THE DENIZEN ARCHITECTURE COLLECTIVE

GENEVIEVE WASSER, TUCKER JONES

ABSTRACT

The 2016 presidential election catalyzed the formation of the Denizen Architecture Collective, an informal micro experiment in collective design thinking and action at Portland State University. Initiated by students frustrated with the fractured social and cultural landscape around them, the group made it their mission to foster a stronger sense of community around the production of architecture in the school environment.

As students of architecture, we are inculcated with the omnipresence of our discipline. We believe in our ability to shape the physical environment and design the stage for everyday and extraordinary encounters. We occupy, think, and create in a special space of distorted reality. But upon entering the architectural workforce, we become minions of the market. Passion, drive, collaboration, and ethics, galvanizing forces in the shelter of architecture school, dissolve beneath the pressure to be recognized as a professional.

The struggles that eventually led to the dissipation of the Denizen Architecture Collective are echoed in the space of transition from academia to practice. Writing from the bridge between the academy and the "real world," we worry that we will fail to live up to our mission of pursuing extra-capitalist architecture. Efforts to engage other disciplines fall short, and we begin to concretize the belief systems of our clients, whether or not we agree with the ideas for which they stand. This think piece is an exploration of the power of the collective to foster experiments in citizenship and engage with the world beyond the bubble. It grapples with the challenges of moving beyond the cultural confines of academic structure and its pedagogic values.

Using the Denizen Architecture Collective as a point of departure, this paper examines the potential of collective agency and authorship as vehicles for envisioning an extra-capitalist read on the discipline and practice of architecture. We draw on practical and theoretical frameworks to examine architecture's capacity to respond to moments of social unrest, and in so doing, examine the relationship between citizenship and architecture. Ultimately, we argue for a focus on the collective as a means to redirect the isolated, hierarchical, and apolitical nature of our discipline.

INTRODUCTION

On November 9th, 2016, the front page of *The New Yorker* read: "The election of Donald Trump to the Presidency is nothing less than a tragedy for the American republic, a tragedy for the Constitution, and a triumph for the forces, at home and abroad, of nativism, authoritarianism, misogyny, and racism."[1] Following a campaign rampant with racism, sexism, and bigotry, the realization that America had made the choice to elect Trump was nothing short of sickening. To add insult to injury, Robert Ivy, the CEO of the AIA—the organization that represents the profession of architecture at the institutional level—published his letter of support for the Trump Administration.[2]

As graduate students of architecture at Portland State University, we found ourselves in the midst of an identity crisis. Like so many others living in liberal bubbles, we were completely blindsided by Trump's victory. In just a short 24-hour period a palpable fog of utter confusion had settled over our existence. But the confusion also presented an opportunity. Conversations in the halls and classrooms of PSU's School of Architecture revealed solidarity in this existential crisis, and more importantly, interest and energy to take a stance and do something about it.

Thus, in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, an informal group organized at PSU's School of Architecture. We called ourselves the Denizen Architecture Collective. We were inspired by the name Citizen Architect, particularly given its reference to the work of Sam Mockbee and the Rural Studio. "Citizen" symbolizes belonging to something shared and greater than any one individual, and in turn, having a responsibility to that same shared something. But citizen is also a loaded word. It connotes a power dynamic in its use to describe legal status, and even more alarmingly, it had been appropriated by the President-Elect and other far-right groups to support hateful, nationalist rhetoric. We chose denizen as a replacement because denizen means someone who frequents a place; an inhabitant or occupant of a particular place.[3] As such, it does not infuse a top-down binary relationship of citizen/outsider, but rather it suggests a performative condition of belonging.

