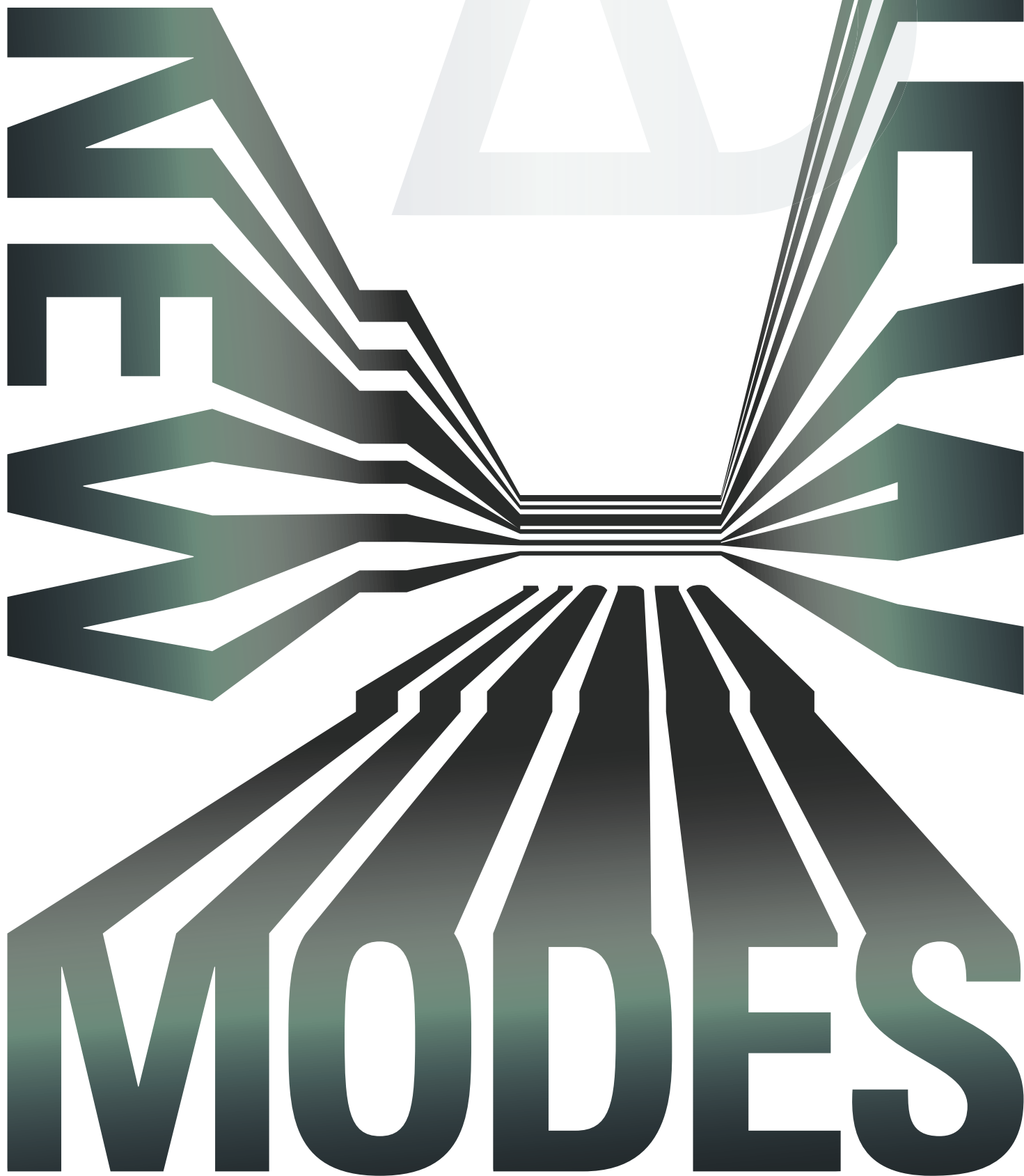


NEW MODES: Redefining Practice

Guest-edited by
CHRIS BRYANT,
CASPAR RODGERS AND
TRISTAN WIGFALL
OF ALMA-NAC

05 | Vol 88 | 2018





KITCHEN
FOR REFUGEES

LIVING SPACE
FOR REFUGEES

PROBLEMS

REFUGEE
ADVICE

build it yourself

EDUCATION

SOCIAL
AFFAIRS

collaboration

talk

CULTURE

HAUS TAK

ATELIERS

KANTINE

neighbourhood

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New Modes

Redefining Practice

**ARCHITECTURAL
DESIGN**

September/October 2018
Profile No 255

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Chris Bryant,
Caspar Rodgers
and Tristan Wigfall
of alma-nac

