

## Marking Places in the Space of Flows

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### INTRODUCTION

Architecture centres, or organizations which promote issues of the built environment, increasingly appear to be a key component in the cultural and development arsenal of cities and regions worldwide. Centres position themselves with variant identities – some strive to act as locations for the empowerment of citizens, some as vehicles for the regional development, while others operate as arms of tourism development within a city. With this growing dispersal of centres, particularly in Europe, has coincided the emergence of official government policies on architecture and the quality of the built environment.

A recently-completed three-year research project reveals that a key shared goal for architecture centres is increased debate and exchange about the built environment amongst those with professional expertise and more general constituents alike. The study, which included the collection of data via survey of 50 centres worldwide and 4 in-depth case studies – the Kent Architecture Centre (KAC,) the Museum of Finnish Architecture, Helsinki (MFA,) the National Architecture Institute, Rotterdam (NAi) and the Chicago Architecture Foundation (CAF) – also investigated roles of centres in the development of identity, uniqueness and authenticity of place, particularly through their development of architectural tourism.

With the completion of the project has come further theoretical questioning, particularly as the

“phenomenon” of architecture centres appears to be both growing (in Asia,) and to be under increased scrutiny by government funders with increasingly tight budgets (in Europe.) Much of the analysis of the seemingly ironic duality of globalization – the increase of networked megacities with a parallel focus of locality -- has been focused on economies, particularly by Sassen. Many of these theorists also consider the global city and its future physical manifestation. This paper proposes that architecture centres themselves may offer far smaller, but focused example of a new cultural typology which is similarly bilateral, trying to both act as a network in which flows of information can be accessed, while simultaneously requiring their constituents to concentrate on specific, local places and buildings. The text which follows will read centres as organizations which attempt to “mark... places in the space of flows” (Castells, 2004: 452) and to begin to ask how centres can most readily contend with their double-sided identity.

Definitions and questions – a new typology?

A standard definition of “architecture centre” is difficult to discern, though some attempts are being made by funders and networks of centres to codify a recognizable “type.” Architecture centres differ in size, funding structures, evaluation methods, personnel and in many other characteristics. The aforementioned survey and case study data reveal that many have libraries, galleries, classrooms and bookstores; these spaces are used for a variety of purposes ranging from debates to lectures, from workshops to major multi-media exhibitions.

The research shows that centres are part of networks; those in the UK in particular are carefully marketed as members of the UK's Architecture Centre Network. Many centres are members of the much older network, the International Congress of Architectural Museums which, since 2004, has begun to re-imagine its identity and role, including "debate and discussion" in its aims and objectives. More established centres, such as the CAF and the NAI have struggled to some degree with their self-definition and have latterly made efforts to be seen, too, as part of a wider nodal infrastructure of similar organizations. CAF has, since 2006, instituted two major new networks in an effort to both create opportunities for cross-fertilization as well as a market for their long-standing experience in tour operations and education – namely the Association of Architectural Organizations and the Architecture and Design Education Network.

While centres appear to struggle with a cohesive identity, the data do reveal that most centres share a key common goal: to increase debate, interest in and understanding of architecture and built environment issues. Goals such as these are significantly predicated on the resolutely modernist notions espoused by Habermas as they seek to facilitate democratic change, in this case, of the built environment, through dialogue and interaction. The questioning that later theorists have of Habermas<sup>1</sup> relating to the composite character of publics has entered centres' discourse to some degree, and it is reflected in their common desire, though often with lack of success, to open issues of the built environment to wide audiences with little or no previous experience in the process or product of architecture.

#### *A new typology?*

In parallel with this key challenge of identifying a universally accepted or recognized definition, has been the attempt to ascertain if, in the "architecture centre," there is a recognizable new typology. Does it differ substantially from previous organizations to truly engender a "movement" as Ford and Sawyers' preliminary book, *International Architecture Centres* suggests? With a proliferation of individuals and groups interested in built environment issues, from preservation organizations to visitor bureaux that offer architectural tours, where does one draw a line in terms of what organizations can be called an architecture centre?

