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Published online: 04 May 2016.

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides new direction for geographic scholarship on architecture by focusing upon architectural projects that go well beyond designing and producing material objects. Recent work on practising architectures by social and cultural geographers has examined the multiple processes of human and non-human actors that cohere and congeal to produce buildings. Responding to concerns that geographers are failing to work closely with architects, I introduce ideas of spatial agency to examine the practices of architects working beyond buildings. Arguing that the profession has always been under threat, I outline why socially progressive architects are rejecting claims as expert technical problem-solvers or artistic form-givers by instead initiating and contributing towards explicitly spatial projects prioritizing social and economic objectives. By calling for creative engagement with such projects, I set forth an agenda for a politically progressive geography of architecture.

« Spatial agency » et pratique de l'architecture au-delà des bâtiments

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article propose une nouvelle direction pour la recherche géographique sur l'architecture en mettant l'accent sur des projets architecturaux qui vont bien au-delà de la conception et de la production d'objets matériels. Des travaux récents sur la pratique de l'architecture par des géographes sociaux et culturels ont examiné les processus multiples d'acteurs humains et non-humains réunis et associés pour produire des bâtiments. Répondant aux inquiétudes que les géographes ne réussissent pas à travailler en étroite collaboration avec les architectes, j'introduis les idées de « spatial agency » pour examiner les pratiques des architectes qui travaillent au-delà des bâtiments. Soutenant que la profession a toujours été en danger, j'expose les raisons pour lesquelles les architectes socialement progressistes rejettent des demandes en tant qu'experts techniques de résolutions de problèmes ou donneurs de forme artistiques en initiant plutôt des projets explicitement spatiaux et en contribuant à donner la priorité aux objectifs sociaux et économiques. En appelant à l'engagement créatif pour de tels projets, j'établis un programme pour une géographie politiquement progressive de l'architecture.

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La agencia espacial y la práctica de la arquitectura más allá de los edificios

RESUMEN

Este documento proporciona una nueva dirección para los estudios geográficos en la arquitectura, centrándose sobre proyectos arquitectónicos que van mucho más allá del diseño y la producción de objetos materiales. El trabajo reciente sobre la práctica de las arquitecturas de los geógrafos sociales y culturales ha examinado los múltiples procesos de actores humanos y no humanos que se adhieren y se solidifican para producir edificios. En respuesta a la preocupación de que los geógrafos están fallando a trabajar en estrecha colaboración con arquitectos, se presentan ideas de agencia espacial para examinar las prácticas de los arquitectos que trabajan más allá de los edificios. Argumentando que la profesión ha estado siempre bajo amenaza, se esboza por qué los arquitectos socialmente progresistas rechazan reclamos como expertos solucionadores de problemas técnicos o dadores de formas artísticas y, en su lugar, inician y contribuyen a proyectos espaciales de forma explícita, dando prioridad a objetivos sociales y económicos. Llamando al compromiso creativo con este tipo de proyectos, se expone una agenda para una geografía de la arquitectura políticamente progresiva.

Introduction

Geographers, along with sociologists and anthropologists, have long been interested in architects and their roles in the social production of built environments (Domosh, 1989; Faulconbridge, 2009; Imrie, 2003; Imrie & Street, 2014; Knox, 1987; Lefebvre, 1991; McNeill, 2006, 2008; Yaneva, 2009). As Faulconbridge and McNeill (2010) note, there has often been suspicion of architects, particularly among Marxist scholars, questioning their complicity in the production of urban space built for capitalist consumption. Through the production of buildings, the critique goes, architects help symbolize and reinforce uneven social relations. From rather different perspectives, social and cultural geographers over the last decade or so have been suspicious of claims that it is architects who 'create' buildings. This work, broadly inspired by interest in non-representational geographies, has animated buildings as ongoing processes of more-or-less human, more-or-less formal and more-or-less welcome actors that produce, inhabit, maintain and destroy architecture in different ways (Cairns & Jacobs, 2014; Jacobs, 2006; Kraftl & Adey, 2008; Lees, 2001; Rose, Degen, & Basdas, 2010). Such geographic accounts have de-centred the agency of architects in the production of architectural space. Whilst recognizing the importance of this scholarship, my concern in this paper is that by focusing upon the study of individual buildings, the geographies of architecture have failed to engage with a growing body of socially-orientated, politically-motivated architects who go significantly beyond the designing of material objects.

This paper provides new direction to geographic scholarship on architecture through introducing ideas of spatial agency, examining the design practices of architects who are initiating and mediating explicitly *spatial* projects. Often running parallel to recent geographic debates (although see Rendell, Penner, and Borden (2000) and Swenarton, Troiani, and Webster (2007) for interdisciplinary connections), many practising and educational architects are aware of the critiques levelled at them by earlier and more recent geographies of architecture. With roots in a history of progressive/alternative architectural practice, there is an emerging coalescence in thought among architects who are drawing upon geographic

perspectives to inform the ideas of 'spatial agency' (Awan, Schneider, & Till, 2011). This approach is insistent upon situating design practices within the social production of space rejecting notions that it is the sole product of 'heroic' figures such as architects, by instead designing in relation to space understood as lively and political. Crucially, they are contributing towards initiatives and intervening in ways that go far beyond making more objects; this paper examines such projects and brings them into dialogue with geographic scholarship.

