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CONSTRUCTING “SOCIAL ARCHITECTURE”: The Politics of Representing Practice¹

In the context of ongoing economic and environmental crises, “social architecture” has gained traction as a description of those practices that seek to challenge the dominant professional model of capital-intensive, client-dependent architectural production. Approaching “social architecture” as a representation that contains crucial assumptions both about mainstream architectural practice and disparate strategies for its rejection, this paper draws on recent critical social science literature to analyse fieldwork with the Rural Studio, a design-build program in Alabama, USA. Exploring different understandings of “social architecture”—including as expressed by students, teachers, clients and community members—we suggest that the category is, in practice contexts, replete with tensions, rejections and uncertainties; coherence of intention or outcome can certainly not be assumed when architects attempt to deal with contradictions and crises emerging from other parts of capitalist society.

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Introduction

Margaret Crawford has observed that representations of professional architectural practice absorb as much effort as the design of architecture itself.² The unresolved tension between what Crawford refers to as "actual practices and ideological representations" is particularly manifest in debates on "social architecture", a category that has gained resonance in recent professional and academic accounts of the roles and responsibilities of architects in the context of various crises, progressive political projects, participatory design, and sustainable building.³

One of the most coherent discussions of social architecture to date can be found in Thomas A. Dutton and Lian H. Mann's edited volume *Restructuring Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices*, a collection of essays exploring the tensions (in theory and practice) between architecture's potentially critical function and its mobilization in the reinforcing of privilege and power. Within this excellent volume, Anthony Ward's essay focuses most directly on social architecture, unpacking many of the assumptions stored within this category; he is worth quoting at length:

[W]hat is called *social architecture* is the practice of architecture as an instrument for progressive social change. It foregrounds the moral imperative to increase human dignity and reduce human suffering ... [architecture] is "nothing but social", yet its social practice has both supported and reinforced existing social hierarchies and has operated mostly as a mechanism of oppression and domination. "Social architecture" ... challenges structures of domination and, in the process, calls capitalism itself into question.⁴

We agree with Ward's diagnosis of architecture's entanglement with power, and share his interest in exploring strategies for alternative practice engaged in practical political struggle, but here analysis of the category of "social architecture" serves as an entry point for wider discussion of architects' practices. And, as will become evident, we do not understand such representations as neutral, objective reflections of prior existing realities, but rather as co-constructions that are mobilised, negotiated and rejected through social action in particular contexts. Representations of social architecture are understood as part of the practices of architects and others, all of which contain a vision—often implicit—of the roles and responsibilities of architects in the context of contradictions and crises not of their own making.

Our starting point is that "social architecture" reflects some fundamental tensions, emanating on the one hand from the architectural field's structural relation to political-economy and on the other from critiques thereof. We set out to chart a course between two competing reductionisms: one that would dismiss "social architecture" as an inherently romanticised and ideologically-motivated self-representation authored and fostered by architects; and another that would a priori develop an abstracted celebratory account of the contribution to the collective good that can be achieved when politically-committed architects engage in alternative forms of practising. Pursuing Crawford's aforementioned call for a critical approach to both architectural practices and their representation, we seek to analyse rather than evaluate, exploring i) the implications that the designation "social architecture" has for wider understandings of architectural practice; and ii) the mobilization—and rejection—of this category in a specific context.

This article is in three main parts. Firstly, we use insights from Actor-Network Theory and conversation analysis to tease out some implications of the designation “social architecture”, and to argue for the necessity of guarding against the use of the category as a kind of a “black box” into which disparate types of practice are placed never to be interrogated further. Our interest here is to problematise abstracted—and often romanticised—representations of architecture, seeking instead to illuminate some implications of designating a subset of architectural practice “social”. Next, discussion turns to theories of architecture and critiques encouraging resistance to or rejection of elements of dominant models of architectural production. The key argument here is that critical architectural practice, and representations thereof, need to be understood relationally, which involves both revealing architecture’s “contingencies”⁵ and “silent complicities”,⁶ and engaging with the ways in which such resistances and new visions bear the hallmarks of the models of wider architectural production they seek to reject.

Finally, empirical investigation of the work of the Rural Studio, an undergraduate design-build program run from Auburn University in Alabama, is discussed in light of the preceding sections. A major contention is that understandings emerging from making architecture in this context mean the category of “social architecture” occupies a highly ambiguous status. From this fieldwork our argument is that the internal complexities of what is frequently represented as “social architecture” should not be lost in a rush to romanticise or abstract practices that illuminate fundamental aspects of architects’ relationship to clients, wider social formations, and the “non-social” architectural mainstream. The closer research gets to those strategies represented from afar

as “social architecture”, the less determinate the strategies become, and studying the making of architecture provides a reminder of the tensions and uncertainties that emerge when externally generated accounts of “social” practices fail to resonate in context.

