FIELD NOTES

The Future of Yesterday[1]

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What does it mean to not matter? To have lived your whole life and not count? In the pantheon of your field, your world, your culture—to be as if you did not exist. No contribution, no worth? Nothing notable at all.

I am deathly afraid of it. Of not mattering. I suspect a few within the sound of my voice share the same fear. One can perhaps take solace in the knowledge that you have been a good spouse, a good lover, a good parent, brother, sister, aunt, uncle, friend, or person. Yes. But these things are, perhaps debatably, more about who you are than what you do; things we aspire to be, not what we aspire to do. These are what's expected, not so much what's accomplished. And while they are fulfilling and certainly worth cherishing, the truth of each—in the end—remains solely within the privy of that small circle of people who have come to know you intimately.

Perhaps many in this room—myself included—can take solace in the fact that you are an academic; that through the actions of your yearly charges, your mark, and passage will remain and have some long-term meaning. Yes, this too is most admirable and surely worth the effort. But, this is not really what I mean, or perhaps more accurately, this is not what concerns me.

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What troubles me is perhaps something both smaller and broader. How might my peers, history, the media perceive me? Will any even take notice? What, if anything, might each find worthy to note of my efforts in this field I so clearly enjoy?

Now, you might be thinking right now that such ruminations are rather presumptuous. I agree. But, you have to remember, I'm an architect and, well— . . . presumptuousness is my middle name. Still, a just rejoinder from one less full of oneself might be, "Whoa, slow down cowboy. Narcissistic, much? First, do something and then we'll talk." Fair enough, but exactly what does that mean? Do something? What is the "something" I'm expected to "do"? Since I find it difficult to believe that what's signified here is "do anything," then "something" must mean "something particular" if not "something noteworthy." Alrighty then, but again, what might that be, exactly? By what criteria is the relevance of that "something" defined? "Something" to me might be different, perhaps even vastly different, than "something" to someone else. And sometimes, sometimes, just "being" is something, which, in truth, doesn't require one to do anything. Does that count?

So, in my pondering, I've concluded that to acquiesce to that request to do something, one is required to consider three things; in no particular order: (1) the something itself, (2) to whom that something might matter, and (3) who might ultimately mark that something as matterworthy.

As to the something itself, taking a cursory glance at current architectural discourse, it's rather clear what the presumptive, default something is. Architects are fixated on the object—building and/or body. Our critics, scholars, journalists, bloggers, filmmakers, theorists, practitioners, professional, and disciplinary organizations, as well as a host of outlets for their work—newspapers, magazines, journals, websites, film and TV, books and monographs, marketing brochures, and, of course, professional awards—have all come together into a nice, tight, symbiotic orbit around the significance of that object. But it's not just any object that commands the attention of this coalition of the architectural willing. It is the spectacle object—the shiny object; the new object; the trailblazing, rule-breaking object. The competition for attention within that orbit has forced objects and their producers to be ever more obtuse in order to garner the attention of the coalition, which then garners the attention of capital and people to fuel the cycle of obtuseness all over again and again. In fact, that orbit has gone so far as to become a spectacle itself. Its intent is to serve history immediately, to be significant without the benefit of time, of patience, of evaluation, of reflection. It is blissfully unaware of the difference between being historic and historically relevant.

As to whom that something might matter, given the something above, it is rather clear that it's those who might make use of such a something as leverage for specific interests: the men, women, municipalities, businesses, disciplines, designers, and developers who indeed crave spectacle and have the means, motive, and opportunity to demonstrate their unique visions of the world, all the way down to the coffee table on which the proof of their somethings will eventually rest. They are willfully unconcerned with the difference between the historic and historically relevant.

Finally, it should be easy enough to ascertain who might ultimately mark that something as matter-worthy, following the above line of reasoning. Our critics, scholars, journalists, bloggers, filmmakers, theorists, practitioners, and professional and disciplinary organizations might do the same as above: use such objects as they will, as leverage for their own specific economic interests, shamefully betraying the difference between historic and historically relevant.

It has been this way in the study and practice of architecture, for quite some time. It is through these stories that the default notions of "architect"—the someone doing something—and "architecture"—the something being done—have become normative within the discipline and, given this centrality, one is led to believe that somewhere among this constellation of interests is where the "do something" resides. But the more I read these stories in hope of finding my own something, the more I come to realize that—as interesting as these stories are, as compelling as their characters may be—the narrative structure is always the same, the outcome familiar, the steps repetitive, the heroes clichéd. Architecturally, significance is closely tied to a very particular kind of tale—a narrative in which one's something is easily and most often both construed and verified.

