

Curating Architecture: The Architecture of Estrangement

Alison Hugill in conversation with Carson Chan

The term ‘architecture’ has become ambiguous, producing a defamiliarizing effect when strategically used out of context. While generally referring to any complex structure, the term ‘architecture’ has come to represent, among other things, the conceptual framework and logical organization of systems. Thus the phrase “curating architecture” gains nuance—it signifies the act of curating architecture (buildings) as subject matter and, simultaneously, the structural process of curating itself.

Is a synthesis between these two interpretations possible, or does the phrase “curating architecture” depend on its defamiliarizing effect? Originating from the term *ostranenie*, coined by Viktor Shklovsky in his essay “Art as Device”, defamiliarization refers to the artistic production of information that imparts the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. If applied successfully, defamiliarization prolongs the active process of perception, enabling critical thought. The link between defamiliarization and architecture is precisely the temporality of perception, whether in built space or in the virtual forms of infrastructure space.

In this conversation, Alison Hugill discusses curating architecture with Carson Chan, an architecture writer and curator who co-curated the 4th Marrakech Biennale 2012, acted as Executive Curator of the Biennial of the Americas 2013, and co-organised the conference “Exhibiting Architecture. A Paradox?” at Yale School of Architecture in 2013. Hugill’s line of questioning draws from her research on Marxist-feminist politics and aesthetic theories of community, communication, and communism. She has also curated several architecture exhibitions in Norway and Germany.

Benjamin T. Busch

Alison Hugill: The issue at hand is ‘defamiliarization’ and the potential poetics of exhibiting architecture, a staple of the ‘everyday’ taken out of context. How does the exhibition of architecture, both as the form and the content, provoke estrangement? With reference to your curatorial experience, is that effect better achieved in public space or in a traditional gallery or exhibition space?

Carson Chan: Well, as you said, the act of removing architecture from the everyday world and placing it on display produces a new set of demands and aesthetics for the architectural object. Factual communicability is privileged over the immersive experience, and architecture is presented as a set of instances—shown through models, drawings, photographs—rather than a process. Exhibited through representation, the architectural work more easily assumes the mantle of single authorship, where in situ, the same thought is almost impossible. In this sense, estrangement is built into the exhibition of architecture. Exhibitions make the places, structures, and durations we generally ignore into objects of scrutiny. To flip your question on its side, I see curating architecture or architecture exhibition-making becoming ‘familiarized’, insofar that it is now commonly seen as something that anyone with knowledge or interest in architecture can do. This is not the case. Curating is a separate discipline. Within the architecture world, to curate an exhibition is unfortunately not seen as a specialized skill the same way that making a building is.

AH: When did these questions begin for you?

CC: At PROGRAM, the interdisciplinary exhibition space I opened in 2006 in Berlin with Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga, we wanted to question

the conventions of architecture exhibitions by borrowing the display techniques of other fields. We asked artists, musicians, dancers, and writers to make architecture exhibitions in their own way. In doing this we were trying to bypass both the impulse to simply put small buildings inside a gallery space, and the convention of exhibiting architecture by proxy, through representation. Could other disciplines show us new, direct ways to access architectural ideas?

For the Biennial of the Americas in Denver, I had the opportunity to engage the physical city as an exhibition. I have always been impressed by architecture exhibitions like the Weissenhof Siedlungen in Stuttgart (1927), or Hansa Viertel in Berlin (1957)—entire neighbourhoods of fully functioning buildings. The 2013 edition of the biennial was called *Draft Urbanism*, referring both to the idea that cities are never complete—that they are always a draft version of a changing ideal—as well as to Denver’s historically rooted beer culture. Like the German examples, I too wanted to turn downtown Denver into a giant exhibition. We exhibited art on all the downtown billboards, and videos on public LED screens, and we exhibited museum labels on several buildings that were pertinent to the exhibition’s theme. We saw that just by putting a label on a building, we were able to transform something that people generally walk past into an object on display. Estrangement, paradoxically, allows us to become familiarized with the already familiar.



