

Click/Scan/Bold: The New Materiality of Architectural Discourse and Its Counter-Publics

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ABSTRACT The past five years have brought several exhibitions, conferences, and other events that examine the past, present, and future of architectural periodicals. Incited in large part by the transformations wrought by new digital and social media in both architecture and publishing, these events reflect a desire among their participants to shape the materiality of architectural discourse – and even to frame the creation of discursive space as a form of architectural design itself. It is often hoped that the creation of new forms of “little” or “subversive” publications will result in the production not only of a designed object or process, but also of new discursive (counter)publics.

KEYWORDS: architecture, media, magazines, blogs, design discourse, materiality, publishing

In November of 2006, a group of Princeton grad students and faculty plastered the walls of Storefront for Art and Architecture, on Kenmare Street in New York, with reprints of decades-old architectural magazine covers. They invited the creators of those magazines to meet in the gallery periodically throughout the following weeks to discuss the heady moments of their publications' conception and creation. By then seasoned, and most of them firmly planted in the professional and academic establishment, these once (and perhaps still) restive designers and writers drew standing-room-only crowds to *Clip/Stamp/Fold: The Radical Architecture of Little Magazines 196X–197X*.

"Little magazines," literary scholars Suzanne W. Churchill and Adam McKible explain, are "non-commercial enterprises founded by individuals or small groups intent upon publishing experimental works or radical opinions of untried, unpopular, or under-represented writers" for small audiences, and typically with small budgets (Churchill and McKible 2005: 3). Architect Denise Scott Brown offers a more playful description of the little architecture magazine of the 1960s: "usually one-track – led by one guiding spirit, trying to make one point"; "often scurrilous, irresponsible and subversive of the existing order"; "badly distributed and marketed (although perhaps intentionally so) and ... short-lived"; usually "hand-made and ... ill-kempt in appearance, but with a certain flair. They may attempt to follow in layout and graphics the same style that they preach in their content" (Brown 1968: 223).

Clip/Stamp/Fold is only one of many recent events focused on experimental and subversive forms of architectural publication, yet it is the most widely publicized and best documented of these events. The project's creators, who regard the exhibition as its own "archive," have done much of that documenting themselves (Colomina and Buckley 2010). In the next section, I recount the global journey that this exhibition has taken, and I describe the parallel paths taken by myriad other relevant exhibitions and discussions over the past five years. The curators, scholars, designers, etc. involved in many of these events have attempted to locate where the "radical" edges of architectural discourse lie today. Through this search, they collectively explore how magazines, zines, newspapers, blogs, Tweets, public events, and other media – in their specific material forms or their slippage between them – offer a means of shaping architecture's discourse and constructing its discursive (counter)publics.

Because of the wealth of existing resources on *Clip/Stamp/Fold* (and because I have examined this exhibition, and the influence of early twentieth-century design and literary "little magazines," elsewhere), I will focus here instead on two events – *A Few Zines* and

Postopolis! – that have not received much attention outside the “blogosphere” (see Mattern 2011a, 2011b). Both demonstrated consciousness of being on the cusp of, or in the incunabula of, the digital revolution – a revolution that ostensibly resulted in the dematerialization of media, the virtualization of social relations, and dramatic transformations of both publishing and design. These two events were thus primed to examine the evolving materiality of architectural discourse and its publics, and in the second and third sections of this paper I discuss how and where these events located the edges of architectural discourse, and whether and how they opened up that discourse to new publics.

The Global Circulation of Discourse on Design Discourse

After the New York debut of Click/Stamp/Fold, the Princeton crew packed up their magazines and sent them off to the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montréal, and then to Documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany, in the summer of 2007. In Kassel, Clip/Stamp/Fold was part of The Making of Your Magazines, an exhibit curated by German magazine ARCH+ and hosted in a space designed to resemble an editorial office, where visitors could browse through folders of content and produce their own photocopied magazines (Bishop 2007; Documenta n.d.). In the fall of 2007, Clip/Stamp/Fold moved on to the Architectural Association in London, then in 2008 to the Norsk Form Gallery in Oslo and the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, and after that, in early 2009, to the Disseny Hub Barcelona. As the show headed to Spain, Columbia University’s Studio-X hosted an exhibition of architecture zines from the 1990s to today. A Few Zines: Dispatches from the Edge of Architectural Production then traveled from New York to Boston’s pinkcomma gallery, to the LA Forum in Los Angeles, and to the University of Illinois at Chicago. Also in early 2009, New York’s New Museum introduced a show, which later moved on to LA’s Hammer Museum and Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art, featuring *Urban China*, one of China’s few urbanism magazines.

Clip/Stamp/Fold made its way to the Colegio de Arquitectos in Murcia, Spain and, in mid-2010, to the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Maastricht, where “Staple,” an extension comprised of Dutch little magazines, was added to the show. Later that year, as *newspapers* stole the show at the architecture-newsprint-focused Newsstand and New City Reader projects at pinkcomma gallery and The New Museum, Clip/Stamp/Fold celebrated its transformation into a massive 671-page book back home at Storefront.

