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## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Rethinking site as field, field notes, observations and practices

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Around one hundred delegates from sixteen countries met on the late afternoon of Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> November 2009 in the University of Edinburgh's Architecture basement Lecture Room, with an assembled panel of the conference chair and three keynote speakers. After two full days of the conference in three venues- an opening reception at The Talbot Rice Art Gallery's *Darwin* exhibition, academic paper presentations in rooms in Minto House, Chambers Street, an evening dinner in the Sculpture Court of Edinburgh College of Art, and a forthcoming 'Field Sunday' to take place in Inspace digital gallery- delegates met to consolidate and summarise some key aspects of what had emerged as significant from this gathering of academics from across the world. Three keynote speakers had oriented the conference theme, which was addressed in a range of ways by fifty two selected papers, loosely grouped thematically in eighteen parallel sessions, poster presentations- a selection of 'visual findings' which were part of a physically exhibited backdrop to the proceedings, and one website under construction with an open twitter feed. With so much compressed and varied activity, what was possible to *account* in a short summary panel session?

The first mooted of the theme of 'fieldwork' in relation to Architecture took place in an informal conversation at the end of the 2007 AHRA conference in Kingston. It feels apposite to be reporting on this international conference a symmetrical two years after the event. In this four year cultivation period, the theme has been discussed, described, debated, challenged, addressed through the conference planning process, through public presentation and discussion, and more formally edited and curated through the publication of *Architecture and Field/Work* (Routledge, 2010), part of the ongoing AHRA Critiques series, which included work by fourteen of the conference presenters, the three keynote speakers, and four editors who were part of the conference planning team. The further papers selected for this edition of ARQ were initially prompted by the conference call, and subsequently developed and refined through conference and journal refereeing processes.

One starting point in the summary plenary session was to recall the origin of the conference theme and the articulation of the first public communication- the call for papers. This conference call for papers outlined "an ambition to examine the question of *fieldwork* in its historical, contemporary, disciplinary and interdisciplinary terms. It aims to address conventions of praxis and action in architecture and landscape architecture in particular, across media, scales, cultures: to articulate current discourses on the topic, and to identify critical dilemmas and opportunities for future practices of design and research. Keynote speakers are invited to draw attention to, and to enable articulation of, a range of theory-practice knowledges, discourses and (hi)stories: architectural, sensory, oral and spatial." Dense. Ambitious. Seductive? Potentially multidisciplinary. Achieved? Quite clearly a session at the end of the conference would be unable to intelligently or thoughtfully process whether or to what extent the conference had actually fulfilled these aims. However, by focusing through the lens of the keynote speakers' contributions, there was some possibility of weaving significant threads, of identifying some tone, texture and fabric of the conference, perhaps "thinning the concept and thickening the discourse", to quote Andrea Kahn's critically orienting opening comments on the Friday morning.

The opening presentation of a conference has capacity to act as an intellectual and ethical compass. Andrea Kahn, Founding Principal of consulting practice, designCONTENT, New York, and adjunct Professor of Urban Planning in the Graduate School of Columbia University, delivered this and set a clear tone which established some critical direction in the opening conference lecture of *Field/Work*. While revisiting her particular work as contributing editor of *Site Matters: Design Concepts, Histories and Strategies* (with Carol Burns, 1995), she touched on how we apprehend site, how we delineate boundaries, how we understand site specificity, site scale, and actions of and as site construction. The critical motif that she offered and elicited was from John Dewey's work, quoting and revisiting, "Thinking is secreted in the interstices between habits." She observed and cautioned the conference's described intentions: perhaps a tangling of questions, a saturated, thick concept which might be in danger of leading to a thin discourse if basic questions are overlooked. With rich territories, and text inviting theorisation, what are the values that guide us? What values guide site and field/work activity in and of Architecture, or even define and redefine the disciplinary field? To what end and to whose benefit are these activities undertaken?

