“Manifest: Architecture Lobby” – An interview with Marci Szczodry, Peggy Deamer and Aaron **Cayer**

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MS: You are - as you put it on your website - an organization of architectural workers advocating for the structural change of the profession and promoting workers’ rights within the field of architecture. I am curious how did it all begin? What pushed you to start Architecture Lobby?

PD: There were series of events piling on top of each other that made it hard to ignore that something structurally was problematic. One happened at the law school at Yale. There was a small architectural talk. I was walking down the hall when I saw a sign saying "top ten family friendly law firms.” I was distracted by the fact that you would never see that in architecture school. It made me think about why it might be that we wouldn't care about that or gather such information in architecture. Another one was at the small symposium organized by the group called "Who Builds Your Architecture?". They were trying to get architects who were building in the Emirates to reflect on the endangered construction worker problems there. They couldn't get even one architect working there to touch that topic. Nobody wanted to lose work by commenting negatively on that. I found that astounding. At another symposium, there was a panel discussion with really bright architects. Somebody from the audience asked: “I am thinking of a career in architecture, what can I expect?” The answer was: “Architecture is not a career, it is a calling.” You hear it, and you think: “Wow!” It is like saying, “Please don't pay me! The less you pay me, the more holy I am!” After this series of events, I began to gather a group of people who had similar concerns. We called a meeting, and this is how it all started.

MS: In every country, there is at least one professional organization associating architects. They control licensure, organize competitions and offer education for their members. In fact, most of them represent the interest of the owners of the offices and not their employees. There are almost none organizations or trade unions addressed to people employed in architecture. You are avant-garde in this field. What do you think is the reason for that? Why are architecture workers not organizing themselves to fight for better conditions of their everyday life?

PD: I think part of the difficulty is that there is not such a clear consciousness of a division between staff and the owners. I think the workers believe they are soon-to-be partners. The management and ownership are ambiguous. To think about a union means first to get people to consider the fact that they are employees. But even by admitting it, they quite often feel that they are pals with a partner, and they are fighting together for architecture. There is no real consciousness that their bosses might exploit them.

AC: I would also just add that, in some ways, the profession in the US has been historically limited by legal challenges prohibiting it from being more proactive about equity and labor rights. A consent decree issued by the US government during the 1970s in accordance with Antitrust Laws argued that anti-competition was unethical, and it resulted in a structural incapability of the profession to be more vocal about pay and economic equity. The Lobby hasn't outlined a single vision for an architecture union, but we have discussed various forms, and we have had debates about them in cities across the US. At the moment, no single form is universally accepted or embraced even amongst Lobby members. This is due in part to the way in which traditional worker unions advocate for the labor rights of employees but not necessarily for the owners of firms. Nonetheless, the proposal itself raises many questions about what kind of organization might be structurally able to lobby for the values and the rights of architects if the professional body is not capable of doing so. It is an on-going discussion.

MS: What was the reaction among architects and official organizations in the US after you published your Manifesto?

PD: I could say there were two things. One is that when we met with the AIA, they implied sympathy and indicated that we are asking the right questions. At the same time, they said that the things we are asking for are on the edge of being illegal because of antitrust laws, which Aaron has mentioned. They were kind of patronizing about our naiveté. The other is the reaction amongst my colleagues here at Yale. Many of them have boutique firms, which are very often the most precarious and hence the most sensitive to discussing the fact that they might pay people more. So there is a kind of defensiveness. I think that's the main feeling. What do you think, Aaron?

AC: I joined slightly later from when the manifesto was first published, but there is a very similar kind of embrace of our ideals here in Los Angeles by the local AIA-LA. They are very supportive of our goals and ambitions, but they are a bit more limited in what they can actually do. Nevertheless, we share similar motivations. They organize workshops, conferences, and symposia about gender diversity, rights in the profession, but they are not necessarily advocating for specific changes or forms of action.

MS: According to your survey 88% of offices do not pay overtime, and more than a half of architects are working on the weekends without being paid. In the same time, 37% of them have to supplement their income with outside work. What happened that the prestigious and well-paid profession, which architecture was in the past, turned into this? Is it a natural consequence of the neoliberalism? Or was it somewhat due to the technological improvement which changed the way we work and made it easier, faster and cheaper?

AC: I would just first start by questioning the concept that architecture was a "prestigious and well-paid profession" from a historical perspective. In the United States, architects were always market-driven, in the absence of secured patronage from the State. The rise of the profession went hand-in-hand with the rise of the business person, but it was primarily established to implement some uniformity to the group of practitioners and provide a means of regulation, safety, and welfare. But perhaps where it didn't do so well was defining the value of labor itself. Is the profession itself responsible for the shifting conditions of work under neoliberalism? Not necessarily, but it has certainly led to a downplaying of economic motivations and a repression of labor discussions that has allowed for such changes to go unnoticed by many.