To do so, I suggest that the geographies of architecture are at something of an impasse following recent comprehensive – and often excellent – studies of individual buildings. Whilst recent research has responded to calls to examine the affective or 'nonrepresentational import' of architecture to move beyond the limitations of a focus upon form and symbolism (Lees, 2001), the radical political possibilities sought by Lees through this theoretical and methodological rethinking of architectural space received much less attention. I introduce the ideas of spatial agency in this paper to make this link. To help do so, I provide a brief history of architecture as a profession under threat. This is to emphasize that architects are not as powerful as often presumed, but also to focus upon those who situate their practices within such uncertainty rather than deny it through a retreat to abstract form-making. Through outlining the key tenets of spatial agency, I turn to discuss the methods used to engage with these 'spatial agents' in light of the repeated calls for geographers to work more closely with architects and other practitioners (Jacobs, Cairns, & Strebel, 2012; Jacobs & Merriman, 2011; Kraftl, 2010a; Lees, 2001). Drawing upon these interviews and informal interactions, I discuss the frustrations among contemporary architects surrounding their marginalization within 'conventional' land development and how this connects to broader questioning of their design practices in relation to the social production of space and their complicity in producing more commodity objects. Through introducing a series of examples, I outline the practices of architects expanding their roles as 'spatial agents'. Discussing such transformative possibilities, this paper offers new direction for geographic scholarship on architecture, setting forth an agenda for creative engagement with such an approach to pursue a politically progressive geography of architecture that has yet to emerge.

Space, architecture and architects

Despite the geographies of architecture being a relatively small sub-discipline – if it can even be referred to as such – the different ways in which geographers analyse architecture and the built environment has had significant impact upon theoretical and methodological advances within geography (Kraftl, 2010a). For instance, architecture has been central to theoretical debates surrounding the new cultural geographies of the 1980s, from the culturally-informed readings of buildings through to the more Marxist-inspired interpretations of political–economic relations (as summarized by Lees, 2001). During this time, there were calls for a 'relevant and critical architectural geography' that demanded much closer engagement with social theory to understand the complexity of buildings (Goss, 1988, p. 402). Architects, along with their powerful clients, were often the focus of such geographic work (Domosh, 1989). Knox (1987, earlier), has looked closely at the changing roles of architects and design professionals in the social production of the built environment in the context of socio-economic transformation and the postmodern city. This was borne out of a concern that related studies of the built environment were focusing upon a rather

deterministic micro-scale such that the role of design *in itself* was often overstated at the expense of social and economic theorizing, particularly in relation to the imperatives of property capital: 'the architect, by virtue of the prestige and mystique socially accorded to creativity, adds exchange value to buildings through his or her decisions about design' (Knox, 1987, p. 365). By focusing on architects and architecture, the call was for a geographic approach that analysed the relations between individuals, the built environment and wider society. Yet, it has been suggested that over the years the political vitality of these semiotic approaches to landscape has dissipated and with it much of the emancipatory desire of social theory (Lees, 2001).

A move away from the role of architects and symbolism was led by placing emphasis upon the everyday inhabitation and use of architectural space by 'ordinary' people so as to shift research beyond readings of buildings (Lees, 2001). Counter to buildings as a 'black box' from which we can hang other claims (Jenkins, 2002), a 'critical geography of architecture' would pursue a 'more active and embodied engagement with the lived building' (Lees, 2001, p. 51) analysing the social practices and formation of identities that produce and are produced by architectural space. Subsequently, over the last decade or so, there has been renewed interest in architecture among social and cultural geographers animating buildings as lived-in (Kraftl, 2009; Lees & Baxter, 2011) and living things (Cairns & Jacobs, 2014; Jacobs, 2006; Strebel, 2011). As such, this has displaced much of the previous research whereby architecture acts as a referent to understand broader social, political and historical contexts (although see Jones (2009) as a notable recent exception). Through individual building case studies, a focus upon the many other actors and actants involved in practising architectures has rejuvenated what the geographies of architecture might look like, challenging assumptions that buildings can be understood as solid, static objects. By blurring distinctions between the producers and consumers of architecture (Llewellyn, 2003), this body of work opens up an alternative perspective for understanding who and what produces what we typically identify as a building such that 'building' is understood more as a verb than a noun (Jacobs & Merriman, 2011).

Geographers and anthropologists inspired by actor network theory (Jacobs, 2006; Jacobs, Cairns, & Strebel, 2007; Jenkins, 2002; Strebel, 2011; Yaneva, 2009, 2012) have contested what 'architecture' is by opening up the 'black box' to consider the different human and non-human events, ideas and technologies that cohere to make a building (as quasi-object) hold together and fall apart. This work connects with architects and architectural critics who also deny the status of building as a solid object, arguing for an approach that recognizes the 'shearing layers' of change over time (Brand, 1994, p. 12; extending the work of architect Frank Duffy). What Jane Jacobs (2006) termed 'a geography of big things', this approach fundamentally challenges the idea that a building is a bounded, local space such that claims of an architect 'creating' a building rapidly lose authority. For instance, anthropologist Albena Yaneva's (2009, p. 4) research in *The making of a building* pursued the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (the architecture practice associated to Rem Koolhaas) in their 'architectural laboratories' by treading a similar path to Latour and Woolgar's (1979) science and technology studies of scientists at work. In doing so, she examined closely the mundane practices of architects – albeit that of an exceptionally famous architectural practice – looking at great depth into the processes, models, routines and relationships in which architects are involved, despite the building in question ultimately failing to undergo construction.

However, with a symmetric relationship between humans and non-humans, as in actor network theory, what room is there for critical human intentionality and politicized practice

(Castree, 2002; Murdoch, 1997)? What if, in this instance, an architect sought to radically transform or disconnect the network? Taking Kraftl's (2010b) ruminations on utopia and architecture further, what if an architect purposely seeks to dissociate the conventional socio-technical 'solution' of a building? As this paper will demonstrate, this may well be highly utopian but equally it may be much more pragmatic. What if it is proposed that a 'better' approach might be to suggest to build nothing, but instead focus on something else? Jacobs et al. (2012, p. 128) helpfully call to analyse the 'diverse gatherings of contingently formed associates and associations'. I wish to take this further by focusing on the design practices of architects who insist that it is not necessarily building-work that they are involved with.

