

Architecture Toward Other Ends (Portland, 26–27 Apr 13)

Portland State University, Portland, OR, USA, Apr 26–27, 2013

Deadline: Nov 2, 2012

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CFP: A Strange Utility: Architecture Toward Other Ends
Conference

Keynote Speaker: Jill L. Stoner, Associate Professor of Architecture,
UC Berkeley

Ours is an era of austerity measures, global economic turmoil, and resource depletion in which the utility, or “use value” of any product, resource, or process is championed as its foremost virtue. Politicians aspire to budgets that maintain only the most functional and necessary line-items and consumers seek products that are economical in their use of resources or their adaptability from one utility to another—for example, cars that use only a limited amount of gasoline, furniture that converts into other uses, cell phones that are also computers, cameras, and personal navigation systems.

Of course, the discipline of architecture has always been linked to the idea of utility—albeit in a variety of ways and to different degrees. From architecture’s putative origins as a primitive form of shelter made of foliage to the Modernist dictum that form follows function, architecture, from the beginning, has been required to perform a “useful” function. Not surprisingly, utility remains a central concern within contemporary architectural practice, but alongside some of the obvious benefits—the development of more energy efficient materials and processes and the economic incentive to redevelop existing buildings before building anew—have come some strange, if understudied effects. It is now common to describe the inhabitants of buildings as “users,” a turn of phrase that subtly positions architecture as a product whose value, in the end, is determined primarily by the function of its use, and its inhabitants, in the end, as consumers of space, rather than active participants who engage with and indeed transform space through their habits, interventions, and rituals.

Meanwhile, outside the confines of mainstream practice, architecture is being appropriated to ends that seem to dramatically expand and estrange the familiar notion of utility. For example, contemporary Polish artist Monika Sosnowska recently used the twisted architectural form of a Soviet-bloc government building as a metaphor for the pressures exerted upon now-collapsed political regimes. Likewise, artists Paul Pfeiffer, Thomas Demand, and James Casebere have all used the architectural model (and its subsequent imaging) as a vehicle for addressing historical and societal ills, their photographs addressing subjects such as the atomization of the crowd at the sports arena, the history of American slavery, and the atrocities of Nazi Germany. At the same time, for revered science-fiction author Bruce Sterling, architecture is the very medium through which future worlds are destroyed, imagined, and rebuilt. Moreover, within the sphere of architecture itself, as envisioned by Jean-Gilles Décosterd and Philippe Rahm, the built environment is designed to incite physiological and biological responses; indeed, for many avant-garde architects, architecture is both a medium and means to an unconventional end, one part of an equation that considers, among many influences, the social, cultural, mythological, economic, electromagnetic, biological and chemical interactions between our bodies and the built environments they engage.

Recognizing the contemporary currency of utility, this symposium seeks unexpected ways of defining this term within and with respect to the built environment. Submissions sought include, but are not limited to, academic papers, performances, audience-participatory projects, poetry, and prose. This symposium will be structured around a series of events and speakers that grapple with the following questions: how and who has defined architecture's use-value, its utility? How can turning to other disciplines' unexpected utilization of architecture expand architects' and architectural historians' perception of architecture's utility? And, what are architecture's future utilities? As architecture's primary function is called into question daily, we may find that the answer to architecture's future lies precisely in its strange utility.

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