

# Reconsidering the Voice of Architectural Discourse: A Case for Qualitative Research

John H. Trefry<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Laurel Watson<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas

<sup>2</sup>University of Missouri – Kansas City, Kansas City, Missouri

**ABSTRACT:** The voice of architectural discourse is primarily derived from institutional power. Research focused on disrupting this power has become more prominent in the field. Beyond the quantifiable roles architecture and urbanism play in poverty and access to services, more insidious social imbalances of gender and race in architectural history and practice have been unveiled through feminist and multicultural lenses. Though invaluable, the presentation of these issues continues to adopt the conventional institutional voice of scholarly removal. This essay explores a variety of more inclusive research methods established in the social sciences under the banner of qualitative research.

**KEYWORDS:** Architectural discourse, institutional power, qualitative research, social justice, social science

## INTRODUCTION

Who has the right to speak for a building? Is it the scholar who has spent their life understanding its cultural and material context, perhaps only visiting once? Or is it the untrained individual who spent their life living or working in the building, witness to ten thousand sunsets, ten thousand different sounds, ten thousand chances to touch and smell the place intimately? This paper recognizes that both answers should be correct, though the balance is currently tipped toward the institutionally knighted scholar.

Scholarly architectural research has a common voice rooted in institutional cultures and products. Writings in this voice are a self-fulfilling prophecy of what we will call transactional scholarship. Rather than empowering citizens of the built environment, their function is to control by transmitting knowledge. The institutional approach comprises an inescapable voice in the intellectual and material lives of the field.

Architectural research in the topic of disenfranchised populations has sounded an implicit call for methods of inquiry that will give voice to silenced populations in a meaningful way. Yet, the grip of convention in architectural scholarship is tenacious. This research is still primarily structured on the same critically detached, monocular model that has reinforced predominant narratives of design by excluding non-authoritative perspectives. However, we do not want to disparage these efforts. We are no less guilty of such hesitation. We see this as necessary simply to gain the legitimacy to dip our toes in the pool of discourse. However, we agree with Audre Lorde's adage that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

This essay first explores the dominant voice of architectural discourse characterized in historical and theoretical scholarship. It is our assertion that this voice contributes not only to the exclusion of socially and economically disenfranchised voices, but to the exclusion of the voice of the public at large. Secondly, a sampling of scholarly literature currently striving to expand access of other voices into architectural discourse is reviewed. Finally, these are contrasted with the methods of qualitative analysis used in the social sciences to give voice to populations that have historically been silenced.

## 1.0 THE VOICE OF ARCHITECTURAL DISCOURSE

### 1.1 Institutional Legitimacy

C. Greig Crysler's book *Writing Spaces: Discourses of Architecture, Urbanism, and the Built Environment* proved an invaluable resource in distilling the qualities of scholarly writing about architecture. To understand the role of scholarly texts in the discipline of architecture Crysler analyzes five exemplary journals in the field of built environments: *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians (JSAH)*, *Assemblage*, *The*

*Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review, The International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, and Society and Space.*

It is Crysler's position that scholarly journals play the preeminent role in establishing the discourse of architectural. They play a key role in the promotion of departments and programs for things like admissions and recruiting, fundraising, and general cachet (Crysler 2003, 10). He asserts that because of its institutional legitimacy journal research is able to influence policy decisions related to the field (Crysler 2003, 9). As a central component of the educational climate, journal research affects and shapes the positions and perspectives of students who will go into practice constructing the built environment.

In Lesley Lokko's introduction to *White Papers, Black Marks* she notes that identities in power "pursue their own pleasures – from the writing of history to the media of representation" and that "the world is usually organized according to principles that flatter the dominant imagination (Lokko 2000, 33)." Indeed, journals have a major role as a gatekeeper of the information, positions, and voices that establish the dominant narrative for contemporary practices. Art critic and curator Lawrence Alloway calls these "spectacular acts of exclusion (Alloway 2006, 243)."

Two journals that Crysler profiles clearly represent the homogenous voice of contemporary discourse, both historical and theoretical, and its influence on the tones and trends of education and practice in architecture: the *JSAH* and *Assemblage*.

### **1.2 The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians**

Crysler's analysis of the *JSAH* finds its perspective to be univocal. Works are predominantly omniscient third person narrations that favor a scientific voice, where the "narrative is... treated as a neutral container of historical fact (Crysler 2003, 36)." Works in the *JSAH* are of two genres: the architect and the work. The first genre fixates on the heroism of the architect by embedding economic, social, political, and building forces into their consciousness. Conversely, the second treats their buildings as acontextual apart from purely typological or formal ancestry (Crysler 2003, 37). In both approaches the third person voice focuses on a mimetic presentation of history that attempts to embed the content outside of the author's consciousness, into the unassailable matter of the object. By appearing to lack speculation this voice fosters the belief in a positivistic natural order to architectural history that it has itself applied.