Meanwhile, many of the periodicals on display in these exhibitions, and the larger architectural publishing context from which they emerged, were the subjects of discussions in Lisbon, Melbourne, Montréal, New York, and Paris, among other sites.¹ The debate over the state of the architectural periodical has been just as vibrant

online. Blogs like *City of Sound*, *BLDG BLOG*, *Things Magazine*, *loud paper*, and *Varnelis.net* regularly visit the topic. In 2007 web portal *Archinect* featured lively conversations with creators of alternative-format architectural publications *Volume* and *Verb*; both threads drew over 3,000 comments, and one maintained momentum for over a year (Jourden 2007; Jourden 2007–8). These online discussions also occasionally spilled back over into “real space,” inspiring conferences like the Postopolis! blogathons between 2007 and 2010 in New York, Los Angeles, and Mexico City and *Domus* magazine’s Critical Futures 2011 international debate series.

Why all the hullabaloo? My contention is that concerns over the transformations wrought by new digital and social media in both architecture and publishing have incited parallel concerns regarding the materiality of architectural discourse and its discursive publics. I have written elsewhere about the contemporary social and theoretical contexts (in particular, the rise of “new materialism,” the emergence of new methods for studying periodicals, evolving research agendas in “architectural media,” and the search for new models of design and publication as economic crises render the old models obsolete) for this growth of interest in architectural publications, so I will not repeat that discussion here (Mattern 2011c). I will, however, reissue Katherine Hayles’s caution that a focus on materiality requires more than attendance to a medium’s “apparatus” (Hayles 2004); materiality is “the interplay between a text’s physical characteristics and its signifying strategies” – both of which have been attended to in several recent exhibitions, through their display of the publications’ contents and presentation of magazines in their complete physical form (72). I would add Arjun Appadurai’s (2006) voice to Hayles’s in acknowledging that materiality is also an embodiment of social relations.

These recent exhibitions and conversations attend to the multiple material dimensions of the publications on display or under discussion. Collectively, they suggest that the materialization of discourse itself constitutes a design practice, and, furthermore, that that practice results in the production not only of a designed object or process, but also of discursive (counter)publics. As the organizers of *Clip/Stamp/Fold* posit, the publications on display in their exhibition didn’t only “disseminate and catalyze” experimental design practices; the publications were *themselves* an experimental practice. They demonstrated that “architects ... conceived of publication as an architectural project in its own right” (*Clip/Stamp/Fold* 2 2007: 1). Similarly, art historian Benjamin Buchloh, speaking about his experience in the early 1970s as co-editor of experimental art magazine *Interfunktionen*, confessed that “making a magazine constructed a new space,” and through the magazine, “you can have access to a public sphere ... you can actually reach an alternative community” (Bear et al. 2006). That “alternative community” might be what Michael Warner, building on the work of Nancy Fraser, calls

a “counterpublic,” a public that “maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status,” and that constitutes a “spac[e] of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative [of “discourse pragmatics” and life-worlds], not replicative merely” (Warner 2002: 119, 122).

In 1934 Walter Benjamin advocated in his prescient “Author as Producer” lecture that “Rather than ask, ‘What is the *attitude* of a work to the relations of production of its time?’ we should ask ‘What is its *position* in them?’” (222).² Benjamin encouraged progressive creative techniques that embrace new technologies and transcend “specialization in the process of production” – techniques that characterize the making of many of the periodicals on exhibit and under discussion in these recent events (Benjamin [1934] 1978: 230, 234). Rather than “competing with newer instruments of publication,” established creative and media forms should seek “to use and learn from them, in short, to enter into debate with them” (234). As the titles of these exhibitions and discussions imply, architectural publishing is searching for its new “edge.”

Formal Flexibility vs Heavy Web Architecture

In early 2009, Columbia University’s Studio-X, a downtown Manhattan architecture/planning studio that “dedicates itself to removing the lines between education and action, information and transformation,” hosted an exhibition of turn-of-the-twenty-first-century architecture zines. *A Few Zines: Dispatches from the Edge of Architectural Production* was based on the premise that “much has been made of [the 1990s] zine phenomenon”; publications like *Monorail*, *Infiltration*, and *loud paper* “subverted traditional trade and academic architecture magazine trends” – yet “little attention has been paid to architecture zine culture specifically, or its resonance within architectural publication today” (Studio-X n.d.).³ As its subtitle implies, publication is regarded here as a form (albeit marginal) of architectural *production*. We might also infer that these publications live on the edge of material and digital means of production and appeal to, or cultivate, marginal publics.

Zines have their roots in the sci-fi fanzines of the early twentieth century, but they experienced an explosion in the last forty years, with the rise of punk rock in the 1970s; the increasing accessibility and user-friendliness of copy machines, publishing software, and home printing technologies; and the riot grrrl scene of the 1990s (Pallister 2007). Zines are “experimental, multifarious performances ... instantiations of multiple subject-positions,” and, as Janice Radway argues in her study of girls’ zines, they “should be read ... for their radical generativity, for the way they combine and recombine rich repertoires of contradictory cultural fragments” (Radway 2001: 11). Stephen Duncombe (1997), author of one of the first book-length scholarly studies of zines, suggests that a key aspect of this generativity is the physical means by which zines are created: cut,

paste, copy. Zines' material form, he argues, "becomes part of the message from zine creators to their audience" (Duncombe 1997: 97). The very constructedness of the format is central to its politics: "Zines – with all their seams showing – encourage ... you to come close and say, 'I see how they did that ... Anybody can do that'" (129). Their message is in part one of participatory, DIY production; they embody a critique of the dominant conditions of production.⁴ Architecture zines in particular, which are commonly one-man or one-woman productions, or the creations of small collectives who have control over their publications' form and content, stand in stark contrast to their *built* architectural subject, whose production is institutionalized, expensive, and highly over-determined.

