourse, transparency, patronage, education, and sustainability—how they are brought to bear in the Suburbanists' works, and what we can apply to our nascent public-interest architecture.

SPHERES OF PARTICIPATION

A person lives in at least two communities in the globalized world: the one comprising her hyper-local, quotidian existence, and the one manifested by the increasingly networked, articulated transnational telecommunications technologies. In "Cities as Frontier Zones: Making Informal Politics," Saskia Sassen argues for an (inevitably political) informal shaping of the public sphere for it "makes possible the formation of new types of political subjects that do not have to go through the formal political system."[18] She calls for street- and Web-based initiatives specifically for their complimentarity.

> "As cities and urban regions are increasingly traversed by nonlocal, including notably global circuits, much of what we experience as the local becomes locally sited, is actually a transformed condition in that it is imbricated with nonlocal dynamics or is a localization of global processes. One way of thinking about this is in terms of spatializations for various projects—economic, political, cultural."[19]

The Suburbanist Projects and PIJIN.NET are striking because they typify precisely the community participation and political activation Sassen advances, in concert with the socio-psychological phenomenon of appropriation, wherein one takes ownership of things, "by endowing them with special meaning."[20] "The sketchbook project", the Suburbanists' first, was a collaborative journal-making and -passing scheme intended to connect them to each other and their suburb, providing each "a chance to ruminate intersubjectively—in writing and pictures—on the suburb."[21] (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Scanned excerpts from the sketchbook project. (Source: Andrew Putter)

After not too long, over eight notebooks were full of drawings, notes, and ideas which they shared gladly with one another, rather than retreating to corners of jealously guarded intellectual property so prevalent in the art world. In a move that prefigured his PIJIN. NET vision, Strychalski opened up the sketchbook project to neighbors, encouraging them to create and share their own sketchbooks at "SectorDrop"-designated locations in the community.

Of course, all of PIJIN.NET is an experiment in community participation- and social capital-enhancement. Strychalski and his co-creator developed the site to "foster collective identity and pride—artistic discovery and exhilaration—and skills development,"[22] thereby drawing young people away from such passive activities as television watching and gaming.

In PIJIN.NET, we see Sassen's "imbricated" communities brought to bear: players create works in and of their own material worlds and later upload their virtual representations onto the site. (Figure 2)

Using Flash technology, the ultra-rich media site provides a platform for users to create their own spaces, form and join groups depending on affini-
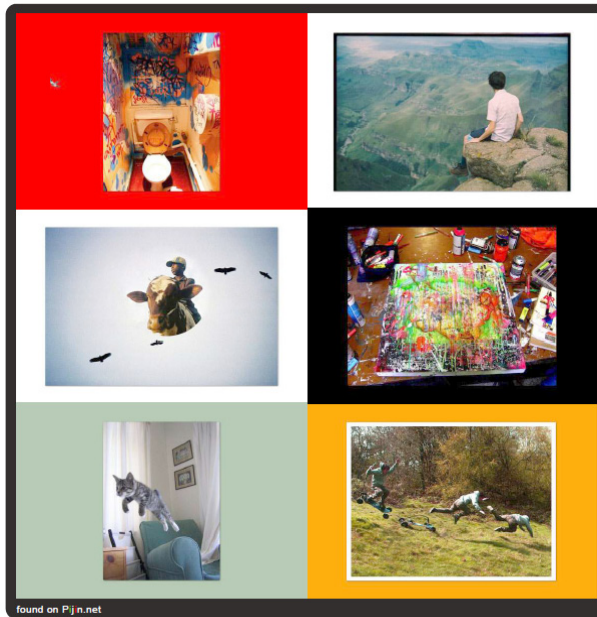
Figure 2: Some of the many worlds to be found on PIJIN.NET. (Source: Maciek Strychalski)

ties, and "upload images and writing into competitions of creativity where winners are decided by player votes."[23]

DEMOCRACY THROUGH DISAGREEMENT

Naturally, community participation is propelled by the discursive practice. Public-interest architecture can no more finish than sociocultural discourse, therefore, we must agree that transparency is constituent to that discourse—the street and Web becoming palimpsests, elucidating the divergent perspectives of those who have preceded us. Chantal Mouffe, in her examination of antagonistic democracy, proposes an alternative for diplomatic relationships between parties. In Mouffe's "agonism" we find "an us/them relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their challengers. They are adversaries, not opponents."[24] Constructively, then, the adverse groups can still perceive "themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place."[25]

Principal to the Suburbanist Projects and PIJIN.NET is a commitment to the discursive, agonistic milieu. For Strychalski, programming a democratic censor-

ship system on PIJIN.NET "opened a Pandora's box of possible uses/abuses and has, therefore, been the most interesting and difficult element."[26] Leader-Boards rank players' uploads and serve as the forum for users to compare works, and, if necessary, "get hissy" over "unfair"[27] score results.

