# THE PERFORMANCE OF FORM

by Brendan Moran

A cunning demonstation.

Published July 7, 2015

> Architects are in charge of the FORM of the built environment, not its content. We need to grasp this and run with this despite all the (ultimately conservative) moralizing political correctness that is trying to paralyse us with bad conscience and arrest our explorations if we cannot instantly demonstrate a manifest tangible benefit for the poor—as if the delivery of social justice is the architect's competency. ...Architecture is NOT ART although FORM is our specific contribution to the evolution of world society.
> —Patrik Schumacher[1]

> There is no imperative that we [architects] must use any given technique. There is, however, an imperative that we attempt to better understand architectural activity, the problem situation within which it works, and the reasons for its often rather bad performance. At any rate, it is only through such an understanding of architecture's relation to its problems that we could come to know when and where to use which new techniques.
> —Stanford Anderson[2]

For nearly a century, architecture education in North America (and even elsewhere) has been fixated on what is usually deemed "design research." Whether it be from Colin Rowe to Peter Eisenman, or from Zaha Hadid to Patrik Schumacher, the avant-garde desire for "genuine novelty" has been passed down from mentor to pupil, driving a never-ending process of call and response among designers—a process that is assumed to be a central part of the discipline's basic knowledge.[3] Within the academy, investigations of "pure" form and the formal resolution of design have been taken as legitimate arenas for expending research energy (and funding). The ensuing pedagogical experimentation and peer review publication that results from this research constitutes the testing ground for legitimacy within the academy, yet also professionally, beyond its ivory towers.

What is design research? Instead it might be better to ask: when should design be considered research? It is less a question of *what* it is—as it can be nearly anything, given the complexity and enormity of design concerns—than *when* do we know we are dealing with it. Design research is recognized in any of the many images that depict processes of formal transformation: say for example, one of Eisenman's early houses or one of BIG's (Bjarke Ingels Group's) numerous housing proposals. It is also found in the depictions of alternative proposals for a particular design, like the ubiquitous grid of building models—from the various entries in a design competition to the "glut images" of multiple iterations provided by Gehry Partners or OMA (Office of Metropolitan Architecture). Both recall the scales practiced by an opera singer or the timed laps of an Olympic swimmer in training, in that they depict the probing of limits and the feats of labor necessary in order to realize worthwhile achievements. Design research is thus a reflexive indication of the questions asked in the design process to satisfy a brief or requirement; and, furthermore, of a particular intelligence used to face the dilemmas necessitated by this questioning.

Yet it can be said that this intellectual vision is predicated on a pernicious assumption that masks dangerous political implications: the performance of form's inventiveness holds legitimate social value, regardless of the particular social effects of the forms generated. I say "performance," in light of a particular character that architectural design pedagogy has possessed since the standardization of disparate teaching models in the United States just over a century ago. Soon after 1900, the importation of teaching methods from the Ecole des Beaux Arts, namely three primary technical exercises (*analytique/esquisse/thesis*) and one overarching milieu (design studio or atelier), initiated a logic that privileged representations over performance.[4] As a pendulum swing against this, later importation of Bauhaus teaching methods—specifically the *vorkurs*, preliminary design course—upset or compromised this development. This Beaux-Arts-followed-by-Bauhaus succession was in effect a one-two punch of sorts. While the representations generated in the Beaux Arts method embodied competence at techniques of imitation—beginning with the analytique (analysis drawings of existing architecture), then the esquisse (regulatory sketches for a future design) and culminating in the Rome Prize competition entry (complete and resolved design)—the provisional products of the vorkurs telegraphed, whether actually present and accounted for or not, a burgeoning architectural subject capable of inventive exploration. If the earlier model depended upon representations "speaking" for their creators within the closed chamber of learned professional experts who adjudicated design merit, the Bauhaus model democratized this representational logic (of *both* architectural content and the subject of architecture, i.e. the designer), paving the way for an eventual public performance of the adjudication process through the jury or review.[5] The designer, established by these pedagogical performance rituals as a professional and as a disciplined member of an intellectual order (an academician in the French sense), learns to project the values of these social groups through who they are and what they do.

In this pedagogical shift, the status of architectural drawings as "immutable mobiles," a term coined by Bruno Latour, was simultaneously secured and augmented by the designer's performance of her role as singular creator.[6] Immutable mobiles are those precise and reasonably permanent entities (such as maps and charts) that retain their informational value while freely moving about in the world; though in existence long before the training of architects joined the university, the practice of using such representations in an teaching context forcefully propped up budding educational regimes. In twentieth century North American educational development, the logic of imitation was fused with the logic of invention, generating a challenge for the modern designer to satisfy the mission of both—to extend the world as it is currently known, and to improve upon it. Latour's assessment is pointedly ontological. It is concerned with a character of being that is possessed by intermediary, transitional artifacts: not quite end products, and yet not merely tools to realize them. The designer who generates immutable mobiles is a similar entity: not quite the maker of art (someone else usually builds what they design), and yet unmistakably more than a mere facilitator of making on the part of others, namely building contractors. More clearly, designers are initiators of the usefulness of architectural representations—a characterization that pinpoints function as that criteria which distinguishes architecture from art. Yet this way of thinking about function in relation to architectural representations is precisely what serves to ultimately sidestep important questions regarding society's demand for architecture.

Applied to architectural drawings, a characterization like Latour's assists in precisely identifying how design research can appear to satisfy conventional social demands—by examining form's relation to function, say, or by pioneering new formal techniques—while in effect actually sidestepping it altogether. Thinking in terms of immutable mobiles suggests that the logic of design research might be masking a certain slippage, one in which form (social and architectural) is mistaken for (social) performance.

I would argue design research proper consists nearly exclusively of two- and three-dimensional representations, and not of realized buildings. Though the former contributes to the latter's existence, realized buildings are NOT primarily evidence that design research has indeed taken place. What I mean by this is that design research is the process of being self-conscious about the principles and techniques of designing, which are hidden or masked by a design's resolution in built form. Multiple forms can indeed be entertained en route to resolving a design; yet once a design solution is resolved formally,

the multiplicity of myriad and distinct design proposals evaporates. The virtual potential of the iterations entertained crystalizes into something new: a potential to perceive *one* precise entity as possessing *many* numerous multivalent uses, allusions and meanings. This shift occurs because the inquiry into the potential of forms, engaged in during earlier stages of design, is eclipsed by what is best described as a kind of performance—one delivered by the resolved design, and discernable in the multiple layers of experience capable of being extracted from encounters with its realization.

This latter performance—of architecture, one could say, on the part of a design—extends beyond society's precise demand for architecture. Like any good stage performance, a resolved design becomes a memorable event, perhaps even an architectural event, for the ages.[7] Recalling Bernard Tschumi's admonition in "Spaces and Events" to recognize that the forms of space are not synonymous with the events performed within them—whether or not imagined by the designers—design research benefits from welcoming the confluence of concepts found in the term *performance*.[8] While design research clearly performs pedagogically, i.e., allows for methods of design to be imaged so as to be emulated (by students) and exceeded (by future architects), it is only through the panoply of multiple designs that it performs intentionally and pedagogically. Analogous is the way an actor's performance of an established role (like Lear or Hamlet) simultaneously brings a complex character distinct from the actor to life, and renders the performer's skill and genius at doing so palpable. In the case of the actor, performance—as the technical mastery of necessary attributes for successful realization—is clearly not identical to the masterful nuance of character, complexity of motivation and rich inner life found in say, a memorable production of *King Lear*.

Furthermore, there is another, third sense of the word *performance* distinct from the previous two, which comes into play when questioning the value or values of design research. In a compelling and wide-ranging study of the concept of performance in contemporary society, Jon McKenzie identifies distinct technical, cultural and managerial discourses surrounding the word.[9] His identification of a managerial logic of performance —characterized by the social pressure to perform within incorporations (rather than institutions), under threat of the loss of membership or social standing within them—adds a third frame to the two I have already described, namely performance logics of technical proficiency and cultural expression.[10]

I would suggest that the eclipsing of the designer's performance of disciplinary inquiry by the resolved design's performance of architecture, in relation to the question of design research, is not uniquely architectural at all—despite being tied to the kinds of representations described earlier. Instead, a resolute downplaying of an account for what McKenzie terms organizational or managerial performance suggests it as an absent cause. It is important to observe that all varieties of immutable mobiles project an elusive discursive centrality, which involves an unmistakable quality of "being there" that is the analogue of a discipline's elusiveness. Immutable mobiles, taken as more than just information—that is as structures of knowledge—are engaged in linkages that contribute to that information's exchange value in society; that is to say, they play a fundamental role in instituting social organization around and through artifacts such as immutable mobiles. If knowledge's application "in the field" happens wherever it may, attention to this knowledge foregrounds the presence of a disciplinary *field* simultaneously more precise, more tangible and more locatable than its widely dispersed domain of application. This is due to the fact that the scientific rigor associated with immutable mobiles, maps and architectural drawings alike, can easily move from the center to the periphery and back again—and the application of the dispersed authority constituted by them always needs to be managed. Neither the halls of a school nor the volumes in a library nor the headquarters of a professional association alone marks the epicenter of a practice's social usefulness or value—it is always being negotiated within myriad social exchanges simultaneously.

Architectural drawings, in particular, generate a type of presence that heretofore was located in the figure of the architect, and depended upon that figure's movement for its efficacy. As Hélène Lipstadt has argued, a distinct class of architectural representations came into existence with immutable mobiles, namely *figurations*, which foreground "the psycho-social conditions governing the production of the object used to differentiate representations by architects from other representations of architecture."[11] Architectural

figurations stand in for the figure of the architect; they speak the aspirations of the designer, rather than just the facts of the design. Hence they are images that primarily traffic in intentions, over and above their informational content, in order to on the one hand give voice to architectural design's potential value to society, and on the other hand easily move from the academy to the profession, and back again—so as to legitimize and manage this value. It should, however, be asked: if the representations produced by design research are clearly intentional (i.e. are figurations), what relates to form and what to performance? What variety of the latter do they purport to be, or rather encompass?

In the movement from place to place, and in the networking of various social figures into larger assemblages, architectural representations draw discursive attention to architecture's societal value. Thus, a transference is discernable in those figurations calling out design research's presence, most resolutely linking them to a performative logic—in particular, I would argue, to its logic of management. Why else would images that in effect compete with the usefulness of buildings be taken by society as guarantors of that very value? They would do so, it seems to me, precisely if they instantiated the designer's responsibility to ask, in Stanford Anderson's prescient words, how to "better understand architectural activity, the problem situation within which it works, and the reasons for its often rather bad performance." And nowhere is this more valuable than in relation to representations generated in an educational context, whether produced by the student en route to professionalization, or by the professional acting as an academic researcher concentrating on design—in effect researching new ways to exceed the discipline's track record of "bad performance," as a means of managing the built environment to contribute to society's well-being.

In conclusion, scholastic exchanges—of figurations for realizations and of design research for pedagogical or professional activity—perform a vital role within the replacement of intellectual labor. Though the pedagogical environment might seem secluded from the vagaries and struggles of the world, as training ground, ivory tower and think tank, it contributes to real-world negotiations—and real world struggles—by encompassing a variety of activities. In addition to indoctrinating new recruits by way of a discipline (or brotherhood) and extending valuable social practices from one generation to the next, architecture schools, perhaps most significantly, lend disciplinary credence to architectural knowledge as one field among many. They legitimize those inculcated skills imparted by training and the products of research undertaken as proof of the field's social value. Yet today, as professional practice is claimed by many to be the new incubator of innovation, might it be best that we stop searching either in "practice" or "the academy" to locate new horizons for design research, and look further afield? [12] While academic traditions, and design research in particular, have emphasized technical and cultural performance criteria, can it be argued there has been a corresponding lag in examining what McKenzie has identified as the post-Taylorized managerial logic of contemporary society—in which the horizon of performance within "in-corporations" remains beyond our discipline's control, yet appears out there, as a goal yet to be achieved and an aspiration worth taking on? If so, the very claim that practice offers the antidote to the academy misidentifies the where for a possible what. If we were to instead explore alternative means—recognize the presence of multiple performative dynamics in design research's very regimes—performance itself might yet be an instrument for increasing architecture's net social worth.

