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Imago Mundi: informal logics and design in the world
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Introduction

Traditional sacred practice, according to Mircea Eliade, has it that the cosmos is divisible into three levels: earth, heaven and underworld.[1] Hierophanies, manifestations of the sacred, form breaks permitting communication between these planes. Often expressed as an axis which supports the heavens and earth, fixed in the world below, this pillar *is* the centre of the world, the point around which all that is, is ordered. Also, communication with the heavens and the underworld from the earth are only possible because of these breaks between planes, linked by the axis. In a similar vein, the earth is organised by its relationship with the reality of the cosmic and underworld, both mediating the reality of everyday, terrestrial life, giving coherence and purpose to it. At the point of the break a re-presentation of the cosmos, a perfect place, is re-inscribed on the earth in the country, the city, the temple and the home, each an image, an *imago mundi*, of the cosmos. This location of the earth between heaven and the underworld and its means of communication with both can therefore be seen both to impose a cosmological imperative on all acts of making in the world and simultaneously a terrestrial reality for our cosmological contemplation. This idea is not the preserve of long-lost civilizations though; it still characterizes good architecture and good city making – the cosmic bound to the terrestrial; the worldly elevated by an abstract desire to transcend our materiality.

Problematic

The normal way we do architecture in architecture school is a long way from this, focusing now almost wholly on the cosmological, abstract aspects. We seem to pursue a mode of inquiry that, justified as 'natural' to the discipline of making buildings and space, is primarily situated 'out there' in other worlds apart from the one we've got. Architectural design, then, usually involves a series of carefully calibrated representational moves which produces stuff that's architectural, but only in relation to the practice of architecture itself. And because architecture evolves through a process of

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[1] Eliade, Mircea. (1987). *The Sacred and the Profane*. Orlando, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

discrepancy integrated through replication into the cannon, as Dana Cuff identified,[2] these moves *seem* to have meaning and substance, because they reference the cannon of architectural process as defined. Consequently, architectural culture increasingly speaks only to itself; for the real world, it all remains rather 'over there' and irrelevant. Levittown is less another way of doing architecture, more a rejection of doing architecture at all.

This retreat from reality can theoretically be addressed by processes of participation. This can be fruitful when designers become involved in the lives of communities as they find them and use tools and mechanisms which work to generate a 'present-ness' in the communities in which they operate. This is not only a generous, supportive and graceful way to go, but also that in so being, it offers much clearer insights into the lives, desires, needs and opportunities of any given context. This can be effectively achieved through collaborative acts of making which challenge the alienation from the material reality of their own lives felt by many people. This is just as important for students as it is for the public at large.

Test Unit

This is the context of Test Unit, a short summer school in Glasgow, Scotland, which tries to enact making as a means of investigating a contended socio-cultural context. Glasgow is a preeminent example of post-industrialism, a city of 1.1 million in 1961 collapsing to half that by 2001 and only now beginning to regrow. There's a lot of leftover space there, a lot of waste land and dereliction and the modernizing moves made since the war only embedded a sense of rupture and disharmony. The motorway, which mirrors Robert Moses' work in New York acts like a foul river, splitting the city into bits. Urban regeneration focuses on utilizing the cultural and student dollar with marginalization a seemingly unfortunate by unaddressed side issue. Participatory practices are normally orchestrated around predetermined goals and are almost exclusively rhetorical and abstract – plans, post-its and large-scale 'visioning'.

Test Unit's work is set within this and tries to form a new discourse for design practitioners (and others) which reorientates the learner <u>to</u> the place they are in, through processes of making. Based

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[2] Dana Cuff in Crysler, C. G., Cairns, S. and Heynen, H.(eds). 2012. *The Sage Handbook of Architectural Theory*. London: Sage.

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on a logic that corresponds to the 'adaptive spatial practices'[3] of informality in urban and architectural production to use Owen, Dovey an all, and which descend from lay and not professional epistemologies, the school's intention is to look beyond rhetoric and the cycle of oral consultation that typifies top-down processes of both education and urban renewal in places like Glasgow. It instead seeks to foreground active, situated making. This, it is proposed, is a better model for designers to get to grips with the meaning of urban space, and the motivations and values of the people who live there.

Shift ethnography

The work described at Test Unit is, I suggest a mechanism for *re-seeing* the site through active building. This building praxis constitutes a valuable addition to architecture's methodological cannon, a situated research methodology that derives from informal and marginal practices and which foregrounds ways of seeing over the imperative to make an architectural move.