Constructing Social Architecture: Actors and Networks

Actor-Network Theory has become a popular framework for studying the ways in which networks are sustained by human practices, objects, technologies, and representations thereof. Seeking to expose connections between agents and objects, with no a priori assumption that people will be the key agents in these constructions, Actor-Network Theory (henceforth “ANT”) emerges from attempts to interpret the frequently overlooked work that needs to be carried out to “knit together” human actors and non-human actors, the technical and the non-technical, with the aim to reveal ways in which networks and relations are assembled and maintained, and thus made “social” (or not). Indeed, a major strand of ANT’s critique of “the social” is that it operates as a kind of default explanation to which social scientists retreat when the animation of networks becomes too complex or fast-moving to capture. In his book *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, the French sociologist Bruno Latour observes:

In most situations we use “social” to mean that which has already been assembled and acts as a whole, without being too picky on the precise nature of what has been gathered, bundled, and packaged together. When we say something is “social” or has a “social dimension”, we mobilize one set of features that, so to

speak, march in step together, even though it may be consisted of very different sets of entities.⁷

Latour's opposition is to overly-systematizing and abstracting mobilisations of the category "social", which he argues frequently acts as a default house of refuge to which academic researchers withdraw in the face of complicated relations between humans and objects necessary to sustain networks. From this perspective, "the social" is often called upon to stand in for the entanglements of people and things, which need to be explained and interpreted before any such category can become meaningful. In encouraging us to guard against the tendency to throw everything into the "black box" of the social, ANT encourages a sensitivity to the relationality of people and things (material objects, spaces and technologies), to the processes through which they are made meaningful and resonant (or not), and to the ways in which connections "go with the grain" of existing interactions and understandings. In short, Latour's central argument is that if a set of practices and objects can be said to be "social", the challenge for researchers is to show how, to reveal the people, the technologies, the shared understandings, knowledges and uncertainties that must underpin any such network.

Indeed, the development of ANT was closely bound up with science and technology studies,⁸ where research from "inside science"—within labs, conferences, meetings etc—was designed to defamiliarise the embedded expertise and "native knowledge" of the scientists, who most often take for granted the stability of the networks. ANT positioned scientific communities as networks of people and things, rendering visible assumptions amongst which were the maintenance and mobilization of disciplinary and sub-disciplinary boundaries.

If the basis for ANT is that much social science has been casual about the constitutive nature of technologies and objects relative to networks and human relations, then for studies of architecture—typically characterized by close engagement with materials, objects, form and socio-spatial relations—the challenge from ANT is perhaps to capture i) the "animation" of buildings and their socialization through a variety of uses, interpretations and struggles; and ii) the wider structural relationships (e.g. between architectural production and other sets of political-economic relations) within which claims for social architecture are made and remade.

Viewing architecture through this lens, Kjetil Fallan suggests in a thought-provoking paper that the promise of ANT, relative to the built environment, lies in its non-reductionist approach to the dialectic relationship between social interaction and materiality, with the framework opening up potential for analysing the co-constitutive relationships between technology, objects and social networks.⁹ Albená Yaneva has also made use of ANT in her ethnography on the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), in which she frames the design process—from conception through competition to delivery and beyond—as an inventive "projectile" of "objects of design experiences".¹⁰ In this account Yaneva challenges reductionist accounts, discrediting those critics who do not consider design "from the inside", but instead make ahistorical, placeless assertions in which practice is absent. Yaneva has also used ANT to make far-reaching suggestions about learning and teaching in architecture, encouraging students to unpick architecture's entanglements and to "follow controversies" (with controversy understood as those "series of uncertainties that a design project, a building, an urban plan

undergoes ... it is rather a synonym of 'architecture in the making').¹¹

Thinking through ANT about the designation "social architecture" certainly raises some interesting initial questions about the ways in which architecture is *made social* in particular contexts, the types of uses and struggles that centre on the built environment, and the ways in which architectural practice—including the assemblage of materials, meanings and relations that constitute "architecture"—connects to wider questions (such as concerning the material inequalities characteristic of capitalist formations). Indeed, the rejection of any essentialised or formalistic connections between practices, materials and their meaning requires situating objects and practices within wider sets of entanglements and relations, and to question what combinations of people, things and meanings need be "assembled" before claims for social architecture can be made and sustained. How does claims-making attach to particular types of architectural practice in context?

Thinking in this way also encourages assessment of the linguistic dimension of claims-making with respect to a "social" subset of architectural practice. Harvey Sacks, the originator of sociological conversation analysis, would position the prefix "social"—as in "social architecture"—as a "modifier; inference rich",¹² as a linguistic marker that reveals much about the wider category being modified (architecture). In other words, that certain types of architectural practice attract the modifier "social" should lead to a consideration of those forms that *don't*; the use of the term "social architecture" suggests a "nonequivalence" with wider representations of architectural practice, and acts as a linguistic marker of distinction from something else ("non-social architecture"? "anti-social architecture"?). Sacks would also say

that "social architecture" can be positioned as a "contrast class", as a linguistic marker of differentiation that implies the rejection of elements of the category being modified by the prefix; "if one could be used, the other could not be used if it were true. If the other could be used, the first could not be used if it were true."¹³ Such representation from *within* the architectural field must also be understood as a project of internal distinction between architects but—as we will see in discussion of the empirical case—while "social architecture" is often mobilised as a proxy for an explicit engagement with the "contingencies"¹⁴ of dominant architectural practice more widely, those involved in practice contexts often reject the application from afar of such labels, even if ostensibly they imply a valorisation of their "social" work.

Architecture and Critique: Contingencies and Scales

It is an oft-stated aphorism that professional architectural practice is closely aligned with the powerful. The symbiotic relationship is due both to architecture's capacity to materialise status, and its potential to facilitate the generation of surplus value from urban space; as a key site in these regards, architecture bears the hallmarks of cycles of speculative investment and disinvestment, of growth and of shrinkage.¹⁵ Given professional architecture's reliance on wealthy clients for commissions, on the surface it is perhaps an unlikely place to look for critiques, resistances and challenges to capitalist political-economy. Indeed, the capacity for this type of architecture practice would ostensibly seem highly conscribed, with potential for a radical social program of architecture limited by the constraints of individual or institutional clients willing to pay for such.

