

Spatial Agency
Other Ways Of Doing Architecture

First published 2011
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Text pages designed by Ben Weaver and typeset by Adam Cheltsov in F Grotesk by Radim Pesko, and Galaxie Polaris Condensed by Chester Jenkins
Printed and bound in India by Replika Press, Pvt. Ltd, Sonapat, Haryana

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN13: 978-0-415-57192-0 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-415-57193-7 (pbk)

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London and New York

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INTRODUCTION

A few years ago the French sociologist Bruno Latour self-criticised *Actor-Network-Theory*, his seminal contribution to social theory. “There are four things that do not work with Actor-Network-Theory,” he notes, only half-jokingly, “the word actor, the word, network, the word theory and the hyphen.”¹ In a similar spirit we became uncomfortable with the working title of this book, *Alternative Architectural Practice*. These three words became increasingly limiting in a project that we wanted to be expansive and empowering. This introduction will therefore trace the journey from *Alternative Architectural Practice* to *Spatial Agency*, starting with an explanation as to why the first three words “do not work”.

Alternative

As soon as one says the word “alternative” it begs the question: “alternative to what?” In order to establish an alternative it is first necessary to define the norm against which it is set, and with this three issues immediately arise. First, the interpretation of the norm will differ according to who is doing the defining. As the authors of the *Dictionary of Alternatives* note, “one person’s alternative is another person’s orthodoxy.”² There is no agreed understanding of what constitutes the inviolate centre of architectural culture, and so the definition of the alternative becomes difficult to pin down. Second, the alternative is necessarily reactive to the norm, and thus may remain in thrall to it. In some cases in this book the critique of the norm is explicit, and the resulting alternatives establish another way of constructing practice – for example, the feminist move away from the patriarchal underpinnings of so much architecture practice. But often, as in any binary structure, the alternative becomes bound by exactly

the terms of reference that it would wish to escape. The alternative is always caught in the shadow of the thing that it posits itself against. The result is that the alternative is inevitably defined by the norm, whilst the norm remains largely undisturbed by the irritant it overshadows. Third, the dialectical operation of the alternative suggests that, in the will to criticise the norm, one should abandon all the structures and rituals of the norm. The alternative marks itself through casting off the attributes of the centre, and in this there is a danger that the baby will be thrown out with the bathwater, as opposed to the possibility of assuming a hybrid stance that might keep those characteristics of the centre that are still worthwhile or appropriate, but doing so in a manner that reframes them in new guises or with revised motivations. In our context this means avoiding the temptation to ditch the traditional architectural skills of design and spatial intelligence (because they might in some way be tainted with the brush of normality), but instead seeing how they might be exploited in different ways and contexts. This is not to dismiss the value of alternative approaches and the power of the term as such but for the purpose of this project alternative became a hindrance to the underlying critical inquiry. Instead, we wanted our project to be able to engage with projects and practices not through their overt alterity but through the possibilities that they offered.

These three issues with the “alternative” revealed themselves at a symposium that we organised as part of the research project on which this book is based. Nearly all the speakers at the conference, which was called *Alternate Currents*, started their talks with a definition of what their work was alternative to. Although there was a general sense that mainstream architectural practice is not engaged enough with political and

social contexts, no clear consensus as to how to create alternatives was formed. The positing of these multiple alternatives was at the same time affirming as it was frustrating. Affirming because of the hope that doing things in other ways was both possible and empowering, frustrating because the centre was often left so untroubled or unchanged by these alternative actions. Rather than defining common ground and shared tools, the defining of each individual position as “alternative” also led to the need of each of the presenters to demarcate and defend their own position with some force; each person became alternative to the others.³