Understandings of architecture through the geographies of affect tend to afford greater capacity to more-or-less formal designers to influence potential inhabitations of buildings. Following Thrift's (2004, p. 64) premise that cities are designed or engineered to evoke 'a sense of push in the world', geographers working with affect and ambiences have been using encounters with architectural space to momentarily pin down how certain intensities are increasing or decreasing the capacities for bodies to act in space (Adey, 2008; Adey et al., 2013; Allen, 2006; Kraftl & Adey, 2008; Paterson, 2011). Such accounts explore how the continuous 'redesigning' of buildings has the potential to influence particular movements, feelings and flows such as a sense of homeliness, peacefulness or security. The choice of materials, inflections of light and shadow and the positioning of windows and doors can all affect the feelings produced between 'more-than-human' bodies. Even before construction, architects are entangled in mediating particular affective atmospheres through computer-generated imagery (Melhuish, Degen, & Rose, 2014). Indeed, as I shall later discuss, the architects interviewed within this research suggested that such practices were troubling as they felt that architects can become complicit in selling future experiences for powerful profit-seeking developers.

With a focus upon buildings to distinguish more precise affects, this has often taken a more introverted, if still dynamic, conceptualization of architecture by focusing upon the 'nitty-gritty' and 'localized' architectural details (Kraftl & Adey, 2008, p. 228). As with ANT, the 'architects' of a particular built space are not merely the formal designers, but the many different actors that compose such spaces. At times, however, there is the risk that too much weight is given to the ability for the more formal 'designers' to choreograph and engineer embodied experiences through architecture. For example, Adey (2008) suggests that architectural practice is increasingly focusing upon engineering atmospheres and moods, citing artist-architect Peter Zumthor to exemplify moves towards designing atmospheres (Zumthor, 2006) and multi-sensory experiences (Pallasmaa, 2012). Yet the capacity for 'star architects' such as Zumthor to shape or even 'seal in' embodied experiences of architecture is by far an exception rather than a rule for the profession (Till, 2009). As I will discuss shortly, caution needs to be taken here not to foreground, nor to glamorize, the capacity of architects to influence building projects. Whilst being attentive to the affective materiality of a shopping mall, Rose et al. (2010) seek to emphasize the importance of human subjectivities constituted in relation to architectural space. Elsewhere, there have been moves to consider how biopolitical processes are constituted through urban architectural practices, reaching out to connect with economic imperatives, as well as how the materiality of architecture interweaves with national utopian narratives such as in a school building programme across the U.K. (Den Besten, Horton, Adey, & Kraftl, 2011; Kraftl, 2012, 2014). Significantly, the successive U.K. coalition government cancelled this new schools programme, in a climate of austerity

politics, stating that '[g]ood quality education does not necessarily need sparkling, archi-
tect-designed buildings' (Gove, 2010; cited in Kraftl, 2012). This was to be a clear sign that
architects are far from powerful agents.

Recent geographic engagement with professional architects beyond the prominent ANT
and affect/emotion framings have considered how architectural design is shaped through
negotiating different risks, regulations and standardizations (Faulconbridge, 2009; Imrie &
Street, 2009; Kraftl, 2012) whilst failing in designing for diverse bodies (Imrie, 2003). McNeill
(2006, 2008) has paid extended attention to the expanding geographies of 'elite' global
architecture firms. His concern is that international professional architects are relinquishing
their ethical responsibilities through competing for ethically-questionable commissions. For
instance, whilst such architects might intervene in popular discourse through an appeal for
environmental responsibility and reduced consumption, rather than re-designing and ret-
rofitting buildings for sustainability, they continue to enter competitions for rather expansive,
symbolic mega-buildings such as airports. Likewise, similar concerns are raised about new
developments that displace existing residents whilst also working on luxury apartments.
Inward looking debates within architecture often seek claims that the architect is either an
artist or technician, re-asserting the myth of the individual creative architectural genius
(McNeill, 2008). Indeed, as Imrie and Street (2014) argue, understanding the actions of pro-
fessional architects through claims as either 'autonomous of' or entirely 'dependent upon'
is unhelpful for engaging with questions of ethical responsibility and situating
the co-constructed design practices that McNeill calls for. The roots of this erosion of archi-
tectural influence and responsibility can be traced to those concerns about professional
architects raised by Knox (1987). As such, it is helpful to turn to provide a brief historical
outline of how architecture has always been a weak profession under threat in order to
consider how the approach of spatial agency insists upon engaging with, rather than deny-
ing, what Schneider (2011; cited in Imrie & Street, 2014) calls a 'field of questions and
uncertainties'.

A profession under threat

Counter to academic and popular narratives, architects are not as powerful as is often pre-
sumed. Mistaken claims of control over the built environment are continually reasserted
through educational and professional practice whereby the 'expert' architect is often con-
flated with architecture as a profession, architecture as a practice and with architecture as
a product (Till, 2009). As such, architects are implied to have constant presence throughout
this hierarchical chain until a building is 'completed'. As already suggested, the recent geog-
raphies of architecture dispel this myth by examining the many different actors involved in
the ongoing construction of buildings and the ways in which changing, unexpected inhab-
itations can undermine, subvert or ruin intended uses. More than this, a fundamental prob-
lem for the professional architect goes beyond trying to claim control over the life of a
building project, for which they are sure to fail, but that there is a need for more and more
building (Awan et al., 2011). Architecture is a 'weak profession' (Crinson & Lubbock, 1994,
p. 2): where architects were once responsible for managing finances and construction con-
tracts, these roles have largely been fragmented and replaced by specialists such as project
managers and quantity surveyors brought in to manage risk and cost, with architects often

becoming confined to desk-based delivery and design management (Sage, 2013). The weakness of the profession is most exposed when there is no construction work at all.

