

## Sold Out

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**This paper looks at how buildings and design work realistically exist in the world for many young practitioners - as a breadth of curated and consumable representations. But looking beyond the proliferation of the image (blogs, books, social media), consumer artifacts may be the most effective conduits for the dissemination and presentation of architectural work as our contemporary landscape increasingly asks for more accessible artifacts and expedient modes of procurement. This paper explores alternative modes of production, representation, and dissemination for architecture practices through the lens of a recent exhibition by the authors' entitled "Sports the Store." The discussion of the exhibition intends to show how the insular nature of current architectural representation can be challenged with alternative modes of communication and production through everyday consumer artifacts to reach a larger, more general audience - and more importantly, a greater appreciation.**

### **PRACTICE AND COMMODIFICATION**

The current age of consumption has asked a lot of the production of architectural ideas and significantly implicates how they realistically exist in the world. Our work as designers, especially young designers, is rarely understood through one-on-one experiences of the built environment, but rather as a breadth of curated and consumable representations. In addition to the work itself, young practices must contend with the needs and possibilities for dissemination and promotion as well as opportunities for sly branding and the staking of stylistic territory. Nevertheless, the image of the architectural project has less and less agency as the saturation of visuals becomes significantly greater with every new technology and media stream. However, if we look beyond the proliferation of the image – in blogs, books, social media, etc. - consumer artifacts begin to present themselves as conduits for the dissemination and presentation of architectural work, perhaps more extensively than the actual objects or buildings themselves.

In one form or another the consumer object is, and has been, a vehicle for exploration in architecture studios. For many architecture practices, both contemporaneously and historically, these products – tea sets, chairs, glasses, etc. – are tangential ways to push forward a number of ambitions. For example, this type of work could be an expedited approach to get design ideas into a broader audience, a way to practice

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and explore sensibilities or concepts, or a way to generate income to augment the often precarious economics of proper architectural work. However, these are autonomous in most cases, running in parallel to specific architectural endeavors, rather than as direct representations of these endeavors themselves.

Perhaps one of the clearest examples of the commodification of architectural representation was the development of the gallery as a commercial outlet for work in the nineteen seventies and eighties. Galleries like the Max Protetch Gallery in New York exhibited and sold original drawings of design work by active architects like Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, and Daniel Libeskind, among others. With this model, there were financial rewards - an office, particularly those not building a significant amount, could augment their income stream with drawing sales. The gallery also provided a mechanism for the diffusion and expansion of architectural ideas to a broader audience. Architectural historian Jordan Kaufman writes of the Max Protetch Gallery that "no part of the market had a greater effect or influence on thinking about architecture than sales of architectural drawings. Thus, the Protetch Gallery was an integral part of the production of particular understandings of architectural drawings and through them, of architecture in general."<sup>1</sup> This model of selling representation was instrumental in blurring the boundaries of architectural production and ruffling the edges of practice. Venues like the Max Protetch Gallery demonstrated the potential impact of this commodification on the reach of practice.

But what may have existed as an earlier financial model for young architecture offices in the gallery scene, the contemporary landscape of today asks for more accessible artifacts and expedient modes of procurement. Our culture's current consumption model requires that representation align with various consumer aesthetics and be less expensive, easily available, and perhaps most importantly, intellectually or culturally approachable. In this context, consumer artifacts begin to present themselves as unique channels for the dissemination and presentation of architectural work. From "Starchitect" museums turned t-shirts, to building landmarks turned kids puzzle, the architectural project already exists strongly in the consumer space. Through third party operators, these buildings have already attached themselves to kitsch and consumer aesthetics and found their way into indifferent, but wide-reaching, commercial venues.



Figure 1: SPORTS the Store exhibition in Los Angeles

### SPORTS THE STORE

Our practice, SPORTS, is interested to know: can this latent thread of production be successfully appropriated by the architectural studio? Should it be? Can architects leverage the mass appeal and potential momentum inherent in the consumer artifact and define new possibilities for the boundaries, reach, and relevance of practice? Our recent exhibition, entitled *SPORTS the Store*, was an opportunity to consider questions such as these and explore alternative modes of production, representation, and dissemination.

This store was a response to the exhibition brief of *One Night Stand for Art and Architecture* in Los Angeles in 2017. The exhibition was created and organized by Anthony Morey and Ryan Martinez and curated by Jennifer Bonner, Volkan Alkanoglu, and Kyle Miller with a charge for young practices to think of new models for production that go beyond the common installation project.<sup>2</sup> SPORTS' project was a functioning gift shop consisting of a selection of custom consumer goods - t-shirts, tote bags, toys, mugs, etc. These artifacts were not autonomous or singular products but rather were representations (perhaps better described as merchandise) of SPORTS' built and unbuilt work. In other words, they were representational extensions of the projects, no different than drawings, photographs, and models other than they were packaged in commercially familiar vehicles. The store was a speculation on how practice might leverage the contemporary phenomenon of mass consumption to generate real traction through a consumeristic Trojan horse.

The artifacts for the exhibition were produced with ideas inherent to each project distilled as quick and easy depictions. For example, *Runaway*, a pavilion for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Santa Barbara (MCASB) consisting of three self-similar objects that are transported to different neighborhoods and rearranged at each new site to support specific visual and programmatic desires of MCASB was featured on a number of products. The "I heart SB" mug where the heart was replaced with an icon of the project was an

attempt to proactively advertise and designate the project as a significant landmark within the city. Two graphics that featured on shirts included one for the visual effect of the objects and one for the urban compositional possibilities of the project. These shirts were simultaneously both graphically playful attire and also diagrammatic artifacts for an architectural thesis about small and flexible urban gestures.

While most of the drawings and designs for the exhibition were generated internally, artist were also invited to help in the creation of the merchandise. Michael C. Hsiung is a well-known illustrator and artist in Los Angeles whose work has been used on products for Mountain Dew, Burton Snowboards, Vans, among others. Michael is known for playful characters populating strange situations and landscapes. His style and attitude were an appropriate fit to represent SPORTS' project *Rounds*, a whimsical performance space that uses simple curvy formal moves to encourage or instigate new ways of engaging with a performance and discovering the built environment. By soliciting Michael to produce an illustration for the exhibition his work provided a fresh interpretation of the character of the project, but did so in a cute, humorous, and immediately accessible manner that resonated with this audience.

The store was a speculation on how the insular nature of current architectural representation could be challenged by alternative modes of communication with the ambition to reach a larger, more general audience, and more importantly, cultivate a greater appreciation for architecture. Sales totaled over \$800 worth of merchandise (a large amount relative to the low cost of the individual artifacts) and the merchandise was sold to a great number and wide range of people. While some patrons were architects and educators, many were also creatively engaged people who perhaps had little intersection with the architecture world but came to the exhibition simply because it was a large event in Los Angeles. These people not only were obliquely engaged with architectural ideas but potential did so in a more meaningful way. Similarly, one could conclude that many patrons are then implicitly promoting these architectural ideas and works by wearing



Figure 2: Merchandise for Runaway and Rounds featured in the SPORTS the Store exhibition.

this merchandise around Los Angeles. In one way, the work is penetrating circles that it may not have otherwise.

It is a provocative thought to consider that simply a pivot in the representation could have a different, and maybe more effective, point of entry for a wider audience. Perhaps this is careless or flippant approach to self-promotion and a reductive model for circulating work. Maybe it is simply an architectural side-hustle. Maybe it is an irreverent embrace of something that people look down on but unfortunately has cultural agency. Nevertheless, one can argue architects operate in a discipline that is surprisingly insular, surprisingly irrelevant to the masses, and underappreciated and misunderstood as a profession. Perhaps for those trying to engage a larger audience and cultivate a greater appreciation for architectural work, selling out then is an appropriate action.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Jordan Kauffman, "Architecture in the Art Market: The Max Protetch Gallery" *Journal of Architectural Education*, 70:2 (2016), 257-268, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.2016.1197674>
2. See more information about exhibition and curatorial charge at [www.onenightstand-la.com](http://www.onenightstand-la.com)