### **1.3 Assemblage**

Regarding architectural theory, historian Hanno-Walter Kruff rejects the validity of this positivism. He argues for a more polyvalent and unlimited scope of inquiry (Kruff 1994, 14). Crysler's assessment of the journal *Assemblage* establishes its origins in an assault on the "cycle of affirmations" inherent in abstract and idealized scholarly journals such as *JSAH*. *Assemblage* reacted against a voice that "maintains disciplinary boundaries, dominant institutions, and disengaged modes of practice (Crysler 2003, 58)." One of *Assemblage*'s foundational principles was to reject that meaning is inherent in the architectural object. *Assemblage* approaches objects obliquely hoping to dislodge the static narrative of their cultural context. The expanded constellation of referents comes into play through what editor K. Michael Hays calls "transcoding." By transcoding architectural knowledge to locations of outside of architecture proper its effects are moved outward into the general socio-cultural field (Crysler 2003, 58). Calling their work "text as architecture (Crysler 2003, 65)", these writers consider the text itself to be a parallel construction parallel not an attachment.

### **1.4 Institutional voice**

*Assemblage* has profoundly influenced the character of contemporary architectural scholarship. But did the voice of *Assemblage* really differ in a material way from that found in journals like *JSAH*? Crysler himself asserts that:

*Assemblage* reproduced many of the characteristics of the modernist writing it criticized. Both the critic and the designer become heroic figures who endow form with the capacity to capture and transform the social world (Crysler 2003, 75).

While the reliance on and necessity of the social world to actualize and make meaning of form are paid lip-service through the assertion that the texts are architectural conditions whose meaning is constructed outside their form, this postmodern sleight of hand continues to serve the goal of ossifying institutional authority. At their foundations, both journals construct representations on a lineage of scholarly precedent. We don't argue against the legitimacy of scholarship originating in institutions. However, we argue that they have greater responsibility to the citizens of the built world to be more inclusive in their inquiries.

## 2.0 ADDITIONAL VOICES

### 2.1 The social component of architecture

Christian Norberg-Schulz emphasizes the social component of architecture in the introduction to his sweeping book *Architecture: Meaning & Place*.

Human life cannot take place anywhere, it presupposes... *a system of meaningful places*. It is the task of the architect to give such places such a form [offering rich possibilities], that they may receive the necessary content (Norberg-Schulz 1988, 24-26).

Even the great proponent of inherent architectural meaning, John Ruskin, asserted that:

It is not until a building has assumed this character... hallowed by the deeds of man, till its walls have been witness of suffering [that it] can be gifted with so much as these possess, of language and of life (Ruskin 1903, 234).

Let us accept that architecture is a social construct as well as vehicle. In this context architectural discourse languishes embarrassingly behind other inquiries into social phenomena.

### 2.2 Calls for additional voices in architectural discourse

Architecture continues to be that art with the most irrefutable and unavoidable grounding in social life. In addition to merely evaluating the aesthetic relevance of individual projects, architectural theory, criticism, and education should survey the now-neglected cultural ground – the preconditions of the art of architecture (Pallasmaa 2007, 97-98).

The voice of the public, the citizens of the built environment, is marginalized by the exclusionary conventions of transactional scholarship in architectural discourse. A call from the profession, both practitioners and educators, to explore methods for introducing new, more diverse voices into architectural research is found in a survey of the literature from the diminutive realm of progressive thinking in architecture. These calls for inclusion generally take the form of research projects whose subjects lie on the outside of realms of traditional scholarship (minority groups, women, LGBTQIQ individuals). In Joan Rothschild's introduction to *Design and Feminism*, prominent British architect Etain Fitzpatrick is quoted as saying of the texts in the volume (and indeed all that we surveyed) that:

A common thread throughout these essays is the promotion of inclusionary practices which challenge predominant ideologies that separate, divide, and erase identity (Rothschild 1999, 2).

Roberta Feldman's essay "Participatory Design at the Grass Roots" (Feldman 1999, 135-148) covers a group disenfranchised by the power structures that architecture can be complicit in shoring up. In this case the subjects are residents of a Chicago public housing development. The essay includes numerous photographs of the residents in spaces they have reclaimed from the housing authority. Though mostly written in the conventional scholarly voice, the article opens with three unattributed quotes. For example:

We don't give up... We're willing to fight for what we need here and what we want here, and I think that's the strength we have (Feldman 1999, 135).

