Discourses of design-build: Recognizing complexity in public-interest architecture

Verbal presentation

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Mindful of the argument concerning architecture’s relationship to elites both in practice and representation, this paper explores a televisual representation of architecture (education) in which a disenfranchised group is explicitly catered for. The program is the 2008, Sundance Channel reality show, Architecture School. The six-part series followed students and instructors from Tulane University’s URBANbuild design-build program as they created a family home in post-Katrina New Orleans. The Tulane educational program, and others like it, position themselves as oriented towards social innovation and community development, however, despite such intentions the intricate limitations of contexts and practices impose constraints. Through reference to segments of dialogue and imagery from the show, this paper explores how the TV program reproduces familiar architectural clichés through, for example, presenting the students as more concerned with structure and materials than with the needs of their potential clients. However, this paper also explores how the clients themselves are represented in this media text. Here, nuanced details of personal circumstance and seemingly
intractable problems of administration and governance are depicted in ways that clearly indicate the complex constellation of problems that can limit access to innovative architecture. By exploring Architecture School’s somewhat ambivalent perspective on public-interest architecture our paper offers both a reflection upon televisual media’s rather restricted and contradictory depiction of architectural practice as well as a critical reflection upon the structural and historic social conditions that may curtail the success of even the most publically-minded architectural professionals and educators.

• Author(s) Biography:

Arlene Oak teaches and conducts research in the area of material culture and design studies in the Department of Human Ecology at the University of Alberta, Canada. She has a background in studio-based design (BDes), the History of Design & Material Culture (MA(RCA)), and Social & Political Sciences (PhD, University of Cambridge). Her research is focused on how language (particularly conversation) relates to the creation, mediation, and consumption of the material world with current research (with collaborators Dr. Claire Nicholas and/or Prof. Peter Lloyd) focusing on architecture education and professional practice, the presentation of design and architecture on TV, and the performance of unconscious (gender) bias in design education. Methods and approaches associated with ethnography and forms of micro-sociological discourse analysis are used in her work to better understand how people communicate and explain the decisions they make about the material world, and also to explore how participants in design engage with multimodality (materials, objects, gestures, actions) during creative practice. Arlene has studied and taught in the UK and Canada, and has papers published in, for example, the Journal of Design History, Design Studies, Co-Design, International Journal of Art and Design Education, and Discourse & Society (forthcoming).

Nicholas, Claire is Assistant Professor of Textiles and Material Culture in the Department of Textiles, Merchandising & Fashion Design at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She holds a PhD in socio-cultural anthropology from Princeton University, a DEA from EHESS (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris), and completed a postdoctoral research fellowship in the Department of Human Ecology at the University of Alberta. Dr. Nicholas employs primarily ethnographic and historical methods in the study of Moroccan textile craft and North American design education. Her research focuses on the ethnography of craft and design process, pedagogy, and the everyday practices (and politics) of making and interpreting material and visual culture. Her current book project examines socio-economic development and “traditional” textile artisans in Morocco. Together with Dr. Arlene Oak, she also conducts research on the social dimensions of design and collaborative pedagogies in design education with “real
world” applications, including healthcare contexts and the built environment. She has conducted fieldwork in Morocco and across North America in contexts ranging from artisanal textile workshops to university architecture studios.