The Denizen Architecture Collective consisted of graduate students, undergraduate students, and a few faculty members. With meetings open to anyone who wanted to participate, we set ourselves to the task of directing our outrage and disappointment towards productive efforts. Examining our broad frustrations around the divisions in our country and the general apathetic attitude we saw in our generation, we recognized that these same realities were also present in our architecture school community. For example, some of our peers had voted for Trump and we had no idea why. It was rare for graduate and undergraduate students to mingle outside the structure of the classroom, so, in lieu of a strong and unifying school culture, a keep-to-yourself mentality permeated our corridors; we lacked the infrastructure that might support and encourage engagement. (While PSU is home to the Center for Public Interest Design, to which many of us were affiliated, this served more as a curricular activity than an organization for direct action.)

It was through these observations that we established our own community as a site of resistance.

STRATEGIC REACTIONS

Our position was perhaps most authentically described by the manifesto we established to describe our shared values, some of which were professional and others interpersonal. To begin, in our professional work:

• we will not design walls to keep immigrants or refugees out,
• we will not design torture facilities,
• we will acknowledge and design for the needs of individual users over corporate and political interests,
• we will design spaces for all demographics, with a concerted effort to provide spaces for all nationalities and religions, and
• we will consider multiple publics when designing public spaces.

In social contexts:

• we will be diligent in sourcing information on both sides of an argument,
• we will practice person-to-person eye contact and put away our phones when listening to another speak,
• we will turn our devices off when not using them and unplug devices that do not need to be plugged in, and
• we will recycle our materials and first look to reuse before buying new (we will consume less).

These were not novel statements; on the contrary, the points were quite basic. They were significant in that they expressed our anger, indignation, and protest at the state of our political, cultural, social, and environmental spheres. Each item on the list represented a reaction to a perceived threat to the values that we shared as a collective, and that we hoped to advocate for in the discipline (Figures 1-4).

In his recent essay "Trump and Brexit: Reality in the Balance", Jeremy Till draws on the work of Anthony Giddens to make sense of the political and cultural crisis surrounding the 2016 U.S. election and Britain's campaign to leave the European Union.[4] Particularly of interest are his interpretations of sustained optimism, pragmatic acceptance, and radical engagement to describe sociocultural responses to the sense of uncertainty generated by the forces of modernity.

Till describes sustained optimism as "a gilded version of a fresh and better future." The contingencies and context surrounding our messy reality are intentionally overlooked in favor of "the illusion of positive spin." Sustained optimism serves as a powerful tool of persuasion in campaign politics and is the basis for rationalizing contemporary neoliberal economics as politically neutral. Pandering to this same myth of political neutrality, sustained optimism also plays a role in mainstream architecture rhetoric. Till draws attention to the way in which major design outlets such as *Dezeen*, *Arch Daily*, and *Inhabitat* present buildings and objects entirely detached of any political, economic, or environmental context that might tarnish or complicate the image. This produces a whimsical world for architecture to inhabit, a world conveniently disassociated from reality.

Pragmatic acceptance is the attitude of playing the game because it is necessary for survival, even if it means sacrificing integrity. Radical engagement acknowledges perceived threats and mobilizes against them. Where sustained optimism and pragmatic acceptance are uncritical, and pragmatic acceptance is unproductive, radical engagement is both critical and productive. While radical engagement most holistically

The promise of the future as a place we want to live in is in peril. As a school of architecture, the shape of the future is in our hands. And yet, we find in our school culture traces of the same insipid commitment to social values and environmental justice that we identify as problems for our design solutions. We see this in the repetitive renderings plastering the walls of our architecture school, in monoculture (young, white) scale figures, in an apathetic studio culture, in the lack of commitment to bring our own cups to Fridays at 4. This is hidden beneath an agreeable narrative where students are challenged to "address the poetics of material, urban issues, and cultural meaning, community engagement and social needs" through a "materially diverse, urban-oriented, socially engaged architectural education." But in the critical moment of the 2016 presidential election, the branding has proven irrelevant. Branding alone is not enough to account for diversity, nor combat divisiveness in our culture. The time is ripe for applying our efforts, skills, and passion as designers to shape a future where places are expressions of inclusive values, equity, and environmental justice.

