A quick conversation about the theory and practice of control, authorship and creativity in architecture

Kim Trogal & Leo Care

In mainstream architectural practice in the UK, we find that most architects are largely concerned with the issues of 'determination' and 'definition'. At each stage of the process aspects of the project become increasingly identified, categorised and specified. In this context indeterminacy is a negative term, synonymous with weakness; understood as creating a risk for the legal, financial and professional position of the individual. As such, architects seek to eradicate indeterminacy from their work.

The adoption of certain tools and processes serve to limit and fix aspects of the project and the nature of the relationships that create it. We suggest that these processes are adopted within a particular and established context that often escapes questioning. It is to this we turn our attention, and through the form of dialogue, we examine critically some of the tools and languages of traditional practice and suggest some alternatives.

Foreword

At the conference from which this publication developed, our intention was to encourage our student audience to consider what the topic of the conference might mean for them as future practicing architects. We wanted to use the opportunity to pose the question, both to ourselves and to our audience, 'How might ideas of indeterminacy alter how we go abut practicing architecture?' Through our conversation, we wanted to emphasise that the work presented by speakers should not be taken as isolated theory that is abstractly 'applied' to practice, rather it should be understood as something that can transform our way of thinking and working. By reflecting on our recent experiences and questioning established processes in practice, we wanted to use the opportunity to think about how we might begin to practice differently.

We approached the conference from two differing personal positions. Having shared our architectural education together at Sheffield University a few years ago, we have each worked for different architects, but shared similar concerns over our modes of practice; in search of something more ethical, transforming and creative. In the last year, Leo has completed the professional practice course (Part 3) and Kim has begun a research degree (PhD). We were interested in allowing these contrasting experiences to meet in an informal and inquisitive way, over our shared concerns. We were the final speakers of the day and so in this position we chose to begin a dialogue, to initiate questioning and debate; specifically around the political potential of indeterminacy in relation to how we go about doing things as architects.

In the introduction to her essay, 'The Invisible Mask', Andrea Khan argues that architecture 'divides, organises and manages' and as such constitutes a form of control and power. This she argues is achieved through enclosure, that is to say, through the delineation of particular spaces for particular uses and this she argues, is 'the political nature of architecture'.[1] In a similar way, we might view that within the architectural field, intellectual property and knowledge is defined and maintained through the establishment of different boundaries within the process. As the delineation of spaces for particular uses constitutes a form of control, so does the delineation of various activities and duties, by specific groups or individuals, within a process. This delineation is a means of controlling the process and hence invariably leads to a control of its architectural product. This is also then, part of the 'political nature of architecture'.

[1]   Andrea Kahn 'The Invisible Mask', in Andrea Kahn (ed.) *Drawing, Building Text: Essays in Architectural Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991), pp. 85-106.

138

www.field-journal.org
vol.1 (1)
A quick conversation about architecture

Along similar lines, and following the work of David Harvey, Katherine Shonfield connects the fixed delineation of space, architecture and its associated process directly to the development of capitalism. She writes:

> The regular delineation of space — whether at the micro scale of a component, as in the post war building industry, or at the macro scale of the city — smoothes the way to the commodification of space allowing it to be bought or sold as other products.[2]

Again, we can extend this argument to consider architecture's associated processes, and it is here that tension arises between architectural education, training and the profession. Jeremy Till has written:

> There is a familiar complaint from the architectural profession about architectural education: 'You are not preparing students for practice' to which I reply 'which practice?' Underlying the question is an assumption that there is a single model of practice to which the profession aspires and it is the task of education to supply students who will passively serve and support this model.[3]

In our dialogue. we wanted to suggest that the delineation of architectural education is also a significant issue, and that the Part 3 course serves as professional training at the expense of a more critical practice. By taking indeterminacy as a specific example, we wanted to highlight the division of theory and practice in architectural pedagogical structures, and moreover to suggest indeterminacy has a radical implication for architectural processes, education and our ideas of professionalism. By discussing our own experiences of education and the profession, we wanted to highlight how indeterminacy in architectural processes is perceived as a weakness rather than a potential strength. In fact in this context, indeterminacy is something that we as architects usually try to rid ourselves of as we continually seek to define aspects of a project. Indeterminacy is seen as a risk and increasingly so as a project develops.

