

INTRODUCTION: DIVERGENCES IN ARCHITECTURAL RESEARCH

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Foreword to the first issue of Contour Journal

The first issue of Contour presents a series of contributions from emerging scholars from around the world on the question “What is research in architecture?”. The contributions map a territory of research practices related to architecture and the built environment, the urban; and also to two of their main subject matters: space and its different users. The outline of this territory is marked by architectural and educational practices but stretch far beyond classical disciplinary limitations. The goal of the Contour editorial team was not to reach consensus about the exact role of architecture in research practices. The texts and images we have selected are rather the result of tensions and contradictions that pertain to a journal issue showcasing possibilities, collisions of method, exceptions from disciplinary rules and encounters between disparate intellectual traditions. This issue does not aim to offer a holistic view of research in architecture, but rather to shed light on some of its more divergent and novel cases.

Most people have an experience of and opinion on architecture and the built environment. Architecture is urban, rural, vernacular, high-tech, shaped by and shaping human experience, a practice of learning and conception. It is a physical and mental craft that can be studied and taught. Academic research too is increasingly focusing on architecture. Yet it is difficult to say what it means to do research in the context of this pervasive thing that is architecture; that is outside the traditional paths of hermeneutics and unapologetic nombrilism.

While architecture is a common denominator to the research interests presented here, architecture’s academia is too complex to easily be classified into a simple typology. The practice of research in architecture often results from a partnership with other disciplines. While this scholarship should seek to identify the idiosyncrasy of its contribution to knowledge beyond the historical accounts of buildings, types and settlements, it is often limited to an intellectual

framework which addresses single disciplinary perspectives or, ultimately seeks to improve architectural practice. Whether or not these aims correspond to our own views of architectural research, the articles in this issue demonstrate that each research endeavour must draw from and develops a methodology that best fits the questions and problems it seeks to address.

To interrogate this notion further, the editors of this journal held a workshop in Rolle, Switzerland in the fall of 2013. We invited doctoral researchers and guest speakers from across Europe to discuss the importance, administration, methods, audience, and application of research in the field of architecture. Besides formal lectures, the seminar provided doctoral researchers a chance to engage in an intense dialogue where they explored and discuss those subject matters with the aid of a diagramming method specially conceived for the occasion. Following the Rolle workshop, the members of the editorial team wrote a series of short editorial texts (#0 editorial) which define our individual positions towards research in architecture. These texts already describe a rather complex set of topics, from public space, informal settlements, building performance, design research and the underlying trans-disciplinarity. The texts set the tone for an enquiry into the essence and boundaries of research and architecture. This prompted a collective urge to ask the broader research community: what is research in architecture? We used this opportunity to start a dialogue and to shape the line of inquiry that this journal may represent.

The articles gathered here engage the question of research in architecture from a variety of perspectives, and in more or less direct ways. The authors come from universities across Europe (Aix-en-Provence, Grenoble, Novi Sad, Paris, Porto, Rotterdam and Sheffield) and form a loose network of young researchers, all faced with the challenge to define, design and defend their particular methodologies in a budding field which lacks rigorous methodological traditions.

Sarah Joyce discusses her research addressing the design of birth spaces. Her essay documents the conflicts which emerge from an architectural research that is peer and ethically reviewed by a different discipline, inverting the usual hierarchies between expert knowledge and actual user experiences. ‘Trespassing’ disciplinary boundaries in a number of ways, Joyce challenges both medical and architectural research to produce knowledge that is actually relevant to the field, which cannot be singularly defined by one without input from the other.

Stephanie Messal recounts her experience of architectural practice and anthropological research. Messal finds the connection between these two disciplines through the site or terrain which is central to the work of both architects and anthropologists. The personal style of writing (biographie réflexive) not only fosters an identification with her observations, but also raises important questions on the discrepancies between what one imagines an architect to do, their architectural education, and the actual practice of making. Anthropology for her is a way to refocus an architect’s view on the human subject. While staying close in scope of architectural practice, she proposes novel ways of defining architectural research as a practice.

