The Hybrid Practitioner

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The conference room of a Brooklyn-based architecture firm is where most of the action will take place (fig. 3.1). The walls are covered with printouts from the ceiling to the floor; a large screen hangs on one side. The remote control, a box of pins, a roll of tracing paper, and some pens are lying on a table designed and fabricated by the architects. Between 2016 and 2017, I immersed myself for eight months within this firm to conduct my research, sharing my time between my own desk and the various team meetings and presentations, mostly in the studio and the fabrication facility, but also visiting clients or the construction site. My aim was to describe architecture in the making, instead of studying the architects’ production, once built or published.

Observing Architects at Work: Eclipsing Their Discourse?

Following the architects at work allows for the collection of material that is different from – and additional to – what is found when digging into existing documentation (writings, drawings, publications, monographs, press…) or conducting in-depth interviews. That material includes provisional, unstable elements, those that do not last or will not be saved and recalled: drafts, hypotheses, discussions, gestures, time spans, attitudes, hesitations, versions… Because this approach reaches – and favours – those aspects that are not directly accessible in documents or the architects’ own recollections and explanations of their work, it tends to provisionally eclipse what architects have to say and emphasise material operations instead.

When I started this research, several studies had been published in the previous years that were based on following architects at work. Three of them are of a particular interest in the context of this paper because they display variations with regard to the role they grant to the architects’ discourse, while having in common a “pragmatist” approach – which they situate as a prolongation of Bruno Latour’s work in the field of Science and Technology Studies. In 2009,
Albena Yaneva published the results of her ethnographic study conducted at the Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) in Rotterdam. She is explicit about how adopting a “pragmatist approach” required excluding the architects’ theories from her scope, to focus on following the architects in their daily activities and encounters:

I follow designers at work also because I assume that there is much more logic in each piece of work executed by them, even in the apparently insignificant and unrelated design operations such as classifying models or reusing an old and forgotten piece of foam, than in the totality of their behavior or design philosophy.

Yaneva explicitly aims to apply the actor–network theory to the field architecture. That approach encourages the researcher to put on hold any attempt to explain the practice observed with the help of contextual elements or pre-established categories or theories. The social background of the actors, or society as a concept, for instance, are given no explanatory potential; they need to be explained with the help of the observations.

The same year – 2009 – Sophie Houdart, an anthropologist who also studied with Latour, published another monograph based on ethnographic observations and descriptions, this one about Kengo Kuma’s firm in Tokyo. She also proposes to “forget for a moment the idea, the intention, not to visit the
buildings.” She focuses on “ways of making that often have nothing special, that are considered daily, trivial by the architects themselves.” However, she maintains a closer connection to the architect’s discourse: her intention is to depict how the intentions and concepts that Kuma develops in his writings are practically made to happen in built form through a long series of numerous unremarkable gestures. She shows the concrete work that these intentions entail and how materials eventually actualise them.

Finally, a third author, the sociologist Christophe Camus, also refers to Latour to explain his approach, which he calls a “constructivist” one. Departing from what architects “actually do,” he is less interested in depicting the design process than in showing how architecture is constructed as a discipline. His hypothesis is that architects’ activities, products, and words continuously shape what architecture is. While Camus acknowledges the relevance of Yaneva’s work as she insists on the material operations of design, he regrets the fact that her inquiry sets aside the architects’ discourse, and therefore doesn’t address their communication strategies. In his own fieldwork, Camus observed the amount of time the designers were spending on activities other than design, among which the communication of their work (brochures, portfolio, etc.) and the formulation of a discourse.
In a similar manner, this paper questions the tendency to dismiss the architects’ words when focusing on their daily practice and, more importantly, to draw a line between their discourse and their work. Like Camus, my fieldwork made it impossible to ignore the time and resources spent by the firm on writing and discussing texts, and more generally on their branding and marketing efforts. Unlike Camus, however, I do not focus on how they establish contours for the discipline. My aim is closer to Houdart’s when she attempts to bridge the architect’s intentions with their realisations, by emphasising “all the little things through which their work in the making transits.” My research investigates more particularly the forms that architects’ political or social engagements take within their daily practice, beyond the posture or values that they explicitly claim (whether with words or in built forms). However, as I will show in this paper, their claims cannot be eclipsed altogether; it is their multifarious articulations – in words, images, attitudes, artefacts, organisations – that matter.

I had chosen that particular firm as my object of inquiry because part of their discourse was precisely about favouring practice and making over thinking or theorising on what they do. When I started my research there, presenting my work to the founding partners, they made clear that they were not oriented towards working with words. One of the partners mentioned, for instance, that “if [the firm] was to make a monograph, it would definitely question the fact that books contain so much text.” They also explicitly refuse to set an agenda regarding the architecture they want to do before experimenting with the situation they are asked to deal with. In the “about” section of their website at the time, they stated:

A deep engagement with the program and context of each project underpins an approach to design problems that favors the development of rule sets, processes and protocols over any particular stylistic or formal agenda.