The study delved into the wide array of scholarship on the architectural museum, work carried out by curators and critics of such museums, as well as academically-oriented architectural historians.<sup>2</sup> For these historians and theorists, the architectural museum was founded for a variety of purposes – for political representation and public instruction as well as for education of architects and the workers who built their designs. The research project described here, however, identified numerous possible reasons for foundation of architecture centres, differing from those illustrated by architectural museums. Nationalism, fears for historic structures and increasing recognition of the importance of culture for citizens has been joined by sinking levels of design expertise within public bodies and the potential for architourism in the last decade. Centres founded in the last five years show a marked increase in the desire of founders to react to architecture as a cultural industry – not only able to generate economic activity as a profession but as a creative lifestyle activity which in turn, some argue, attracts others to want to live and work in the vicinity of creative people.<sup>3</sup>

The research strongly indicates that the architecture centre is not an architectural museum. The reasons of foundation for the museum -- political representation, public instruction and education of architects unable to travel -- find some traces in those for architecture centres. However, centres are also part of later, post-modern trends towards fragmentation, a questioning of status quo, a desire for the individual to impact upon specific built environments. Unlike the architectural museum, they are places which intend, though often do not succeed, in what Till calls "transformative participation," asking communities to comment on and in some rare cases, to make an assessable impact on their local built environments.

Sassen notes that there is "evidence of a greater cross-border networks for cultural purposes, as in the growth of international markets for art and a transnational class of curators." (Sassen: 81) This aspect of globalization, of culture-based cross-border transference of skills, information and expertise, must also be read as an underlying fertile setting in which architecture centres, as a recognizable and distinguishable typology of cultural organization, have been able to develop.

### VARIETY OF CONSTITUENTS: GLOBAL, NATIONAL, LOCAL

The research project found that the variety and depth of centres' communities are considerable. Not only do these constituents include those who are "users" or "visitors" to the centres, but also organizations which channel their policies through centres while acting as funders.

The following list was offered to the centres in the preliminary survey, and all of the groups were indicated as "users" of at least one of the fifty surveyed centres:

- Architects
- Children and young people
- Community/voluntary groups
- Developers
- Engineers
- Funding Bodies
- Landscape architects
- Local Government
- National Government
- Prospective clients
- Planners
- Primary students
- Public bodies
- Secondary students
- Students in higher education
- Teachers
- Other

In answering their surveys, centres also added to the "other" group thusly:

- Academics
- Artists
- Authors
- Creative Professionals
- Designers
- General Public
- Homeowners
- Local historians
- Researchers
- Scholars
- Tourists

In an effort to interrogate of these categories, both those imposed by the survey and those identified by the centres independently, the surveys and case study transcripts were examined in detail to list every

constituent group possible. These lists were then classified into increasingly exclusive categories:

- Caché consumers – shoppers and café users who don't interact with the centres for anything other than their retail faces, but prefer that location to other like businesses due to the caché such an institution offers
- Decision makers – a group which envelopes governments, policy makers, politicians, developers and those groups and individuals who influence them
- Education recipients – this is perhaps the widest ranging category including in-house and outreach programmes for people of all ages and includes Continuing Professional Development offerings
- Funders – individual philanthropists, donators of collections, foundations, corporations, government bodies
- Internal – staff, board members, steering groups, volunteers, outside consultants who provide services
- "Culture vultures" – including cultural tourists and individuals in the local community who are users of the centre for leisure and cultural activities
- Professional "culture vultures" – individuals, including tourists, in professions based in the built environment
- Peer organisations/competitors – these are audiences which act as both supporters, exchanging and sharing advice as well as acting as competitors for the same users
- Retransmitters – individuals and organisations which publicize or rebroadcast the work, aims, events of centres, including media
- Dr. Sarah A. Lappin, Queens University Belfast "Marking places in the space of flows" ACSA ReBuilding 4-7 March 2009
- Technical service clients/information recipients – this group pertains particularly to KAC cli-

ents which provides technical expertise and to researchers, scholars and practicing architects, as well as lobbyists or those with particular agendas requiring data

While these categories are not necessarily a definitive list – and as architecture centres are a rapidly changing phenomenon, one can expect these users to frequently shift and evolve – it does explode the notion of the “general public” as centres’ main audience. It also identifies that centres’ communities are made up of more than “users,” and that they have the possibility, through careful programming, to act as a node for discourse for these divergent groups.

#### *Policy and connection to funders*

issue of public policy and its impact on architecture centres led to some of the most surprising findings in the study. At the outset of the research, it was assumed that two types of policy would have significant impact on architecture centres: architecture policies and those related to ensuring access to culture by all. In addition, it was presumed that these policies would largely be those generated by governments on a national level. However, the data have shown that these, though clearly heavily influential, are by no means the only policies which directly affect centres in their daily operations.

Many of the centres in the UK are funded heavily by government bodies particularly departments of social/regional development. Centres are funded by these regional development agencies in order to increase the quality of the built environment – these bodies regard “quality” as key to attracting both highly-skilled potential inhabitants and businesses to the area. In this, they conflate notions of making place attractive to large-scale investment and to the notion of creative cities espoused by Richard Florida and others. Thus in this specific context, centres act as a key part of economic policy under Labour; if and when the Conservative Party take control of government in the UK in 2010, these regional development agencies may be eliminated, and the future of many UK centres will be called into question.