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Page 1: 00, Diagram of the distributed manufacturing network of WikiHouse, 2015. © 00

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ABOUT THE
GUEST-EDITORS

CHRIS BRYANT, TRISTAN
WIGFALL AND CASPAR
RODGERS OF ALMA-NAC



alma-nac's Chris Bryant,
Tristan Wigfall
and Caspar Rodgers

Chris Bryant, Caspar Rodgers and Tristan Wigfall met while studying for their Architecture Diplomas at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London (UCL) in 2006. They founded alma-nac in 2010 after a period of working for larger practices in London and San Francisco.

Alma-nac began on a market stall with their first project, *Free Architecture* (2010), a method of engaging with the general public, offering advice and consultations to anyone who passed by their pitches on Portabello Road and London's Southbank. Beginning with the idea that good design should be available to all, start with a conversation and be clear and accessible, they used the stall to promote their belief that architecture does not need to be resource intensive or excessively polished, and is more than a shiny object. These core principles continue to resonate throughout their work.

The practice has since developed a strong 'research through action' methodology, embracing values of craft and craftiness, which is evident in their early work delivered in testing environments. Examples included the Incredible Edible Gingerbread House (Brunswick Centre, London, 2011), in which a million calories were devoured in three days by 2,000 children; *Balls!* (Arup Headquarters, London, 2014), an open-source interactive kinetic installation in collaboration with Ruairi Glynn; and the Slim House (London, 2011), a 2.3-metre (7.5-foot) wide three-bedroom family house. This early experimental work led to larger projects including co-housing schemes inspired by the Slim House; low-cost workspaces in high-cost areas; and an innovative animal hospital focused on relaxing pet owners. In July 2015 alma-nac was named one of the 'emerging architectural talents' of the world by *Wallpaper** magazine as part of its Architects' Directory, and in 2016 was one of three winners in the Royal Academy of Arts' 'Urban Jigsaw' ideas competition looking at new and innovative approaches to address brownfield sites in the capital.

Always about more than the projects delivered by the team, alma-nac recognise the importance and benefit of being part of a wider community, and how the furthering of the profession of architecture is advantageous to all. They seek to expand the notion of architectural practice and make the process transparent and accessible. In 2010 they set up the Emerging Group, a place for young architects to meet, share ideas and collaborate, as a direct response to the recession and the low morale within the profession. Since then they have held a variety of positions at a number of architecture institutions: Chris Bryant was chair of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Small Practice Group and Guerrilla Tactics Conference Steering Group, has taught at Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, and currently teaches at the University of Westminster, London. Caspar Rodgers is a member of the RIBA Client Liaison Group and has taught at Oxford Brookes University. Tristan Wigfall has led educational workshops at the Architecture Foundation and is part of the London School of Architecture Practice Network.

Every alma-nac project is a collective effort. Other members of the core team, past and present, include Alice Aldrin-Schrepfer, Simon Campbell, Adam Currie, Victoria Dean, Marta Kruger, Joe Reilly, Adam Shapland and Kieran Wardle. Beyond this, alma-nac has been fortunate to work with many other inspiring organisations and individuals. It is the richness and diversity of these collaborations that drives the practice forward. ▮