The firm engages in making and craftsmanship: they develop an experimental approach based on prototyping at a 1:1 scale, and the business model of the firm includes a fabrication department that allows them to take some of their projects all the way to construction. Earlier in that short text, they also emphasise their “social” engagements, in the form of participatory processes and architectural products that empower their users. These characteristics a priori exclude both the establishment of a given agenda and writing as a favoured medium. Yet, once in the firm, it was impossible to ignore the energy that the architects were spending on discussing and defining what they were doing and how to communicate about it, writing various forms of texts and constantly looking for the right formats and words.
Episode 1: Observing Architects Crafting Words

I propose to focus here on one particular episode. At the time of my observations, the founding partners and the marketing associate were engaged in the renewal of the firm’s communication strategies and supports. They had hired a London-based graphic designer to renew their website but also their visual identity entirely (e.g. logo, fonts, colours, portfolios, cards, general layouts). In that context, they also wanted to revise the texts about their work. Ahead of a meeting with the web designer, two internal workshops took place during which the partners and the marketing associate brainstormed and debated in order to agree on a series of keywords to describe the work of the firm (fig. 3.2). They called those their “values” and eventually established five of them: “generative collaboration,” “centrality of making,” “multidisciplinary craftsmanship,” “radical pragmatism,” and “impact.” For each, the team also wrote a short paragraph, phrasing and rephrasing them with precision in a shared document, before integrating them as slides in the deck they would present to the web designer.

Fig. 3.2  The whiteboard used to brainstorm keywords that could be used to describe the firm’s values, as captured after the meeting with the marketing associate and stored in the dedicated folder on the server. Courtesy of SITU.
During that presentation, they read these words very quickly, showing signs of embarrassment. They pretended the texts had been drafted the night before and were not so important after all. Their reluctance at that point was in sharp contrast with the energy they had – and would continue to – put into this effort. It confirmed their ambiguous relationship with writing. This episode is just one of a long series in which I observed tensions when the architects had to write about their practice: what was the right length and format of text and what exact words would be best. They had these discussions not only around their website, portfolio, and slide shows but also around every competition entry and bidding process, or around presentations to clients in the context of a project (What were the concepts put forward? What title for each section of the presentation? What captions on the images? How to name each component, piece of furniture, or room?, etc.).

The debates – about formats and content – revealed a major unresolved tension between two stakes: their values (what they cared about) and their message (what would allow them to do more, or more interesting, work). For instance, when defining their values, the need to emphasise their process, rather than the end products, came to be discussed:

Partner 1: It would be helpful for us [...] to be able to go through our process through our message.
Marketing Associate: My concern about that is [that] some people aren’t interested in the process, and there are core attributes that aren’t a part of the process. There are people who are just interested in the result – it needs to be quick [...] 
Partner 2: A number of clients are interested in that, and it sets us apart.

On the one side, the architects wanted to present their work in a way that was aligned with their affinities, what was important to them, and what they enjoyed doing: their process-driven, trial-and-error, experimental, and very material way of working. On the other side, they were compelled to target potential clients in order for the firm to keep growing – and survive on the highly competitive market of New York City – and therefore were balancing in favour of a presentation of themselves that would be quick, efficient, and more market oriented, leaving some of the experimental aspects aside.

In the context of the marketing effort in which they had engaged, writing definitely played a central role. It was so crucial that, after their first attempt to establish their five values, they hired a special branding consultant to help them with “how to talk about themselves” and with “the complexity to choose a few words.” However, these words were never separated from the production and choice of images, nor from their actual practice as designers and fabricators. Texts were meant to take place among many other documents and media. The slides with their five values were, for instance, only a small part of a much longer
presentation: a slide show presenting films, photographs, and a few drawings to attest to the various design and fabrication activities of the firm. The work they had put in that “branding deck” was substantial: selecting the projects, choosing and ordering the images, building a narrative, and so on. Their values as a firm are not contained in the slides presenting five concepts and their short description. Their values are built up throughout all the slides: in their carefully chosen order, the framing of the pictures, the choice of using film as well, the limited number of drawings, the very short, or absence of, captions, for example. The architects “craft” their discourse with many other tools, materials, skills, and gestures than writing words. One activity that was central in that regard was the pinning up of images, pages, or slides to reconfigure and fine-tune a narrative. For any kind of presentation, the architects were always printing out the slides, pinning them up, moving them from one place to another, clipping alternative versions on top of each other, annotating the content with markers, etc. Each wall in the office was dedicated to a specific process that was ongoing in the firm, the marketing and branding effort among a number of current design processes at various stages (fig. 3.3). The presence of all these images on the walls allowed the architects to constantly refer to past and current projects in conversations. With them, the building of a discourse was also made into a material and physical activity: moving corkboards, climbing on ladders, pricking one’s fingers...

