Rethinking site as field, field notes, observations and practices

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Aiming to introduce some key issues of fieldwork—what is the fieldwork?—in relation to Architecture took place in an informal conversation at the end of the 2007 ARHA conference in Kingston. It feels apposite to be reporting on this international conference a symmetrical two years after the event. In the four-year period since the theme has been discussed, described, debated, challenged, addressed through the conference planning process, through public presentation and discussion, and more formally edited and curated through the publication of *Architecture and Field/Work* (Routledge, 2010), part of the ongoing ARHA Critical series, which included work by fourteen of the conference presenters, the three keynote speakers, and four editors who were part of the conference planning team. The further papers selected for this edition of *ARI* were initially prompted by the conference call, and subsequently developed and refined through conference and journal refereeing processes.

One starting point in the summary/plebiscite was to recall the origin of the conference theme and the articulation of the first public communication: the call for papers. This conference call for papers outlined an ambition to examine the question of fieldwork in theoretical, contemporary, disciplinary, and interdisciplinary terms. It aimed to address conventions of print and access in architecture and landscape architecture in particular, across media, scales, cultures, to articulate current discourses on the topic, and to identify critical dilemmas and opportunities for future practices of design and research. Keynote speakers are invited to three attention-to, and to enable articulations of a range of theory-practice knowledges, discourses and (hi)stories: architectural, sensory, oral and spatial.

Dense. Ambitious. Seductive? Potentially multidisciplinary. Achieved? Quite clearly a process of re-making and re-inventing, and of therefore being able to think of architecture, urbanism, landscape, sociology, anthropology, art. Taking seriously possibilities of re-making, re-inventing and responding to and adapting habits, of therefore being able to think of architecture, urbanism, landscape, sociology, anthropology, art.

Three dominant threads did emerge from this plenary discussion. Firstly, a reminder of the basic question—taking on board an attentiveness to habits and habitual practices of what is understood within and without the field. What are these responsibilities of engagements, disseminations, relations, methods of being and acting in the world, which has been worked to enable articulation of, a range of theory-practice knowledges, discourses and (hi)stories: architectural, sensory, oral and spatial? And, as such connect with the critical motif that she offered and elicited was from John Dewey’s work, quoting and revisiting, “Thinking as a source of the interferences between Arts.” She observed and cautioned the conference’s described intentions—perhaps a strange of questions, a saturated, thick concept which might be in danger of leading to a thin discourse if basic questions are overlooked. With rich terminologies, and text-illustrating theorisations, what are the values that guide us? What values guide site and fieldwork activity in and of Architecture, and even define and discipline the disciplinary field? To what end and whose benefit are these activities undertaken?

After a full day of diverse and stimulating papers, a view of the power presentations in the Matthew Gallery, and an enjoyable dinner in the early twentieth-century space of the Sculpture Court, hardened with the case of the ‘glamour’ Pantheon house, award winning UK Broadcaster and oral historian, Alan Rion, opened the conference gathering on Saturday morning. He shared knowledge and practices of fieldwork, through his oral history and audio-essay work which are usually based in urban landscapes, and in this session he visually journeyed from a Birmingham industrial estate to Lodzgen Island Ball to Pemotovo next to ongoing work at the changing area of Kings Cross in London. Explaining his ambition to unlock memories, to explore living memory, to craft a new construction, he exposed his position in relation to an “outside art” of two traditions—voice and sound which both connect with worlds of world/s, and ultimately potentially create new voices. The ligature of counterstrategies through sound and voice are achieved with a high and practised relationship with particular tools—microphones, recording equipment, and an implicit relationship with the subject—person and place. Oral fieldwork is a slow, yet open process, and as an opening up of questions of storage of the gathered material, and the openness of dissemination resonated with Andrea’s opening question of the ethics of benefit and one. The ligature of Alan’s presentation on the subsequent keynote presentation was an unexpectedly rich dialogue, where questions blunted into the morning of Can Alar’s contribution. Can, an architect based in Turkey, who works across the boundaries of architecture, art, urbanism, practice, and research, is an expert in spatial practices, and acts as he has termed, a spatial anthropologist. The responsive discussion with Alan was based on the idea of tools and practices in the urban context, of working with the overlooked and understanding the generative potential of a carefully critical observational output which might activate and perhaps change some aspect of the complex condition of the contemporary, contiguous public urban domain. He described his aims as exploring limits, tools and methodologies of existing modes and traditions of practice in the city in the architectural and urban professions—always reassessing methods, reviewing ways of advancing means. Examples included the potential neutrality of a field trip to enable those in urban authority to see new potential commissions and actions in their city, maps which open up previously unimagined connections, and an extract from the film, *White Butterflies*, made with Phillip Minovesco, which was a moving embodiment of the field, the fieldwork which is *in field*, and *on field*. White Butterflies, white butterflies, can be found in the streets of the site real lives of a group ofendangered women. Can’s focus on the question of “field” in the city, alongside this particular work from the field, recalled the conference delegates to questions of value and ethics. How do you cross the threshold between research and practice? What is the professional responsibility to act, having worked on the field? Three dominant threads emerged from this plenary discussion. Firstly, a reminder of the basic questions—taking on board an attentiveness to habits and habitual practices of what is understood within and without the field of architecture, urbanism, landscape, sociology, anthropology, art. Taking seriously possibilities of re-making, re-inventing and responding to and adapting habits, of therefore being able to think of architecture, urbanism, landscape, sociology, anthropology, art. Taking seriously possibilities of re-making, re-inventing and responding to and adapting habits, of therefore being able to think of architecture, urbanism, landscape, sociology, anthropology, art.