Amanda Marquez similarly proposes methods from different disciplines in order to prepare oneself for researching complexity. She approaches informal city as a fragile and complex environment, which would benefit from a more culturally and socially attuned analysis. Marquez identifies a set of methods that rely on sociology, geography, ethnography and anthropology and proposes to spend time in the informal city, walking with and interviewing the residents. She then uses cartography as a way to capture complex data in a spatial way. Marquez does not claim to fix a methodology of researching slums but to provide some key strategies that could enrich a research project.

To the meta-question addressing those particular sensations in architecture which are created, Susana Ventura proposes a method she describes as “the journey” and a “Map of Intensities” as a tool to communicate her findings. While both notions of the *journey* and *intensity* are inspired by writings of Deleuze, Ventura’s discourse is strongly focused on architectural practice which she decides to use as a destination for her journeys. This Map of Intensities is created based on visits and collaborations with

contemporary architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro, Lacaton & Vassal, Zumthor, whose practice Ventura analyses through the sensations they evoke.

Mazel and Tomasi pose a more general methodological question: what is the role of a project in architectural research? Next to this, what is the relationship between research and architectural practice? They combined a review of complex corpus of literature from journal articles, interviews with architects, and doctoral theses that address the role of the project in research. Their analysis seeks to understand the potential for architectural practice to shed light on complex research questions.

Amir Djalali offers a much needed analysis of the links between global economic events (1975 crash, 1990s building crisis, 2008 global economic crisis) and trends in architectural practice. He describes the shifts in research interests from construction to unsolicited architecture that paralleled shifts in economic growth. Is it the lack of commissions (caused by economic crises) or is it the availability of funding that drives architects towards research? Djalali recounts the case of Dutch architecture, between the “golden age” (early 2000s) to the drastic public funding cuts in 2012, presenting a number of interesting cases between unsolicited architecture, research and outright resistance.

Cecile Bourgade explores the relationship between art, technology (technique) and material (*matière*) in the architectural practice of Oscar Niemeyer and in the academic research on his work, specific to the Brazilian cultural and political context. In a more general discussion on architecture’s position between art and the object of study by humanities or engineering disciplines, Bourgade asks how we can distinguish that which is still inherent to architecture as a discipline. Demonstrating the failure of different disciplinary theories to explain the built environment, Bourgade shows how architecture does not fit a single theoretical framework but always escapes beyond their limits.

For the question addressing method and the subject of architectural research, we explicitly solicited works that are of a visual character. We received numerous interesting proposals and are presenting three of them here. The first is a visual dossier, an experimental format which groups a larger number of images around a particular topic. The visual dossier by Andrés Avila proposes “wandering” (*flânerie*) as

a research method for exploring the architecture of Paris cinemas built between the two World Wars. Starting from historical observations on the context and development of this building type, Avila embarks on a meandering walk inspired by writing of Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, to uncover the cinema's contemporary condition.

Two other contributions explore the potential of images to communicate research findings. Danica Karaicic observes the power of photographs to interpret sensual and visual experiences of building and clothing materials. Aleksandra Pešterac documents the atmosphere and situation created by memorial architecture, through an image and a brief analysis of its power to influence experience.

Perhaps the most problematic question remains whether research is meant to improve architectural practice. Several contributions presented here take this goal as a given, others question it while others still, completely ignore it. The relationship between research and practice is further blurred by a conflation of three distinguishable practices: research of the terrain, social and cultural conditions in preparation for an architectural project; unsolicited architectural practice, and academic research. The actual academic research, guided and evaluated by classical academic rigour sometimes has to be more creative in its own legitimisation, than the playful architectural projects that explore possibilities for unsolicited architectures and enjoy the appreciation of the wider audience. Moreover, the articles presented here are relevant insofar they contribute to a more reflective *problematization* of both notions of architecture and research. As young researchers that belong to the era of interdisciplinarity, we have witnessed how it does not suffice to draw simplistic parallels between architecture's essential projective nature and the projection of worldviews through models and other descriptive and interpretative schemes that are typical for research. Only a more in-depth analysis and a more honest retrieval of the essential forms of enquiry in their differences, resemblances and articulations can bear a more fruitful friction. We hope this issue might contribute to that end by bringing together a diversity of methods that foster a dialogue among disciplines and researchers.

The articles appear in both English and French, as this journal contends to enable coexistence of different discourses, sometimes showing differences in sources and concepts that are based on language, at

other times demonstrating similar interests and approaches across different cultural backgrounds.

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