CAF is mainly self-funding through income streams such as sales of their tours and shop, but they receive some minimal funding from city and state departments of tourism. With CAF’s large group of

dedicated and highly trained volunteer tour guides, CAF is seen as a linchpin in the development of Chicago as a key tourism destination. Their tourism literature is displayed with prominence at Chicago’s city and state funded tourist information centres; CAF’s only advertising is targeted, thought funding from these departments, at tourism magazines and guides. Latterly, CAF have begun to consider acting as the deliverers of policy for not-for-profit groups as well. Here CAF would begin a new mode of activity in community redevelopment.

In Finland and the Netherlands, the MFA and NAI are seen as primary deliverers for government of cultural provision – here, architecture is seen as an integral part of the larger cultural landscape, and centres are the mechanism of delivery for their citizens. At both of these centres, their collections are seen as their key responsibility to the state and citizens, though these collections are used by the centres to discuss current subjects which impact on local and global scales. Both centres also produce exhibitions which travel, acting, in part, as means to, like CAF and UK centres, to attract tourists and possible investment.

#### *Nexus for constituents?*

Thus centres have an almost considerable array of relationships to local and national cultural, economic and tourism bodies, and the potential for architecture centres to act as a nexus or confluence for needs of users and requirements of funders is considerable. Here is a potential place for policies and issues acting at national, even global level can be assessed, scrutinized and implemented on a local scale.

However, the data revealed that a considerable amount of time, energy and funding was directed at maintaining separation between these constituencies, particularly between the specialist audience and the less “connected” tourist. This was not a specific goal for centres, but rather a product of the difficulty in describing architecture in gallery setting; audiences uneducated in architecture do not have the ability to understand the basic vocabulary of the professional architect – the orthogonal drawing. Criticisms can be leveled at the traditional methods of display in architecture – a wide range of current research on display and architecture to non-specialized audiences persists in the literature.<sup>4</sup>

Thus one of the main findings of the study was for a greater need of integration, particularly of audiences and constituencies of centres. In many cases, those audiences with specialist interest in architecture, were separated from centres' other main stakeholders, usually community groups and tourists. Rather than a purposeful separation of these groups, centres could instead use the varying layers of economic, social and cultural capital, in Bourdieuan terms, to increase the depth and breadth of the exchange which occurs there.

This key recommendation grew largely from a close analysis of the case study site data. Many of the staff interviewees expressed considerable anxiety about their perceived need to segregate with the attendant doubling up of effort and expenditure of time and funding as particular concerns. It was noticed that audiences were often engaging only in exhibitions rather than other dialectic interactivity with one another. Many centres did not engage with their specific "place" but rather gallerized both the experience of the built environment and the whole process of the making of architecture and urban space.

*CAF: possible model for opportunities of dialogue*  
CAF becomes a particularly intriguing case study when analyzing possibilities for "place marking" within a decontextualized architectural network. On the one hand, CAF is heavily active in the consumption and commodification of architecture, with its shop selling t-shirts emblazoned with Burnham and Root buildings and the mug of Frank Lloyd Wright decorating coffee cups. They are keen to celebrate "stararchitects" and non-local architourists are their main audience.

Where CAF's tours begin to subvert the consumption cycle, and begin to conflate the worlds of the space of flows and the space of place, is in their walking tours. These tours take people into the city and bombard them not only with facts about particular buildings, but with residents and workers of Chicago, with traffic, with the influence of the overarching grid pattern. CAF's walking tour audience experience the city in every sense, not in a well controlled gallery space, (though one might criticize the tours for emphasizing the spectacularized "starchitect" buildings in the city, particularly those by Gehry, Jahn and Mies.) Here the tourist becomes a Benjaminian flâneur, distracted and open to perceptions not dictated by the tour guide.

More singular are the interactive conversations that occur during the tour, between the carefully trained guide and a wide variety of interested tour takers. The participants hail from scattered locations in the US, Europe, and Asia with an almost incongruous mixture of expertise about architecture, from those with long years of engineering specialization to individuals with no architectural cultural capital whatsoever. The sheer numbers of tours given – seven per day in peak seasons – indicates that these are not all "specialist tourists." It is not necessarily the "movement through architecture" which makes the CAF tourism model potentially integrative, but rather the exchange of ideas and expertise, the dialogue that occurs during the tour between individuals of varying knowledge and backgrounds. Tourists can not only add to the debate in the area of an architecture centre, but also uncover issues which affect them at home.