This narrative structure is confirmed by an exploration of the documented history of the doers and what's done. A cursory internet search reveals, even when reduced by 20 percent for potential repetitions, that books about Frank Lloyd Wright number 960; Corbu, 974; Mies van der Rohe, 260; Palladio, 850; Richardson, 34. Last month, the influential blog "Designers and Books" published a survey concerning the foundational, most influential books of 60 designers—30 of whom were architects—including Elizabeth Diller, Andrés Duany, Billie Tsien, Denise Scott Brown, Peter Eisenman, Shigeru Ban, Norman Foster, Antoine Predock, Steven Holl, Robert Venturi, Daniel Libeskind, and Michael Graves, among others. Of the 797 books listed as must reads, only four were written by people of color; three of these books were novels. In a field that frequently argues its primacy as the first true multidisciplinary study and practice, such devotion to a singularly defined version of architecture perhaps has unexpected consequences, ramifications that should give one at least three reasons to pause in adapting the singular narrative as one's own.

The first of these three is professional myopia. It's been argued that design today has become visual and quantifiable white noise, responsible for the proliferation of increasingly unnecessary artifacts that respond to no real need; rather they appear as variations on a theme—visual configurations, material exploration, stylistically driven outcomes, or preoccupation with the minutiae of detail. While the profession of architecture has largely been spared the "variations on a theme" complaint, it has done so by overcompensating on the other end of the spectrum: the perpetual reinvention of the wheel.

Currently, traditional design programs are producing—in fact, over-producing—designers who compete in the marketplace ultimately to influence the lives of only about 10 percent of the population, but in architecture it is far, far worse. According to several studies, that number drops to about 2 percent. However, architects are no fools. They see what is championed, and they, like me, do not want to toil only to remain without recognition and reward. The path to both appears to be producing more and more outlandishly organized work for that small 2 percent. To get noticed above the white noise of an over-designed world, egalitarianism is demoted to equality among codified equals, based on a constructed hierarchy of practice; diversity is limited to the stylistic exploration of the next big thing. Other kinds of

practices, other reasons for practice, other outcomes of practice, and other practitioners are excluded from, or at best, ignored within, this realm of recognition.

The second unexpected consequence is individual vulnerability. The need to do such work requires capital and clients to feed it. It makes one a slave to both, vulnerable to their whims and unresponsive to demands outside of their circle of interest. Accordingly, architects are apt to eschew all else in pursuit of the client who can make their dreams a reality—and their practice relevant to the matter-makers—even if such pursuit winks at ignoring things they shouldn't. They scrap with other firms for the right to access said capital to produce both the beautiful sell, and the beautiful self, for this moment and beyond.

The third consequence? Public apathy. Architects may assure each other of their own importance, but society has come to view architecture as a luxury it can do without. This is perhaps the saddest consequence of all, as such pursuits all but silence public engagement in the built environment. The language used to attract and maintain such capital, the clients who can afford to deploy such language, and the documents that chronicle these achievements have two things in common: (1) the matter-makers suffer from the same myopia as those they chronicle, and, most importantly, (2) the majority of people believe that none of it has anything to do with their lives, everyday or otherwise. For them, these interventions of objects are simply the purview of the "not me," and as such, they might be interesting, and in some cases, even compelling, but in the grand scheme of things, they certainly are not important. This is particularly true in communities of color. The objects of today foretell history's artifacts of tomorrow.

There is much, much of the built environment that—by choice or consignment—remains firmly outside that default narrative. What is to be made of that? When viewed through such narrow a lens, what happens to the unspectacular, the unmarketable? Of course, I use this term "unmarketable" not in a pejorative or derogatory way. I mean it includes the things outside the "beautiful sell." What do we loose when we use the same criteria of spectacle—and the same gatekeepers for those criteria—for all decisions? Are all other paths of practice destined to lead to oblivion, to professional insignificance?

One could easily be led to believe that, well, this is what it is; but in truth, it is not. For as long as there has been the practice of architecture, there have been parallel and competing stories concealed within the dominant narrative defining its significance. As with all cultural production, there is a struggle to define meaning, to fix it and make it permanent; yet architecture is not an end in itself but part of an economic, political, and social process. The influence of architecture—its importance, its significance, and thus its marketability, its exchange value—goes well beyond where many would like to leave it.

We who study and/or practice architecture have become far too comfortable defining our contributions—and our constituents—much, much too narrowly, and we persist in defining them more narrowly still. The narrower the field, the less diverse it is as well. And this isn't simply in terms of people—look around; it has never been diverse in that manner, but in the diversity of services, products, and significance. Everything that lies outside the "beautiful sell"—and a particular kind of "beautiful sell" at that—becomes by default, unmarketable, irrelevant, unimportant, insignificant—a regrettable deviation from the ideal, if not a failure. However, treating difference this way makes it seem contingent or accidental and is, in a very real sense, disingenuous. It is difficult to believe that in all of that which lies outside the beautiful sell, there's nothing worth knowing, learning, documenting, sharing, teaching, and striving for; that in all this vast landscape, architecture's only exchange value is based on a singular kind of contribution by a singular kind of body determined by a singular kind of gate-keeper, which has led to—depending on which study you employ—architects addressing at best 10 percent of the population—and at worst 2 percent. That's a problem any way you look at it.