Yet, there clearly are strong normalising tendencies of mainstream architectural production; we can see them all around us: the conforming city of office and apartment blocks, the city of sameness, indifference and of non-engagement, but also of conflict. We didn’t want to hide behind something that could be seen as marginal because of its associated implication of being ineffectual, so the large number of examples collected in this book are intended to present a powerful counter, an otherness, to this centre. The book does not see these actions as marginal, because as soon as one accepts the dialectic of margin/centre then one inevitably submits to the terms of reference of the centre. If the centre has been found wanting – as was so spectacularly exposed in the 2008–2009 economic collapse – then what right has it to define, and so control, what constitutes the “margins”? In many ways the tenets of the centre are unravelling by themselves in front of our very eyes, most poignantly in the form of the global environmental crisis and the accompanying social divisions, and so what we present are not merely reactions to established “mainstream” practices but empowering examples

from the past and present from around the globe that provide pointers as to how one might operate not only in uncertain times but as a matter of principle. Some of the work in the book is motivated by a critique of certain aspects of normative structures; critique, however, is always used as a means to positive action, not as an end in itself. In this much, the term alternative didn’t work for us, because the work presented here should not be read as alternative and therefore potentially marginal, but on its own terms and merits, presenting a new paradigm as to how to operate – a paradigm that has thus far been largely written out of the standard histories of architecture.

Architectural

The second term that we found limiting was “architectural”. The standard definition of an architect is someone who designs buildings, and the vast majority of architects do indeed spend most of their time designing and detailing buildings. There is, of course, nothing wrong with this per se, but the concentration on the building as the primary locus of architectural production brings with it certain limitations. First, is the association of architecture with the building as object. Architectural culture – expressed through reviews, awards and publications – tends to prioritise aspects associated with the static properties of objects: the visual, the technical, and the atemporal. Hence the dominance of aesthetics, style, form and technique in the usual discussion of architecture, and with this the suppression of the more volatile aspects of buildings: the processes of their production, their occupation, their temporality, and their relations to society and nature. The definition of architecture in

terms of object-buildings thus excludes just those aspects of world that cause architects discomfort, because these often unpredictable and contingent aspects are those over which they have limited power, whereas the static aspects are those over which architects still retain nominal control, in terms of being able to manipulate form and technique. What is found in the work in this book is that a loss of control is seen not as a threat to professional credibility, but as an inevitable condition that must be worked with in a positive light. Buildings and spaces are treated as part of a dynamic context of networks. The standard tools of aesthetics and making are insufficient to negotiate these networks on their own, and so the examples collated here use other priorities and ways of working as part of their toolkit.

The second limit we found in the association of architecture with buildings is that the equation *architecture=building* magnifies the commodification of architecture. Buildings are all too easily appropriated into the commodity exchange of the marketplace: “progressive”, “innovative”, “efficient”, “iconic” or “landmark” buildings are seen to have higher exchange value within this system, and it is thus that the signifiers of progress, innovation, efficiency and income generation have become the hallmarks of successful architects in times of fiscal growth. In the economic excesses of the 2000s, the rampant displays of so-called progress and innovation went unchecked as architects tried to outbid themselves with tricks of excessive form and technique. Aligning architecture so closely to the control and values of the marketplace not only shuts down other ways of thinking and operating, but also begs the question as what to do when the foundations of the market are undermined by its own excessive actions? Or rather, if buildings have been reduced to commodities, what happens to architecture when the commodity exchange of architecture is stanchied? The answer was all too apparent in the early days of the 2009 recession, with architects and other built environment professionals topping the lists of unemployment growth, taking with them an even bigger number of construction workers.

New ways of working and behaving are demanded if we are to avoid being impotent passengers on the rollercoaster of boom and bust cycles. Clues as to these other ways are given by the examples in the book, most of which prioritise values outside the normal terms of

reference of the economic market, namely those of social, environmental and ethical justice. As we shall see, these are issues that are best addressed within the dynamic context of social space, rather than within the static context of architecture as building, hence our move from the limits of the term “architectural” to the more open possibilities of the “spatial”. But, again, this does not mean abandoning the skills and ways of thinking that go into the production of buildings; instead we argue that they can be deployed and developed in other settings as well.