After a full day of diverse and stimulating papers, a viewing of the poster presentations in the Matthew Gallery, and an enjoyable dinner in the early twentieth century space of the Sculpture Court, festooned with casts of the 'gleaned' Parthenon frieze, award winning UK Broadcaster and oral historian, Alan Dein, opened the conference gathering on Saturday morning. He shared knowledges and practices of field/work, through his oral history and audio essays which are usually based in urban landscapes, and in this session he visually journeyed from a Birmingham industrial estate to Islington Mission Hall to Pentonville Prison to ongoing work at the changing area of Kings Cross in London. Explaining his ambitions to unlock memories, to explore living memory, to craft a new construction, he exposed his position in relation to an 'outsider art' of two traditions- voice and sound- which both connect with worlds of pasts, and ultimately potentially create new futures. The lingering of constructed images through sound and voice are achieved with a close and practised relationship with particular tools- the microphone, recording equipment, and an implicit relationship with the subject- person and place. Oral field/work is a slow, yet open process, and an opening up of questions of storage of the gathered material, and the openness of dissemination resonated with Andrea's orienting question of the ethics of benefit and use.

The lingering register of Alan's presentation set the subsequent keynote presentation up as an unexpectedly rich dialogue, where questions blurred into the beginning of Can Altay's contribution. Can, an architect based in Turkey, who works across the boundaries of architecture, art, urbanism, practice, and research, is an explorer of spatial practices, and acts as what he has termed, a spatial anthropologist. The responsive discussion with Alan was focused on the idea of tools and practices in the urban context, of working with the overlooked and understanding the generative potential of a carefully crafted observational output which might activate and perhaps change some aspect of the complex condition of the contemporary, contested public urban domain. He described his aims as exploring limits, tools and methodologies of existing modes and traditions of practice in the city in the architectural and urban professions- always reassessing methods, reviewing ways of advancing means. Examples included the potential neutrality of a field trip to enable those in urban authority to see new potential commissions and actions in their city, maps which opened up previously unimagined connections, and an extract from the film, *White Butterfly Laundry*, made with Phillip Misselwitz, which was a moving embodiment of the potential of work in a hidden field which revealed strikingly intense stories of the in-situ real lives of a group of endangered women. Can's focus on the question of 'refuge' in the city, alongside this particular work from the field, recalled the conference delegates to questions of value and ethics. How do you cross the threshold between research and practice? What is the professional responsibility to act, having worked in/ with the field? Three dominant threads did emerge from this plenary discussion. Firstly, a reminder of basic questions- taking on board an attentiveness to habits and habitual practices of what is understood within and without the 'field' of architecture, urbanism, landscape, sociology, anthropology, art. Taking seriously possibilities of re-making, reinventing and responding to and adapting habits, of therefore being able to think 'in the interstices between habits'. Secondly, acknowledging that the *field* is not neutral or a mere plaything- there are responsibilities of engagements, disseminations, relations, methods of being and acting in the world, which has been worked through by a number of disciplines, in particular anthropology. Thirdly, as the keynote speakers had exposed in their own work- Andrea's writing and thinking/ site constructions; Alan's audio essays; Can's refuge film- the nature of any *work* in the field has its own vocabulary, practices, productive spaces, imaginative realms, and deserves careful attention. Many other field 'works' were exposed through the two days of the conference in academic papers and posters-inventories, drawings, films, maps, diagrams, narratives, briefs. As organisers, we had been surprised by the proportion of case-study and reflective practice material which we had received from the fairly open call. The excellent papers selected for this journal deal with methodologies of fieldwork- living in the field, literal working of the field, routes in the field, expanding the field, and as such connect with much anthropological understanding of what 'fieldwork' is and might be. However, the particularity of field/work in relation to architecture, the urban, landscape, art practice, is demonstrated through the necessary production of 'constructions', of work which becomes integral to this 'fieldwork'- Anarchitecture's 'catalogue', the making and events of Polyark, Steidle's transformative restorations, the meticulous visual and textual documentary from Columbia.

The keynote speakers at the November 2009 conference had collectively and in dialogue during the two days, enabled a deeper focus of this 'work': of practice, secretion, openness, limit, hybridity, reconstitution, adjacency, originality, intent, allowing space for more work and discussion. The *account* of the conference at the end of the *Field/Work* conference in November 2009 was not definitively conclusive, but characterised by some significant clarifications and orientations of the definition and scope of the original conference theme.

1581

Add something beginning or end about 'field/work' title- not just a conceit, but slash opening up a question...and perhaps uncertain ground.

Learning from the field, place of knowledge gathering/ making

Site and field- more contemporary cloud like conditions- recall some of wider earlier discussions.

Comment on nature of academic conference as an experience.

Ambition to connect theory and practice, dry paper presentation - messy real making

AS- what is the 'field' of fieldwork?

Enables an opening up of 'the field'

Aiming to introduce some key issues of field/ filed/work