

Transilient Skyline

Denitsa Petrova
Edinburgh College of Art (UK)

Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to the debate on the shifting roles of art and architecture in contemporary society and the way in which both creative activities play a part in the creation of today's urban environments. It examines the transitional areas where architecture becomes art and where art becomes an integral part of urban architectural fabric. The study explores projects in which both activities share viewpoints, whilst finding amorphous spaces and ways to collaborate, and discusses works that are believed to define a new form of site-specificity – one where human presence is not only required but the body itself becomes the site and the space around which the work is created. The paper looks into collaborative projects which are inspired by natural ways of creating dialogue, rather than with pre-imposed agendas. Furthermore, it aims to provide evidence of even more sophisticated site-specificity, where community participation becomes a focus and an inseparable part of the work itself.

Today, we observe dramatic and incessant changes taking place within our cities. These transformations prompt artists, architects and activists to seek new ways of working and new kinds of intervention. The diversity that our cities offer is a fascinating arena for artistic exploration, interaction, and recreation.

This study explores the transitional areas where architecture becomes art and where art becomes an integral part of the urban architectural fabric. In addition, this paper examines case studies which involve collaborative urban art projects created by artists and architects and the results of their work together. The essay aims to investigate those interventionist projects in city settings which compel audiences to think about the urban environment in new ways. It focuses on the point where the subversive design potential of art meets the functionality of architecture and investigates what happens when artist and architect mix roles. Furthermore, the study examines how these processes of transformation start to merge into a "critical spatial practice" as defined by Jane Rendell,¹ by adopting ways of working

which are typically related to activist art as it focuses on social or political issues.

Today, successful collaborative work between artists and architects is often seen as a process of transformation for both parties within their respective fields. Over the past two decades, we have come to realize the benefits of these collaborations, as "interventionist" art projects are reshaping our cities and questioning our role as citizens. These art and architecture groups are working under the banner of activism in order to change traditional assumptions about our urban surroundings. Rediscovering and reshaping places is something that artists and architects now do together.

In her book, *Art and Architecture: A Place in Between*, Jane Rendell notes that, to a great extent, the architect's curiosity about art relates to the potential for subversive design and creative projects free from economic and social pressures. Likewise, Rendell also describes the artist's interest in architectural practices as connected with the functional role of architecture.²

As demonstrated by the projects discussed further in this paper, collaboration is more than a mutual agreement between artists and architects; it is more than a division of tasks and sharing knowledge. It is rather a shared understanding and fusion of thoughts resulting in works which cannot be defined as either art or architecture.

In the past decade, the Office of Subversive Architecture (OSA) has been operating in these undefined areas where both disciplines merge. The OSA is a collective of architects, whose members are based in different cities throughout Europe.³ They are also known as "guerrilla architects" because of the radical approaches that they take in their work. The projects of OSA are influenced by the visual arts and music, and demonstrate the meaning of "critical spatial practice."

In 2004, Bernd Truemppler and Karsten Huneck, both members of OSA, embarked on a project which originally started as a rather simple makeover plan, but concluded as a guerrilla style "intervention." The

project, called *Intact*, was planned as a refurbishment of an abandoned railway signal box in Shoreditch - one of London's poorest areas. Truempier and Huneck comment:

*This house looked like a small and forlorn version of a stereotypical and slightly "twee" cottage. Although it was old and weathered these idyllic associations made it appear out of place in its rough urban environs, like a strange "Building-Alien". We immediately thought that this structure needed a treat and set about refurbishing the house in a way that aimed to express the idealized vision of a dream property.*⁴

After attempts to obtain permission for a makeover of the building from the local authorities proved unsuccessful, the group decided to conduct their project 'guerrilla style', by covertly starting their makeover work very early in the morning and completing it ten hours later.⁵ Their intervention turned the signal box into a beautiful home with white exterior walls, window flower boxes, and a balcony covered with fine artificial grass. They installed a light switch, powered by a car battery, which turned a light on inside the house every night. (See Fig. 1)