However, and precisely due to architecture's reliance on capital, crises in models of economic accumulation tend to encourage new ways of thinking about architecture's relationships, with entanglements and reliances sometimes recast as opportunities and challenges. Critiques of the symbiotic and durable relationship between architects and the agendas of the powerful—and of the wider social order—have long emerged from politically-engaged architects whose work explores the potential of architecture to help secure new social formations. In the Marxist tradition, the concept of critique is bound up with the transformatory potential of knowledge-as-practice to disrupt and reveal the contradictions inherent in wider capitalist formations. In terms of architectural production, this means foregrounding its origins and impacts, and wider political questions (including those related to inequality). Kim Dovey has suggested that critical architectural practice must unsettle the parameters of the field itself, exposing architecture's "silent complicity" with agendas of the powerful.¹⁶

Projects seeking to do this seem to have an affinity with "local" architecture, operating outside of mainstream client-dependencies and high capital costs and so offering the possibility for architecture's contingencies and entanglements to be more readily revealed, resisted, and challenged (a key basis of some versions of the vernacular tradition, see below). Smaller scale approaches also seem to harbour more potential to embed architects' practice in the politics of the community, rather than, for example, retreating to the abstractions and heroic scales associated with modernism's utopianism. The British geographer Doreen Massey has made a very useful contribution to our understanding of the relationality of scales within capitalism.¹⁷ Drawing attention to the political implications of

connecting actions across wider social formations, Massey has rejected the romanticised dualism between place as the "in here", the soft and meaningful lifeworld, and space as "out there", the system. As she encourages consideration of the ways in which capitalism is practised—and resisted—at different scales and registers, it is important to understand from Massey the ways such "local" and ostensibly critical practices bear the hallmarks of the wider structures of the architectural field in capitalist societies (precisely because such structural political-economic conditions make their force felt at points where people seek to reject or resist them). Problematizing the tendency in academic research to ascribe meaning to locality and to abstract capitalism from context, Massey's work reminds us of how particular economic formations are sustained by architectural teaching, decisions that are made in firms, practices in situ etc.¹⁸

Erik Swyngedouw's recent work has been concerned with the ways in which expert knowledge production is entangled in governance strategies, leading to a colonization of public dissent and a silencing of conflict in conditions he describes as "post-political".¹⁹ Rejecting such limited and enfeebled versions of politics, Swyngedouw argues that any politically motivated project must coalesce first around a democratic politics that is "properly political", including an acceptance of the inevitability of disagreement. The co-option of incorporated groups of experts is characteristic of "post-political" contexts, and Thomas Dutton and Lian Mann have challenged "co-opted" versions of "critical" architecture and have identified three ideal-typical ways in which this incorporation occurs: when the distinction between form-making and meaning-making is collapsed; when a critique of architecture replaces a critique of society; and when radical

academic theory replaces radical social action and engagement with projects of social change, including through new social movements.²⁰ A real danger concerns the aestheticization of inequality, for example where questions of material inequality are displaced onto built form and the meanings thereof.²¹ Despite the fact that as individuals, many architects

sincerely assert that they are deeply concerned about issues of social and economic justice ... as a profession they have steadily moved away from engagement with any social issues, even those that fall within their realm of professional competence, such as homelessness, the growing crisis in affordable and appropriate housing, the loss of environment quality, and the challenge posed by traffic-choked, unmanageable urban areas.²²

What follows here is an attempt to draw on these theoretical frameworks to focus attention on the constitutive practices and representations needed to sustain "social architecture", understood as a frame foregrounding some elements of architectural production and the backgrounding of others. It is not intended as an evaluation or a normative reflection on the work of the Rural Studio, which we would anyway consider to be a presumption on our part—who are we to judge the goods or bads associated with such work?—but rather to reveal some of the understandings, tensions and complexities associated with "social architecture" in context.

The Rural Studio and "Social Architecture": Practices and Representing Practice

If social architecture suggests a project of re-ordering spatial and social relations, pedagogy

is a key site for exploring strategies and practices that can be employed to this end.²³ In the United States over the last 40 years much teaching and learning innovation in this area has centred on "design-build" programs, which have received international recognition for both the holistic learning experience made available to students therein, and for the impact of build projects in disadvantaged communities.²⁴ The first such design-build program was the Vlock Building Project at Yale University's School of Architecture, which in 1967 took first year students into rural Appalachia to design and construct buildings in poor communities; Charles Willard Moore pioneered the program, still running to this day, as an educational strategy to expose architecture students to construction techniques in situ as well as encourage their reflection on the social responsibilities of the architect relative to questions of poverty and inequality. In the intervening decades at least a dozen design-build architecture programs have developed in universities in the United States and elsewhere, many having become prestigious qualifications in their own right and garnering much media and public interest outside of the formally-constituted architectural field.²⁵

This section of the paper is organised around discussion of data gathered as part of a wider research project to explore "social architecture" from the perspective of local community members/clients, professors and instructors, and students. The project entailed eight months of participant observation fieldwork at a number of design-build programs across the United States, with overarching concerns centring on how design-build programs are presented to their various publics; and on how debates around social architecture were understood and negotiated in context. The ethnographic research process involved active

participation in the schemes, including observation and interviews with a range of individuals contributing to the process of seeking, using the language of ANT, to "make architecture social" (rather than to "make social architecture").