A starting point for those architects that I am concerned with was to question what it means to be a *professional* architect and whether this is the most helpful way of thinking about their design practices. There is a long history within sociology that conceptualizes the rise of professionals. We might interpret professionalism as a value system whereby society places trust in professionals to respond to problems within their domain (Hughes, 1958), hence this establishes a 'normative expert' knowledge base within capitalist economies (Parsons, 1951). Shared identities constituted through educational and professional training reinforce the perception of problems and their expected solutions (Evetts, 2003). As such, experts are positioned to mediate and limit uncertainty over space and time (Reed, 1996). Yet as we have already established autonomous claims to architecture that conflate the practice of architects with practising architectures are intrinsically unstable, whether that be due to the collapse of a supporting wall or the collapse of a financial system. It has been argued that professionals as 'experts', within an Anglo-American context, have long been under threat (Reed, 1996). Certainly, most structures built in the world never involve an architect. What if, then, we understand the profession of architecture through an ideology of control? Here, occupational groups seek to fix and defend their claims to a territory of knowledge production whilst benefitting from privileged societal status (Larson, 1977). In this way, the rise of professions may therefore be understood as self-protectionism through the closing of markets whilst determining access. Witz (1990) stresses the gendered politics of such occupational closure; indeed, this is incredibly pronounced within architecture which continues to fail to address gender inequalities in a profession monopolized by white men (Fowler & Wilson, 2004; Matthewson, 2012).[1] Throughout literature, architectural education and popular media, the image of the 'genius' architect is almost exclusively constructed as a male individual (see, e.g. Endnote 2).

What I propose here is that the 'expert' architect has always been under threat. As early as 1452 attempts were made to distinguish 'architecture' from 'buildings' with the 'Renaissance Man' architect seeking intellectual superiority over those involved in construction (Till & Schneider, 2012). As a distinct profession in the U.K. – the principal context for this research – architecture is relatively new. The Institute of British Architects was founded in 1834, becoming the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) according to royal charter in 1837 (Saint, 1983). The RIBA set out the rules and obligations of architects as an attempt to stabilize architectural knowledge with the 1837 RIBA Charter stating that it was intended for 'establishing an uniformity and respectability of practice in the profession' (Kaye, 1960, p. 80). Prior to this, due to its unprotected title 'architect' was often synonymous with 'engineer' and 'surveyor', with several routes into this work including 'master-craftsman', wealthy landowning nobility, from other fields including sculpture, painting and science, through training at the Royal Works or through a fee-paying pupillage with an established practitioner (Crinson & Lubbock, 1994). The majority of buildings before the mid-eighteenth century were built by skilled builders, with only a small fraction of monumental buildings such as churches and palaces requiring more extensive scholarship from skilled amateurs (Saint, 1983). It has not gone unnoticed that the Architects (Registration) Acts of 1931, 1934 and 1938, brought in to regulate claims to the profession, occurred during a time of depression (Kaye, 1960).

Arguably, the architecture professions' period of the greatest power, at least in the U.K., was between the 1950s and 1970s, whereby architects were often leading planning

departments overseeing post-war redevelopment projects (Crinson & Lubbock, 1994). As Harvey (1989) has suggested the standardization of knowledge and production as part of the modernist project perhaps befitted the sheer scale of post-war redevelopment under capitalism. However, 1972 often marks a symbolic moment, accurate or otherwise, of a move towards postmodernity and a retreat among architects to aesthetics over ethics (Harvey, 1989). This year marked the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe, St Louis, USA, leading to Charles Jencks' provocation that this was the death of modern architecture (Jencks, 1977) coinciding with the year that *Learning from Las Vegas* was published (Venturi, Brown, & Izenour, 1972).[2] It is such socio-economic transformations towards postmodern cities that the changing roles of architects towards urban managers in processes of urban production and the circulation of capital began to be examined (Knox, 1987). The effects of another recession in the 1980s further weakened architects' positions following a squeezing of the profession whereby public service clients were encouraged to pursue the lowest cost (Duffy & Hutton, 1998). At the same time, architects' fees and years of educational training were to be lowered, and amidst proposals to deregulate the title of 'architect', questions were being asked of architects just what made them so special (Duffy & Hutton, 1998)? In the U.K., whilst the title of 'architect' remains protected today by the external body Architects Registration Board (ARB), following The Architects Act (1997), the functional roles of architects are not.

We cannot talk about architects as all the same in all times and spaces. For instance, strongly politicized concerns echoed around architecture in the U.K. during the years of the Thatcher government, with the founding of groups such as the New Architecture Movement borne out of strong criticisms of the RIBA and the architectural profession's inadequacy in fulfilling its social obligations. Their work promoted tackling the exclusion of women within construction, encouraging the unionization of architects for fair wages and emphasizing the failures of architects having minimal contact with building inhabitants. The Greater London Council – who had considerable involvement with public sector architects – funded groups such as the Women's Design Service who lobbied and provided assistance in design and planning to foster inclusive design and challenge social inequality (Berglund, 2008). Undoubtedly, the ideas of spatial agency discussed below have their roots in the approaches of these feminist collectives. At a similar time, in Barcelona during the same period, the influence of architects, along with radical economists and planners of a broadly political Left politics contributed considerably towards the practice of political and urban transformations (McNeill, 2003). Yet where such municipal projects no longer exist, the capacity for such contributions becomes far harder.

In a rather different way, the architecture profession is under 'threat' by approaches that draw upon participatory design. Moreover, the re-publication of *Adhocism* (Jencks & Silver, 2013) reinforces a persistent criticism of architects in favour of championing 'ordinary', make-do designers. Yet, whilst professional architects can often neglect to consider the knowledge and experiences of inhabitants, at the same time, rejection of designers entirely by no means leads to 'better' or more democratic design (Day & Parnell, 2003). However, as Till (2005) insists, often in community participation design processes, once the 'threat' of participation is identified by the professional architect, there can be a manoeuvring to give the veneer of participation, with control returning back to the 'expert' problem-solvers. Rather than be rid of architects entirely, he urges a move towards citizen sense-maker whereby architectural intelligence can be deployed not by taking a set of lively spatial issues and presenting a building solution to gain consensus, but through opening-up and negotiating

design processes informed and transformed by the future desires of inhabitants. Such approach recognizes that buildings are never finished (Lerup, 1977).

