Architects to the Rescue : Exhibitions in the Architectural Gallery Aedes, 2000-2015

Garcia Martinez, Marcela Antonia

DIALECTIC IV

ARCHITECTURE AT SERVICE
A PROFESSION BETWEEN LUXURY PROVISION, PUBLIC AGENCY, AND COUNTER-CULTURE

Dialectic is the refereed journal of the School of Archi-tecture at the University of Utah since 2012 providing a forum for the true spirit of dialectical thinking. This journal brings together the most compelling opposing voices in the discipline today, interrogating the issues, values, methods, and debates that are important to the community of educators at the University of Utah and abroad.

Dialectic is grateful to the following supporters:

Front Cover image: Rem Koolhaas, Cronocaos, Venice Biennale, 2010, photo by Ole W. Fischer.

Back Cover image: Diébédo Francis Kéré, Teacher's Housing, Gando, Burkina Faso, 2004, photo by Erik-Jan Ouwerkerk.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DIALECTIC IV: ARCHITECTURE AT SERVICE?
A Profession between Luxury Provision, Public Agency, and Counter-Culture

When defining architecture, the debate codified in mid-nineteenth century as "Architecture: Art or Profession" is far from dead. The emphasis on the primacy of the program, function, and technological problem solving is still robust; though there is no consensus among its champions about the addressee of architectural design. Should architecture be serving the interests of the client, the users, or the vision of the architect? Should its primary duty be to the profession, the debates in the media, or the symbolic client, namely the public at large? The opponents of this faction, in turn, insist on artistic freedom from such constraints and call for the autonomy of the discipline. Art-architects as well as practitioners of architectural history, aesthetic philosophy, and semiotics dominate this school of thought. These questions are highly charged with political and ideological leaning, full of consequences for teaching, practice, and society, and therefore in need of dialectical interrogation.

Following a liberal reading, architects belong to the tertiary service sector and could serve as a poster child for open market competition: which other profession would ask its members to fight for commissions through public anonymous call for proposals to be judged by blind peer review? And even if this idealizing view of architectural competition has been passed by real existing practice and society, the general notion of architects providing planning and design services for institutional and private clients cannot be disputed.

In a more conservative interpretation—and with a sense of *realpolitik*—architecture cannot but serve the interest of its stakeholders, which are traditionally members of the financial, political, and intellectual elites. Architectural services are provided only for those being able to pay, and since the fees of architects are closely connected to construction costs, there is a clear relationship between investment per cubic unit and architectural design intensity. Traditionally architects were spared for the most valued building tasks within society: the temples, churches and shrines, the palaces and private villas, the monuments, state institutions, and corporate headquarters. Although this close link between architecture and power has been challenged repeatedly, the reality of the practice today still is one of delivering luxury goods. Since this problem is one of architectural representation, architects and critics following this worldview hope for the "enlightened" affluent client (institutional, corporate, or private) to commission the artistically most advanced designers, so that they may carry out daring experiments, for the progress of contemporary culture and the discipline at large.

Seen from a more materialist perspective, architecture is part of the intellectual superstructure of culture as well as of the productive base of society. Architects are involved in matter of fact processes of production and organization of labor, in the distribution of goods, products, and services, and in the provision of reproduction of labor forces. Therefore, architecture and the built landscape represent the societal forces by necessity—there is simply no other way than to think, design and build a neo-liberal architecture within a neo-liberal society. Architects would first have to understand and then take into account the work of the intellectual as "producer" within the production process, within the larger socio-economic system, as Walter Benjamin and Manfredo Tafuri have already suggested. From a slightly different angle thinkers of critical theory have argued for a more dialectical relationship between culture and base, where vanguard architecture might reserve a space of semi-autonomy that would allow for a critical comment and progressive practice within the existing societal forces. Or if this alternative practice is hard to find within the design community, then at least there might be room for an alternative counter-culture within everyday use, appropriation, and practice of the city…

Dialectic IV convenes contributions with new takes on the long-held proposition that architects are providers of design services. They service everyone from the status quo all the way to the subaltern. We know well how architects have historically fashioned themselves to be able to procure the most valued building commissions a people have to offer. But how have the members of the same profession managed to fashion themselves as the custodians of the public good?

Following the thematic issues of *Dialectic II* on architecture and economy and *Dialectic III* on design-build, the fourth issue of our peer-review journal explores architecture at service—of whom, for whom, service to what ideals and realized how?

Ole W. Fischer

ARCHITECTS TO THE RESCUE: EXHIBITIONS IN THE ARCHITECTURAL GALLERY AEDES, 2000-2015

MARCELA GARCIA

ABSTRACT

The German architectural gallery Aedes was established in West Berlin in 1980 by Kristin Feireiss and Helga Retzer, as a platform for discussing contemporary architecture through exhibitions, lectures, and publications. During its first 20 years, Aedes functioned as an entirely private gallery and presented mainly single architects and iconic projects. The gallery changed its institutional framework in 1999 by creating a parallel non-profit association, Aedes East, making it possible for Aedes to have new sources of funding and expand its program. From that moment on, the gallery organized more thematic and collective exhibitions, some addressing the way architects work and the role they should have in society. The message was initially directed to architects themselves. For instance, in 2005 Aedes organized the exhibition *Find the Gap–New Spirits and Strategies for Architecture*. Through the works and practices of 13 young German teams, the gallery showed the ways in which architects were redefining their profession to keep it alive and relevant. In 2013, Aedes went even further and encouraged architects to reach out to the rest of society and put their profession to the service of social and environmental issues in developing countries. That was the main intention behind *Smart City, The Next Generation, Focus Southeast Asia*, an exhibition with original projects for countries in Southeast Asia. *Smart City* stands as an example of a 'reactive' and 'activist' exhibition, one that attempts to solve contemporary issues in the world, an approach that Aedes shares with other institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The gallery is therefore aligned with the general architectural discourse of the last 15 years that exhorts architects to reconnect with their social responsibilities. As a small and independent institution, Aedes further expands and experiments with this discourse in its own way.

What should be the role of the architect in the 21st century? To save the world—at least according to German architectural gallery *Aedes Architekturforum*, which since the early 2000s has been urging the architectural profession to engage in alleviating social and environmental issues across the globe. Its significance stems from three things: first, it is one of the oldest and most prolific architectural galleries in Europe; second, it focuses on international issues; and third, Aedes' co-founder Kristin Feireiss belongs to the circles that validate contemporary architects. Over time, the gallery has attained local and international recognition through showing Berlin before and after the fall of the Wall, as well as through exhibitions of architects from the mainstream international scene. Many of them, such as Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, and Frank Gehry, to name just a few, were at the early stages of their celebrity status at the time of their first show in Aedes. The gallery is also known for its co-founder Kristin Feireiss, who was director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI)—the country's architectural museum—from 1996 to 2001, curator of the Dutch pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 1996 and 2000, and a jury member of the Pritzker Architecture Prize since 2013. Feireiss has been co-director of Aedes, together with architectural photographer Hans-Jürgen Commerell, since 1994.

This paper focuses on the changes in Aedes' program since 2000, in particular on its shift from exhibitions of individual architects and single projects to themed exhibitions, such as architecture from developing countries and environmental issues. Two exhibitions illustrate this transition: *Find the Gap* in 2005 encouraged young architects to redefine their profession through new survival strategies, and *Smart City* in 2013 advocated for the use of these strategies to improve living conditions in developing countries. Aedes shares this approach with other institutions such as the Museum

Figure 1: Exhibition display of *Find the Gap–New Spirits and Strategies for Architecture*, in Aedes in Berlin. ©Aedes.

of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), and is therefore aligned with the reigning architectural discourse. However, its institutional characteristics allow Aedes to experiment with this discourse in its own way.

