Sergio M. Figueiredo

draft for 20 Years of VAi talk on 6 May 2022

MAKING SHADOWS (FOR ARCHITECTURE)

In 1986, the late Geert Bekaert first presented and then published one of his most fundamental texts (if such a thing can even be claimed from the thousands of texts he published during his illustrious career). In *Architecture devoid of Shadow*,[1] Bekaert reflected how architecture had been discussed and appropriated throughout history, exploring its "two-sided reality" that he identified between understanding architecture as a science or understanding it as an art, that is, either as a rational endeavor in which architecture becomes merely a symbol of a system of ideas or, conversely, a poetic, indefinite enterprise fashioned with amazement, defined by ritual and laced with stories.

It is, of course, far more complex than this (and Bekaert is quite articulate in his reflection), but what it boils down to is, that the difference between these two understandings of architecture lay, precisely in either the presence or absence of shadow. For Bekaert, architecture required not simply *a* shadow, but multiple shadows. Shadows in which architecture's meaning is constructed and layered, where ideas are brewed, implications are considered, interpretations are developed, and, ultimately, discussions can be had. Through these shadows, architecture becomes more than simple material construction, since with these shadows architecture can reach the

[1] Geert Bekaert, *Architecture Devoid of Shadow* (010 Publishers, 1988), later republished in Geert Bekaert, *Rooted in the Real: Writings on Architecture*, Vlees & Beton 87 (Gent: WZW editions and productions, 2011).

emotion of poets or the imagination of bards. As such, material building becomes but traces of those struggles, discussions and contemplations, that is, of our very own human condition.

Today, more than ever, we are in need of shadows. Shadows that can expand beyond the overwhelmingly dominant dictates of capital. Shadows that can reveal architecture's multiple narratives and understandings. Shadows that can infuse architecture with a new vitality and remind us once again of architecture's public condition. It is with these shadows that architecture becomes a cultural force. While not directly referring to Bekaert's shadows, another bastion of architecture, Phyllis Lambert, has recently reminded us that "[i]f the players involved don't see architecture as a cultural force, then you don't have architecture, you have commerce."[2]

Please, don't misunderstand me. Architecture is (and some would even argue that, ultimately, requires) an economic activity with clear commercial considerations, but I think that we can all agree that architecture is not only that, and should not be reduced to, just that. The fixation on the demands of the market, rationalization and productivity above all else is a poor characterization of architecture. Instead, architecture is often the result of business savvy *and* imagination, of pragmatic concerns *and* conceptual ambitions.

It is precisely this broadening of the common understanding of what architecture is and what it should be, that has been the focus and the basis of the work historically developed by architecture institutions. Certainly by the VAI in the past 20 years, but in

[2] Stephan Burkoff and Jeanette Kunsmann, "The Contemporary Is Usually Misunderstood: An Interview with Phyllis Lambert," uncube magazine, October 12, 2015, http://www.uncubemagazine.com/blog/16132491.

the 20 years before that by the NAi in Rotterdam, by the DAM in Frankfurt, by the CCA in Montreal, and earlier than that, by the MoMA in New York and by the Sir John Soane Museum in London. These and many other institutions across the world have worked tirelessly since their inception to make evident to both a specialized and a broad audience the breadth and the depth of architecture. For better or worse, these institutions have operated as true machines for revealing (and sometimes even, making) shadows for architecture, that is, broadly speaking, for producing architectural discourse.

However, more is needed! As architecture and the world around us changes (and keeps on changing), so must architectural institutions. We need more ideas, more frameworks, more projects, more people and more institutions committed to making shadows, committed to architecture beyond construction. We need to open up architecture institutions to democratize their processes and develop co-creation projects through which more and more diverse voices can engage in conversation. Voices with different ideas, with different experiences, with whom institutions can develop a truly plural understanding of what architecture is and what it could and should be. Developing a coalition that can reveal the limitations of economic discourses, and how those have mostly worked towards a skewed image of architecture as being a private concern reserved for those with the means to engage in construction.

The desire and ambition to counteract this *de facto* privatization of architecture seems to already be bubbling below the surface in architecture education and practice. Across Europe, students and young professionals are gathering into collectives and groups to develop new working models, inclusive approaches, and

innovative formats for both producing and discussing architecture. In these groups, we can find an activism with a resolute energy to challenge previous assumptions and fundamentally disrupt the *status quo*, that can revive public debate as well as engage pressing social, cultural, and economic issues through architecture. To counter the cycles of real estate boom and bust (which have come to define what gets built and for whom) and develop instead a broader understanding of architecture as a common, social, and collective endeavor in which each and every one of us has the right (if not the duty) to participate.

I mention these groups because in their energy and in their activities, I have previously recognized spaces of resistance that can indicate a path forward for architecture culture. A path for making shadows that matter not just for architecture circles, but for society at large. For using architecture, its approaches, its tools, its ambitions and intentions to engage with pressing societal problems and, in that process, re-affirm the presence and relevance of architecture in shaping our everyday lives. To reaffirm architecture's political, cultural, and social dimensions and implications.

Today I would like to speculate on what the following step in that path could be. Specifically, I would propose that architecture institutions should not only be attentive to these developments but should also actively incorporate them into their activities and approaches. An infusion of fresh blood that can provide the starting point for a much-needed broadening of architectural discourse. When combining these original approaches and models with the expertise and knowledge of established institutions, these spaces of resistance can become spaces of normalization, that is, spaces where

ideas and approaches on architecture that may fall outside of currently dominant norms can be regarded as and become "normal." This refers not only to a truly plural, multiple, and collective notion of architectural practice or a more inclusive and diverse architectural discourse, but refers also to a recovery of the simple expectation that architecture has something to say beyond spectacular forms or superficial façades. The renewed conviction that architecture is a public activity that should be scrutinized and held accountable as such. In both its praise as well as its critiques.

