



*Additional details about the 2007 Telling Places conference can be found online:*

*<http://tellingplaces.co.uk/>*

## Introduction: Telling Places

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There is a wonderful moment in Althusser's text where he says "I can now abolish the notion of ideas". And he actually writes the word "ideas" and draws a line through it to convince himself we need never use the word again.

In exactly the same way, the old discourse of the subject was abolished, put in a deep container, concrete poured over it, with a half-life of a million years. We will never look at it again, when, bloody hell, in about five minutes, we are talking about subjectivity, and the subject in discourse, and it has come roaring back in.

Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities", page 47.

I don't think it is desirable, or possible, in this introduction to a small selection of papers (four) from the conference Telling Places: Narrative and identity in art and architecture, to attempt a complete summary of its proceedings (which included twenty papers, including Davison 2008). Along with the paper presentations, the conference included an exhibition of work produced in the PhD programs at the Bartlett School of Architecture and the Slade School of Fine Art, curated by Christiana Ioannou, Christos Papastergiou, and Laura Cinti; a workshop (that included, most disconcertingly and significantly, actual singing by academics) provided by the artist Gavin Bryars; and keynotes by the artist Bruce McLean, and the artists Jane and Louise Wilson. These were significant aspects of the conference, and the

four papers chosen for this issue of *Multi* can only begin to indicate what came out of those other elements. Nevertheless, the papers here show the extent to which the conference encouraged material from both the history/theory, and practice, traditions of fine art and architecture.

I hope this editorial can provide a context to the conference, beginning with the intellectual origin of some of the questions posed in the call for papers (including a distinction from certain other enquiries); and a brief introduction to the papers published in this issue of *Multi*.

One of the most satisfying outcomes for the organizers of Telling Places was not the extent to which underlying concerns and critical enquiries were answered, but clarified. In this instance, the “point” of the conference was not so much addressed (as something given), as reached (as something discovered), in the process of putting it together and assembling the various contributors. Perhaps it is in the nature of a PhD research conference, that understanding of the problem posed begins to emerge only once the process is in “full-swing”.

### **Research Spaces**

The idea of an annual research conference to be hosted between the PhD programs at the Bartlett and the Slade was originally conceived in 2003 by Professor Jane Rendell (Bartlett) and Professor Penny Florence (Slade). The first event, (Dis)Locating Specificity, was a forum which allowed students to engage with interdisciplinary concerns in a format which broke with traditional academic conferences, presenting as it did, seven site-specific works, installed on the campus of University College London. Rather than respond to a spoken paper, attendees entered into dialogue with the artist, architect or theorist, within the work itself, exploring outcomes, consequences, ways of thinking through, and on, the subject at hand.

Now an annual event, led and organized by students from the two schools, the proposed themes of Research Spaces attempt not only to demonstrate similar objects of enquiry in the fields of architecture and art, but also potential methodologies for engaging, disrupting, and transforming those disciplines. As Director of Architectural Research at the Bartlett, in her own work, and following theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Homi K Bhabha, and Mieke Bal, Rendell maintains a distinction between the “multi-disciplinary”—that might share a forum, a problem, or an object, but in which a given discipline retains

its distinct methodology and epistemology—and the “inter-disciplinary”—in which these are brought into crisis (Rendell 2004, 145–6; 2006, 10–11; 2007, 178–9).

The aim of such work is to question dominant processes that seek to control intellectual and creative production, and instead generate new resistant forms and modes of knowledge and understanding.

Rendell, “Critical Architecture”, pages 1–2.

So defined, the attraction of interdisciplinarity in the arts appears obvious, not least, as Rendell, Jonathan Hill, and others, continue to explore, because of the complex and ambiguous relationship between “theory” and “practice” in the creative arts, and the institutional relation between academe and profession that supports certain renderings of that relationship (Hill 2003; Heynen 2006; Araujo, Rendell, and Hill 2007).

I think it useful to distinguish this proposition from an approach to architecture and criticism, that was very clearly articulated in 1995, for the Assemblage conference in New Orleans, “The Politics of Contemporary Architectural Discourse” (McAnulty 1995). I hope such a distinction, though fine, shows the extent to which positions on the relation of “theory”/“practice”, intimate positions on the relation between “identity” and “narrative” (more on which in a moment). At the same time, I do not intend this distinction to act as a “staged assault” on earlier theorists, but to contribute to the on-going working through of a particular problematic (Wigley 1995, 93).

