

On Instruments for Engagement

Adam Murray

Cabins built in forests, clumsy blocks of painted-over graffiti, the bus station of England's newest city, rooftops in Seoul, cardboard houses, the office of a deceased relative, a personal celebration of post-industrial Sheffield, tennis courts, English transmission towers, houses covered in snow, a 40-year self-build in Sao Paolo. Diverse, instinctive and, at times, esoteric, these are some of the subjects that have been dealt with by a current group of photographers and artists that are offering a reappraised perspective on visually dealing with architecture and the built environment.

The built environment has consistently provided photographers with rich subject matter for work both in an artistic and commercial context. The pioneers of photography were able to take advantage of the static nature of buildings that would allow for the long set up and exposure times that early technology dictated. Typologies produced by photographers such as Bernd and Hilla Becher¹ and Donovan Wylie² have encouraged audiences to focus on architectural form, the purpose of the buildings and what is considered worthy of such detailed photographic study. Architects rely on the pixel perfect photograph to provide a document of their spectacular showpiece project before it is subjected to people actually using the construction. For many audiences, it is precisely this photograph that allows them at least some experience of a building that most cannot hope to ever gain access to.

Within both photography and the built environment there are long standing hierarchical structures in terms of what is considered work worthy of discussion and consequently, what discussion is considered worthy. Often it is the grand or extraordinary architectural projects that are given the most discussion within relatively mainstream media, for example the Olympic facilities in London, the Beetham Tower in Manchester and the Park Hill Estate in Sheffield. These projects have the combination of spectacle, exoticism and public interest that will encourage a wide audience to read an article on their commute to work or over Sunday breakfast.

More in depth debate is generally the realm of specialist publications and conferences that are contained within specific professional fields with the professional motivations that are inherent within these arenas. Trade journals such as *The Architects' Journal* and *Architect*, academic journals such as *The Journal of Architecture* and *Town Planning and Architecture*, and magazine style publications such as *El Croquis* and *Detail*, all offer knowledgeable and informed debate to an audience that would consider themselves to very much be peers of the writers and photographers featured.

The content of these publications has clear emphasis on the written word as being the communication method for commentary and criticism. The role of photography within these publications is to inform and illustrate in that it gives a visual context to accompany the written article. This is not to undermine this work; each project has it's own purpose and significant influence can clearly be seen in many contemporary examples. However, through a project such as ARCHIZNES it is possible to see

¹ Lange, S., 2006. *Bernd and Hilla Becher: Life and Work*. MIT Press

² Purbrick, L., 2007. *Donovan Wylie: British Watchtowers*. Steidl

that a new generation of photographers and artists believe that there is another role for photography in relation to the built environment and publishing practice. These practitioners are removing themselves from the mainstream professional press and are concerned with using photography as a visual language to critique and focus attention on the spaces that we occupy. This distance has allowed image-makers a new freedom in terms of the subject matter, aesthetic style and format that their work takes.

Looking through the selection of publications that are contained in the ARCHIZINES archive, only a few contain predominantly just photography; The Belgian based publication *UP*³ is one example. According to the editors, their work is focused on “interesting architecture”⁴ and “appears regularly with an irregular interval”⁵. It is this subjective, idiosyncratic approach to architecture that makes their work instantly stand out.

UP rebels against the mainstream architectural press in a number of ways; the format of the publication changes from stapled to concertina folding and there is a seemingly flexible identity for the group, but it is the subject matter and use of photography that is the distinguishing feature. This is a publication that turns it's back on the latest mega-structure by celebrity architects, instead choosing to focus on subjects such as a house that Eduardo Longo began building in Sao Paolo in 1970 and is still unfinished, a Belgian architecture project from the mid-fifties and simply a series of doorways and corridors.

Text is kept to a minimum and the reader is left with work to do in terms of interpreting the meaning of the photographs. In one instance it begins seemingly as being a relatively simple case of comparison between archive photographs of the house being built and how it stands now. But the question still remains, why this particular house? It is clearly unorthodox in terms of design and construction methods, but surely there must be other projects of this kind. As readers, we are then encouraged to consider how we would build our own house; are projects like this happening in our towns and cities. The publication acts as a trigger for our imagination to dream about what is possible.

Issue 8 of *UP* moves further into the realms of conceptual documentary photography. There are some similarities to a typological study with repetitive composition and subject matter of the corridors and doorways, but this is a project that uses photography and the physicality of print to deal with our interpretation and use of space. The concertina structure of the publication forces the reader to play with how the work is ‘read’. Single pages can be looked at, but the real joy comes when the publication is stood up on a surface and an almost mirror-like juxtaposition occurs. This image relationship is changed however as the reader manipulates the pages, we are essentially involved in a basic version of an architect planning the structure of a building.

I started *Preston is my Paris* with Robert Parkinson in July 2009 in order to encourage the exploration of Preston in the north west of England as a subject for creative practice and to generally focus more attention on the city. What originally started as a free zine and blog has developed into a multi-faceted project that includes exhibitions, digital applications and live events. *Preston is my Paris*

³ Edited by Dedobbeleer, K. Dockx, N. Kimpe, K. & Master, J.

⁴ www.archizines.com

⁵ www.archizines.com

Publishing was then set up to produce affordable, photography publications that focused attention on other places that are underappreciated aesthetically. Through the use of photography and appropriation of vernacular printing formats, we can explore how people perceive and experience their surroundings. Recent publications have focused on *Preston Bus Station* and other cities, such as Derby and Carlisle.