AH: You mention the idea of single authorship, which gets built into exhibitions of architecture that are conveyed through representation (models/photographs/renders). Is this kind of estrangement, or alienation, of the various forms of labour that go into the making of architectural works an issue that informs your approach to exhibition-making?

CC: Well, to clarify, though the persistent myth of the single author in architecture has over-privileged the architect’s biography in architectural discourse, the identity of the architect or the firm is still important as it lends a measure of accountability to the designs. No matter the profession, authorial ownership of work does ensure a level of quality. In any case, I see myself as an author of exhibitions, but like architecture, exhibitions are always co-produced by the visitor or user.

AH: A recent proliferation of architecture collectives and non-hierarchical or bottom-up working configurations has put emphasis on the community (loosely defined) as agents in a given project’s design. I often wonder about the emancipatory potential of these kinds of socially engaged works or, more importantly, the politics they aim to articulate and what their effects might be beyond the installation of the work. For example, how those relationships are maintained outside of the budget of the work and the presence of the artist/architect/collective who initiates it.

CC: Elín Hansdóttir’s *Mud Brick Spiral* (2012), commissioned for the Marrakech Biennale, exemplifies for me the co-constitutive nature of both exhibitions and architecture. At the time, Elín was an artist-in-resident at Dar Al-Ma’mûn, an art foundation founded by and located within a luxury resort on the outskirts of Marrakech. Elín made a large-scale sculpture—or architectural folly, depending on how you to see it—the plan of which was a spiral. The whole thing was made by hand out of mud bricks. She formed a small team of helpers from the village named Tassoultante next to her residency. It was located on an empty plot of land in Tassoultante next to the boundary walls of the resort. Before long, the villagers began to develop a sense of ownership for it. Children would come every day to watch the construction. Others would make food for the team. To allow Elín quick access to the construction site, the directors of Dar Al-Ma’mûn made a door between the resort and the village, which has introduced a new spatial relationship between the two communities. In this way, the installation contributed to the spatial configuration of both the residency and the village beyond the bounds of its physical form. Dar Al-Ma’mûn subsequently allowed villagers to access their collection of books. The villagers also began to hold town meetings next to Elín’s installation. Apparently, they never had these meetings before, as if one unusual form of communication (the installation) justified another (the town meeting). Clearly, any

new structure introduced to Tassoultante would have produced some kind of social change, no matter how slight that change may be. This change is nevertheless the result of a discursive system including the biennial institution, its funding, the history of the location, the various audience groups, the artists, as well as the curators. I think it's much more interesting to think of the artwork, the architectural object, or the exhibited object as a discourse network rather than as a discrete thing.



AH: As you mentioned, we often see architectural exhibitions presented through photography, video, sculpture, and quantitative research. What contemporary possibilities do you see for exhibiting architecture in its own medium, beyond commercial instances?

CC: So many of these conventions of exhibiting architecture come from academic and commercial practices. The Beaux Arts system mandated that plans, sections, and elevations be exhibited for review. The presentation board was developed through corporate demands. Not to discount these traditions, but I don't think we have really investigated the possibilities of how architecture can be exhibited. Part of the way forward includes a redefinition of what architecture is, and that perhaps it should be understood more as an umbrella term that includes buildings, rather than its synonym. I see architecture as a spatial practice of many intersecting considerations. It makes social, political, economic, environmental, technical, and informational forces manifest. How these things become singularly manifest does not necessarily take the form of a building. However this takes shape will suggest different modes of presentation.



AH: In your 2010 *Domus* article, "Exhibiting Architecture: show, don't tell", you write that one of the aims of architectural curators is "to cultivate an audience with the spatial sensitivity to engage with the built environment in a conscious and potentially more responsible way". What are some of the challenges and solutions to society's overall obliviousness towards architecture as an art form? What do you mean by 'responsible'?

