How do architects act on behalf of others?

Modes of comportment and possibilities for action

Agency

Stephen Cairns

'Agency' is a beguiling word. It has the immediacy of a call-to-arms and the remoteness and anonymity of a bureaucratic function. Agency, as action in the world, underpins revolutionary social change, and the representation of someone else's interests – usually at a distance – in a governmental or business context. It is implicated in both the agitprop of the Reclaim the Streets network, or Brazil's Homeless Workers Movement, and in state bureaucracies such as the UK Border Agency, or commercial franchises such as the Western Union. The term encapsulates two quite distinctive forms of action: one individuated, collective and immediate; and the other systemic, anonymised and bureaucratic. It is no accident, then, that in academic literature 'agency' is often paired with 'structure', and in the binarised form, structure/agency, is used to refer to the tension between the creative actions of individuals and the social, political and economic structures that supposedly constrain them. The fact that architects are expected to exercise agency in both of these senses – as creative actors and as representatives of their clients' interests – gives the theme further significance.

So when the organising group at the University of Sheffield's School of Architecture decided to organise last year's Architectural Humanities Research Association (AHRA) conference around the theme of *Agency*, they were charting a rich terrain for discussion. By leaving the term to stand so nakedly unqualified by subtitles or diacritical marks, the organisers must have been confident that the wider ramifications of the term would be mobilised. Of course, it is clear that 'Agency' makes a better conference title than 'Structure', or 'Structure/Agency', or certainly 'Structuration!' – the term that sociologist Anthony Giddens coined in his attempt to reconcile that awkward binary.[1] Despite its brevity, there should be no doubt that the long legacy of the structure/agency debate haunted the conference. The question that follows is how this legacy was managed, marshalled, activated, explored and extended in the event itself.[2]

The *Agency* conference was the fifth in the now well-established AHRA series, beginning in 2004 with *Critical Architecture* (UCL), followed by *Models and Drawings* (University of Nottingham 2005, **arq** 9.3+4), *The Politics of Making: Theory, Practice, Product* (Oxford Brookes University 2006, **arq** 10.3+4), *Architecture and Curatorship* (Kingston University 2007), and to be followed by *Field/Work* (University of Edinburgh) in November 2009, and *Scale* (University of Kent) in 2010. This series, remarkable for the quality of debate it has promoted, also includes a strong set of publications (Routledge) and a number of valuable postgraduate workshops. The organisation, and the conferences, workshops and publications it has seeded, are hinged on the idea of an 'architectural humanities' that emphasises self-reflexive critique and speculative curiosity about built environments as they are and what they could be. It is an idea that the Sheffield conference sought to exploit by focusing on the sub-themes of 'architectural praxis' and 'the big social and political questions of our age concerning the survival of the environment'. The transformative power of architecture was openly advocated in the original call-for-papers/-to-arms:

> *AGENCY accepts that the conditions for effective action are both*



https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135509990182 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contingent on individual circumstances and constantly changing. Nevertheless, the conference sets out to explore how humanities research can better contribute towards understanding current architectural needs, possibilities and capacities for action. It will explore what is meant by 'action' in this context, what kinds of activities and conditions are relevant, what prevents the effective exercise of agency, and how the consideration of such prevention might indicate effective points of, and tactics for, alternative action.

The keynote speakers – an architect, academic and an artist – offered substantial grist to this call.





Border territories

Teddy Cruz is perhaps the best known in contemporary architecture circles. He is Principal at Estudio Teddy Cruz, and is Associate Professor at the University of California, San Diego. He has also established a lively research and advocacy group, known as the Border Institute (BI), and has worked in collaboration with community-based, non-profit organisations such as Casa Familiar (a 'community service agency') on housing and more inclusive urban policy. His architectural work is based in and around the US/Mexico border at San Diego/Tijuana. It is a growing body of work that focuses on innovative forms of housing, both North and South of the border.[3]

The striking thing about his work is that it is based on rigorous research and a nuanced understanding of the political, economic and cultural workings of the highly charged border territories. For all its ubiquity, most of us in middle-class urban Europe are relatively insulated from the profound contradictions and inequities that are structured into the globalisation phenomenon. What appears so striking about the territories where Cruz works is that the effects of globalisation are materialised and manifest in inescapable ways: in the morphologies of the twin cities, in the complex security apparatus of the border itself, and the *maquiladoras* that draw foreign investment from across the US and the Pacific and labour from the South. As Mike Davis has noted, this borderland functions both as dam and sieve, generating a reservoir for cheap labour in the South that feeds the economies of California and other states to the North.