Outside the realm of ARCHIZINES, there are many photographers producing one off publications that use architecture and built space as a starting point. The work of Sheffield based photographer Theo Simpson⁶ deals with subject matter that relates closely to his post-industrial hometown. His three self-published works, *Dead Ends*, *Eight* and *What We Buy*, feature discarded job centre slips, transmission towers and a range of products available to buy for £1 or less. It is possible to trace the subject matter of Simpson's work through the tradition of British documentary photography by practitioners such as John Davies, Paul Graham and Martin Parr, yet there could be no accusation of simple replication.

Although it could be argued that all of Simpson's work focuses on the built environment, his project *Eight* is clearly the most defined. This large scale, publication features a series of photographic screen prints of British transmission towers. Simpson says about the work; "What fascinates me with transmission towers is that they are the second largest network of man made structures in the UK, except you don't really notice them." His intention is to focus attention on the "intricacies and consideration of everyday structures."

Beyond subject matter, Simpson's work really triumphs as an example of an innovative approach to responding to architecture with regards the format that the work is presented. The publication is over half a metre in height and contains a series of loose screen prints, "as I felt the graphic nature of the print method highlighted the lattice form of the structures." In an era where digital technologies allow completed images of a structure to be produced even before it is physically finished, the tactile, individual and hand crafted format encourages the reader to engage with and consider the subject matter that would normally be overlooked.

The role of an architect or town planner is to come up with an ideal to fulfill a particular purpose. The success of their solution is then communicated in the imagery used to show the work to a general audience. Buildings are photographed as spectacular beacons that often look more like computer generated models rather than physical constructions. The press release for a redeveloped city centre is likely to be accompanied by photographs showing the streets and shops before the general public has been allowed in. The architects have done their job; this is the finished product, done.

But what happens when people actually start using the buildings? Although it does not necessarily fit in with the utopian plans of the initial project, a building is inert until people engage with it. Inevitably the built environment changes as people bring their own personal methods of use and values to the table. This study of the way people operate within the built environment has increasingly become the focus of photographic projects.

Produced in a photocopied, zine-like format, photographer Chris Seddon released 50 copies of his publication titled *Correctionism*⁷. The project is a photographic

⁶ www.theosimpson.com

⁷ www.nolayout.com/chris-seddon/correctionism/

documentation of the deletion of graffiti that has been put on to public space in Hackney and Tower Hamlets. This is the opposite of the ideal visions that commissioned architectural photography usually would like to portray; this is what happens when people become involved.

The initial graffiti is put there by someone wanting to impose his or her identity on a particular environment; other people who also engage with that environment may not like this and it has been decided that the role of the council responsible for this area is to delete or 'correct' this work by painting over the graffiti. Consequently this still leaves an obvious paint mark on the area and has been interpreted by Seddon as being a different form of graffiti. Although graffiti is often the subject of terribly clichéd and repetitive work, this photographic project offers a new perspective. It is about the ideals that people have with regards public space and the built environment and who possesses the power to impose these ideals.

Released as a self-published photobook in 1999, *Dad's Office*⁸ by Nigel Shafran also shows how what at first could be seen as having only personal interest actually addresses universal themes. It is the ambiguous nature of the subject matter that makes this work focused on a building particularly engaging. There are a mixed signs as to what it is that we are looking at; the title suggests it is the work environment of the author's father, but the different rooms featured correlate more with our understanding of domestic rather than vocational space. The glimpses of trees and houses that we see out of the window again reinforce this idea of suburbia.

In the same way that *Correctionism* makes us question the purpose and role of the cities that we inhabit, *Dad's Office* uses deeply personal subject matter to make the reader question the purpose and role of the spaces around us. Objects such as the desk, rusty stapler and phone book suggest a work space, but the ironing board, wine glasses and tooth ache medicine contradict this to be a domestic environment. Although an architect may initially have determined a specific building to be either home or office, this publication encourages the reader to consider why this purpose should be fixed.

*IANN*⁹ is a bi-annual contemporary art photography magazine published simultaneously in Korea and Japan. In September 2009 an issue was released with the overall title 'Nameless Cities'. Featuring mainly photographic work from a range of practitioners including Chikashi Suzuki, Paul Graham, Yoon-Jean Lee and Niels Stomps, the publication aims to offer different visual interpretations of urban spaces.

One of the less instantly spectacular of the projects featured in the publication is called *rooftops, Seoul*¹⁰ by Jan Lemitz. Understated in aesthetic style and taking up just four pages of the publication, it relates very much to the idea of how people engage with urban space. The space in this case is not public space or an iconic building, simply the rooftops of a range of buildings in Seoul.

Flat and with balcony style walls, you would be unable to see these rooftops from the street and they do not have the instant aesthetic seduction values that other buildings in Seoul surely must have. The uniform composition of the photographs encourages analysis and comparison. Some of the rooftops are in a state of disrepair; others seem to have been turned into garden-like areas for a family to use.

⁸ www.nigelshafran.com/pages/dads_office_pages/001dads_office.html

⁹ www.iannmagazine.com

¹⁰ www.janlemitz.com/series/

Although interesting in terms of offering a viewpoint into spaces not normally seen, the real success of this project is that Lemitz raises issues to do with how space is used within the modern city and the value of this space in a way that does not seek to impose opinion.

With the amount of valuable and relevant work that is currently being produced, it would be a challenge to produce a comprehensive survey. What the work discusses in this essay aims to highlight is the variety of approaches in terms of subject matter, aesthetic style and treatment of the printed outcome. An appropriate summation of this body of work would be the concept of being informed by 'real users' and the importance of this should not be underestimated. By questioning the role that photography has in relation to architecture and the built environment, practitioners and audiences are being provoked into actively engaging with subjects that are relevant to them. Using photography as the language of communication then enables a different group of people to contribute their valuable opinion and understanding to the wider debate.