Workshop

Shifting Centers – Changing Worlds:
Do We Need Theory to Ride a Bicycle

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Summary statement
Viewed as an artifact of social life, the nature of a building's embodiment reflects the social conditions that produce it. The everyday dynamics that shape the built world reflect societal structures and processes (context), the consequence of which generate, too often, inhuman landscapes and troubling ecological consequences.   Contemporary architecture and building processes have been specifically engineered to eliminate the conditions that allow *craft-work* to shape the built world, thus robbing much of the human landscape its humanity. Altering the embodied content of buildings requires altering the context that generate them but culturally embedded assumptions form rigid obstacles to change.

Methods for overcoming such obstacles exist in other areas of human endeavor and this workshop explores how theater process facilitates two of them. Framed through a negative dialectic and the ancient tradition of *solvitur ambulando*, the workshop's objective is to demonstrate how simple rule sets and embodied states can generate the kind of working complexity that gives theater performance its richness and transcendental qualities in the absence of formal controls and defined outcomes. The presenters believe this same dynamic is also present in craft-work, and this dynamic is one of the principle qualities driving the working complexity, "that is characteristic of both nature and traditional urban fabric," (Salingaros 2015).

Topic
This workshop explores the theoretical and practical experience of patterning architectural and building processes to theater work as a method for re-incorporating the dynamics of craft into the complex social equation of architecture.

Scope
In T*he Culture of Building*, Howard Davis described the conditions for craft-work in terms that can be best construed as *proximity to the artifact* and *agency in affecting the emerging reality of the artifact* (2006). Much of the inhumanity embedded in contemporary architecture can be understood as the negation of "basic human impulse" expressed through the systematic degradation of craft-work to mindless, rote tasks valued only in reference to power and the machine qualities of uniformity, precision, control and efficiency.

In attempting to restore craft into the dynamics of a building's materialization there is the problem of altering context and overcoming the psychological and behavioral void industrial mass production has created in the ability for agents to *craft* work. To that end, the workshop presenters found resonance in the objectives, methodologies and outcomes of the theater work of Sanford Meisner and the practices of Christopher Alexander in their aims to generate wholeness in artifacts arising out of socially complex processes. In both approaches, it is embodied agents acting against the structure of a "script" who create the emergent properties of the artifact, unfolding a naturally arising dynamic (complexity).

For theater to be resonant, its complexity must arise from the agency present in the interactions of all those involved, including that of the audience. Resonance, or *life of the play*, cannot be designed, only lived as experience. In Meisner's approach, no theory guides the agent, just proximity to the work and the crucible of the play. Clarity and understanding arise from the process of "walking", that is to say, existing within the flow of the work itself.

For building, the strategy of shifting centers of agency and altering context is a way to achieve a similar end, and realize a qualitative change in a building's embodied content. Here, the process of generating Alexander's concept of *living structure* – not conceived as a theory, ideal or imitation – is one rooted in the natural agency of its actors. The ability to negate requirements for formal theory, rigid hierarchical controls and teleological objectives serves to liberate craft agents and reanimate vernacular processes and culture.

We understand *living structure* and *life of the play* to be the same phenomena. *Life/living*, in the sense we use, is a function of the degree an agent(s) is a "principle and presence" in relation to the *work* at hand (Berger 1984).

Case Study/Workshop Activity
We will use a technique developed by the renown and highly influential American acting coach, Sanford Meisner, that enables actors to, "live truthfully under imaginary circumstances," through the, "reality of doing" (Meisner 1987). Meisner's approach to script is highly embodied and the quality of "truthfulness" his methods generate are the animating force and spirit of a play. Meisner's insight into embodied states parallels Davis' conditions for craft-work and serves as a guide to restructuring the relationship between agents and artifact.

Participants will share in a series of acting exercises that serve to exemplify how this approach to artifact can create the animating force in a socially complex activity.

A discussion of the practical aspects of incorporating this methodology into the design/build process.

Intended Conclusions
Altering the embodied content of buildings requires altering the context that materializes them. This workshop explores the relationship between theater and architectural processes in order to illuminate the essential role of agency in craft-work as key to creating living structure. Since both theater and architecture operate under similar constraints, patterning a design/build process along the lines of theater is possible.

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