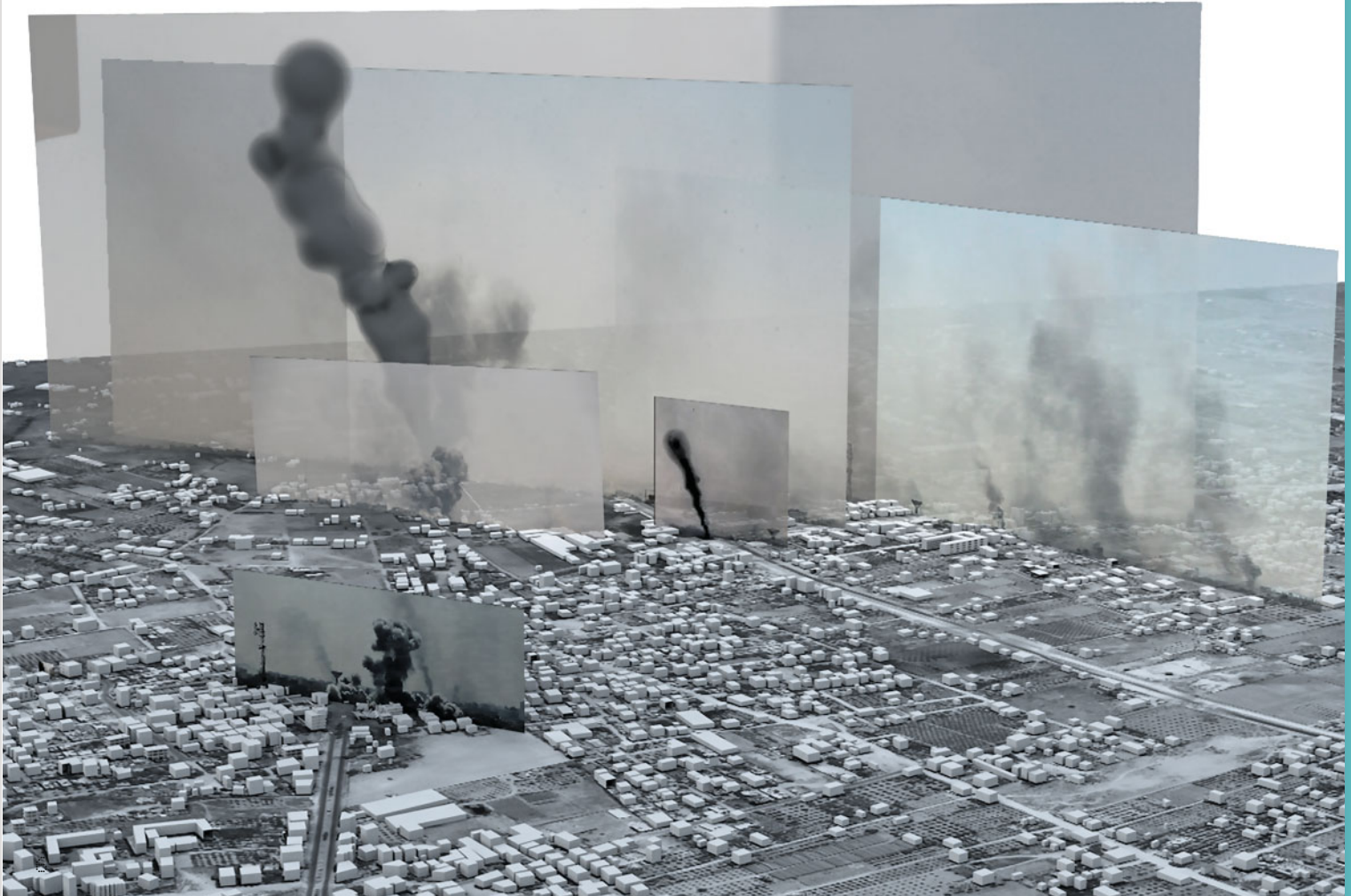
The Changing Forms and Values of Architectural Practice

Forensic Architecture,
Rafah: Black Friday,
1-4 August 2014

Working in the crossover between architecture, politics and law, Forensic Architecture draw on input from a wide range of collaborators to create spatial evidence rather than buildings. This 'Image-Complex' illustrates how 3D models provide an optical device and a means of composing the relation between multiple images and videos in space and time.

INTRODUCTION

CHRIS BRYANT, CASPAR RODGERS
AND TRISTAN WIGFALL OF ALMA-NAC



Architecture appears as the exercise of an arcane and privileged aesthetic code.

—Reyner Banham, 'A Black Box: The Secret Profession of Architecture', 1990¹

The architectural profession has siloed itself. With increasing focus placed on image and form, the agency of the professional architect can be seen to have steadily diminished over the last 50 years. As the environments in which architects work grow in complexity, official reports chart the demise of the profession.² Routes to building no longer necessarily start with the architect; what remains of the architect's services, reduced to accommodate other statutory, construction and management specialists, now occupies a smaller space in the decision-making process. However, there is a growing practice of architecture that is breaking free from this mould, embracing the complexities of politics and people and finally admitting that architecture without these influences is just glorified furniture design. This new mode of practice is emerging with a very different set of role models, creating new types of outputs that relate to a very different set of values. While the profession begins to wither, the discipline of architecture is re-emerging.