The site of research engagement that forms the basis of our discussion here is the Rural Studio, a design-build program associated with the School of Architecture at Auburn University, which works with local communities in rural Alabama.²⁶ By now one of the most admired undergraduate architectural programs in the United States,²⁷ the Rural Studio is at the centre of much discussion on social architecture, in terms of both pedagogy and professional practice.²⁸ Co-founded by the charismatic Samuel Mockbee (1944–2001) and D. K. Ruth (1944–2009), the Rural Studio was founded upon a critique of the separation in architectural education of theory, building technique, and practice. Set up in 1993, and working primarily in the Alabama "black belt" (so named due to a strip of dark soil that runs across the state), which contains areas characterized by high levels of economic deprivation and associated problems, and where the median household income is \$US22,930,²⁹ the Rural Studio emerged in the midst of a period when critiques (from within and without the formal architectural field) of the symbiosis between modernist architectural production and footloose international capital had led to a rejuvenation of interest in vernacular architecture.

Stances such as critical regionalism developed preceding debates around non-pedigreed "architecture without architects",³⁰ and encouraged a move away from the technologically-driven, universalizing nature of modernism, and towards connecting buildings and architects with local understandings of place and the lived

realities of future residents.³¹ The interest in vernacular and "rooted" architecture echoes through the various writings, interviews and pronouncements of Samuel Mockbee, whose vision of the Rural Studio was fundamentally contingent on the rejection of many of the principles of mainstream architectural practice and training. His program was designed to put undergraduate students "into an architecture that is real ... not theoretical"³² and to encourage a "self-aware" architectural practice that would challenge "pretense and undue abstraction" in the next generation of architects. Mockbee explained that while "all architects expect and hope their work will act in some sense as a servant for humanity—to make a better world", architects must choose "between fortune and virtue".³³ In his writings and teachings, Mockbee outlined his vision of a participatory architecture engaged in its form and practice with locality and people, with strategies built on an implicit rejection of prevailing models of "American architecture [that] had retreated from social and civic engagement to a preoccupation with matters of style".³⁴

In this sense Mockbee's positioning of the Rural Studio in its early years can be understood through the lens of Harvey Sacks' aforementioned concept of the "contrast class", which in this case served not only to present an alternative model for architectural teaching and practice, but also to develop an implicit critique of broader architectural production relative to inequality. Connecting critical thought with practice as a form of challenging the "indifference [of the] intellectual community"³⁵ to unjust power relations entailed living "the myth that [students] can make a difference."³⁶ This is contingent on students and lecturers/instructors acting as agents of social change, challenging existing hierarchies within and beyond the architectural field through

their teaching and learning. These aims are captured in the Rural Studio's mission statement, written by Mockbee, which says, "[i]f architecture is going to nudge, cajole, and inspire a community to challenge the status quo into making responsible changes, it will take the subversive leadership of academics and practitioners who keep reminding students of the profession's responsibilities".³⁷ Forging what he saw as a vital link between architecture and building, Mockbee eschewed theorisations of practice and form in favour of "hands-on design and construction in nose-to-nose negotiations [to transform] a left-behind place".³⁸

The rich legacy of Mockbee's vision for the Rural Studio provides a sometimes ambivalent backdrop against which the contemporary design-build course operates. Certainly, and as was Mockbee's intention, engaging students in local issues in economically disadvantaged communities means student architects are inextricably "entangled" in sets of issues that go far beyond the formal limits of the architectural field, with the contingencies and negotiations inherent in such work having to be addressed head on. It was in this context that this research sought to draw out attitudes towards the representation of the Rural Studio as "social architecture". Many interviews revealed ambivalence towards this prevalent abstraction of the Rural Studio's work. For example, an instructor (himself a graduate of the program) was keen to dispel romanticised representations of architecture as poverty alleviation. He commented that:

I don't like the sort of "social architecture" thing we get labelled [with]. The things that the books don't show is the sort of context of the place, that it's pretty fucked up when you go there. It's still fucked up. And it will probably always

be fucked up. And you don't see that in the books. [With "social architecture"] you just see the sort of romanticized poverty (14.04.2008).

Similarly, the same instructor criticised media representations of the Rural Studio when observing that "the mission [of the Rural Studio] is, sort of as it's published, is sort of this social or environmental agenda, which is totally not the case ... We're not here to solve the social problem. And you can't solve it through architecture because [the problem of poverty is] too broad" (14.04.2008). Although he suggested an absolute commitment to getting students involved with communities, and to try to "do good" with architecture, this instructor also observed "it's never sort of like, 'We're going to do social architecture.'" (14.04.2008)

Ostensibly, these responses—picked for their representativeness—may seem to indicate a limited role for architecture, but our reading of the interview data is that these instructors are attempting to ensure that constraints emerging from the *wider contexts* within which their practice takes place are not overlooked by naïve, heroic, or romanticised representations situating their work as inherently radical and/or transformatory activity. Importantly, their critique of such abstraction actually focuses our attention on the complexities and tensions associated with teaching and doing architecture in these contexts. In effect, the instructors sought to stress the dangers—as per the earlier analysis drawn from ANT—of celebrating an abstracted "social architecture" that flattens out such issues. Returning to conversation analysis, Sacks is interested to show how knowledge and expertise of practices and situations become "stored" in linguistic categories, and the subtle inferences associated

with their deployment or rejection in conversation.³⁹ From this, it is interesting to note the highly ambivalent connection to "social architecture" expressed from the perspective of instructors and students alike. Indeed, the term itself had a slightly ambiguous status, with its lack of resonance as a description *within* the conversations of instructors and students, reflecting something of the tension between *practising* architecture and representing it.

