

Momus

Art and Architecture's DIY Practices and "Folk Politics": Radical or Picking Up the Social Tab?

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A young architect in Berlin recently argued to me that working with refugees on a design-build project could lend it more credibility and political relevance than simply putting it out there under the name of his firm. For the current generation of architects, single authorship is a dead-end, and the discipline as it's traditionally conceived, with principal architects at the helm of every office, is teetering on the brink of collapse. This is not a lament but a testament to its possible resuscitation. Last year's [Turner Prize win](#) by 18-member collective Assemble, as well as [Pritzker Prize](#) winner [Alejandro Aravena's](#) curation of the [15th Venice Architecture Biennale](#), signals the direction of this changing tide, but it also presents a series of problems that arise when artists or architects conflate the public with the political.

Let's start with the last: many young architecture graduates are embracing diversified, horizontally-structured collectivity and opting to form large studios with artists, theorists, urbanists, and designers to challenge the limited outlook of a uni-disciplinary visual language. They're turning to DIY practices and "folk politics" – in the vein of utopian architecture collectives like [Ant Farm](#) or Archigram, established in the counter-culture milieu of the 1960s – to reconsider the scope of the profession. In the face of this repeated pattern, it might be a good time to ask ourselves: are these kinds of collectivizing initiatives still radical, or merely evidence of localized individuals and groups picking up the social tab?

Last year, [Assemble](#) won the Turner Prize for their response to a design brief calling for revitalization of public housing in Toxteth, Liverpool. Together with the local Community Land Trust, the group initiated a grassroots workshop to reuse and refurbish elements of the dilapidated, turn-of-the-20th-century housing project. They incorporated parts of the building into marketable DIY furniture and interior design products, "Made in Granby." The 'social enterprise' that resulted now acts as a marketplace for locally-produced homeware as well as a meeting place for local craftspeople. As critic Fred Scharmen writes, rather polemically, in his article "But is it architecture?": "Awarding an art prize for a nice adaptive reuse of half-demolished public housing is like giving an award for the prettiest band-aid on a sucking chest wound."

This is a damning critique of participatory or socially-engaged practice, but it gets at the heart of a real problem, which appears to be cyclical and symptomatic of capitalist crisis. In times of austerity, it's no surprise that community groups – often with creative workers, artists, and architects at the fore – begin to take the reins on imagining and enacting their own living spaces, share and care economies, and urban gardens. The state or other regulating bodies lose the burden of meeting these basic needs. Grassroots autonomous self-organization rises from the ashes of the welfare state. As these kinds of projects become more ubiquitous, they risk normalizing and fetishizing this pervasive lack of governmental assistance.

Take the recently opened Venice Architecture Biennale as an example. It's curated by Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena of the "Do Tank" [Elemental](#), an architecture office which prides itself on creating projects "of public interest and social impact" through a "participatory design process." This year's biennale, entitled "Reporting from the Front," called for architects and national pavilions to respond to an ostensibly political proposition: what, today, constitutes the front lines of architecture? Aravena's own curatorial contribution, in both the Giardini and Arsenale, is research-heavy, and relies on various material cultures to get his point across. Unlike [Rem Koolhaas's](#) "Fundamentals" – going back to the basics of architectural details – this year's biennale purports to be future-oriented. Yet it draws on local references often appropriated from Indigenous cultures and repackaged to be palatable for the contemporary architectural mainstream.

A banner hanging above an installation in the Arsenale reads: *Does permanence matter?* On the floor below sits a roving projection of a series of buzzwords: #community, #energy, #refugeecrisis. Examples of temporary architecture from Burning Man and Glastonbury are juxtaposed with temporary settlements in India in an installation about "Ephemeral Urbanism." A certain fetishism of the temporary, the nomadic, and the handmade pervades the Biennale, an indication of the curator's own approach to architecture, which has been [criticized](#) as a "clever co-optation and conversion of struggle into social/financial capital."

The question of how or whether art and architecture can affect political change is not new, nor is the conflation of participation and politics. The question "is it art?" has plagued the Turner prize since its inception. The heyday of participatory, socially-engaged art in the '90s culminated in the publication of Nicolas Bourriaud's influential book *Relational Aesthetics*. In 2004, Jeremy Deller – an artist best known for his piece *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), where he brought together members of a Yorkshire community to reenact a recent event in their political history, a clash between miners and police under the Thatcher administration – was also awarded the prize. In 2011, Claire Bishop wrote her opus against Relational Aesthetics, *Artificial Hells*, and Markus Miessen wrote a similar treatise from the architectural perspective, *The Nightmare of Participation*. Yet efforts like that of Assemble and Aravena continue to be lauded as radical.

Bottom-up community activism is important, but it's not always the solution. In 2012, Hurricane Sandy hit the northeastern states of the US. Members of the Occupy Wall Street movement banded together to organize a relief effort, dubbed "Occupy Sandy," for victims of the natural disaster. As Peer Illner notes in his recent talk "The Locals do it better? The Strange Victory of Occupy Sandy," the ground-up initiative was so successful in distributing aid – spurred on by donations and volunteer power collected largely over social media – that it outperformed FEMA, the US government body expressly dedicated to disaster response and relief. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) praised Occupy Sandy and juxtaposed its efforts to the comparatively inadequate response of FEMA and the Red Cross. In 2013, and seemingly as a direct result of this inadequacy, FEMA saw a 14% cut to its annual budget. Many have championed this case as evidence that fluid, horizontal structures are better able to support victims in times of crisis.

There is a danger in reproducing this modus operandi – for example, by government bodies like the DHS – without an attendant structural critique. The Occupy Sandy example is evidence of a core assumption by nation states that, when their efforts fail, community groups will bear the cost. Many art and architecture collectives operating today – Assemble and Elemental included – favor this reform approach of incremental political change. On the other end of the Left spectrum, the [accelerationist approach](#) of refusal aims to cause a jolt in the system, forcing the state to assume responsibility or face inevitable collapse.

Speculative architect Liam Young [recently remarked](#) that “architecture is becoming increasingly marginalized in terms of its capacity to affect change ... But the things it talks about – spatial relations and how we engage with each other in cities – are really, really important. To only talk about that through a built medium is bizarre.” Temporary, community-driven design projects are often considered political by nature. Yet few of them address the given terms by which they operate: what defines a community? Who is the public? By focusing efforts at a local level, public art and architecture initiatives often fail to imagine how the urban politics they embody can be scaled globally, in order to address structural economic, social, and political problems. Aravena’s contribution to the Biennale this year, rather than marking a radical shift in the Biennale’s political outlook, served to further entrench these kinds of projects in the canon of the for-profit architectural mainstream. And to make clearer than ever the troublesome conflation of the public and the political.