The paradigmatic representation of the palimpsest in all of the Suburbanists' discursive projects, and perhaps the most emblematic of our public-interest architecture practice, is the "paste-up." (Figure 3) Throughout the course of their sketchbook project, the Suburbanists discovered they were each continually inspired by their neighborhood's tag graffiti. While materially one-dimensional and formulaic, tag graffiti carries with it multifaceted connotations. Some regard it as a legitimate, urban art form and expression of the urban condition. Others consider it unqualified vandalism. On yet another level, the "anti-environments" created by confrontational urban art inevitably "stand in opposition to environments in a way that reveals them as constructs."[28] Not surprising, then, is Cape Town's "city-wide War on Graffiti"[29] policy. What might surprise, however, is that the Suburbanists' direct interventions on the extant graffiti via temporary applications of paper and water-based wallpaper catalyzed improbable alliances throughout the area.

UNLIKELY AND INVALUABLE ADVOCACY

The proposal to add to graffiti more graffiti was risky: taggers could be unimpressed (or worse) and anti-graffiti adults could consider it more of the unwelcome same. Acknowledging these positions, the Suburbanists strategized intently about exactly what their tag-inspired project would be, as well as how to "promote" it to skeptics and taggers alike. Evoking Mouffe's agonistic democracy and John Forester's progressive planner, Putter explains: "Provisionally accepting the reductive idea that there are two sides, we would value both, persuading them into the projects, somehow connecting their separate dreams through our work."[30]

Further, the installation and weekly de-installation processes proved effective in relaying critical messages of custodianship to both adversarial groups. Placed on public walls, the designs responded directly to the tagging underneath, echoed the neighborhood's leitmotifs, or just expressed what that particular Suburbanist was feeling at the moment

Figure 3: The Suburbanist paste-ups in "derelict spaces. (Source: Andrew Putter)

of creation. Neighborhood responses included: "anything is better than graffiti," from "80-something" Wolfie; "it's just what the kids need, a way of expressing themselves without vandalizing anything,"[31] from Gloria; and "I salute what you young people are doing,"[32] from erstwhile vocal anti-graffiti protester Mrs. Edwards. Even The Law was won over: Inspector Sisam's police station lobby shortly became the Suburbanists' de facto mid-drift lounge for the course of the residency.

THE WORLD IS OUR CLASSROOM

The "expert" is a problematic figure for the Suburbanists, an imposing presence that "silences the unconventional or tentative ideas of others, and… flattens difference and forestalls the emergence of experimental assemblages."[33] Putter's disdain for

the top-down "bureaucratic effect"[34] compelled him, then, to risk social discomfort at the first meeting, limiting himself to the standard introductions and the conceptual broad strokes. While pregnant, awkward silences did follow his overture, after long they were relieved by keen, collaborative scheming in an authentically democratic setting.

PIJIN.NET's sharp design and unique utilization of Flash for social networking betokens its creators' passion for experimental and productive education, and its facility for conducing personal, cultural, and social capital. (Figure 4)

