

Working (Through) the Field: /

What follows are some speculative thoughts on the relation between the terms 'field' and 'work' articulated in response to the fascinating essays and projects contained within *Architecture and Field/Work*. My purpose is to offer some ideas about how the research encapsulated within this book can be considered with respect to the wider context of interdisciplinary spatial practice and to reflect upon how future research in architectural design and other practice-led arenas might make productive links between academia and the profession, specifically, as this book suggests to me, by 'working (through) the field'.

When disciplines exchange they come together in dialogue, but there is often also competitive tension, and frequently disputes over territory. When claims are made for the particular meaning of conceptual terms and the specificity of disciplinary methods what seems to be at stake is the wish to put into play terms that dissolve fixity and valorize ambiguity. This current volume is situated at a point of interchange between architecture and anthropology and as such is concerned particularly with the relevance of 'field work' for architecture, a set of ethnographic techniques, which form the heartland of anthropological methodology. When I asked editor Suzanne Ewing how she understood the distinction between site and field, for example, she pointed out that: 'site is a place to practice in/on/with, and field is a place to learn from/in'... "To site" implies definitive moves, an author(s) and of course specificity. "To field" is more contingent, responsive, and depends on flowing, pervasive conditions, clouds, indeterminate edges'.¹ Both site and field are spatial terms, which in recent times have provided exciting points of departure and operative mechanisms for new architectural research, but the way in which Ewing draws the distinction between them indicates the emphasis she wishes to place on learning, and also her decision to flag up indeterminacy as a desirable feature of the exchange. So in *Architecture and Field/Work* the emergence of a new term – 'field' – in architecture is given value in relation to a more established term – 'site' – by virtue of its potential as a location of learning and for its indefinite qualities.

This desire to discover new terms, which allow the production of, and the claims for, knowledge to be unfixed, is part of a larger project in spatial theory and practice. Elsewhere I have explored how cultural geography and other allied fields have, over the past thirty years, continually sought to discover unfixed or relational qualities in given spatial terms so demonstrating that space is an active ingredient not a passive backdrop in social and cultural life.ⁱⁱ In the 1970s, for example, one of the main projects for cultural geographers was the 'reassertion of space in critical social theory'.ⁱⁱⁱ While time, as history, through the dialectical processes of historical materialism in Marxist thought, had been taken to be the active entity in shaping social production; space was taken to be merely the site in which social relations took place. To argue for the importance of space in producing change geographers such as David Harvey, Doreen Massey and Edward Soja turned to the work of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre.^{iv} In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre suggests that the relation between space and the social is two-way: 'Space and the political organization of space express social relationships but also react back upon them.'^v Soja describes this concept of Lefebvre's as the 'fundamental notion of the socio-spatial dialectic: that social and spatial relations are dialectically inter-reactive, interdependent; that social relations of production are both space forming and space contingent'.^{vi} This meant then that space was not inert but an active ingredient, not only socially produced, but also, and importantly, vital in the production of social relations.

This highlighting of the importance of space rather than time in the postmodern period encouraged a 'turn' to spatial theory in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Academics from all kinds of disciplines, from art history to cultural studies, looked to geography for a rigorous and theoretically informed analysis of the relationship between spatial and social relations. Published in 1993, Michael Keith's and Steve Pile's edited collection of essays, *Place and the Politics of Identity*, marked the moment in the debate when place started to become more central to discussions.^{vii} By interrogating the reciprocity of the relation between the politics of place

and the place of politics, the introduction and many of the essays in the collection highlighted an interest in 'unfixing' place.^{viii} Doreen Massey had already been arguing in favour of an understanding of place as 'unfixed, contested and multiple'. For Massey, although a place may comprise one articulation of the spatial or one particular moment in a network of social relations, each point of view is contingent on and subject to change.^{ix}

As an intellectual tool, the 'unfixing' of place operated as a critique of writings in human geography and architectural theory that had emphasized the special qualities of particular places as if they were somehow pre-given and not open to change or connected to wider conditions. The focus on 'genius loci', in architecture in particular, had essentializing tendencies.^x While other work, including Yi-Tu Tuan's notion of topophilia and Gaston Bachelard's concept of topoanalysis, had been far more valuable in emphasizing a humane, but also an imaginative and sensual understanding of place.^{xi}

In 2002 cultural geographers came to reflect on the 'seminal' theorists whose 'spatial thinking' had influenced geography's so called 'spatial turn'.^{xii} In *Thinking Space*, editors Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift identified a number of new themes in spatial thinking such as experience and travel, trace and deferral, mobility, practice and performance.^{xiii} All the qualities noted indicated that space had become mobilized as experiential and practice orientated, not only from a social perspective, but also in a way which somehow emphasized temporal qualities – not the 'old' time of history but other temporalities – flow, flux, duration, ephemerality, event – arguably setting up discussions that are now being termed the 'performative turn'.^{xiv}

