

Going Public

Sarah Whiting

Architects have a fondness for things public. Discussions about the rebuilding of the World Trade Center have revolved primarily around the public nature of the site, students want their thesis projects to *explore public space*, and the duality of public and private life has become the binary of choice for academic as well as journalistic inquiry. Increasingly, however, architecture faces a public problem. Our public interest has become schizophrenic of late: theory's investment in publicness tends toward pluralization, while practice's public is increasingly marked by an interest in singular consensus. Perhaps most problematic for those of us with egos (and just try to find an architect without one) is that neither pole encourages, or even allows for, architectural assertion. As an instrument of progress, our commitment to a collective civitas risks becoming a posture (instead of a stance). Our altruism may well have become the enemy of architecture's forward motion, even at the very moment when our understanding of the public has entered a vastly more sophisticated era.

Public Opinion

*Unlike "hegemony," the public sphere is less on the side of rule, more open to opposing views. Unlike "culture," it is more obviously a site of intersections with other classes and cultures. ...Public sphere invokes "identity," but does so with more emphasis on actions and their consequences than on the nature or characteristics of the actors.*¹

By 1993, when Bruce Robbins penned the words above as part of his introduction to *The Phantom Public Sphere*, critical theorists were already fully immersed in unpacking what public might mean. Decades of important writing have profoundly advanced our understanding of the multifaceted nature of this term. We are now acutely attentive to the dangers of oversimplification, homogenization, and marginalization. We know a great deal more today about the tricky terrain of politics, agency, and action. For better or worse, we even know enough to state unequivocally that we frankly don't know much at all. This writing has had an enormously positive influence upon schools of architecture, including a resurgence of interest in

the work of Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Michel Foucault, and a production of sophisticated analyses of buildings and cities across broad historic and geographic spans. An inadvertent parallel to this public labor, however, has been the emergent role of the architect as public crossing guard: a generator of and mediator among multiple publics. While mediation has been rendered a productive strategy by theorists like Fredric Jameson and K. Michael Hays or practitioners like Peter Eisenman and Rem Koolhaas, who already long ago understood mediation as an active between (that is, an engaged interaction that itself generates new possibilities rather than compromise), more often than not, mediation has been misunderstood within architecture to mean a passive between – a simple conciliation between two sides.

Public Safety

*We represent a broad-based citizenry, composed of public and private sector leaders, community activists, and multidisciplinary professionals. We are committed to re-establishing the relationship between the art of building and the making of community, through citizen-based participatory planning and design.*²

The public design charrette, where residents, practitioners and local politicians work together to generate design solutions, epitomizes what has become a numbing drive for consensus or conciliation within an increasing majority of architectural and development projects. Lower Manhattan, for example, is now under the watch of millions of eyes. Will this hyper-supervision guarantee that the outcome of the WTC rebuilding project will be less banal than the harrowingly dull six schemes initially proposed? Probably not. The implication that the broadest of publics needs to approve the WTC proposition – or that it ever could reach consensus – is an assumption that should raise a red flag for architecture today. This assumption is precisely where architecture's public crisis lies and where architects, schools, and clients should take notice.

Ideologies of inclusiveness and accommodation have unknowingly become the progenitors of such forms of compromise. The neutralities that (don't) steer architectural actions in today's compromise urbanism find a strange resonance in the DNA of our intellectual upbringing. Could it be that *The Critical*, in its contemporary guise, has placed us into a Novocain-laced stupor where we can't recognize the simultaneous dilution and desiccation of what were once potent critical strategies?³ Recognizing and exposing options, differences, and similarities should not become an end in itself. The richness of alternatives has become an opiate whose ingestion satisfies our desire for the extraordinary, while drawing us ever deeper into a public coma.

Public Image

In the Downtown Athletic Club each "plan" is an abstract composition of activities that describes, on each of the synthetic platforms, a different perfor-

² *Charter of the New Urbanism*, 1996: 1 [nb: a pdf of the Charter is available on the CNU website: www.cnu.org. An expanded version of the Charter was issued in book form, *The Charter of the New Urbanism*, ed. Michael Leccese (NY: McGraw Hill, 2000)].

³ For more on *The Critical* as a specific movement in architectural theory, see Sarah Whiting, "Critical Reflections;" Peter Eisenman, "Autonomy and the Will to the Critical;" R.E. Somol, "In the Wake of *Assemblage*," *Assemblage* 41 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000): 88-93; and Somol & Whiting, "Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism," *Perspecta* 33 (2002), p. 72-77.

¹ Bruce Robbins, *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) xvii.