

MOVEMENT

Over the last few weeks I have been traveling around Europe to meet with architectural offices that have developed similar practices committed to engaging with societal agendas : Assemble, Ateliermob, Atelier Georges, Practice Architecture, Raumlabor, REAL, StudioBASAR, Studio Miessen, We Made That and also met with Anne Lacaton, Joachim Declerck, Finn Williams, Freek Persyn, Peter Swinnen and Olivier Mongin as part of the discussion.

This initiative has been motivated by the need to learn more about a movement of practices that have simultaneously emerged over Europe in the last decade and more intensely after the 2008 financial crisis. The offices have been chosen by their specificity to act with architecture within a political and economical context, by their geographical position each time revealing a different attitude of practices, and by their strong involvement alongside public authorities as well as in the realm of education and research.

‘Engagement’ is probably the best way to qualify the common characteristic of these practices. I’m aware that this a slightly problematic word especially with the trend of developers who want to increase the value of their empty land with pop-up installations and of biennale curators who are eager to test their communication within a public realm. Far from being cynical I consider it good news that such a notion of starts to be widely spread within the architectural discourse, as this is a sign that the social, political, economic, and architectural debate needs to be restructured to respond to the current situation and it reveals the urgency to interrogate the architect’s role and responsibility to build common benefits.

Discussions with a variety of practices and contexts in Paris, London, Brussels, Berlin, Lisbon, and Bucharest, have been structured by three main preoccupations that I used to frame the debates:

CONDITION

How have global and local shaped architectural engagement?

ATTITUDE

What roles and tools does the architect have to engage in a societal agenda?

ECONOMY

How is it possible to sustain engagement in the long run?

CONDITION

“Subversion of a system first requires mastering an understanding of how it works.”
Jack Self, REAL.
London. November 7th, 2016.

The Financial Crisis, European Union shifting paradigms, cure of austerity imposed by national governments and top-down EU policies, rise of the extreme-right, a general disbelief in Politics, large cuts in the public subsidies etc have been our daily bread for the past couple of years and have made a generation accustomed to living in uncertainty and precarity. At the architectural level, such shifting paradigms strongly impact the practice conditions : globalization of labour, increased competitions between architectural offices, large cuts in publicly funded projects, intensification of monetized private development, disengagement of the public sector in the city-making, homogenization of the cultural life. These changes have limited architects' ability to intervene in the public sphere and be major actors in urban development. The value of architecture has depreciated with the increase of economic restrictions taking control of the cities development.

The 2008 financial crisis has been largely considered as a culminating point by many of those interviewed and revealed a desire for change - especially for those who have been involved in the Occupy Movement. Individuals and collectives have developed a strong awareness of that changing context and the need to not only be a spectator of such changes but to intervene and take action. Crisis acts as a revelator to ask critical questions:
How could the so-called crisis be turned into an advantage? How can precarity be seen as an opportunity to develop more freedom? What types of new attitudes could we invent to refresh the architectural practice?

ATTITUDE

“The act of doing things yourself is political.”
Anthony Engi Meacock, Assemble.
London. October 5th, 2016.

The need for independence and a desire for immediate action has pushed many students to opt for radical trajectories disrupting normative career paths. This new wave of protagonists has moved away from the traditional boundaries of the architectural discipline to initiate projects themselves rather than becoming dependent of traditional offices hierarchy or of the market demand. Guided by a strong sense of self-sufficiency, these offices exploit a void that is left by the increasing commodification of architecture: the reaction towards the tiny minority of 'starchitects' who perpetuate the myth of the power of an individual and the their products mask the way that the vast majority of architectural production is in the thrall of economic and political forces.

As a reaction against the simplification of the architect's function as a service provider or a problem-solver in a saturated market, this resistance centers the role of the architect at the core of the production of common benefits. Simple solutions start to emerge by building collective temporary structures, by occupying voids left in the city and its periphery with unusual and spontaneous programme and by involving public in the project process. More than strategies or pre-conceived methodologies, invent contextual ways of practicing that seek out local opportunities and exploit holes in the legal and policy frameworks, gambling with the tolerance of the public authority and the private sector.

ECONOMY

“In a limited resources situation, the most important is to be aware of where you want to place the value.”

Markus Bader, Raumlabor.
Berlin October 13th, 2016

One remaining question has to be discussed in the enthusiastic underpinning of such practices emerging. Most of these practices are far from economically profitable but they aim to find alternative forms of profits, however, the financial question remains a major topic for these practices to become economically sustainable.

It is no great surprise that most of these practices depend on public subsidies: from local, regional, national or European funds or public-private equity funds such as CSR. Most of them also try to be less dependant on the public money tap, to sustain themselves throughout future cuts in public subsidies. Their survival is also due to the scale of their projects - that do not necessarily need a lot of money to be developed - and the economy of their offices - that does not need huge functioning costs - which allow for a certain financial resilience. But what if this type of practices wants to keep its independence and realised larger scale project at the same time?

Creativity in the business domain aims to rethink juridical or financial frameworks that have led to the birth of alternative business models. Some of them are opting for passive/ active economic models by generating revenues with different services (renting office space or teaching) to independently pursue their own projects. Others have developed architecture cooperatives to act as a public service organization or a NGO to be exempted from VAT, while others are digging into the mechanisms of real-estate development to propose new ways of conceiving and financing projects.

Suddenly and simultaneously in few different places and cities in Europe, individual and collectives realized that architectural tools could be weaponized to provoke changes in the society. Advocating for collective agency, these practices bridge new relationships between powers, people and places to challenge social issues and substantiate the architect's' role and urge to take leadership and responsibility in the formation of the built environment. It is now the moment to bring together these practices in order to think about what could be achieved to move further. First step is to create a common debate and stimulate the collective intelligence to share new ways of practicing, to imagine new economies and to frame new boundaries allowing the architectural discipline to challenge its time.