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Getting Over the Fence

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This paper examines the relationship between the concept of the 'social' within an aspect of architectural practice. It explores how the detachment of a building site from an urban context through the use of fences and boards inhibits architectures ability to engage with social networks. Using de Certeau and in particular, Latour's definition of the social as a critical benchmark, the author identifies the Arch-OS system as having a constructive methodology toward reconciling architectures use of digital systems in order to recover an integrated model of the social.

Architecture has been using computers for many years since IBM's introduction of the first commercial computer aided design (CAD) system for General Motors in 1963. Since then, the advent of networked desktop PCs has allowed small businesses and academic centers to use computers to share work around the clock and around the globe, as well as being able to work simultaneously on single CAD documents across a network. In 1990 Mitchell used of the term 'society of design', derived from Marvin Minsky's metaphor 'society of mind' to forecast how complex design problems may be solved through distributed actions (Mitchell et al 1990:489).

Nearly twenty years on, architecture has indeed absorbed technical procedures to improve the communication, management and ultimately profitability of designing and constructing buildings. However, any social attributes of networked design remained within the profession and only 'leaked out' through public and client consultation. A way of evidencing how architecture appears to mishandle social relations can be found in the contemporary practice of hiding new projects behind high wooden boards that encircle the entire perimeter of building sites. The practice of making new architectural projects invisible from an environmental space, so as to allow designer and engineers the opportunity to quarantine a project until it is ready for introduction in to society, is a deeply anti-social practice. This temporal separation from society designed to obfuscate a new building is a conscious act that limits the process of design and construction to take part in any existing or new opportunities for social discourse.

Whilst the practical deportation of a building site has obvious health and safety benefits, its impact on the human geographical fabric of the city is akin to Certeau's critique of a vacation as it prevents the stakeholders in the community taking part in the construction process:

> "Everyone goes back to work at the place he has been given, in the office or the workshop. The incarceration-vacation is over. For the beautiful abstraction of the prison are substituted the compromises, opacities and dependencies of a workplace. Hand-to-hand combat begins again with a reality that dislodges the spectator without rails or window-panes. There comes to an end the Robinson Crusoe adventure of the
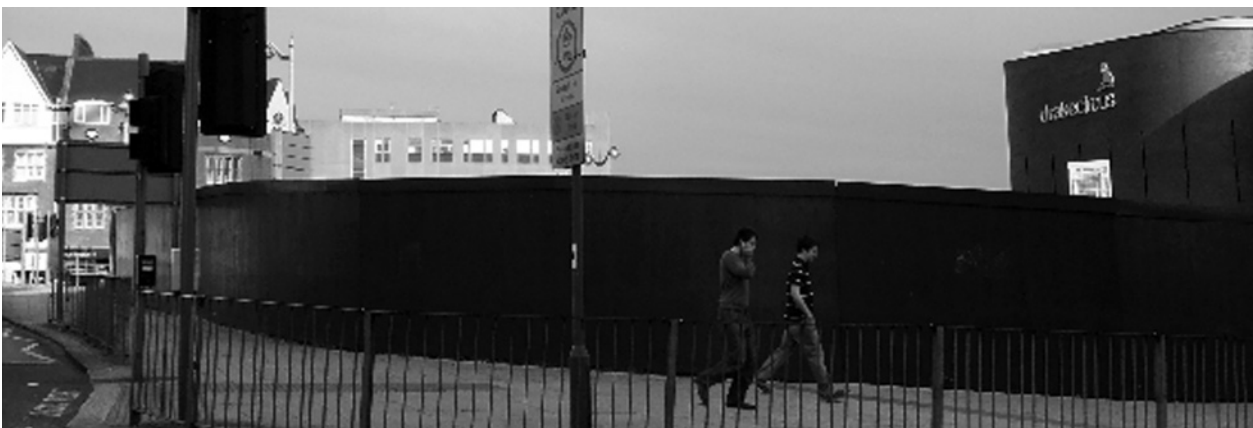
travelling noble soul that could believe itself intact because it was surrounded by glass and iron." (de Certeau 1988:114)

Certeau's despair of the holiday is surmised as a disengagement from a meaningful place, and his example of the workplace as a richer environment in which we can contest and engage with the production of space is comparable to the problem of cutting off a building site from its context. The choice to isolate a building as they are being built at a local address is akin to teleporting it away to a beach resort in Spain for the duration of its construction. Latour's model of the social through Actor Network Theory is also placed within a sensitive model of space and identifies the futility of understanding social networks from a distance, suggesting that only through close connection can social systems be nurtured and valued.

"It's not that there is no hierarchy, no ups and downs, no rifts, no deep canyons, no high spots. It is simply that if you wish to go from one site to another, then you have to pay the full cost of relation, connection, displacement, and information. No lifts, accelerations, or shortcuts are allowed." (Latour 2005:176)

At present, the construction of buildings is distanced from its social and environmental context, if architecture wants to connect the social networks that are present in the construction of a building to local networks, architecture must find ways to shorten this distance between building site and people. With this in mind the author references the Arch-OS project as having practical strategies in getting over the fence that surrounds the building site.

Arch-OS and streaming the social

The author's experience of the Arch-OS system represents a methodological opportunity for digital systems to recover a social deficit within professional architecture. Although the system at the University of Plymouth was 'turned on' after the building had been handed over to the client, the use of the BMS (Building Management System) and computer networks represents the core of a potential creative strategy that satisfies some of Latour's conditions for a socially reflexive system. Latour reminds us that the social is best understood as the passage of relations across a network;

"Society is not the whole 'in which' everything is embedded, but what travels 'through' everything, calibrating connections and offering every entity it reaches some possibility of commensurability. We should now learn to 'hook up' social channels like we do cable for our televisions. Society does not cover the whole any more than the World Wide Web is really worldwide." (Latour 2005/242)

Related to the Arch-OS strategy is Hou Je Bek's blog www.urbanxml.com which documents the growth of RSS feeds that trace human activity across the world. More strategic in its efforts to support architectures 'environmental' communication across digital networks is Haque's and Leung's 'Extended Environments Markup Language' (www.eml.org), which constructs protocols to support collaboration and exchange.

The formative work that Arch-OS and related systems have achieved in documenting the secret lives of buildings has began to provide the ingredients for evidencing the social networks that constitute spaces of work and play. The next challenge it would seem, would be to use these systems not just as visualizations of activity once a building has been built, but as systems to enrich the emergence of new spaces through pre-existing social networks and the networks involved in constructing a building. In this way, perhaps architecture and construction would benefit from not pretending that a building site is invisible, but by locating its development within the networks that define a society, which may in turn lead to new and challenging forms of architecture.

"Once the whole social world is relocated inside its metrological chains, an immense new landscape jumps into view. If knowledge of the social is limited to the termite galleries in which we have been traveling, what do we know about what is outside? Not much." (Latour 2005:242)

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