The extent to which "social architecture" resonates with the people doing it was a key concern of the research project. While from afar the category can make sense as a shorthand descriptor that bundles together any of a range of approaches to design and building that express a "social consciousness", that is "sustainable", or "radical", the closer one gets to the realpolitik of working, for example, in poor communities, the less this abstraction seems to chime with practice. The lack of "ownership" of the category was also expressed by a Rural Studio student, who had in fact been inspired to apply to the program because of its reputation as a site for the practice of "social architecture" (itself an interesting illustration of the previous point). He captured something of architecture's contingency and entanglements when suggesting "architecture is not a solution to a social problem" (02.04.2009). The tension between actual practices and their romanticised representation was actually the source of some frustration.

However, even in the rejection of mainstream practice, the dominant rules of the wider "game" are inevitably inflected into teaching and practice. (One instructor explains "we're here to learn about architecture. We're here to learn about how architecture deals with a client. And then the sort of hope is that you

can do some good with it. But it's never primary." (14.04.2008)) Certainly though, those working with the Rural Studio *did* frequently present their work as doing something "other" than that of the majority of those in professional architectural practice. This distinction often took the form of representing the centrality of materiality and building, as opposed to theory and the quest for symbolic value. One instructor captured this distinction with the suggestion that the Rural Studio emphasises "getting students to work with their hands and work in a community" (14.04.2008), while the current director Andrew Freear explained, "it is not closeted education ... we are doing projects that matter; they are not just 'throw away' paper projects".⁴⁰ The emphasis on building does not altogether collapse the cherished distinction between architects and builders/engineers, central to the professionalization of architecture,⁴¹ but it does emphasise what actually gets built, regardless of the potency of models, drawings and other representations (the aesthetic component of architecture is still central to the work of the Rural Studio, which must in Owen and Dovey's words—describing tensions between sustainable architecture and mainstream practice—"serve two masters"⁴² in this respect). This weighting towards actually building is of course inherent in design-build programs, but the ability to build is also reliant on an atypical architect-client relationship. Removing some of the constraints associated with powerful, demanding clients paying full market rates not only opens up educational opportunities, it also allows a kind of architectural autonomy. In the words of one student, if "you take out funding, you take out clients with demands. You get to build it the way you want" (22.02.2010). Certainly, the atypical architect-client relationship was the source of much discussion, with the sometime uneasy power

relationship between architects and future residents provoking particular debate. One instructor suggested we “imagine someone so poor that they can’t say no to any help. And so that leaves them sort of powerless, and they have to sort of take something. . . . There’s a level of us exploiting them because of their poverty.” (14.04.2008)

Patricio Del Real—drawing on Marcel Mauss’ classic analysis of the reciprocal expectations surrounding gift exchange in traditional societies⁴³—has suggested the Rural Studio’s work is comparable to a “gift economy”. His argument is that the “reciprocal” nature of the exchange in this case sees students attract the capital accruing to “social architects”, while the client gets the architecture/house as part of the deal.⁴⁴ While the work of the Rural Studio is rooted in “the belief that architecture can humanize”, Del Real has suggested the danger of “hiding disciplinary power behind good intentions”; social architecture must confront this paradox, manage these tensions, especially in a situation where help—at least of the kind offered by architects—may not be wanted, and confront the provocation that “architecture is not necessary for life”.⁴⁵ One student reflected wryly that “poor people do not *need* architecture, but they need money and a builder” (02.04.2009).

Certainly, these buildings are not designed and constructed in a vacuum. While the clients may not be corporate magnates obsessed with tall buildings, or states adept at enforcing building regulations, the resident-clients interviewed brought very different sets of expectations to the projects. For local residents the architecture—the houses, the spaces, the objects—were certainly not sufficient on their own to constitute social architecture, and there were often expectations of atypical interactions over

and above the usual architect-client relationship. For example, a local business owner, while reflecting very favourably on the built results of the projects, and the Rural Studio in general, suggested that students “have their own little clique, and they stay in that clique, and they don’t mingle with the community” (30.04.2008). She illustrated this contention with a vignette from Taco Night, a get-together on Wednesdays at a local Mexican restaurant where local community members move between tables and conversations, socializing and catching up with each other’s news. The local business owner observed that although the students are very often in attendance at these nights, understandably they can sometimes be a little peripheral in the context of the long-established friendships and relationships among those they are designing and building with. Clearly the meanings attached to such interactions, by both students and “locals”, cannot and should not be assumed; as with any social context, issues of standpoint mean that people experience and/or interpret interaction in different ways.

Reflecting on the complexities of non-architecturally framed interactions between students and community members, one student noted “very significant differences in the culture of [the local community] and the culture of the typical student. For example, most of [the local community] is [religious]. And they don’t drink, which is in contrast to the typical college student who *does* drink and party and *doesn’t* go to church” (02.04.2009). While there is no suggestion that students should necessarily or even could assimilate with the dominant norms and values of the local communities in which they are working and studying, these vignettes are a reminder that the sets of learned dispositions and values of trainee architects are not always in sync with the clients with whom they work, and

that "making architecture social" brings with it expectations over and above the designing and building. Certainly, working in such contexts means that the dominant model of client dependency is disrupted.

