

to our readers...

We have witnessed a political agenda marked by consensus rather than conflict—a democracy more recognizable in stalemata than in action. Political subjectivity and difference has been stifled and ‘politics,’ a set of practices and power relations that organize social order, has been relegated to the realm of mere management and administration. However, after the seemingly unchallenged triumph of neoliberalism, we find ourselves in the midst of global unrest and disillusionment. From Ferguson to Hong Kong, diffused systems of power and control that underpin the everyday have become glaringly obvious.

We prioritize “the political” over “politics.” For us ‘the political’ (*le politique*) is inherently conflictual. It is the space where power is challenged and reordered. In this third volume of *o*, we explore how architecture stands as a series of actions—how architecture itself acts politically. Architectural practice is a medium of dissent with the potential to occupy, resist, reject, topple, subvert, and criticize current hegemonic systems and ideologies. An alternative cannot exist without an existing, opposing term, position, and

possibility. As architects, we propose new forms and images, but also think about the tactics to achieve those ends. This volume is concerned with strategies that promote friction and provide space for the political.

If we take architecture to mean the deliberate arrangement of the material world, then labor is one of its prerequisites. By “labor” we not only refer to physical construction, but also creative capital, and the managerial role dedicated to their organization. Furthermore, the architect cannot be thought of as distinct from the legislations and decrees that mandate and govern their work. Two political realities stem from these facts alone: first, an architect is a legally and historically constructed figure with given rights and powers; second, as a collective body of workers, we need to dismantle the mythical figure of the detached designer à la Le Corbusier—instead, we must “reprogram our own identity and admit that we are workers.”¹ In this episode we identify the legalities that govern our profession and advocate for their improvement.

bad guys to their good guys

Paul Segal and Peggy Deamer in conversation with **JQ**. Recorded November 18th, 2014

JQ: One of the reasons why you wanted to bring both of you together is because during our conversation with you Paul, you said that students should be picketing the lectures of architects who do not pay their interns. Just this last summer, the Architecture Lobby was picketing for similar reasons at the Venice Biennale and AIA convention in Chicago. Could each of you speak to your own experiences as activists within the architectural profession?

PD: I started the Architecture Lobby in conversation with other individuals who were openly anxious about the profession—particularly revolving around the issue of indentured laborers and worker’s rights in the construction of our buildings, brought to the forefront with “Who Builds Your Architecture,” organized by Mabel Wilson and Kadambari Baxi.² Many people in the field don’t identify with workers, because they don’t see architects as laborers, even though many of the same living conditions being described were applicable to us as well: four people living together in order to make their way in New York, working twenty-four seven for firms that barely pay—very basic illegal labor practices that were happening with construction workers were happening with us. Some of us who agreed about this perception decided that we should start meeting, and it just grew from there. That happened about a year and a half ago.

PS: I am an advocate of picketing. I think students have a lot more power than they realize. When I was a grad student, we had a fabulous faculty, except for an environmental systems professor who was awful! We figured maybe he’s new and nervous. He was even worse the second class. I remember thinking that it was ridiculous and not up to the standards of this place at all. Everyone in my graduate school class went down to the dean’s office and demanded that we get a better professor. He asked “Are you telling me what to do?” I said “No, but if you don’t, we’re not going to go to class anymore. None of us.” He threatened us with incompletes and the possibility of not graduating. I responded by saying “How is that going to look to the provost when the entire class is unable to graduate because we had an incomplete?” The next week we had a new professor, and he was fabulous! We all have a ton of political power that we don’t appreciate and don’t exercise.

I was up in Albany last May for the AIA’s annual lobby day, where we all lobby for things that we care about. The things we care about may not be earth shattering, but it’s incremental. We lobby, for instance, for our protection when we aid in cases of declared disasters—a Good Samaritan law, which doctors have but architects don’t.³ We lobby for a statute of limitations on third-party lawsuits, we lobby for a lot of small things that have big implications.

JQ: How is the Architecture Lobby more or less effective than the AIA in advocating for the welfare of architects? Do you see the Architecture Lobby as an alternative to the AIA?

PD: When people ask me what the Architecture Lobby does, I say we argue for the things that we wish the AIA was and is not arguing for. So that posits us as an alternative. But we would like to work alongside, in a sort of partnership, with the AIA. We’re willing to be the bad guys to their good guys. If we’re testing the limits to the Sherman Antitrust Act⁴, which I think really delimits a lot of what the AIA does, we’re willing to push that boundary a little bit more. Is the Justice Department really going to come after us? And if they do, maybe it would be good news. I feel that we can be naughty to the AIA’s nice, and I see that as collaboration.

PS: As president of the AIA during the 1986 consent decree, and as somebody who is on record for having violated the 1972 consent decree in 1985, I would strongly urge you to avoid that like the plague.⁵ You don’t want the justice department poking around

in your business. Their only concern is preventing competitors doing anything that limits competition.