The mechanisms and tools we develop as architects, generally reflect the idea that indeterminacy is a weakness. The formal delineation and determination of architectural processes, acts to control cost, design authorship and built quality of a building. In this arena, indeterminacy is understood to create a risk to the legal, financial and professional position of the individual. As such, architects adopt standard tools and processes to safeguard themselves, and thus seek to eradicate indeterminacy from their work. Francesca Hughes writes:

> We go to great lengths to both separate ourselves from and control the act of making buildings. These lengths, the production of complex documentation in order to direct construction by others... define the architect [...] like all forms of discipline, the less effective it is, the more

[2] Katherine Shonfield, 'The Use of Fiction to Reinterpret Architectural and Urban Space' in Iain Borden and Jane Rendell (eds.) *Intersections: Architectural Histories and Critical Theories* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 310.

[3] Jeremy Till, 'Five Questions for Architectural Education' paper presented to the RIBA, UK (1997).

139

www.field-journal.org
vol.1 (1)
A quick conversation about architecture

4   Francesca Hughes, 'Stabat Mater:
     on standing in for matter' in Doina
     Petrescu (ed.) *Altering Practices:*
     Feminine Politics and Poetics of Space
     (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 267.

5   Katie Lloyd Thomas has drawn a
     connection between the establishment
     of particular architectural drawings in
     the process and their connection to the
     profession. She writes: 'Although it is
     often said that architectural drawings
     allows communication between the
     architect and the builder, historically
     it has produced a separation […] The
     standardisation of architectural drawing
     […] coincides with the emergence of
     the profession.' Katie Lloyd Thomas
     'Building While Being In It: Notes
     on drawing "otherhow"', in Petrescu
     (ed.) *Altering Practices*, pp. 89-112.

6   In the UK, the title 'Architect' is
     legally protected, for which the Part
     3 qualification is a legal requirement:
     you cannot call yourself an architect
     without it. Currently, 'Part 2' is a
     postgraduate course, usually 2 years
     full-time accredited by the RIBA (Royal
     Institute of British Architects). 'Part 3'
     also refers to the professional practice
     course, usually a part-time course
     undertaken over a year at a University,
     whilst the student is in full-time
     employment in an architectural practice.

7   Jeremy Till, 'Architecture and
     Contingency', *field:*, 1(1) (2007): 124-140.

excessively it is employed and the more unbending, frequent and extreme its application is likely to be.[4]

At each stage of the process, be it development of the brief, initial designs or the production of working drawings, aspects of the project become increasingly identified, categorised and specified. The tools employed by architects in practice within this process, such as the RIBA stages of work, the establishment of tender processes and the adoption of standard contracts, serve to limit and fix aspects of the project and the nature of the relationships it takes to create it.

The tools adopted by practice are chosen within a particular and established economic and political context, and it is precisely this context we sought to question here. We wanted to emphasise that to work with indeterminacy requires new tools, new ways of working and ultimately requires a rethinking our professional roles.[5] We began with the premise that rather than posing a risk to practice, indeterminacy is essential in creative processes. We felt that in order to be creative, we need to be open to things, places and people. In considering indeterminacy and architectural processes, we associate indeterminacy with openness and generosity to others.

We felt that if we, and our audience, were to take the ideas of the conference into our working lives we will have to learn to make space for it.