In the late 60s—not only as a result, but certainly influenced by the 1968 student protests— there was a growing sentiment to question the role of cultural institutions in general and museums in particular. How could these institutions remain relevant? How could, or even should, the reflections embedded in art be transposed and reappropriated to everyday life? In short, how could museums become more open and democratic? Under the leadership of Jean Leering, the Van Abbemusuem in Eindhoven turned to architecture as the element to bridge that gap and not only provide new tools for engagement, but also to relate the insulated art world of the gallery to the real world beyond it.[3] A similar condition can be observed today within architecture and its institutions. Some institutions, such as the VAI (as well as others) are already directly engaging with these pressing concerns. Both by directing their resources to explore particular intersections between society and architecture as well as by incorporating diverse methods of engagement.

One of my personal favorite examples is the project *Wiki Women Design*,[4] since it

[3] Jean Leering, "De Funktie van Het Museum. Tendens van Mausoleum Naar Een 'Levend Museum,'" *Intermediair*, no. 25 (June 26, 1970): 1–9.
[4] https://www.vai.be/en/projects/wiki-women-design

aims to uncover, make visible, and provide long overdue recognition to the fundamental contribution of female designers in Belgium's "designed environment" (from architecture and interior architecture to graphic design and product design). As far as I understand the project (and I am sure that that there are several others here today who can discuss this project with far more authority and in much greater detail), *Wiki Women Design* took as a starting point the recognized shortcomings and, why not say it, the injustices, of conventional collecting policies and practices—particularly in how they have addressed the work of female designers—and developed a plan of action to redress those discrepancies. Also the methods pursued in this project are quite revealing, since instead of simply changing collection policies, *Wiki Women Design* endeavored to change public perceptions by adopting as its tools Wikipedia edit-a-thons, that is writing sessions that record new information into Wikipedia, so that the contributions that were uncovered during this project could become much more broadly accessible than if they would have been concentrated in the archive alone. At least to me, this reveals a recognition of how knowledge structures must become more open and accessible in order to have any kind of meaningful impact. Furthermore, it also indicates how by providing greater visibility and shifting public perception on the work of female designers, collection policies and further research will subsequently follow, in what is expected to be a virtuous circle that displaces previous patterns by more inclusive alternatives. As such, this project engages not only with notions of gender equality, but also with notions of authorship, the construction of memory, as well as the processes through which the architectural canon is constructed… With this project, it becomes clear that the knowledge structures proposed by institutions can also be redirected towards addressing systematic omissions while also showing how

architecture and its institutions can (and should) be stewards for an inclusive and diverse society.

Furthermore, this is also a paradigmatic example of what I imagine the future of architecture culture will look like in the next twenty years (or, perhaps, I should say, what I would hope architecture culture will look like in the next twenty years). Specifically, that the boundaries between the main audiences for architecture institutions become ever more supple until they entirely collapse. If in the past institutions have attempted to occupy a space between critical and popular, the reality has been that their work and activities tended to focus on either end of the spectrum, with a clear focus on different types of audiences (generally and roughly divided between architecture scholars, students and professionals on the one hand, and the general public on the other). In the future, however, institutions should strive to develop frameworks that are flexible and can be used by all, effectively developing the methods and processes through which the critical can become popular and the popular can become critical.

In short, I wonder if institutions can work towards making academic, theoretical, and critical considerations even more accessible and understandable. Effectively, more relatable to the everyday experience of architecture. And can they also work towards fostering popular conversations that are deeper and sharper? Effectively empowering its visitors and the general public to consider architecture in all its plenitude, beyond that what meets the eye. Can we develop structures of knowledge that are unhindered by jargon and professional-speak as much as unencumbered by superficial readings and solely economic or aesthetic considerations? That are welcoming and open to

anyone regardless of their architectural experience and in which the confrontation of ideas and dissent is valued?

Only when architectural discourse is available and understandable to everyone, can architecture become public. Not only that, but only by discussing architecture, by constantly making new shadows, is architecture made possible.

This leads me to my final consideration on, or perhaps a plea for, the future of architecture institutions, namely how they should direct their efforts towards a shared commitment to open up architecture debate and to make it more diverse and inclusive. Specifically, how institutions must not only develop activities that reveal and produce architectural discourse, but also focus on empowering more people to find their own voice and engage in the conversation. Institutions should thus operate as nodes in broader networks of knowledge exchange, steadily working on shared vocabularies and shared frames of reference, with which and within which broader dialogues can be had. Institutions must develop the tools, the frameworks, and the programs to nurture the engagement of more people with varied experiences. This could be done by providing them the space to develop their critical voices and the tools to articulate their own ideas about architecture and the world around them. By fostering the emergence and the visibility for voices that can inject architectural discourse with a more diverse way of thinking, of speaking and understanding the built environment, institutions will be ensuring that we develop new opportunities for more shadows.

Effectively, beyond revealing and making shadows, institutions need to provide the opportunities for others to make their own shadows as well, so that they no longer must rely on institutions or developers, architects or politicians to indicate what is and isn't

important, but instead determine for themselves. Only then will institutions be able to foster open dialogues and, effectively, fulfil their potentials as true forums for architectural discussion rather than temples for architectural affirmation.

However, as Geert Bekaert also once said, "[t]hese opportunities do not drop out of the blue. Just as architecture, they must be created."[5] Let us meet again in 20 years and discuss the various opportunities the VAI will have created.

Thank you.

[5] Geert Bekaert, "Architecture Devoid of Shadow," in *Rooted in the Real: Writings on Architecture*, Vlees & Beton 87 (Gent: WZW editions and productions, 2011), 39.