A central concern of ANT lies in the network connections between actors and object, and applying this framework to the Rural Studio case leads us to question the ways in which architectural objects—materials, forms, aesthetics—are implicated in "social architecture". As was suggested earlier, and as with other manifestations of vernacular architecture, Mock-bee's vision was contingent on embedding architectural practice *and* form in place.⁴⁶ An essentialist analysis would suggest that certain materials or style inherently "link" to a place, but this tendency to reduce X material or style to Y community or region overlooks the wide range of arbitrary meanings and judgments that need to be stabilized before such connections can be sustained. However, even retaining a sense of the "constructed" connections between forms and meanings, the Rural Studio's use of unconventional building materials—for example the walls of Lucy's House were constructed with rugs, those of the Sanders/Dudley House with rammed earth—serves a number of key symbolic functions. The materials chosen for buildings had tactile qualities, were environmentally sustainable, and suggested an innovative, experimental approach to "ordinary" and "everyday" objects. Furthermore these choices also imply a rejection of technologically-driven and expensive building materials, the materials of choice in supposedly more rarefied strata of architecture.

Of course, aesthetics and form—while perhaps seeking to distinguish some houses from other houses, to connect to a *terroir*, and become a site of pride—are also the stuff of distinction, based on a set of learned and consecrated

judgments.⁴⁷ In the case of the innovative use of objects, a material reflection of a distinct approach developed by the Rural Studio, these could also alienate clients, or at least challenge their existing expectations/definition/understanding of a house or home (the rammed-earth walls of the Sanders/Dudley House led the clients to see the building as perpetually unfinished). Likewise, the aesthetic form of the houses—how "vernacular", "modern" or "fashionable" they appear—creates dialogue in a number of architectural and lay communities, each attaching different judgments and values to the same objects and forms. The differential meanings attached to form and materials do not always "travel" or "translate" without being modified in some way. For example, local residents—indeed, perhaps a majority of Alabamans—are widely understood to enjoy the spaces created by porches. Yet one resident, while expressing gratitude for the work the students had carried out on his house—which within the architectural community had been celebrated for its low-cost, beautiful form, and innovation with non-traditional building materials—felt that the attempt to maximize porch space had meant a reduction in closet space, and room for washing machines (14.04.2008). Again, rather than leading us to evaluation, this vignette should perhaps direct our attention to the fact that objects drawn into social architectural processes are themselves key, because they reflect understandings of wider embedded practices and judgments of participatory design, of the local, indeed of the social, all of which differ contingent on one's standpoint.

Rural Studio has recently expanded their design-build project to develop a model housing unit at \$20,000 (the 20K Project), with the wider objective to "produce a model

home that can be reproduced on a large scale by a contractor".⁴⁸ The general idea is that a 20K house is affordable for someone on government assistance, meaning that they can have a house that "will appreciate in value" (02.04.2009). Here, architecture is caught up in a process of "capitalization", dependent on expectations of real estate appreciation, and while in the media the project is represented as "aim[ed] to address the dearth of decent, affordable housing in western Alabama ... a new paradigm of low-income rural housing, ... a truly repeatable model,"⁴⁹ one instructor on site reflected in the following terms on the wider material contexts within which such interventions were taking place: "20-K houses are Band-Aids. They're Band-Aids on like a head wound, like a serious head wound, which is not the answer" (14.04.2008). While such architectural productions seek to redress wider social and economic issues, there are always going to be emergent tensions in the strategies. But far from suggesting an impoverished role for architects, students and their work, this is a reminder of the architectural field's reliance on other parts of society, the necessity for architects to engage in problems not of their own making, and to seek to contribute their specific expertise to solutions that sometimes disrupt the existing parameters of architecture as presently practised. In Mockbee's words, "the role of architecture should be placed in relation to other issues of education, health-care, transportation, recreation, law enforcement, employment, the environment, the collective community [which] impact on the lives of both the rich and the poor".⁵⁰

Conclusion

When discussing architecture and the French Revolution, Anthony Vidler suggests there

should be less concern with identifying a definitive formal style of the revolution, and more with studying the roles of architects and the uses of their architecture during the revolutionary period.⁵¹ In encouraging researchers to "follow controversies", Latour's version of Actor-Network Theory makes a similar plea, directing attention to representations, technologies/objects, and practices, and consequently is a useful theoretical frame within which to interrogate the construction of networks of action and knowledge underpinning what is frequently represented as "social architecture". From ANT, a focus on the actions of practising architects, teachers, architect-students, and clients discourages abstraction and directs us towards the entanglements and mobilisations that are represented as constituting "social architecture" at a particular time and place.

As is commonly mobilised, the category of "social architecture" reflects highly differentiated practices, and its elastic and unquestioned use can obscure the necessary work and practical negotiations to make architecture in context. Drawing on ANT we have suggested the necessity of opening up dialogue about the practices and politics of social architecture, which otherwise is a sufficiently elastic category to be mobilised to "post-political" ends, and to obscure the very real issues at stake. Indeed, to not include an analysis of these enmeshed power relationships can equate to a denial of their force, which is to overlook the very "real" contributions that are made by architects and communities working to make architecture social.

Through empirical engagement with the work of the Rural Studio, we have sought to draw out some of the contingencies, struggles and complexities that centre on what is often

represented as social architecture. The field-work suggests at best a highly ambivalent relationship in practice with the label of "social architecture" that, while serving as shorthand or a flag of convenience in certain circumstances, becomes indeterminate the more it is interrogated. Navigating the complexities of the Rural Studio's work in Hale County is also a reminder that while the category of "social architecture" is designed to resonate with publics outside of the formally constituted architectural field, it is also the site of internal distinction *within* architecture.