Like many of their little magazine predecessors, zines tend to promote "discontinuous," montaged production and consumption practices. According to Radway,

Zines ... explore the delineation and porousness of boundaries, crossings, connections, and comminglings. Zines are also deeply engaged in conversation with many different discourses appearing in the surrounding culture ... [T]hey cite, reference, and even ventriloquize a multifarious range of discourses precisely in order to respond to all of them. Thus, they re-circulate cultural discourses at the very moment that they alter them by juxtaposing and combining them. (Radway 2001: 11)

We should note that these same modes of production were evident as an *aesthetic* in some architecture of the 90s that was inspired by postmodern or deconstructionist theories.⁵ For the work on display at *A Few Zines* (Figure 1), though, deconstruction and pastiche were both aesthetics and production techniques. According to the organizers, the featured zines "subverted traditional trade and academic architecture magazine trends by crossing the built environment with art, music, politics and pop"; *loud paper*, for example, was known for its regular indie rock reviews and ads (Studio-X n.d.). The publications didn't merely take these disparate topics as their *subjects* and then reformat the discussion to fit the journal's house style. Zines commonly "stylized" their eclecticism; by using an assortment of typefaces and handwriting and by collaging myriad layouts, they materialized the processes by which they "combine and recombine ... cultural fragments" (Radway 2001: 11).

The opening of the exhibition, on January 8, 2009, featured a panel discussion between zine and "little publication" editors – Luke Bulman from *Thumb*, Felix Burrichter from *Pin-Up*, Mark Shepard from the Architectural League's *Situated Technologies* pamphlets, and Mimi Zeiger (also the exhibition's curator) from *loud paper* – joined by Columbia University's Kazys Varnelis and NYU's Duncombe (both bloggers). When asked why they still make zines, or "little"



Figure 1

A Few Zines at the LA Forum for Architecture and Urban Design, August 2009.
Courtesy of Mimi Zeiger.

publications, despite the potential economies of online publication, several panelists acknowledged that the “always-on” quality of blogs creates an exciting sense of immediacy and urgency and cultivates quick, efficient reading and writing practices, but noted that it also creates responsibilities for both its creators and its consumers to “produce” and “keep up.”⁶ The immediacy of blogs, both in production and consumption, can be “scary.” Much of the recent work on digital labor examines how the *potential* for exhaustive immediacy creates these compulsions (see Institute for Distributed Creativity 2009). Zines, although *timely*, still require “time to make, time to take in” – and because zines often employ challenging graphic designs and topical juxtapositions, that “taking in” requires more than just a quick glance. They require a reflexive reading practice, several panelists agreed.

The panelists paid particular attention to the distinctive materiality of the zine: it’s an architectural object that creates an embodied experience for both its creators and its readers. Zeiger, whose *loud paper* was first printed in 1997 and now has both virtual and physical incarnations, recounts that she continually experimented with the material form of the zine: it began with a staple-fold, then moved to a saddle stitch; then, perhaps taking a cue from *Clip Kit*, to the perfect bind; and eventually migrated to a broadsheet form before the enterprise moved online. Several participants noted that paper zines’ more flexible structure permits editors greater control in determining how their publications are distributed. A zine, like the little magazine, is defined in part by its being “outside the distribution apparatus” of mainstream publications. Zine editors have an opportunity to employ creative dissemination strategies and to “stage chance encounters”

– to slide copies of their zines between the pages of mainstream publications on the shelves at *Barnes & Noble*, or to place a stack in a bar bathroom.⁷ Whereas a blogger can do little to keep his or her site from reaching a worldwide web audience indiscriminately, zines have the opportunity to control their reach by “deliberately retaining and cultivating an underground presence” (Studio-X n.d.).

Communication scholar Jennifer Rauch (2004) discovered similar sentiments in her study of zine circulation. She found that some zine editors “who have published online remain ambivalent about both the realities of and the prospects for this new technology” (Rauch 2004: 154). Many “believe that paper and xerography work better” than the Internet “to achieve their goal of participation in a subcultural community” (154). Distribution online isn’t *social* in the same way that it is off-line, where editors often deliver their publications to book and record shops or design schools, where they hand-exchange physical copies with readers or mail them, often with personalized notes, to faraway subscribers. These physical exchanges promote a different type of contact, build a different type of community, create a different kind of (counter)public space, than does mere online *interactivity*. Alison Piepmeier concurs: “Zines instigate intimate, affectionate connections between their creators and readers, not just communities but *embodied* communities that are made possible by the materiality of the zine medium” (Piepmeier 2008: 214).⁸ “The repeated linking – even conflation – of zines and electronic media, particularly blogs, both in mainstream discourses and academic studies,” she argues, “reveals a lack of awareness of the significance of zines’ visual and material embodiment” (220).

