

# UC Berkeley

## Room One Thousand

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Kevin Block

## Introduction

# President-Architect: On Recent Politics and Architectural Expertise

*“Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men’s blood...”*

Daniel Burnham

*“You have to think anyway, so why not think big?”*

Donald Trump

Donald Trump is not an architect, but he’s the closest thing we’ve had to a president-architect since Herbert Hoover held office, and before that Thomas Jefferson. Hoover was a mining engineer by profession and Jefferson, a plantation owner, thought of architecture as his special “delight.” Trump is a self-proclaimed real estate mogul and a professional braggart. Nevertheless, although he clearly lacks the sensibility of a designer, we could very well think of him as a maker: he makes deals. We could also think of him as a builder: he builds towers. Like most architects, making and building are part of Trump’s identity. For members of the architectural community, observing Trump may feel like looking into a grossly distorted mirror. He’s clearly not one of us, and yet the occasional flash of resemblance makes the reflected image all the more disturbing.

1 See “Call For Entries: Building The Border Wall?” In *ArchDaily* (4 March 2016): <http://www.archdaily.com/783550/call-for-entries-building-the-border-wall>; see also Ron Rael’s response, “Designing the Border Wall?” In *The Architect’s Newspaper* (18 March 2016): <http://www.archpaper.com/news/articles.asp?id=8561>.

Left: Graffiti left by workers during the construction process for Trump Tower, Sy Rubin and Jonathan Mandell. Trump Tower. (Secaucus, N.J.) L. Stuart, 1984

It is no coincidence, then, that Trump’s controversial promise to build a wall along the Mexican-U.S. border has recently roused the interest of the architectural community and sparked a controversial debate about the ethics of wall-building.<sup>1</sup> One likely reason why Trump interests architects is because his political rhetoric is materialist, albeit a materialism of the most vulgar kind. Abstract notions like equity, justice, propriety, and dignity (of labor, for example) clearly mean very little to him. For Trump, one of

the major problems with establishment politics is that there's too much thinking and not enough doing. Instead, he has galvanized an angry, disenfranchised, lesser-educated base with proposals for concrete interventions into the built environment, and the bigger the better. "We've spent \$4 trillion trying to topple various people. If we could've spent that \$4 trillion in the United States to fix our roads, our bridges and all of the other problems—our airports and all of the other problems we've had—we would've been a lot better off. I can tell you that right now."<sup>2</sup> Guess who said that. I almost want to clap.

To be absolutely clear, I do not support the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump and this editorial introduction represents my political orientation only. For the purposes of introducing this issue of *Room One Thousand*, however, Trump interests me simply because it is almost inconceivable to imagine an actual, practicing American architect running for a high-ranking political office, let alone the presidency. Why is this such a difficult thought-exercise? Is it because there's something inherent to architectural expertise in this country that fails to translate to political leadership? Possibly, but I doubt it. We can learn from Trump like we have learned from Las Vegas.

Beyond the realm of the metaphoric ("Trump has deconstructed the architecture of American politics") architecture was once thought to be tangibly political. In colonial America, for example, the skills and ethic necessary for good land surveying were widely understood by settlers and yeoman farmers to be part of what constituted republican virtue. Surveying was one of the reasons why Washington and Jefferson were considered "founders" and it's not coincidental that they were willing and able to personally design Mount Vernon and Monticello. The political viability of surveying even lasted well into the nineteenth century, a more industrial age. In 1872, Frederick Law Olmsted, the great landscape architect and one of the designers of Central Park, was nominated as the Republican vice-presidential candidate. He didn't win, of course, but it's remarkable that he was even nominated. Today, in a media landscape that Trump has surveyed better than anyone else, in an era when the value of a legal education for governance seems to be outweighed

2 Ehrenfreund, Max. "Liberals Will Love Something Donald Trump Said Last Night". *Washington Post* (16 December 2016). Web. 23 Mar. 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/12/16/one-thing-donald-trump-got-right-about-how-the-u-s-is-spending-its-money/>



by the public relations savvy necessary to win an election, the time is perhaps right for architects to add their visionary and organizational abilities to the political spectrum. Think big. Or some other professional group—like lawyers and the CEOs of the tech industry—will think big for you.