The architectural profession is unstable and uncertain. The question is whether architects seek to situate their practices within such uncertainty, or rather, attempt to defend against it. It is significant, then, that on the cover of a recent Building Futures/RIBA publication, an architect is quoted stating that 'in 10 years we probably will not call ourselves an architecture practice, it will be something else entirely' (Building Futures/RIBA, 2011, n.p.). The critiques of professional claims to stable architectural knowledge unite those practitioners contesting the boundaries of what it means to be an architect.

Spatial agency

The recent publication/online resource *Spatial Agency* was borne out of those concerns that architects have been failing in their social responsibilities by retreating to the self-protectionism that makes claims to architectural knowledge presupposing and being complicit with the need for building more commodity objects (Awan et al., 2011; see also www.spatialagency.net). Although these concerns are not new, a desire for approaching design practice differently has gained momentum following the 2008 financial crisis and economic recession that halted much development, providing an opportunity to question the apparently stable professional claims to architectural knowledge. Drawing upon Lefebvre to re-assert that architects alone do not produce space, the ideas of spatial agency call for collaborative approaches that situate their design practices with much wider publics than that of the individual client. Subtitled, 'other ways of doing architecture', key to this is to ask how design intelligence can be deployed in open-ended, politically progressive ways without rejecting the skills of architects outright. They suggest that through both education and practice, spatial agency involves seeking to expand project briefs, initiating projects rather than waiting for 'conventional' competitions to arise, designing for indeterminacy, appropriating and re-using particular (but not all) under-used resources and opposing 'neoliberalism' and oppressive agendas (Awan et al., 2011, pp. 69–82).

They provide an online resource of different historical and contemporary examples of spatial agency that range from co-housing and ecological community garden projects through to protest movements and ad hoc urban interventions. Consistent with all their examples are that they involve 'spatial judgement, mutual knowledge and critical awareness' (Awan et al., 2011, p. 33). In other words, they seek to encourage socially orientated design approaches that work with different human and non-human actants so as to open up possibilities that challenge the status quo (Massey, 2005). Lively accounts of buildings within geography have begun to open up questions as to how architecture 'might "act otherwise" or lead to other possible futures' (Doucet & Cupers, 2009, p. 1). The ideas of spatial agency seek to address such questions.

In many ways, this approach to architectural design runs counter to the ethics of professional practice by the architects researched by McNeill (2006, p. 57), that 'if we didn't design it, someone else would'. At the same time, it broadens a pragmatic approach to architecture which 'takes the practice of architecture as, more-or-less, the creation of individual buildings by both professionally trained, named "architects" and untrained builders' (Kraftl, 2010a, p. 403). Instead, the rather provocative approach of architect Cedric Price is cited in asking: do you really need a building? In this way, practising architecture in ways that go beyond

buildings is not to ignore the powerful political economic forces that shape the production and commodification of the built environment nor is it a rejection of more enlivened, multiple processes and practitioners that animate architectural space. Rather, the ideas of spatial agency seek to challenge the dangers and limitations of the former whilst altering and expanding their practices in response to the latter.

Method

This paper is based principally upon 16 interviews with academic and practising architects. Most of those interviewed were associated with the book *Spatial Agency*, although I have broadened my research based upon the suggestions of interviewees. The architects range from the more 'mainstream' (former president of the Royal Institute of British Architects) to the more 'peripheral' (semi-formalized collective of Part 1 architecture students working alongside non-designers). Significantly, this also includes a number of practitioners who are not trained architects but work within architectural firms undertaking research and strategic design, two of whom were students of geography. Interviews were purposely loosely structured with the intention that this would provide room to explore where contemporary architectural practice converges and diverges from broader geographic research into practising architectures.

However, this research has also been informed by ongoing informal conversations working alongside several of these 'spatial agents' in a shared co-working space. I have been researching this workplace as part of a wider project into the practices and spaces of co-working. This particular shared workplace is said to be part of a 'global network of innovative workplaces for social entrepreneurs'. It is significant because not only did the architectural practice undertake the more formal material design of the workplace, but they founded the project, led the strategic work through raising funding and developing the financial model as well as continuing to inhabit and contribute towards the co-working space. As such, I would regularly debate these ideas and examples of their work whilst waiting for the kettle or bumping into them in the workplace. Although I do not discuss fully the wider political implications of this project *per se*, it does, however, provide initial insight into their expanded modes of architectural practice.

This research, therefore, directly responds to repeated calls for geographers to listen more carefully and work more closely with architects (Jacobs & Merriman, 2011; Jacobs et al., 2012; Kraftl, 2010a; Lees, 2001). I wish to further those concerns that recent geographic scholarship on architecture is becoming too restricted to a focus on buildings as the 'object' of research, even if such status is denied. Yet it is through interactions with architects that I examine the suggestion that architects operate at the scale of the building (Jacobs & Merriman, 2011, p. 219). In order to do so, I first wish to outline the frustrations felt by architects being marginalized within more 'conventional' construction projects.

Limits to contemporary professional practice

There are too many cases where there is a slight fetishisation within architecture over the past decades about the fact that – and I partly blame the architectural education process and I partly blame that the profession itself has almost become overly-marketised within a relatively short space of time, it's felt powerless to the forces that are beholden to it – ultimately, you end up in

a position where you ever increasingly make your statement on the physical output, i.e. here's a picture of the buildings we do. (Practising architect, male, 25–30)

There was an uneasiness among those interviewed that architects have sought a retreat to the visual realm in an attempt to retain a semblance of control. Here, the creative value of architectural design largely operates in terms of aesthetic form and beauty, that of the *expert-designed* building (Jacobs & Merriman, 2011). Despite the global prominence of elite artist-architects, as Sudjic (2005, p. 296) states candidly: '[t]here can never have been a moment when quite so much high-visibility architecture has been designed by so few people. Sometimes it seems as if there are just thirty architects in the world'. Recognizing their complicity in the accumulation of capital, many of the architects interviewed followed Harvey's (1989) argument, either explicitly or implicitly, that architectural concern has moved from ethics towards aesthetics under the conditions of postmodernity (see also Knox, 1987). The profession, they argue, is reliant upon the provision of 'window-dressing' for the short-term accumulation of capital rather than acting with responsibility towards wider publics:

> One of tragedies of contemporary architecture is that as the market has been so dominated by the spatialisation of capital, as our cities are completely determined by the profit of space, the role of the architect is inevitably diminished. The public sector has a vested interest in the long-term future of the built environment because they know they're going to be the carers and the owners of that, the future. As soon as there's no vested interest in the long-term well-being of people in the built environment, then architects have no responsibility for that because they don't have any control over it. (Academic architect, male, 55–60)

Even a generation or so ago, a considerable proportion of architects, in the U.K. at least, were employed within the public sector, yet are now increasingly competing for new markets, often at the expense of ethical responsibility (McNeill, 2006). It was insisted that the delivery of projects has become geared towards maximizing profit with very narrow concerns towards changing uses and future inhabitations.

Contemporary practising architects are often contracted later on in projects such that the brief has already been defined. They are bound to delivery processes wherein the parameters of a project are often set such that their capacity to influence is restricted. Much frustration related to the architectural professions' failure to be able to challenge: 'you know, it's our job to attack the delivery process and stop these things happening. We ought to be *angrier* about the delivery process' (practising architect, male, 60–65, original emphasis). Whilst the RIBA (2005) have raised problems with private finance initiative (PFI) and design and build contracts, their concern is marrying up these initiatives with delivering 'good design' rather than, for instance, actually challenging the proliferation of such contracts. Indeed, major concerns surrounding the construction and ownership of 'public' infrastructure through PFI are being exposed elsewhere within geography (Raco, 2013), yet how the forces of finance and procurement affect and limit the embodied experiences of architectural/public space are yet to be fully examined by architectural geographers (although, see Kraftl, 2012). We might consider how these long-term contracts influence the design, delivery and maintenance of projects and the lives of built spaces such as hospitals (for instance, room sizes and circulation, cleanliness and contamination). Yet, this is often engineered by risk managers more than architects, after all. As it has been highlighted elsewhere (Sage, 2013), geographers should not assume that this de-centring will necessarily lead to more democratic or utopian architectural inhabitations.

These frustrations are consistent with Cohen, Wilkinson, Arnold, and Finn (2005) discussion of architects being sub-contracted into projects by larger developers, suggesting that architectural creativity is limited through this loss of control. Yet their argument is that project managers, quantity surveyors and contractors are more concerned with limiting uncertainty regarding expenditure and risk than with *aesthetic* design. This emphasis upon restricted financial budgets limiting visual design quality problematically reinforces the notion that the primary capacity of architects is that of artistic form-maker. As such, those long-standing disputes surrounding architecture as art continue to obfuscate architectural politics, acting as a means of professional resistance among wider fragmentation of the construction industry (Saint, 1983). The voices emerging from 'spatial agents', however, are stating that practising architecture is explicitly *not* art, but inherently connected to social justice (Brown, Parvin, & Schneider, 2011).

It is important not to reject outright the significance of visuality and representation. For instance, one architect discussed the tensions negotiating the re-design of a housing project for a developer working closely with existing working-class housing tenants. They stressed that they categorically did not want 'yuppie flats', but instead detached houses with private back gardens:

> We have a client group in the way of essentially working-class Mancunians in a regeneration project where it would seem that a working-class area of Manchester has been gentrified into a yuppie area of Manchester and sort of our role was to represent and accommodate that culture as a valid part of what would be the new landscape of that area. So the house became in a way a certain celebration of their tastes and their lifestyles, as a way of saying that's an important, that's an aspect of places that is normally destroyed in the process of regeneration. (Practising architect, male, 35–40)

Working within the constraints of the project master plan, the architects attempted, at least, to try to counter processes of gentrification across the housing estate. Indeed, there are echoes here of Lees (2001) insistence not to disregard the political meaning of architectural symbolism in a turn towards the lively productions of architectural space. Nonetheless, soon after these houses reached formal 'completion', a financial crisis and recession emphasized just how tightly bound up buildings are within the unstable dynamics of capitalism, perhaps most acutely felt in wake of the sub-prime mortgage crisis by those being forced out of their homes (Strauss, 2009). Speculative buildings in the form of 'iconic' architecture have sat under-occupied whilst construction levels fell to an abrupt halt leaving vast urban spaces apparently waiting to be filled.

In questioning what public value is left of the architecture profession, Indy Johar made a call for a vastly expanded approach to design:

> Rather than just aesthetics, we really have to get down and answer some of these real social and political issues that are on the ground. Frankly, in terms of propositional design of our cities – and I differentiate between analysis and proposition – there are not many propositional actors out there. (Johar, 2009, p. 2)

I would be hesitant to suggest that architects are *leading* propositional ideas for 'alternative' urban futures. Nonetheless, I now turn to introduce several examples that outline such expanded spatial approaches to practising architecture.

Practising architecture beyond buildings

> It definitely involves architects working in quite different ways from the way they would tradi-
> tionally. So in an ideal way, they may be involved much, much earlier in the project, because
> they're involved in trying to source funding and really develop what the brief is … they're not
> coming in at the point where it's 'okay we're going to make a spatial manifestation of what you've
> decided that this is going to be', but more that 'we're going to use our knowledge and skills and
> abilities to develop with you what it could be to start with'. (Practising architect, male, 35–40)

This approach to architectural practice introduced here emphasizes that architects push for
the involvement in projects much earlier on. They are doing so to try to question and chal-
lenge the client's brief rather than to adopt a more technical role drawing a building accord-
ing to pre-determined plans (Worthington, 2000). Designing in such a way recognizes the
objective of architects is not the 'completion' of buildings:

> So rather than just seeing as caught within economic structures where I am told to build a space
> for £2000 per m^2, [a spatial agent] would say, let us understand the construction of that £2000
> per m^2 and re-distribute it in different ways … What happens if we only spent £1000 per m^2
> and released the rest of the money into a childcare proposal? I'm most interested in the 'what
> if?' questions which are radically social and therefore radically spatial. (Educational architect,
> male, 55–60)

The skills of trained architects are not necessarily lost here, but it means relinquishing the
inherited sense of 'expert' design that presupposes a building as a 'solution' to a particular
'problem'. One of the younger architects emphasized that this approach alters what it is that
a designer does: 'I suppose if the traditional designer is problem-solver, what you're finding
now is that it's problem-finder' (practising architect, male, 25–30). For him, this realignment
meant challenging the starting point of a project, rather than to pre-empting through
sketches of buildings. From this stance, project design involves attempts to disturb, to ask
questions such as 'do you really need a room …?', 'what happens if…?' (academic architect,
male, 55–60). Rather than positioning architects as professionals who try to limit uncertainty,
this explicitly works *with* contingency:

> We don't quite really know what's going to happen on this site and rather than give you a vision
> of something that might or might not happen, it's more of a kind of framework of how things
> *could* happen which would allow for different eventualities and actually to be a very pragmatic
> response and also a philosophical response. (Practising architect, male, 35–40)

> So, the normal premise of the project was to do a design, build something and then at the end
> do some events to celebrate the opening of the square, and we decided to turn it the other
> way round, so that you have the events at the beginning which brings everyone out into the
> square … We made this 1-to-1 prototype of what our initial ideas were, and it was a way of testing
> to see how they were used, whether they worked or not and very actively getting feedback.
> (Practising architect, female, 25–30)

Such open-ended, participatory approach to design is neither particularly 'radical' nor 'new'.
Yet it is notable that the emphasis is upon the liveliness of a project. The architect mentioned
above (female, 25–30), as part of a collective design practice, raised concerns about conven-
tional 'community consultation' processes which often seek consensus in relation to a broadly
pre-determined 'product'. Through the low-budget prototype of a raised stage in the public
square working with a town council in outer London, their approach was to organize different
events for groups who may have been deemed to be out of place in the square, such as
elderly tea-dancers and skateboarders. In this way, through testing and gaining feedback
prior to the more formal construction, they would engage different citizens as 'accomplices'

within an enlivened understanding of spatial production. Yet I want to unravel this further to elaborate how practising architects are deploying these ideas for building *less*.

Standing in the co-working space established by the architectural practice, one of their architects (male, 30–35) outlined their entry to a competition for a school building extension. Several million pounds had been made available to facilitate the construction of a new wing of the school building to disperse congestion of students in the corridors between lessons. Rather than designing an extension working to the limits of the budget, their idea was to remove the central school bell, replace it with a series of asynchronous bells and adjusting the school timetable. As a result, corridor flow was sufficiently improved without building anything new. This successful proposal has been identified as an 'invisible' example of spatial agency such that rather than focusing upon the production of a new school building and the addition of expensive material construction, this approach challenged the project brief working closely with the client and cost just £3000 (see also, Till & Schneider, 2012). A similar approach was taken when responding to an architectural competition by an environmental charity. The brief was for an inhabitable structure that would help slowdown an airport expansion through being difficult to bulldoze. Rather than propose a building, the architects approached design in relation to crowd-funding, legal regulations regarding demolition and online digital technologies to propose a 'non-building': Constructed from cheap, decomposing sacks that could be purchased through crowd-sourced finance among a growing number of protesters, the project resembled a large, grassy mound that would strengthen if demolition was attempted, rather than collapse. This growing hill would incorporate a complicated series of secret tunnels leading to different inhabitable hollows. If demolition was attempted, those protesting could purport to be inside the structure so as to render destruction illegal due to the potential risk of life. The non-building successfully won the competition, although was not undertaken due to a temporary halt in plans for the airport expansion. Nonetheless, both examples provide insight into the creative approach to spatial design.

This shift to spatial agency is not to suggest that smaller details are not important, nor is it to claim that architects are no longer working on more 'conventional' construction projects. For instance, the collective architectural practice interviewed placed emphasis upon utilizing materials for a community project by re-using rubble and sand found on the existing site. Yet, many of those architects interviewed are seeking a focus beyond built objects first and foremost. With calls stating that it is 'vital to explore the nitty-gritty, material, localized details of architectural design and form making, be it the curvature of a window set or the diffuseness of a light' (Kraftl & Adey, 2008, p. 228), without being prompted, a response came from a former architect who challenged this:

> I get bored when you get to the finer detail. I can really appreciate the finely detailed windows, I can look at that, but it's not something I'm drawn towards spending my time. I suppose I ended up drawing a personal line in the sand, conscious of the fact that trying to find work in the current climate is far harder and what I wouldn't be prepared to do and the line in the sand was about doing projects which are about social justice, about democratising life in organisations or by some addressing of inequalities, and addressing issues around homophobia and access and things which are genuinely about people's voice. (Former practising architect, male, 55–60)

Having once been a member of the aforementioned radical Left *New Architecture Movement*, he had since left the architecture profession to pursue these social concerns working in organizational and educational change. This begins to hint towards the limits by which

architects can undertake such social and political initiatives. Whilst he was supportive of these spatial agents, he noted that only the most entrepreneurial practices and those shel-tered by academic institutions can easily rely on this approach to architectural practice. Attention, then, must be paid towards the circumstances whereby designers are advising to build less.