CC: I think this question is particularly poignant as we continue to degrade our environment. That we don't regard our buildings and cities with particular care is connected to the difficulty of getting people to care about the unnecessary degradation of our resources, not to mention the non-human natural world in general. Part of the problem is that the scale and complexity of a biome, a city, or even a building is too vast to communicate in a succinct way. These things are also not discrete objects, but part of larger networks of influence. We're good at thinking about a sculpture, a song, or a book. For me, there's something accommodating with projects that imagine a city as an object, even just as a heuristic method. O.M. Unger's "Green Archipelago" project (1977), which basically imagined West Berlin as an exhibition—buildings became artworks, and the encircling Berlin Wall became gallery walls—is one such example. The photograph of the Earth from the moon similarly forced us to see the world as a discrete object. Spaceship Earth is a capsule, and this forces us to reconsider the way we use what we have. Through analogy, something complex, immense, and unwieldy is able to enter more easily into discourse. Being sensitive to our built environment could make us more acute to the effects we have on the greater world.

AH: You say that you find the idea of using a neighbourhood or section of a city as an exhibition space, with 1:1 buildings as the objects of exhibition,

accommodating. There seems to have been a strong tradition of this kind of exhibition in Germany, particularly the Modernist examples you've cited. Can you talk about how this idea has translated, for you, into contemporary projects (Draft Urbanism, Aurora?) and whether the effect is still relevant in a digital age?

CC: Seeing the city explicitly as an exhibition has its dangers. Built during the Cold War, the Hansa Viertel was organized by the West German government to show off Western design and ideals to the East. Even back then, there was a sense that the built world has a parallel existence in various media like newspapers, magazines, and now the Internet. Buildings are being built, and cities are being designed as much for how they serve a function as how they appear in photographs.

AH: Do you think this kind of citywide exhibition is still relevant in the digital age?

CC: Because buildings have such symbolic and representational significance, I think it's particularly important in the digital age to engage the public with the physicality of the lived world. This is an issue I have elaborated on in the past, particularly in my essay called "Measure of an Exhibition: Space, Not Art, is the Curator's Primary Material" (*Fillip* 13, 2011). As with Denver, a similar strategy was employed for my exhibition at Aurora Dallas 2015. My exhibition was called *Second Hand Emotions*. It was comprised of the blocks containing the Meyer Symphony Hall, and the Cathedral Shrine of the Virgin in Guadalupe, which houses the second biggest Catholic congregation in the United States. As the title of the show suggests, I'm interested in the vicarious experiences of the digital age we so often accept as first-hand experiences. We've grown accustomed to distance and representation. Often times we say we've "seen" artworks or buildings when we've in fact seen images of them online. Aurora is a biennial exhibition that has been attracting more than 50,000 visitors in one night, and I was attracted to the idea of making an exhibition in which the physical presence of a large audience was guaranteed. I saw it as an opportunity to try to engage the public's attention in a way that would hopefully make them think about the spaces they inhabit.

AH: Our potential global reach is huge these days. How can architecture, as a predictably physical manifestation, stubbornly located in a specific spatial

or geographical context, compete with art forms that adapt easily to the ephemerality of online networks?

CC: I've been very interested in Arseny Avraamov's *Simfonia gudkov* (1917)—a symphony played by navy ship horns, sirens, car horns, train whistles, factory sirens, artillery guns, and so on. By scoring each urban "instrument", it transformed the city from a place of sound to a place of sonic discourse, of music. I was thinking of this piece when I invited Dan Bodan, a Berlin-based Canadian musician, to compose a new piece for the Guadalupe Cathedral's bell tower. The bell, or carillon, is both a maker of urban sounds and a musical instrument, and I liked that Dan would be composing a piece that would be heard throughout downtown Dallas without ever having been there. In this case, the people of Dallas would be given a direct experience of a work made by someone who only has an indirect experience of it. For the same exhibition, I also projected Niko Princen's *In the Event of Fire* (2011) on the north wall of I.M. Pei's Meyerson Symphony Hall. Niko's piece allows visitors to blow out a candle in Amsterdam by blowing into a microphone in Dallas. Connected through Skype, the sound of blowing into a mic is played on bass speakers positioned next to a candle in Amsterdam, and enough pressure is created to blow out a candle. There is a slight lag between when you blow into the mic and when the candle is extinguished, and it's a really entertaining demonstration of how we have forgotten about the physical distances in our lived world, distances that contain much poetry and insight yet to mine. I also enjoyed that this work was projected onto a symphony hall, an architectural type that relies on our demand for first-hand, direct experiences for its existence.



