

Situated Artefacts - Exhibition Making as a Discursive Practice

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Academic debates about research into explicit and tacit knowledge in architecture often put the two forms into opposition with each other labelling one as “conservative” and the other as “liberal”. Recent theory has posited hybrid forms that combine both critical and creative approaches to form new research practices. These types of research sometimes encounter resistance along established disciplinary boundaries that tend to silo architectural knowledge into history-theory-criticism models on the one hand, and reflections on creative practice on the other. Another way to think about them is to view explicit and tacit knowledge as different research areas with porous connections, and to explore practices that operate at the nexus between them producing, papers, books, drawings, buildings, and exhibitions, as related outputs to be experienced by different audiences where *“knowledge is produced in both tacit and explicit form and is formulated both as...concepts and as particular answers to specific local questions”*(1). By rejecting a binary opposition between theory and practice it becomes possible to imagine multiple ways for philosophy to be spatial and for design to be theoretical. There are many precedents for these ways of thinking from conceptual art’s move beyond objecthood in the nineteen seventies (2), to the philosopher Francois Lyotard’s exhibition *Les Immatériaux* in the Centre Pompidou in nineteen eighty seven, where pure philosophy was presented spatially (3). What they each share is a rejection of disciplinary autonomy in either theory or practice

My design and research work in the field of exhibition making is a situated practice where the spatial and cultural contexts are considered as fields where the designed interventions create reciprocal relationships that the viewers activate. Through a series of exhibition projects across multiple sites ranging from park landscapes to international biennales and white cube galleries, these artefacts connect their host environments and the viewers to produce discursive encounters. In this way the sites of the interventions become spaces of production rather than merely spaces of display. The artefacts are both operational and compositional interventions and are necessarily temporary being precisely situated in the context of their host environments. Some of them have been deliberately designed as nomadic structures that can activate a number of specific contexts. I have also worked with a photographer to document the interventions and have produced written texts that reflect on these events and articulate the conceptual dimensions of the work. This movement from explicit intention to designed intervention, to documentation and critical reflection returns on itself so that each design process is informed by the previous ones. The methodological approach was articulated by Murray Fraser when he proposed that “..*design research in architecture has to form its operations around a dialectical engagement between ideas and practices (and) a very real task for design research is to act as a mechanism for a wider critique of architecture itself.*” (4).

I have explored my process through a series of papers presented at previous CA2RE conferences:

- A paper at the CA2RE conference in Ghent in spring 2017 titled *PhD by Prior Published Work, A Case for Appropriation* set out the context of disciplinary debate about the status of tacit and explicit knowledge in architectural research.
- A paper in Ljublanja in autumn 2017 titled *Pavilions and Positions* explored the potential of the architecture exhibition to act as a discursive space.
- A paper in Aarhus in spring 2018 titled *Seeing Myself Seeing* explored the process of designing my own house and the spatial ideas that it contains.
- A paper in Berlin in autumn 2018 titled *Constructing a Position* looked at the potential of the architectural detail to articulate an explicit theoretical idea.
- A paper at Ghent in 2019 titled *Entropy and Performance* explored thinking about the recent past through a conservation project for the retrofit of an important modern school building from the nineteen seventies.

These CA2RE conferences have provided me with invaluable peer-review feedback and have enabled me to contextualise my research within a wider community of practice. I have found that other researchers presentations have given me insights into my own process. As I am based in a small school of architecture on the periphery of Europe I have found that the discussions with the review panels open up new perspectives in my research and I have left each conference with a sense of discovery and new direction. Each paper has developed from the discussion with the review panels at previous conferences.

My paper for Milan will build on these earlier papers by comparing and contrasting the formal and operational designs of the exhibits and host environments. This was a suggestion in a previous CA2RE review. Through a comparative analysis it will elaborate the principles that run through the spatial organisation of the connections between host and intervention. The projects were situated inside older structures that themselves had previous uses. These spaces have been recycled because of their their reduced use value. This in turn opens up perspectives on the ways that we think about the past and ascribe historic value to buildings. The design of exhibition environments is informed by the power of temporary interventions to change our readings of permanent spaces. Since the architecture exhibition only really has

impact when we remember that architectural practice does not reside inside the exhibition, but in the external world, it is also possible to then venture out and start to design the buildings that house the exhibitions themselves (5). In conclusion I will discuss how the principles of exhibition making informed my designs for adapting the National Archive building in Dublin which itself is housed in a former biscuit factory into a space of productive conflict.

Bibliography

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Design Driven Research

As an practicing architect and academic I am interested in the relationship between theory and design and the ways that they can mutually nourish each other as a dialectical critical practice. I approach research as a theory driven design practice where the critical ideas act as drivers for the designs. I have developed these through a series of designed manifestos presented as pavilions and exhibits at international biennales and triennales as well as through the slower practices of designing buildings and writing books. Concieved as a spatially distributed discourse, I think of this mixture of methods as a triadic movement of design, documentation, and critique, that then returns to design informed by the rigour of the critical process itself.

Keywords: Exhibition architecture; Embodied manifesto; Discursive practice.

John McLaughlin is a practicing architect and senior lecturer (associate professor) in architectural design in University College Cork. He is currently undertaking doctoral research on dialectical critical practice and the architecture exhibition as a discursive space. He curated the Irish Pavilions at the Venice Architecture Biennales in 2012 and 2014, and he was an invited exhibitor in the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2016. He co-edited the book *Infrastructure and the Architectures of Modernity in Ireland 1916-2016*, (Ashgate 2015). He won the Arthur Gibney Prize from the Royal Hibernian Academy in 2019, and exhibited at *Words + Works* Biennale of Artistic Research in Architecture at KADK, Copenhagen in 2019-20.

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