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Apolonija Šuštersiĉ, "Bonnie Dundee," interior view, Dundee, Scotland, 2005. (Courtesy of Apolonija Šuštersiĉ.)

Democracy, Deliberation, and Hybridity in Three Contemporary Architectural Practices: Interboro, Apolonija Šuštersiĉ, and Stealth

Writing in 1962, the Dutch architect and Team 10 Secretary Jaap Bakema claimed “if architecture and planning could ‘shake hands’ again, streets and buildings will define each other [sic] in return.” Two disciplines playing nicely together seemed, at the time, like a long shot. Today, a growing number of architects have grown suspicious and even weary of the profession’s long-standing sovereignty, choosing to challenge conventionally hierarchical arrangements, to expose sites to the mysteries of the atelier (allowing the site to serve as the space of work, rather than designing, a priori, every detail), and to undo the tyranny of heteronomy.

These adherents to the cult of hybridity are as nomadic as their projects are restless. Refusal to reside in a single city is a function of the works’ existence amid liminal spaces beyond geographic urban confines, and yet always within them as well. Their projects are motivated by a shared perception that master narratives—of epistemology; of the intersections of art, urban conditions, and politics; and of geopolitical and biopolitical truths—must be subjected to a radical reframing such that the vicissitudes of contemporary life not only avoid neglect but, in fact, comprise the substance of a new mode of existence. Their work is more often than not staged through the rules and regulations of an intervention, rather than through the canonical practice of monumentality. The question as to whether theirs is a cultural activity, a social commentary, an aesthetic act, or something that stands outside of previously established categories,

is a question that I hope to answer (or at least to problematize) here.

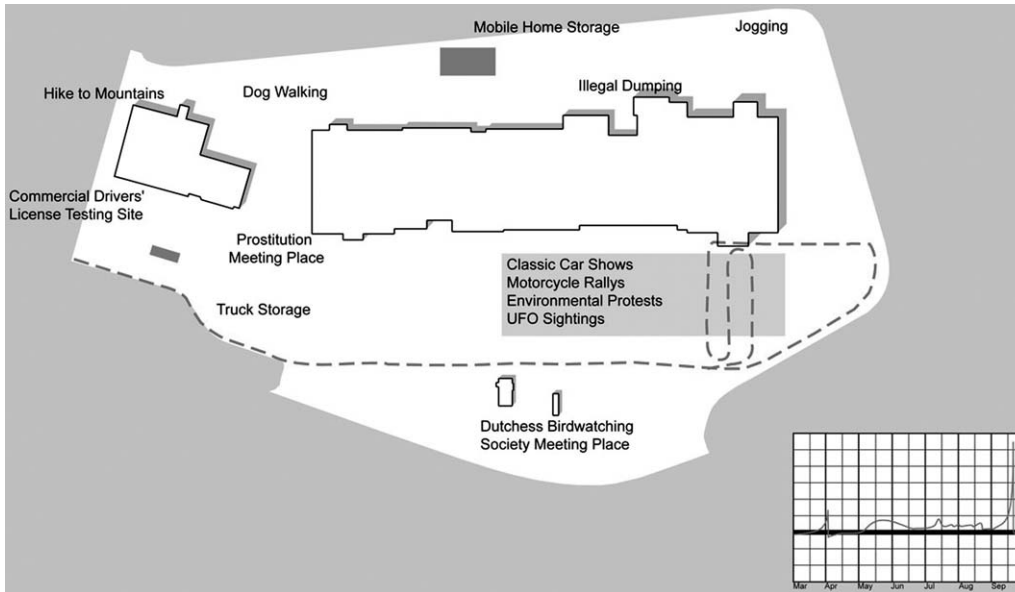
Biopolitics, as derived from Michel Foucault’s writings, has been used and abused recently in varying ways. Here, without launching into a philosophical inquiry into the term’s utility, I’d like to use it in an admittedly narrow manner. We have known for some time the way in which architectural and urban practice has been utilized to entrench hegemonies and reinforce traditions both old and new. What one can now observe is an acknowledgment of the power of motivated intellectual and cultural practices to give voice to disenfranchised communities, those that are culturally, sociologically, economically, geopolitically marginalized. The conventional boundaries of marginality most definitely have shifted, and architecture and planning must move with these shifts to take proper stock of the way that the politics of center and periphery have heretofore been played out, and of how they must change in order to accommodate new positions.