In 1995, Mark Wigley distinguished architectural “theory” and “practice” as two distinct disciplines within “architecture” which itself “is only ever discourse about building” (Wigley 1995, 82). In doing so, Wigley’s intention was not to reiterate a certain, now long-running trope, regarding the operativity of theory within modernist practice—and the need to generate a distinct, critical history (Tafuri 1980; Leach 2007)—but to high-light the ambiguous relationship between the two, the ways in which each might disrupt the certainties, and authority of the other.

In that sense, Wigley’s discursive history could be read as precursor to, perhaps much the same as, Rendell’s call for interdisciplinarity. There are

differences, however. Wigley set a fundamental limit for the role of the theorist (and consequently practitioner)—

[...] the only thing that theorists can and should do is to carefully open up certain already existing cracks within the institutionalized discourse of architecture [...] theorists decide which parts of the discourse can be usefully opened up [...] architects [...] which parts of the built environment [...] The difference between writers and architects is [...] a technological one.

Wigley, "Story-Time," page 94.

Just as Wigley posits an axiomatic that "architecture is only ever discourse about building," he retreats from the proposition that, in that case, writing might be design, drawing might be theory, and history might be practice (and other possible variations). Wigley's fears, at the time, were that the attempts of theorists from outside of this discursive limit, were themselves contributing to it—

The walls of our home are maintained by inviting strangers in and listening eagerly to their after-dinner stories about displacement or seven types of ambiguity or fractal geometry or the evils of commodification. The very stories about disturbing boundaries, interdisciplinary exchanges, and so on, serve only to reinforce the boundaries [...] All the talk about disturbing walls is literally designed to leave walls intact.

Wigley, "Story-Time," page 90.

Interdisciplinarity is, then, rejected wholesale—an embarrassing white-wash is revealed, or even more seriously, a structural fault in architecture, a field which just can't help absorbing all before it.

Accepting (promoting) the necessity for critical activity (opening up the cracks), Rendell's project, as I understand it, contrasts from those such as Wigley's because it does not contain the multiple polarization of "theory"/"practice" : "history"/"design" : "writing"/"drawing"; and, because its characterisation of interdisciplinarity, does not propose that "ideas [...] drift into architectural discourse from other fields [un]disturbed by their impact on architecture";

but precisely that they are disturbed (Wigley 1995, 90). This difference in the two approaches is highlighted in the different authors' use of the terms "territory" and "occupation". In Wigley's discussion of the interdisciplinary, both the "territory" and the "occupier" (in Wigley's terms "colonizer") remain untouched by one another—"the colony is at once subordinate to the new masters and safe from them"—both, but particularly the "territory," are passive. In Rendell's discussion, new disciplinary territories have an active status—

I found new territories to occupy. These provided me with different views of the place I had left behind. From there I was able to reflect upon my disciplinary-specific mechanisms of operation, before returning, transformed by where I had been, to suggest alternative modes of enquiry.

Rendell, "Site-Writing," page 178.

This alternative proposition—Rendell terms it "critical spatial practice"—has in part arisen from an encounter "between art and architecture," in which the strict disciplinary limits of architecture and art, so carefully described and interrogated by theorists such as Wigley, are extended, or disrupted. At the same time, just as "critical theory" disrupts the disciplines of architecture and art, those disciplines, and particularly their spatiality, are employed reflectively on critical theory (distinguishing "theory"—that is developed within a discipline for instrumental ends—and "critical theory"—that is productive of self-reflectivity and critical consciousness. Rendell, 2006, 6–9). Far from remaining "untouched," interdisciplinarity demands a thorough transformation.

At the same time, Jonathan Hill has continued to interrogate—within his own practice and in the development of the Bartlett PhD by Design program—the origin and emergence of "design" (in the Italian Renaissance design)—

[...] suggesting both the drawing of a line on paper and the drawing forth of an idea from the mind [...] enabl[ing] architecture, painting and sculpture—the three visual arts—to be recognised as liberal arts concerned with ideas [...]

Jonathan Hill, "Criticism by Design: drawing, wearing, weathering," page 285.

If this, again, appears as a restatement of the problem, it differs in essentials from the project outlined by Wigley, in suggesting that the “theoretical” may be challenged, subverted, or driven, through the practice of design. It is this recognition, and working through, of the theory-practice problematic at the heart of creative endeavour that distinguishes much of the research at both the Bartlett and the Slade (for example, the Spatial Imagination Research Cluster 2008).

Such an enterprise—if accepted—compounds the existing anxieties a group of young researchers (originally nine, eventually six) have over the production of a successful conference (the final conference committee consisted of Nick Beech, Laura Cinti, Chritiana Ioannou, Christos Papasergiou, Léa-Catherine Szacka, and Anna Tchernakova). Perhaps prosaically (it didn’t feel so at the time) not only is one to develop an academic conference for the first time (and on time, and to budget), but to develop one as a group consisting of distinct professional procedures, goals, and values. Previous conferences—Research Spaces, 2005 in particular—set high standards to follow, having attracted papers from an array of disciplines, that challenged in terms of intellectual content and in continuing to break with standard conference formats. Early on, it became clear that the organizers of Telling Places dared not try to match the complexity of form shown in (Dis) Locating Specificity, shear scale and scope of the 2005 conference, or technical organization of Topos. Yet, even with restricted ambition, the conference soon grew to test all our skills and knowledge.

From the beginning the conference organizers shared two potentially contradictory desires—to generate a theme that was focused and bounded, and at the same time, open and inclusive. Early discussions reduced the possibilities tabled to two core terms—narrative and identity—that reflected the research concerns of members of both schools. Of course, these terms meant different things for different people. Was “narrative” (a story) a concern of the practitioner? And was that because they wished to represent—or break—with a narrative tradition? Or, was narrative (story telling) a means by which the historian or critic might engage with an object/subject? Was “identity” a referral for the “artist,” or the “audience”? Would “narration” (the way in which a story is told) and “identification” (the process of identity construction) be better terms?

Interestingly—perhaps the reason why there was ambiguity over which question was being asked—these terms emerged, as conference themes,

from separate quarters; in other words, they were not at first, thought together. The process was one of seeking out definition, and in that process the two became related. It is only later, and with hindsight, that the relationship between narrative and identity—their inter-relation—was understood as invariably bound together.

[...] identity is always in part a narrative, always in part a kind of representation. It is always within representation. Identity is not something which is formed outside and then we tell stories about it. It is that which is narrated in one's own self.

Hall, "Old and New Identities," page 48.

Returning, for a moment, to the period of the Assemblage conference, it seems ridiculous not to have considered identity and narrative at one and the same time. As the quotes from Stuart Hall presented above show, the way in which identity was then being thought—derived as it was from Louis Althusser's conceptualization of ideology and its functioning—require that identity—or the 'subject"—be thought of as already in a determined, discursive (narrative), frame (Althusser 2001; Hall 1996)—

[...] this is the problem with the architecture of most rooms, of most buildings [...] there [are] a complex [...] of social and psychological relations, narratives, desires, gestures, and identifications that pertain [...] yet only a narrowly restricted few of these relations are being consciously identified by the architecture [...]

Mark Rakatansky, "Identity and the Discourse of Politics in Contemporary Architecture," page 14.

This, surely, sets a challenge—how does the theorist, artist, critic, architect, user, or audience, disrupt or break with "narrowly restricted" relations "consciously identified"? If the work of Althusser provides a powerful lens for highlighting this problem, never the less, with its emphasis on ideology as a universal, and a-historical (or "trans-historical") condition, it also appears to nullify any potential agency (Althusser 2001, 106–9; Stedman Jones 1996, 19–35). This is, perhaps, why so many of the papers received,

though considering precisely this complex relation between identity and representation, turned more often than not, on the work of theorists such as Bhabha, or Anthony King, who have given greater emphasis to potential cultural hybridity and appropriation, and specificity of history and place (Bhabha 2004, 199–209; King 1991, 149–54). Telling Places was, then, less bounded, less determined, less definite, than it might have been.

### **Telling Places**

To retain the possibility of a only-loosely bounded conference, an umbrella title—Telling Places—was chosen, that would offer a series of potential readings: that “places” (artefacts, architectures) have narrative (they “tell”); and that places are narrated (they are, by being “told”); that telling is about placing; that telling might only be possible by being place-able; and that certain places, indeed the conference itself, might allow certain kinds of telling to occur.

This rather ambiguous umbrella was further defined in the call for papers, through four strands—

#### **Places that Tell:**

How do buildings, artefacts, models, or stories, contribute towards the formation of cultural identity? To what extent can culturally and ethnically specific representations be considered political? To what extent are the limits of such representations set by the work (the object, the site), or set by the audience? How, and what, does the non-representational object, or building, narrate?

#### **Meeting Places:**

Has a new “narrative of place,” challenged the boundaries between art and architecture? What are the implications, for the relationship between art and architecture, of such narratives?