The third limit of the word “architectural” is that it suggests that only architects are involved in the creative production of the built environment. Architecture as a profession is based on the need for architecture (as practice and product) to be the protected domain of the architect. The standard histories of architecture focus almost exclusively on the guiding hand of the individual architect, and in this exclude the multiple voices and actions of others. Architects, as is argued in the book *Informal City*, “fail to see, let alone analyse or capitalize upon, the informal aspects of urban life because they lack a professional vocabulary for describing them. Their vision is shaped and, therefore, also limited by their theories, which [...] fail to confront critically real-world issues. The present-day city calls for a profound reorientation in the manner in which we study it: we believe in working at the intersections of the individual and the collective, the real and the virtual in a multiplicity of parallel engagements.”⁴ As can be seen from many of the examples in the book, it is clear to our spatial agents that spatial production belongs to a much wider group of actors – from artists to users, from politicians to builders – with a diverse range of skills and intents. To acknowledge this breadth, we moved away from the limits of the word “architecture”, with its implications that it is the sole domain of the architect, and moved to the wider possibilities of space.

Practice

The third term that we found limiting was “practice”, mainly because of its connotations of habit and unreflective action. Although much solace is given to architects by Donald Schön’s famous identification of architecture with a certain type of reflective practice,⁵ the reality of much architectural practice is circumscribed by much more instrumental demands, in which

action is determined in reaction to the short-term priorities of clients and the market. Practice also brings with it connotations of repetition – “practice makes perfect” – as if architectural practice is a matter of refining particular stylistic or technical tropes over time, and applying them to any given context without real concern for the particular. Famous architects are usually those who have developed, through practice, a defining character to their work. The architectural results can be seen from the global reach of international modernism to the way that contemporary icons impose standard formal solutions with little regard for local conditions, because it is these solutions that constitute the architect’s signature. If such practice is guided by theory, it is theory of the traditional type, based on the model of the natural sciences, which attempts to develop universal and systematic methods removed from the vagaries of the particular.⁶

One response to this tying of traditional theory to normative practice is to introduce the word “critical” to theory. Critical is here not seen as a merely negative function but one which starts with a critical evaluation of existing conditions in order to make them better. “We do not anticipate the world dogmatically,” says Marx, “but rather wish to find the new world through criticism of the old.”⁷ Traditional architectural practice may be associated with predetermined action, or of anticipating the world dogmatically, through its habit of playing out established themes. Against this a critical practice or rather, to use the accepted word, “praxis”, starts with an open-ended evaluation of the particular external conditions, out of which action arises with no predetermined outcome but with the intention to be transformative. It is this attention to external dynamics and structures that differentiates critical praxis from the internalised concerns of so much so-called “critical architecture”, a term which has come under increasing scrutiny in recent architectural discourse.⁸ Critical architecture and its accompanying theories, particularly in the guise developed in the US East Coast academies,⁹ revolves around a retying of architecture’s internal knots, in which critical attention is focused solely on architecture’s own concerns and obsessions. What results is a spiralling effect of critique, which effectively asserts architecture’s presumed autonomy. Praxis, in the sense of action propelled by a critical understanding of external conditions, moves away from the normative concerns

and structures of traditional practice, and also away from the endless deferral and retreat of “critical” theory and practice. It is such praxis that one can sense running through the projects in the book.

Spatial Agency

While it may appear churlish to open a book with an unravelling of some standard terms, it is at least consistent with this notion of praxis and led us to the phrase *Spatial Agency*.

Spatial does not so much replace architectural as a term, but radically expands it. It is now generally understood that space describes something more than the idea of empty stuff found between physical objects, or of the white expanses left between the black lines of architects’ drawings. As the residue of the construction of those lines, space is abstracted and emptied of its social content, so better and easier to subject to control. The key text in challenging the hold of abstract space was Henri Lefebvre’s 1974 book *The Production of Space*, first translated in to English in 1991. Of the many memorable phrases in the book, one summarises the argument most succinctly: “(social) space is a (social) product.”¹⁰ At a stroke, Lefebvre wrests the production of space from the clutches of specialists, most notably architects and planners, and places it in a much broader social context.