Why? Architecture is a profession—and professions have duties and responsibilities (that's why they exist) that go beyond the beautiful. It is not an art guild. Perpetuating the position that it is or should be not only limits what is understood to be architecture, it also limits those who might be drawn to its practice, who might be concerned with its outcome, and who might be authorized to speak about its influence. It only feeds the desire to ignore the object's other, equally important outcomes, and in the process, dismisses those whose work excels at those outcomes, leaving them—and their work—forever outside the boundaries of the marketable, of the important, and of the relevant. There they become available for erasure and reuse. It is a compliance with a norm whose existence is, if one is perfectly honest, now embarrassing to admit. And by continuing to comply, not only do we lose our past, we strangle our future. Really, a 2 percent history is no history at all.

And so we come to the crux of my talk: what, exactly, is the future of yesterday—the place where the unmarketable is forgotten? Are there ways we might (1) look back at the pantheon of architectural production and conceive of an architectural "something" that's different, broader, and bigger than the currently constructed framework for defining "significant" work, and (2) make that broader definition matter within the chronicles of the disciplinary narrative?

I have to believe there is, and, more than that, I must have you believe it, too.

This is no easy task. In fact, it is a herculean task, to be sure. I can only hope it is not a Sisyphean one. Architects are an arrogant, stubborn bunch, especially when it comes to their object. I suspect historians are the same way. However, should this effort to broaden the definition and unpack its possible contributions—nay, its influences—fail, I would argue that there'll be precious little for future historians to write about. Unlike artists, architects need public sanction to do what we do, and it is difficult to argue relevance, much less the continuation of an exclusive monopoly, while serving only 2 percent of that public.

Like it or not, we are in this together, you and I.

In any tyrannical state there is great effort to cut off voices and silence dissent; thus, many stories never get told. Such is true here as well. Important stories are failing to be released, as if they never happened. And if it didn't happen, one can reimagine history in any way one chooses; and often that choice is made to make a profit.

So, it's important. How you as historians position architecture—and concomitantly, the architect—in your work and courses, is important. It's where we read about the heroes and heroines of the field and why they are considered so. It's through these lenses that the understanding of what is relevant can take on additional meaning and significance, open up new and important avenues of knowledge and research, and paint a fuller, more colorful picture of architectural history, and in turn, its people and practitioners, not to mention the nation.

We are in this together, you and I.

It's important because architects need to understand and appreciate the plethora of ways in which their work matters; ways in which their practice matters; ways in which they matter. At best on this point we have been lazy, complacent; at worst, we've been dismissive and disingenuous. But even more than architects, the public needs to know as well. There is truly a dearth in understanding about why history in general is important in our country. And architectural history? Please. We're young and rapacious, rarely looking inward, always outward. As a public, we need to understand why design and architecture are important. Architects don't do a very good job of (1) connecting with the public and (2) communicating with the public. Archispeak does not translate well into a language that can reach the layperson's ears. Theorists are little better. Critics are somewhat more inclined in this direction, but they discuss mostly the immediate, and they scribe intermittently. Who is left? I'm looking at you historians. What are we to make of the world beyond the "beautiful sell"?

Perhaps I assume too much.

Maybe this is not your collective goal. It is certainly mine, and I am happy to say it's not *just* mine. If you can forgive my Minnesota bias for a moment, Gail Dubrow's book on recovering women's history, and John Archer's book on the architecture of suburbia are the kinds of stories that make me hopeful.[2] They help both the discipline and profession because both expand the notion of architecture's significance; why there is more to it than just the aesthetic.

Maybe I am speaking out of turn. I admit to speaking to you today from a much more personal perspective than is my usual wont. As such, a comprehensive understanding of the internal workings of your discipline and organization was not a part of the construction of this talk. Should there be more of this kind of work going on than I have seen, please forgive me, and I thank you and look forward to reading and employing such in my efforts; if, on the other hand, there is not, then I entreat you. Architects, I'm sorry to say, cannot do this—or more accurately—cannot do it alone. We will desperately need assistance, and since I am here before you, I thought I'd take the opportunity to ask while I have the podium, since we are in this together, you and I.

What I would hope to emerge from our combined effort is a better understanding of what architecture can and should be, a more informed public that can understand and cogently discuss the merits of architectural interventions both large and small, a more robust profession that understands that there is more than one way to ply one's trade, and ultimately an enhanced respect and appreciation for the built environment from all concerned and a collaborative stewardship for both the marketable and unmarketable.

Should these other influences be recognized and valued, it will allow access to information and knowledge to those who in the current framework have none, providing them with another kind of currency, which might counter the economic kind. In a sense, this would make architecture—both noun and verb—more accessible, more relevant, and thus more useful to all, broadening its circle of influence.

In that, everyone wins, so perhaps, just perhaps, I—we—will not have toiled in vain.

Notes

1. This essay is adapted from the Keynote Address at the SAH Annual Meeting in New Orleans, 15 April 2011.

2. Gail Lee Dubrow and Jennifer B. Goodman, eds., *Restoring Women's History through Historic Preservation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

3. John Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).