Re-thinking site as field

Field notes, observations and practices

Field/Work

Suzanne Ewing

Four of the papers collected in this issue of arq were first presented at a conference called Field/Work, held in November 2009 and jointly organised by the University of Edinburgh and AHRA, the Architectural Humanities Research Association. Here, the Conference Chair reflects on the event, reviewing the ideas behind it and its outcomes.

The conference title contains a slash, a space of relation, also hinting at an uncertain connection between the two subjects of *field* and *work*. *Fieldwork* has many well established, and revisited, definitions in the disciplines of anthropology, geography and archaeology where it is seen as a practice clearly contributing to the pursuit of knowledge, with associated research methodologies and disciplinary habits. In the context of the late-twentieth-century's so-called 'ethnographic turn' in artistic thought and practice, architectural education, research and production have increasingly 'turned' towards, borrowed from and experimented with, modes of ethnographic exploration. Yet these have rarely been examined critically, or questioned in relation to field/work habits and production particular to architecture. A new attentiveness to 'field' and 'field/work' habits – by architects, and in the cause of architectural production and research – emerged as a critical theme underpinning the conference discussions and subsequent work.

The theme of 'fieldwork' was first mooted at the end of the 2007 AHRA conference in Kingston. It feels apposite to be reporting on this 2009 conference a symmetrical two years after the event, in 2011. In this four year period, the theme has been discussed, described, debated, challenged, addressed through the conference planning process, through public presentation and discussion, and more formally curated through the publication of a book *Architecture and Field/Work* (S. Ewing, J. McGowan, C. Speed, V. Bernie (eds)) which included work by fourteen of the conference presenters, the three keynote speakers, and four editors who were part of the conference planning team. The papers selected for this edition of **arq** resulted from the conference call and were subsequently developed and refined through conference and journal refereeing processes.

The term 'field' – in relation to the physically delimited, culturally- and historically-situated concept of 'site' – has developed simultaneously with the 'ethnographic turn', describing a more cloud-like set of social, cultural, economic and non-hierarchically networked conditions of reality. It has affected, and is unsettling, architecture's understanding of its own domain, scope, limits, habits, practices, potential and trajectory. What has become clearer, with critical distance from the event and conference book, is that architecture's capacity to *work* in, from and through *field* has something distinctive to offer to other disciplines, and other prevalent understandings of fieldwork. It enables active and pertinent strategies and tactics – and to some extent newly formed habits – for making connections and relations *between* field and work. Unlike other disciplines, field/work in architecture always contributes and connects, whether closely or more indirectly or collaboratively, to a form of architectural production, rather than remaining autonomous as field data. More in-depth explorations of this are included in the edited book, *Architecture and Field/Work*.

Around one hundred delegates from sixteen countries met on the late afternoon of Saturday 20 November 2009 in the University of Edinburgh's Architecture Lecture Room, with an assembled panel of the conference chair and keynote speakers. After two full days of the conference in three venues – an opening reception at the Talbot Rice Art Gallery's *Darwin* exhibition, academic paper presentations in rooms in Minto House, Chambers Street, an evening dinner in the Sculpture Court of Edinburgh College of Art, and a forthcoming 'Field Sunday' to take place in Inspace digital gallery – delegates met to consolidate and summarise some key aspects of what had emerged as significant from this gathering of academics and practitioners from across the world. The keynote speakers had oriented the conference theme, which was addressed in a range of ways by fifty-two selected papers, loosely grouped thematically in eighteen parallel sessions, poster presentations – a selection of 'visual findings' which were part of a physically exhibited backdrop to the event, and one website under construction with an open twitter feed. With so much compressed and varied activity, what was it possible to conclude in a short summary panel session?

The keynote speakers' contributions offer some possibility of weaving significant threads, of identifying some tone,

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texture and fabric of the conference, perhaps 'thinning the concept and thickening the discourse', to quote Andrea Kahn's orienting comments opening the event on the Friday morning. Founding Principal of consulting practice, designCONTENT, New York, and adjunct Professor of Urban Planning in the Graduate School of Columbia University, she set a clear tone. While revisiting her particular work as contributing editor of *Site Matters: Design Concepts, Histories and Strategies* (with Carol Burns, 1995), she touched on how we apprehend site, how we delineate boundaries, how we understand site specificity, site scale, and actions of and as site construction. The critical motif that she offered was from John Dewey's work: 'Thinking is secreted in the interstices between habits.' She cautioned the conference's described intentions: perhaps a tangling of questions, a saturated, thick concept which might be in danger of leading to a thin discourse if basic questions are overlooked. With rich territories, and text inviting theorisation, what are the values that guide us? What values guide site and field/work activity in and of architecture, or even define and redefine the disciplinary field? To what end and to whose benefit are these activities undertaken?