This discursive ambiance also offers considerable opportunity for centres to keep themselves informed about issues pressing on various publics. Here is an ideal time not only for the mixing of international audiences with different experience, but also an opportunity for CAF, through its volunteers, to understand what issues are of both specific (place) universal (flow) interest – a direct link of opinion and concern which can, in a positive way, impact on future programming of the organization.

#### *Setting for flow and place to meet*

The mix of opinions and expertise in a CAF walking tour happen in a loose setting, contrasting with a more orchestrated debate or lecture in which many individuals with little cultural capital on the subject, or those less connected to a larger network of architecture and architects, might feel intimidated to ask questions or express an opinion. These are what Edensor would identify, in tourist terms, as "heterogeneous spaces" where the participant can make his or her own story, opposed to "enclavic spaces," far more controlled, with a dominant discourse. (Edensor) This discursive effect must, in part, be the product of the environment in which they were happening – that is, a less controlled environment of the city street, rather than the exhibition space or the purpose-built architecture centre building.

Separation requires different curatorial skills and an often-fruitless uni-directional mode of information, unproductive for both centre and tourist. Rather

than constantly separating those with and without built environment expertise, then, centres could embrace the opportunities, as discussed above, that mixing might afford them. Delgado's analysis of cultural tourism begins to envisage something similar – an "interactivity" which allows for cross-fertilization of ideas and discussion.<sup>5</sup> There may be opportunities for interactivity which centres are neglecting, both in terms of mixing different types of audiences and in treating those users with perhaps less cultural capital in the process of place making, and indeed those possibly less embedded in the space of flows, with more regard.

## CONCLUSIONS

Architecture centres, as a recent phenomenon separate from their older progenitor, the architectural museum, should be read alongside understandings of the impact of an increasingly globalized economy on urban space by Sassen. While this paper offers a first reading for the opportunities centres to connect nodal communities and pressures with specific place, centres could be further utilized as a focused entity with which to examine globalization versus locality. Architecture centres are seemingly both constituents and orchestrators of both the space of flows and the space of place. They act as networks in which those with specialized built environment skills or interests become and remain connected. At the same time, they are, they purport, allied to their localities, specifically to the architecture and urban form of their cities, those places which require more than ever their symbolic potency.

The research project and the underlying suppositions by centres themselves have placed a great deal of reliance on Habermas whose notions which were developed over four decades ago. Though his ideas were exposed to excoriating criticism by Derrida at the time and to supportive but critical assessment by numerous scholars since, his ideas remained essentially unchanged – debate and exchange are not only possible in a world of multiple discourses, but the possibility of creating serious transformation remains a reasonable prospect. The notion of flows further calls into question goals and overall ethos of centres themselves – is it possible for centres to activate democratic discussion in a society divided into those who exist, largely within a networked megacity and those whose life experience centres of a sense of place?

Centres seem to operate as sites ripe for examination of the Janus-like dual modality illustrated by Sassen and others of globalization and localization. They are nodes which allow for and indeed promote focus of global issues and policies of the built environment; they link populations of specialized audiences, especially those with built environment background and training while at the same time promote flows of information, types of programming, even sharing specific projects and exhibitions. So do they force an examination of the notion of locality, often placing their work in amongst the cities and buildings in which they are physically based. Any exhortation for architecture to recoup its symbolic meaning should be further examined in light of this new typology of cultural organization.

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## ENDNOTES

1. See Habermas, Calhoun and Fraser.
2. See the work of Vidler, Poulot, Searing and Harris, Colomina, Summerson, Furjan, Forty, Lambert, among others. There has been considerable research carried out on Patrick Geddes's Outlook Tower in Edinburgh, seen by Dyckhoff as the "first" architecture centre – see Boardman, Boyer, Ponte and Dyckhoff.
3. See the work of Richard Florida The Rise of the Creative Class of 2002 and critics of cultural planning including Jamie Peck, Stevenson, Hesmondhalgh and Hartley among many others.
4. See the Chaplin, Sarah and Stara, Alexandra Curating Architecture and the City. London: Routledge, 2009 and the "Curating Architecture" project based at Goldsmiths, London among many others.
5. At this writing, Delgado's work has not yet been translated from the Spanish. His work is referenced in Richards, Greg. "Conclusion: The Future of Cultural Tourism – Grounds for Optimism?" Cultural Tourism. Greg Richards, ed. Binghampton, NY: The Hawthorn Hospitality Press, 2007, p. 330.