One other quote attributed to an activist resident detailing her neighborhood's needs is used, though without strong methodological integration in the text. The rest of Feldman's text is heavy with citations, including many of her own publications. In the same volume, Lynne Walker and Sue Cavanagh's essay "Women's Design Service" (Walker and Cavanagh 1999, 149-157) is filled with photographs of forlorn-looking women pushing strollers and emerging crestfallen from subterranean public toilets. The voices of these women are not quoted, or referenced, or included.

*White Papers, Black Marks* deals in a diverse and complex manner with issues interrelating racial identity and architecture. The photographs in many of the book's essays capture disenfranchised figures in the architectural conditions that subjugate them. Malindi Neluheni's essay, "Apartheid Urban Development" (Neluheni 2000, 67-90) is one example. Contrasting these moving photographs is a text that maintains its scholarly distance. By using no quotes or voices of the pictured it continues to yoke these figures as others whose voices cannot be heard. Their stories are filtered through the institutional voice. They are not given license to speak on their own.

Although certainly more such work exists, the greatest break with convention and the most inclusive work in this survey is artist Imogen Ward-Konao's "Anything Red Doesn't Come to the House" (Ward-Konao 2000, 305-347). This text is described as a "visual diary" of the author's apprenticeship to a Ghanaian artist in a section of the book described as including "a more elastic interpretation of architecture (Lokko 2000, 279)." Including a wide range of photographic materials documenting her experience, Ward-Konao also includes a very lengthy and detailed transcription of a conversation with her mentor.

Social ecologist and educator Sherry Ahrentzen approaches the call for a more inclusive voice most definitively in terms of feminism's most basic societal goals and how they might enter into the architectural discourse (emphasis mine):

"Looking at the social context shifts analysis from abstract and binary differences to the social relations and contexts in which *multiple differences are constructed and given meaning*. Transformative contextual feminism... seek[s] the production of a better set of social constructs than the ones presently available, and thus the creation of new and better sorts of people and places (Ahrentzen 1996, 93-94)."

### 2.3 Why are additional voices valuable?

The attitude implicit in architectural discourse is that untrained individuals cannot understand the complex interrelations between architecture and its cultural, economic, and material contexts. A countering perspective has been described in detail by Black feminist thinker Patricia Hill Collins. She presents two prevailing positions: that subordinate groups identify with their oppressors and therefore have no personal perspective on their identities, and that subordinate groups are less human and not capable of constructing articulating their own identities. However, in their everyday acts of resistance:

Black women's political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality than that available to other groups... these experiences stimulate a distinctive Black feminist consciousness concerning that material reality. In brief, a subordinate group not only experiences a different reality than a group that rules, but a subordinate group may interpret that reality differently than a dominant group. (Collins 1989, 747)

Consider by extrapolation all of the unique standpoints on architecture from all groups and individuals to which we as architects are deaf. Again, by refusing to acknowledge the validity of these perspectives, of this consciousness, architectural discourse is embarrassingly conservative.

### 2.4 Qualitative research in the social sciences

Over the last twenty years in the social sciences a distinct research methodology, qualitative research, has gained a significant foothold in the discourse of the field. Educational psychologist and expert in research methodologies John W. Creswell defines qualitative research as beginning:

with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals of groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell 2007, 37).

To give form to this methodology Creswell stipulates several common characteristics of qualitative research: natural setting, researcher as key instrument, multiple sources of data, inductive data analysis, participants' meanings, emergent design, theoretical lens, interpretive inquiry, and holistic account (Creswell 2007, 37-39). For our purposes we will describe a few relevant characteristics in slightly more detail. By natural setting, Creswell asserts that data collection is done "in the field at the site where participants' experience the issue or problem under study (Creswell 2007, 37)." By multiple sources of data, Creswell indicates that qualitative research uses heterogeneous forms "such as interviews, observations, and documents (Creswell 2007, 38)." Great value is placed on participants' meanings. Creswell emphasizes that:

In the entire qualitative research process, the researchers keep a focus on learning the meaning the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or writers from the literature (Creswell 2007, 39).

These characteristics are particularly pertinent to architecture, being a site or setting itself and reaching across multiple spheres of influence.

