

2014

The Authentic Renovated

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Recommended Citation

Juhasz, Joseph B.; Yost, Bambi L.; Flanagan, Robert; Thomas, David; Sworts, Scott; Grabowska, Samantha; Spencer, Jordan; Meurant, Robert; Hilton, Leigh; and Paxson, Lynn, "The Authentic Renovated" (2014). *Architecture Conference Proceedings and Presentations*. 94. https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch_conf/94

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The Authentic Renovated

Abstract

How can research enable innovative ways of accepting, absorbing, and reacting to change in the built environment? To answer this question, we bring together a diverse panel of practitioners, who focus on the core idea of change and authenticity. Change without addressing the authentic becomes change for change's sake; while the exploration of the authentic becomes opportunity to create lasting change. In this Intensive, the presenters approach the issues of change and the authentic from a number of different perspectives. "Building With Small Change" looks at melding the local with the global, and the importance of the small scale at effecting real change. This idea is built upon in "The Authenticity of Invasive Systems," which explores the notion of physical change providing other opportunities for new ways of being authentic. "The Graveyard of the Authentic" examines the relationship between the authenticity of the original, and of the copy. "Authentic Fun" addresses the authenticity of context, and how we have changed the definitions of architectural theory. "Thinking About Architecture" explores how language drives change and evolution in architectural theory, and how it can detach people from their cultural context. "Come Hell or High Water" investigates how informal architecture in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands responds to rapid ecological and accumulative sociopolitical change. From socio-political change and cultural context, we turn to the destruction of place in "The Authentic on the Cusp of Gentrification: A Tale of Two Cities," and how change in the urban fabric can be both negative and positive. Moving in the direction of the spiritual, "Towards a Sacred Aesthetic" challenges the idea that in sacred architecture, the form itself can be considered sacred, in mistaking the vehicle for the essence. Distilling the divine down to propaganda, "Building Balderdash: The Propaganda of the Divine and the Modern American Dream" scrutinizes the ways in which divine myth and American building programs have been carefully identified since the country's founding, and brings us home again to New Orleans. Tying it all together, "Changing Our Understanding of Authenticity" poses important questions to launch a dialog: How can the idea of authentic indigenous place-making change processes and approaches for research, design, and the outcome of place-making; and go beyond individual projects and activities, to impact architectural knowledge and pedagogy? We anticipate that this Intensive will generate wide-ranging dialog between the panel and the audience, revolving around the key ideas of change and authenticity in architecture.

Disciplines

Architecture

Comments

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Presentation #1: Building With Small Change

The essence of authenticity in design is the utter necessity of incrementalism. Using small change to make a good place better is the only way to mitigate unforeseen catastrophic consequences, which are the necessary concomitants of Big Gesture design. Small change, of course, is an intentional pun. Incrementalism in scale and scope chooses small expenditures for small-scale projects, over grand expenditures for grandiose projects. I report on the projects that I have assigned to students at the International Summer Semester at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul, over the past five years. Using minimal budgets in four-week projects, students from all over the world form heterogeneous teams to work on local sites, to make a good place better. This is an example of building for small change. Building for small change involves, in today's world, a melding of the local with the global. The Universal Value of Site is the basis of sustainable architectural design in the natural environment. No piece of architecture can be sustainable, if it is not authentic—if it does not grow from, beautify, and improve upon the site. The key to a sustainable future is the development of good dwellings, workplaces, places of worship and institutions—of hamlets, villages, towns, neighborhoods, cities, nations, regions and worlds—that grow incrementally from good sites. This is the essence of building for small change. Our connection to what is essential is through nature. Not "nature", but rather, nature. Thus, surrender-

ing the arrogance of radical scientism has to be dovetailed with giving up the arrogance of radical relativism; indeed, the two are joint enemies of building with small change. Being in quest of the authentic is to be in quest of building with, and in nature.

Presentation #2: The Authenticity of Invasive Systems

Sometimes large and rapid changes allow for immediate stability, which then creates an opportunity for authentic redesign. The Learning Landscapes project in Denver attempts to embrace community to create authentic redesigns of schoolyards. Every public building is subject to approval from authorities with power and money; Learning Landscapes are no different. As the population changes on these sites, authenticity is simultaneously lost and gained. These physical changes provided other opportunities for new ways of being authentic. The best thing that the Learning Landscapes project has done is not the physical rebuilding of antiquated schoolyards but the political and social restructuring of an entire school district. These changes were not immediate at first, but the speed of rebuilding which occurred after the first 21 school grounds were rebuilt was staggering, and between seven and eleven playgrounds were transformed each year. Rapid progress and efficiency combined with deep pockets allowed for rapid transformation. Some might argue that these sites are not authentic, but they are examples of politics, people, and place at work. Not everyone moves slowly and not everyone can keep up with fast-paced grand ideas readily fueled with cash and political buy-in. The other components involve scale and ownership. The scale of these projects are not very large. A school site can readily be comprehended as part of a larger context with immediate relationships to streets and residential or commercial districts. As a result, people see these changes as more incremental, even though in many ways they aren't, because these rebuilds are not adjacent to one another. These sites are designed to evolve and to change, and through this development, become authentic and owned by all of the participants. Sometimes authenticity can evolve out of the most incredibly invasive systems.