#### **Telling of Places:**

If narrative cannot be treated as “neutral,” what is its role in the examination of the history of art and design? To what extent, and in what ways, does the historian, or critic, contribute to the construction/production of place? In what ways does narrative affect ownership of the work?

**Hidden Places:**

To what degree can the artist or designer reveal the process of production, in the work itself? Can practice be considered an act of identification? To what extent is practice an “uncovering,” “unmasking,” “revealing,” or a “making known,” that which had been “guessed,” “assumed,” “hidden,” or even “secret”? What models, technologies, procedures, and dialogues have been developed to “reveal,” and how are these limited (do they “hide” as well)? What are the aesthetics, and ethics, of the “disguised” work?

In the end (of course?) these strands were further re-defined, re-arranged, and re-constructed, once abstracts were received. The three strands represented in this issue “Places that Tell: National Identity”; “Hidden Places”; and, “Meeting Places: Encounters between Narratives” all raise questions that certainly do not sit within the confines of the strands laid out above.

Carola Ebert’s paper “Into the Great Wide Open: The West-German modernist bungalow of the 1960s as a psycho-political re-creation of home,” one of four in the “Places that Tell: National Identity” strand, concerns just that cultural hybridity referred to above in relation to the theorization by Bhabha and King. Here, the “bungalow” is examined as a representation of nationalism, and democratic values, otherwise unavailable in post-War West-Germany. Situating the emergence of the “modernist bungalow” in the context of West-Germany’s complex location between “East” and “West,” Ebert poses the question as to whether, almost paradoxically, it was the bungalow’s figuration as both “modern” (and therefore not of the recent past), and “rootless” (and therefore not bound to a discourse of the Third Reich) that allowed national, democratic values to adhere.

As Ebert’s paper describes a process by which particular representations inadvertently adhere to an architectural morphology, Léa-Catherine Szacka’s, “The Architectural Public Sphere,” comes to terms with some of the consequences of conscious attempts to direct the representation of architecture. In a detailed account of the Venice Biennale architectural exhibition of the past 30 years, Szacka employs Jürgen Habermas’ concept of the “public sphere”—its emergence, and subsequent disintegration—as a device for critiquing the intentions behind, and control of, the representation

of architecture. This leads Szacka to suggest that if the initial purpose of the Biennale was to develop a forum for “reasoned” and “informed” debate within a wider public, about the meaning and value of architecture, this was invariably corrupted. Just as the authority of the “critic” increases, imposing particular renderings of the multiple available narratives, so the significance of the media, and the State, grow. In the end, the “public sphere,” initially formed around the representation of architecture, dissolves.

Such a narrative arc—of representation as determined and fixed—is resisted in the (always working) paper of Trish Bould and Kathy Oldridge. One of the papers impossible to contain by the conference organizers, Bould and Oldridge attempt to represent their working, without fixing or locating that process in a singular moment.<sup>20</sup> In this, there can be seen an attempt to counter those discursive fields (funding processes, institutional codes, and technocratic procedures) that attempt to absorb otherwise disparate and differentiated practices. Conceptualizing the public sphere (in this instance the conference, this journal), not as a fixed narrative within which identity is “hailed,” but in which a process of exchange might occur, they reveal a problematic at the heart of representational practice. To what extent is one able to “exchange” across a boundary that is already in the process of being absorbed in its own re-presentation?

Finally, Howard Boland and Laura Cinti’s (c-lab) “Martian Rose,” raises questions about the stability and coherence of both scientific and artistic narrative. In weaving together a positivist and instrumental investigation of a potential, engineered “life on Mars,” with the romantic and oneiric possibility of “giving a rose to Mars,” c-lab also describe the development of a “project.” This proceeds in terms of the production of a literal “new identity”—the production of new forms of life. Rather than achieve this through the direct manipulation of an extant genetic structure, c-lab continue to develop and discover new, “extreme” environments, determining the point at which adaptations become new forms. This, perhaps, returns us to hybridity, a conceptualization of identity and discourse that never the less invites the new.

All the State Apparatuses, as Althusser would call it, like the Church and the schools and the military—that’s social

agents—we have to do something to make those not all powerful; everything that can contribute to that is about political agency, and the political agency of art, in particular, is aesthetics.

Mieke Bal, "Montage in the Turbine Hall: Doris Salcedo's Political Aesthetics", Bartlett Fletcher Priest International Lecture Series, 12 December 2007.

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