I have termed this approach *shift ethnography*. The word 'shift' means many things, relating to time and movement, speed, hard work and change. This plurality is welcome – each of its standard meanings has application and relevance to the practice as an architectural research and pedagogical device designed to relocate the designer on and in the world. Shift ethnography requires time on the site; it instigates new physical and cognitive movement over and through the site, its changes sites, it is laborious.

Three projects from the school in which I was more or less involved help illustrate this methodological approach:

Occupation

The first iteration of Test Unit in 2016 was based at a site called Bairds Brae, a small gap site next to the canal and over the water from some significant industrial heritage. The site was seen as a unique opportunity to propose an intervention as a mechanism for generating community through public space. The group examined these conditions and developed a prototype intervention that could be occupied whilst also creating an embedded public/ civic role for the occupant on the site. The project developed was a small 'inn', responding to the old 'Basin House Tavern' that used to occupy the site in the 1800s, which also contained a brewery and acted as social hub for people working on

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[3] Owen, C., K. Dovey, et al. "Teaching Informal Urbanism: Simulating Informal Settlement Practices in the Design Studio." Journal of Architectural Education 67(2): 214-223.

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the canal on this key intersection site. The concept of the groups design was a 'micro-inn' - incorporating all the components of a tavern: service 'bar' protruding through the wall to engage passers-by on the canal path, preparation area for food and drinks (using foraged plants from the site) and a sleeping area above with views over the canal. The project temporarily reanimated the site, serving as a means of exposing its dereliction, the relationship of the space to the 'developed' spaces beyond and inviting interaction as a way of drawing people's attention to the site's potential as a route and destination. It's elevation – size – enabled the user to literally acquire a new vantage point from which to view the site and its surroundings, thereby demonstrating the significance and possibility of that place. The project had aesthetic and formal design intent because the participating students were designers.

In many ways, the proposed approach has a corresponding logic to George Marcus' 'multi-sited ethnography' which, he suggests, 'may begin in the world system, but because of the way it evolves its object of study, this mode comes circumstantially to be of the world system as well.'[4] Marcus recognized that postmodernity 'has provided ideas and concepts for the emergence of multi-sited ethnography, […] more importantly it arises in response to empirical changes in the world and therefore to transformed locations of cultural production […]. Empirically following the thread of cultural process itself impels the move toward multi-sited ethnography'.[5] This paper proposes that shift ethnography returns to the site. This is ostensibly more in line with the critical regionalist practices proposed by Kenneth Frampton and characterizing some postmodern architect's work but whereas that sort of architectural output retained an orientation towards the modernity in postmodernity, laying itself open to accusations of both retaining the reactionariness of modernism and engaging with the site through a still active modernist vision, shift ethnographies meet the site where it is.

This means that that which is made *on* site is materially and conceptually *of* the site and thus works to reveal its intricate interconnectivities. Unlike postmodernist approaches it does not depend upon the artful synthesis of selected bits of the locale to generate an aesthetic whole. And whereas Marcus' multi-sited ethnography is still principally concerned with mapping phenomena as they are apprehended as per a dispassionate scientific method, shift ethnography embraces the agency of the ethnographer and the impact of their processes. The action of designing and making a pavilion for example is therefore a calibrated device, emerging from a considered approach to a site based on rapid investigation, mapping and

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4 George E. Marcus (1995). Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography
Annu. Rev. Anthropol. (24): 96.
5 ibid.

design followed by on-site prototyping and making. It is, to use Hannah Arendt, a means of producing the *space of appearance*, not only for the designer-makers but also for the culture and material stuff of the site as well. It goes beyond the reflexive practices of the good ethnographer and does not pretend to be able to escape the reality of its own agency.

Habitation

A second project on another unused urban site produced a small shelter. This responded to the participating student's recognition that the site was already occupied, in this case, by the homeless and drug users. Whilst not entirely ideal, the presence of these groups' lives on site was an important consideration – urban development is not ever calibrated to recognize this reality. The build questioned the requisition of post-industrial space for use as cultural capital by institutional and commercial actors by building a small hotel. By developing a place to stay on site, the build raised issues of rights to and in the city, to provoke a response from the site's old users, to clear a piece of land that was problematic by making a safer, drier place. The tiny site chosen served as a tensioning point for *sensing* the city beyond and the build, subject to little design but instead emerging through an iterative process of ideas, testing, making and negotiation, responded to this role through (tiny) monumental architectural language.