While paper zines may be materially “heavier” than their online counterparts, many panelists at *A Few Zines*, echoing their Clip/Stamp/Fold forebears, argued that the opportunities for formal experimentation – with paper quality, size, shape, binding, etc. – are greater for zines than they are for blogs and other online platforms.⁹ Blogs, Zeiger said, are “heavy architecture”; she compared them, through an apt architectural metaphor, to the infrastructural rigidity of Levittown. danah boyd (2006), Gabriella Coleman (n.d.), Alexander Galloway (2004), and Geert Lovink (2007) have addressed the formal properties and infrastructural politics of digital media. Lovink argues that their politics are more conservative than the emancipatory myths of Web 2.0 would lead us to believe. Many of the notable design sites use major blogging services or software: *City of Sound* runs on Typepad, while *BLDGBLOG* and *Pruned* use Blogspot, and *mammoth* and *Things Magazine* are built with WordPress. In late July 2009, *Design Observer (DO)* implemented a new, type-heavy, navigationally challenging, design, which seemed (to some) to be driven by a compulsion to collapse all available Web 2.0 geegaws into a single window. Nearly all design sites have the same white background; all-caps, sans-serif logo; and multi-column layout, with columns dedicated to posts, typically in

a sans-serif font; the blogroll; post categories; and archives – and, occasionally, thumbnails of books that the editors are reading; links to Flickr photo albums and Facebook and Twitter pages; lists of awards, if one is so lucky as to have garnered any; and advertisements for outside sponsors or the bloggers' own books. Underlying most of these sites is a relentless verticality and reverse chronology, and behind them is an obligation to adhere to established protocols and the normative structures of software and hosting services (see Galloway 2004). This heavy architecture is inimical to the "little" ethos and its formal flexibility.

Some digital enthusiasts are more concerned with aesthetics than infrastructure, or assume that the digital, the networked, is inherently radical.¹⁰ Eran Neuman (2008), in his review of the Clip/Stamp/Fold exhibition, suggests that digital designers, taking cues from the radical graphic treatment and topical content of little magazines, can use digital "graphic experimentation ... as a means of branding and communicating radicalism in architectural thinking and production" today – as if radicalism is a "brand" that can be computer-generated and applied cosmetically. "With e-presentations of architecture," he continues, "the discipline is once again confronting radical methods for design and production." Such assumptions perpetuate the myth of technological progressivism, which posits that "e-presentation" and graphic experimentation are inherently subversive.

Blogs and web publishing *do* have progressive potential; they can permit the expansion of critical discourse through links to other voices and through open discussions – yet even in this "world of almost infinite self-publishing possibilities," *Blueprint* magazine's Tim Abrahams (2009) finds that, rather than offering meaningful debate and criticism, architecture sites are often "home to a huge host of visual effluvia, a flotsam and jetsam of jpegs. Some people think this is an end in itself."¹¹ A reader commented on Abrahams' controversial article: "One would think that the web would be ideal for disseminating one's own criticism and theories ... This doesn't seem to be happening even though this form of communication has the potential to completely undermine the gatekeepers of architectural discourse" (Manuel 2009). Could it be that the graphic and infrastructural *form* of the blog somehow promotes play and irony for its own sake, rather than posing serious challenges to normative modes of production or the aesthetic or political status quo? Abrahams' *Blueprint* colleague Peter Kelly (2010) picked up on this theme, and cited some of my own writing, in another widely debated article. While Kelly unfairly takes to task several prominent bloggers for not offering serious design criticism – something they never promised to do – he does echo my own concerns regarding the limitations of constructing discursive publics (which sometimes feel more like fan clubs) around the obscure personal fascinations (which sometimes feel like press releases) of a few increasingly well connected (and mostly male) figures.

Could it be that we've failed to employ digital publishing platforms in ways that can stave off what film scholar Mary Ann Doane calls the "pervasive commodification of the virtual?" (Doane 2007: 148). Buchloh has argued that, due in large part to technological development, "there is no such thing anymore as a countercultural model or a space for negation or contestation, because whatever one does is instantly absorbed and either technologically or institutionally assimilated" (Bear et al. 2006). Consequently, "we are living in a world where the concept of the 'little magazine' or the alternative space ... has been completely erased from the historical possibility" (ibid.). Lovink, argues that this critique extends to Web 2.0:

"Alternative" has been effectively reduced to style. In the media context, this means that we can no longer sell a certain forum (Website, radio station, zine) as subversive or even revolutionary. It will have the immediate danger of being turned into a fashion, a lifestyle item. This tendency towards branding and commodification of criticism poses a serious dilemma for all those who are opposing the powers that be. (Quoted in Meikle 2000)

Disillusioned of the myth of technological progressivism, some have concluded that the architectural "edge" is not to be found on Blogger or Tumblr. Hence, perhaps, the renewed interest, especially among bloggers like Zeiger and Varnelis, in newsprint. Perhaps one "edge" exists where media formats sink into commercial obsolescence. Left for dead, and consequently freed from the obligation to turn a profit and to link itself into a web of cross-promotion, newsprint perhaps offers up new counter-discursive potential.

Blogging Architecture in Realspace

Still, some little magazines are deciding to move entirely online, and new design blogs and online publications proliferate rapidly and promote themselves as counter-sites for design discourse. When *A Few Zines* moved to Los Angeles in August 2009 (Figure 2), the opening night discussion – "Marginalia: Edge Conditions in Publishing and Practice" – took for granted that "self-publishing, blogging, and social media give designers the tools to shape alternative [design] practices" (quoted in Zeiger 2009). This is not to say that there's a deterministic relationship between social media and the design of buildings, in the way that new digital media made possible blobitecture and parametrics, or mid-century media culture inspired transitory, clip-on design practices. Instead, we might say that the more geographically widespread, more topically diffuse, more networked conversations taking place *through* these new publishing platforms could themselves constitute a design practice. Some designers design discursive forms and publics rather than buildings.