A caveat from the young 'problem-finder' designer above was to ask: 'but who wants to pay a designer to do that?' This is an important question. In an example, he explained how he adopted more of a strategic brief writing role on a project for a former state-funded youth centre that was to be taken over by a 'social enterprise':

> They kind of said 'look there's a couple of youth centres closing down and they're looking to do something with the space, design a youth centre getting it up and running, do you want to, perhaps go in the existing buildings and maybe re-' – 'Woah woah woah!' I sat down with them and asked what is this youth club meant to do. The need was [that] they can see into the future and see 20-somethings unemployed, there's no aspiration and actually high unemployment. Perhaps there's no entrepreneurial spirit there? At the same time, there's nothing to do. Okay, there's your need, there's your objective, that conversation's happening now. It's actually about engaging young people in positive activity, developing an entrepreneurial mindset. Okay, so do we need an building? Actually, no. (Practising architect, male, 25–30)

The suggested solution to this spatial 'problem' was to instil those young people with a more 'entrepreneurial spirit' by harnessing web-based resources so that they could self-organize a five-a-side football tournament. This would take priority over a more extensive redevel-opment of the youth club. Certainly, this might be radically challenging the profession through practices of strategic design, yet this by no means implies that this is socially and politically radical. Perhaps the architect might instead be better protesting the cuts to youth services rather than encouraging entrepreneurial behaviour among individuals? Likewise, might the school bell example above risk being used to legitimize the cancellation of (re) building new schools which now must 'make-do' instead, as has been the case with the scraping of the government's *Building Schools for the Future* initiative in the U.K. (Kraftl, 2012)? Therefore, the political capacity of architects in these changing roles needs much greater exploration and I argue that geographers are well-placed to do so. At its best, this expanded architectural agency highlights some creative, experimental responses to the profession failing in its ethical and social responsibility (McNeill, 2006). Yet there are risks, too, that this expanded spatial approach merely becomes an attempt by architects to re-gain control without contributing towards opening up an alternative politics of space.

Conclusion

Being told by an architect that there are 'bigger' issues that they might engage with than making buildings is indeed an intriguing proposition. This has provided motivation for re-thinking the direction of recent geographic studies of architecture so as to go beyond a focus upon the multiple processes and practices of building. This is not to insist that we must shift our attention towards the more abstract; I do not set out an impossible call for a focus upon the geographies of 'bigger things'. Yet it *is* a call to re-engage with the politically pro-gressive possibilities that a critical geography of architecture might enable following a shift towards the non-representational (Lees, 2001). Where Kraftl and Adey (2008, p. 213; my emphasis) suggest that 'for architects and their buildings to be taken seriously, *buildings* must be imbued with the power to make a difference to their inhabitants', this approach

instead argues that architects seeking to make a difference are taking seriously the lively conditions of *space*. To understand this approach to architectural design, I have traced the concerns raised by architects surrounding their marginalization from 'conventional' land development contracts orientated around the accumulation of capital, limiting their possibility for progressive architectural practice, echoing well-established geographic scholarship into the social production of the built environment (Knox, 1987). Yet they too are recognizing that there are many human and non-human actors involved in building processes, in line with more recent geographic work on practising architectures (Jacobs & Merriman, 2011). It is significant, then, that there is an emergence of architects questioning how wider sociopolitical imperatives limit and constrain their design practices by directly confronting how they are enrolled in the production of space.

Through introducing the approach and examples of spatial agency, this paper provides new direction to the geographies of architecture scholarship. It has done so by examining how socially orientated architects are explicitly expanding their creative design practices to help address broader social and economic issues. This stance is more concerned with expanding design briefs, re-distributing materials and initiating and mediating projects than designating what form a building should take or what materials are to be used. By contesting the boundaries of the profession and what it is that architects are involved with, spatial agency involves doing more to intervene politically in early stages of development or even initiating and contributing towards projects that may not involve any building at all. Through discussing these projects in relation to the geographies of architecture, this moves us beyond comprehensive geographic studies of buildings, shifting our attention towards how spatial design opens up possibilities to 'act otherwise' (Doucet & Cupers, 2009).

By examining why this profession under threat has been motivated to act spatially, this raises questions as to how geographers might respond. In pursuing the approach, I argue this helps us move towards different forms of political engagement through our practices and interventions as geographers. Certainly, I do not wish to return to claims of the architect-as-hero. That these architects are informed by thinking on 'space' rather than 'architecture' provides a great opportunity for geographers to work constructively with and alongside these practitioners. Notably, the operations of 'spatial agency' never quite relinquish the 'architectural', rather they propose 'other ways of doing architecture' (Awan et al., 2011). It is pertinent, then, that one architect asked: 'what perspective do you bring to it as a social geographer that an architectural theorist doesn't?' (academic architect, male, 55–60), whilst another stated: 'you're a geographer, you shouldn't care too much about architecture. It's for architects to make the argument about their role in the world, right? That's not your problem' (strategic designer, male, 30–35). Such tensions link with the perceived differences between 'conventional' geographers and practitioners such as architects, planners and urban designers (Jacobs & Merriman, 2011, p. 219). Yet perhaps we need to be rethinking our own academic performances as geographers to help foster new progressive possibilities (Gibson-Graham, 2008), whilst recognizing that few geographers are trained as designers. We might follow the collaborative action research/practices of *atelier d'architecture autogérée* (Studio for Self-managed Architecture) who hope to enact the affects and emotions of a post-capitalist politics through practices of communing, intersecting with the collective practices cultivated by J.K. Gibson-Graham and the Community Economies Collective.

I urge for those geographers concerned with architecture and the social production of urban environments to experiment in such creative modes of working, to reach out to engage

with these practitioners aware that we are often challenged and limited by very different budgets, objectives and outcomes. This paper provides a theoretical reframing to help geographers articulate and open up such a space for fostering radical urban experiments and interventions. By calling for creative engagement with such projects, I therefore set forth an agenda for a politically progressive geography of architecture.

Notes

1. I encountered an architect who was insistent that the Royal Institute of British Architects be understood as an 'old boys network'.
2. I am keen to emphasize all the authors of this text here to counter the misconception that the ideas within this publication were solely the work of Robert Venturi. Indeed, he received the Pritzker Architecture Prize and this was not shared with equal partner Denise Scott Brown, reinforcing the notion of the 'genius' architect as singular and male.

Acknowledgements

Funding

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