---

1. This quote comes from what was originally a longer Facebook posting; reference to it can be found, among other places, at "'Architecture is not art' says Patrik Schumacher in Venice Architecture Biennale rant," *Dezeen* 18 March 2014 (http://www.dezeen.com/2014/03/18/architecture-not-art-patrik-schumacher-venice-architecturebiennale-rant/ accessed June 30, 2015). ^

2. Stanford Anderson, "Quasi-Autonomy in Architecture: The Search for an 'In-Between'," *Perspecta* 33: Mining Autonomy (2002): 33. This essay is the first published version of a talk originally delivered in 1966 at both the Architectural Association in London and the AIA-ACSA Teacher Seminar held at Cranbrook Academy of Art. ^

3. The phrase is explicitly used by Colin Rowe in a 1982 essay, originally given as an essay in 1980; see "Program versus Paradigm: Otherwise Casual Notes on the Pragmatic, the Typical, and the Possible," *The Cornell Journal of Architecture* 3 (1982/83): 8-19. ^

4. The studio milieu replaced the earlier laboratory-based understanding that had been put into place with the first training program for architects located within the university, in 1865 at MIT. For a discussion of the implications of this foundational move, see Mark Wigley, "Prosthetic Theory; The Disciplining of Architecture," *Assemblage* 15 (Aug., 1991): 6-29. ^

5. It was not really until the postwar era, as architectural education slowly shifted to the graduate level, that a public presentation of final designs became common practice in North American institutions. ^

6. At times Latour refers to such entities as "immutable and combinable mobiles," highlighting their ability to coalesce into collective and hybrid entities, which are incapable of being determined by any one representation yet nonetheless are, like an as-yet-unrealized design, associated with a set of representations, i.e. a schematic design, roll of working drawings, or competition entry. See Bruno Latour, "Visualization and Cognition: Thinking with Eyes

and Hands," *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present* 6 (1986): 1-40; term first appears on 7. ^

7. There is quite a vast literature on architecture as "event", most of it has appeared since the late 1960s. Most influential for my thinking has been Jacques Derrida, "Architecture Where Desire Can Live," *Domus* 671 (April 1986): 17-24. ^

8. Bernard Tschumi, "Spaces and Events," *Themes 3: The Discourse of Events* (London: Architectural Association, 1983). ^

9. Jon McKenzie, *Perform, or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001). ^

10. While line of thinking McKenzie relies on is too complex to review here, his primarily argument is that a citizen's constant retraining—by forces of management, but also as self-improvement within a social system predicated on expectations to constantly manage oneself—secures them status as a valuable member of society. As such, social control emanates not from social institutions, as in Foucault's assessment of a disciplinary society, but rather from a dispersed "lecture machine," i.e., a system of performance situations that frame the individual as subject to a logic of constant self-help. See, in relation to McKenzie's argument, Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (Winter 1991): 3-7, as well as Jacques Derrida, "Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce," translated by Francois Raffoul, in *Derrida and Joyce: Texts and Contexts*/, eds. Andrew J. Mitchell and Sam Slote (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 41-86. ^

11. Lipstadt takes the term from historian Jacques Guillerme; see Hélène Lipstadt, "Architectural Publications, Competitions, and Exhibitions," *Architecture and its Image: Four Centuries of Architectural Representation*, ed. Eve Blau and Edward Kaufman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 109-37. ^

12. For just one among many such claims, see Elite Kedan, John Dreyfous, and Craig Mutter, eds., *Provisional: Emerging Modes of Architectural Practice USA* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009). ^

Brendan D. Moran is an architectural historian and theorist. He has taught studio and history/theory courses at RPI, the University of Toronto's Daniels Faculty, Syracuse University's School of Architecture and the Columbia University GSAPP. His recent writing has appeared in *Architecture School: Three Centuries of Educating Architects in North America* and *Second Modernity: MIT, Architecture, and the "Techno-Social" Moment*.