On the other hand, the depoliticization of most professional architects and pedagogues should not be confused with the stance of those design activists who strategically remain outside the elected political world, where they hope to serve a more critical function. For architects to make a political or civic difference they obviously do not need to be on the ballot. The citizen-architects (*à la* Mockbee) and the proponents of the critical-artistic tradition are still important constituencies within architectural culture. Still, if more architects tried to enter the macropolitical arena while refusing to be cast in the role of technician or bureaucrat, my contention is that they would support the micropolitical work of design activists and ultimately increase the likelihood of creating a more caring, design-conscious society, like the ones they have in Scandinavia.<sup>3</sup> As they say, the opposite of macropolitics is not micropolitics—it's indifference.

Donald Trump at the opening of Trump Tower (New York City) in 1973, Sy Rubin and Jonathan Mandell, Trump Tower. (Secaucus, N.J.) L. Stuart, 1984

3 On the relationship between design and care, see Keith Murphy's article, "A Cultural Geometry: Designing Political Things In Sweden," *American Ethnologist* 40.1 (2013): 118-131.

Admittedly, it's hard to debate the politics of architectural expertise when the concept of architectural expertise is itself ambiguous. That's one of the reasons why the journal released the following "Call for Papers" in May of last year:

*What is architectural expertise? Is it only a matter of design? Any claim to autonomy, disciplinarity, specialization, social status, philosophical essence, or historical continuity seems to depend, at least in part, on one's answer to that question. Pedagogical success is also at stake, since one of the primary institutional functions of the architecture school is to revitalize the professional body with new and different kinds of expertise, linked to the past but adapted to the needs of the present. Where is architectural expertise located? Is it in the tacit hand of the craftworker, the skillful eye of the visionary, the auratic head of the creative, or is it somewhere, out there, floating in the clouds of BIM? If architectural expertise is a cognitive attribute, can we image it with an MRI machine or map the distributed network of a firm's expertise ethnographically, like a good STS scholar? If architectural expertise is a performance, for whom does the architect perform? What does the concept reveal about the architect's relation to the public, the client, the user, the citizen? Is that relation participatory, service-oriented, intentionally provocative? In contrast to all of these ambiguities, what is clear is that "expertise," as a keyword in our culture, is a post-1960s phenomenon. Previous generations referred to other concepts like *métier* when confronting many of the same issues. What changed, then, historically and culturally? How should one situate the figure of the architectural expert with respect to the legacy of modernism? Finally, what is the relation between the concept of architectural expertise and the organization and division of architectural labor, as it exists internationally and throughout the building industry? How should we think about the migration or transmission of architectural expertise across space and time? What does expertise reveal about architecture as a global practice?*

In the following pages you will find responses from architecture students, architecture professors, practitioners, researchers, sociologists, and an anthropologist. Some of them have tried very hard to address the "Call for Papers" directly; others have taken a more oblique approach. We still don't have a single definition of architectural expertise, but we've got what I believe to be a very stimulating collection of alternative perspectives. Briefly, in alphabetical order of the contributor's last name, the collection includes:

1

A photo-essay on funereal architecture and urban land usage from Matthew Au. Au is an MArch student in the CED who recently received the Branner Fellowship.

2

An introduction to the work of the Center for the Built Environment at UC Berkeley from the CBE's leaders, Prof. Gail Brager (Associate Director) and Prof. Edward Arens (Director).

3

A sociological consideration of architectural expertise from an interdisciplinary group of scholars associated with the Center for the Study of Knowledge Expertise and Science at Cardiff University in Wales, including Prof. Harry Collins, Prof. Robert Evans, Sergio Pineda (an architect), and Dr. Martin Weinel.

4

A graphic essay by Sean Nakamura Dolan about Shigeru Ban in New Orleans. Dolan is an undergraduate student in the CED

5

A retrospective interview with Prof. Paul Groth, a leading scholar in the field of cultural landscape studies, in celebration of his recent retirement from teaching. The interview was conducted by Prof. Sarah Lopez of UT Austin, one of his former doctoral students in the CED.

6

An introduction to the documentary film *Masons of Djenné* by the film's director, Emeritus Prof. Trevor H.J. Marchand of Social Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London.

7

An interpretive essay by Adam Miller on the work of British firm FAT Architecture. Miller is an MArch student in the CED.

8

A think-piece from John Parman, editorial director at Gensler, a founding editor of TraceSF, and a member of Room One Thousand's advisory board, among other positions and appointments.

9

An interview with Prof. Avigail Sachs of UT Knoxville, a CED alumna who researches the history of architectural research. The interview was conducted by Room One Thousand editor Jennifer Gaugler, a current doctoral student in the CED's Architecture Department.

10

An essay by Tatjana Schneider on the work of Will Alsop and Reversible Destiny. Dr. Schneider is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Architecture at the University of Sheffield.

