Effecting Social Change
Architecture as Servitude

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We’ve learned from the modernist movement, which privileged form in architecture as a way of supporting an ideal version of life, that architectural form cannot transform human attitudes or processes. Idealized social processes and interactions cannot be brought to fruition through a particular arrangement of inanimate forms and materials. And yet, architecture must provide the spatial conditions for social processes to play out. How do we design for dynamic human interactions and movements- how do we put forth a definite form to house these- without imposing a set of defined parameters that didactically regulate human interaction? I do not presume to possess a solution, but intend to suggest an initial approach that may serve as a starting point for an architecture that seeks to support social change.

The demolition of Pruitt-Igoe is often cited as evidence of the failure of the modernist movement’s attempts at public service. While the architects of these projects may have intended to benefit their low-income residents, the process was one of imposition rather than input. In Walter Benjamin’s terms, the architects produced according to the existing method of production, rather than seeking to provide the recipients of the architecture with access to the process of production at some level. Social architecture is not about steering social outcomes toward an ideal through architectural composition, but instead aims to provide the conditions to allow social factors and processes to guide and define the architecture. It does not operate in the elitist, conceptual realm that is comprised mainly by intellectuals and members of the field, but focuses on serving the public. In the experiment that social architecture will necessarily begin as, the architect must not be interested in advancing architecture for conceptual reintegration into the aesthetic or formal aspirations of architecture itself, viewing the client (or user) as the dependent variable- that which is effected. Instead, the user is the independent variable, defining and affecting the architecture. Architects should seek acclaim for innovative solutions to pressing social issues as

evaluated through the input and criticism of the public, conforming to the needs of specific users rather than existing to satisfy intellectual discourse and architectural critics.

This architecture of public service would be inherently humanist, site and user specific, integrated into the larger social network, and responsive to potentially changing conditions. The architecture that is concerned with formal autonomy, proliferated by the Greys, exists only in the realm of conceptual and intellectual. While the formal approach is valuable as a tool for furthering the study of architecture and the language in which it is expressed, it is oriented toward the intellectual rather than the user. The architect is the detached viewer described by Michel de Certeau in “Walking in the City,”2 not the occupant or user of the building, who must deal with the realities of spatial and material composition. The user must then reorient her movements to conform to the ideal manifested in the building. Architects interested in serving the user rather than the study of architecture would need to become re-acquainted with the physical realities of construction and the urban environment. The practice would move away from the purely conceptual toward the practical, thereby placing the designer—she who possesses the tools of production—nearer to the requirements of design and the realistic implications.

In an architecture of public service, the architect would seek to serve the user, indexing the specific concerns and ideals of the person or group of people who will occupy the architecture and formulate the architecture accordingly. Design-build programs could be an integral part of reorienting the focus of the architect and understanding the physical realities of design. Under former director Sam Mockbee, the Rural Studio of Auburn University provided low-income residents of Greensboro, Alabama with innovative solutions to a lack of housing. In one instance, the architecture students used old carpet tiles to construct a house for the Williams family, and built a tower above one of the resident’s bedrooms to allow her a view of the stars from her bed, which she had specifically requested. The architects did not only hear the requests of the residents before construction, but returned to reevaluate and refurbish the carpet tile system after years of compression, turning the process from one characterized by a definitive end or deposit to one concerned with long-term investment and return.

In this way, architecture could be responsive to changing conditions over time. It would be optimistic without being didactic, creating an environment for potential social interactions rather than a priori, intentional ones. This might mean providing a varied set of spatial elements or

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conditions to be manipulated and exploited for different uses by changing users over time. Reyner Banham posited this approach with his conceptual design for the Clip-On City in the early 1960’s, envisioning “a zone of total probability, in which the possibility of participating in practically anything could be caused to exist.” This concept of a built environment that could provide space for any number of activities or uses was essentially visualized by Banham as a blank space containing theoretical potential, but would in reality require physical form. The idea has recently been reinterpreted in the context of landscape urbanism as an urban surface that could be layered in such a way as to provide varied conditions for varied uses. James Corner describes the form that may result, offering a physical precipitation of the concepts posed by Banham decades earlier. The urban surface would create a continuous, interconnected environment that would simultaneously create private spaces and varied conditions. Similarly, social architecture would address the concerns of specific users, creating particular or custom environments, but would place these buildings in direct connection with the larger community or global whole. Unlike the public housing projects of American modernism, which sought to create enclosed communities according to an idealized way of life envisioned by authorities for the residents, the architect would not only open the immediate environment to the control of the user, but would place that environment within the larger whole.

“Unlike architecture, which consumes the potential of a site in order to project,” Corner distinguishes, “urban infrastructure sows the seeds of future possibility, staging the ground for both uncertainty and promise.” Socially-minded architecture would aim to dissolve this distinction. The architect would address the immediate concerns of the users while providing the conditions to support changing processes over time. In describing an approach to programming the urban condition for future potential, James Corner reacts to David Harvey’s call for “a more socially just, politically emancipatory, ecologically sane mix of spatio-temporal production processes,” noting, “the projection of new possibilities…must derive less from an understanding of form and more from an understanding of process- how things work in space and time.” For the architect, this

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would mean surrendering control of the design to the trampling of the architecture (literally and figuratively) over time, relinquishing rigidity to the decisions of the user.

In the end, architecture interested in social servitude would mean a democratized architecture, making design available to a needy public, not as a product presented to the user from a top-down system, but as a system placed in the hands of the user. In this model, the architect might act as facilitator, providing the means and materials for production according to the demands and ideals of the client. Walter Benjamin referenced Brecht in requiring that socially responsible art did not “supply the apparatus of production without, to the utmost extent possible, changing it in accordance with socialism.” In other words, “the [architect] as producer”, that is, an architect concerned with effecting positive social change, would need to place the means of production in the hands of the user rather than simply producing according to the existing, top-down system of production in order to deposit the indifferent product in the user’s hands. “The more completely [the architect] can orient his activity towards this task,” declares Benjamin, “the more correct will be the political tendency, and necessarily also the higher the technical quality, of his work.” The quality of social architecture rests in its ability to provide the user with the essential conditions to support current social processes while allowing the user the freedom to manipulate the architecture over time according to changing needs.