

Call / Response: Generating Dialogic Space Between People & Place in East Austin

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Introduction:

Without a client, funding, or a site to speak of, what *tactics* might an architect use to design-- and effect change in--the public realm?

In its purest and oldest translation, the word *architect* means “master (arkhi) builder (tekton).” A more contemporary definition of the word describes the architect as someone who designs and then supervises the construction of buildings, thereby shaping the built environment around us. Though the definition has become looser in recent years, even so far as to be co-opted by other professions¹, it still conjures up pictures of a person hunched over a drafting table late at night, drawing up plans for their next masterpiece.

Thanks to iconographic figures such as Frank Lloyd Wright, the uncompromising Howard Roark, and the idealized Mike Brady², this was how I envisioned an architect when I was younger. In the midst of my 6+ years of practice I began to realize, in a very acute way, that this is not the only way to influence the built world around us and that in fact, there are numerous unofficial ways in which one can more authentically act on his or her own architectural beliefs.

One ready-made definition of these unofficial acts is encapsulated in the word *tactics*. The definition of *tactics* as used herein stems from Michel de Certeau's expanded definition in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. To paraphrase some key points, de Certeau describes *tactics* as methods used by individuals to fulfill an *existing* need. These methods tend to be site-less, center-less, created with minimal resources, and/or resources that they themselves do not control. *Tactics* are often contrasted with *strategies*. *Strategies* are means used by people or institutions³ in power to maintain control and further propagate themselves. *Strategies* typically have a physical manifestation in space. This could be the actual site that the strategic entity owns, and/or the products it manufactures. Also in contrast to *tactics*, *strategies* may instead choose to *create* needs, thereby producing a market for their product. (de Certeau, 1984)

I closely associate this concept of *tactics* with what I call “*extracurricular*⁴ *architectural pursuits* (EAP's).” These EAP's occur outside the realm of school and office, but similar to traditional practice, they share a goal of informing space and place. That being said, I am particularly interested in how EAP's might provide alternate means for an architect to inform and affect the *public realm*.⁵

*I have included some examples of EAP's under the similarly titled section below.

Precedents / Related Projects

Not all of the projects listed below are carried out by architects, nor are they necessarily motivated by architectural values per se. What they do have in common is that they critically

¹ Software *architect*, platform *architect*, information *architect*, etc.

² Mike Brady, the father/architect on the Brady Bunch television show.

³ For instance: government, educational, and corporate institutions.

⁴ From the American Heritage Dictionary, *extracurricular*: “Being outside the usual duties of a job or profession.” The word also connotes volunteerism, philanthropic and non-paying activities/work.

⁵ The term *public realm* is used to emphasize the fact that this study is focused on space that is collectively shared by all. This doesn't preclude private space or property from entering the discussion. It instead means that the intent is to instigate *tactics* that address public and communal life.

observe and record the urban environment, and in some cases to begin to effect change. Another important aspect to take note of is the media *tactic* that each project transmits itself through.

1a) Text / Book:

The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961) by Jane Jacobs

This text was one of the most influential books ever written on American urban planning. Based on many first hand observations of the neighborhood in which she lived, her actions had immediate and long term effects that are visible even to this day (or invisible in the case of the Lower Manhattan Expressway that never came to be). Along with the book's far-reaching influence, it is important to note that it is/was read by many non-architects and non-planners.

2a) Audio / Song:

Little Boxes (1962) by Malvina Reynolds

Malvina Reynolds was a folk singer, songwriter and activist, best known for her song "Little Boxes." The song has strong anti-suburban rhetoric—elaborating upon the negative aspects of homogeneity and conformity in social and architectural terms.

<http://www.ocap.ca/songs/littlbox.html>

3a) Film:

The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces (1980) by William Whyte

This movie is a classic that most all architects have viewed at some point during their lives. Whyte used observational techniques to analyze how plazas and other "public" spaces were used by people. His visual documentation along with narration encouraged changes in how plazas and such were designed. This work went on to influence other keen observers of the urban environment, including the infamous Jane Jacobs.

4a) Publications + Organization:

Adbusters Media Foundation (1989-present)

Best known as a magazine, Adbusters is an anti-consumerist organization founded on dedication to political and social activism. It has a strong emphasis on graphic design, detournment, and visual rhetoric in general. It also encourages creative participation by all. Though the topic of the "urban environment" may only occasionally arise as subject matter, the magazine is a prime example of how design can be used to change the way people think about everyday things.

