Hidden in the Urban Fabric:
Art + Architecture – a Case Study of Collaboration in interdisciplinary Contexts

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Abstract

This paper relates to the Conference's theme of the Exploration of possible (interdisciplinary) worlds, where collaboration flows naturally and partnering delivers benefits for all participants. It contributes to the ongoing debate about installations / interventions in an urban context, and the potential that such new collaborative experiences and interdisciplinary models can present. It discusses the potential that partnering between architects and artists has for creative interaction with a city's cultural (often derelict) fabric through 'informal urban design'. It introduces and examines a selection of site-specific installation works in Brisbane (Australia) and Berlin (Germany), which were the results of collaborative practices initiated by the author. These temporary works provoke our comfortable notions of life in cities as well as challenge our understanding of the roles of architecture and art, and their modus operandi.

Each presented installation involved the collaboration of at least one artist and one architect. The paper provides insight concerning the organisational process and the interaction of the organisations involved and the behind the scenes activity as to how the curator was able to get the different groups involved, to work together and focus on the project. While working together with a common goal opens up new arenas for artistic exploration, where do the boundaries between art (electronic media art, etc) and architecture / urban design begin and end? Addressing this question of discipline boundary is an essential element in an educational context of interdisciplinary pedagogy, a context in which both projects were initially set.

The exhibitions involved teams of established and emerging artists, and students of architecture, visual arts, landscape architecture and urban design. The resulting dialogues and contemporary crossovers between the disciplines have led to new, informal forms of collaborations and ways to understand the urban context. It has also promoted a fresh perspective on the design process, demonstrating the potential of such reciprocal relationships.

How do media artists draw inspiration from architecture and vice-versa (e.g. intuition versus analytical approach)? How can disciplinary boundaries best be challenged and transgressed in order to critically re-assess them? How might architects and artists work together in Design+Build Studios and temporary urban interventions in public space, in an interdisciplinary future?

Keywords

Collaborative design-build Studio, site-specific installations, interdisciplinary crossover, partnering between artists and architects, reciprocal relationship, urban public space.

1. Introduction: Testing Different Models of Collaboration

The architectural world is continually looking elsewhere — outside itself — for reference points. The current debate about public art and interdisciplinarity indicates that there is a huge potential for collaboration between architects and artists in interacting with the cultural fabric of the city. In this context, temporary installation works can provoke our comfortable notions of life in cities as well as challenge our understanding of the roles of architecture and art, and their *modus operandi*. [1] Obviously, as architects we need to be able to operate in several domains at the same time, or as Wouter Davidts has put it: 'Disciplinary borders should be challenged and transgressed in order to critically reassess them.' [2]

In response to our current times of rapid change, we have become increasingly aware of the need to look beyond conventional models of organisation, and to develop more appropriate cross-disciplinary studio models in teaching architecture. [3] Such collaborative studios differ from the traditional design studios in that they are cross-disciplined and, at the same time, embed a leadership role for the architecture discipline. Of course, there are many precedents for such interdisciplinary approaches. I found the advantage of running collaborative studios is that they produce students who are highly motivated, and who are more rigorous in their thinking.

2. Ways of Sharing Criteria

But where does the discipline of art begin and that of architecture end? The reciprocal relationship between architecture and sculpture has been an intriguing artistic phenomenon for a long time. It's challenging to uncover

these methodological differences, through the act of making. Our recent investigations revealed interesting crossover practices, where contemporary artists produced *architectural* objects and space-engaging installations, while artistic tendencies such as Constructivism, Pop Art or Minimalism were quickly adapted by the architecture students.

The idea behind the two exhibitions *Rethinking: Space, Time, Architecture* in Berlin (2002), and *Art+Arch infinite* in downtown Brisbane (2004), was to bring together the disciplines by engaging artists and architects / landscape architects in a collaborative and exploratory discourse with each other. Therefore, the exhibition projects involved teams of both established and emerging artists, and students of architecture and art. Collaboration thrives on difference as much as similarities and the resulting dialogues between the disciplines has led to interesting new forms of collaborations and innovative ways to understand urban context, demonstrating the potential of such reciprocal relationships. Working together with a common goal has opened up new arenas of artistic exploration.

Today, more than ever, making architecture is an interdisciplinary adventure without clear boundaries. Space, proportion, material, colour, surface: architects share with artists a whole range of criteria in their work, as well as some central elements of theory, planning and delivery. Both disciplines are concerned with the construction of space. Consequently, the influence of works by artists such as Richard Serra, Donald Judd or Gordon Matta-Clark on architects and urban designers is often evident, despite the radical alienation from architecture by these artists. [4] [5] The area between the two poles is charged with a tension that can release artistic energies, witness the case of Matta-Clark, who introduced radically new ideas into the artist-architect relationship, and who is known for his dissections of buildings. 'Why hang things on a wall,' he asked, 'when the wall itself is so much more a challenging medium?' [6] His installations transformed the notion of sculpture into bisected

pieces of walk-in architecture. Thus, art and architecture can meet and define each other's respective domains on many levels, in a healthy cross-fertilisation.