Presentation #3: The Graveyard of the Authentic: Madam Tussaud's

Authentic—Real. Inauthentic—Fake. A person is real; a dead person, especially embalmed, is an overt fake. It is hard to fault the tears of a grieving widow, when the loss is so great, and the grief is so real. Reason is overwhelmed with emotion. But does it really matter?

Not to the grieving widow! At this stage, architectural analogies would elicit sympathy, if not outright understanding and acceptance. But that's not the end of it. Even long after death (at least for the rich and famous), longing gives way to voyeurism, passion gives way to familiarity, and love gives way to curiosity. In its recreation of "authentic history", Madam Tussaud memorializes the corpse—in London, Paris, and Bangkok. Perhaps this is inevitable, since authenticity is perceived to have value, real value. There is no sense in prematurely burying the corpse when there is money to be made. At this stage, architectural analogies are unfortunate, eliciting regret, and even disdain. Real architecture is a paean to man's quest for authenticity—engaging immortality. In 1935, Wright created Falling Water on Bear Run in Pennsylvania. "It is listed among Smithsonian's Life List of 28 places 'to visit before you die'". That said, is Falling Water a corpse? Does it matter? Is its beauty and elegance so great, that it transcends the physical world? The great architect had something to say—and that voice was undoubtedly authentic. On the other hand, architecture is often bereft of authenticity, often intentionally. While the original was authentic, now the intention is to make them look the same—it's the Madam Tussaud principle—we now build recreations of the original McDonalds. When that is the point, there is little to criticize architecturally; when it is not the point, it requires a reexamination of the methods and procedures that contribute to the maze of meaningless architecture that fills the void. This discussion evaluates the tools and processes that are entering the architectural design workplace, and their potential contribution and hindrance to the architect's quest for the authentic, as well as the inauthentic.

Presentation #4: Authentic Fun

"What happened to authenticity?" It never used to be a question. Until modernism, that is. From Benjamin Front forward, the authentic has only been called into question by the contextual. If things couldn't just be what they were, then we feared that what was authentic would disappear into this contextual house of machine-reproduced mirrors. So, the better question is: "What happened to the contextual?" Somewhere along the way, once we preped "post" a couple of times in front of modernism, we managed to deconstruct modernism, architecture, and authenticity, all at the same time. Meanwhile, people kept waiting at bus stations, sitting on park benches, worshiping in cathedrals, and passing laws in squat neo-classical buildings, with all the authority of a Caesar. All quite authentic. People didn't lose the authentic, theory did. But something

has been going on. The information age has challenged everyone to think about, or at least confront, the context. And it's no wonder that, as we charge blindly into the future, with information piling up like snowdrifts, threatening to obscure everything that was underneath, we can also see the beginning of an aesthetics of context. This paper presents the idea that games—a cultural artifact as old as any other—have always embodied an aesthetics of context. What Gregory Bateson described as the is/is not condition of play, is emerging into a clear aesthetic of fun. Retrieving context from architectural theorists who would challenge any notion of volume or mass, form or function, with a historical tweak or gravity-defying cantilever, we can now talk of authentic architecture that speaks of an understanding of the authentic, that also allows for its contradiction. Context doesn't have to eat the authentic, as classic theory had assumed, it merely needs to make a place for it at the table. In our return to the authentic, we now admit context, in an additive manner that returns the authentic to people, and empowers them to tell their own stories.

Presentation #5: Thinking About Architecture

Our thought processes are enframed by our language, and our language literally controls not only how we think about things, but literally what we can think about at all. Because language enframes cognition, if you control the language, you control the thought. Further, not only does language enframe thought, it affects attitudes and culture. Language enframes thought; thought enframes design; design creates the built environment. When you design in another language, the architecture lacks cultural identity, or more precisely, has an alien identity. This loss of identity, though, goes beyond style into the realms of essence. There is something essential (essence) being lost, because the cognition is occurring in an alien language. This force is radically changing the built environment, promoting a new sort of homogeneity in the built environment, creating maze-way degradation, and severing entire communities from their identity.

Presentation #6: Come Hell or High Water: Nature as Double-Agent in the Border-Crosser Architecture of the Sonoran Desert Borderlands

Though the Arizona portion of the Sonoran Desert may seem uninhabited and completely “natural”, in fact it continually houses clandestine border-crossers, surveillance technologies, and humanitarians. At any given moment, it is likely that while you cannot see them, they can see you. Nature, in this case, is the

double agent of political, physiological, and emotional landscapes. It is both that which threatens the physical well being of border-crossers, and that which cloaks them. It is used by the U.S. government as a tool to prevent border crossing; and in its immense wilderness, is an obstacle for Border Patrol tactics. Though the border-crossing process is temporary, some migrants, drug mules, and guides further draw upon the environment to provide the materials, site, and infrastructure to build small informal shelters. These shelters work to mitigate ecological factors, such as harsh sun or freezing rain; political factors, such as law enforcement; and emotional factors, such as fear, or loss of faith. We can look at the variability of form, materiality, and contents (e.g. clothing, discarded food and beverage containers, personal effects) of these shelters, to see the ways in which architecture attempts to respond to change. Using data from a mixed method approach of ethnography, archaeology of the contemporary, and typological analysis, this case study interrogates the common tropes of authenticity of place: where nature is benevolent, there is inherent progress in slow accumulative change, and fast change results in placelessness. Even under these informal conditions, even when one builds within, and out of nature, architecture's capacity to respond to change is desperate and problematic, at best.