Many hybrid architectural practices address these newly fluid paradigms; focusing on one individual or group that completely encompasses every aspect of this new type of alternative practice would be contrary to the inherent logic of alterity. Of course, none of the practices discussed herein necessarily use the term “hybrid” to describe what they do. Given this constraint (and the failure of historians, critics, and curators to name new movements as they occur), I have selected three practices with which I’ve had tangential relation-

ships as a practicing academic and critic: Interboro Partners, Apolonija Šuštersiĉ, and Stealth. Measuring these practices against one another helps to draw the parameters of an emergent interface between aesthetic vision, praxis, and social interaction.

All of the practitioners discussed were trained as architects, save one member of Interboro, trained as an urban planner. That they have chosen to work outside of the relative conformity and comfort of conventional architectural practice is not entirely a financially motivated decision. Instead, the interstitial qualities of these practices derive organically from a response to the unstable conditions of political and cultural realities that characterize contemporary urban conditions.

Interboro, comprised of Georgeen Theodore, Daniel D’Oca, and Tobias Armbrorst, inhabit an office in an old commercial building on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn. Interboro annexed a floor of this building and subleased work stations to a variety of architectural and design practices, all of whom share the space both discretely and as a collective. The building’s rather unorthodox landlord imagines the entire complex eventually comprising an interactive, multiplicity of interwoven cultural practices, modeled on the community that Interboro has created and named “MEX” (short for “Metropolitan Exchange”). The cooperative not only uses the space as studios and offices, but also organizes dinners, symposia, film screenings, and other events designed to open up the cooperative’s inner workings to a larger community,



1. Interboro, Site Plan, "In the Meantime, Life with Landbanking," winning entry for Dead Malls Competition, 2002. (Courtesy of Interboro Partners.)

including the residents of this socio-culturally diverse neighborhood at the nexus of Downtown Brooklyn, Fort Greene, and Park Slope.

The best example of the firm's interdisciplinary approach might be found in their winning project for the LA Forum's Dead Malls competition (2002). Their choice of the Dutchess County Mall in Fishkill, NY was motivated by a careful perusal of the site,

one that had been landbanked by the mall's developer (Figure 1). The developer's refusal to transform the mall into something that could immediately benefit the community was based on financial concerns; yet what Interboro observed to have happened while the site sat dormant was quite compelling. Once a thriving commercial destination, the mall had reached a state of desuetude by

the late 1990s. At that point, the politics and ingenuity of self-organization came into play: a flea market arose in the vacant lot; it became a popular place for driver's license practice and testing; and informal gatherings of both political and illicit natures occurred. The point of the exercise was not to repurpose the site as a first step at rehabilitation, but to see how disregarded urban spaces organically prosper in unanticipated ways. Interboro's metaphor for the assessment—a sort of etiological appraisal—imagined the site as a body depleted by disease in which healthy biological constituents, aided by medical interventions, could still be identified from the faint pulses of activity detected within the decaying corpus. Interboro principal Daniel D'Oca calls this incremental approach the "cumulative effect of little moves."¹ The intention, ultimately, is to extrapolate events, uses, amenities, and the internally organic, inchoate nature of the site in order to envision its multivalent potential uses as a cohesive unit, rather than as an inert series of disintegrated, discrete spaces.

One of Interboro's current projects seeks to ratify similar attempts at community advocacy through a project for the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. A 37,000 square foot site at the nexus of Canal and Varick Streets and Sixth Avenue lies empty, awaiting development by Trinity Real Estate. Interboro is in the process of designing a sculpture park that will function with a rotating series of site-specific installations, the entire project lasting for 3 to 5 years. The requirement of a perimeter fence, due to the lot being technically a construction site, necessitates that the firm integrate some sort of boundary into the plan's conceptual framework (Figure 2). The design calls for a module that can function simultaneously as a fence unit and a bench segment, each module moveable to accommodate whatever sculptural intervention might be proposed and accepted into the space. In this way, the fence becomes the project's "most public and usable part." Likewise, a series of trees will be planted to correspond to the site's proposed street grid,

2. Interboro, Parameter, Varick and Canal Streets, New York City. (Courtesy of Lower Manhattan Cultural Council.)





3. Apolonija Šuštersič, Community Research Office, interior view, iBiD Gallery, London, 2002. (Courtesy of Apolonija Šuštersič.)