AH: You have written about the importance of “context-sensitivity”—how did you address this concern at the Marrakech Biennial in particular, but also in the American context of Draft Urbanism in Denver?

CC: Maria Lind’s concept of “context sensitivity”, which I saw as an extension of the way Miwon Kwon understood “site specificity”, was a strategy framing the way contemporary art and architecture was presented in Marrakech. Fundamentally, we sought to structure the exhibition in Marrakech through our imagined visitor’s eyes. Marrakech didn’t have any public venues for people to see contemporary art. This was the initial challenge, but it was also not necessarily a hindrance. Instead of relying on preexisting knowledge about art or explanations through wall text, I privileged large installations that provided physical, immersive experiences, shifting the locus of meaning from the artists’ intention to the viewer’s experience. In Denver, the architectural installations began by identifying a problem of their respective sites. Working the Denver Downtown Partnership—an organization of business owners in the downtown area—various urban concerns were highlighted, and each invited architect was asked to respond on-site through their interventions. Pezo von Ellrichshausen drew attention to the way Speer Boulevard, an eight-lane street, cuts through downtown fragmenting the area’s civic and social unity; June14 Meyer-Grohbrügge & Chermayeff made butterfly pavilions to introduce a foreign species to downtown ecology by way of commenting on the perception of the homeless as non-native to the area; Alex Schweder made a temporary mobile hotel room in one of downtown Denver’s many parking lots to give visitors a glimpse of what further development might look like; and plan:b arquitectos created shading structures for Skyline Park to promote public use as they did in their hometown Medellín. Skyline Park, problematically, has very few trees, and without shade, under direct light, people don’t congregate. In all these cases, the conditions addressed are well known to people living in Denver, but it takes some added effort to draw out the key narratives of the everyday, architectural conditions surrounding us. Exhibiting architecture has the potential, and perhaps the responsibility, of bringing to the fore the salient subtexts that are so easily ignored in day-to-day living.

Captions

1 Barkow Leibinger, *Loom-Hyperbolic*, 2014.

Photograph by: Johannes Foerster.

2 Elín Hansdóttir, *Mud Brick Spiral*, 2012.

Photograph by the artist.

3 Pezo von Ellrichshausen, *Mine Pavilion*, 2013.

Photograph by: Christobal Palma.

4 Niko Princen, *In the Event of Fire*, 2011.

Photograph by: Josh Blaylock, 2015.

Benjamin T. Busch was internationally trained as an architect at the University of Kansas, Potsdam University of Applied Sciences and the University of Stuttgart. He has lived and worked in Berlin since 2011, where he leads *Studio Busch*, a platform for spatial practice operating between the disciplines of photography and design. As a graduate student of *Raumstrategien* (spatial strategies) at *Weissensee School of Art*, he is currently researching critical modes of architectural production within the field of spatial practice. Treating architecture as a symptom of abstract processes, his artwork and writing investigate complex fields of relations within the built environment.

Carson Chan is an architecture curator and writer. He is co-founder of *PROGRAM*, a project space for art and architecture that hosted exhibitions, workshops, talks, and a residency in Berlin between 2006 and 2012. He co-curated the 4th Marrakech Biennale in 2012, and in 2013, he was Executive Curator of the Biennial of the Americas in Denver. His writing appears regularly in *Texte zur Kunst*, *Art Papers*, *Frieze*, and *Kaleidoscope*, where he is Contributing Editor, and *O32c*, where he is Editor-at-Large. He is currently pursuing a PhD in architecture at Princeton University.

Alison Hugill has a Master’s in Art Theory from Goldsmiths College, University of London (2011). Her research focuses on marxist-feminist politics and aesthetic theories of community, communication and communism. Alison is Managing Editor of *Berlin Art Link* magazine, and a freelance writer and curator based in Berlin. www.alisonhugill.com.