But are these new values being expressed in the form of architectural practice? If so, what are the 'new modes of practice' that are emerging, and are they actually new at all, or merely recycled structures and ideologies played out in a new field?

New Modes Versus Old Modes

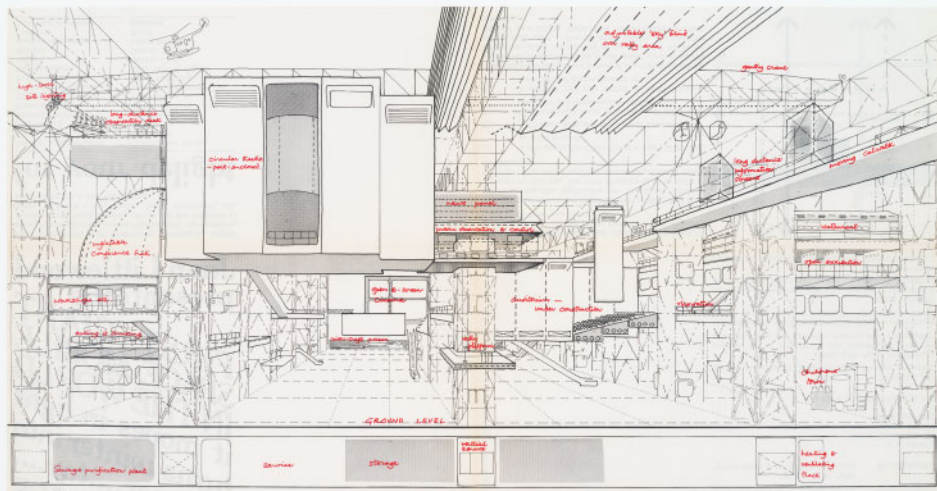
The role of architects can cover a huge range of activities and values, altering according to the project, and the subsequent mode of practice they employ follows suit. The role is notoriously hard to adequately define without the definition becoming overly limiting. However, in order to distinguish what we mean by a 'new mode' of architectural practice, it is necessary to establish what we understand to be the traditional form. Russian-American novelist Ayn Rand's Howard Roarke, the fictional lead character of her book *The Fountainhead*, written in 1943,³ would sadly have us believe the architect is the sole tortured ego sitting between the property mogul and the ultimate purity of spatial expression.

A little less impassioned, in 1997 Renzo Piano stated: 'Architects are people who know ... why and how houses, bridges, and cities are built'.⁴ The subsections of the 'how' and 'why' have been in varying degrees of flux since the role of the architect separated from that of the master builder around 1600,⁵ and the profession was born. Rate of change has been particularly rapid over the last 70 years, the 'how' of building becoming vastly complex, and the 'why' reacting to the growing influence of the private sector. As set out in Finn Williams's article (see pp 104–9), architects have shifted away from the state-employed practice typical of the 1950s



Zaha Hadid,
Pavilion/Aqua Table,
2005

When a Zaha table looks just like a Zaha building, then you know you are in some kind of trouble – a visual comparison made by Jeremy Till in his 'Beyond the Fountainhead' lecture, indicating how some of the current values of contemporary architecture are so close to pure shape making as to be indistinguishable from that of furniture design.



Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood, Fun Palace promotional brochure, 1964

The Fun Palace was an unrealised scheme, commissioned by theatre director Joan Littlewood, for a cultural and education environment on disused public land that would adapt to the local community's desires and requirements. Intended to be dismantled after 10 years, it was designed as a kit of parts, an ever-evolving assortment of distinct structures formed from prefabricated panels suspended within an open steel frame.

to the 1970s towards the private sector, with the proportion of architects practising in the public sector dropping from 49 per cent in 1976 to 0.7 per cent in 2017. It is this fairly recent arrival at a profession dominated by private practice that forms the status quo for this issue of *Δ*.

Architectural output is set by the agenda of architect, client and regulatory bodies combined. Working within the state, the focus of this output was often on longer-term value to the community. With the pronounced global shift towards neoliberalism since the 1980s,⁶ however, this agenda is now more financially driven and often shorter-term in outlook. Within the building industry, the subsequent introduction of early design role specialisms, such as planning consultants and project managers, alongside changes in typical procurement routes, such as the contractor-led approach, have all impacted the architect's services. As a profession, architecture has seen its influence wane; the architect becoming one of a myriad of specialist consultants whose contribution to a project is all but pre-decided. In the tightly worded appointment documents relating to the delivery of highly complex constructions, there is no space left for the indefinite role. Outputs must be pre-established in black and white, and focused on risk management and financial goals. Roles are specialised and compartmentalised and that of the architect has been edited down accordingly.