<http://www.adbusters.org/home/>

5a) Web + Wiki

Greenmaps.org (1992-present)

"The Green Map System (GMS) is a locally adaptable, globally shared framework for environmental mapmaking." While every map may look quite different in form and content, they share a common vocabulary of environmental [icons](#) that represent a myriad of site types (resources, toxic hot spots, natural features, etc). This enables collected information to transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries. Technically speaking, this site is not a wiki, but it is a type of "collaborative authoring" that works well on both the local and global scale. The site seems to be a growing and living thing.

www.greenmaps.org

6a) Art + Real world:

Louisa Van Leer (2003-present)

Louisa is an architect turned conceptual artist. She records and expresses various urban phenomenon in her work. Her pieces can be found both in galleries and the public realm.

<http://www.louisavanleer.com/>

7a) Web + Blogs:

Kitchen Democracy (2006)

KD is a website based in Berkeley, CA that connects “Citizens and City Hall” through online dialogue between residents and politicians. The site isn’t necessarily about architecture, but it does begin to gauge communal opinion on planning and development issues in a more readily accessible way.

www.kitchendemocracy.org

Related Topics / Concepts / Terms / Tactics:

Locative Media, the Situationists, Guerilla Architecture, Generative Psychogeography, Detournment, Visual Rhetoric

Extracurricular Architectural Pursuits / Related Projects

Along with the precedents mentioned above, some of the starting points for this proposal originated in my own EAP’s. After practicing architecture for a number of years, moving out of the office and into a more publicly accessible role presented itself as a means to explore/practice one’s architectural values and to more actively engage in shaping space and place.

1b) In October of 2004, I worked with the Camelia Street Neighborhood Association to create and present an alternate scheme for the 1340 Sixth Warehouse to the City of Berkeley’s Design Review Committee and Zoning Adjustments Board. The proposal was in reaction to a poorly planned project would potentially erode the already fragile neighborhood fabric. Instead of the normal obstructive stance Berkeley residents are known for, the neighbors proposed a scheme that fulfilled the property owner’s programmatic requirements and was more in keeping with the light industrial aesthetic of the neighborhood. Though the owner refused to acknowledge the neighborhood proposal, it helped the City representatives recognize the potential of the site, and how the originally proposed project would be a detriment to the neighborhood. The action was considered a success because the unfortunate scheme was never built. The property has since been sold to a more sensitive developer.

http://www.annemone.com/Images/1340_Alt_Scheme.JPG

2b) In January 2005, under the guise of “The Perpetual Clothespin” I posted illustrated commentary on various telephone poles around the area affected by malodorous pollution from Pacific Steel Casting. (Pacific Steel Casting is a local foundry, a major employer and an economic force in the city of Berkeley, known to be the 4th largest steel production facility in the US. It is also the largest polluter in the city.) Along with making a statement in a more publicly visible place, there was also a Perpetual Clothespin website (now defunct) that encouraged other illustrated submissions. Though the site never received any contributions, one of the telephone pole postings was able to foster some feisty dialogue. Though this is not immediately tied to the built environment per se (though it does relate to quality of life and land use issues), a similar tactic could be used to present and exchange ideas about the built environment.

<http://www.annemone.com/Images/distant%20with%20text.jpg>

3b) In April 2005, reacting to a lack of communication and coordination amongst neighbors, I created a neighborhood blog that focused on the area in which I lived. The site specific blog helps residents and other stakeholders stay informed of local issues (new developments, public meetings, crime, environmental issues, etc.), and functions as a communal bulletin board of sorts. I currently maintain the site remotely from Austin.

www.cameliastreet.org

4b) In September 2006, I collaborated with Nicole Blair of Studio 512 on a submission to the Austin American Statesman’s series titled “Squeezing It In”. The project was a hypothetical one meant to test the strengths and weaknesses of the new McMansion ordinance and foster further discussion of the new law. “Freedom of Space,” September 25, 2006, Austin American Statesman.

http://www.annemone.com/Images/squeezing_it_in.jpg

Methodology

Part I: Pre-Production

The project would begin with the study of precedents for, and the design and implementation of various *rules of engagement*.⁶ These rules begin to provide a consistent framework in which to observe, discover and explore the location in question. This will lead to the production of verbal, visual, and cartographic *narratives*.⁷ These narratives will be combined with more traditional methods of investigation in the form of archival research (periodicals, old photos from the Austin History Center, etc).

