CRITICAL PRACTICE IN AN AGE OF COMPLEXITY - AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CRITIQUE OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

• Paper / Proposal Title:
Architecture as Fiction

• Format:
Written paper

• Author(s) Name:
Jassen Callender

• University or Company Affiliation:
Mississippi State University School of Architecture

• Abstract (300 words):
It is difficult to describe architecture as a discipline or practice. There are phenomenologists and formalists, experientialists and conceptualists, criticalists and post-criticalists, event-oriented-media-ists and object-oriented-ontologists, environmentalists and technologists alongside pragmatists who just want to build buildings and make money. Layered on top of these practices, there are differences in belief as to who and what architecture should serve (and for how long), ranging from those who hold that architecture should aspire to timelessness as the ultimate cultural artifact to those who believe that environmentally transparent and ultimately short-lived buildings are an ethical duty. For some, it is art. For others, infrastructure.

As a result, it is common to hear refrains of “crisis” or “crises” and see handwringing over our “age of complexity.” The issues do seem intractable and, worse, the resulting divisions are apparent not only to insiders and professionals but are visible to everyday people for whom “architecture” is becoming an outdated and irrelevant term. Architecture’s
identity is fractured and contested to such an extent that the singular possessive, “architecture’s identity,” is no longer proper grammar. Arguably, “architectures’ identities” is better.

The root of all this divisiveness lies in a single, and relatively unquestioned, paradigm: the pursuit of truth. Only within a paradigm of truth are things like multiple identities, divergent agendas or conflicting characters (the -ists) problematic. Even when truth is conceived as open to complexities, it carries obligations to hierarchy and certainty. These terms are not useful if the goal is to create environments that people in general, and not just architects, can enjoy as backdrops to meaningful lives. To this end, I advocate transitioning to the paradigm of fiction as it has served humanity – east, west, young, old, poor, affluent – for millennia, despite upheavals in societies and cultures, and its techniques well known.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Jassen Callender is an associate professor of architecture and director of Mississippi State University’s Jackson Center which houses the School of Architecture’s 5th year program where he teaches advanced design studios and Theory of Urban Design. He is also an occasional practitioner, painter, and writer who is a member of both the Society of Architectural Historians and a regional board member of the US Green Building Council. Callender’s educational background underscores this range of interests and concerns, from undergraduate training in both architecture and philosophy (1987-1994) to graduate work in painting, sculpture, and art history leading to an MFA in 2001. His subsequent research interests at first seem varied in equal measure – ranging from phenomenological studies of desire, to analyses of the role of perception and meaning in sustainable urbanism, to questioning the impact of shifts from meaning to information paradigms on the evolution of architecture theory and practice. All of this research aims at deepening our understanding of how meaning is constructed and shared in and through the built environment. His first book, Architecture History and Theory in Reverse, is forthcoming from Routledge in July 2017.