Over a similar timeframe discourses around public, context-based and site-specific art developed an understanding of site beyond its location as the physical co-ordinates of the work but instead in relation to performance and also to ethnography. Some authors made their arguments with particular reference to the practice of place, Nick Kaye, for example, made a strong argument for site as a performed place.^{xv} Also

drawing on Michel de Certeau's 'notion of space as a practiced place',^{xvi} in my *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, I identified an interdisciplinary mode of practice, located between art and architecture, which I termed 'critical spatial practice', to describe works that intervened into specific sites in order to offer both a moment of self-reflection on their own methods as well as social critiques of those sites and their cultural histories and contemporary social uses.^{xvii}

Miwon Kwon's *One Place after Another* also used place as a term from which to begin a critique of site-specificity. Kwon noted that site-specificity had been 'embraced as an automatic signifier of "criticality"' in current art practice and argued instead that there was a lack of criticality in much site-specific work and that while site-specific practice might have a radical potential it is always open to co-option by institutional and market forces.^{xviii} The title of her book sounded a warning of 'undifferentiated serialization', one of the dangers associated with taking one site after another without examining the differences between them.^{xix} Kwon looked to Homi Bhabha's concept of 'relational specificity' as a way of emphasizing the importance of thinking about the particularity of the relationships between objects, people and spaces positioned, akin to James Clifford's notion of site as a mobile place, between fixed points.^{xx}

Meanwhile Alex Coles's edited collection, *Site Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, positioned art's interest in site within an ethnographic perspective that included the research processes of fieldwork as well as the role of the artist as a contemporary ethnographer.^{xxi} This approach also defined sites not in terms of geometry but in relation to the cultural and spatial practices that produced them, including the actions of their researchers and investigators. Indeed, following Hal Foster's seminal essay, self-critique, along with culture, context, alterity and interdisciplinarity, were taken to be the key aspects of anthropological research to impact on fine art practice.^{xxii}

When locating the new collection of essays in *Architecture and Field/Work* within the broader development of spatial terms, it is important to note

that the emergence of 'field' in architecture, alongside space, place and site, is explicitly anthropological in its reference. It is not the first time that architects have been interested in anthropology, in the late 1960s and early 1970s research into the use of architectural spaces drew greatly on anthropological approaches.^{xxiii} In more recent work, it is an explicit interest in ethnographic processes, which characterises the interdisciplinary encounter. The fascination with certain methodological qualities certainly seems to overlap fine art's attraction to ethnography as noted by Foster. Architectural practitioners and cultural critics in *Architecture and Field/Work* are interested in shifting the focus from the architectural product to the whole production process and its various constituents as a field of enquiry. While earlier engagements with anthropology emphasised the 'users' of architecture as producers of cultural space, this current interaction also highlights the role of the building industry in the construction of architecture, and shifts the terminology employed to discuss producers and users towards the ethnographic term 'participants', thus questioning the line drawn between researcher and researched, and bringing ethical issues concerning researching subjects and their objects of study – people as well as buildings – into the frame.

Of particular interest in this book's specific engagement between architecture and anthropology is the decision to focus on 'work'. For this reason the papers and projects discussed in this collection produce an original take on the broader cultural project I have described so far and its concern in revitalizing spatial terms. Thus far in order to (re)activate spatial terms critics have shown how they interrelate with social and temporal categories, from the socio-spatial dialectic, to the unfixing of place, to site as a performed place. Rather than space, place or site, *Architecture and Field/Work* explores the potential of the spatial term field, and it examines field's relation to the social-temporal category not of unfixing or performance but of work; and it does not with explicit reference to the dialectic but rather through the operation of /.

Work is an action, it refers to the act of labour, but it is also a term used to describe a process in psychoanalysis – the ‘working-through’ of resistance. For Sigmund Freud, resistance is a response, it comprises actions that are performed to avoid the process of remembering painful events that have been repressed: ‘The greater the resistance,’ Freud says, ‘the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering.’^{xxiv} The therapeutic process of psychoanalysis allows analysands to work through material that has been repressed, to bring unconscious elements of the psychic structure into relation with consciousness. So how might this psychoanalytic process of working-through be relevant to field/work?

I suggest that a consideration of work in terms of ‘working-through’ brings to mind the need to work-through disciplinary resistances, the ways in which disciplines foreground and value certain patterns of enquiry and knowledge production, and ignore, marginalise and even repress others. Perhaps then the very interest that architecture currently has in ethnographic practice is present precisely because these methodologies contain qualities and activities that have been and are currently cast aside and devalued in architecture, or maybe because adopting such research procedures which engage with a range of participants, can shift attitudes towards that which has been repressed in architecture.