Kristin Feireiss and Helga Retzer founded Aedes in West Berlin in 1980 as a gallery aiming to promote contemporary architects from Germany and abroad, just three years after the beginning of the International Building Exhibition (*Internationale Bauausstellung*, IBA), a massive 10-year housing operation that turned the western part of the divided city into a center of architectural experimentation and attracted architects from numerous countries. Aedes benefitted greatly from this construction boom because the IBA created an ideal opportunity to discuss architecture. Additionally, architects' participation in the IBA made it easier for the gallery to reach out to them and exhibit some of their works.[1] The late 1970s and the 1980s were also a time when private collectors, art galleries, and a new wave of institutions devoted to the presentation of architecture across Europe and

North America were looking to acquire architectural drawings, particularly by living architects.[2] Some of these institutions were important national museums like the Canadian Center for Architecture in Montreal, founded in 1979, and the German Architecture Museum in Frankfurt, established in 1984. Unlike those museums, Aedes was a rather small-scale and independent initiative, in many ways similar to an art gallery but exclusively devoted to architecture. As such, Aedes holds the distinction of being Germany's first architectural gallery, with the primary intention not to sell drawings—even though it did sell some occasionally—but rather to show them as part of the process underlying the creation of architecture.[3]

FROM MONOGRAPHIC TO THEMATIC: A CHANGE IN STRUCTURE

Aedes has been extremely prolific, showing more than 530 exhibitions from its opening in September 1980 until September 2015, most of which were produced in-house and the rest by other institutions.[4] Regarding the

Figure 2: Exhibition display of *Smart City: The Next Generation, Focus Southeast Asia*, in Aedes in Berlin. ©Aedes.

gallery's exhibition policy, Feireiss has always maintained that she only shows what she finds interesting. Additionally, her background in art history instead of architecture has allowed her to explore her interests instead of limiting herself to current trends.[5] That is why, during its early years, the gallery exhibited architects from two opposing trenches: Postmodernism and Deconstructivism. This subjective approach has been possible thanks to the gallery's reliance on private funding rather than public subsidies for its activities. Aedes generates its income from several sources and activities: from its café, sale of its catalogues, sporadic sale of drawings, private sponsoring, contributions from exhibited architects, and from Feireiss' work as an independent exhibition organizer and editor. This financing model, in place from the very beginning, was the main reason for mostly monographic exhibitions and on single architectural or urban projects in the first 20 years of the gallery's history. Even though exhibitions of single architects and firms, especially those of international reputation, are responsible for Aedes' recognition outside Germany, these exhibitions have also maintained the "architect as celebrity" phenomenon that emerged in the 1980s and is still visible today. However, this phenomenon has been gradually challenged since early 2000s, even by those same actors who helped establish it in the first place.[6]

Aedes has lately tried to distance itself from the cult of individual architects by incorporating more thematic exhibitions into its program. To this end, the gallery's owners created a parallel non-profit association called Aedes East International Forum for Architecture in 1999. At the time, Aedes held exhibitions in two venues: Aedes West, located since 1989 in Savignyplatz, and Aedes East, situated in the Hackesche Höfe complex in the city center, Berlin-Mitte district, since 1995.[7] Since 1999, the intention was for Aedes West to remain private and devoted to monographic exhibitions, whereas Aedes East would develop more complex exhibitions financed through new sources of funding that are permitted only to non-profit associations, such as revenues from memberships and funding from the European Union and from federal and lo-
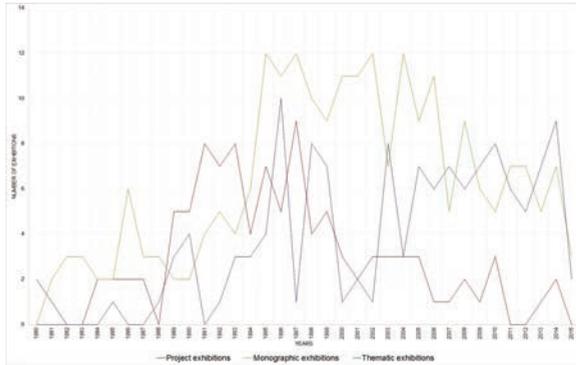
Figure 3: Graph of exhibitions in Aedes by categories over time.

cal governments. Aedes East would also depart from the gallery's traditional orientation by looking outside of Berlin and into trends in other regions, most notably in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Other goals at the time were to present more young architects and to work with architectural schools.[8]

As a consequence of this restructuring, Aedes' exhibitions did change significantly; even though monographic exhibitions remained an important part of the gallery's program, single project exhibitions have drastically declined and have become marginal since the early 2000s. In contrast, thematic exhibitions, which only sporadically outnumbered single project or monographic exhibitions before 2000, have risen and become the second most frequent type of exhibitions in Aedes.