Presentation #7: The Authentic on the Cusp of Gentrification: A Tale of Two Cities

The urban fabric of traditionally ethnic neighborhoods is being torn apart by the forces of gentrification. Although on the surface, this change may seem to be a net positive to the city, in the form of increased safety, beautification, and higher tax revenues, the authenticity of these historic neighborhoods is being obliterated under a wave of cupcake bakeries, doggie salons and art galleries. The spaces are being preserved, but the intrinsic character is being lost. In the rush to create a new cultural center, the authentic culture is being discarded. Through images and words, I will explore the renovated urban fabric of two ethnic neighborhoods, one in Denver and one in New Orleans, and try to tell the story of the loss of authenticity to “positive” change. I will also explore ideas, such as locally driven design solutions, that will preserve the authentic character of the places while accommodating the need for rebuilding and renewal.

Presentation #8: Towards a Sacred Aesthetic

What is the nature of the aesthetic act through which the Sacred may be approached and made manifest, through the creation and appreciation of Sacred Archi-

ecture? Are there universal aesthetic principles that accord with the presumed absolute nature of that Reality, and might one therefore elucidate an aesthetics of the Sacred? The Center may be considered as the archetypal spatial form of the manifestation of the Sacred. But the Sacrality associated with this form is neither determined, nor limited by it. By analogy, this extends to any Sacred form. Therefore, the use of what is termed Sacred form does not ensure that the product or process will be Sacred. To see form as Sacred is idolatry, mistaking the vehicle for the essence. So, how is it possible, through architecture, to approach the Sacred? To encounter the Sacred, it is necessary to pass beyond form. The paradox of phenomenal form mediating the Absolute is resolved, by penetration into essence. As I elsewhere suggest, to achieve this is to follow a light within, and beyond, form. Deep meaning may then arise, in the direct apprehension of an ultimate reality, beyond the socio-cultural milieu. Thus the theory and practice of Sacred Architecture is primarily spiritual activity, and needs to be situated within a comprehensive Sacred metaphysic. The import of Sacred Architecture is the facilitating of a process of spiritual realization; but it seems the design of authentic Sacred Architecture can only proceed through persons in a state of Grace. Although the Sacred may be approached through form, it appears necessary to pass beyond that form, by proper attending towards an essence that lies beyond. In so far as there is an Aesthetic of the Sacred, it is that which lies in Tradition.

Presentation #9: Building Balderdash: Divine Propaganda and the Modern American Dream

In 1954, when the Pledge of Allegiance was amended to include “under God,” the divine became the ultimate propaganda tool used to represent and promote the idealized image of the American dream. Going further back in American history, the divine and the American mind have been linked since the invention of American culture, at the turn of the nineteenth century. Today, the colonial revival in architecture and city planning continues to represent the critical role that the divine has played in shaping the morality of the nation, and subsequently the way we, the people, build the space around us, to reflect those religious values. While the founding fathers were famously deists, rather than theists, their radical stance against religion and national identity has taken a complete one-eighty, especially in the last 60 years—religion has come to be a cornerstone of any presidential debate. If the divine, as I will argue, can be distilled down to propaganda, both in theory and in the imagery of the built environment, how does it affect the

authenticity of the buildings and images built on such a politicized foundation? Likewise, is there inherently a greater or lessened authenticity of the divine, in a community like New Orleans that is uniquely positioned between cultures, French and American, and steeped in a combination of Christianity and mysticism? This paper will explore such questions, examining the ways in which divine myth and American building programs have been carefully linked as one, almost since the country’s founding, and remain inextricably linked in the modern American psyche.

Presentation #10: Changing Our Understanding of Authenticity

In the two previous EDRA presentations where we have explored issues of the “authentic” in contemporary place-making, I have focused on this concept in relation to Indigenous peoples of North America. I have raised issues of definition, control, and sovereignty and the vested politics of both colonized and colonizers, or minority and majority stakeholders in the concept of authenticity. In this presentation, I will focus on the potential of Indigenous place-making as change-agent. How can the idea of authentic Indigenous place-making be changing processes and approaches for research, design, and the outcome of place-making, and go beyond individual projects and activities to impact knowing, education, and pedagogy? How is place-making both changing and remaining the same? How is it undertaken in a critical way and negotiated within the community? Between communities? Between community(s) and ‘authorities’? Between community(s) and research and design professionals (Indigenous or not Indigenous)? What are the impacts or potential impacts for learning and knowing and for educational institutions and professional disciplines and practices on all the various stakeholders? Based on on-going work on the iArchitecture project various contemporary Indigenous projects and examples will be used to discuss and explore aspects of these issues during this presentation.