Rethinking site as field, field notes, observations and practices

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The opening presentation of a conference has capacity to act as an intellectual and ethical compass. Andrea Kahn, Founding Principal of consulting practice, designCONTENT, New York, and adjunct Professor of Urban Planning at the Graduate School of Columbia University, delivered this and set a clear tone which established some critical directions in the opening conference lecture of FieldWork. While revising her particular work as contributing editor of Site Matter: Design Concepts, Historicities and Strategies (with Carol Brunie, 1995), she traced on how we apprehend site, how we delineate boundaries, how we understand site specificity, site scale, and actions of and as site construction. The critical model that she offered and elicited was from John Dewey’s work, quoting and revising, “Thinking is second to the interaction between Artists.” She observed and cautioned the conference’s described intentions: perhaps a querying 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-interlacing theorizations, what are the values that guide us? What values guide site and fieldwork activity in art of Architecture, or even define and subdue 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 presentation power of the Matthew Gallery, and an enjoyable dinner in the early twentieth century space of the Sculpture Court, immersed with the gaze of the ‘glanced’ Parthenon frieze, award-winning UK Broadcaster and oral historian, Alan Dein, opened the conference gathering on Saturday morning. He shared knowledge and practices of fieldwork, through his oral history and audio essays which are usually based in urban landscapes, and in this session he visually journeyed from a Birmingham industrial estate to Hodgen’s Mill in Pentonville Prison to ongoing work at the changing landscape of Kings Cross in London, explaining his ambition to unknot memories, to exploits learning 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 pasts, and ultimately potentially create new futures. The lingering of constructed images through sound and voice are achieved with a close and practised relationship with particular tools - the microphone, recording equipment, and an implicit relationship with the subject: person and place. Oral fieldwork is a slow, open process, and an opening up of cases of storage of the gathered material, and the openness of dissemination resonated with Andrea’s orienting question of the ethics of benefit and one.

The lingering segment of Alan’s presentation set the subsequent keynote presentations up as an unexpectedly rich dialogue, where questions burned into the beginning of Can Alky’s contribution. Can, an architect based in Turkey, who works across the boundaries of architecture, art, urbanism, practice, and research, is an expert of spatial practices, and acts as what he has termed, a spatial anthropologist. The responsive discussion with Alan was focused 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, contoured public urban domain. 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