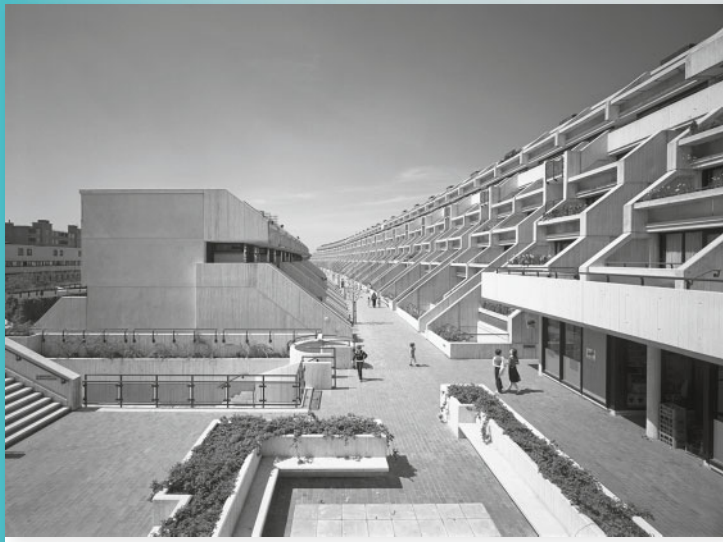
With this curtailment of the role has come a loss of agency, further cemented through the self-siloing of the discipline, and reinforced through the profession's reading of its own history as both purely formal and, critically, almost entirely distinct from that of its wider environment,⁷ 'privileging the building over its occupation ... over the processes of production ... and over the way it situates itself in society'.⁸ This objectification of the output of the discipline is encouraged through the methods of teaching at key influential schools of architecture.⁹ Teaching and practising architecture relative to the history of architecture, a self-referential story of form, occasionally function, hardly ever of socioeconomic context or actual end-use, posits that the true value of a building is too idiosyncratic for all to understand, and must ultimately be taken on trust. Not the best starting point for the commercial justification of the architect's role.

In the midst of all this, however, in 2015 a young studio collective called Assemble, sitting clearly apart from this current mode of practice, won the Turner Prize, the most

alma-nac, Free Architecture, London, 2009

As part of the process of establishing their practice, alma-nac's directors set up market stalls around London offering 'Free Architecture', an intentionally ambiguous giveaway designed to start conversations with the general public.





Neave Brown/London Borough of Camden Architects Department,
Alexandra Road Estate (Rowley Way),
Camden,
London,
1979

Designed in 1968 by Neave Brown, the scheme included 520 homes alongside a school, community centre, youth club and parks. Brown's aim was not one of maximising the site's financial potential, but of integrating the built form with open space while creating low-rise, repetitive and anonymous homes that replicated the characteristics he saw as the true virtues of traditional housing.

alma-nac,
Paxton House, Croydon,
London,
2017

Renovation and extension of an office block to accommodate 43 homes, along with co-living facilities including a spare bedroom shared by the block. The scheme forms part of the practice's ongoing research into methods of positively activating awkward sites in response to London's housing shortage.



prestigious of British contemporary art awards. Their project, Granby Four Streets (completed in 2017), was the renovation of a series of traditional terraced houses in collaboration with the local community in Liverpool (see p 16). This highlighted the existence of what can be described as a 'quiet revolution' in the architectural profession. A new breed of architect is emerging, challenging the limitations of current typical practice. As Williams puts it, returning to 'the social idealism, freedom to experiment and scale of ambition' of an earlier era, rejecting the 1980s' architecture school of built form fetishisation yet this time with a new set of tools to play with; no longer subscribing to less is more, but closer aligned with mess is the law. Alma-nac's work is part of this revolution, as one of many practices exploring this new mode of practice, the output of which need not be devoid of aesthetic control, but rather defined by values that are not purely financial. Our recently completed Paxton House scheme in London (2017) marries these two aspects in the continuation of a self-driven research project into new forms of constrained living requirements, but in a product whose value is in part still tied to its form.

