

# A PLACE BETWEEN, Art, Architecture and Critical Theory

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This paper explores ideas about art, architecture and theory contained in a book I am completing for Reaktion Press, called *A Place Between, Art, Architecture and Critical Theory*. I will start by sketching a backdrop to some of my concerns overall. Then I include a chapter, 'Imagination is the Root of all Change', as a more focused study, which deals with the artist's walk.

## A place between

*Writing has nothing to do with signifying.  
It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come.*  
(Deleuze, Guattari 1988: 5.)

A place between is spatial, it is a mapping of the topographies between here, there and elsewhere. A place between is temporal, it pays attention to time, to the ways in which we locate the then from the now, the now from the yet-to-come, for in our writings of history, our placing of the past in the present, we are already positioning possibilities for the future. A place between is social, it is an articulation of the place of dialogue, ongoing discussion, between one and another.

For some years now I have been between. As a child I moved from country to country, home to home, and now in my working life I find myself between library, classroom, art school and design studio. As a writer, researcher and educator of artists, architects, historians and theorists, I explore the relationship between disciplines – theory and practice, art and architecture, criticism and writing. My current work maps my investigations and in so doing draws on a range of ideas from geography, cultural studies and philosophy, as well as examines projects from a variety of practice-based disciplines, from architecture to performance art, from poetry to landscape design.

In the last ten years a number of academic disciplines have come together in discussions concerning 'the city'. This interdisciplinary terrain of 'spatial theory' has reformulated the ways in which space is understood and practiced. One of the books I am working on, *A Place Between*, focuses attention on the writings of such influential spatial thinkers as Michel de Certeau, Walter Benjamin, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Rosi Braidotti. I do so to provide starting points for several speculative journeys between theory and practice. By stretching and playing out definitions like 'art' and 'architecture', theoretical reflection provides standpoints from which to explore what we might call critical spatial practice.

I have taken Edward Soja's trialectic of space, time and social being as a tripartite structure for the book. Each term places the relation between theory and practice slightly differently, through spatiality, temporality, and subjectivity. In the first section, 'Between Here and There' the focus is on space. The section deals with the spatial relationship between what is inside and outside the gallery, looking at Robert Smithson's dialectic of site (the site of the work) and non-site (gallery) and the contemporary gallery terminology of site (gallery) and off-site (the site of the work). I examine how Rosalind Krauss's notion of the expanded field operates today in terms of the expanded practice of curatorship and the spaces between works rather than the individual works themselves. The work of Michel de Certeau offers a chance to think of site-specific work as 'a practiced place' and the artist's walk as a 'spatial story'. The second section, 'Between Now and Then' highlights the importance of time and shifts in scale to examine new actions in existing contexts, in terms of addition, subtraction, intervention, juxtaposition, contemplation and transformation. In the third section, 'Between One and Another', I look at the relationships established between people in the making of work, between artists and architects, makers and users, authors and audiences. I attempt to consider the work less as a series of things or objects placed between people, and more as a series of exchanges or choreographed economies composed of actions, things, people, events and places, a 'social sculpture' perhaps.

Having laid down the structure for this book in a synchronic fashion, it became apparent to me that it was of course not possible to talk of the work of the present without either the past or the future. For this reason each section looks backwards in order to locate itself within a broader historical trajectory, but

also forwards to speculate on the future. Looking backwards, I found myself making connections with the work of minimal, conceptual, land and performance artists of the 1960s and 1970s. Looking forwards, I discovered that the art works I had been examining set out a series of implications for architecture, for ways of making architecture that are not yet in existence.

As with any piece of writing that has developed over a period of years, my own position has changed. I set up a structure only to discover that the works I wanted to describe would not settle in their appointed places. As a result there is not one single voice that pervades the text. I move between observation and interpretation. I am situated very much in the middle of things, in motion, pausing only at specific points.

### Interdisciplinarity

*Interdisciplinarity is always a site where expressions of resistance are latent. Many academics are locked within the specificity of their field: that is a fact ... the first obstacle is often linked to individual competence, coupled with a tendency to jealously protect one's own domain. Specialists are often too protective of their own prerogatives, do not actually work with other colleagues, and therefore do not teach their students to construct a diagonal axis in their methodology.*

(Kristeva 1997: 5–6.)

In both academic and arts-based contexts, the term ‘interdisciplinarity’ is often used interchangeably with multidisciplinary and with collaboration, but I understand the terms to mean quite different things. In my view, multidisciplinary refers to a way of working where a number of disciplines are present but maintain their own distinct identities and ways of doing things. Whereas in interdisciplinarity individuals move between disciplines and in so doing question the ways in which they work. In collaboration the emphasis is less on disciplinary distinctions and more on how individuals work together towards end points decided through mutual consent.

Despite current enthusiasm for multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity and collaboration in current art practice and academic debate, I remain somewhat skeptical, because to truly engage in such activities is demanding and not simply procedural. All these activities require a mode of ‘thinking between’. This is

what I believe Kristeva is referring to when she argues for the construction of 'a diagonal axis' in 'methodology' between theory and practice. Thinking between demands that we call into question what we normally take for granted, that we question our methodologies, the ways we do things, and our terminologies, what we call what we do. The construction of a diagonal axis is necessarily, then, a difficult business. When Kristeva talks of 'the anxiety of interdisciplinarity', she is also referring to the difficulty we have in questioning the disciplines we identify with. For this reason that I am also a passionate advocate for interdisciplinarity, because at best this is a difficult and transformative way of working – rigorous and reflective, creative and critical.

Much of my research to date has involved working as part of a multidisciplinary team (e.g. in *Strangely Familiar: Narratives of Architecture in the City*, an exhibition, symposium, and catalogue produced in 1995). The working team included researchers, architects, graphic designers, film makers, multimedia artists (Borden *et al.* 1996). The initial project came out of an invitation to curate and design an architectural exhibition. Our response was to reject the notion of architectural history done only by architectural historians and consisting of boards on walls describing the work of famous architects. Instead we invited academics from disciplines outside architecture to provide a short narrative about a specific place in a city and an object related to that space. The interpretative stance was intended to reveal a place that was 'strangely familiar', familiar because it was a known place, strange because this place was being understood in a new way. *The Unknown City*, the book that came out of *Strangely Familiar*, went further in inviting practitioners from art, film, architecture, as well as theorists from geography, cultural studies, architectural and art theory, to comment on the relationship between how designers make and how occupants experience and use the city (Borden *et al.* 2001).

I often work collaboratively as part of an editorial team. This was the case for *Gender, Space, Architecture* (Rendell *et al.* 1999) a book which brought together a series of seminal texts looking at the relationship between gender theories and architectural space, and *InterSections* (Borden, Rendell 2000) a collection of specially commissioned essays addressing questions of critical methodology in the relationship between critical theory and architectural history. The edited book offers a good place for developing interdisciplinarity. The process involves identifying a new area of study, often located at the meeting point between

previously distinct and separate areas of thought. The product, in placing ideas by different authors next to each other around the same thematic, creates a 'between'.

More recently I was invited to guest edit an issue of *The Public Art Journal*. I invited a number of theorists and practitioners to reflect on the notion of public art as social space. I was keen to locate public art as a form of practice engaged with the kind of issues already being developed through the writings of cultural geographers and other theorists (Rendell 1999). My own work in this area suggests that the strategies adopted by fine artists who work outside galleries can offer a mode of conceptual and critical practice that could operate in architecture.

These ideas came out of my time running a Masters Course at Chelsea School of Art entitled the Theory and Practice of Public Art and Design. Here I taught both studio and history/theory and dialogued between them. Students started out with the identification of a conceptual interest and then developed this by locating a site and a medium appropriate for the communication of the idea. 'You can't design art', a colleague once said. One of the most serious failings of so-called public art has been to do precisely this, to make public spaces and objects that illustrate ideas rather than work through them. This has resulted in a number of passive objects that solve problems by offering up fixed meanings. Instead we should be engaged in the making of restless objects, ones that provoke us, that refuse to give up their meaning easily but instead make us question the world around us. If design is the solving of problems – albeit in new and original ways – and craft the perfected making of objects, art, conceptual art that is, involves itself in thinking the impossible, in rethinking and questioning the way things are.

Teaching public art gave me an insight into how theoretical ideas could become manifest in the making of objects and spaces. Armed with this knowledge I set out to find ways of bringing critical and conceptual thinking into architectural design education. In my studio teaching at the architecture school at the University of Nottingham, I used the brief or programme as the place where it was most possible to work between theory and practice, developing conceptual thinking to critique and to reinvent the brief. Now at the Bartlett, UCL, my interests have evolved into a programme of what I call 'site specific writing' where the writing of history/theory is considered a form of practice in

its own right. Students are asked to choose a site of investigation and produce a piece of writing that both researches and critiques the site and physically intervenes within it – taking the form of say a guidebook, catalogue, script or textual installation.

In the PhD programme, my students work between the PhD by Architectural Design and the more conventional history/theory route. Where a more traditional model of research tends to identify a series of questions at the outset and then explore these within a certain time frame, design or practice based research does not necessarily follow this route. Rather the questions only emerge once certain processes of making and design are already engaged with.

