Defiance

Lobby

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"When your ideas shatter established thought, expect blowback."

TIM FARGO
On the occasion of the upcoming publication of her new book, Jane Rendell discusses how psychoanalysis, art, feminism and political activism shaped her peculiar brand of thinking and writing about architecture.
away from that when I started teaching in an art school. At that time I became more interested in artistic practice and art criticism. And then, through developing my practice of site-writing as a situated form of art criticism, I became more interested in what that critical and spatial modes of practice could do in relation to urban criticism and social architecture. In a way, the new book is taking these processes of site-writing that I’ve developed in response to art, back into architecture. Having said that, I don’t see the art-related work as just an ‘excursion’; it has fundamentally changed the way I think about practice, and the way that I write. For me, an encounter with another pedagogic experience or practice or a body of literature from another discipline has evolved the way that I work — and I think that is likely to be the case for many researchers.

In the meantime, the way that art and architecture relate has also shifted, though.

That’s true. In the early 1990s — well, in London at least — you had FAT and muf as very influential collaborative art-architecture practices. I think you see more of that kind of practice now, maybe also related to this condition of enforced austerity. You see self-initiated projects, and younger people no longer necessarily wanting to go on and work for commercial architects, but to set up and direct their own practice, to engage in some kinds of gallery-based work too. I mean, the fact that Assemblage was shortlisted for the Turner Prize is a really interesting indicator of where we might be now. In my Art and Architecture book (2006), I talk about two different disciplines and what forms of practice in between them or at their cross-over points might look like. But I think we are now in a much more transversal moment — it has become quite artificial to separate the artistic from the architectural.

And how might work on the page with text and images, so I am much more involved in the design of the book than earlier. I love how the designer — Marit Munzberg — interprets graphically what I am trying to do conceptually.

The other thing that has changed is more unsettling. When I was a student, I was an outspoken feminist. In my first year I was totally opposed to what we were being taught, a bit rebellious and maybe in that sense not a very ‘good’ student; I couldn’t see beyond the feminist politics and what I could learn from the so-called ‘male masters’ like Le Corbusier. Why should I study a modern male architect? But in this book I decided — because of the photographs I found — that the time had come to return to these very iconic projects by male architects, like the Narkomfin, the Unité and Roehampton. Perhaps my attempt to connect the story of these buildings with my work on psychoanalysis, might help me say something new about these buildings, to see them in a different way.

And thanks to my training in architectural history, I have also gone back to what other architectural historians have written before me. I have learned an amazing amount from the secondary sources — from Jean-Louis Cohen’s, Catherine Cooke’s and Nicholas Bullock’s relevant studies.

How did your engagement with feminism develop over the years?

Well, it’s been an ‘in-and-out’ process really, and I am heading back in again now. I think feminism has changed over this period too. When I was doing my history dissertation for my PhD back in 1988, there were only two or three books on feminism in architecture. So, I was more interested in relevant feminism developments in other disciplines, like anthropology and geography. After that time, I worked in a feminist architectural cooperative. It was an environment that helped me think about women users, discrimination in the building industry and the profession at large. During that phase, feminism was more of a lived experience for me. I picked up the academic thread again when I came back to study for my Masters, and by that time the literature had started to develop; Beatriz Colomina’s book on Sexuality and Space (1992) had come out, and I also contributed to this developing interdisciplinary discourse through the Gender Space Architecture book I co-edited with Lain

Photograph by: Jane Rendell.


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emotionally, I like to be more discursive and less combative. Yet there are certain matters where I reach a limit and know I must act, and I am finding ways of working with people who have different limits or different value systems. I am currently negotiating those differences through the Ethics in the Built Environment research project.

The enforced austerity programme as an agenda for dismantling the welfare state is another pressing issue that also touches upon me directly as a leaseholder in a social housing estate. Issues that I have been discussing with colleagues like Ben Campkin and the UCL Urban Lab have suddenly become very, very real in my own life and neighbourhood—for example in the Aylesbury Estate in South London now. I am trying to relate my concerns around fossil fuel funding and the current housing crisis; I am thinking about a project on work/home displacements. What would link the two is ethics; and that is the work I’ve been doing in order to build a network within UCL around ethics in the built environment research. While our research ethics regulations at UCL have been devised through the model of medicine, I have been thinking about what different ethical models emerge in the humanities, design and participatory research—regarding covert research, for instance, and the vulnerability of the researching as well as the researched subject.

I am reading philosophy to help develop my understanding of ethics—in terms of Foucault and Butler, for instance, about how one relates to another. I am thinking, on the one hand, about displacement in terms of my own home—and the shift in the Bartlett from an academic office-based culture to open-plan working; for peace and quiet, I work more at home now. The institution has managed to outsource or displace one set of costs onto its employees, but also, because of the demolition of social housing estates, how being ‘at home’ as a site of work as well as leisure is no longer secure. On the other hand, ‘at work’, in the university, I have been engaged in the movement of funds from one site to another, and in tracing the source of that funding back to the displacement of people from their homes as a result of fossil fuel extraction. Lots to tie together, hopefully I can use my method of site-writing as a way to configure displacements.

I am not saying that you have to have lived through something in order to be galvanised, but perhaps, as is the case with a lot of activism, there is usually some kind of trigger for action to take place. In the past I was a bit wary of the impact assessment of academic work. I agreed that our research should influence life outside the academy, but the ways of measuring this seemed wrong, and quite often impact is constructed around more scientific models such as prototyping and commercial contracts. However, when doing work recently as an academic expert for the Public Inquiry into the Compulsory Purchase Orders on the Aylesbury Estate, I really saw how my research in architectural history could be more directly useful. It got me thinking: what could the work and knowledge produced by our Bachelors, Masters and PhD students do in these concrete situations? And suddenly things feel so much more alive.

“I have become less interested in the ownership of knowledge and more interested in what people can do together.”