Catalysts and Context

Recognising the causes of change is crucial to understanding the potential impact of this 'revolution' on the architectural profession as a whole. The catalysts are contextual. A globalised context could be argued to stem from Western capitalist trends, from the four threats to localism Brian McGrath maps out in his contribution to the issue (pp 50–57). Many will be both shared worldwide and Western-centric. However, as emerging markets grow to form the majority of global construction, with an estimated growth of 128 per cent by 2020 resulting in a 55 per cent share of global construction,¹⁰ a far wider set of local influences is just as critical to comprehend. So are the catalysts for this change in the architectural profession global or local, born from scarcity of environment or window of opportunity? Douglas Murphy's clarification of the diminishing role of the architect (pp 14–21) is a clear enough impetus. His analysis of the profession's history of 'constitutive crises', specific to the UK,

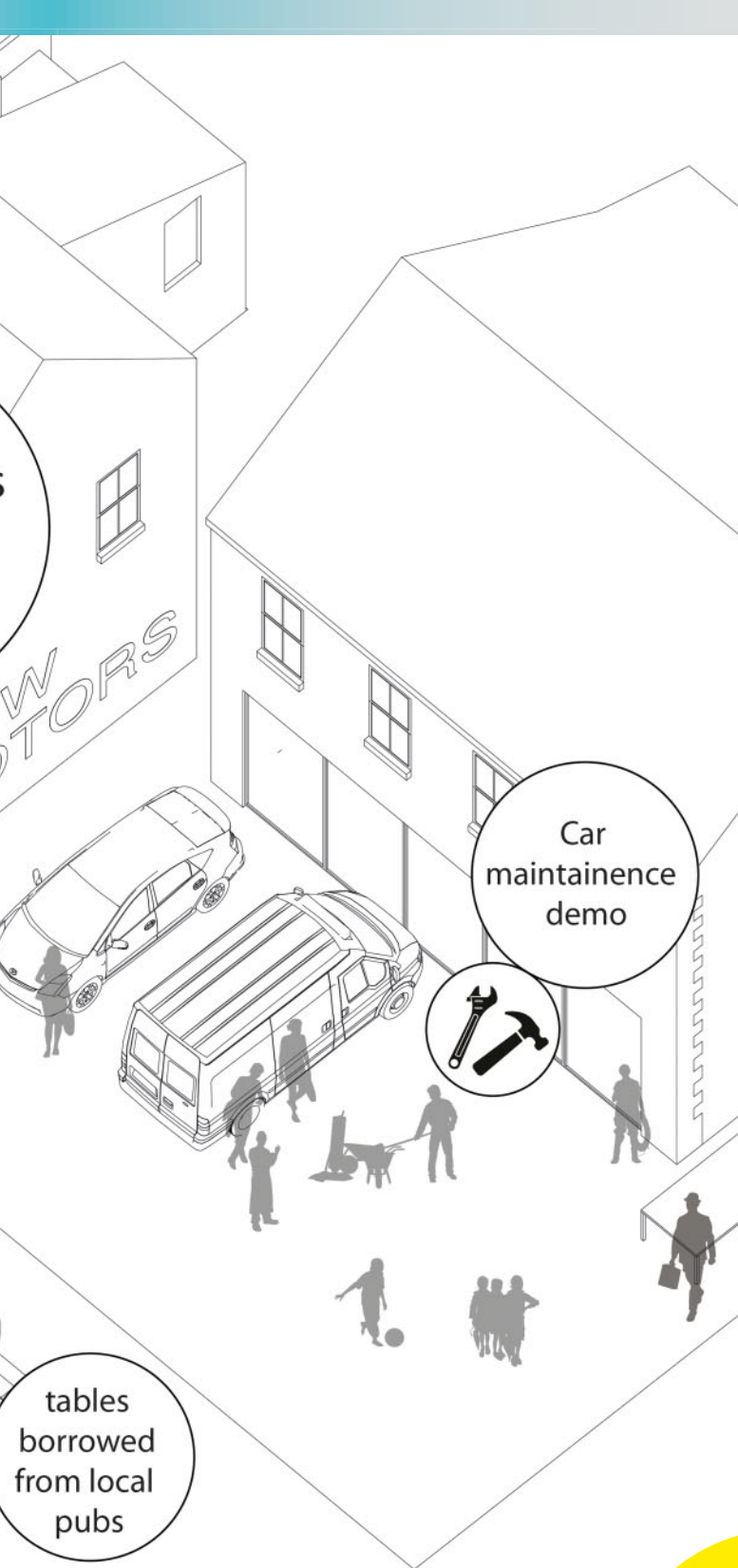
EXYZT and Agnes Denes,
The Dalston Mill,
Hackney,
London,
2009

This temporary wheat field, functioning flour mill and bakery served to connect local communities with the new incoming populations of a rapidly changing area. EXYZT refused to accept architecture as an isolated discipline – their manifesto went so far as to state they refused to enter the current world of architectural practice, a system solely serving the building industry.