Given the current state of our nation, we the

citizen architect

group at Portland State University's School of Architecture commit to the following and ask our fellow faculty and students to pledge their

solidarity:

CITIZEN ARCHITECT

We will not design walls to
keep immigrants or refugees out

We will not design torture facilities

We will acknowledge and design for the needs of
individual users over corporate and political interests

We will design spaces for all demographics, with a
concerted effort to provide spaces for all nationalities
and religious affiliations

We will consider multiple
publics when designing public spaces

We will be diligent in sourcing
information on both sides of an argument

We will practice person to person eye contact, and
put away our phones when listening to a person speak

We will turn our devices off when not using them and
unplug devices that do not need to be plugged in

We will recycle our materials and first
look to reuse before buying new
(we will shop and therefore consume less)

We will not design walls to
keep immigrants or refugees out

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**Solidarity
in
design**

Figures 1-4: These posters are from the early formative days of the Denizen Collective, prior to having decided on a name. Because they were produced as part of a course assignment with a deadline, we borrowed the name Citizen Architect from Sam Mockbee and the rural studio. The posters reflect the sense of urgency we felt as students in the discipline of architecture.
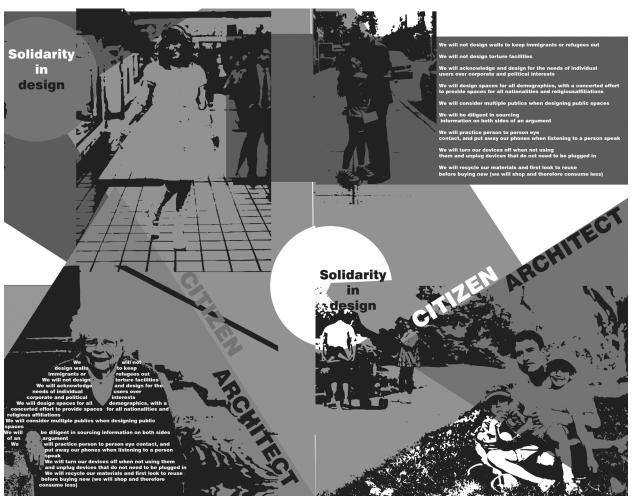Courtesy: Tucker Jones, Alex Ruiz, Genevieve Wasser

described the Denizen position, translating our ideas to direct action required navigating the tensions of sustained optimism and pragmatic acceptance.

Denizen's most action-oriented endeavor involved installing a coffee cart on the third floor of the School of Architecture, where all the undergraduate studios were located. Coffee is to architecture students as electrolyte infusion is to long distance runners—that is, essential. We hoped that this 24-hour purveyor of coffee might ignite a stronger sense of community within our school. Locating the cart on the third floor was a strategic move to facilitate more interaction between graduate and undergraduate students, particularly given that until then the closest place to get coffee was a couple of buildings away.

To expand on the relationship between the coffee cart and radical engagement, let us consider for a moment an *Architectural Review* think piece entitled "Perestroika of Life."[5] Author Andrew Willimott explains the concept of the social condenser as a way to encourage human interaction and collective consciousness through spatial design. Since its origins in Constructivist Soviet Architecture of the 1920s and '30s, the social condenser has reappeared time

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and again as a reaction to social threats precipitated by capitalism and laissez-faire economics. For Willimott, visions of change capable of inspiring social movements must "emerge out of dialogue with utopia."[6]

EXTRA-CAPITALIST EXPERIMENTS

A collectively created Coffee Cart punctuates the studio corridor, an artful assemblage collectively designed and built from donated student models. On it sits a shiny percolator rescued from the pantry of a faculty member, buttressed by the quintessential accompaniments: snacks, pamphlets, and free studio materials. A donation jar bursts at the seams with wrinkled cash and IOUs from bankrupt undergrads. The Coffee Cart is the water cooler for intellectual discussion and the mainspring of efficacious student movements and blossoming collaborations.

