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

• Paper / Proposal Title:
  Predictive Speculation: Researching the Spatial Future

• Format:
  Written Paper/Verbal Presentation

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• Abstract (300 words):

  This paper and presentation posits that spatial historic research actually can generate the future as its subject, through predictive narratives developed through reading the past. Normative modes of architectural history have tended to exclusively take the past as the subject, producing knowledge that distills into produced historicism – often veiling the politics of its own production. Clearly spatial history is generated as a function of a present being, as well as a future becoming – yet historians cling to method that denies the operative nature of architectural history itself. What if spatial history admitted the present and even the future as its subject, and ruptured the duality between history’s subject and object? The project may assist in modelling futures for sites, cities and nations.

  In this work, the author will demonstrate a potential method of producing speculative historic facts, which later may constitute the never-having-been proposed by Heidegger and Virno, among others. Or perhaps these facts become a sort of
established alternative narrative despite what happens. The construction narratives that begin in supposedly objective fact of past, reconsider subjective fact of present and generate propositional or transitory facts of future is a critical practice that challenges the temporal fixity of historic spatial practices such as historic preservation and urban planning.

The paper will present complete 100-year narratives that begin 50 years ago and end 50 years from now, with the Chernobyl exclusion zone in Ukraine and the radioactive West Lake Landfill in St. Louis as exemplary subjects of the speculative project. Radioactivity’s almost unfathomable empirical timeline dislodges historicism as a project of knowing to a coping strategy – and provides an excellent entry point into the project of producing the spatial knowledge of the future. From our speculations can begin our repairs, our pauses and our boldest steps forward.

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

Michael R. Allen’s work encompasses architectural history, cultural geography, historic preservation and political activism. Allen practices prefigurative and critical heritage conservation, documenting buildings and cultural landscapes as possible clues to a collective future.

Allen currently holds appointments as Senior Lecturer in Architecture and Landscape Architecture and Lecturer in American Culture Studies at Washington University in St. Louis. Allen also directs his own consultancy, the Preservation Research Office, which has undertaken cultural heritage preservation projects in St. Louis and across the Midwest since its founding in 2009. He founded the Department of Walking as a platform for participatory critical spatial tours, and (with Mallory Nezam) Building As Body as a transgressive architectural yoga practice.

Allen’s publications include chapters in Buildings of Missouri (forthcoming), Bending the Future: 50 Ideas for the Next Fifty Years of Historic Preservation in the United States (2016) and The Making of an All-America City: East St. Louis at 150 (2011). In 2016, he was Urbanist in Residence at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis.