
OBJECTS OF OUR AFFECTION

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INTRODUCTION

It has been my experience as both an architect and an educator that what evolves practice is not what happens in the offices of architects, but rather how the demands placed on us by others influence what architects do and how we do it. In an effort to expand this, I have been looking at the types of things we make through a metric of relationships and resources, a body count if you will, that considers architectural objects in relationship to their specific geography, processes and influence.

Using a series of case studies, the idea that I would like to put forth is that contemporary practice can be understood as operating within three distinct economies; the Economy of Patronage, the Economy of Architectural Production, and the Economy of Construction. The scale and impact of the work itself, as well as the mechanisms for authorship and collaboration, are conditioned by variable forces and hierarchies inherent in each economy, where our work is directed towards specific material objects. Moreover, innovation in practice can be seen where work is generated through new economies in which the efforts of architects are focused more on problem solving of a non object nature.

ECONOMY OF PATRONAGE

For this research, the Economy of Patronage has been defined as one in which an architect has the means, or is provided with the means to build occupiable buildings in the physical world that serve only a few people. This often takes the form of a single family home, a building type for which in most parts of the U.S. an architect is not required for design or construction.

Houses are typically designed and built by developers or construction companies; statistics vary, but well under 30% of new homes built in the U.S. involve an architect. It is the exception, and not the norm, for an individual to hire an architect to design a custom home, yet inversely this type of work is the bread and butter of many firms, and a rite of passage for architects in the early stages of their careers. The opportunity to design a home can provide a forum for innovation in materiality or detail for architects; working directly with contractors and fabricators architects are able to significantly influence how the buildings are made.

Kiel Moe's *Stackhouse*, (2009) and SSD Design's *Big Dig House* (2006) represent the type of work being done currently within the economy of patronage. Located in the rural environment of Boulder Colorado, *Stackhouse* is designed for use as a "pavilion" by its owners. It was designed by Moe in collaboration with the owners, a couple who have commissioned Moe for other work in the Boulder area. The entire number of people involved in the design and construction of the building totals twelve: four people including Moe during design, and eight people on site to build it. Moe served as contractor for the building, which was built in less than three months. It cannot be seen from the road, so the public has no physical experience of it, but the project has received no lack of recognition in the architectural press; it has received four national design awards (two from the AIA, and one from the ACSA) and has been published, by Moe and others, in at least five peer review publications.

BigDig House by SSD design is situated in the residential neighborhood of Lexington Massachusetts. Like *Stackhouse*, the project has won multiple design awards (two from the AIA) and, upon completion, served as a staple in lectures by the architects at schools of architecture. The home serves only the family living in it, who commissioned SSD after seeing a house designed by the architects under construction in the neighborhood. Portions of the project are made from salvaged materials from Boston's Big Dig project, and in 2007 it was featured on the cover of *Dwell Magazine*. It took only twenty-three people to design and construct the 3,300sf home; seven people during design and sixteen during an eight month construction period.

What these two examples demonstrate is perhaps the degree to which the re-presentation of the architectural object has more engagement with the public than the object itself. This may be a function of pure geography (both are located in low-density non pedestrian neighborhoods) and has the effect of increasing scale; when we work with only a few people on small scale buildings, reproducing and distributing them to a broader audience can be a way to make the projects bigger.

ECONOMY OF ARCHITECTURAL PRODUCTION

Here, Architects generate a creative intellectual inquiry that may take any number of forms; a book, installation, exhibit, movie, even an article for the ACSA conference proceedings.

Though the object of design is variable, the process for conception and execution of work in this economy consistently emphasizes individual authorship and singular control of content. George L. Legendre's book, *Pasta by Design* published in 2011 was developed in the office of Legendre's architectural firm, IJP, over the course of a one year. Working through several drafts, the manuscript was completed in its entirety by six people, including Legendre and his colleague Mario Guarnieri, before being shown to publishers. Once the publisher (Thames and Hudson) signed a contract for the book, it took no more than a dozen people, and another year, to print seven-thousand copies. The book -which provides a visual and mathematical taxonomy of pasta-, has received extensive praise by mainstream media, including a review in the New York Times, a mention in both Oprah and Esquire magazines, and being named one of 2011's top books by NPR. As in the economy of patronage, the extensive publicity and re-presentation of the work draws attention to the individual firm, with the potential to generate interest from future clients.

A curated example of the Economy of Architectural Production is The Young Architects Program sponsored by MOMA PS1. Since its inception in 2000, this annual competition has provided a venue for emerging architects to test ideas at full scale in the courtyard of PS1 in Queens, New York. A small number of firms are invited by committee to be considered for an opportunity to design a temporary urban landscape that will serve as a recreation space and concert venue for the institutions summer programs. Three firms are then given a small stipend and a couple of months to produce a proposal for the space. The winner is provided with a budget and essentially serves as design-build contractor for the project; contracting directly with fabricators, hiring and (more often) soliciting volunteers for installation. This is in addition to signing a waiver of liability for the duration of the installation.

Here the architect is in complete control of cost, fabrication, installation, and the public safety of thousands of people. What is notable about this is the minimal nature of the resulting projects; in the past ten years none have required a building permit from the city. At the time of this writing, the 2012 winner, Wendy by HWKN, was required by the city of New York to obtain a permit because of the extensive stairs within the project.