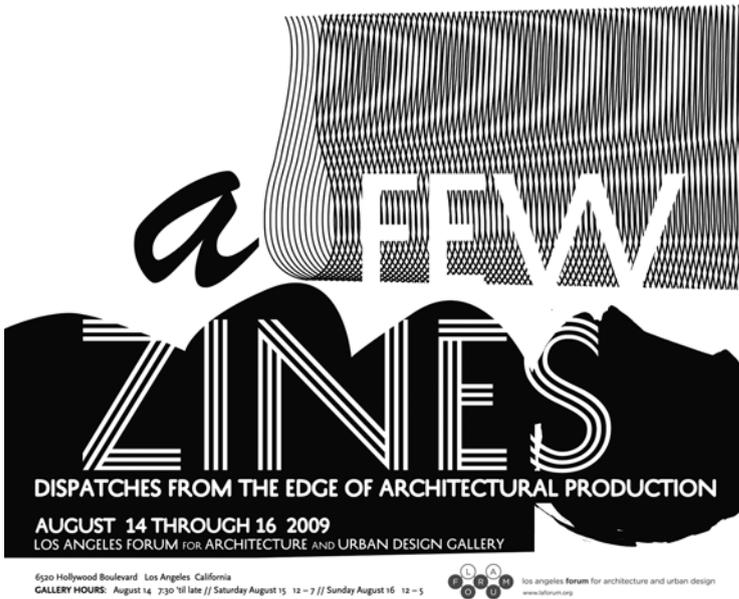


Figure 2

A Few Zines, Los Angeles Poster. Courtesy of Tim Durfee.

“For the past five years, blogging has helped to expand the bounds of architectural discussion,” and its “influence now spreads far beyond the internet to affect museums, institutions, and even higher education,” declared the organizers of Postopolis!, a 2007 bloggers’ conference hosted by the creators of *Inhabitat*, *Subtopia*, *City of Sound*, and *BLDGBLOG* (Postopolis! n.d.).¹² Not coincidentally, Postopolis! (whose name, perkily punctuated, conjures up images of a city constructed of blog posts) was held at Storefront not even two months after Clip/Stamp/Fold folded and moved on to Montréal. Taking cues from that earlier exhibition, the organizers of Postopolis! adorned Storefront’s walls with printouts of posts from their various sites. Dozens of bloggers, publishers, critics, academics, planners, artists, and designers gathered for five days in late May/early June 2007 for “near-continuous conversation about architecture, urbanism, landscape, and design” (Postopolis! n.d.). The live event was



Figure 3
Postopolis! attendees mingling outside Storefront for Art and Architecture.
Courtesy of Stephen Boyd.

to emulate the round-the-clock production cycle, the immediacy, the urgency of the Internet. Through panel discussions, live and telephone interviews, and multimedia presentations – and of course perpetual blogging of the event itself – the hosts aimed to “fuse the informal energy and interdisciplinary approach of the architectural blogosphere with the immediacy of face to face interaction.” It was intended to be a “zine” of a conference – an “experimental, multifarious performance” with “instantiations of multiple subject-positions,” a production with its seams showing, staged in that “kit” of a gallery, Storefront (Figures 3–5; Duncombe 1997: 129; Radway 2001: 11).

Postopolis! was perhaps also an attempt to atone for the acknowledged shortcomings of blogs and other web publications; convening an embodied community, and materializing their conversations on the gallery walls, would perhaps make manifest those “intimate, affectionate connections” that exist between zine editors and readers, and among readers and editors themselves (Piepmeier 2008: 214).¹³ Bryan Finoki (2007) of *Subtopia* suggests that the real value of the New York Postopolis! conference “has been in somehow bridging the virtual world of bloggerdom with an actual node in physical space where people could come together out from behind their anonymous virtual identities and just talk, and listen, and smell each other and raise a glass to some shared idea and space ...”

Following in the tradition of Hans Hollein, who in 1968 declared on the cover of *Bau* that “Everything is architecture,” Manaugh writes in his new *BLDGBLOG Book* (the blog materialized into print in 2009) that design critics should “get people to realize that the everyday spatial world of earthquake safety plans and prison break films – and suburban Home Depot parking lots and bad funhouse rides – is



Figure 4

Postopolis! attendees inside Storefront. Courtesy of Dan Hill.

worthy of architectural analysis, and that architecture is everywhere and involves everything” (Manaugh 2009: 32; see also Mattern 2009). “If the world is framed by architecture,” he writes, “then the world can be rebuilt” (35). A similarly eclectic, evangelical, and mildly hegemonic agenda characterized the Postopolis! gatherings. Participants discussed topics ranging from sustainability to robots to data visualization. But recurring themes revealed the self-consciousness and self-referentiality of the whole affair: live presenters and bloggers talked and blogged about the politics of blogging and the conceit of the gathering itself. Michael Beirut, William Drentell, and Tom Vanderbilt explained how *Design Observer’s* contributors cultivated a style that blends writing for print and writing for web; it permits a multitude of voices and a sense of immediacy, while



Figure 5

Printed blog posts affixed to Storefront’s walls at Postopolis! Courtesy of Dan Hill.

still allowing for quality control. Other participants addressed how a blog's open system results in a *lack* of quality control: the conversation often devolves into "argumentation [and] binary antagonism," two noted presenters complained. Susan Szenasy, *Metropolis* editor-in-chief, characterized blog discourse as "more exposure with less knowledge than ever before."

Dan Hill (2007), of *City of Sound*, admitted later online that he was glad when the gallery wi-fi went kaput, because he was "bored of seeing a glassy-eyed crowd with heads angled down toward a screenful of IM, web, email, Flickr, Shittr, etc."