After a full day of diverse and stimulating papers, a viewing of the poster presentations in the Matthew Gallery, and an enjoyable dinner overseen by nineteenth-century casts of the 'gleaned' Parthenon frieze, award-winning UK broadcaster and oral historian Alan Dein opened the gathering on Saturday morning. He shared knowledges and practices of field/work, through his oral history and audio essays usually based in urban landscapes. He journeyed from a Birmingham industrial estate to Islington Mission Hall, to Pentonville Prison, to ongoing work in the changing area of King's Cross in London. Explaining his ambitions to unlock memories, to explore living memory, to craft a new construction, he exposed his position in relation to an 'outsider art' of two traditions – voice and sound – which connect both with worlds of pasts and create new potential futures. The lingering of constructed images through sound and voice are achieved with a close and practised relationship with particular tools: the microphone, recording equipment and an implicit relationship with the subject-person and -place. Oral





field/work is a slow, yet open, process. Questions about the storage of the gathered material, and the openness of dissemination, resonated with Kahn's orienting question of the ethics of benefit and use.

The lingering register of Dein's presentation set up the subsequent keynote presentation as an unexpectedly rich dialogue, where questions blurred into the beginning of Can Altay's contribution. Altay is an architect based in Turkey who works across the boundaries of architecture, art, urbanism, practice and research. He is an explorer of spatial practices and acts as what he has termed a spatial anthropologist. The discussion with Dein focused on the idea of tools and practices in the urban context, of working with the overlooked and understanding the generative potential of a carefully crafted observational output which might activate some aspect of the complex condition of the contemporary, contested public urban domain. Altay described his aims as exploring limits, tools and methodologies of existing modes and traditions of practice in the city – always reassessing methods, reviewing ways of advancing means. Examples included the neutrality of a field trip to enable those in urban authority to see new potential commissions and actions in their city, maps which opened up previously unimagined connections, and an extract from the film, *White Butterfly Laundries*, made with Philipp Misselwitz, which was a moving embodiment of the potential of work in a hidden field which revealed strikingly intense stories of the *in situ* real lives of a group of endangered women. Altay's focus on the question of 'refuge' in the city, alongside this particular work from the field, recalled the conference delegates to questions of value and ethics. How do you cross the threshold between research and practice? What is the professional responsibility to act,

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having worked in/with the field?

Three dominant threads emerged from this plenary discussion. First, a reminder of basic questions – taking on board an attentiveness to habits and habitual practices of what is understood within and without the 'field' of architecture, urbanism, landscape, sociology, anthropology, art. Taking seriously possibilities of re-making, reinventing and responding to and adapting habits, of therefore being able to think 'in the interstices between habits'. Second, acknowledging that the *field* is not neutral or a mere plaything – there are responsibilities of engagements, disseminations, relations, methods of being and acting in the world that have been worked through by a number of disciplines, in particular anthropology. Third, as the keynote speakers had exposed in their own work – Kahn's writing and thinking/site constructions; Dein's audio essays; Altay's refuge film – the nature of any *work* in the field has its own vocabulary, tools, productive spaces, imaginative realms, and these practices and techniques deserve careful attention. Many other field 'works' were exposed through the two days of the conference in academic papers and posters: inventories, drawings, films, maps, diagrams, narratives, briefs, propositions. As organisers, we had been surprised by the proportion of case-study and reflective practice material which we had received from the fairly open call.

The papers selected for this **arq** issue deal with methodologies of fieldwork: living in the field, the literal working of the field, routes in the field, expanding the field and, as such, connect with much anthropological appreciation of what 'fieldwork' is and might be. However, the particularity of field/work in relation to architecture, the urban, landscape, art practice, is demonstrated through the necessary production of 'constructions', of *work* which become integral to this 'fieldwork': Anarchitecture's 'catalogue', the events of Polyark, Steidle's transformative restorations, meticulous visual and textual documentary from Columbia.

Collectively and in dialogue, the keynote speakers at the conference during the two days enabled a deeper focus of this *field/work*: of practice, secretion, openness, limit, hybridity, reconstitution, adjacency, originality, intent, allowing space for more work and discussion in terms of its relation to a range of fields and other disciplines. The event enabled clarifications and orientations of the definition and scope of the conference theme of *Field/Work*. Importantly, they highlighted a need to be attentive to that space of relation – and underpinning ethics and values – between *field* and *work* in architecture.

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