3. Site-Specific Installations in Public Space: How Context becomes the Content

Probably for too long, artists and architects have performed in their separate communities. Prior to the two mentioned exhibitions, the interaction between practising artists and architects in Brisbane was limited or, rather, accidental, in Berlin it was limited to a small group. In order to improve this situation, the exhibition projects were conceived to realise site-specific installations at different locations in the city — outside, not inside a museum or gallery. [7] For the potential of interdisciplinary crossovers and new forms of partnering, the notion of 'working conceptually' is crucial, since this method relates directly to working methods in architecture as well as in visual arts. Through the collaborative process, architecture and the arts willingly or unwillingly become 'accomplices' in working together in the construction of space.

However, it seems that collaboration frequently means different things to architects and artists. While the roles played by architects and artists certainly vary from project to project, and while it is impossible to generalise about their relationship, old stereotypes were challenged and new forms of partnering explored.

Most of the teams in Berlin and Brisbane were quick in selecting their sites; the contextual characteristics re-emerge as content – something Rorimer had pointed out. [8] The preparation period was sometimes hampered by the difficulties of liaising between overpowered architects and egocentric artists, where observations and concepts where at constant risk of being compromised. Soon it became clear

that there is no 'ideal' way artists or architects should perform, and there were some expectable differences between what was supposed to happen, and what really did happen. Surprisingly, most of the artists acted more like architects, whereas the architects started to approach the design task suddenly in the way as expected by the artists. This phase revealed the varying levels to which individuals were able to work across discourses and accommodate different perspectives. As noted by Nicolescu, 'interdisciplinarity concerns the transfer of methods from one discipline to another', similar to the borrowing of techniques or values. [9] Such teaming-up, of course, is generally not so new for the architectural disciplines which have, for a long time, recognised and responded to situations in practice where collaborations with consultants from various disciplines have become a common standard. Unfortunately, in the past, this has too often been piecemeal and not explicitly informed by theory, substance or method.

The discussions between architects and artists involved in these innovative collaborations required changing roles in terms of agreements, disagreements and resolutions. Furthermore, it seems that the architect is frequently unable to experiment, with the same degree of freedom as the artist. It often seems that 'the question of assumed disciplinarian rights, namely that of form-giver and space-maker, bothers architects more than it bothers artists.' [10] As Philip Drew rightly remarks, 'the artist frequently appears to be at liberty to develop a new means quickly and inexpensively with an ease that the architect can only envy'. In this regard, the collaboration between architect Peter Eisenman and sculptor Richard Serra is worth a closer look. [11] Some lessons could be learnt from such projects.

4. Strategies for Art Interventions in Public Spaces: Case Studies in Transferring Techniques

How have the teams of visual artists and architects dealt with the complexity and diversity of their urban surroundings, and how have they transformed their various environments? And, in turn, do these installations alter our perception of the city, e.g. in the sense of a 'Creative City' context [12]?

The earlier exhibition in Berlin led to a wider understanding of contemporary art and its appropriate venues, and even to an advancement of architectural knowledge. In some way, the Brisbane project developed from the experience with the Berlin exhibition, and was a continuation of these aspects. Importantly, the method of working ensured that art was always a part of the whole, not simply a later application. Thus these types of projects have the potential to open up a much broader discourse about public space. In both cities, the selected participating teams used prominent places and locations for their interventions, such as city gardens, city squares, inner city parks, busy thoroughfares, as well as little known spaces such as laneways and alleyways off the central business district, under-croft spaces along the river, and less-known corners of the city precinct. Typically, such often-overlooked spaces evade description or have outlived their former usefulness, but are ideal for those 'informal urban design interventions'. The following shows a selection of four works from Berlin and Brisbane:
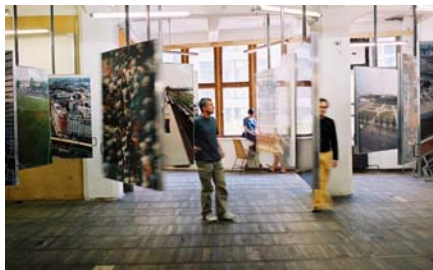
Fig. 1: 'Where is Bolk?', Berlin 2002. Art: Florian Bolk. Arch: Philip Wehage. The installation comprised of turning panels with photos of macro and micro views.

