Production/Value

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What is the role of the architect in the production of a building? This is the ambitious question that this issue seeks to unpack. It is a fair and timely question. In the expanded field of building production, what the "architect" does may include possibilities that journalists have already mined to a great extent—architect of the surge, architect of the strategic plan, architect of a bill. The architect has become an organizer, a strategic thinker, the designer of systems, and not simply a designer of buildings. Following this logic, "architect" has also become a verb. Software and other systems are now architected. This is in line with Kanye West's pronouncement while visiting the Harvard Graduate School of Design, that the world "needs to be architected." Given this context, the model of the architect, either as sole genius designer or as conductor of the orchestra of the building trades, is a question open for discussion.

Historical examples exist. Prior to the formalization of architectural education in the nineteenth century, the architect was much more (though just as often, much less) than the designer of buildings. Surveyor, mapmaker, perspectivalist, engineer, humanist, intellectual, planner, politician, proto, and clerk were all synonymous with the title of architect. From Saint-Simonianism to Fordism, the potential role of architecture in society, or, to be more precise, the architecture of society, appeared to be fertile ground for architects. Over time, however, that relationship was limited to the development of factory buildings—production centers—from automotive to Amazon. Even as there have been many attempts at architectural mass-production—from Le Corbusier, to Fuller, to more recent examples such as Modern Modular—we continue to produce buildings in ways not distinct from those in the last century. If anything, the production of buildings, and specifically the documentation now required to build, has become drastically more complicated. Ironically, as the historic purview of the architect, the drawing set, has become more complex, our role in the production of a building has dwindled. The processes by which buildings are financed, bid, and built have more of an effect on the design than the reverse. Hybrid models exist—the architect/developer, architect/builder, architect/manufacturer, and even architect/owner—but are still, however, in the minority.

I would like to propose that the potential for the architect to be more of a player in the production of buildings, and even society, begins in the university and, more specifically, in the studio. While the model of the studio as one that replicates practice and produces a building proposal has been challenged, it is still normative. Oddly enough, it is often in first and final years that this model is most often questioned. Foundation studios need not be about a building because students are not yet prepared to design one (or so the logic goes), and thesis studios can easily be disguised as research. Indeed, the research-based studio has recently reemerged and with it a renewed fascination with fabrication, biomimicry, information-based design, and all things parametric often under the guise of performance. At best, perhaps, is a new awareness achieved by grafting the techniques of the natural sciences onto architectural production in the hope of providing a new *utilitas*, by way of material efficiencies, form making, and fabrication techniques. We are, as a discipline, however, very late to the game. Robots, for example, have been used in the production of automobiles for decades, and CNC (computer numerical control) technologies have been used in manufacturing for even longer.

What if the studio's intention was to focus on design thinking, rather than building design? Why not rethink the production of a building rather than a building proposal? Arguably, these are not distinct, but what happens when we are much more intentional about systems thinking than renderings? Can financing be part of the design problem? How might we rethink the way in which students interact? What is the role of other disciplines? This is, of course, already happening. The d.school at Stanford is the typical go-to model. Stanford, ironically, does not have an architecture school, yet they own design thinking in higher education. Of course, there is the danger that design thinking as a broad enterprise dissolves the disciplinary boundaries of architecture. Perhaps. But, what more professional ground can we lose in the context of the built environment? What if the discipline expanded to be more than building? In other words, what is the value in redefining the discipline while having more agency in the very production of architecture?