A very different spatial understanding arises out of Lefebvre’s redefinition. First is that production is a shared enterprise. Of course, professionals are involved in the process, but social space explicitly acknowledges the contribution of others, and with this dismisses the notion of expert authorship that the professions still cling to. Second, social space is dynamic space; its production continues over time and is not fixed to a single moment of completion. This dynamic inevitably shifts the focus of spatial attention away from the static objects of display that constitute the foreground of so much architectural production, and moves it onto the continuous cycle of spatial production, and to all the people and processes that go into it. The dynamic, and hence temporal, nature of space means that spatial production must be understood as part of an evolving sequence, with no fixed start or finish, and that multiple actors contribute at various stages. Third, social space is intractably political space, in so much as people live out their lives in this space, and so one has to be

continuously alert to the effects of that space on those lives. It is too easy in the abstraction of space that takes place in drawings and models, to see it as some kind of neutral ether which, as Lefebvre notes, “the architect has before him (like) a slice of space cut from larger wholes... (and) takes this portion of space as a ‘given’ and works on it according to his tastes, technical skills, ideas and preferences.”¹¹ But this apparent neutrality and abstraction is simply not the case: social space, as inherently political, is charged with the dynamics of power/empowerment, interaction/isolation, control/freedom, and so on. What can be seen in the examples in the book is an awareness of these dynamics, with responses that eschew any pretence that architectural, and hence spatial, production can be treated as a neutral action. They remind us that every line on an architectural drawing should be sensed as the anticipation of a future social relationship, and not merely as a harbinger of aesthetics or as an instruction to a contractor. They also point to the possibility of achieving transformation in manners beyond the drawing of lines.

Lefebvre’s analysis of space, written as it was in 1974, now has to be supplemented by other factors that have multiplied since, most clearly the issues of globalisation, climate change, and the rise of the virtual – all of which have clear implications for spatial production. We live, as Zygmunt Bauman argues so compellingly, in liquid times,¹² which means that all the producers of space are enmeshed in the intertwining and restless arms of social networks, global networks, ecological networks and virtual networks. Such engagement with wider spatial forces is both frightening and necessary. Frightening because they present a challenge to the safety-blanket of self-reflexive language that architecture has wrapped itself in since the Renaissance: exposed to the multiple, and often conflicting, forces of these networks, architecture’s pretence to any autonomy is shattered. Necessary because unless one at least recognizes these networks and architecture’s place within them, then the likely fate that awaits architects is to be shunted in to a cul-de-sac away from the networks, there to be reduced to polishers of static form and technical manipulators of stuff in the name of efficiency and progress. These are activities that consolidate, and pander to, the demands of the capitalist production of space, with shining form just another bauble in the endless production of commodities, and efficiency part

of a wider programme of spatial control in which lives are measured and ruled by the dictates of the market. Zoned cities, smaller dwellings, the privatisation of the public realm and contractor-led provision of public buildings are just a few of the consequences.

Although we are critical of the values that have led to this reduction, and the apparent inability of the architectural profession to escape the trap it has set itself, our intention is not one of abandoning architectural intelligence. Quite the opposite. The book is meant as an inspiration as to how that intelligence can be exercised in a much broader spatial field, one that acknowledges the social, global, ecological and virtual networks. As will be seen, the reasons (why), context (where) and means (how) of that engagement are also greatly expanded beyond the traditional role of the architect. But far from killing off any role for architects, the intent is to posit a much richer set of activities that give new scope, and hope, for architectural activity; hence the subtitle of the book, *Other Ways of Doing Architecture*. Equally, if the introduction of the term “spatial” challenges the protective nature of the term “architectural”, and in so doing dissolves the protection of the title that the profession has so dearly clung to since Victorian times, then we do not see this as a negative consequence. Protection of a small patch of territory – that of designing buildings – has allowed others to claim the larger networks. Now is the time to step over the self-defined boundaries of the profession and share in that expansive spatial field, or more particularly to act as spatial agents.

