The Roles of the Architect
Toward a Theory of Practice

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Lexicon N°1
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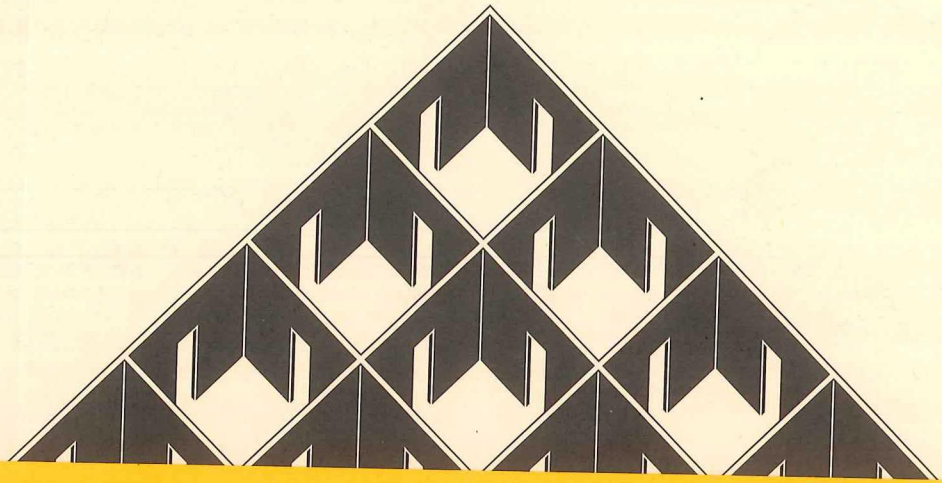

Lexicon N°1

Forty-two keywords cross-referenced into ten critical positions in an attempt to articulate a theory of practice in relation to the changing role of the architect.

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Lexicon N°1: On the Role of the Architect is the first in a series of publications exploring keywords relevant to contemporary architecture discourse. It is accompanied by a supplement entitled *After-words, or the Encyclopedia Temptation* by Jean-Louis Cohen.

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Editor's note

The succeeding pages are the result of a seminar taught at the Berlage in the autumn of 2015 by Tom Avermaete, Professor of Architecture, and Hans Teerds of the TU Delft's Chair of Methods and Analysis. Students sought new insights on the relationship of architecture to society by identifying forty-two keywords based on recent perspectives on how architects practice today. Accompanying this nomenclature are ten critical positions on the changing role of the architect.
—SEF

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The Roles of the Architect: Toward a Theory of Practice

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Changing Perspectives

To claim that today's professional field of architecture is characterized by rapid transformation is to state the obvious. New techniques of communication and modeling—like 3D printing, CNC milling, modeling software, and gaming tactics, among other things—extensively affect the architect's work. Building industries are, too, impacted by these changes and themselves experience the emergence of new materials and products. Urban and architectural projects are being redefined as complete business cases: including design, financing, construction, marketing, and maintenance during the first decades of use.

Commissioners take alternative positions and roles in the building process, as do contractors. Not only do new bonds develop between developers and users, inhabitants and local governments, engineers and designers but also formerly silent parties take initiatives in the urban landscape or take the responsibility to develop projects. Instead of being commissioned by the state or the market, urban projects are increasingly initiated as co-productive and collaborative ventures involving complex groups composed of private and public actors and, notably, citizens. Finally, there has been a noticeable shift in thinking about architecture's relation to resources. Influenced by recent reflections on circular and purpose economies, a new understanding of how architecture engages with common urban resources has developed, an understanding that redefines architecture's relation to material, spatial, natural, and social resources. All of these changes have significantly affected the architect's role within the professional field and beyond. These are changes that have consequences on the small scale of individual building project as well as on the large scale of cities, infrastructure, and landscape.

These changes not only affect the role of the architect but also surely challenge any understanding of architecture at large. What happens when contractors surpass independent architects and start to act as designers? What do architects have to offer in participative projects of local agency, when inhabitants are likely to plan, organize, develop, and design their dwelling environments themselves? Is architecture

merely the design of buildings and places, and thus opposed to both the bricolage-like state of many of the bottom-up projects and the glitz and glamour presented in the developer's renderings?

Although today's changes seem to challenge the field extensively, it would be a misconception to regard this state as a new condition. The profession of the architect has never been "stable," but has rather been characterized by a continuous transformation of its conditions and characteristics. Modernism and its aftermath have shown how easily a socially engaged understanding of architectural design can lose its depth and turn into an aesthetic idiom, meanwhile drastically altering the role of the architect. Against this background, the field is continuously urged to rethink its own premises, urged not to lose depth and too to keep a clear perspective on its relevance, aims, and tools within contemporary society. Rethinking the logos and praxis of the architect is and has been foundational to the discipline of architecture.

Sensus Communis, Forma Communis

We feel that the urge to continuously reflect upon the very profession of the architect begins with the acknowledgment that the field of architecture bears a specific responsibility in society. The meaning of architecture, as such, has always surpassed the sheer technical design of buildings and spaces; indeed, even in its most technical appearance the responsibility of architecture reaches further than the occurrence of the single detail or building. Architecture deals with space and it delineates its boundaries. As the French thinker Henri Lefebvre has taught us, this delineation of space is not exclusive or particular to architects: all people appropriate, demarcate, and engage with space.[1] There is no such a thing as the authority of the architect in space. However, in the planning of spaces, and their very appearance, the architect not only draws the lines and limits of space but also deals with "the world and the people in it."[2] This is the very substance of architecture: intervening in the world and taking into account its people.