In a 2015 *Architectural Review* article, Reinier de Graaf argues that our discipline is a tool of capitalism, and an effective one at that. Citing Thomas Piketty's economic theories, De Graaf describes how capitalism relies on disparity of wealth and inequality to function. Use value is consistently neglected for asset value, and architectural concepts transform in their focus from usability to marketability.[7] Ultimately, he posits that "Architecture is now a tool of capital, complicit in a purpose antithetical to its erstwhile ideological endeavor."[8] This attitude illustrates what Till refers to as pragmatic acceptance of the problems embedded in our neoliberal economic model.

Take, for example, co-working and maker spaces. These "spaces" are business models marketed as an architectural design strategy that facilitates teamwork and opportunities for cross pollination across a variety of professional fields. However, they are really just boxes of minimal program where workers from different companies sit side-by-side with their faces glued to their laptops and mobile devices. Collaboration and cooperative idea generation are marketed instead of developed thoughtfully. The value of these spaces is determined by the amount of revenue they can generate instead of their potential to create human relationships or enhance the creative process.

These contemporary co-working spaces are an example of pragmatic acceptance. Architects are willing to design, and even advocate for the production of these spaces knowing that the "collaborative" language is disingenuous. Architecture adopts the attitude of pragmatic acceptance when directed at increasing the monetary value of these work spaces without genuine consideration for their potential to create an atmosphere of collaboration, which is their stated function.

Conversely, the coffee cart operated outside the conventional marketplace, somewhere between donation-based and a sharing economy. We frame this as an extra-capitalist experiment because the Denizen Collective saw the cart as a mini test site for students and faculty to engage in an alternate marketplace. With no designated overseer, it was up to the greater collective to brew the coffee, clean the equipment, and add to the contents.

BLURRING BOUNDARIES

Late one fall night, two art students stand at the doors of the architecture school hoping for entry into the building that houses the well-known Coffee Cart. With nothing else on campus open past midnight, word of the cart had spread quickly among the night owls. An accommodating undergrad with a key card lets the two in and points them in the direction of the Coffee Cart, where a group of students appear intensely engaged in conversation. Drawing closer, the two art students realize they are walking right into a meeting of the minds.

Members of the group sip coffee from an assortment of ceramic mugs as they lay out their latest plan of action for the Denizen Collective. A couple of students from the planning department are explaining their strategies for mapping vacant lots, social services, and spaces in the city that are out of view of the typical police sweep zones. An architecture undergrad explains to the two curious newcomers that they are deep in the midst of figuring out how best to combine their skills and resources to aid a houseless community advocacy group. The two art students are equally surprised

and excited to hear this type of talk coming from such an unassuming gathering and settle in to join the brainstorming.

Historically, the box labeled "plays well with others" has been left unchecked on the architect's report card. Responding to this, the Denizen Collective made it a goal to build relationships with allied disciplines in art and urban planning, in the spirit of formalizing a stronger, more potent collective network. Truth be told, we only made it to the initial stage when we attended a panel discussion about the challenges of planning in Trump's America. Our reputation as poor collaborators thwarted our attempts at working with the planners, and our reluctance to leave our home in Shattuck Hall meant we had little contact with the art students, despite belonging to the same college.

This experience is symptomatic of a larger issue within the discipline of architecture, which translates into practice. In school we learn how to defend our design decisions and use our pursuasive powers as a tool to convince the jury of the merits of our ideas. Rather than active listening and participating in constructive dialogue, we are conditioned to smile and nod while we rationalize away critiques (sustained optimism) and discredit any non-expert. In addition to an obsession with our own ideas, a culture of isolation is rooted in the architecture school experience. Students spend so much time in studio with one another that there is little chance to broaden their scope of thought beyond the limits of architecture.