Spatial Agency

Agency as a term has only relatively recently been introduced into architectural discourse,¹³ but has a long history in social and political theory. Agency is traditionally held in a dialectic pairing with structure. Agency is described as the ability of the individual to act independently of the constraining structures of society; structure is seen as the way that society is organized. Discussion in classic social theory then centres on which of the two has primacy over the other. Do the accumulated actions of individuals constitute the overarching societal structures, or are the latter so overwhelming as to allow no scope for individual action and freedom? Such dialectic of agency and structure is played out in architectural practice. On the one hand, as agent, there is hope that the creative actions of

individuals will effect change. On the other hand, as an operation within a social structure, architecture can be described an act determined by economic and social forces, and the architect reduced to a technical facilitator with decisions effectively made by others. This dialectic of agency and structure constructs the stereotypical images of the architect as either the individual genius who singlehandedly takes on the world or else the lackey of commercial forces – a tension that Ayn Rand parodied in her 1943 novel and subsequent film *The Fountainhead*, with the genius architect Howard Roark contrasted with his saviour cum nemesis, the commercial architect, Peter Keating. In reality the productions of a tiny minority of elite architects perpetuate the myth of the power of individual agency, and the glamour of their products masks the way that the vast majority of architectural production is in the thrall of economic and political forces. The individual agents may exist, but in such a minority that they are an ineffectual foil to the production of dross that emits from the overriding economic structure.

In terms of spatial agency, neither side of the agency/structure dialectic is appropriate. The primacy of the freedom of the individual to act suggests a lack of engagement with both the limits and opportunities of wider spatial and societal structures, and sanctions the retreat into an autonomous world of form-making and crafting, undisturbed by external factors. On the other hand, the primacy of structure would lead us to believe that individual action in the spatial field is always at best constrained by, at worst completely determined by, the overarching societal structures. This leads to despair as to the efficacy of any action, and with it the abrogation of wider responsibilities: why bother to attempt to effect change if that attempt is inevitably overcome by others? The answer is played out all too commonly in the withdrawal of architecture from a critical engagement with societal structures.

To avoid on the one hand the ineffectual solipsism of individual agents or on the other hand despair in the face of overarching structures, one has to get away from the idea of agency and structure as a dualism, as two opposing conditions. Instead, as Anthony Giddens has argued, agency and structure should be understood as a duality, two linked but separately identifiable conditions. “Human agency and structure,” he writes, “are logically implicated with one another.”¹⁴ This duality of agency accords with other recent investigations of the

relation of action to society, and in particular those coming from Actor Network Theory (ANT), in which any societal event or object is only understood as embedded in a set of associations between human and non-human.¹⁵ For architecture, this means that buildings are not seen as determinants of society (the primacy of the individual) nor as determined by society (the primacy of structure) but rather as in society.

It is Giddens’ take on agency that we follow in this book. He argues that agents are neither completely free as individuals, nor are they completely entrapped by structure. Spatial agents are neither impotent nor all powerful: they are negotiators of existing conditions in order to partially reform them. Spatial agency implies that action to engage transformatively with structure is possible, but will only be effective if one is alert to the constraints and opportunities that the structure presents. “Action depends on the capability of the individual to ‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events,” writes Giddens, “... agency means being able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs.”¹⁶ The idea that withdrawing from a situation might be as appropriate an action as intervening is an interesting one in an architectural context. The normal *modus operandi* for an architect is to add something physical to the world; this alternative suggests that, in the spirit of Cedric Price, the addition of a building is not necessarily the best solution to a spatial problem and that there are other ways of making a spatial difference.¹⁷