Players, going on explorative and inspiration-seeking drifts in their own areas, share the resultant art via "peer to group" interactions and networks they manage democratically in an online sphere that explores
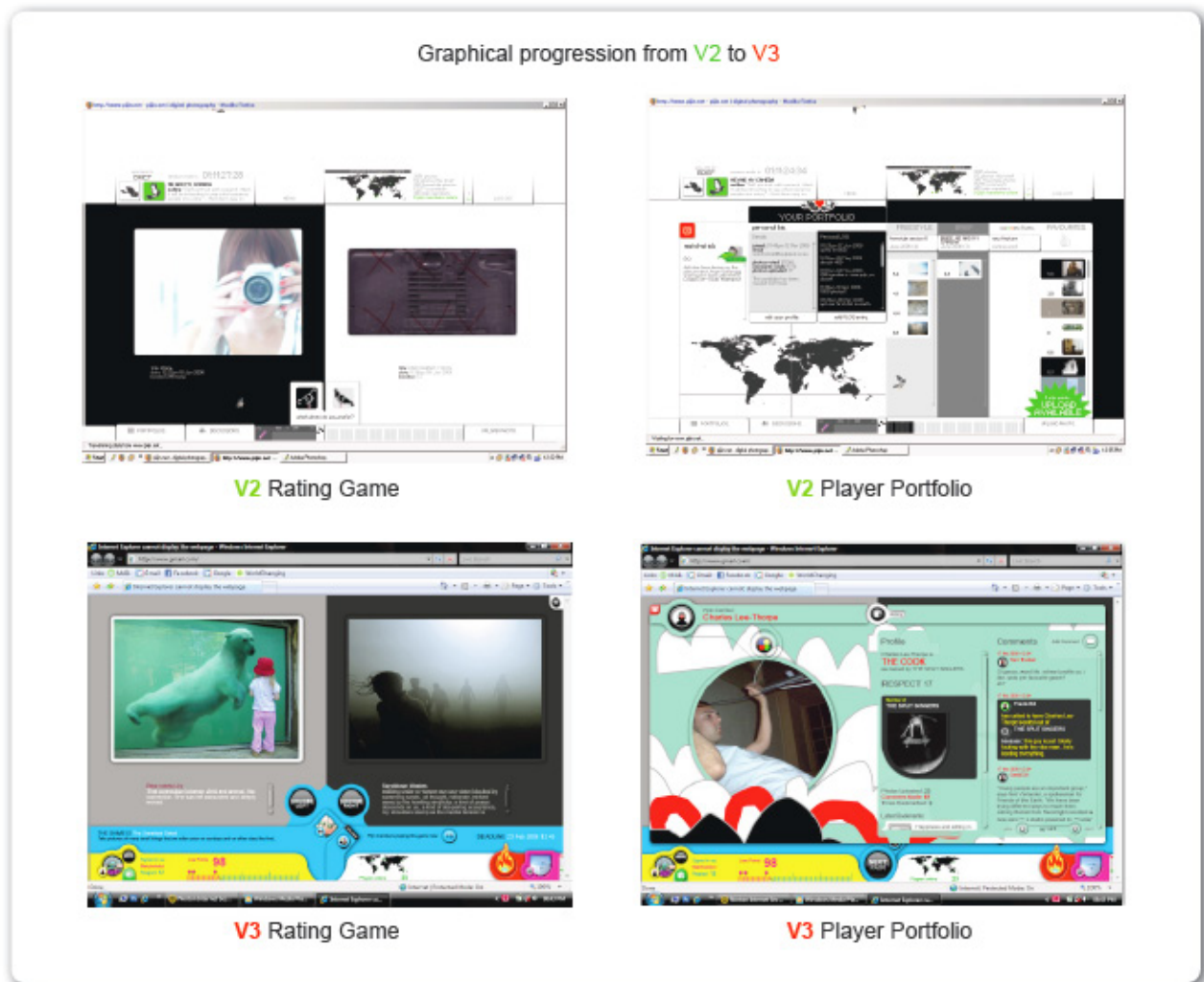
Figure 4: PIJIN.NET provides a creative platform and learns from itself. (Source: Maciek Strychalski)

and challenges prevailing concepts of social dynamics. "Most importantly," explains Strychalski, "you will have a space where "respecting" yourself and those around you is the most valuable currency."[35]

In a 1992 interview with Paul Panhuysen, founder of the experimental music and sound venue Het Apollhuis, and sometimes urban planner averred, "all sorts of technological media will be used in the near future by nearly everybody. But what is important is that we look at these not simply as tools, but as tools that may be useful."[36] PIJIN.NET's educational philosophy does not stop at cultural and social capital building. Rather, this creative global community is just the beginning. The long-term aim is to apply the portable, docile PIJIN.NET System to a number

of uses, foremost among them, interactive online schooling. "Students would rather play games than do homework. The PIJIN.NET System allows them to do both." The "ultimate" goal? That PIJIN.NET will host "The World's First Creative Olympics."[37]

CREATIVE EXPRESSION THROUGH CONSERVATION

Sustainability, our final dimension, links with and subsumes all others. A term often understood solely in ecological and climatological terms is best taken to represent our necessary mission to protect our natural, built, social, and economic environments through practices revolutionary for their counterpart boundary-pushing ideologies and pragmatic

Figure 5: Exploration and custodianship. (Source: Andrew Putter)

systems. We do not need, nor are we served by, the public art monoliths populating urban financial centers. Indeed, the trend away from political monumentality was observed well before the economic meltdown. In 1998 political art historian Sergiusz Michaelski noted, "We are witnessing an important caesura: the traditional involvement with a message and the semantics of the isolated monument is being replaced by a growing regard for its contextualization, both visual and symbolic.[38] The most successful and critically acclaimed monuments are either temporary or unmonumental. Non-enduring public art—and in some cases architecture—is now preferred because to contemporary society, "the presence of enduring objects has become as exotic as time itself."[39] Laura Burkhalter and Manuel Castells go further, reasoning that art is a critical element in "the construction of meaning in the sprawling metropolis…[and therefore must be] distributed around multi-located public spaces of all sizes."[40]

Thusly the Suburbanist oeuvre evinces sustainability. The drift-inspired Cape Town interventions required virtually no materials (after all, the streets and walls were there already); were temporary in a way that echoed the life cycle, rather than disposability; and reignited in residents pride in, ownership of, and, ultimately, hope for their community, perhaps some of the most difficult things to sustain in the midst of an urban backslide. (Figure 5)