[A]s much as the neophyte in me would defend that practice as layering an ever-shifting information space over the physical space of the conference or some such bollocks. It's been incredibly healthy to have this informal space, with focused, serious questions about important things, and not deflect that focus with screens, only with noisy New York in the rear window.

Old-fashioned materiality – i.e., the physical world and its infrastructure – reasserts itself here. Various technological failures frustrated presenters and attendees, fire engines blared and loud machinery rumbled through the building's hinged walls, sometimes drowning out speakers' voices – and then a section of the aging ceiling reportedly crumbled, dusting presenter Jeff Byles as he read, appropriately, from his book titled *Rubble*.

When Postopolis! reconvened in Los Angeles in early spring 2009, the organizers – *ArchDaily/Platforma*, *Arquitectura*, *BLDGBLOG*, *City of Sound*, *Subtopia*, *MuddUp!*, and *We Make Money Not Art* – found a place where there was no ceiling: a hotel roof (Figure 6). Storefront and ForYourArt, a self-described "producer and meta-curator" of LA-based cultural events, sponsored another five-day blogathon featuring a group of architects, publishers, geographers, artists, and philosophers. The roof of the "hip, happening, and hallucinogenic" Standard Hotel in downtown LA "pushe[d] us up to the midriff of some of the surrounding skyscrapers, though barely the knee of others, and [felt] suitably cinematic," Hill (2009a) described (quoted on *The Standard Hotel* n.d.). As in New York, the conference was distributed across time and space; Hill and other participants blogged throughout the event, Storefront posted videos, others posted photos, and Manaugh Tweeted the goings-on. And again, the conference site existed in some liminal real/virtual space – half inside, half-out; half-embodied, half-virtual.

Presenters again discussed an astounding array of topics: edible front lawns, street poetry, the US-Mexico border, rapid prototyping, the global financial crisis, the dearth of architecture jobs, and, of course, architectural media. Through his blog posts Hill (2009b) suggested that the variety and interdisciplinarity of presentations



Figure 6

Postopolis! on the Standard Hotel roof in Los Angeles. Courtesy of Storefront for Art and Architecture.

paralleled an expanding understanding of what architecture *is*. He wrote:

[The variety of presentation topics] points to another theme of Postopolis! LA: that of architects and other designers increasingly engaging in fields outside their traditional discipline boundaries, working in multi-disciplinary collaborations often focused on deploying “design thinking” to the broader themes of the day. Not simply solving problems but framing questions. Not simply building stuff but helping shape a lens through which to understand and shape our world. This I am all in favour of, with the caveat that it is best done with grace, humility and broad skills and experience. The theme emerged several times, and is perhaps the most interesting area of design at this point. But one also wonders whether it is simply a reaction to the global financial crisis and the vertiginous drop in jobs in architecture and urban development i.e. a need to find a new job, a new role. (ibid.)¹⁴

Self-reflection was particularly appropriate in 2009’s economic climate. “Some pundits are already announcing the death of the much-hyped and derided ‘star’ architecture system and the baroque extravagances of digital fabrication, and hailing the beginning of a more realistic, sober, and sustainable period of design,” *The Architect’s Newspaper’s* William Menking reported in a July 2009 editorial (5). With “fewer private commissions on the horizon and government RFQs on hold, it is a perfect time for architecture and urban planning to rethink the basics of their professions

and embrace a culture of research inside their offices” – or, the Postopolis! organizers might add, *outside* those offices, in places like Storefront or the Architectural League, or even on hotel rooftops. But would Menking have imagined that that research would encompass processing economic and social data, mapping climatological and astronomical phenomena, pushing architects into other highly specialized fields?¹⁵

In 2005, at the start of this recent storm of exhibitions and discussions of architectural publications, *Volume* magazine, in the editorial to its fourth issue, lamented (in characteristic hyperbolic fashion) that architecture is losing its resonance and relevance. It has “struggled in its response to the urgent questions of our time. At most, these issues are paid lip-service ... Seldom are these proclamations connected to a sound analysis of the power structures determining architecture’s fading role but also its explosive potential” (“Coming Up” 2005). Architecture, the editors suggest, neglected to ask questions about its *technique*. The solution is not to go on the defensive – not to get wrapped up in positioning architecture “as a discipline ... trying to define strategies to keep it relevant and meaningful” (Bouman 2007). Instead, the “experimental activists in architecture” need to “come up with new ways to talk about it – new media” (Wigley 2007b). *Volume* was of course introduced as one potential new architectural media form. Postopolis! could be another. The debate asks whether to reinvigorate architectural discourse – and, by extension, architecture itself – by expanding that discourse’s content (what counts as architecture?) or its form, or both.

Social theorist Benjamin Bratton (2009), “batting last” on the Standard rooftop, summarized a theme that was embedded in many presentations throughout the Postopolis! LA conference: “If media innovation in the 20th century meant new content: movies, stories, music, then the 21st media innovation has been in new ways to re-sort and redistribute that archive. From content to form, as it were.” Postopolis! attempted to expand the architectural agenda. But the event was also a play on form – a layering of media platforms that captured and recreated the event both in real-time and days or weeks after the event, after the bloggers had had time to “take in” the proceedings. Hill remarked on *City of Sound* about this layering of discourses and temporalities:

Someone commented on one of my posts that “it’s almost like there was more information in there than the actual talk.” Well, that’s the idea. You can’t approach the sensation of being there, but you can at least add context, analysis, links and your own take on such things. This will slow the process down (as you’ll see, when my reviews of this thing are still emerging a few weeks from now) but I hope it’s better for it. (Hill 2009b)