PD: This might be naïve, but sometimes naïve can go a long way... It’s amazing to me that lawyers, for example, come to a consensus on what their salaries will be the first year out of school. My understanding is that if we architects agreed to such a standard, the Justice Department would come after us. Why is it so different for law than it is for architecture?

PS: First of all, the lawyers are smarter than we are.

PD: And they wrote the laws...

PS: You’re right. They were also smart enough to never be seen together agreeing on something. Real-estate brokers get the same commission, but you will never catch them agreeing to it. The Justice Department caught me making speeches about that very topic—what should starting architects make? That is precisely the video they jumped on. The reason, by the way, that you may not want to take this on is that the AIA in 1986, ‘87, and ‘88 spent over a million dollars taking this issue to court. We didn’t win.

JQ: If the Architecture Lobby is really an alternative to the AIA, then I would say it’s necessary that it pushes these boundaries. There are certain things that the AIA just can’t do...

PS: Or it doesn’t want to do. The AIA textbook to professional practice is horrible because it tries to be all things to all people. That’s not the way it is. The truth is that there are good guys and there are bad guys, there are things you should do in practice and there are things you’d be insane to do. I can say that, they can’t. I’d say keep your ability to say tough things and stay out of the justice department’s sights. The problem with the AIA is that they’re a membership organization out of necessity, while the Architecture Lobby is not, and that gives them tremendous freedom to tell the truth.

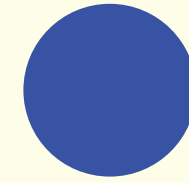
JQ: Both of you are outspoken about transforming the profession. Do you think a radical transformation is necessary or can it happen gradually from the inside? What does that look like and what are the critical steps towards making it happen?

PD: I wish a radical transformation were possible, but I don’t think that would ever happen, so I default to gradual change. I certainly think that graduating students coming out of classes like yours will increasingly expect more. Gradual transformation will happen with, I don’t want to say “radicalizing” the students—but making them conscious of things like their abilities and their right to compensation.

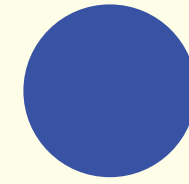
PS: I think it’s going to happen both ways. The critical part to the gradual transformation is making architects realize that they add value and that value deserves reward. By that I mean figuring out better ways to use resources—I don’t mean making silly-looking buildings. I don’t think silly looking buildings should be applauded at schools. It is bad behavior that shouldn’t be encouraged. Silly-looking buildings cost a fortune to build and they leak like crazy. That’s why people don’t like architects. The revolutionary step is some smart student who’s going to do something that makes construction much more efficient.

PD: That’s inspiring. However, I have to say that the kind of formal changes that have happened with parametricism and complex geometries have also pushed forward the stuff that we actually do think is admirable, whether it’s BIM, environmental simulations or construction management. I do think that pushing aesthetic boundaries can lead to positive things, but we need to be more conscious about these opportunities and not just leave it at fancy formalism.

the political



peggy deamer



paul segal

JQ: Paul, you define the architect as a public servant, because we are licensed and franchised by the state—that public health, safety and welfare is inherent to architecture.⁶ This definition has been recently contested with the question of labor rights and a refusal by some architects to engage with their designs outside of the office. How do you see the relationship between the political struggles within the profession and its political ramifications outside of it?

PD: If you don’t understand your architectural work as being part of work in general, labor relationships, and the economy, you’re not going to see how it is that we are actually operating within neo-liberalism. I think a lot of students in schools of architecture say “oh yeah, neoliberalism? We’re anti-neoliberalism, but I will still work a hundred hours a week for that groovy architect.” It’s necessary to see these as part of the same system and; to draw a connection between the two.

PS: I know there are offices that don’t pay young people. While I don’t believe that public humiliation is a good pedagogical tool, I always ask “why do you think anyone works for free?” As a practicing architect who ran an office, I paid everyone a fair living wage. I am competing against people who don’t, so I have a self-interest against free labor. I know which offices don’t pay, and if I see on a resume that an individual has worked for one of them then I assume that you are telling me that you have no self-worth. Furthermore, if you can’t protect your own wallet, how are you going to protect our clients from difficult New York City contractors—you’re not somebody who can be trusted with financial matters, and that’s a large part of what architects do. So you just lose on both accounts.

It also it goes back to the simple fact that we don’t operate in a vacuum. I am a very firm believer that if an architect is living in his or her office, and designing and drafting twenty-four seven, they are not much of an architect. I believe an architect has a life, has a family, and has friends. Someone who is isolated from the world can’t be a good architect because a large part of being an architect is being a citizen.

PD: I do think that students are becoming more economically savvy, they are realizing that a firm that will support their career, pay benefits and make a long term investment in them is a better way to go.