Given that that outcome is divided equally between a scholarly piece of writing and a portfolio, it is possible to combine writings and projects, practice and theory, and to construct a creative and critical dialogue between the two forms of outcome as part of the research itself. To negotiate the relation that theory has to practice has never been an easy task. Examples of practice are not illustrations of theoretical positions – as many theorists would have it. Nor can theoretical insights be applied to modes of practice – as some practitioners would prefer. The relationship is not one way, nor is it linear. This work is challenging – how can one think rigorously and critically as well as provide creative propositions?

Now it is important here to clarify what I mean when I use the word ‘theory’. The term ‘theory’ is often understood to refer to modes of enquiry in science, either through induction, the setting out of a thesis that is then proved or disproved by experiment, or deduction, the development of a general principle from specific sets of data. In architecture, theory is taken to refer to writings by architects who describe a design method they have ‘proved’ by example over time. I am using ‘theory’ as a shorthand for critical theory, a term often used to refer to Marxist thought, the work of the Frankfurt School, and in some cases the work of Sigmund Freud. For me this also includes the writings of feminist theorists and philosophers. Critical theories do not seek to prove a hypothesis or ‘test’ a theory, but rather, they are reflective and seek to change the world rather than to simply comment upon it.

A critical theory, then, is a reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation. (Geuss 1981: 3.)

But it is easy to generalise about the relationship between theory and practice, and I think a little dangerous. Each historical moment offers a particular set of conditions, and depending on their own life story, each person takes a different angle. I trained, and worked, first as an architect or practitioner, and later as an historian and theorist. This influences the place I occupy between theory and practice. Now I say this, because for me, even though I started out chronologically as a practitioner, an architect, the relationship between the two probably does 'start' with theory. Reading theory is what opened up my world – allowed me to see things differently. Theoretical debates reformulated the ways in which I understood space, creating potential 'places between' in which connections between disciplines might be made.

### **Imagination is the root of all change**

It is spring in London, early enough to be wearing a jacket, late enough to keep taking it off. Across the tender green of Hampstead Heath, I see a cluster of people. Fragments of bright conversation catch the breeze and a bride's dress blows gauzy. All couples should start their life together like this, in fresh milky sunshine.

I am being asked to look down, at the earth at my feet, under my boots new life is emerging. Moisture is oozing through the soil. The river Thames is surfacing in the form of the Fleet, one of its many tributaries.

I am to spend the day on a walk led by Platform, a group of environmental artists. We will trace the course of the Fleet through London, from its springing point in Hampstead, down through into Camden, King's Cross and St. Pancras, on then to Clerkenwell and along the Farringdon Road to the point where this tributary enters the Thames near Blackfriar's Bridge. The odd thing is, we will not be following a silver sliver of water cutting through the urban terrain, but instead we will traverse the tarmac and concrete of north London. Our walk is to be a meditation upon the course of this buried river.

Before we leave Hampstead, we pause for reflection in the ponds at the Vale of Health. We learn that they are possibly artificial and consider the distinction between what is natural and what is man-made. We comment on the trees and plants around us, some are indigenous, others are, or at one point were, strange to this land. At what point does a newcomer become an old friend?

After Hampstead the Fleet runs underground. When a river is buried, ca-

nalised, contained and arched over, what does it become, a flood drain, a sewer? Is it still a river? We note remnants of the impact the river once had when it cut channels through the surface of the city. Road names recall watercress beds, there are laundries and swimming pools, pubs that grew up around springs. In Camden, we stop a while to watch the reeds in the slow moving canal – a complex microbiology that cleans up the water. We hear how the babbling brook and the dialogue of the reeds in the wind taught humans to speak.

An interesting conversation starts up in St. Pancras churchyard, concerning the poet Aidan Andrew Dunn whose recent epic *Vale Royal* recalls the history of the Fleet in this part of London, in a manner not dissimilar to a twentieth-century Blake (Dunn 1995: 9). The churchyard has some strange memorials, Sir John Soane's Mausoleum designed by his wife, Thomas Hardy's grave, as well as some fascinating stories about the dust heap that used to shadow this site. Like the river, this portion of London was a dumping ground for all kinds of waste: rubble from the brick-making industries, blood and entrails from the tanneries, as well as human effluent. As far back as the thirteenth century, the foul-smelling Fleet was a source of complaint. At one point it was described as a 'cocktail of effluent'; Ben Johnson claimed that it outdid the four rivers of Hades in its vile stench. Anxieties concerning the river's filthy condition and fears of flooding damage were among the reasons given for its burial. The bottom reaches were covered over in the seventeenth century, and the upper reaches later, at the end of the nineteenth century. Today the Fleet is a sewer.

