# Exploring needs, possibilities and capacities for action

# Promoting social and political change

## Agency: alternative practices and alternative worlds

***Doina Petrescu, Prue Chiles and 'The Agency'***

This edition of **arq** assembles a selection of papers presented at the Conference 'Agency' organised by the research group called *'The Agency'*[1] initiated in 2007 in the School of Architecture at the University of Sheffield. We offered to host the 5th AHRA International Conference,[2] giving it the theme of 'Agency' and hoping that the submissions would energise the relationships between the humanities, the architectural profession, and society.

We wanted to explore ways of understanding current architectural needs, possibilities, and capacities for action. As humanities research has a tendency to be too inward looking, 'Agency's' ambition was to redirect such work towards greater engagement. We hoped to shift the focus away from the objects and processes of architectural production towards an investigation of their wider context and possibilities. We wanted to learn from the papers offered what is meant by 'action' in the different contexts of research and practice. We wanted to know what kinds of activities and conditions are relevant, what prevents the effective exercise of agency, and what the necessary tactics for action might be. We hoped also to address the big social and political questions in this period of rapid global environmental change.

A number of papers focussed on forms of agency within the urban, mostly following a Lefebvrian line and arguing for the social production of space and the inherent continuity between social, political and spatial agencies. Drawing on case studies and personal experiences, some papers provided interesting responses to questions from our call for papers, such as 'Where are the ethics of practice located?' and 'What are alternative forms of practice?'

Traditional architectural practice is changing and beginning to involve itself in participatory practices and working with communities; but much of this is still lip service, inarticulate to the needs of society and disconnected to later stages of projects. The profession needs to change more radically to be connected to social and political change. The papers here all move towards this more fundamental change.

From America, Wanda Dye equates 'agency' with cultural difference and involvement, suggesting this is how to prevent sameness. Again, using Lefebvre's critique of capitalist space, both students and practitioners create projects with strategic and tactical moves, informed by wit, playful symbolism, 'deep histories' and iconography... and generosity. Dye is making a case for popular regionalism showing projects for intricate lazer cut bus stops, labyrinthine spaces and ferry terminals linking them as connected to the regional every-day and encouraging a more public sense of space with social activity between many different users.

Richard Coyne writes about 'smart mobs'[3] generating collective action through mobile phones and is eloquent on the importance of digital media and the power it can give to communities; helping tune people into their environments. The burgeoning social networks available and open source software becoming 'dynamic subarchitectures that make up the environment' and are able to 'amplify otherness, difference and dislocated action'. He concludes that place is both a source and a medium of agency potently bought to light through these digital devices and media.

Sam Vardy's paper also addresses issues of urban agencies, concentrating on self-organised dynamics and the relationship of individual and collective subjectivities to the politics of space. Vardy uses Unger's term of 'negative capability'[4] to express the transcendent nature of practices of self-organisation in urban contexts such as raves, free radios, tactics of border transgression, and the like. New forms of agencies result from these ways of operating, which are 'ecological' (in the sense of Guattari), activating at the same time the environment, the social and subjectivity. 'Alternative worlds' are created by re-subjectivating space and displacing the dominant forms of (capitalist) spatial development.

The 'Garden Service' project presented in Apolonija Sustersic and Meike Schalk's paper was initiated within an art context to become a transformative agency to solve a particular urban problem: the neglected residential courtyards in the historic centre of Edinburgh which have been overtaken by tourism. Sustersic and Schalk show how the production of public space could start with conflict generated through challenging rules and regulations which abstractly define 'public space' from above, demonstrating how instead, through negotiation, these dynamics could be mobilised in a collective counter-production of real public space.

Dougal Sherridan similarly addresses the social and political responsibility of the architect but in a post-conflict city, mainly regulated by institutional and developer driven mechanisms.



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He presents the 'initiatives' of a collaborative group of architects, urbanists and artists to inform and realise citizen-led urban regeneration in Belfast. 'Agency' is understood here as an alternative form of praxis which create opportunities to work in a variety of sectors including architecture, planning, academia and the media and at a range of scales, from local to international, in order to create shared social space within the public domain of a post-conflict city. This space, called metaphorically 'yellow space', utilises and subverts the semiotic sensitivity of this colour which is politically 'neutral' and commonly used for public goods and utilities, to highlight a 'third space', a potentially shared social space in the city of Belfast.

At Sheffield University, the idea of 'agency' has been partly influenced by our live projects programme[5] and a desire to participate in the politics and social networks of our own city. We started with a local response to a change in the city towards a more participatory role for communities, but over the last ten years the programme has widened its net to the rest of Britain and Europe. It is inspiring to be connected to other projects in other universities and practices here in Europe and the United States that all share this desire for action and change. These connections conduct to many other forms of agency, which seek alternatives and allow for imaginative and transformative interventions in our technologically and globally mediated world. This is potentially, in different ways and in different spheres of activity, the work of our group 'The Agency': Transformative Research into Architectural Practice and Education'.

## Notes

1. 'The Agency' is potentially a provocative name for a research group. It was chosen to give an immediate sense of the research in the group being active, engaged, and outward looking. It implies change, with a hint of subversive irony. The strapline 'Transformative Research into Architectural Practice and Education' expands the idea, stressing the word 'transformative' to suggest a research activity that both creates and responds to shifting conditions. Instead of remaining passively (and safely) contained within our academic environments, the group members see themselves as 'agents' acting both within and between the fields of research, practice, education, and civic life. 'The Agency' founding members include: Peter Blundell Jones, Prue Chiles, Florian Kossak, Doina Petrescu, Tatjana Schneider, Jeremy Till, Renata Tyszczuk, Stephen Walker and Sarah Wigglesworth. Cristina Cerulli and Rosie Parnell have also joined the group in 2008.
2. The AHRA (Architectural Humanities Research Association) was founded in 2003 in an attempt to foster humanities research in architecture in the UK and overseas. It aims to promote, support, develop and disseminate research in the areas of architectural history, theory, culture, design and urbanism. (See <http://www.ahra-architecture.org> [accessed: 1 October 2009]).
3. cf. Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: the next Social Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Book, 2002.
4. cf. Roberto Mangabeira Unger, False Necessity – Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
5. Live projects in Sheffield are student led projects in real contexts, happening in real time with real people. They are run at MA level, as equivalent to studio based design assignments and as such they are different from the models of work placements and learning through work. Architecture students work in groups with a range of 'clients' including local community groups, charities, health organisations and regional authorities. In same cases the projects involve actual building, in others the design of urban masterplans or consultation exercises. In all cases the students are looking for new and imaginative ways to engage with and actively change architectural practice for the people architecture is for. (see <http://www.liveprojects.org> [accessed: 1 October 2009] and <http://www.shef.ac.uk/architecture/main/gallery/gal/diploma/lpw/index.htm> [accessed: 1 October 2009]).

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