YOUNG ARCHITECTS SHOULD "FIND THE GAP"

With its 25th anniversary exhibition in 2005 titled *Find the Gap – New Spirits and Strategies for Architecture*, Aedes consolidated its preference for themes. At the same time, it expanded the notion that architects work mainly for big projects in which the most important thing is the aesthetic signature of its creator. The concept of this exhibition was to showcase 13 young German teams who, through their projects and their practices, were redefining how architects work in the 21st century, in times of globalization, financial crisis, and political instability. In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Feireiss and Commerell state that "the image of the supremely self-confident star architect often conveyed by the media offers no guide to the concrete professional situations facing these younger

architects, whose careers tend nowadays to evolve along unpredictable trajectories." This could not be further away from Aedes' 15th year anniversary publication that underscored the gallery's affiliation with renowned architects by featuring pictures from their past exhibitions openings with architects such as Aldo Rossi and James Stirling.[9]

Find the Gap can be interpreted as Aedes' response to the 2002 International Architects Union Congress in Berlin, which Feireiss described as proof that the architectural profession "has become disoriented, desperate, unable to communicate, and racked by an identity crisis" because of the "lack of preparation for the changing image of the architect."[10] She further argued that architects in Germany were not sufficiently trained in communicating their work, a shortcoming that the exhibition addressed directly. Several projects in *Find the Gap* highlighted community participation. For instance, firm Bb22 integrated discussions with residents in their design process during renovation of the area surrounding Frankfurt am Main's train station and organized bi-monthly reunions from 2003 to 2008 with people willing to debate about the city. This was a more democratic approach to architecture, one that involved the public and put the users, and not only the architect's will, to the center of the architectural project.

The exhibition showed other ways in which architects were finding new strategies to practice their profession. Firms such as Behles & Jochimsen chose to work on multiple scales, reaching from design of small objects like door handles to bigger schemes, such as their proposal for a waste incineration plant. Other initiatives were not focused on building but on research, such as For Made's experimentations with industrial materials. Another example is Kenny Cupers' and Markus Miessen's investigation and photographic project titled "Spaces of Uncertainty." This project focused on the transformation of vacant spaces in Berlin, a methodology that Cupers and Miessen later transposed for Brussels and London. The aim of Schoper. Schoper Architekten's intervention was to show everyday architecture as a way to valorize the anonymous in contrast to what they called the "cult of the new." In what can only be qualified as "guerrilla" architecture, the Office for Subversive Architecture showed its illegal construction of a single family house on top

71

Figure 4: *Find the Gap*: from November 11 to December 11, 2005, in the Aedes East location in the Hackesche Höfe, Berlin-Mitte district. ©Aedes.

of pillars in London, a metaphor for house ownership that is nowadays becoming literally unattainable. Apart from their projects, it was also through their practices that many of the architects in the exhibition acted as the antithesis of a traditional firm; instead of having a single architect leading a big office with subsidiaries around the world, *Find the Gap* showed architects who normally work independently and even in different countries, but who create temporary associations for certain projects.

In spite of its innovative approach, *Find the Gap* conveyed a protectionist message in the sense that it was directed mainly at architects and failed to create a bridge between the profession and issues affecting the rest of society. According to the exhibition, young architects should find new strategies to adapt to current circumstances and redefine their profession if they want to keep it afloat and, by extension, continue working. This concern was not unjustified: Feireiss herself acknowledged that architects were one among the many actors involved in the building process by stating that "the architect has long ceased to be master craftsman and is now, at best, the conductor of an orchestra of specialists."[11] What was contradictory in this situation was that, at a time when architecture exhibitions were becoming more popular than ever, architects were progressively losing their grip in the construction industry.[12]

IT'S TIME TO LOOK TOWARDS THE DEVELOPING WORLD: *SMART CITY*

Aedes put architects to the service of others in 2013 with *Smart City, The Next Generation, Focus Southeast Asia*.[13] This exhibition synthesized some of the lessons learned in *Find the Gap* such as designing on a smaller scale, investing in research, and encouraging community participation. This time, however, they served a greater purpose: to aid developing countries in responding to climate change, to contribute to their social cohesion, and to help them come up with new solutions for housing, public facilities, and other infrastructure needs.