What does it mean to bury a river? At the outset of the walk, this did not seem to me such a big deal. But during the day, as I walked the Fleet my views shifted. Platform told us about a school group they had been working with as part of their campaign to uncover the buried rivers of London. When the children were told that a river lay beneath them underground, they were bewildered. How? How, they had asked, do you bury a river? And technicalities aside. Why? Why would anyone do such a thing? Why indeed would anyone want to bury a river?

Nearby, also underground, apparently under platform 9 at King's Cross Station, is the body of Bodicea defeated and buried after Battlebridge. This part of north London remains still the site of conflict, though today it is over the plans to regenerate King's Cross. Are there any links to be made between the buried body of this ancient British queen and the burying of the river Fleet?

Our present culture is one that attempts to deny the natural in so many ways, medical knowledge and technological expertise seek control of wayward human flesh as we turn a blind eye to the terrifying indications of global warming and environmental disaster around us.

As evening falls we reach the lower stretch of the Farringdon road, with the Thames now in sight we come to a grim halt by some bolted iron doors under Blackfriar's Bridge. This is where the Fleet ends its journey into the city, behind this set of metal grills. We pass around a postcard of an oil painting made by Samuel Scott in the seventeenth century – *Mouth of the River Fleet*. It shows a grand scene, London as Venice, in the style of Canaletto, with a turquoise Fleet glorious, proudly joining the Thames.

It is hard to reconcile this magnificent image with the rather bleak view before me. All along the river, ancient tributaries are falling apart, removing a special way of experiencing London. I learn so much that day. Not just facts about the Thames, but a new way of relating to this city. Walking to the Thames along the Fleet offers a particular sense of 'being in the world', an ecological view that connects us to a networked environment that is both natural and cultural. Unlike reading a book or watching television, I am walking the river as I find out about it. Ley lines, song lines, story lines, some lines only speak as you walk them. The stories I was told that day are intimately connected with the places in which I first heard them.

Platform ask us to imagine what London would be like with majestic rivers flowing down its valleys into the Thames. 'Imagination is the root of all change', they say.

Platform's walk reminded me of another artist's walk I had participated in a year or so earlier. In 1999, in autumn this time, I followed Marysia Lewandowska's *Detour* through the Paddington basin in west London. The project, funded by the Public Arts Development Trust, also took the form of a route through the city, but this artist chose to adopt a more anonymous role. Following months spent researching the area Lewandowska devised several walks. This knowledge was imparted to a number of professional tour guides, who along with workers and residents of the area, took us on *Detour*.

We went to some strange places, strange that is for a conventional 'tour'. We spent a good hour in a storage warehouse for a major Oxford Street retailer hearing the site manager give a full and detailed account of his day's activities, the

organisation, moving and storage of various-sized cardboard boxes. We visited the place where penicillin was invented (quite by accident), rummaged through an antiques market and squashed into a tiny council flat to talk to the inhabitant about life on the estate. As in many of her projects, some of them conducted with Neil Cummings, Lewandowska's passion for the 'everyday' is a driving force. She brought to our attention, not historical facts and dates, nor the famous monuments or sites of architectural interest in the area, but rather the sort of stuff that is all around us, but so ordinary that it remains ignored and invisible. I was left pondering on the huge number of objects we acquire, only to get rid of them again. Lewandowska's research into the history of this part of London focused on aspects of exchange – production, consumption and waste. It is no coincidence, I now think having reflected on the buried Fleet, that this key role water plays in the distribution of our world of things, bringing goods into the city and taking waste away, is barely visible in the urban fabric.

It is not the first time artists have been interested in walking, you only have to think of Robert Smithson, Hamish Fulton or Richard Long in the 1960s and 1970s. Today, there certainly seems to be a fascination with walking among artists, as a way perhaps of engaging with place and change. The popularity of a work like Janet Cardiff's *The Missing Voice* a choreographed walk around the east end of London, commissioned by Art Angel, points to an interest in space current in art practice. It also suggests that there is a difference between an everyday action, such as walking, and an art work, which refines and develops such an action into a critical spatial practice.