This conception of spatial agency brings with it a number of other features. First is the notion of intent. Agents act with intent but that intent is necessarily shaped and reshaped by the context within which the agent is working. An agent’s action is guided by an initial transformative intent, but because of the dynamics of the structural context, that intent has to be responsive and flexible. This is very different from the determinist view of the world in which things play out according to preordained patterns, either because of the will of agents to act as individuals come what may, or because of the power of the structure to control all individual actions. Against such fixity, Giddens states clearly that “agency presumes the capability of acting otherwise.”¹⁸ To act “otherwise” is counterintuitive to the professional mindset, which is based on the assumption that stable knowledge will inevitably lead to a

certain solution. Professions rely on this assertion of stable knowledge in order to give themselves authority over others, and so to accept acting otherwise is to recognise the limits of one's authority, and to relinquish the sole hold of fixed and certain knowledge. If agents are indeed to allow themselves to act otherwise, then the knowledge that they bring to the table must be negotiable, flexible and, above all, shared with others. Agents act not alone but as part of a mutual enterprise, hence Giddens' term "mutual knowledge" as a defining feature of the agent's makeup. Mutual knowledge is not determined by professional norms and expectations, but rather is founded in exchange, in negotiation, out of hunch, out of intuition. Mutual knowledge means abandoning the hierarchies embedded in most professional relationships ("I know more than you do,") and instead welcoming contributions from everyone in the spirit of a shared enterprise. Many of the people in the book are not professionals in the protective sense of the word, or indeed care about this alleged status, but instead engage with the world as expert citizens, working with others, the citizen experts, on equal terms.

In contrast to what Giddens calls "discursive consciousness", in which matters are explicit and explainable, mutual knowledge is "practical in character." But the discursive and the practical are by no means mutually exclusive: "the line between discursive and practical consciousness is fluctuating and permeable,"¹⁹ he argues, suggesting that each draws on the other in the act of agency. The discursive realm, allows the development of knowledge away from the immediate demands of the everyday; mutual knowledge is about the practical deployment of knowledge within the everyday. Each needs the other. Without the realism of mutual knowledge, discursive consciousness floats free into spheres of impossible purity. Without the discursive, mutual knowledge will lose any sense of distance and vision as it is ground down by the particular demands of each condition. These transactions between the discursive and the practical present a challenge to professional norms, both academic and architectural, which have traditionally tended towards the higher ground of the discursive. If one cannot explicate, then one cannot claim authority; hence the domination of the discursive over the practical, of discourse over doing, and with this the marginalisation of discourse as it increasingly needs to feed off itself, discourse on discourse, in an ever-spiralling effect of internalisation.

Our call for a move beyond discourse for the sake of discourse does not throw away discursive consciousness but sees it working with and on behalf of practical transformative action.

In foregrounding the necessity of working with others, agency inevitably exposes the professional to issues of power, and in particular of how power might be used, and how it might be abused, by professionals acting as spatial agents. Agency is intractably tied to power – an early definition of agent in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is: "one who exerts power or produces an effect".²⁰ The words used here are telling: power exerted is the power of one person over another, which is hardly consistent with the notion of shared responsibility. A better definition in relation to spatial agency is that the agent is one who effects change through the *empowerment* of others, allowing them to engage in their spatial environments in ways previously unknown or unavailable to them, opening up new freedoms and potentials as a result of reconfigured social space.

It is through the notion of empowerment that the word agency can be taken at face value, in terms of acting as an agent with and on behalf of others; not in the sense of simply reacting to the often short-term market-led demands of clients and developers, but in the sense being responsive to the longer-term desires and needs of the multitude of others who build, live in, work in, occupy, and experience architecture and social space. In this way agency fits the previous identification of the temporality and contingency of spatial production, because in being alert to the coming wants and needs of others, one has to project visions and solutions onto an uncertain future.

The combination of visions and solutions introduces a complexity to the idea of spatial agency that one does not get in traditional theories of agency. In the latter, agents intervene directly in the world through their actions. In spatial agency, their agency is effected both through actions and visions, but also through the resulting spatial solutions. It resides in both the human and the non-human, and spatial agents have to be responsible for all aspects of their actions, from their initial relationship with others to enabling the production of physical relations and social structures, because all are means of playing out their intent. Spatial agency is here as much about modes of behaviour as it is about modes of making. In Bruno Latour's term, critical

attention is shifted from architecture as a matter of fact to architecture as a matter of concern.²¹ As matters of fact, buildings can be subjected to rules and methods, and they can be treated as things on their own terms. As matters of concern, they enter into socially embedded networks, in which the consequences of architecture are of much more significance than the objects of architecture.