Fig 1: *Intact* [<http://www.osa-online.net/de/flavours/up/intact/a/index.htm>] (accessed 20 February 2009)

Intact reflects the notion of "humanized space" as discussed by Yi-Fu Tuan in his book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. In several respects, this project manifests the ideas of Tuan. He argues that, without personal influence and an element of possessiveness over a space, the emotional bond between a person and a place is slow to develop.⁶ The location of the project plays just as important a role as the intervention itself. The picturesque home stood out among the rest of the houses in the area and attracted more attention to their poor state. Karsten Huneck comments that, "Through a simple, low budget and temporary action on a specific site, such projects capture the imagination and raise awareness and debate around the spaces that we often pass by without so much as a glance."⁷

In a publication following the exhibition, *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere*, organized by the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) in 2004, a member of the *Institute of Applied Autonomy*⁸ describes the concept of intervention as an "...attempt to change the behavior of a system in a way that the system is not prepared to deal with."⁹ *Intact* re-examines the use of urban spaces in two ways – by looking at the choice of location and the type of intervention possible. Situated in an area of the city where the results of failed private capital interests have marginalized the human needs for space and shelter, the project tries to direct public attention towards the fact that many spaces in our cities have been abandoned and forgotten.

The works of American artist Michael Rakowitz not only try to focus the audience's attention on social issues, but actually provide real solutions to problems such as homelessness. The artist addresses the typical functions of architectural design, such as offering shelter and protection for the body, by creating inflatable shelters for homeless people. The structures, called *paraSITES*, utilize air flow from building ventilation systems to keep them inflated, and after being slept in overnight, can be packed up and carried around throughout the day by a homeless person.¹⁰ (See Fig. 2)



Fig 2: *paraSITE* [http://www.a-n.co.uk/artists_talking/image_bank/images/79865] (accessed 21 February 2009)

In a similar fashion, the British artist Lucy Orta embraces an overlap of ideas between art and architecture with her series entitled *Modular Architecture*. Orta responds to social issues such as refugee displacement and homelessness with her portable body structures. In *Modular Architecture*, she has designed individual waterproof body units that allow people to travel independently, but, when multiple units are connected to each other, a sleeping shelter for several people is created. (See Fig. 3)



Fig 3: Modular Architecture [<http://www.studio-orta.com>] (accessed 22 February 2009)

She uses aluminium coated materials so that the installations can reflect the sunlight when placed outside and, at the same time, retain body heat when being used. Orta states that her work expresses "...the idea that our body is in complete interaction with the surrounding environment."¹¹ Fulfilling the notion of "body architecture,"¹² the artist borrows typical architectural techniques by allowing her works to act as a protective environment and shelter for "...displaced people who must carry their belongings and homes with them as they migrate within or between cities."¹³ The art critic Miwon Kwon claims that site-specific works are to be seen as projects which are "...focused on establishing an inextricable, indivisible relationship between the work and its site and demand the physical presence of the viewer for the work's completion,"¹⁴ and this notion is strongly reflected in the Orta's work. Her projects are designed not simply to be viewed but to be used by people. Modular Architecture and paraSITE are examples of a new form of site specificity – one where human presence is not only required, but the body itself becomes the site and the space around which the work is created.

Projects such as INTACT, paraSITE, and Modular Architecture challenge the traditional relationship between the individual and the building that they inhabit. Furthermore, these projects can be seen as a reactionary process and as a critique of postmodern life, adopting critical roles typically associated with art. Jane Rendell describes the relationship between art and architecture as often defined by their differences in terms of possessing a function. She notes that, "...architecture is taken to be functional and art is presumed to have no function."¹⁵ Rendell instead suggests that the function of art is concealed in its critical role. Following this viewpoint and the concepts of the projects discussed above, one can conclude that there is strong evidence that the roles of art and architecture are shifting and the result of this is subversive spatial design practices. Architectural projects such as Urban Oasis adopt elements typically

associated with critical art practices. On the other hand, art projects such as Modular Architecture and paraSITE take on practical and functional roles.