4. Apolonija Šuštersič, "Bonnie Dundee," aerial view, Dundee, Scotland 2005. (Courtesy of Apolonija Šuštersič.)



"incubating the future open-source network of the site," according to principal Georgeen Theodore.

The democratic ideals espoused by open source advocates of all disciplines (be they software, housing, or literature based) are precisely the antidotes to heteronomy that many alternative practices find most compelling. A U.S. president speaks of the need for a "deliberative democracy," while simultaneously assembling a cabinet whose clashing viewpoints virtually guarantee that policy meetings will be structured like graduate philosophy seminars. This will come as welcome relief from the obedient, team-building exercises that were likely the norm in the outgoing administration, and in Obama's agenda one can discern hints of a not-so-subtle shift in the way that more of us are beginning to gauge the importance of understanding the workings of free space (that is, space as in communal, not Cartesian).

Deliberation connotes discourse, and discourse, as many have come to accept it, begets indeterminacy. The peripatetic Apolonija Šuštersič, a Slovenian-born architect practicing in Amsterdam and teaching in Stockholm, works often in concert with other artists, architects, theorists, and curators to create a hybrid practice the parameters of which are deliberately hard to grasp. For 2 ½ months in early 2002, Šuštersič took over the iBiD Gallery in East London and transformed it into the Community Research Office, a space for the discussion and dissemination of ideas about gentrification—specifically focusing on the neighborhood where the gallery is located, but also understood as a larger urban issue (Figure 3). A kind of mobilized version of David Adjaye's two Idea Stores (also in London), Šuštersič's intention was to begin with an empty space and gradually fill the gallery with material accumulated from a series of invited guests, speakers, and community members. The exercise mirrored the way in which gentrified neighborhoods gradually (and somewhat artificially) transform from empty, disused space to ones comprised of material displays of increased affluence and use. It



5. TU-Delft Faculty of Architecture After Fire, May 2008. (Photo by Sjors van Berkel courtesy of TU Delft.)

also deliberately opened up the often internal and mysterious processes of artistic invention and research into public view, inviting scrutiny, criticism, praise, encouragement, skepticism—essentially the gamut of potential responses.

Šuštersiĉ called the Community Research Office a “study situation.”² This taxonomy refuses

the traditional primacy of artistic intention and relocates agency to the dynamic interactions that take place on and within the site, rather than within a set of a priori decisions imported to the site as a kind of temporary artifice. Part charrette, part studio exercise, part curatorial enterprise, Šuštersiĉ’s intervention is performative rather than

6. Stealth, “Archiphoenix: Faculties for Architecture,” Venice 2008. (Courtesy of Stealth.)



character driven—an interactive, interdisciplinary, temporal series of actions that can only be understood as a convergence of constituent actions and actors, both intentional and incidental.

In collaboration with architect Meike Schalk, Šuštersiĉ created another participatory intervention at the Contemporary Arts Center in Dundee, Scotland for a 2005 exhibition called “Our Surroundings.” Bonnie Dundee, as the installation was titled, was modeled after famed Scottish botanist and urban reformer Patrick Geddes, whose model of the garden landscape and the Valley Section were early-twentieth-century attempts to foreground the importance of community and social interaction in the formation of urban contexts. In Dundee, a greenhouse, suggesting perhaps both Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace (1851) and the transparency of the International Style, took center stage on a small tract of sod-covered land in an empty lot near the city’s waterfront (Figure 4). Again, the site and structure served as a meeting place for public discussions on the positive and negative connotations of urban activism. As Schalk and Šuštersiĉ write, the structure demonstrated how “a city planning office could be thought of less as an exclusive institution, and more as a public meeting place.”³

The publicness of architectural and urban design practice are benchmarks of the works by Dutch architect Marc Neelen and Belgrade-trained architect Ana Dzokic, who together comprise Stealth Architects (their name is sometimes rendered as “stealth.ultd”). Their description of a hybrid practice is of working on a “horizontal, interdisciplinary level . . . treating space as an agency.” The concern is more about what an architect can “lead you to understand about space and structures” than how the practitioner “can determine how [space and structures] function as objects.”⁴ Along with Ole Bouman, architectural theorist and director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam, Stealth co-curated the Dutch pavilion at the 2008 Venice



7. Stealth, “Transformation of the City through the Processes of Wild Building and Street Trade,” from *Wild City*, 1999–2001. (Courtesy of Stealth.)