Choosing Spatial Agency

This book contains 136 examples of spatial agency. As with any such collection, the natural reaction of the reader is first to see what has been included, and then question what has been left out. Clearly, space restricted the number of entries, and equally clearly there are omissions, some because we failed to spot them, some because they failed to meet our criteria for inclusion.²² But the real point of lists is not to agree with them, but to argue about inclusions and exclusions, and in this wrangle form one's own sense of the subject. This is what we did between the three of us, and we now offer up our list for further debate and refinement. The selection as it stands is inevitably partial, in both senses of the word: it is both incomplete and also a reflection of our own tendencies. In order to get some consistency in our choices, we used three criteria against which to measure potential entries: spatial judgement, mutual knowledge and critical awareness.

Spatial judgement refers to the ability to exercise spatial decisions. In this it exceeds, but does not exclude, spatial intelligence, which has been understood as an innate human capability and a defining feature of the architectural and other creative professions.²³ Where spatial intelligence tends to concentrate on the ability to work in three dimensions, and thus to focus on the formal aspects of spatial production, our understanding of spatial judgement prioritises the social aspects of space, and the way that the formal affects them. It follows that, in selecting examples on the basis of spatial judgement, we were looking more at the way that they initiate empowering social relationships than at formal sophistication, the latter of which has been for so long the paradigm of architectural excellence.

Mutual knowledge refers to Giddens' term, discussed above; it indicates the willingness of spatial agents to both share their knowledge in an open manner, and also to respect the knowledge of others.

Mutual knowledge implies openness as to what may contribute to spatial production, so that the instinct of the amateur is accepted as having equal potential as the established methods of the supposed "expert". Mutual knowledge expands the means by which knowledge may be displayed and developed. Thus stories (which can be shared) are as productive as drawings (which often exclude the non-expert), and actions are privileged as much as things.

Finally, critical awareness refers to the need for spatial agents to act in a critical manner – "critical" here designating not a negative stance but an evaluative one that is aware of the opportunities and challenges, freedoms and restrictions, of the given context. Critical awareness also relates to the need to be self-critical, and so avoid imposing the same solutions onto different places, just playing out the old tropes in an unthinking manner.

To make the cut, examples had to meet at least two of these criteria, and preferably achieve well against all three. Just being spectacular in one area was not enough, which tended to exclude virtuoso architects (who may excel in an aspect of spatial judgement, but fail on the other criteria) and the individual critic (whose work remains isolated from others and from spatial production). Looking through the final list, a certain flavour becomes evident. An early twitter about the *Spatial Agency* website called it "terribly worthy", which we suspect was not meant as a compliment.²⁴ But if worthiness can be removed from its pious associations and returned to its Middle English origins of worth, then perhaps it is not such a bad acknowledgement that spatial agency is something that adds social value to the world. The examples of individuals, groups and projects collated in this book all show a desire to critically interrogate the status quo, and change it for the better. They show architecture's capacity for transformative action and, even more importantly, how the role of the architect can be extended to take into account the consequences of architecture as much as the objects of architecture.

This research project was set off by a frustration with the conservative tendencies of so much architectural practice. It would have been easy enough to be relentlessly damning about the limited preoccupations of the profession, but as we progressed through the research, this negative turn was replaced by a much more buoyant approach, inspired by the examples in the

book, which leave us in admiration for their mixture of canniness, bravery and optimism. It is possible to appreciate the work on its own terms and in its own setting, but the ambition is that the various approaches can be applied in a much wider range of contexts. Because much of the work included here has never made it into the pages of orthodox architectural histories, the temptation may be to damn it with faint praise as interesting but marginal. But this would be to deny the inherent strength of the work to effect change at a wider level. Just because a project has been developed in the Global South among slum dwellers does not mean that its lessons and ethics cannot be adapted to a northern city. These are ways of thinking and behaving that are relevant, and applicable, in a multitude of design contexts, from the commercial office block to the infrastructure of a favela. Taken together, the examples are testimony to the possibility of how, by looking at the world in the different way, one is able to find other ways of doing architecture.