PD: I agree with you in thinking that it is incorrect to believe that it has only mythically been considered a prestigious and well-paid job. It might have been prestigious in its aristocratic origins when, as part of the same gentry class as their clients, theydidn't need to get paid; money then was not the real issue. When I was first thinking about the Lobby, I was reading Edward R. Ford's *The Details of Modern Architecture.* One of the things that caught my attention was the passage where he writes that, during the nineteenth century, if you were a socially concerned architect then you cared for the workers, and during the twentieth century if you were socially conscious, you cared for the user. And that made me wonder about why we were no longer interested in the worker. But just to put this in the context of the broader question, I think that change comes from a transitions in capitalism - from one that is based predominantly on the production to one that is made or carried by consumption. You are getting the cohesion here: we did care about the worker (production) vs. now we care about the user (consumption). Therefore, I think there was an economic change that made that shift, one that is today intensified with neoliberalism. In that sense, I think it goes hand in hand with making the prestige of the architect very much related to the starchitect—the person who can make consumable images. And the things that we would *want* to see as a part of the "prestige" - like building an ethical society, respecting staff, the team, the builder, and being united to make a better environment - are no longer in place. That meaning of prestige just disappeared. The German Werkbund or William Morris come to mind as examples of trying to come to grips with the workers' creativity, autonomy, and ethical contribution.. Maybe that was a particular era in the history - industriaization - but it is for sure not a space that we are in anymore, although we should be!

MS: In your Manifesto, you write about demystifying the architect as a "solo creative genius." You have already mentioned Starchitects being part of the problem. What do you think about celebrity status some architects have gained in last two decades?

AC: I think the concept of the "solo creative genius" is not necessarily a product of the last two decades. We can think about this in the context of the history of the architecture, dating back to the Renaissance. In some ways, the Lobby's critique is part of a broader effort for the past two decades to challenge the idea that the architect is an individual worker. The manifesto of the Lobby is reflective of this discursive shift within the discipline. There is now a greater interest in practice, to the inner workings of offices, of workers, of their tools, and also in problematizing the historical narrative of individuals working alone in their studios.

MS: Let us talk about your method. What do you do to gain the attention to your case and how do you want to implement demands listed in your Manifesto?

AC: To say that there is a single method or even a single set of operating rules is in some ways contradictory to the Lobby's modus operandi. The strategies are actively written by its members. It ranges from activist work of organizing and protesting to more traditionally academic conferences, where practitioners and academics can debate. We have also hosted "think-ins" in cities across the US, which combine local practitioners and academics to discuss topics such as unionization for example. They help us to find out whether or not there is support for these kinds of formats or organizations. Our approach is a multi-pronged and involves not only faculty and active practitioners, but also students, by creating interstitial spaces for dialogue between academy and office.

PD: I would also add that we recognize that it is time to move away from raising consciousness and change course through specific acts that help the profession directly. For instance, we have a campaign going on, which is called "JustDesign.US." It offers a certificate to the offices that have decent labor practices so that when people want to look for a place to work, they are not just looking at the architecture that is produced but can also check the quality of the work environment. We are producing Labor Law pamphlet. We are working on a small-firm support network - such that they aren't held back by routinized work of payroll, health benefits, insurance, etc.. We have hosted gatherings of academic teachers to share information how to teach about professional practice. As Aaron mentioned, we debate the concept of the union, and we recognize that this is a strategy to organize workers in large offices but not small ones. We want to become a go-to place that either provides needed worker and organization services or links to organizations that have them. What we can do now is pick up on certain things that AIA should be doing, and isn't.

MS: You are both academics. That's why I would like to ask what role do you think universities could play to change the status quo?

AC: This question might first consider not if but *how* universities may play an active role. One opportunity that we have been thinking about is the way in which we teach about professional practice. Traditionally it is a course about regulations, institutions, contracts and so on. But the course presents an opportunity for much more critical and engaging means of thinking about the value, equity, and histories of labor and professional practice itself.

PD: Part of that is also thinking about professional practice earlier on. I don't know how it is in Europe, but in the US, it is a required course usually taken during a student's last semester. You know, one that students moan and groan about and don't want to go to. No surprise! Students do all the speculative thinking for two and a half years and then suddenly everything is about the reality! It should be a part of the discourse earlier on, in studios. It is not about practicality or buildability; it is just thinking creatively about how you operate in the system that will not automatically want to implement your visions. Something empowering!

MS: I want to know more about your "JustDesign.US" action. You have already explained how it works, and indeed I like this idea and the positive approach behind it. But I am interested if you ever thought about something quite the opposite, like listing the bad practices and creating a kind of list of shame. Do you think it is a no-go?

PD: It is a very good question. Very often when new members join, the first thing they ask is why don't we create such a "shame" list. But we are sensitive to the fact that we want to support the profession and be positive about it. So early on we decided that shaming was not going to be the way. Before we started JustDesign.US, we had put out two previous surveys that showed that people would not name their firm if they were identifying problems. We were shocked at the level of fear the workers had of being recognized as a complainer and being called out. In the JustDesign process, we were careful to identify this as a questionnaire and not a survey (where results outside the nomination issues would be published). But we do hope to start awareness where people will talk, comparatively, about the bad offices and make this problem visible.