Fig. 2: 'Marking Time and Territory', Berlin 2002. Art: Colin Ardley. Arch: Hermann Scheidt. A large, object-like ramp was inserted into a ruin of a church by K.F. Schinkel.

Fig. 3 : 'Surveillance', Brisbane 2004. Art: Cida de Aragon. Arch: Phil Heywood. Sound: C.McCombe. Large eyes and whispering voices indicate a climate of fear: post 9/11 paranoia, security systems and control of space. Too much control diminishes the public realm.

Fig. 4: 'Dining Room', Brisbane 2004. Art: Simone Eisler. Arch: Alex Steen. A large chandelier is suspended from underneath a bridge, playing with the irony of opulence, and offering a dining room to the homeless.

5. Some Concluding Remarks: An Evolving Network between Artists and Architects

The involvement of students from different disciplines in the presented exhibition projects created a pedagogical model that resulted in a particular type of learning situation. I would like to suggest that the applied collaborative model was successful in engendering an interdisciplinary attitude, as well as achieving creative energy and new awareness of public space. In this respect, the collaborative exhibition projects were used as the theoretical basis for the further development of an interest in cross-discipline design+build studios for architecture students, dealing with the revitalisation of the city centre.

Architecture is constantly used as a vehicle to fundamentally rethink the way artworks are displayed on both the micro and the macro level. Today, each museum of contemporary art would like to transform itself from a static repository and institutional space into a 'dynamic workshop' engaged directly with the city and the artist's ever changing strategies of production and presentation. [13] Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that the public, outdoor and temporal nature of both presented projects has allowed for works unlikely to result from permanent works or to conceive of in the 'white cube' of an art gallery. Here, contemporary and ephemeral art and architecture indulges in the truly public domain by being, literally, in public space. Most of the time, convincing art is temporary, not permanent. The culture of temporary use and temporary installation is an important urban resource that can generate and encourage new activities and make a significant contribution to city life. [14]

Interestingly, such interventions can be small scale and do not need to be of large scale and budget.

The exhibition projects have clearly improved and triggered more collaboration between the artists and architects in both cities. The next exhibition project entitled 'Back to the City' is organised for the city of Newcastle, in 2008 (see: www.backtothecity.com.au) The architecture students involved in the project were highly motivated to test this new ground, and most of them confirmed afterwards that they wanted to do more work with artists in the future. A vibrant and active network has been evolving out of the projects. These collaborative programs offer a useful model for other architecture / art programs to adapt. All the works explored the uniqueness and the scope of topics that are brought together within the fields of art and architecture, and the contradictions inherent in the relationship of architecture, as an art form in itself, to the forms of life that it serves.

References

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[2] Davidts, W. (Febr. 2005). Discussion at the conference on 'Art and Architecture' at Ghent University.

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[7] In this regard, refer to: Malraux, Andre (1965), and his concept of *Museum Without Walls.* Paris

[8] Rorimer, Anne (2001). *New Art in the 60s and 70s. Redefining Reality*; Thames & Hudson, London, 229ff.

[9] Nicolescu, B. (1997). *The transdisciplinary evolution of the university condition for sustainable development*, Melbourne.

[10] Drew, Philip (1986). Site-specific installations, exhibition catalogue, RMIT, Melbourne. Of course, both are disciplines with a long and profound historical and theoretical background of their own.

[11] Eisenman, Peter (2005). *The Holocaust Memorial in Berlin.* This recently completed project (inaugurated May 2005) offers an interesting case in our exploration: Initially, the American sculptor Richard Serra collaborated with architect Peter Eisenman. However, Serra could not accept any required changes to the winning proposal and therefore walked-out from the partnership. Eisenman accepted the changing requirements from the user groups and government bodies, kept adapting the scheme over three years and finally completed the memorial himself. Refer to the interview between Eisenman and Serra, where Serra argues that 'one reason architects consume and use traditional sculpture is to control and domesticate art'; in: Serra, R. (1994). *Writings and Interviews*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London, 142.

[12] Florida, Richard (2002). *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Basic Books, New York. In his concept of the 'Creative City', Florida argues that the values most favoured by creative people, such as artists and architects, are: progressive and free-thinking, tolerance, diversity, and a cosmopolitan lifestyle.

[13] Refer in this regard to the debate at Arts@Work Public Art Conference (2005). *Claiming Ground*, Hobart, Tasmania (August 2005). See: www.artsatwork.com.au/claiming_ground

[14] Kwon, M. (2002). One place after another. Site-specific public art. MIT Press, Cambridge, 112.