The Architecture Lobby (T-A-L) attributes architecture's reluctance to engage with other players in the building industry to our inability to share credit, and thereby relinquish the claim to sole architectural genius. They are working to decentralize the authority of decision making, alongside highlighting the work of the countless builders, engineers, associate designers, and consultants who are essential to bringing a building into being.[9] Part of this effort involves positioning architects as workers instead of members of an elite social class. This is particularly helpful in discussing the building trades, where there is a separation between the people designing the building components and those putting them together.

MAIO, an architectural office operating out of Barcelona, is also working toward an authentic model for collaboration, bringing people from across the world of design and construction to a literal table. This long table is central to their studio, serving as a collective work surface and a symbol of their design ethos. As an act of spatial production, it reflects the ideals of a studio actively working to deconstruct traditional hierarchies in architectural praxis.[10] They established their design philosophy or ideal, then built a space to reinforce this philosophy, which continues to carry through to projects like "the kitchenless city" and "110 rooms," where they push the boundaries of what we consider necessities for our living spaces. This young group of architects and designers prioritizes cross-disciplinary collaboration to inform spaces and built objects that are both flexible and adaptable.

Assemble, a UK-based design group, is another example of a design firm attempting to subvert the traditional role of architect as expert. In the Granby Four Streets development project, Assemble worked with the neighborhood's uniquely structured Community Land Trust to help bring their long-anticipated visions to life. Past urban regeneration efforts had failed because no one took the initiative to engage in dialogue with the people in Granby to find out what they wanted to see. The success of this project lies within the exchange of knowledge between the people of Granby and Assemble. The former shared the spirit of their community as a DIY and resourceful community, while the latter saw beyond the existing structures of communication and generated a spark to an already determined group of people.[11]

COLLECTIVE AUTHORSHIP

Five years after its formation, a Denizen alumna returns to the School of Architecture as a guest critic for final reviews. She is delighted to spot the Coffee Cart. The skeleton is mostly unchanged, but the trusty percolator and donated mugs are gone. In their stead, a colorful array of book spines sits atop the basswood model fragments turned cabinetry. On closer examination, the volumes are important texts from electives past. Folders of printouts, carefully catalogued by topic, nestle between these books among the likes of the

Whole Earth Catalogue *and the* Squatter's Guide to London.

Someone has welded a tablet to the steel frame of the material exchange. She reaches out to touch it and it lights up to display the Denizen Database. Scrolling through the folders, she is struck by the amount of content that Denizen has created since she left. She opens up one folder titled "Alumni Entourage" and chuckles at the cutouts of students past and present who donated their likenesses in poses that are often needed to complete a last minute rendering.

From the outset, the Denizen Collective conceived of the Coffee Cart as an object that belonged not to the group, but to the greater collective of the school. We resisted our temptations as design students to craft a beautiful object, instead opting for the old busted-up AV cart, hoping that this might encourage a principle of collective and transferable ownership. In an essay titled "Returning Duchamp's Urinal to the Bathroom? On the Reconnection between Artistic Experimentation, Social Responsibility and Institutional Transformation," Teddy Cruz calls for a revolution that would replace a system of economic excess with a system of social responsibility to legitimize creativity and artistic autonomy, thereby freeing the creative spirit from the oppressive grasp of conservative political forces. He argues for humble, small-scale interventions as catalysts for change, where the collective imagination is the creative agent in designing an inclusive urbanism.[12]

Ultimately, we hoped that the Coffee Cart could serve as a sort of prototype for this theory, igniting the collective spirit of the school, which then might propel the cart through greater and greater programmatic and physical iterations. We believed that there was opportunity to generate tangible social/political action by drawing on the variety of viewpoints, wealth of knowledge, and diversity of skills available to a cooperative group of energized students. This was intended as an act of resistance to the notion that architecture is a product of isolated individual genius. While the Coffee Cart did not live up to our original expectations as a remarkable object of collective authorship, while in operation, it did serve as a place for informal interaction. Upon reflection, what came

out of the Coffee Cart was proportional to the work that went into it.