Kim Trogal: Leo, after 10 years, you are now officially a fully qualified architect. Con-gratulations. To reflect on our experiences, I have the feeling that in the UK we are stuck with the idea that part 2 is 'about theory', and therefore irrelevant to practice, but part 3 is something completely different; it's 'about practice' and therefore irrelevant to the rest of the school of architecture.[6] And so it constructs the idea that theory and practice are divorced from each other. Do you feel your experience reflects this?

Leo Care: To help me answer that I had a small diagram, which was very crude, but it was essentially somebody stood at the beginning of a series of paths and that was to try to represent how this course — the Part 2 course — is all about finding your own way; its about people offering you opportunities. Situations arise and you choose to follow, to explore different avenues. My feeling doing the part 3 course, was that all those avenues that had opened up to you suddenly converged; they came together to form a single route that you had to go down. So, in a sense the possibility of making space for indeterminacy was completely taken away from you. I think this goes back to what Jeremy[7] said this morning, about the profession and architects yearning for simplicity and not opening our eyes to the muckiness of life, or affording people the chance to look more openly at situations.

KT: Do you think the Part 3 course reflects a view that indeterminacy is synonymous with weakness? Or that it cannot accept indeterminacy in practice?

LC: Yes. I think it does. The Part 3 course is all about learning a set of protocols. It's about learning the way that you should work and that is a very established way of working in practice. The course doesn't recognise different ways of working; it is very set and very linear. I found that very difficult to cope with; there not being the opportunity to try different things or explore different possibilities.

KT: Maybe we can talk about the dreaded log sheets? (Fig. 1). They raise questions about the way we categorise and regulate our experience. I don't know about you, but I would say a lot of my experience doesn't fit with those forms. The forms had a series of categories that break down the process of how you go about doing an architectural project.

LC: There are 26 categories and then four blank stages at the end. It's a linear process, a very defined package of things, with boxes you've got to tick off to prove that you've had enough experience, and the four little segments at the bottom that you are allowed to fill in are your only chance to express something.

Fig.1. Kim's sample Practical Training Log Sheet. Image: Kim Trogal.

KT: The fact that they're at the end … implies they're not related to any of the other stages. I used to work for a practice called 'fluid' and I would say much of my experience there would not be considered, lets say 'valid', in terms of that way of measuring and assessing your experience. I was looking at masterplanning for areas that required regeneration, where you design the brief for the project and the proposal with members of the community. So a lot of my work was about designing a process rather than a thing; designing processes of research, of ways to work with people, or working on other more art-based projects. A lot of people would put that into a different category and say as a profession its not part of our work. Yet we are architects doing these things, and there is no space for it on those forms — I would still call it architecture, part of architecture.

Currently I work in a traditional private practice, and … I think what's strikingly obvious, is that there is an attempt to establish everything in advance, to fix everything as quickly as you can before you even know who's going to build it with you … it shows the desire in formal processes to avoid uncertainty …

One thing I did was to draw a diagram,[8] that was a bit naïve to draw … about the idea of 'chora' from Plato, describing the relationship of ideas and matter; let's say theory and practice and the relationship between the two. Between these two he describes a space, which he calls 'chora' … the unbounded, undefined, limitless, formless, indeterminate space, the space in between these two things, where you are moving from one to the other, and it is precisely in this space where things change, where things are transformed and come into being.[9]

Alongside this, for effect, we place the RIBA stages of work. Stages A-L, where you have a completely linear process, where you move from idea to matter in one direction only and at each stage you determine more and more what you are trying to do. Jeremy referred to an ordering tendency we have, and I think that applies to process as well as a desire to order physical space.[10] I'd suggest that the way to deal with contingency or indeterminacy is, for us at least, an issue of process. So at each stage you are determining things, but all in advance. As a model of working, it can't accommodate participative processes very well, for instance.