11

Images and a speculative essay by Alex Spatzier. Spatzier is an MArch student in the CED.

12

Sharóne L. Tomer's book review of *The Architect as Worker: Immaterial Labor, the Creative Class, and the Politics of Design*, edited by Peggy Deamer. Tomer is a doctoral student in the CED's Architecture Department.

13

A historical essay on the Cold War politics of architectural expertise by Katherine Zubovich. Zubovich is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at UC Berkeley.

## THANK YOU

Many people have contributed to the production of this issue and they deserve recognition.

Thank you to Tom Buresh, Chair of the Architecture Department, for the Department's support. Thanks also to Camille Thoma for helping with the journal's events and all of the people on the financial staff of the Architecture Department for helping with our financial management.

John Parman, Greg Castillo, and Ramona Naddaff remain on the journal's advisory board. Thanks to all of them for the assistance and a special thanks to Greg for serving as our faculty signatory.

The look and feel of the print version of this issue, its graphic soul, is mostly thanks to Soo, Betsy, and Sun. They comprise the journal's Graphics Team. For this issue, they have tried to maintain some continuity with the design of the first three issues of the journal while leading our graphic identity in a new direction. They've also adroitly dealt with the fact that this journal operates on a minimal budget and is committed to making itself cheaper.

This issue also marks the first time that Room One Thousand has included a section exclusively devoted to undergraduate and graduate student work from the College of Environment Design. The Projects section is an initiative that was suggested and managed by Neal. Submissions include the following:

1. Neal Barber & Nick Harvey Cheetham's "City of the Captive Audience"
2. Jessica Chen & Mia Narell's "Who What When Where How Why"
3. Keenan Gravier & Isabella Warren's "Overlap / Succession / Sedimentation"
4. Phirak Suon's "Dynamic Ceramics"
5. Foster Turcott's "Aether House"

The editorial team intends to make Projects a recurring part of our journal's format. These contributions might therefore be related to the issue theme but not necessarily. The criteria that the editorial board developed to select these projects was not determined by a principle of excellence. That means that the featured projects are not featured because they represent the best or most polished work on display at the CED; indeed, the journal has no interest in occupying a position of authority or doing to the work of school publicity. Instead, the projects should be thought of as speculative offerings. Neal's hope, which is also the hope of the rest of the board, is that their inclusion

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contributes in some small way to a community of intellectual openness and collaborative evaluation. Perfectionism is boring. Soo says that “casualness” has replaced perfectionism as the ruling ethic in Wurster anyway. So forget about perfection. Architectural culture is at least partially predicated on sharing and talking about ideas in a situation in which you’re not paying others for feedback and they’re not paying you. Please consider submitting your projects to the journal in the future.

Room One Thousand remains a precarious venture. We exist from year to year and are wholly dependent on the interest and dedication of the busy students who volunteer to work on the editorial team. Thank you to Thomas and Mia, who have been steady forces throughout the past couple of years, handling a whole assortment of tasks, and Jen, who helped a great deal with content editing even as she prepped for her qualifying exam. If you are reading this issue and you still have time remaining in your student career at the CED, please consider getting involved. Even if the time remaining amounts to very little. Spencer, for example, joined during his last semester as an MArch. We were very happy to have him. He wrangled a submission out of Alex Spatzier. Once people get involved with Room One Thousand, they seem to stick around. We hope that precarity turns to stability in the near future, but have enjoyed ourselves in the present.

For an issue that is dedicated to exploring the concept of architectural expertise, which is so closely affiliated with the idea of professionalism, I would be remiss to ignore the importance of amateurism. Graduate students in architecture are, of course, welcome to think of themselves as professional students, to think of their education as pre-professional training, and to interpret the agony and ecstasy of their time at Berkeley as the feeling of employable human capital accumulating. Indeed, they have every financial incentive to do so. On the other hand, the critical and pedagogical potential of amateurism, as the ideology and practice of failing better, is undeniable. This journal is pretty damn good, if I do say so myself, and yet, as an extracurricular student journal, it is in many ways amateurish. For example, my main leadership strategy once Padma stepped down and I became managing editor was just to continue to send out bi-weekly emails that included a Doodle scheduling poll. The strategy worked. My lack of editorial expertise does not seem to have prevented a successful collaboration, although I must also thank the contributors for their patience and commitment throughout the editorial process. Producing the journal has been an amazing tool for learning about architecture. I hope that the experience of reading gives you a little more faith in amateur pursuits.

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