The art historian Rosalyn Deutsche discusses site-specificity as a discourse which combines "...ideas about art, architecture, and urban design, on one hand, with theories of the city, social space, and public space, on the other."¹⁶ Urban Oasis is a type of intervention which combines elements of these theories and practices. Initiated in 2005, the project's aim was to create a green area in the middle of Broadgate Circus in the City of London. The architects of the project aspired to create a "...living piece of nature in the heart of the city," where the structure resembles an outdoor pub with chairs and tables covered by grass. (See Fig. 4) They installed a jukebox that played sounds from nature and posted a warning board reading "Keep on the grass."¹⁷



Fig 4: Urban Oasis [www.osa-online.net] (accessed 22 February 2009)

Karsten Huneck, one of the creators of the project, observes:

*A major part of our work with OSA focuses on those areas of the city which tend to be overlooked, forgotten or abandoned. All over London you can find neglected sites that invite exploration and engagement. They offer up opportunities to create temporary projects that explore their potential and the possibilities for positive future development.*¹⁸

By responding to the needs of city dwellers in the local area and creating "...breathing space amid the concrete surroundings,"¹⁹ this work is not simply site-specific. It is also "audience specific" and "issue specific."²⁰ This change of direction, the American curator Mary Jane Jacob explains, is a "...logical step toward a more intimate and meaningful relationship between the artist and his/her audience, a way of shrinking the poles of production and reception."²¹

The precise ability of Urban Oasis to shrink the distance between the work and

its audience and the fact that the work itself is a facilitator, "a partial object, a vehicle of relation to the other,"²² links the project with the ideas of "Relational Art" as defined by Nicolas Bourriaud, in which the author argues that "...encounters are more important than the individuals who compose them."²³ Urban Oasis is more than an intervention in the City of London. The project not only removes the distance between the work and its audience but also acts as a catalyst for social networking between the audience members. This is why the concept of Urban Oasis can be linked to relational art practices, where prompting human relations is crucial point of the artwork.

In the final chapter of *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre notes:

*On the horizon, then, at the furthest edge of the possible, it is the matter of producing the space of the human species – the collective (generic) work of the species – on the model of what used to be called 'art'; indeed, it is still so called, but art no longer has any meaning at the level of an 'object' isolated by and for the individual.*²⁴

This advanced concept of site specificity, addressing not only the physical conditions of the site but encouraging dialogue with the audience and public participation, is demonstrated in Park Products, a collaborative project between the artist Kathrin Böhm and the architect Andreas Lang. As part of a residency at the London Serpentine Gallery in 2004, Böhm and Lang collaborated with visitors to the Royal Park Gardens and Product Design Students from the Royal College of Art, London, to create their project. Being interested in socio-geographical networks, the duo investigated existing social structures as a starting point for collaborative work. They worked with a wide range of people; from scientists at the Imperial College, London, to gardeners, dog walkers and park visitors. They created "...products that used the raw materials of the Park and reflected the diverse interests of park users,"²⁵ such as chocolate-bar shaped Compost Bars made from compressed Royal Parks compost, bird houses for some of the rare birds living in the park, and shiny jewellery to attract magpies.

The products' distribution was via non-traditional methods. For example, people were invited stroke the trees or to weed the gardens as payment for 'purchased' goods. Visitors within the park were also encouraged to exchange possessions amongst themselves: this was an integral part of the project itself, as a method of promoting dialogue. (See Fig. 5) Böhm and Lang let the participants make their own choices when designing products and opting for the type of product-exchange that they wished to make.



Fig 5: Park Products Launch 2004, Photograph David Bebbler.

The important goal of the project was not to achieve a controlled final outcome, but to provide an environment in which an unpredictable and natural way of letting things happen could develop. For both artists and architects, this is a rather unusual form of "...critical engagement: not a holding down but a letting go," as noted by Jane Rendell.²⁶ The work suggests a method of collaboration, which is inspired by a natural way of creating a dialogue between all the groups involved in the project's creation and reception.