Fig. 3.3 Pin-up boards and table with models. Photograph: Pauline Lefebvre.
Episode 2: Observing Architects Dealing with Their Values

During the first brainstorming that the architects organised around their “values”, a specific moment pointed to the entanglement between the operations of choosing words and selecting images. After one of the partners stated that “performance is an aspiration” for the firm, his colleague continued on that topic but shifted the focus, suddenly wondering “how can we document the project?” and declaring “you have to document how it performs—it needs to be used.” In this sequence, performance – as a value – is at once something they wish to achieve with their work, an existing feature of their projects to be documented, and a guideline about how to capture this characteristic.

At the time the architects engaged in the renewal of their communication strategy, they had just delivered an important project, which they were about to document. These processes were interconnected: they wanted their communication to highlight this project in the best possible way, with the hope that it would bring them similar clients in the future. This project – hopefully a breakthrough – had been commissioned by the creative agency of a major tech company. It entailed refurbishing their office floor in Manhattan, including the design and fabrication of custom pieces of furniture. The discussions that took place around the organisation of the photo shoot of that workspace echoed those around describing their “values” with words, in particular in this case around “performance” being an aspiration. The photographs had to document how the space performed.

The architects were truly interested in how the employees of the creative agency were using their refurbished workspace. Parallel to the documentation of the project, the architects were conducting a short survey to understand successes and failures alike. For them, the fact that the employees freely reconfigured, or even “hacked,” their design was a sign of success in terms of its performance. In a draft version of the slide show presenting the project, the following caption was, for instance, included (before it was judged too long and eventually removed):

Within the first week of occupying their new space, [the] staff had re-arranged desks, walls and pods to support the needs of a diverse array of teams and projects. The conference room became an experimental VR lounge, while the “WarHall” transformed to host a team-wide potluck dinner. Designed to be responsive and reconfigurable, the space will continue to transform as projects take shape and the […] community continues making it their own.

However, the discussions around the photo shoot showed how competing imperatives were at stake. The main issue was about the necessity, as mentioned earlier, to document the space as it is used. On the phone with the photographer
in charge, the marketing associate explained: “a person looking at the photographs should want not just an architecture like this, but the kind of work that is done in there.” The photographs would preferably show the space occupied rather than empty. One question that arose was the choice between staged photographs or more so-called embedded or journalistic images, which would require shooting while the employees were at work. The architects and the photographer liked the second option better. The latter admitted that architects usually asked him for staged views, taken before the clients occupy the space, to have more control over the images. Yet once this option had been dismissed, the participants in the meeting identified a few problems. On the one hand, the space was not yet occupied and used to its full potential at the time of the shooting. On the other hand, some parts of the space were already too messy, which wouldn’t deliver the right message about its performance either. The architects decided that the occupation of the space had to be “curated” for the shooting. They wanted to organise an “embedded” rather than “staged” shooting, but eventually opted for a hybrid of the two.

Among the images to be produced, there was a time-lapse taken with a camera circulating on a rail mounted to the ceiling of the workspace (fig. 3.4). On the main day of the shooting, the architects had to make sure that all

Fig. 3.4 Installation of the railing for the time-lapse in the creative agency’s workspace. Photograph: Pauline Lefebvre.
rooms and custom devices were used, in particular the “WarHall,” a flexible space for impromptu meetings and other activities that was a central feature of the project. During the shooting, they invited their own design and marketing teams to organise their work meeting there, pinning up on the custom moveable boards. The time-lapse successively shows employees of the creative agency at their desks and employees of the architecture firm in the flexible meeting space. This hybrid solution was opportune on at least three different fronts. It was first a solution to document the project fully used, despite the fact that it was not so in reality. But it was also an occasion for some employees of the architecture firm to visit the project, turning the operation into a team-building moment. Finally, it was a way for the architects to experience for themselves – and thereby evaluate – how “performant” the space they had designed was. They ended up very satisfied with the shooting, with the opportunity to enter the headquarters of this famous tech company, as well as with the work sessions they held there, which they judged to be very prolific – just as they hoped it would be for their clients. The result is the time-lapse but also a series of photographs in which employees of both firms occupy the space next to each other, such as this curious mise en abyme (fig. 3.5) where an employee of the creative agency is coding on his computer next to one of the architects who is busy working on his laptop, refining the documentation of the very space in which that scene is captured.

