Curating and architecture: notes from the research

Andrea Phillips

[essay published to accompany the exhibition Curating Architecture at the Showroom, London, November-December 2008]

> 'I think to speak of a "cultural project" today is too limited, and that is partly because culture has become part of the market economy. Perhaps the only domain that is not entirely absorbed by the market is the political domain. If you talk about real imagination at the service of more than commercial forces or more than strictly limited forces, then politics is a culture in itself. That is also a positive outcome of globalisation: we live in such an incredibly radical moment that the best way to participate is through politics rather than culture.'
> (Rem Koolhaas in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist)

Curating Architecture was initiated to investigate three concerns: firstly that the conditions of architectural exhibition-making seemed to be limited in some way to the illustration of built form (a limitation that we sought to define), secondly that many artists were involved in a process of eulogisation of utopian architectural schema through the rubric of social participation, and thirdly that what seemed to be missing in these celebrations of keenly contemplated and readily aestheticised building environments was the critical work that might link them to the complex and often disputed political structures from which they emanated. We asked: what is the use of architectural exhibition-making in its expanded form? Can an exhibition of architecture produce a more complex discussion of such a link between architecture and, for instance, the geo-economic formatting identified by Rem Koolhaas as not simply an affect of its cultural participation, but as the surpassing site of the practice of architecture itself?

We came to these questions not, initially, as architects but as artists, curators and theorists engaged in a broader debate about the politics of space, with a concern that such a politics was already producing the limit conditions of curating. If curators, working with artists, are engaged in the attempt to expand the sites of contemporary art into an immanent conceptualisation of sociality (which is clearly in evidence), then a meeting with the prospect of built form is both to be expected (evidenced by the many art-architecture collaborations in progress) and has a critical dimension that, it became apparent, needed exploration: do the curatorial practices of displaying artifacts and images, however contextualized or process-based, act as a brake on thinking and displaying that which might be said to divide art from architecture; the legal, financial, temporal and contractual imperatives of application within a perhaps less fantasized social milieu?

Breaking down these questions in a series of research seminars held over the first year of the Curating Architecture project, it became apparent that what we were really trying to define was the limit of exhibition-making as a tool for any attempt at addressing a condition of politics (indeed the question of architecture as a political form was certainly not agreed upon by seminar participants, some of whom strongly disagreed with this trajectory of the research, others of whom demanded a definition of such). We found ourselves asking whether the work of artists using architecture as a structural and aesthetic tool for the development of their work had anything at all to do with architecture in actual fact? Perhaps the merging of disciplines was not helpful here. If, as was proposed at one critical point in the seminars, the real site of architectural exhibition was the town hall or public square – that is places where people might be confronted publicly by planning proposals and applications for changes to use of an existing building (exhibitions, that is in which people are faced with ideas for the master-scheming of their own territories) – then the function of architectural exhibition is simply propagandist, and should be understood as such.

Four commissions, exhibited at The Showroom, were developed out of the seminars, in order to continue the research in different terms. Rather than provide retorts to the critiques offered through discussion, the artists and architects propose their own research: further questions, therefore, organised in different ways, all of which take the demands of Curating Architecture

and turn them about.

AMO, whose use of exhibition formats has consistently provoked its audience to rethink the relation between image, data, ideological rhetoric and built form, has developed an installation that revisits the sites of previous exhibition and publication material. To this they add material from two ongoing areas of analysis – the current Hermitage Museum project and the political relation between Eurasia and Africa proposed by Koolhaas at 2008's FD Summit. The work is densely formatted and insistent in its claim that architecture develops out of shifting global economic and cultural infrastructures. Consistent with this demand that architecture understand itself as a site of politics is the proposal that politics admits architecture, as a spatial and social process, through its doors.

Any prehistory of the current crisis in the financial markets cannot fail to take into account the violence of uneven distributions of capital where it arose, resulting in the literal destruction of lives, buildings, cities and state formations: the antithesis, in other words, of the positivist and individuated hagiographies employed to sell architectural projects. Walid Raad has consistently worked to find mechanisms to express the unrepresentability of such a fiscal and political force. Rather than seek to represent that which has been rendered unrecognisable (the buildings, the artworks) in the wars that have characterized Beirut, his place of birth, Raad has instead sought to produce works that reformat the idea of what has been surpassed. Presenting the work *Better be Watching the Clouds* for Curating Architecture, Raad proposes a relation between building and museology in which architecture is not a discrete practice but instead an indicative (and implicated) part of the complex relation between the making of culture and its eradication.

Angela Ferreira is best known for her large-scale sculptural works that take icons of modernist design as their starting points and embed them in the complex forms of colonial heritage to which she understands they relate. For Curating Architecture she produces a new work that explores the breadth of the research process involved in her gathering of historical, associative, anecdotal and autobiographical material, thus laying open the relation between architectural fact-finding and sculptural assemblage. Here it becomes clear that the dissembling of fact-based evidence common to the processes of artistic production, and the assembling of facts pronounced in architectural research, have commonalities at their inception; the process of application differing radically in formal and conceptual terms.

This difference is also pronounced in Nikolaus Hirsch and Philipp Misselwitz' contribution to Curating Architecture which proposes the architectural programme for a new kunsthalle building based on the spatial analysis of current models. Collaborating with artists and curators who are invited to design units for the prototype which the architects then assemble, Hirsch and Misselwitz put forward the literal invention of a kunsthalle built around what are often utopian demands. In doing so they not only suggest the architect as a type of über-curator (thus upending the speculations of the Curating Architecture project *in toto*), but also propose the concept of application as a fissure between art and architecture in terms that are both practical and idealistic.

Hirsch and Misselwitz refocus Curating Architecture on the ambivalent relations between the claims of artistic and architectural display and the ambitions of curating that could be said to produce a set of over-easy identifications that remove critical distance from a practice that might be in need of it.