The term "world" is used here in Hannah Arendt's specific sense; per Arendt, all the interventions that turn the earth—that is, the globe, our biological sphere, and nature—into a habitual environment for the human being.[3] Without these interventions one might state that culture, and life on earth more generally, is not possible. These interventions mainly consist of *things*: houses, cities, infrastructures, tables, spoons, artworks, but also institutions that regulate the human community. The world delivers human life its foundational ground and delivers society its very durability. The world is there before we appear on earth and it still is there when we leave.[4] According to Arendt, the world is therefore by definition a *common* world, shared with fellow human beings, in fact shared even with our predecessors and with future inhabitants.[5] The treatment of this world, as we might imagine, affects all human beings. The world therefore by definition is of public interest and an object of political life. It requires a *sensus communis*. This is precisely the political dimension of architecture: as one of the human being's main instruments to intervene in the world, as a *forma communis*, it is definitionally a public issue.

This perspective immediately situates all architectural intervention—ranging from small, bottom-up initiatives in neighborhoods to vast, top-down infrastructural projects for territories, and from the first commissioning initiatives to long-term exploitation—under the high tension of a political perspective. Space is political, and intervening in space thus necessarily implies a political position. This urge to take a position is obviously not a prerogative of the architect but, as a professional intervening in space, the architect is constantly challenged to articulate his or her position.

Architects today are challenged to be proactive, to take initiative, to interact, to develop, and to respond. They are challenged to rethink spaces and imagine possibilities, to act politically and to enable the public to question spatial developments. They are, we might state, challenged to take a public role, share their knowledge of space, their imagination of possible futures, and their intuition to grasp and affect a specific site or condition.

A Community of Practice

It is clearly not only the architect who is involved in the organization and design of space. This is a task that equally a matter of inhabitants themselves, as well as

1 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 300.

2 Hannah Arendt,"Karl Jaspers, *A Laudatio,*" in Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995 [1968]), 79.

3 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994 [1958]), 2.

4 Ibid., 52–53.

5 Ibid.,137.

of politicians. Contractors are involved, as are local communities, committees of perseverance, and so on. Space is, simply put, a common concern. However, since architects historically have been dealing with space, with the imagination of possible futures, with initiatives of change, with interventions in the world—and the design of all of these things—they can perhaps be described as experts of spatial design. Since it is specifically this expertise that is called into question today, the field needs to understand what it actually has to offer. Architecture might be understood as the art and act of spatial design, today too often understood as the art and act of the figure of the architect.

Architecture is, like other art forms, a "social practice," a term described by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. In his use of these words, MacIntyre means that the participant in a social practice is not a stand-alone figure. "By a 'practice'," he writes: I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form If activity are realized in the course of tryingto achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human power to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the end of goods involved, are systematically extended.[6]

The established "practice" thus means that there is already both a long-developed know-how as well as certain approaches that contribute to the shared knowledge of that specific activity.

Even if these achievements from the past are challenged by the individual participant or by the entrance of other players within the field, it is a certain set of knowledge that is challenged, transformed, and appropriated. This is also the very reason that MacIntyre does not call it simply "practice," but rather emphasizes the social character of these activities. Participating in a social practice means inserting oneself in a practice that already exists, a practice that has a history and a tradition, even if this tradition is constantly and acutely challenged by new forms of communication, methods of working, and tools of production. In other words, to participate in architecture means to deal with an established body of knowledge and to confront *and* relate to preexisting ideas about craftsmanship and perspectives upon good and bad practices and better and worse performances.

6 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 187.

In all of this, social practices depend upon a certain community of practice that contributes to a cumulative body of knowledge.

A Theory of Practice

It is therefore that, when the field is challenged and needs to rethink its premises and approaches and reflect upon the roles that each individual architect can take, we should not look at theoretical perspectives from other fields, but rather "harvest" from the practices within the architectural field itself. Cumulative knowledge originates in everyday practices, practices in which architects develop their approaches and take specific positions on the basis of their shared knowledge. It is in these approaches and positions that architecture's specific contribution to the world appears.

The architect's practice is increasingly linked to the actions of multiple actors and emphasis is increasingly placed on the coproductive nature of the architectural enterprise. The urban territory and the knowledge and skills of citizens are understood as immanent sources to be unlocked, activated, and managed by the architectural project. Questions that arise from this new definition of the architectural project need further exploration. Are the impulses we detect in these projects the prefiguration of a broader new interpretation of the architectural project? Can we in the future regard the architect's intervention as the unlocking and management of important communal sources of skill and knowledge? And how does this relate to the body of collective knowledge and practices that is part of the discipline of architecture itself?

This lexicon—conceived and constructed—is an attempt to articulate such a "theory of practice" that is not composed on the basis of an ideal image of reality but rather theorizes from the very soil of reality itself, accepting and validating the many contingencies, ambiguities, and contradictions of everyday practice. The terms presented here are not meant to replace other forms of knowledge within the field of architecture. Rather, as Pierre Bourdieu writes more generally of a "theory of practice," they are intended to challenge the prevalence of "objectified" and meta-theoretical knowledge in the field of architecture.[7] As notions that begin to outline a theory of practice, the entries in this lexicon contribute to the continuous accumulation of shared and gained knowledge focused on the role of the architect.

7 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 3.