Ironically, the least material product coming from the Suburbanist movement, PIJIN.NET, is the one most threatened by its need for financing. In-

deed, the sponsorship section in "PIJIN.NET: Let the Games Begin" is headed "Financial Sustainability,"[41] and its predecessor "PIJIN.NET: Project Concept and Description" admits upfront, "considering that this project is primarily about cultural and intellectual capital rather than financial capital…[it] doesn't easily lend itself to fiscal backing (at least until there are "millions" of users)."[42]

PUBLIC-INTEREST ARCHITECTURE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The enduring city, as the political monument, is acquiring a tragic exoticism all its own. In their article "Urban Design and Civil Society in New Orleans: Challenges, Opportunities and Strategies in the Post-Flood Design Moment," activist planners Jason Neville and Geoff Coats assert, "we are learning to dream pragmatically."[43] This steady-eyed stargazing, I believe, is at the heart of what will make public-interest architecture a substantive and sustainable profession. Sharing as we do Norberg-Schulz's axiom that ""place" means something more than location,"[44] that it in fact serves as our "existential foothold,"[45] we are beholden to pursue design that is as elevating and empowering as it is feasible, immaterial of a project's scale. Following are select policy recommendations that can be implemented to propel this public-interest architecture into current practice, thus effectuating lasting "footholds" in our communities.

• *Cede control as expert and share power*. The architect and urban planner for public good

need to be unpretentious and sincere, eager to be the students rather than the teachers, and not least, willing to forgo design in favor of discourse. Certainly, the community participation process takes more time and energy than does the technocratic approach, but the latter does not approximate the former's ease of implementation or, critically, legitimacy. If we are to be public-interest architects, we must seek out the public's interests.

- *Adopt an asset-based analytical approach when assessing a neighborhood or site.* Too often, designers seek out the negative aspects of a place first, aiming to diagnose quickly and subsequently remedy whatever ailments they find. This is an unfortunate tendency in that it both intimates a sense of superiority and entitlement assumed by the practitioner—"listen here while I tell you what is wrong with your home"—and all but ignores extant community strengths and resources. Asset-based approaches curb the likelihood of lost opportunities and convey to community members that the practitioner intends to immerse herself in and learn from them, rather than imposing inappropriate and ill-fitting bureaucratic ideals.

- *Design projects to evolve with the community's needs*. Cardinal to our public-interest architecture: there is no "finished product." This is a methodology without a terminus. Dictating ends and finalities undermines the organic pliancy necessary for virtuous urban design. To realize "spaces of engagement" requires a commitment to seeking out new milieus for and strands of communication. Communities and their environments are self-reflexive, dynamically altering over time and with changes in political, economic, and social conditions. So must the public-interest architecture persist, as a continually evolving commitment, a practice in the most genuine sense.

- *Hold charrettes that assume no new materials will be used and nothing "built."* Call this an "architecture of appropriation" wherein the designer is challenged to work with existing, readily available materials. Referring back to data amassed in the asset-based analysis, this approach's aim is multifarious. It inspires creative problem solving, holds with sustainable design practices, and prepares designers to work in the absence of capital investment. These charrettes begin with the foundational assets and delve further, transforming otherwise neutral or negative aspects into opportunities for social capital-enhancing opportunities.

- *Include public-interest architecture foundations in curricula.* Community participation and power-sharing; self-organizing, anarchist models; asset-based analyses; indeed, all models purporting social engagement for sustainable, equitable, and expressive urban design are multivalent and specialized enough to warrant a place in architecture's academic canon. Social empowerment formulae may *seem* self-evident, but the moment presumptions are made about the social dimension, so the risk for failure multiplies exponentially.

In truth, none of the aforementioned methods are new, having been put forth in one form or another for decades by community design leaders such as Randolph Hester and Henry Sanoff. Only in the revision process did I learn I had unwittingly reiterated three of Sanoff's five principles of participation.[46] I humbly reiterate his precepts and advocate for his and Hester's important work to be the bedrock of any public-interest architecture praxis.

One of globalization's myriad paradoxical conditions is that a pointedly local and intimate event can, in a matter of moments, become a fully realized global phenomenon. Local responses and global reactions reverberate in and inform the other, heretofore-unknown parishes such as The Ninth Ward becoming worldwide avatars for all those forgotten and misplaced in the globalization process. People can experience, internalize, sometimes share (own?) the elation and misery experienced half a world away. Perhaps the apparently interminable flow of data characteristic the information age overwhelms, causing inertia where there should be effort? Our public-interest architecture demystifies and deconstructs the contradiction. If anything, the two spheres represent a single starting point. We now leverage creative power coetaneously in the hyperlocal and hyperspace dimensions, effectively creating communities from all sides.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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