PS: I hope so! Not the flashy, just-been-published, really-big-stupid-silly-building firm. People have to stop encouraging bad behavior. We should all say to the magazines “why are you publishing irresponsible architecture?” Critics don’t always love the books they read or plays they watch. Architecture magazines very rarely seriously criticize anything.

JQ: Do you think that the formation of the Architectural Lobby is indicative in a change of perception and willingness to act? Has this generation of architects become more or less engaged than in the past?

PS: Having taught here for thirty years, the pattern I see is that when we’re in an economic downturn, students pay a lot of attention to professional practice. When things are just sailing along fabulously, they tend to care less. The last recession was so searing that even though things are better now, students are still paying more attention—once they get to a certain point they just won’t take the garbage anymore.

PD: The kind of examples we’re getting from highly paid Google, Facebook and Stanford Design School graduates sets a larger entrepreneurial framework for the whole society. I think we are operating in a larger historical moment right now—whether you call it the “knowledge economy,” or “emphasis on innovation.”

JQ: If I showed the Architecture Lobby manifesto to my class I think almost everyone would agree with most of the points.¹ So why isn’t it like that already? Where is the resistance coming from, what is stopping us from having a reasonable lifestyle and equitable pay for the work that we do?

PS: It’s one thing to agree, that’s easy to do, but it’s another thing to take a stand and put yourself on the line. You have to decide that you would rather have no job than work for someone who is collecting a fee on your work for free. You have to boycott them. You’ve got to figure out how to get organized and do it. It’s not scary...

PD: The problem is our ability to entertain two contradictory thoughts simultaneously. One is seeing the Architecture Lobby manifesto and agreeing with it, and the other is going back to studio and thinking that you will be rewarded for designing sexy projects that have no social—let alone labor-agenda at all. So you have students thinking, “I want to be a star, I want to do well” when in reality this valuation has nothing to do with the other value system: participating in a sustainable, rewarding practice. I don’t fault all students, I recognize it in my teaching. I know what it means to want my students to succeed formally. But it is this kind of rhetoric that allows you to put aside or compartmentalize the non-formal issues. By the way, in all of this it is important to say that parametricism is not the enemy.

JQ: Yes of course. Political awareness and parametricism are not mutually exclusive. Similarly, there is also this misperception of what politically engaged architecture looks like.

PD: What does politically engaged architecture look like? The evidence of the political in architecture isn’t just in its program. It’s about understanding the procurement and production of labor.

JQ: Paul has said that architects need to wear many hats and be a jack of all trades. The Architecture Lobby has explicitly proposed a reconceptualized architect within the knowledge economy. Is being an activist one of those necessary hats?

PD: I appreciate the question and in some way I have seen it as a “different” hat. I am not proud of this, but at Yale I keep the Architecture Lobby quite quiet. I feel like there I wear my architectural educator hat that is separate from my work with the Lobby. The Architecture Lobby is this other thing that I do.

PS: They better be, we’re in deep trouble if we’re not.

1. “The Architecture Lobby is an organization of architectural workers advocating for the value of architecture in the general public and for architectural work within the discipline.” See: <http://architecture-lobby.org>

2. Who Builds Your Architecture (WBYA) is a group of activists, architects, and scholars who aim “to examine the links between labor, architecture and the global networks that form around building buildings.” See: <http://whobuilds.org>

3. NYS Public Health Act, Article 30, Section 3000-B, 1: “Any person who voluntarily and without expectation of monetary compensation renders first aid or emergency treatment at the scene of an accident or other emergency outside a hospital, doctor’s office or any other place having proper and necessary medical equipment, to a person who is unconscious, ill, or injured, shall not be liable for damages for injuries alleged to have been sustained by such person or for damages for the death of such person alleged to have occurred by reason of an act or omission in the rendering of such emergency treatment unless it is established that such injuries were or such death was caused by gross negligence on the part of such person.”

4. Sherman Act, [1] 26 Stat. 209, 15 U.S.C. §§ 1–7 from <http://law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/15/chapter-1>: “Every person who shall monopolize, or attempt to monopolize, or combine or conspire with any other person or persons, to monopolize any part of the trade or commerce among the several States, or with foreign nations, shall be deemed guilty of a felony.”

5. Elizabeth Harrison Kubany and Charles D. Linn. “Why Architects Don’t Charge Enough.” *Engineering News-Record*, 8/1/2005. As stated in the article, the 1972 consent decree is “a voluntary agreement accepted in lieu of litigation, which restricted the [American Institute of Architects] from imposing any standard or policy prohibiting members from submitting price quotations for architectural services. Delegates on the convention floor voted that the AIA should accept the terms of the consent decree rather than continue to fight the Justice Department...The minority opinion asserted that the status quo—fee schedules and ethical standards—should be maintained to prevent this scenario.”

6. Paul Segal. “Why Aren’t You Guys Picketing?” *o*. Dot 1, January 2014.