The following chapters outline how the wider lessons of spatial agency may be employed to enact such change. *The Motivations of Spatial Agency* sets out the various reasons that spatial agents have set out on their chosen path. *The Sites of Spatial Agency* shows the means and locations of spatial agency. *The Operation of Spatial Agency* explains how spatial agency has been, and might be, enacted. The final part of the book is a lexicon of enacted examples of spatial agency.

- 1 Bruno Latour, 'On recalling ANT', in *Actor Network Theory and after* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 15–25.
- 2 Martin Parker, Valerie Fournier and Patrick Reedy, *The Dictionary of Alternatives: Utopianism and Organization* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2007), xi.
- 3 For a summary of the issues raised by the symposium see Eeva Berglund, 'Exploring the Social and Political. Are Architects Still Relevant to Architecture?', *Architectural Research Quarterly*, 12 (2008), 105–11. For the papers presented at the symposium see the same issue of ARQ and 'Alternate Currents', *Field: A Free Journal for Architecture*, ed. by Jeremy Till and Tatjana Schneider, 2 (2008) <<http://www.field-journal.org>>.
- 4 Alfredo Brillembourg, Kristin Feireiss and Hubert Klumpner, *Informal City – Caracas case* (Munich: Prestel, 2005), 19.
- 5 Donald A. Schön, *The reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

- 6 As Max Horkheimer notes in his seminal paper *Traditional and Critical Theory*. Traditional theory is "a universal systematic science, not limited to any particular subject matter but embracing all possible objects. This is published in Max Horkheimer, *Critical theory: selected essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982), 188–243. Typical of such normative theories in architecture is the contemporary obsession with theories of form, such as parametrics, in which abstract and universalised principles are used to direct practice, oblivious of the constraints or opportunities of particular contexts.
- 7 Karl Marx, 'Letter to Arnold Ruge, September 1843', accessed from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09.htm>.
- 8 For a recent collection of essays on the subject see: *Critical Architecture*, ed. by Jane Rendell and others (London: Routledge, 2007).
- 9 For a good summary of the issues see: George Baird, 'Criticality and its discontents', *Harvard Design Magazine*, 21 (2004), 1–6.
- 10 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 26.
- 11 Lefebvre, 360.
- 12 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).
- 13 Two recent publications that have focussed on the issue of agency in architecture are: Kenny Cupers and Isabelle Doucet, eds., 'Agency in Architecture: Reframing Criticality in Theory and Practice', *Footprint*, no. 4 (2009), and Florian Kossak and others, *Agency: Working With Uncertain Architectures* (London: Routledge, 2009).
- 14 Anthony Giddens, *Social Theory and Modern Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), 220.
- 15 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: an introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 16 Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 14.
- 17 See introduction to: Cedric Price, *Cedric Price: Works II* (London: Architectural Association, 1984).
- 18 Giddens (1987), 216.
- 19 Giddens (1984), 4.
- 20 Giddens, 9. See also the section 'Agency and Power', pp.14ff.
- 21 Bruno Latour, 'Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern', *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (2004), 225–248.
- 22 An expanded range of entries can be found on the accompanying website, www.spatialagency.net, which also offers the opportunity to point out omissions.
- 23 Leon Van Schaik, *Spatial Intelligence: new futures for architecture* (London: Wiley, 2008).
- 24 Kieran Long, kieranlong, 2010 <<http://twitter.com/kieranlong>>. "Jeremy Till's new database is terrible (sic.) worthy and wordy, but is a great and much-needed resource."