Both of the above examples illustrate the degree to which a client (here a museum or an individual buying a book) is purchasing an authored product. The book is finished before it is even considered for publication; with PS1 the content is mediated through the objectives of the client, but the Museum is explicitly soliciting a visionary product from an individual or entity that can take sole responsibility for authorship and delivery of it. True to the nature of this economy, this work has a self selecting audience and is not consistently free to the public; *Pasta by Design* sells for \$18.26 on Amazon, and the admission to PS1 varies from \$5 to \$15. In the economy of Architectural Production we produce and consume our own work; many of the volunteers working with the winners of PS1 each year to install the projects are architecture students; the same population paying to

see the work, and reading the reviews of it. Although each summer the finalists enjoy some mainstream press (this year's Wendy even received a review in the Huffington Post), the competition is extensively covered in the architectural press both in print and on-line, and of course in lectures at architecture schools.

ECONOMY OF CONSTRUCTION

Ideas about practice, and about innovation in practice, are often delivered to students and those teaching architecture through examples from the two economies described above, where authorship is clear, and where architects generate new ideas while working in direct contact with those responsible for fabricating and installing the work. The built environment, however, is largely generated through what we will call the Economy of Construction. This is where architects work with clients to build buildings that fulfill the needs of multiple constituencies.

In most of the U.S. only buildings of a large scale and budget typically fall under the purview of architects. An important outcome of this condition is that professional architects have three types of primary clients—developers, institutions, and governments—who are charged with the most decision-making power about the built environment. In the Economy of Construction these sizable organizations form our main client base and have complex networks for evaluation and acquisition of large-scale projects such as a building, with many constituents to respond to and many resources to draw on for expertise in construction.

The thirty nine page RFP for a new building at the Brooklyn Navy Yard (B92), completed in 2011 and designed by Beyer Binder Bell Architects of NYC, represents just how much work a client has done before even interviewing architects. The scope of work and legal and physical terms for its delivery were in development for more than a year before they were issued to prospective architects in 2007. In this project, as in most that are subject to public bid, the architects partnered with another firm, as well as multiple consultants for the project, and the overall number of people working on the design prior to construction was almost matched on the client side; around twenty-eight individuals compared to twenty-four on the client end; eight on the committee making decisions, plus three internal stakeholders, a board of trustees, exhibition committee, lawyers, and a construction manager.

The publically traded financial services corporation that commissioned its NYC headquarters to PCF in the early 2000's is ultimately responsible to shareholders and the neighborhood before being beholden to a single idea from the architect. For this building there were no less than twelve architectural firms contracted to the client from conception to completion. This is not because anyone was fired or replaced, but because that's how many were needed; two for the extensive programming that resulted in the RFP, a design architect, executive architect, and eight different firms for specific parts of the two million square foot interior. The owner's representatives, a NYC

development company responsible for reviewing major components of the buildings architectural, structural and mechanical systems, employed more than two dozen people for project. This is in addition to the hundreds on staff on the client side who worked on the project during the seven years between programming and moving into the building. The knowledge base and construction expertise on the client side far exceeded that of any single architectural firm, and well over a thousand people were employed to physically build the building.

In short, architects are not the experts in the Economy of Construction; the collaborative checks and balances among the numerous individuals and entities involved at this scale are essential to making occupiable buildings, and the responsibility is spread among many. In a condition antithetical to the previous economies, neither of these buildings has received any attention from the architectural press; only mainstream media coverage announcing the openings. But there is an equally inverted condition of geography; hundreds of people walk by them every day.

NEW ECONOMIES

The contemporary economies described in the examples above suggest that our authorship is inversely proportionate to our influence over the built environment, and this may in fact be the case. Where change is happening in practice is when work is generated through collaborative relationships focused less on specific objects than on innovative ideas. Three notable examples of this are the BMW Guggenheim Lab, Urban Think Tank's Metro cable in Caracas, and the work of MASS Architects in partnership with Partners in Health.

With a goal to generate public discourse about how to improve urban life, the BMW Guggenheim Lab is funded by a car company and curated by an international museum. In each of three cities, the curators select an architect to design a temporary structure that will serve as a public forum for discussion. The structure is in place for a period of months and then moves to the next city. In the first stage of the Lab, in New York City, the discussions led to the creation of a new park for lower Manhattan. In effect, the architecture is not only temporary but arguably irrelevant; what remains is not a building by an architect, but a park.

MASS Design Group of Boston is a non-profit architectural practice operating in partnership with Partners in Health, a non-profit international healthcare organization dedicated to providing improved health care in the developing world. The education and training of local populations has been a hallmark of the effectiveness and accomplishments of Partners in Health, and MASS began by working with PIH on the design of a hospital in Rwanda in the early 2000's. The type of local education and infrastructure development that has proven effective in health care turns out to work in parallel fashion for buildings; as in the Economy of Patronage, the architects work closely on site to refine specific techniques of construction. This process leaves behind a population trained in the building trades who can serve their community with improved

construction techniques that can be applied to any building type in the future. In effect, the problem for the architects is not how to design or build a hospital, but how to amplify their clients (or in this case their partners) core mission.

CONCLUSIONS

In each of these examples architects are working with others to solve problems that are not object based. Change in practice is not coming through a new model for a firm, a specific process, or a new technique. Change is messy, and what will evolve practice is not us, but rather what is asked of us when we find ourselves in unobvious places.