He thus denied the blog's "immediacy imperative" and used *City of Sound* instead as a space of critical reflection – a place to integrate his thoughts on the site, the people, the content and form of the event.¹⁶ A wildly popular hotel bar, meanwhile, against its better nature, became host to a para-intellectual conference – one that, similarly paradoxically, transformed an online conversation into an in-person meeting. This conference was implicitly about overturning the conventions of various media forms and testing their fruitful integration. The very materiality of the conference – its physical setting and social relations – also suggested that the gathering was about pushing against the imperatives of the digital – e.g., immateriality, immediacy, and anonymity – while at the same time exploiting the opportunities digital media provide for collective authorship, accessibility, and widespread distribution. Digital networks brought these folks together on this rooftop, but once they had all congregated, in-the-flesh interpersonal communication, supplemented with some flashy projected images and various forms of documenting the live event, took over.

Materiality here is complicated, particularly if we examine it as Hayles and Appadurai suggest that we do: in terms of a medium's apparatus, its "physical characteristics and signifying strategies," and its social relations. On one level, Postopolis's medium is interpersonal communication – perhaps the most potentially democratic mode of communication. Manaugh argues that architecture critics' responsibility is both to democratize architectural education – to educate everyday people about what is, or can be, considered architecture – and to legitimate what everyday people think about the spatial world, a gesture that reminds us of zines' embrace of popular culture and the everyday. "What do janitors or security guards or novelists or even housewives – let alone prison guards or elevator-repair personnel – think about the buildings around them?" (quoted in Nissley 2009). *BLDGBLOG* and other architecture sites do occasionally include interviews with non-insiders, denizens of counter-publics, people "who actually [live] in this world (and who [don't] teach at Columbia)," but how often are they a part of these publications' audiences? (Manaugh 2007). It's unlikely that there were many, if any, prison guards or housewives in attendance on the Standard Hotel roof or at Storefront. The attendees at Postopolis! were educated, predominantly white, well-dressed, and well-accessorized with a variety of Apple products – people positioned appropriately within social and economic networks both to know about the event and to be able to get there. Just as with the other alternative architectural media we have examined, the blogger's convention is a medium that embodies a particular politics of access and particular power relations between producers and consumers.

We could see a familiar story playing out here: as blogs are "legitimated" and transformed into books, as bloggers turn consultants or gurus, they run the risk of repeating the histories of the little

magazines of the early and mid-twentieth century that fell into favor with the establishment and lost their “littleness,” that found their visual and rhetorical techniques subsumed by the market, that suffered because of “dampened enthusiasm” for the myths and ideologies they propounded (Pratt 2007). One of the major challenges these new, digital “little” media face, Doane reminds us, is to resist “the pervasive commodification of the virtual” (Doane 2007: 148). The very infrastructure of digital publication – with its Tweets, Facebook updates, blogrolls, and constant demand for new content – compels self- and cross-promotion. As Lovink has explained, many social media platforms enlist users, even those “empowered” enough to create their own content and set their own agendas, in promoting the platforms themselves or their corporate sponsors.

So, while architecture may be experiencing the “death of the much-hyped and derided ‘star’ architecture system and the baroque extravagances of digital fabrication,” and exploring new, “smaller” modes of production on the “edges” of architecture, those edges are cultivating their own extravagances and their own stars. Little goes big, counterpublic goes public – or private. Perhaps, as Buchloh and Lovink suggest, there really is no longer a countercultural space. Perhaps assimilation, co-optation, is inevitable. Perhaps between its debut in Storefront and its sequels in LA and Mexico City, Postopolis! had become a “branded event” championing the host publications (*Domus* co-hosted the Mexico City gathering) and venues (the Standard Hotel and the Museo Experimental El Eco in Mexico City).

Folding Up

A Few Zines raised questions about the ideologies of print and digital infrastructures; the relationships between those media forms and various practices of production, distribution, and consumption; and the social nature of those practices. Postopolis!, meanwhile, involved kaleidoscoping, fluid-format conversations in liminal (but not “subordinate,” and thus not “counter-”) spaces about sundry subjects and postulated about the various publics who might be among architectural discourse’s producers and audiences. Taken as a whole, the projects we’ve explored here – from hard-copy *loud paper* to Postopolis! Tweets to *BLDGBLOG* and its book – as well as additional publications featured in other recent events, illustrate the different forms that architectural discourse, itself conceived as design practice, can take, and the opportunities for and limitations of fluidity between different media forms. Recent print-to-web, blog-to-book, online-to-onsite, magazine-to-exhibition translations, and media format mash-ups have allowed designers, publishers, curators, etc. to experiment with different production techniques, affording new speeds, quantities, and economies of production and new means of distribution, allowing access to different audiences in different conditions – and creating the potential for those audiences to interact with architectural discourse in new ways. But do these

“subversive” publishers and their audiences together constitute counterpublics – publics conscious of their “subordinateness” as a discursive community and committed to “transformative” “scene making”?

Transformative discursive publics require progressive discursive “architectures.” Whether new “little” publishing ventures are hand-sewn or hand-coded, material or virtual, custom designs or mash-ups, they need to acknowledge both the risk of and the necessity for material experimentation – not for its own sake, but as a means of questioning architecture’s and its publications’ position in “the relations of production of [their] time” (Benjamin [1934] 1978: 222). And because that time is ever-advancing, this question must be continually re-posed. The discursive “edge” is thus not a style or a formal template to be copied. It is a counterspace always on the move – if it’s lucky, just one step ahead of the encroaching forces of commodification.