MS: Working conditions are fundamental, but it is not the only field of your focus. You also pay attention to the moral part of the architect's profession. How do you perceive the role of an architect in today's society? Where are our responsibilities?

AC: The Lobby itself is careful not to prescribe or define the particular roles of the architect, or to outline a single form of practice. It would be in some ways antithetical to the broader democratic goals of the

Lobby. However, the Lobby is also committed to a view of an architect whose work upholds the ideals of equity and justice that the group espouses.

PD: I think one of the things that comes through in many of our discussions is an attempt to reformulate how people conceive of architecture as a longer-term commitment. I might be alone in this, but I think most of us agree that our job is not over once we take a photograph and publish our work. I believe we should have an ongoing bond with the client and to the piece of architecture we designed. More and more architects—whether for ethical or economic reasons—are getting into maintenance work and see this as part of their job description. I think it is crucial that we show the public that we are not just interested in our vision and the photograph and publication, but that we are interested in the long-term social procedures and management of the built environment.

MS: Speaking of ethics, it's hard not to mention your political commitment. After Donald Trump became president of the United States, you strongly opposed his idea of building the wall on the border with Mexico. Can you tell me about your action called #NotOurWall? Do we as architects have tools to influence the politics?

AC: #NotOurWall began as a series of events across the country in response to the proposed border wall. It started last March when the Lobby called for a 45 minute walk-out as an act of solidarity among architects, to demonstrate that architects would not take part in the efforts to design a border wall. More recently these efforts have developed into a publication and several speaking engagements. The California Chapters of the Lobby have just finished a #NotOurWall booklet that includes texts about the history of the border, the military-industrial complex, as well as information about the current wall prototypes and the firms that have designed and built them. It is an effort to call out and to problematize complicity. Perhaps one of the most interesting facts is that most architectural firms have disengaged from the process so far. Most of the firms that are contributing to the project right now are contracting and engineering firms, though it also raises the question of how far and where we are looking when we define “architects”: how many architects work within such firms?

PD: Just to connect that to the second part of your question: “if architects have tools to influence the politics?” I believe one of the things that the Lobby is about, and the "#NotOurWall" campaign exemplifies, is helping architects to see that whether they think the architecture is political or not, it *is*. Whatever they do, architects are taking a position. The politics in a spatial act is just unarticulated, but it is always there: whose values are being supported and whose are not is embedded in every program. There is no act that in some way doesn't have social and hence political consequences. We actually would be better respected in the public if we did articulate a position. If we don't, we look like we are self-interested,

concerned only in our egotistical artistic work. In my opinion, it is a mistake for those who believe that architecture shouldn't be political, and that they can get more work because of that “neutrality”. I think it is quite the opposite. It is where we differ from AIA, which wants to avoid politics at all cost.

MS: In 2014 during the Architecture Biennale in Venice you made a protest and performed your Manifesto. Have you ever thought about creating a more comprehensive, international platform to address the problems you talk about? Are you planning to do something on Biennale also this year?

PD: We are trying to develop connections with other international organizations that are like-minded. For the Venice Biennale in 2016, we proposed making an interactive map showing those organizations, but that proposal didn't get picked up and then our energy to develop it faltered. But it is something that may be happening spontaneously, as a number of us speak at the different conferences and establish international relations. We are also preparing something for this Biennale. We have been invited by the curators of the US pavilion to do a presentation about our work on immigration. The "#NotOurWall" campaign is now connected to research about what limiting immigration means to the construction industry and trying to build awareness amongst architects that we need know that is very much our problem, too.

MS: What would you tell your fellow architects from other countries who would like to follow your path and establish similar organizations?

PD: My feeling is that the manifesto was a galvanizer for us. Apparently, it also spoke to you. I think that there is a virtue to just putting out ideas that you believe in. It draws people in and starts the conversation. So write a manifesto. Organization-wise, I have learned so much about the value of building a tight organization. I used to think that just getting as many people as possible to speak the truth was enough, but I have ascertained from other members the value of a systematic approach to building an organization and identifying clear responsibilities. The message matters, but real organizational work is also important.

AC: I think one of the most important factors related to organizational structure and practice is the Lobby’s careful attention to democratic processes as well as its ability to connect various geographies. The Lobby is a national entity, but there are chapters in cities large and small all over the US. Through online organizing and tele-communication platforms, we are readily able to host national meetings virtually, and even meetings by top organizational committee are accessible to all members. I think this is one of the ways in which discourse is produced and solidarity is formed, and people are not left out due to geography or institutional ties.

PD: Just to reinforce that: I think we are trying to practice what we preach. We enact how you respect other opinions, how you listen, how you make people feel that they matter. I'm proud of how that works, and I think it is attractive. That is what other organizations could think about!