A corresponding interest in motion is also apparent in more theoretical discussions about architecture and the city. From the rambler to the skateboarder, we seem increasingly obsessed by figures which move through space. A central motif in recent debates concerning urban experience is the literary *flâneur*. This city stroller who appears in Charles Baudelaire's poems of 1850s Paris, has featured most famously, at least in academic circles, in the work of cultural critic Walter Benjamin. For Benjamin, writing in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as surrealists like André Breton and Louis Aragon, and now for writers such as Iain Sinclair and Patrick Wright and filmmakers like Patrick Keiller, urban roaming defines a particular approach to creative practice. There is a kind of thinking that corresponds to walking; one that follows a general thematic, keeps up a certain pace, but is in constant motion. Moving from one thing to another, engaging

only in passing, the external world operates as a series of prompts for more philosophical musings.<sup>1</sup>

These walks – actual and imagined – are story-telling in motion. In some cases, the work takes the form of a narrative unfolding through space, in others the events discovered on the way are enough to create the story. The spatial element of story-telling is stressed in French sociologist, Michel de Certeau's notion of 'spatial stories'. Stories take place, asserts de Certeau. The spatial story is a device that allows connections to be made between people and places. Through the act of walking, these connections are continually made and re-made, physically and conceptually over time and through space. Public concerns and private fantasies, past events and future imaginings are brought into the here and now, into a relationship that is both sequential and simultaneous. Walking is a way of at once discovering and creating the city (de Certeau 1988: 115–122).

Between departure and arrival, we are in motion. The journey is as important as the destination, or the sites stopped at on route. The fleetingness of travel, of being 'no where' for some time, has been celebrated theoretically, in allowing us to occupy a limbo position. Philosopher Rosi Braidotti's interest in nomadism does not so much describe the nomadic subject, the person who moves from place to place, for this would be politically questionable given the pain of exile experienced by people with no place; rather she is inspired by nomadism as a way of knowing that refuses to be pinned down by existing conditions. For those concerned with issues of identity and the oppression of minorities, the kind of thinking engendered through walking is important for emancipatory politics since it provides a way of imagining a beyond, an 'as if' (Braidotti 1994: 22).

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Charles Baudelaire, *The Parisian Prowler* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1997); Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: a Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1997); Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant* (Boston: Exact Change, 1994); André Breton, *Mad Love* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987); Jane Rendell, *The Pursuit of Pleasure* (London: Continuum/The Athlone Press, 2002) and Guy Debord, 'Theory of the Dérive.' – *Internationale Situationniste*, (December 1958). For useful summaries of this work see for example Christel Hollevoet, *Wandering in the City. – The Power of the City/The City of Power* (Whitney Museum of American Art, 1991–1992). The most well-known anthology of critical texts on the *flâneur* is Keith Tester (ed.), *The Flâneur* (London: Routledge, 1994). Patrick Keiller's films *London* (1995) and *Robinson in Space* (1997) are good examples of contemporary *flânerie*. As is *Topographics*, the series of books about city wandering commissioned by Reaktion Press, including, for example, the work of artist Victor Burgin and writer/novelist Iain Sinclair.

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## Vahepealne koht, kunst, arhitektuur ja kriitiline teooria

### Kokkuvõte

Artikkel esitab mõtteid kunsti, arhitektuuri ja kriitika kohta, mis leiavad käsitlemist ka autori lõpetamisel olevas teoses *A Place Between, Art, Architecture and Critical Theory* (ilmub Reaktion Pressi kirjastuselt).

Raamatu ja artikli teoreetiliseks aluseks on Edward Soja idee ruumi, aja ja ühiskondliku olemise trialektikast. *Vahepealne koht* on ruumiline, kaardistades mõistetega siin–seal–mujal piiratud topograafiaid. Vahepealne koht on ka ajaline, juhtides tähelepanu viisidele, kuidas me eristame olnut ja olevat ning sellest omakorda tulevat. Vahepealne koht on ühtlasi sotsiaalne nähtus, koht dialoogiks ning jätkuvaks mõttevahetuseks. Teooria ja praktika vaheline suhe on mõnevõrra erinev sõltuvalt sellest, kas läheneda sellele küsimusele ajalisuse, ruumilisuse või subjektiivsuse vaatenurgast.

*Vahepealne mõtlemine* nõuab, et me seaksime kahtluse alla asjad, mida tavaliselt võtame kui etteantuid, et me esitaksime küsimusi oma metodoloogia, asjade tegemise viisi ning terminoloogia kohta, mille abil me oma tegevusele nimesid anname. See on eelduseks interdistsiplinaarse uurimise kujunemisele, mis on parimal juhul keerukas ja ümberkorraldusi nõudev töötamisviis – karm ja mõtlemapanev, loominguline ja kriitiline.

Autor kirjeldab oma interdistsiplinaarse akadeemilise tegevuse kogemusi ning linnaruumi analüüse ebatraditsiooniliste vahenditega, näiteks jalutuskäikude abil, mis samuti loovad vahepealseid kohti.