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Notes

1. *Arquitetura e Publicação: Instrumentos e Meios de Comunicação*, Universidade Lusíada, Lisbon, Portugal, March 13, 2009; Winka Dubbeldam, Andrew MacKenzie, & Geoff Manaugh, “Architectural Publishing: The Future” Panel Discussion, Parallax: National Architecture Conference, Melbourne, May 1, 2009; Lars Müller, “If This Was Not the End, What Is the Future of Print?” Lecture, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal, September 18, 2008; Bear et al. 2006; Michael Kubo, Kevin Lippert, Andrea Monfried, Dung Ngo, Suzanne Stephens, “A Panel on Architectural Publishing,” The Architectural League of New York, New York, November 6, 2008; Béton et Garamond symposium, Ecole Spéciale d’Architecture, Paris, France, March 26–7, 2009.
2. Manfredo Tafuri ([1974] 2002) notes that, as criticism poses questions such as these *to architecture*, it must also put them to itself: “that is, in what way does *criticism* enter *into* the process of production? How does it conceive its own role within that process?” (167). We are here posing the same questions to architectural publication.
3. This premise is perhaps worth qualifying, given several recent exhibitions’ interest in *other* time periods’ “subversive” design publications.
4. Michael Kubo (2007), design editor and author, says that the editors of Actar’s boogazines (hybrid book-magazines) have

attempted to strike a balance between the authoritative, “top-down” authorship of the book and the “bottom-up dialog” of the blog, while also considering the “difference between *moderating*, in the sense of mediating a mass of external material towards a coherent discussion, and *curating*, which comes in wanting to have a more active, independent voice in what is produced.” Editors at *Volume* magazine, meanwhile, function as “DJ[s] or VJ[s],” “find[ing] things that already exist, gathering evidence, and mak[ing] something completely new with that evidence”; in other words, they adopt the m.o. of blogging (Wigley 2007a).

5. In the late twentieth century, Louis Martin argues, the “convergence of deconstruction and architecture and the invention of ‘critical architectural theory’” inspired new ways of thinking *about* architecture (Martin 2009: 157). Those new theories made an appearance on the pages, and in the form, of publications of the time.
6. A participant in a 2007 *Archinect*’s discussion about architectural publication noted that the immediacy and urgency that characterized *Archigram* and many of its contemporaries “see[m] to have migrated to the web, where barriers to access are much lower, and the price to read is almost nil” (Jourden 2007–8). But is the effortless immediacy of online posting the same as the exigency conveyed through the “crude immediacy” of the little magazine? (Ouroussoff 2007).
7. In early 2009, *Volume* put out a “bootleg” issue that was a print “mash-up” of *Volume* and *Urban China*, the Chinese periodical then on exhibit at the New Museum. The editors describe the project as a “DIY format for assembling and disseminating work within a circle of hardcore fans ... Unlike a pirated copy or fake which tries to assume the identity of an authorized product and is motivated by a desire for profit, a bootleg announces itself as an improvised, illegitimate work and is largely motivated by a wish to share” (C-Lab. n.d.; Plewke 2009).
8. I have written elsewhere about the publics – the collaborations, the geographically defined communities, the shared media production and consumption practices – generated by early twentieth-century literary little magazines and mid-twentieth-century architecture little magazines (Mattern 2011a, 2011d).
9. Neuman said the same of the little magazines of Clip/Stamp/Fold: “Paper could tolerate extreme ideas that were not always executable. It could integrate text and images, discourse and design, and through presentation expand architecture beyond its disciplinary limitations” (Neuman 2008).
10. See Galloway and Thacker (2007) for discussion of the distinctive forms of “networked” control.
11. Such themes reappear in many recent debates within media studies, information technology, etc. about the politics of

- blogging and the potential for a digital public sphere. See Poell (2009) for a synopsis of this debate.
12. The impact of digital technologies on architectural publishing has been taken up in numerous recent discussions, including “Grafting: Publishing and Practice,” Pinkcomma Gallery, Boston, March 6, 2009; and “Blogitecture: Architecture on the Internet: The State and Influence of Architectural Criticism in an Age of Digital Networks,” MIT HTC Forum, Cambridge, MA, April 7, 2009.
 13. The organizers may have taken aesthetic or political inspiration for this coming-together from relational aesthetics’ commitment to creating models of sociality, or from the many “alternative school” projects, including the New Museum’s Night School series (New York), The Public School (originating in Los Angeles, and now with branches in several global cities), and Manifesta 6 (Cyprus), that are currently in vogue.
 14. Rem Koolhaas presents a more expansive (perhaps even imperial) vision for the transference of “design thinking” to other fields: “Liberated from the obligation to construct,” he says, architecture “can be a way of thinking about anything – a discipline that represents relationships, proportions, connections, effects, the diagram of everything” (Koolhaas 2004: 20).
 15. See Mark Foster Gage (2009) on the spread of “research architecture,” which, he says, assumes “a legitimate cause-and-effect relationship between cursorily observed problems” – the kind of problems and curiosities commonly addressed in a 300-words-or-fewer blog post – “and their subsequent architectural solutions” (Foster Gage 2009: 42).
 16. danah boyd (2006) argues that the blog is a hybrid medium; both textual and oral, it is a manifestation of “secondary orality,” and it is a discursive space simultaneously public and private.

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