Alma-nac's Bow DIY project, undertaken in 2012 in collaboration with Architecture 00, was a similar example, a research and communication exercise setting out to map and unlock a population's skill set in a specific area of London.



paints a colourful picture of the drivers of change. The causes are multitudinous, but three main patterns emerge – financial pressure versus new value; new routes to change; and the political/environmental condition – and it is around these themes that this issue of Δ is organised.

Today, architects are typically paid less for their services than their professional counterparts/predecessors. At the same time, new values are emerging within the realm of architectural production, seeping slowly back into the profession. These extend beyond the finite production of buildings. Indy Johar's reframing of the value of architecture as that of social and economic over the physical illustrates one such example, positioning his practice, Architecture 00, in a very different stream of work (see Helen Castle's interview with him on pp 78–85). Alma-nac's Bow DIY project, undertaken in 2012 in collaboration with Architecture 00, was a similar example, a research and communication exercise setting out to map and unlock a population's skill set in a specific area of London. Indy's calculations show that the cost of construction makes up a fractional proportion of the financial cycle of a building, a viewpoint that has the potential to change what is deemed 'costly' in building, 'thereby driving a systemically different "architecture" judged on its performative effect. This is an architecture that moves beyond the media shot to the long-term impact and influence over human behaviour.'¹¹

With this change of perspective encompassing a wider set of values come new routes to architectural production. In the case of Rotterdam-based Killing Architects (see pp 30–37) this involved a deliberate, wholesale move away from building as their form of architectural production. For others not completely divorced from the built form, there comes a shift away from polished construction as the celebrated output, and with this the potential for a reduced technical barrier to entry. These new avenues of exploration are thus available without the necessary procurement behemoth battling practice structures, sometimes without even the requirement for apprenticeships in practice. New routes to genuine architectural agency outside of the stranglehold of the current systems of spatial influence are numerous. Roles previously treated as 'other' to the traditional architect are being subsumed, for example in the practice of Carl Turner Architects (pp 44–49) where they are builder, developer, curator and, ultimately, client for their own work. Elsewhere, client types are changing top-down wealth to bottom-up connected communities, providing opportunities to return

alma-nac and
Architecture 00,
Bow DIY,
Bow, London,
2012

In exploring the theme of urban 'scarcity', alma-nac and Architecture 00 set up hubs to expose local skills, then mapped and linked these with existing learning infrastructures.

to exploration and testing, and learning through doing. The Burnside Skatepark in Portland, Oregon, officially endorsed in 1993, is a fantastic example of both such a process and resulting product, a method of urban intervention being touted as one of 'visualising citizenship',¹² its precedent causing an explosion of similarly inspired projects.

Then there are architects whose work responds to the vacuums of state, whether the physical legacy of failed state operations, or the opportunities found within slow and complex bureaucratic systems. These practices are working at the micro local level, such as studioBASAR's introduction of social spaces in Bucharest, Romania (pp 38–43) or GutGut's creation of communities within former industrial buildings in Bratislava, Slovakia (pp 98–103). They are also operating at the macro level, for example atelier d'architecture autogérée's fusion as both non-governmental organisation and interdisciplinary design studio (pp 58–65). Globalisation in and of itself presents possibilities for the exploration of new practice; Zoohaus Collective's Inteligencias Colectivas initiative (pp 66–71) operates across scale spectrums combining local skill sets with globalised construction knowledge, then seeding new vernaculars via open-source sharing of the outcomes. Simply the return to genuinely locally responsive design becomes new in the current financially focused environment; New Jersey-based Hector's efforts in this department explore the reality of socially contextual design in extremely complex and deeply rooted modern urban environments, their designs responding to 'multiple conflicting narratives' (see pp 86–91).