One project we did together, when we were students, looked at language and architectural processes. We proposed a double analogy; we took a recipe for a cake and re-wrote it to read as a recipe for site-mixed concrete, and then we took a part of the National Building Specification site work standards for concrete, and re-wrote them to read as instructions for making a cake. We were trying to critique the language we use in industry, to show how abstract it is (and in places absurd) and that it assumes a certain process. The specification is a legally binding document from an architect to a contractor, and so by using that tool you are assuming and setting up, deliberately or otherwise, a very particular relationship and a very particular way of working. So we thought that other forms of communication, like the recipe, can offer the opportunity to leave gaps or openings, for people, for input on the side of the maker, or for someone other than the author or the architect. It incorporates indeterminacy.[11]

8   Diagram of 'chora'; Kim Trogal.
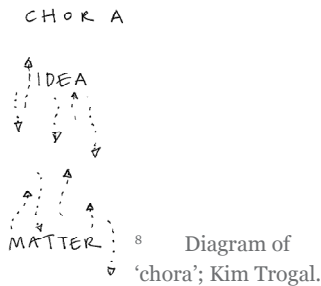
9   'For Plato, chora is that which, lacking any substance or identity of its own, falls between the ideal and the material; it is the receptacle or nurse that brings material into being, without being material […] the space of the in between is that which is not a space, a space without boundaries of its own […] The space of the in between is the locus for social, cultural and natural transformations.' Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays in Virtual and Real Space* (London: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 91-92.

10   Till, 'Architecture and Contingency'.

11   See also Kim Trogal, 'Open Kitchen' in Doina Petrescu (ed.) *Altering Practices: Feminine Politics and Poetics of Space* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 167-188.

142

www.field-journal.org
vol.1 (1)
A quick conversation about architecture

If you want to work with indeterminacy, you can't readily use the existing tools and processes of standard practice. You'll need to radically alter them or invent your own.

Leo … do you find that you often have to invent new tools?

LC: Yes, I just wanted to talk about a very small project that we undertook, to create a very modest piece of architecture essentially, which is a temporary youth shelter in a heritage park in Sheffield. On this project, we tried to change the way that we work and the way we authored … the project in order to create space for other people to be involved, and we did that in a number of ways.

Firstly, by working directly with people interested in using the youth shelter, which were local young people in the area. We went through a simple consultation process (Fig. 2) that involved actually building things, which I think is something people rarely do nowadays, young or old … Established systems of process can actually stop people being involved but its something we believe in. That's the first stage.

Abbeyfield Park Shelter Project ②

Getting young people involved...   ...with the design of the shelter

Fig.2. Abbeyfield Park Shelter Project, consultation. Image: Bureau of Design Research.

Then, this project wasn't to be built by a contractor but at the same time it had to conform to building regulations and pass planning approval as well. But we weren't sure who was going to make and build the project and that's something maybe we're not used to in practice. The person who had commissioned the work was a park ranger, who has a certain skill in creating things, but he wasn't a contractor. Therefore the language that we used, the way we communicated with him and others had to be different.

143

www.field-journal.org
vol.1 (1)
A quick conversation about architecture

Abbeyfield Park Shelter Project 3
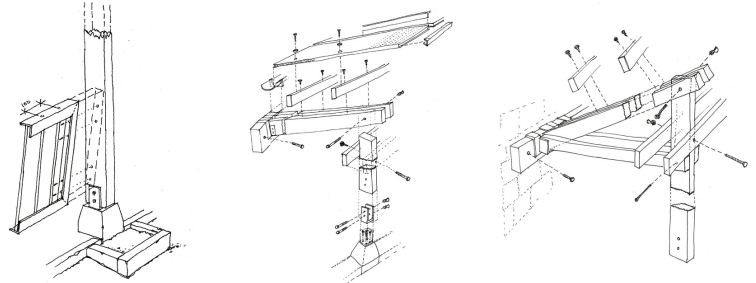
Developing plans for the shelter...

Fig. 3. Abbeyfield Park Shelter Project, DIY drawings. Image: Bureau of Design Research.