The way the architects cherish “performance” is at work in their words as much as in the production of images, but also in the way they concretely organise this documentation. Tracing their values at work demonstrates a constant and complex overlap between the intentions that drive the architects, the evaluation and communication of their built work, and their strategies to reach out to new clients. There is no strict line between what guides the practice, what allows for its evaluation, what’s central in the way it is presented, and what serves as lures for new commissions. Yet these are distinct requirements, which sometimes concretely contradict each other, and force the development of fruitful compromises.

**Describe Values in the Making**

These observations offer an opportunity to track the making of what the architects called their values. In the case developed here, the architects’ values appear less as overarching moral imperatives, than as provisional descriptions of “what they care about.” I depicted, for instance, how they cherish their process-driven approach, or how they pursue performance as a quality in their projects. When discussing their values, they are establishing what is important for them in their work while evaluating what they are and have been doing, and this effort comes entangled with other questions, such as how to
best communicate about what they do and orient themselves in their present and future practice. Those entangled time frames bring me to conclude that the architects’ values are not prior, nor external, to their practice and production, but rather themselves in the making through these very concrete things and processes.

When values are used as synonyms of “intentions” or “aspirations,” they are considered as prior: they serve as guidelines during the design process so that its products (e.g. sketches, models, pieces of furniture, buildings) materialise them in the best possible way. In that scenario, the documentation process is understood as aiming to show how – or to evaluate whether – the end product actualises the intentions. However, such a linear sequence is not confirmed by the observations. Because the establishment of the values cannot be separated from the documentation of their past projects, it is impossible to decide once and for all whether the values explain or are explained by their work. Are the values illustrated by the projects the architects made, which means the values came first and the projects confirmed them? Or are the values written to summarise how these projects were made, which means that they were not prior principles that the architects followed? Being in the firm allows to bridge the gap between these two poles, intention and realisation, and circle this line back in a loop without a given direction. Moreover, the observations showed that the architects’ values could not be considered independently of what they
want to do in the future nor of the means to achieve these prospects. They are constantly making compromises between what they care about and what they feel is needed to get opportunities to continue doing their work.

Values are, at once, what they care about, what they do to achieve or sustain what they care about, and the evaluation of their undertakings. Such a definition echoes the one given by the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey in his “Theory of Valuation” (1939). He shows how valuation (a term he favours over “value”) designates “both prizing, in the sense of holding precious, dear [...] and appraising in the sense of putting a value upon, assigning value to.” He demonstrates that valuation is an active, worldly process: when one values something, one takes care of it, acts in order to bring it into or maintain its existence. Moreover, any valuation can itself be evaluated, both in terms of its means and its ends. From a pragmatist perspective, values are not personal preferences, nor are they absolute moral imperatives. They always relate to a given situation, and it is possible to investigate them, as they “are activities which take place in the world and which have effects in the world.”

Values are not merely made of ideas, words, or even attitudes. The scenes depicted in this paper showed how material the establishment of a discourse actually is (how it is not made of words but of many other materials). Taking this one step further, my observations point to the fact that there is no strict a priori distinction between the material and the discursive. Following the philosopher of science Karen Barad, the “insistence on the materiality of meaning making [...] goes beyond what is usually meant by the frequently heard contemporary refrain that writing and talking are material practices.” Barad accounts for the intimate relationship that exists in knowledge practices between concepts and materiality, meaning and matter – or, in our case, between values and architectural production. She refuses to consider concepts as abstractions existing independently of their encounter with their objects or as concrete attributes to be discovered in the objects. Instead, she describes the processes through which both the concept and the attribute of the object emerge (and are delineated as two different kinds of things). Concepts (or values) are part of the world to which they apply instead of external to it. In the case of architectural design, projects are not mere representations of prior values, and values are not mere descriptions of the projects. Whereas the first idea turns the material side of the couple into “a passive and blank slate awaiting the active inscription of culture,” the second deprives the values of any agency on the process. This paper aimed to show how the ways in which values circulate and are enacted in the studio exceed these restrictive definitions.

Observing the architects at work, one notices how their values manifest themselves in practice and how these values exist in the architects’ decisions and acts on a daily basis. I chose to focus here on the documentation and communication process, but the same could be done with their design activity, tracing how their values manifest themselves in their work, for instance,
when the performance of a piece of furniture is live tested with prototypes rather than imagined and modelled in the studio (fig. 3.6). Values are not what explains architects’ work nor what should be deciphered in their built production, but what needs to be explained thanks to the meticulous depiction of what architects do.

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Notes

11. Unless otherwise specified, all the quotes attributed to the architects are from the notes I took during fieldwork.
12. Former “about” section on the architects’ website, last consulted in August 2017.

Bibliography