The work of the Rural Studio reveals the contingent, dependent, and constrained position of architectural production in those contexts where crises generated by other parts of social formations (be they economic, environmental, or political) are negotiated by architects. Our aim has certainly not been to

either celebrate or denigrate the interesting and important work that can go on in such contexts, but rather to explore the challenges associated with connecting together the practices of architects and their representation, which reveal something of the "unresolved contradictions"⁵² of the architectural field. These include the fact that to produce architecture "is to map the world in some way, to intervene, to signify; it is a political act. Architecture, then, as discourse, practice, and form operates at the intersection of power; relations of production and culture, and representation".⁵³ Those architects and students working with the Rural Studio must deal with a series of urgent challenges and "controversies", namely those emerging from other parts of capitalist formations that remind architects both of their own contingent position and their capacities relative to wider social forces.

Notes

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2. Margaret Crawford, "Can Architects Be Socially Responsible?", in Diane Ghirardo (ed.), *Out of Site: A Social Criticism of Architecture*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1991, 31.
3. The classic contribution to debates on social architecture is in Richard C. Hatch (ed.), *The Scope of Social Architecture*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1984. This volume is organised around a wide range of case study reflections, mainly from the European and USA contexts, of participatory and community-led architectural projects and related dialogues. Most of the interventions are underpinned by an interest in regionalism, community-building design processes, and a rejection of the placelessness of some modernist development and the elitist representation of architects therein. On social architecture more generally, see also: Andrew Saint, *Towards a Social Architecture: The Role of School Building in Post-War England*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1987; Architecture for Humanity (ed.), *Design Like You Give A Damn: Architectural Responses to Humanitarian Crises*, New York: Metropolis Books, 2006; Dan Pitera, "Architecture Held Suspect: Notes on Design and Collaboration", *OZ: Beyond Aesthetics*, no. 28 (2006), 40–45; Graeme Owen, "In Dark Waters: Opportunity and Opportunism in the Reconstruction of New Orleans", *Journal of Architectural Education*, 60, no. 1 (2006), 7–9; Jose L. S. Gamez, and Susan Rogers, "An Architecture of Change", in Bryan Bell and

- Katie Wakeford (eds), *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*, New York: Metropolis Books, 2008.
4. Anthony Ward, "The Suppression of the Social in Design: Architecture as War", in Thomas A. Dutton and Lian H. Mann (eds), *Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 27–70.
 5. Jeremy Till, "Architecture and Contingency", *Field: A Free Journal of Architecture*, 1, no. 1 (2007), 120–35.
 6. Kim Dovey, "The Silent Complicity of Architecture", in Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby (eds), *Habitus 2000: A Sense of Place*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000.
 7. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 43.
 8. Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1979.
 9. Kjetil Fallan, "Architecture in Action: Travelling with Actor-Network Theory in the Land of Architectural Research", *Architectural Theory Review*, 13, no. 1 (2008), 80–96.
 10. Alben Yaneva, *Made by the Office of Metropolitan Architecture: An Ethnography of Design*, Rotterdam: 010 Uitgeverij, 2009.
 11. Alben Yaneva, "From Reflecting-in-Action Towards Mapping of the Real", in Isabelle Doucet and Nel Janssens (eds), *Transdisciplinary Knowledge Production in Architecture and Urbanism*. Heidelberg: Springer Dordrecht, 2011; also see Bruno Latour and Alben Yaneva, "Give me a Gun and I Will Make All Buildings Move", in R. Geiser (ed.), *Explorations in Architecture: Teaching, Design, Research*, Basel: Birkhäuser, 2008, 80–89.
 12. Harvey Sacks, "Lecture Six: The M.I.R. Membership Categorization Device", *Human Studies*, 12 (1989), 271–81.
 13. Harvey Sacks, "Some Considerations of a Story Told in Ordinary Conversations", *Poetics*, 1, no. 2 (1986), 130–1.
 14. Till, "Architecture and Contingency".
 15. Robert Gutman, "Architects and Power: The Natural Market for Architecture", *Progressive Architecture*, 73, no. 12 (1992), 39–41; Maria Kaika and Korinna Thielen, "Form Follows Power", *City*, 10, no. 1 (2006), 59–69.
 16. Dovey, "The Silent Complicity of Architecture".
 17. Doreen Massey, "Geographies of Responsibility", *Geografiska Annaler*, 86, B, no. 1 (2004), 5–18.
 18. Similarly, Edward Soja reflects on "cross-scalar connections" in "spatial justice" movements around the country; Edward Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
 19. Erik Swyngedouw, "The Antinomies of the Postpolitical City: In Search of a Democratic Politics of Environmental Production", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 33, no.3 (2009), 601–20.
 20. Thomas A. Dutton and Lian H. Mann, "Problems in Theorizing 'The Political' in Architectural Discourse", *Rethinking Marxism*, 12, no. 4 (2000), 117. As is noted by Dutton and Mann (120–2), Diane Ghirardo's critique of Peter Eisenman—the "self-proclaimed theorist of strategies of resistance [whose] adventures in appearance substitute for challenges in substance"—goes to the heart of this separation. Her critique of the "aesthetic formalism" emerging from the postmodern deconstruction of bourgeois humanist values focused on Eisenman's projects as ones in which "dissent is inscribed in such a narrow circle of formal choices that it loses any capacity to challenge all but the most banal of issues".
 21. Paul Jones, *The Sociology of Architecture*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011.
 22. Crawford, "Can Architects be Socially Responsible?", 27.
 23. Thomas A. Dutton, "The Hidden Curriculum and the Design Studio: Toward a Critical Studio Pedagogy", in Thomas A. Dutton (ed.), *Voices in Architectural Education*, New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1991, 165; C. Greig Cryslar, "Critical Pedagogy and Architectural Education",

Journal of Architectural Education, 48, no. 4 (1995), 208–17.