So we developed different techniques, more a kind of DIY series of drawings, in order to allow different people to come in and to be involved in the creation of the project (Fig. 3). We were discussing these images last night, one is an invitation to join in with the building (Fig. 4) and that's not something we suggested, that's not an invitation from the architects; that was from the person building it. It was an invitation to anybody passing by to get involved in the project.

Abbeyfield Park Shelter Project 4

Getting young people involved...   ...with the building of the shelter

Fig. 4. Abbeyfield Park Shelter Project, a modest invitation. Image: Bureau of Design Research.

Again, I think it's something that happens very rarely and you could argue that on a more complex, bigger building it might not be possible, but I think on a small-scale it really changes the roles people play, and particularly the role we played as architect, is removed and no longer the sole author of the project. We don't have complete control over what's created.

field:

a free journal for architecture

144

www.field-journal.org
vol.1 (1)
A quick conversation about architecture

It was really nice — I went to visit the site at one point and a group of young people walked past and did join in with the project. They didn't know what was going on, the person constructing it introduced them to what was happening, told them about the tools they were using, and they simply got on and joined in. It's something that rarely happens and is quite unique in architecture.

KT: One thing I thought, was is this only possible because it's so small and a basic structure? You explained to me how everything had to come from a DIY shop and so in its very nature, because it is small.

LC: What we were trying to do is to say, ok we'll design the whole thing, but try to create space for people to be involved at different stages along the way. So there was flexibility and the whole thing could have changed. There was indeterminacy built into the process.

It does seem a bit like a prison with the metal gates. The idea was that part of it would be open during a festival at the park, and different materials would be woven into the screens in order for people to take ownership and inhabit the space. I suppose in a small way and on a small-scale, it is similar to having housing units that people can move into and adapt.

KT: I think what you have said about role is important. That you are not the sole author and I think that's a key thing about indeterminacy. That within a process, it suggests some generosity to others, whether that's by you stepping away earlier or making space for continued involvement … by suspending the definition of things, what they are and how they're used, you're leaving space for other people.

I think the idea of indeterminacy, shifts the more traditional role of how 'the architect' is working, and I think for the profession it's probably quite a destabilising notion.

So, the question is how to be generous? And how to be generous with roles people can take up in a process.

One thing I noticed in my experience is that getting people involved was very much about asking questions … . But how do you know what to ask people? Whether you are canvassing in the street or researching into an area, how do you know that you are asking the right questions? Questions can be leading and you are coming from a position with your own preconceptions. At 'fluid's' office we discussed a lot how you might engage people in the process, and lots of us were quite preoccupied by the tools and media … particularly text messaging, the internet or using other digital media. Of course technology is relevant, but whatever tools you're using to engage people, the main thing itself is the question you are asking them and that's the way you can make an opening for people.

145

www.field-journal.org
vol.1 (1)
A quick conversation about architecture

Abbeyfield Park Shelter Project 5

Finishing off the shelter...   ...and using the shelter

Fig. 5. Abbeyfield Park Shelter Project, nearly finished. Image: Bureau of Design Research.

[12] See Doina Petrescu, 'The Indeterminate Mapping of the Common', *field:* 1(1) (2007): 91-99.

I think Doina's paper is suggesting that it's beyond language, so maybe I need to rethink my position.[12] If you are investigating a city or talking about the regeneration of an area and you ask, 'what are the three things you would change about this place?', it's the most useless question you can ask, because they'll tell you the three things you already know, like the street lighting is rubbish. It doesn't tell you anything about the place. One question 'fluid' might ask would be, 'if Sheffield was a piece of music, what piece of music would it be?' — you get an idea about a person's attachment to a place without asking directly about it. I think that's also what Doina is suggesting, that you are getting beyond what you already know.

So our openings to you:

How have you made space for indeterminacy?
Do you think in your work in practice there has been space for indeterminacy? Would you have wanted there to be? Do you think it's important? How do you think you could change your work in practice?