Figure 5: Display for the "Spaces of Uncertainty" project in *Find the Gap*, by Kenny Cuper's and Markus Miessen. ©Aedes.

Smart City was an initiative of the Aedes East non-profit association that, as mentioned, focused on themes and on regions outside of Europe. Since 2001, Aedes organized at least one exhibition per year on Asia in the context of the "Asia-Pacific Weeks," a yearly forum in Berlin meant to foster economic and cultural exchange between Germany and countries from this region. Many of these exhibitions were in standard formats, like presenting young architects from specific countries or the careers of outstanding single architects. In *Smart City*, however, Aedes went beyond its traditional role as a gallery exhibiting already existing works. Instead, it reached out to architects, urban planners, and architecture students to develop new projects that would form the subsequent exhibition. These projects addressed social or environmental issues in the Southeast Asia region. Professionals from both this region and Europe answered Aedes' call for proposals and participated in three workshops in Phnom Penh, Jakarta, and Manila. Later on, students from the University of Düsseldorf designed the exhibition display in the gallery.

The exhibition features architects working at different scales, from punctual and realistic projects to gigantic and extravagant urban proposals. Three projects were built prior to the workshops and were situated in low-income neighborhoods. The first was a temporary bamboo swing over a river in Jakarta, meant to transform the river into a public space to reduce its pollution. The second project was a bamboo footbridge in the Philippines, built in collaboration with the residents. The last design was a football court surrounded by a seating structure in Bangkok. Other projects addressed bigger problems such as lack of housing and social exclusion, such as a design of prefabricated houses for the elderly that integrated information or commercial stands in which the residents could work. A project of a pedestrian block in Phnom Penh was meant as an opposition to the upsurge in privatized space, and a design for a new type of industrial warehouse was intended to provide better working conditions for employees through natural lighting and more ventilation. The exhibition also presented two strands of research: one illustrated how Southeast Asian airports are dealing with the in-

Figure 6: Display for the Schoper.Schoper Architekten's section in *Find the Gap*. ©Aedes.

crease in air travel caused by low cost flights, and another one on creating a bamboo reinforcement material that could replace steel rods in concrete structural elements. Among the urban proposals, there were a ring belt outside of Jakarta and a flood-resistant park in Bangkok. And finally, two projects that felt out of place when compared to the otherwise down-to-Earth approach of the rest of the exhibition were a blob-like structure for a reservoir city and 13 high-rise residential towers.

The methodology used in the exhibition could easily have been transposed to developing countries on other continents, and many of the projects would have worked elsewhere as well, mainly because they addressed issues that exist in other places. Overall, *Smart City* stands as an example of a 'reactive' and 'activist' exhibition, one in which the curator takes it upon herself/himself to try to offer possible solutions for a contemporary issue, including solutions that may not even exist just yet.[14] Other institutions, like the MoMA in New York, had also tackled contemporary problems, such as the rise in the

ocean levels as a consequence of climate change and the American housing crisis following the 2008 financial collapse. The museum organized workshops with young architectural firms who created new projects which were then presented in exhibitions.[15] These projects and *Smart City* constitute a great example of architects putting their knowledge, skills and even their mediation circuit—architectural exhibitions—to the service of urgent problems affecting the world. And in the end, this may be the key to preserving the relevance of architecture as a profession.

CONCLUSION

In the early 2000s, Aedes changed its structure and increased the number of themed exhibitions. Monographic exhibitions, however, are still an important part of its program. There may be multiple reasons for this, one being that monographic exhibitions are easier to organize and finance compared to the effort and cost of thematic exhibitions that necessitate further research, logistic and human resources, and time to prepare.

Figure 7: *Smart City*: From August 1 to October 7, 2013, in the Aedes am Pfefferberg location, Prenzlauer Berg district, Berlin. ©Aedes.