Some possible methods for acquiring these *narratives* may include:

- Verbal: Correspondence with residents via the post and oral histories via interviews.
- Visual: Film, photography, sketching.
- Cartographic: Mapping of the area that might be used to connect history + place.

Part II: Production

Tactics that occur in Part II will function more as communication tools. The intended audience for this project is the general public. This means the presentation of the resulting information would be conveyed in a way that speaks to a diverse range of backgrounds. The output will be through the use of varied media: film, audio, graphics, maps, and others.

Part III: Post Production

The project, as described above, will be composed of multiple smaller projects in varied media formats. These individual projects will be combined into a single website that will serve as a publicly accessible portal into and about the place described. A design exercise in and of itself, the structuring and organization of the website's content and interface will be important. Another aspect to the site may be its ability to allow for the imprint of others....through forums, comments, and/or submissions etc.

Part IV: Wrap Up

The project will conclude with a bound booklet that will be turned in to the University of Texas as official documentation.

Though the methodology has been broken into Parts I, II, III, and IV, there will almost always be overlap, especially between pre-production, production, and post-production. These will occur throughout, but each will play a larger role within its designated section.

Site

I have elected to begin my *tactical* exercises with the East 11th Street corridor. The reasons for selecting this site⁸ relate to its role in my everyday life, its colorful history as a cultural node for

⁶ I am using the term "Rules of Engagement" in the Situationist sense. The "rules," though somewhat arbitrary, begin to form a procedure and a pattern that one can follow whilst they explore the city. Examples: navigational algorithms, regular timed observance, etc. They will bring structure to what otherwise might be a haphazard exploration/documentation of the urban environment.

⁷ From Dictionary.com, a *narrative* can be described as such: "a story or account of events, experiences, or the like, whether true or fictitious." I have chosen to use the term *narrative* to describe these modes (verbal, visual, cartographic) of recording because of their natural subjective/interpretive nature. The term also connotes a cultural/historic (and thereby locational) grounding.

⁸ So as not to be confused with the idea of *site* as it relates to the idea of *strategy* mentioned earlier: I am using the word *site* in this context in what I consider to be a very non-specific way. It has more to do with loosely focusing on a specific place, and not any sort of property that is owned.

the surrounding neighborhood and beyond, and the fact that it is also the site of ongoing rapid change.

Summary / Outcome

The general aim of this project is to discover or expand upon on how an architect might educate the public, effect change, and/or improve the urban environment in ways other than “building” and/or “practicing architecture” in the traditional sense. Through the collection and composition of narratives, I hope that this exploration, documentation, and design will produce *communication*. The final outcome will be the creation of an open dialogue--between people--about place.

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<http://subsol.c3.hu>

Textual + Visual Descriptions of Cities

Invisible Cities by Italo Calvino

"All Over Coffee" by Paul Madonna

Proposed Schedule / Deadlines:

Meetings will be scheduled with my supervising faculty member, Sam Randall, biweekly, or as necessary. Meetings with my Second Reader, Stephen Ross, will occur three times during the term: the week of 02.26.07, the week of 03.26.07, and then the week of 04.30.07.

Part I Pre-Production

- a. Start of the term – 01.26.07
Formulate and finalize "Rules of Engagement"
- b. Start of term - 02.05.07
Collection of Narratives

Part II Production

- a. 02.05.07—04.27.07

Part III Post-Production

- a. 04.27.07—05.09.07

Part IV Wrap Up

- a. End of term
Documentation is complete.

- Today's Date: Jan. 29, 2007

Pre-Production

Rules of engagement can be described as a self imposed system through which the rules themselves may seem quite arbitrary, but the actions set in motion are quite specific. Following are some examples of scenarios that display relevant uses of various rules of engagement:

<http://sf0.org/>

I propose to do one rubbish walk, the same route every time, once a week for the whole month of February. The walks would be at regular weekly intervals, cover the same route, and be consistently documented in regards to frequency and location.

Refuse Walks—One form of urban archaeology