Cruz has a good grasp of the macro- and micro-politics that structure the built environment in which he works, and it is the way that he negotiates them by architectural means that is so impressive. His work is, significantly, framed by a neat inter-institutional relationship whereby his own practice, University appointment and advocacy with the Border Institute enable him to mix various forms of cultural and economic capital and channel it into practical architectural outcomes.

Universal design

Leslie Kanes Weisman, the conference's second keynote speaker, has a long-standing reputation as critic, scholar and community activist. Her earlier scholarship culminated in the widely-read and -cited book *Discrimination by Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man-Made Environment* (University of Illinois Press, 1994). This book remains an important critique of the masculinist foundations of architecture as discourse and practice. She is currently Professor Emerita of Architecture, New Jersey Institute of Technology, in the US. In addition to her academic work she has been a significant innovator at the interface between the academy, education and community activism. She co-founded Sheltering Ourselves: A Women's Learning Exchange, an international educational forum on housing and economic development for low-income women and their families, ongoing since 1987, and the Women's School of Planning and Architecture (1974–81), a national summer programme for women in the environmental design professions and trades.

Her focus at the Sheffield conference was on universal design

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135509990182 Published online by Cambridge University Press

or, 'Creating the Universally Designed City: Prospects for the 21st Century'. It was a direct and impassioned call for engagement with the principles of universal design in the face of the disability discrimination that remains, despite the widespread adoption of international access standards, stubbornly encoded into everyday architectural spaces. Agency here was understood less as the capacity of the architect to act creatively in the world, and more as enabling greater numbers of people to find a legitimate place within it. In this respect, Kanes Weisman offered a powerful injunction to consider architecture as a practice of accessibility and social equity.

Provocative projects

A further perspective on the conference theme was sketched compellingly by artist and activist John Jordan in the final keynote lecture. Jordan has a remarkable career in a type of public protest that is informed by performative art practices. He has been Co-Director of the art-activist group Platform (*www.platformlondon.org*), and subsequently co-founded the well-known Reclaim the Streets (1995–2000) collective. Following a period as an academic at Sheffield Hallam University, he co-edited *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism* (Verso, 2003), a global (Finland, Bolivia, Thailand, Brazil, France, Mexico, Italy, Kenya) charting of the anti-globalisation initiatives that emerged in the aftermath of the G8 Summit in Seattle. Jordan was one initiator of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) that toured the UK leading up to the G8 Summit in Scotland (2005), and currently works on the Camp for Climate Action project, 'a temporary self managed eco-village and direct action base'.

Jordan's lecture outlined a variety of provocative projects. Each one demonstrated that over the course of a career, now spanning more than two decades, he has developed a substantial catalogue of tactics, tools, ruses and ploys, as well as organisational and logistical strategies that can be deployed flexibly within a shifting range of political concerns. Particularly interesting are his later engagements with alternative or utopian community formations. These initiatives, building upon earlier and more sporadic acts of disobedience, seem to promise genuinely new styles of community formation. It is here that his work comes closest to explicitly architectural concerns; the self-organisational principles of the Camp for Climate Action, for example, demand a re-thinking of the infrastructures that enable cooking, eating, socialising, learning, entertaining, washing etc. In this case the conventional representational mediums of art are abandoned and replaced by the malleable social fabric itself.

The idea of agency was effectively triangulated by this group of keynote speakers. For all their differences – biographical, institutional, disciplinary – the keynote speakers presented a remarkably consistent approach towards the conference theme. Collectively, they charted the kind of inter-institutional alliances, geographical positioning, wit, wisdom and nous, and the sheer discipline and energy, that is required for effectively exercising agency in and around the pressing political issues that globalisation has thrown up. By affirming agency each could be said to resonate with the 'yes we can' spirit of Obama's Presidential campaign – concentrated to such powerful effect in will.i.am's YouTube hit of the same name. This, for me, was the energising call that resonated throughout the conference.