Beyond the halls of academia, there are greater implications for embracing collective authorship, even extending beyond the architectural profession. For example, T-A-L founder Peggy Deamer explains how architects can change the way we work using common trade tools, specifically BIM, as a way to build stronger community among designers and builders. Instead of focusing on the technology's ability to streamline the design process, or focusing on its limitations of form making, Deamer argues for a push to generate a library based on the wealth and variety of knowledge among firms coming from seemingly disparate, isolated projects.[13] Deamer goes on to explain how shared information can generate better relationships between every subgroup involved in an architectural project. There are opportunities to bring fabricators to the table at early stages in the design process, and consult with builders in a less formal way than handing them completed design development documents.

As architects we need to stop working in the vacuum we have created for ourselves. Both Deamer and Till point out that the future of architecture becomes increasingly less relevant as the push toward efficiency over quality grows increasingly important. In the current system of production, much of the work we do is subject to the chopping block of value engineering, and it will be important to be a driving force behind the changes to the field instead of passive passengers who see it change without us.

REFLECTING ON FAILURE

Despite the initial enthusiasm and determination for the Denizen Architecture Collective, we were unable to sustain momentum. As we adjusted to the perceived threats of the Trump Administration, the pressures of school work, volunteering, and assistantships outweighed the urgency of the collective, with radical engagement giving way to pragmatic acceptance.

Not surprisingly, this follows an all too common trend. As Slavoj Zizek points out, historically, instances of horizontal organization have a limited life span. In moments of passionate collective action, people feel

a sense of accomplishment around coming together to stand up for their values. After the initial disruption dies down, normal flows resurface. Most people go back to everyday life, but that brief instance of shared experience is so powerful that participants still come away feeling fulfilled. Lack of organization and determination halt the momentum before it ever elicits any real change in the lives of everyday people.[14]

We might conclude, then, that the dissipation of the Denizen Architecture Collective was likely a foregone conclusion. In our idealistic understanding of the agency of the collective, we were extremely hesitant when it came to formalizing our role. Without dedicated leadership and organization there was no system of accountability.

Here it is important to distinguish that while our experiment in collective agency fell short, other projects based on these same principles (albeit with stronger organization and leadership) are alive and kicking. Most notably, The Architecture Lobby reported that "The effect of the postelection scramble was galvanizing, instantly doubling the member pool, and the lobby is planning a slate of new projects to take advantage of that momentum."[15]

CONCLUSIONS

Through Denizen, we grappled with architecture's relationship to a greater purpose. Writing now from the position of the professional world of architecture, we recognize that this is not unique to the school experience. For example, the centrality of the deadline carries through into practice and acts as a set of blinders to the big picture goals and ideals that we hold as recent graduates. We are trained to generate idea after idea and endless iterations of the preferred scheme, each beholden to a new deadline. Disturbingly, these pressures have little to do with the people who will dwell in these spaces.

While the concept of global citizenship acknowledges a greater purpose beyond the confines of architecture, as it relates to architecture it involves instilling the values of knowledge and relationships outside the discipline. It is about understanding how to be a person among other people, and more importantly, other people who are different from you. Difference is not determined by national boundaries; difference is born of a whole spectrum of factors including education, beliefs, regional biases, and so on. Consequently, going abroad is insufficient for learning global citizenship.

Even though the Denizen Architecture Collective was decidedly local in context, it contended with the same issues and taught the same lessons that are central to global citizenship. Flux, contingency, collective authorship, and human interaction are critical ideas in challenging the western ideal of individualism. This collective experiment was our way of reclaiming the idea of citizenship as a performative act of belonging, and more specifically, global citizenship as a means of understanding our common plight as human beings. We must take an active role in the rapidly changing social, political, economic, and environmental landscape of today's world if we want to see changes that reflect our values. ▪

ENDNOTES

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