Burnside Skatepark,
Portland,
Oregon,
1993

Starting life as a series of illegally constructed concrete banks, this skatepark was designed, built, managed and funded by the local skateboarding community. Iterative negotiations with local authorities saw the scheme retrospectively approved. The park has fundamentally changed both the local area, but also the wider approach to designing and building skateparks.

Four Families of New Modes

This Δ brings together a series of practising groups and organises them according to four predominant trends, each of which is preceded with a foundational piece to establish the context within which these specific subsets of pioneers work.

(1) Diversification of the Role:

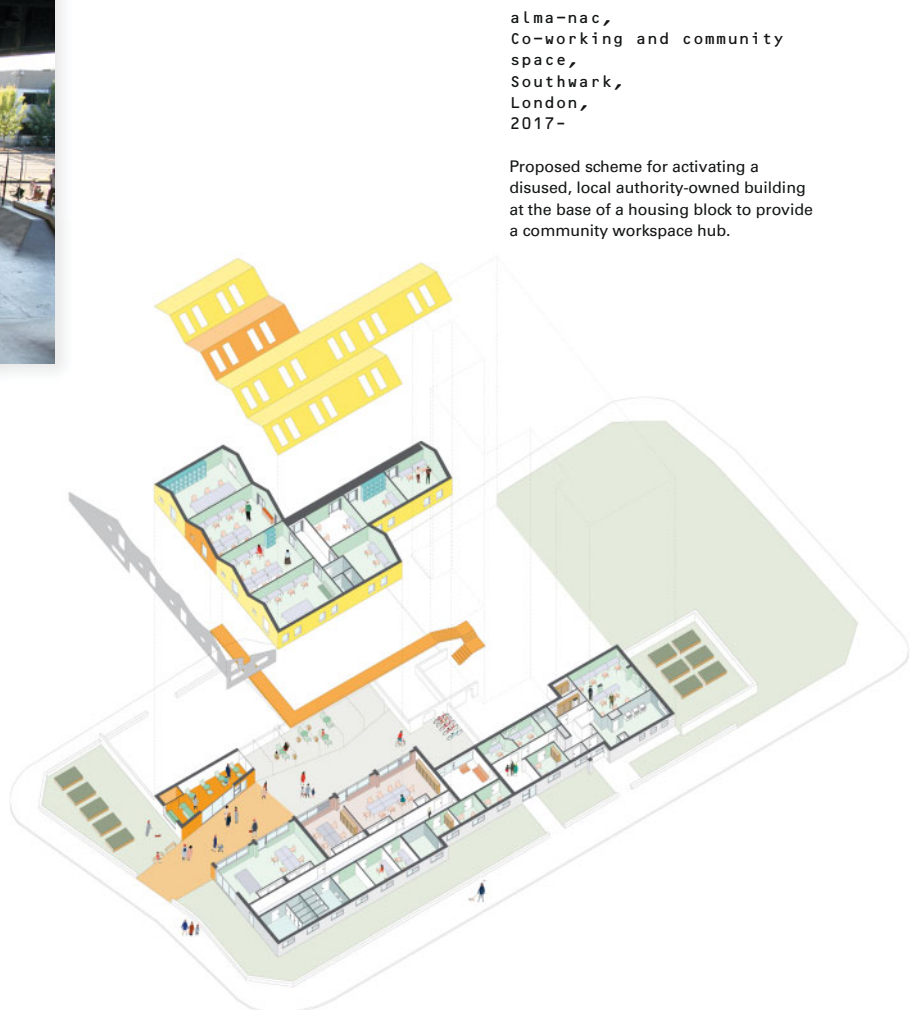
New practice types entrepreneurial in spirit, this brings together those architects whose work steps on the toes of the disciplines around them, climbing up the food chain to take the role of project initiator or developer, or reclaiming territory lost in the wave of specialisation as their primary output, utilising their wider skill sets to offer new types of services.

(2) The Power of Localism:

A new breed of practice returning to localised action, as agents for change within existing communities developing briefs, places and organisations, facilitating community building and rearticulating region-specific design. In place, reverting to the locally embedded professional, yet modifying this position with new practice modalities.

(3) The Architect as Disruptor:

The all-out disruptors – the small family of practices whose work either sets out to destabilise the financial/political structures in which they operate, or doubles as a form of activism.



alma-nac,
Co-working and community
space,
Southwark,
London,
2017–

Proposed scheme for activating a disused, local authority-owned building at the base of a housing block to provide a community workspace hub.