Creswell goes on to characterize subjects that would benefit from qualitative research as meeting eight loose criteria. We have reorganized them in order of their pertinence to the project of change described in this paper. First is the desire to empower individuals, "to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize... power relationships." Second is "to study a group or population... or hear silenced voices." Third is the belief that "we cannot separate what people say from the context in which they say it." Fourth is the need for "a *complex*, detailed understanding of the issue." Fifth is the usefulness of following up more formal studies to "help explain the mechanisms or linkages in causal theories or models." Sixth is to expand on theories that "do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are examining." Seventh is the desire to write in a more inclusive, literary style "without the restrictions of formal academic structures of writing." Finally, the eighth criterion is that formal and quantitative analyses "simply do not *fit* the problem." (Creswell 2007, 40)

## 2.5 The fitness of qualitative research to architecture

Architecture is a field that has worked very hard to both tether itself to and distinguish itself from the subjectivity of the arts. Similar to the obstacles qualitative analysis faced from positivists in the social sciences, its acceptance in the conventions of architectural research would not be without detractors. Conventional scholarly architectural research is praised for its reasonableness, its logic, its grounding, and its inventive use of canonical positions. And, although it is valuable to the gross progress of architectural discourse, it overwrites, or writes around the contradictory and downright messy social constructions of architecture's existence.

The formal characteristics and topical criteria of qualitative research inherently fit architectural research. The theoretical perspectives that establish much of contemporary architectural discourse, such as phenomenology, critical inquiry, and postmodernism, are methodologically congruent with qualitative research.

## 2.6 Potential application of qualitative research to architecture

Because of inherent plurality of its data, the goal of qualitative research in architecture could never be the objective judgment of a building. It would likely address ways in which its inhabitants construct and perceive aspects of its interconnection with its own fabric, with the oeuvre of the designer, other works of architecture, further afield manifestations of culture, historical conditions, social conditions, functions of perception, and so on.

Creswell describes five qualitative approaches, of which we will look at two, narrative research and phenomenological research, and propose potential areas of application. The other three, grounded theory research, ethnographic research, and case study research, would certainly also be applicable.

Narrative research focuses on being a singular and deep forum for personal experience. The sample size of narrative research is limited to one or two individuals. Data gathered takes the form of life-stories and related individual biographical experiences with an interpretive interest in causality (Creswell 2007, 54). In relation to architectural research this limited scale of inquiry and broad scope of temporality might be suited for gross scale analyses such as urban or cultural fabrics and typologies. Conversely, more intimate and smaller scale, limited access settings like dwellings might profit from narrative research.

Phenomenological research "describes the meaning for several individuals of their *lived experiences* of a concept or phenomenon (Creswell 2007, 57)." Phenomenology is a theoretical perspective already applied in scholarly architectural research as a philosophical lens as opposed to a methodology for collecting data. This approach's broader participant sample is balanced against the goal of looking for shared meaning and experience. Phenomenological research is grounded in the belief that the reality of an object is inextricably linked to one's consciousness of it (Creswell 2007, 59). This seems suited to the physicality of architecture and particularly to singular works that are able to be experienced in a number of different ways. It may also be applicable to a particular aspect of architecture across a variety of types, or of multiple instances of a particular type. Because of its focus on common experiences, phenomenological qualitative research provides a deep foundation to developing practices or policies related in a field (Creswell 2007, 60).

Within the variety of approaches to qualitative research are a wide range of data collection methods. In addition to those described above, methods such as unstructured interviews, life histories, and participant-guided tours or shadowing, are applicable to architectural research.

Many articles in *Society and Space*, although not definitively an architectural journal, rely heavily on qualitative data. For example, an article exploring constructions of femininity in the Russian penal system includes fieldwork and qualitative data gathered from interviews with prison staff and from media sources to give deeper understanding into the intensely personal constructs of gender in relation to the strictures of the architectural type (Moran, et al 2009, 700-720). Another article analyzing the conditions of gentrification in Edinburgh, Scotland uses interviews with new residents in gentrifying neighborhoods to provide representative texture to the language and direct insight into motivations, which often deviated from quantitative data also gathered (Bondi 1999, 261-282).

As is evident in the characteristics and criteria for qualitative research, the subjects open to inquiry are wide-ranging and of all extremes in scale. Social researcher Michael Crotty jokes:

not too many of us embark on a piece of social research with epistemology as our starting point... We typically start with a real-life issue that needs to be addressed... a question that needs to be answered (Crotty, 13).

Based on the wide range of topics surveyed in this paper, from compartmentalized histories to urban facilities for underprivileged women, there is no shortage of fodder for qualitative research in architecture. We do not presume to limit the possible scopes. Indeed, we hope to have illustrated a necessity for the richness of information that can come from these types of inquiries in all arenas.

## CONCLUSION

Sherry Ahrentzen places the responsibility for change squarely in the discourse of academic institutions, calling for a deeper look and reconfiguration of "education as well as indoctrination of the professional and non-professional involved in placemaking (Ahrentzen 1996, 95)." She emphasizes the importance of social communities and consciousness-raising groups as a means to influence institutional meaning in society. The question is: how is the design profession currently fostering these communities? How is the design profession giving these communities a voice? We can start by recognizing their role in our profession, and by allowing them to constructively participate in the dialogue that materially shapes their world.

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