Structure

But what of the other side of the agency coin, structure? Was this theme evident, articulated, or otherwise exorcised in the conference? It might be argued that, however much its disciplinary imagination projects itself as offering structures for agency, architecture is more often than not the agent of structure. David Harvey and others have regularly pointed to the deep complicities between architecture, real-estate, capital and the politics of urban development. And as any practising architect knows, the space of the architectural project is heavily over-determined by economic, legislative and social parameters. In any event, architecture poses a strikingly complex site for the analysis of agency. A number of papers in the conference's parallel sessions offered useful approaches to this complex terrain: Ines Weizman's paper 'Architect Dissents: The Possible Architecture of the Governed' on architects working in post-Soviet Russia; Darren Deane's paper 'Inverted Agency: Letting Matter Speak' carefully examined the agency of materials in Louis Kahn's work; Graham Livesey's paper 'Assemblage, Agency, And Ecologies of the Contemporary City' helpfully activated Deleuze's concept of the assemblage; and Paul Emmons' 'Who Built It? Building Credits And The Presence Of Architectural Agency In Building' used Alfred Gell's work on distributed agency in anthropology to consider architectural authorship. These papers, of the small sample that I managed to attend, broached the theoretical consequences of structure/agency that otherwise tended to circulate implicitly.

While 'Agency' may be a better conference title than 'Structure' or 'Structuration' it may be, by way of concluding, worth considering why. Replacing 'agency' with 'structure' would merely invert the issue, and we would be left asking about the status of agency, free will, and capacity to act in the world.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135509990182 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Giddens' term has the virtue and disadvantage of being precise and is, more practically, awkward to pronounce. 'Agency' in the context of architecture cannot help but problematise itself. It can never be a self-evident disciplinary slogan. Giddens' project sought to reconcile the agent-oriented social theories that took the desires, motivations, passions and skills of individual actors seriously with the structural properties of social systems. For Giddens 'structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both constraining and enabling', because 'structure is not "external" to individuals'. Structure, in this sense, is seen as a kind of immersive 'medium' for individual action rather than its polar opposite.

Capacities to act

This line of thinking was subsequently radicalised by Bruno Latour.[4] Operating in the empirical terrain of science and technology studies (STS), Latour emphasises the performative, relational and networked qualities contemporary of society. Society, for Latour as for Giddens, is presented as a medium for social action rather than a mute system or structure into which social agents are inserted. But Latour goes further by distributing agency not only into structure but by explicitly attributing it so-called 'non-human actors' such as machines, technologies, infrastructures and artefacts that we usually see as inert. For Latour, our capacities to act in the world depend on our abilities to forge functional 'alliances' with other 'actors' many of which will be non-human. This radical extension of agency, both spatially and across conventional category boundaries, serves to draw attention to the myriad 'prosthetic' relationships – with laptops, mobile phones, bikes, buildings etc. – we rely upon in our day-to-day lives.

Agency, now displaced into a heterogeneous network of human and non-human relations, is no longer the preserve of conscious human actors. This displacement effectively serves to 'post-humanise' agency. In so doing it offers a world view of buzzing particularities, where sites of action are nowhere the same, and where effective alliances can take the most unusual form. In many respects, this post-human agency is a condition that good architects instinctively understand and work with in their daily professional lives. The best material in the conference sought to find the appropriate conceptual vocabularies to describe the contours of this condition, and proposed modes of comportment, styles of thinking and possibilities for action that might build upon it.





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Notes

1. Anthony Gidens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (California: University of California Press, 1986).
2. As is always the case in conferences with parallel sessions, it is impossible to attend all the presentations. My experience of the Sheffield event, while enjoyable and stimulating, was partial. This brief report also draws on the insights of colleagues Mark Dorrian and Suzanne Ewing who also attended the conference, for which I am grateful.
3. See Nicolai Ouroussoff's review of some of his work here: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/19/arts/design/19hous.html?_r=1> [accessed: 26 June 2009].
4. See, for example, Bruno Latour, *Aramis, Or the Love of Technology*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996). Others who might be cited in this context are: Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) and Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004).

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arq gratefully acknowledges: Stephen Walker, all images

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135509990182 Published online by Cambridge University Press