Projects such as Park Products and Urban Oasis are evidence of sophisticated site specificity, where not just a single human body participates in the work, but the community, and community participation becomes a focus of, and an inseparable part of, the work itself. This is where art and architecture merge into a creative practice which, according to Tuan, "...attempts to give sensible form to the moods, feelings and rhythms of functional life."²⁷ In this symbiotic environment, we may reveal a creation that stimulates its viewers to be participant, rather than react with a distant enjoyment. Urban Oasis and Park Products demonstrate that creative works are not only inspired by real life, but also play an important role in increasing our awareness of the surrounding world and ourselves. Stimulated by the continuous transformation of our cities, many artists

Transilient Skyline

and architects are searching for new working methods. They are creating a parallel horizon as a way of changing the city from within, inspired by the city's most important element – the people.

Notes

- 1 Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place in Between*, New York: I. B. Taurus & Co Ltd, 2006, p.4
- 2 *Ibid.*, p.3.
- 3 See <http://www.osa-online.net> (accessed 12 February 2009).
- 4 See <http://www.osa-online.net/de/flavours/up/intact/a/index.htm> (accessed 18 February 2009).
- 5 See <http://www.osa-online.net/de/flavours/up/intact/a/index.htm> (accessed 18 February 2009).
- 6 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Minnesota Press, 2001, pp. 132, 158.
- 7 Jeremy Hunt, "OSA Office for Subversive Architecture", *Art and Architecture Journal*, Autumn 2008, p.39.
- 8 See <http://www.appliedautonomy.com/projects.html> (accessed 20 February 2009).
- 9 Nato Thompson, Gregory Sholette (eds.) with Joseph Thomson, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Ondine C. Chavoya. *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, North Adams: MASS MoCA Publications, 2005, p.78.
- 10 See http://www.a-n.co.uk/artists_talking/image_bank/images/79865 (accessed 21 February 2009).
- 11 See <http://www.studio-orta.com> (accessed 22 February 2009).
- 12 See http://www.thedesignofprosperity.se/press/orta/Refurge_Wear_Lucy_orta.pdf (accessed 12 February 2009).
- 13 See <http://www.studio-orta.com> (accessed 22 February 2009).
- 14 Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004, p.12.
- 15 Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place in Between*, New York: I. B. Taurus & Co Ltd, 2006, p.156.
- 16 Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions, Art and the Spatial Politics*, Cambridge: MIT Press 1996, xi.
- 17 See <http://www.osa-online.net/de/frameset/zenset.htm> (accessed 19 February 2009).
- 18 See http://www.debatelondon.com/articles.php?section=nav_articles_&id=6&action=showTopics (accessed 16 March 2009).
- 19 *ibid.*
- 20 Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004, p.109.
- 21 Mary Jane Jacob, *Urban Issues Are Focus on New Public Art Program in Chicago*, in Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004, p.109.
- 22 Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place in Between*, New York: I. B. Taurus & Co Ltd, 2006, p.149.
- 23 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002, p.43.
- 24 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, p.422.
- 25 See http://www.publicworksgroup.net/download/Park_Products_brochure.pdf (accessed 19 February 2009).
- 26 Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place in Between*, New York: I. B. Taurus & Co Ltd, 2006, p.178.
- 27 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Minnesota Press, 2001, p.164.

Bibliography

- Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002
- Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions, Art and Spatial Politics*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996
- Jeremy Hunt, "OSA Office for Subversive Architecture", *Art and Architecture Journal*, Autumn 2008
- Mary Jane Jacob, *Urban Issues Are Focus on New Public Art Program in Chicago*, in Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004
- Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004
- Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991
- The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, North Adams: MASS MoCA Publications, 2005
- Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place in Between*, New York: I. B. Taurus & Co Ltd, 2006
- Nato Thompson, Gregory Sholette (eds.) with Joseph Thomson, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Ondine C. Chavoya,
- Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Minnesota Press, 2001