> Just as with a standard ethnography this process relies upon the immersion of the researcher in a particular culture or context, with a view to revealing the values and meaning ascribed to a context by people in places. But, as with situated practices which seek to delineate the politic of space through 'designerly' and aesthetic practices, this method also reveals the meaning and agency of the stuff of the place. A new pathway up and over a derelict site, a cleared path, a small hut function not only to provoke or incite a response from the culture already there, thereby revealing it, but also acts as a nexus around which the meaning and value of the place as stuff can be identified. As such, this mode of practice ties together the culture and stuff of a place into a network of associations and meanings. The 'what' of a place is connected to the 'how' of its production. This is similar to Geiger and Ribes' suggestion that their proposal of trace ethnographies 'not only document events but are also used by participants themselves to coordinate and render accountable many activities'.[6] The network of actors, agencies and the material landscape in which they sit are 'antagonized' into revealing themselves and their interdependencies. As such, perhaps, shift

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[6] Geiger, R. S. and D. Ribes (2011). Trace Ethnography: Following Coordination through Documentary Practices. HICSS '11 44th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, Hawaii.

ethnography has significant overlap with traditional ethnographic process. However, I propose that this approach has specific relevance in conditions where socio-cultural activity is deemed to be limited or non-existent or irrelevant or where the site itself is deemed to be worthless. In this context, the SE approach is a dynamic act intended to provoke a response and, situated from the site, to reveal the systemic and infrastructural/ structural relationship of the site to its broader context.

Additionally, and again similar to Geiger and Ribes' trace ethnography, the production central to the enaction of a shift ethnography is the 'primary mechanism in which users themselves know their distributed communities and act within them.'[7] The building as both a process and an artefact becomes the way in which the contextual network is both revealed and produced. The participating designer-maker becomes part of the ethnographic scene themselves so that, as with participant and action/ activist ethnographies, their implication in the meaning and function of the site is not only recognized but embedded.

Pathways

The third project adopted a borderland site that sat between a public footpath, a new cultural enterprise in a reused warehouse and a strip of decorated pathway of the kind councils are so fond, replete with coloured tarmac, industrial art and 'wayfinding' signage. The site had been once a school fronting a public park before the motorway was introduced in the 60s. The site's main aspect is the motorway although its principal engagement was from the paths from the canals and the underpass. Although fairly exposed, the site was frequented only by drug users and the homeless. The project began with simple acts of clearing a line, picking up the rubbish and weeding. Following this, brief design sessions identified the sites topography as an impermeable border. Steps were proposed to negotiate between the site, path and footpath and the wider site was scoured for potential materials. The build addressed the question of how we physically and cognitively negotiate the spaces left-over by top-down processes of urban change. Through the build, the students began to recognise the way formal urban development is organised to assign 'correct' and 'incorrect' pathways and modes of occupation relating mainly to commercial and taxation goals, and thereby grant privileges to certain types of behaviour and actively marginalize others by permitting or building borders to form spaces of social exclusion.

> *Shift ethnography's making reflects standard ethnographic tactics of writing, mapping, surveys and interviews as well as visual documentation in that its designed, material and constructed qualities document approaches, knowledges and social form to both the process*

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[7] ibid.

itself but also to the site on which the object is situated, and its meaning and perception. After its production, the built material or object's use becomes a surface on which other behaviour is inscribed.

In this way, shift ethnography approach embodies a participatory logic whilst rejecting the descent into rhetoric common now to that approach. It is an embodying approach, which forms a new point of participation that is physical, active and productive. It is dynamic too, and unpredictable. And because that which is produced is solid and stable, it stretches the moment of engagement out over time, beyond even the moment the designer is watching, allowing the participatory process to take on the quality of a city as palimpsest, as David Harvey has it.

Making also imposes a responsibility on the process itself. Whereas much live-build and partciaptory practice has descended to the level of cynical frivolity, a shift ethnography method has meaning and impact. And this then makes the student careful, thoughtful, conscious. Even if only a small thing, immaterially changing a place is significant.

Summary

To ascend from the particular to the universal, or perhaps from the ridiculous to the absurd, I'm going to suggest that the practice documented , this 'shift ethnography' is a way for the design process to refound itself in the world, on the earth as it is, the better to mediate the abstract, cosmological desire of the architectural design process. Indeed, I would suggest that as the world of architecture descends into an increasingly virtuality and absents itself from the nuances of the material world, shift ethnography is an essential tool to help the student architect to recognise the never-ending complexity of everyday life.