Strands of the architectural profession have pragmatic needs that often favour short-term economic gain; when working within a capitalist system procedures need to be simplified in order to be make design work profitable. It is also the case that the university, with its managerialist attitudes and bureaucratic structures, is a field of knowledge production deeply embedded within capitalist modes of production and consumption, and more recently with the scandalous bail out of the banks, it is facing, along with the whole of the public sector, a future raided of finance. Higher education is located within the current crisis of capitalism, but does not face quite the same restrictions or priorities as the architectural profession – as long as the funding allocated to academics still allows original knowledge to be generated that does not have to be entirely focused on economic impact, the possibility remains for the development

of new research cultures which might allow for a working-through of resistance to see what has been repressed in architectural practice.

I would like to end with a note on the /, or forward slash, that links field to work. A major feature of *Architecture and Field/Work* is the in-depth discussion, more explicitly made in the editorial introductions but also implicit in the individual contributions, of the different relations that exist between the terms field and work as: field work, fieldwork and field/work. Ewing has highlighted her own interest in how the shift from field work to fieldwork is a change from verb to noun. I have been exploring a parallel interest in my site-writing project, but rather than a shift from verb to noun, I take a noun and a verb and join them together to produce a hybrid.^{xxv} It was the hyphen, which provided me with an exciting opportunity to create a new term noun-verb out of two others, and I find the use of the slash in field/work even more provocative. The forward slash is often employed instead of the hyphen or dash to connect two terms, but it can also indicate alternative terms. So what does this specific use of the forward facing slash here in *Field/Work* suggest? Does the connection made between the two terms also highlight a distinction, so making their combination one of amalgamation, hybridity and of differences juxtaposed? And where does this forward facing mark point to, who and how might it join and split, and what is it capable of doing?

ⁱ Personal email correspondence, 17 May 2010.

ⁱⁱ See Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 15-20.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).

^{iv} See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) and Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

^v Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) p. 8. This quote from Henri Lefebvre emphasized by David Harvey is discussed in Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, p. 81. See footnote 4.

^{vi} Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, p. 81.

^{vii} See Michael Keith and Steve Pile (eds) *Place and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1993).

^{viii} Keith and Pile, *Politics of Identity*, p. 5.

^{ix} Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, pp. 4–5.

^x See, for example, Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980).

^{xi} See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) and Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of the Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974). See also Paul C. Adams, Steven Hoelscher and Karen E. Till (eds) *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) pp. xix.

^{xii} See Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift (eds) *Thinking Space* (London: Routledge, 2000).

^{xiii} See Crang and Thrift's 'Introduction' to *Thinking Space*, pp. 1–30, especially pp. 19–24.

^{xiv} Jane Rendell, 'Constellations: or the Reassertion of Time into Critical Spatial Practice', David Cross and Claire Doherty (eds), *One Day Sculpture*, (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2009) pp. 19–22, p. 20.

^{xv} See Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London: Routledge, 2000).

^{xvi} Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 117.

^{xvii} The term 'critical spatial practice' was first introduced in my article Jane Rendell, 'A Place Between Art, Architecture and Critical Theory', *Proceedings to Place and Location* (Tallinn, Estonia, 2003), pp. 221–33 (published in English and Estonian) and later consolidated and developed in my book *Art and Architecture*: see p. 1.

^{xviii} Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002) p. 1.

^{xix} Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p. 166.

^{xx} James Clifford, 'An ethnographer in the field', interview by Alex Coles, in Alex Coles (ed.) *Site Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000) pp. 52–73.

^{xxi} See Alex Coles, (ed.) *Site Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000).

^{xxii} Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (London: Verso, 2002) p. 91. See Foster's seminal essay, Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer', *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) pp. 171-204.

^{xxiii} See for example, Amos Rapoport, *House Form and Culture*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1969); Amos Rapoport, *Human Aspects of Urban Form*, (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1977); Anthony D. King (ed.), *Buildings and Society: Essays on the Social Development of the Built Environment*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); and Anthony King, *The Bungalow*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); See also the work of anthropologist Shirley Ardener, 'Ground Rules and Social Maps for Women', Shirley Ardener (ed.), *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps*, (Oxford: Berg, 1993), pp. 1-30.

^{xxiv} Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working Through' [1914] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII (1911-1913): The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works*, translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958) pp. 145–156, p. 151.

^{xxv} My aim in my site-writing work is to write sites rather than write about them – to remake the material qualities of a site in textual form – and in so doing, to shift the relation between subject, verb and object, so that instead of an author, as subject, writing about a site, as object, a different relation is created, where a new site, produced through writing, operates as an object as well as a process, a noun as well as a verb, so setting up a set of relations between sites as subjects and objects. My site-writing project was initiated as a pedagogic tool at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, from 2001, and as a mode of spatializing writing first in Jane Rendell, 'Doing it, (Un)Doing it, (Over)Doing it Yourself: Rhetorics of Architectural Abuse', Jonathan Hill (ed.) *Occupying Architecture* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 229–46, and then developed through a whole series of essays and works, brought together in Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: IB Tauris, 2010).