Figure 8: Overview of the *Smart City* exhibition display, designed by students from the University of Düsseldorf. ©Aedes.

The preponderance of monographs also shows that although the gallery and other institutions have tried to distance themselves from their laudatory practices, which benefitted mainly internationally renowned architects, this remains a tendency still deeply ingrained in the mechanisms that promote architecture.

Aedes is also not alone in urging architects to engage in social and environmental issues. On the contrary, the gallery is part of a generalized movement that includes renowned institutions such as the MoMA. In this sense, Aedes may not be a dissenting voice from the reigning architectural discourse, but this does not make its contribution less significant. It is thanks to its small structure and subjective approach that the gallery has more flexibility to experiment within the confines of this culture and expand it away from Europe and the United States, two main poles that dominate the global architectural scene. In particular, Aedes focused on Southeast Asia, with *Smart City*, and on Latin America, another region that has caught the gallery's attention since 2000.

Aedes and other galleries, centers, and independent institutions that mediate architecture across Europe are not only providing a local point of view for questions that permeate the global architectural circuit, but they have also the advantage of being legitimate actors for discussing architecture and urbanism in their own cities. There could hardly be a better suited institution to debate Berlin's development since the 1980s than Aedes. But nowadays, the gallery has realized that it is crucial to try to understand what is happening in the rest of the world and question the role that architects can play in it. Joining the ranks of those who want to save it seems to be a valid and necessary part. ∎

ENDNOTES

1. Corinne Jaquand, "Aedes", *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, no. 265 (October 1989), 112.

2. Heinrich Klotz, "The founding of the German Architecture Museum", *Architectural Design* 55, no.3/4 (1985), 7.

3. "Kristin Feireiss", *Architektur Szene Berlin 2*, (1989), 29.

4. Information on Aedes' exhibitions is found on its online exhibition archive ("Exhibition Archive", Aedes Architecture Forum, http://www.aedes-arc.de/sixcms/detail.php?template_id=1609&lang=en&menu_id=2. (last accessed July 23, 2015), on its exhibition catalogues and on its own records in Berlin.

5. Jaquand, "Aedes", 112 and Hanno Rauterberg, "Workshop, Ideenschmiede und Forum der Baukultur, Architektur-Galerie: 'Aedes' geht nach Ost-Berlin", *ART Magazin*, (October 1995).

6. See: Miles Glendinning, *Architecture's Evil Empire? The Triumph and Tragedy of Global Modernism* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 134-137.

7. Since June 2006, Aedes is located in the Pfefferberg complex, the building of a former brewery in the Prenzlauer Berg district. This is currently the sole location for the gallery.

8. Bettina Müller, "Weg von der Nabelschau", *Die Tageszeitung*, (May 15 2000), 21.

9. Hans-Jürgen Commerell, Kristin Feireiss, *Find the Gap, Neue Köpfe und Wege in der Architektur, Ausstellung 11. November bis 11. Dezember 2005* (Berlin: Aedes), 2005; and Kristin Feireiss, *15 Years: Architects at Aedes, Eröffnung Aedes East* (Berlin: Aedes East), 1995.

10. Kristin Feireiss, "After the flop", *Hunch: The Berlage Institute Report*, no.6-7 (July 2003), 172-174.

11. Ibid.

12. Barry Bergdoll, "At Home in The Museum?", *Log Journal for Architecture*, no. 15 (Winter 2009), 38.

13. Ulla Giesler (ed.), *Smart City, The Next Generation, Focus Southeast Asia* (Berlin: Aedes East International Forum for Contemporary Architecture NPO), 2013.

14. Barry Bergdoll, "In the Wake of Rising Currents: The Activist Exhibition", *Log Journal for Architecture*, no.20 (Fall 2010), 159-160.

15. See: Barry Bergdoll, *Rising Currents, Projects for New York's Waterfront* (New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2010). And also: Barry Bergdoll, Reinhold Martin, *Foreclosed: Rehousing the American Dream* (New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2012). Both of them published in conjunction with the exhibitions of the same names, shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.