Architecture Biennale, the theme of which was “architecture beyond building.” Stealth and Bouman had just witnessed the accidental burning of the Faculty of Architecture building at the University of Delft (a school with many illustrious alumni,

Neelen and Bouman included), and saw this conflagration as a symbol of the need to rethink architectural practice from the ground up, as it were (Figure 5). Rather than showing significant buildings of the past two years, the curatorial team

decided to design a pavilion holding 1,500 translucent crates that could be fashioned into myriad spatial organizations (Figure 6). Here, they staged a series of debates with invited speakers revolving around themes relevant to the state of the



8. Stealth, "Densification: New Belgrade," from *Wild City*, 1999–2001. (Courtesy of Stealth.)

architectural profession, a series entitled "Archiphoenix: Faculties for Architecture." The obvious invocation of the creature rising from the ashes, along with the double entendre of the word "faculties," makes clear what was at stake in the project. The self-referential nature of the project is evident, too, which is to say that it was a pavilion at an architectural biennial circumscribing a space in which architectural collectivity was discussed collectively, and this discussion of how such spaces in such pavilions might function occurred at the moment that the efficiency of one iteration of such a space was in the process of being tested.

Already in 1999–2001, Stealth had begun to research the self-organization of unregulated spaces. *Wild City* was an investigation of the widespread existence of empty lots and unused structures within Belgrade's city limits (Figure 7). Dzokic, a Belgrade

native having completed graduate studies at the Berlage Institute (then located in Amsterdam), noticed a "schizophrenia" in the conditions separating the two cities most familiar to her, and used an architecture studio in Belgrade to compile a database of the "genetics of uncontrolled urban processes" as manifested in the depravity of Belgrade's built fabric (Figure 8). Much like Interboro's Dead Malls project, *Wild City* sought to use Belgrade as a laboratory, identifying rules within the chaos, and asking the central question, "If you can only block or erase [an underutilized space], can you still interact with it?"⁵ In order to understand the clandestine contours of this disenfranchised public sphere, Stealth collaborated with experts in such fields as artificial intelligence and astrophysics in order to examine the whole theoretical spectrum of chaos from the discrete to the expansive.

There is not room here to adequately explore the concept of the public sphere, either in its historical or its contemporary manifestation (or, for that matter, to debate the concept of its existence entirely). For the sake of discussion, we may assume that there exists a concrete or conceptual space in which the dialectics of contemporary discourse are played out. The contours of this space are contested and increasingly dematerialized, corresponding to the incursion of technology's role into information management and into the mechanisms of social networking. Each of these three practices plays amid the interstices of this as-yet identifiable public sphere, challenging its boundaries from the most material to the most ontologically abstract. One can see how, in the projects discussed above, the intertwined roles of discussion and deliberation come to the fore, returning the most democratic principles of inclusion and community building back to the constituents of those democracies and communities, and establishing the ground rules for their emergence where they do not yet exist. This is the most imperative role that architectural practice can play within our era's rapidly unraveling web.

Notes

1. Conversation between author and Daniel D'Oca, Georgeen Theodore, and Tobias Armbrorst, Brooklyn, NY, 11 November 2008.
2. Apolonija Šuštersiĉ and Liutauras Psibilskis, *Apolonija Šuštersiĉ: Community Research Office* (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver/Archiv für aktuelle Kunst and London: iBiD Projects, 2004), p. 19.
3. Meike Schalk and Apolonija Šuštersiĉ, "Project Bonnie Dundee," in Constantin Petcou, Doina Petrescu, Nolwenn Marchand et al., *Urban Act: Practices, Groups, Networks, Workspaces, Organisations, Tools, Methods, Projects, Data, & Texts* (Montrouge, France: Moutot Imprimeurs, 2007). Significantly (for the argument at hand) the copyright of the book is actually held jointly by all the contributors and the publication is organized through a network of distributors, all of whom have agreed to give away one copy of the book for each one that is sold. The book is also available as a free PDF download at www.peprav.net or www.urbantactics.org.
4. Interview between author and Marc Neelen and Ana Dzokic, November 19, 2008, New York City.
5. Ibid.