24. For example Richard W. Hays, *The Yale Building Project: The First 40 Years*, New Haven: The Yale School of Architecture, 2007.
25. For example: Neighborhood Design Build Studio (University of Washington); Studio 804 (University of Kansas); Miami University's Center for Community Engagement; URBANbuild (The University of Tulane); Sergio Palleroni's BaSic Initiative (University of Texas); Ghost Lab (Dalhousie University); and not-for-profit organizations such as Yes-tomorrow, DesignBuildBuff (Utah), The Wood Program (Finland), and Die Baupiloten (Germany).
26. The research with the Rural Studio was carried out by Kenton Card in spring 2008 and is the source for all excerpts from interviews cited in this essay. Interview dates are given in brackets after each quotation. Many thanks are due to the Rural Studio students, clients and instructors, all of whom generously supported research into the program. Special thanks for their support and engagement to Pam Dorr, Mark Wise, Rob Douge, Jared Fulton, Joe Moore, Willie Bryant, Alberta Bryant, and Lucy Bryant. Also thanks to transcribers at Marlboro College: Jessica Stern, Daniel Hunderfund, Morgan Donhoff, Eva Baisan, Douglas Adams, Melinda Tenenzapf, Elliot Samuel-Lamm, and Patrick Lane. Film of some of the interviews discussed here can be found at: <http://vimeo.com/394866>.
27. Kelly Minner, "2011 United States Best Architecture Schools: Architecture Deans' Survey", *Architectural Daily* at: <http://www.archdaily.com/92310/2011-united-states-best-architecture-schools/> (accessed 21 March 2011).
28. Jason Pearson, *University-Community Design Partnerships: Innovations in Practice*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002; Bryan Bell and Kate Wakeford (eds), *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*, New York: Metropolis Books, 2008; Andres Lepik, *Small Scale Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010, 73.
29. US Census Bureau, "Census 2000 Demographic Profile Highlights: Greensboro City, Alabama". <http://www.census.gov/> (accessed 21 February 2011).
30. Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture: The Anti-Aesthetic*, London: Pluto, 1983; Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981 [1964].
31. Frampton's "Towards Critical Regionalism" is the most coherent call in this tradition.
32. Interview, "A conversation with Samuel Mockbee", *The Charlie Rose Show*, 28 November 2000, <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/3378> (accessed 2 March 2011).
33. Samuel Mockbee, "The Rural Studio", *Architectural Design*, 68, no.7/8 (1998), 72–9.
34. Andrea Oppenheimer Dean and Timothy Hursley, *Rural Studio: Samuel Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001, 1.
35. Mockbee, "The Rural Studio".
36. Interview, "A conversation with Samuel Mockbee," *The Charlie Rose Show*, 28 November 2000, <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/3378> (accessed 26 February 2011).
37. Samuel Mockbee quotation from the Rural Studio website: <http://apps.cadc.auburn.edu/rural-studio/Default.aspx?path=Gallery%2fPurpose%2fObjective%2f> (accessed 2 March 2011).
38. Mockbee's contribution led to consecration from within the architectural field – he was awarded the prestigious McArthur Fellowship—and a great deal of interest from media and from professional publications alike. The current director, Andrew Freear, suggests that "it is amazing that the work of undergraduate students in Hale County can have such a profound effect on the profession of architecture"; Andrew Freear Interview by Auburn University's *Take 5*, March 11, 2011, at: <http://www.auburn.edu/main/take5/freear.html> (accessed 28 March 2011).

39. Sacks, "Lecture Six: The M.I.R Membership Categorization Device", 272.
40. Andrew Freear Interview, Take 5.
41. Garry Stevens, *The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1998.
42. Ceridwen Owen and Kim Dovey, "Fields of Sustainable Architecture", *Journal of Architecture*, 13, no. 1 (2008), 14.
43. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, London: Routledge, 1970.
44. Patricio Del Real, "Ye Shall Receive: The Rural Studio and the Gift of Architecture", *Journal of Architectural Education*, 62, no. 4 (2009), 123–126.
45. Del Real "Ye Shall Receive: The Rural Studio and the Gift of Architecture".
46. The Rural Studio base is a renovated old estate, with vernacular buildings and a campus of housing "pods" serving as their classroom, woodshop and programming spaces.
47. Stevens, *The Favored Circle*.
48. Description of the 20K project from Rural Studio's website: <http://apps.cadc.auburn.edu/rural-studio/Default.aspx?path=Gallery%2fProjects%2f2009%2f20kversion4%2f> (accessed 10 March 2011).
49. Margot Weller, "\$20K House VIII (Dave's House)", in Andres Lepik and Barry Bergdoll (eds), *Small Scale, Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010, 73.
50. Mockbee, "The Rural Studio".
51. Anthony Vidler, "Researching Revolutionary Architecture", *Journal of Architectural Education*, 44, no. 4 (1984), 206–10.
52. Crawford, "Can Architects be Socially Responsible?"
53. Dutton and Mann, "Problems in Theorizing 'The Political' in Architectural Discourse", 117.