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## The architect as activist

Written by Peggy Deamer • in Architecture

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*Peggy Deamer, on behalf of The Architecture Lobby, introduces their manifesto.*

As professionalized architecture eradicates the discourse of design as labor, it does so in capitalism's favor, not to the advantage of the profession. On the one end, the discourse of the lone genius with single authorship, creativity and talent and, on the other end, the willingness of everyday practitioners to work long, unregulated, and underpaid hours for the "sacrifice" we make for society are aspects of capitalism's ideology's success. The system prevents us from identifying as workers and, as a consequence, we remain ignorant of our exploitation by others who aren't so uninformed and can profit from the value of our work.

The Architecture Lobby is an organization that argues for the value of architecture as productive work - aesthetic, technical, social, organizational, environmental, administrative, fiduciary - and architects as productive workers. The goal is to build on this fundamental understanding of value to become perceptive operators in our contemporary political economy.

It has not always been the case that architecture ignored labor. 19th century architects developed their designs with particular regard to the expertise, knowledge and creativity that the various trades -skilled and unskilled - brought to their projects; they saw their immaterial work as part and parcel to the subsequent material labor. In the US, members of the AIA in the 1930's called for the organization to become a union. When this did not come to pass, the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians (FAECT) - formed in 1933 and terminated in 1948 - took up the need for architectural labor advocacy. In other words, it is neither God-given nor "natural" to think that architecture isn't part of a labor discourse.

Still, it has taken a number of convergent events to make clear that today action had to be taken. Advances in technology that foreground the work of fabricators has put the expertise of those usually at the back end of construction and previously dismissed as mere "subcontractors" now at the forefront of design expertise; "manual" labor can no longer be shunned as inferior, post-design work. The labor practices of professions that approach their work habits, fees and hiring practices in a more enlightened manner become more and more obvious; lawyers advertise their family-friendly policies to attract the best graduates and medical residents unionize to be relieved of inhuman hospital hours. Artist who protested the slave labor building the new Guggenheim museum in Abu Dhabi by refusing the exhibiting of their works put the indifference of architects to these same conditions in sharp relief. The ongoing willingness of bright architecture graduates claiming their willingness to work for next to nothing for a firm they admired because they knew the firm earned next to nothing have only intensified in the new economy. All of this has made clear that our refusal to identify as workers has relieved us of any familiarity with labor discourse or labor's role in a neoliberal context. In response, the Architecture Lobby produced this manifesto:

We are precarious workers; these are our demands!

1. Enforce labor laws that prohibit unpaid internships, unpaid overtime; refuse unpaid competitions.
2. Reject fees based on percentage of construction or hourly fees and instead calculate value based on the money we save our clients or gain them.
3. Stop peddling a product - buildings - and focus on the unique value architects help realize through spatial services.
4. Enforce wage transparency across the discipline.
5. Establish a union for architects, designers, academics and interns in architecture and design.
6. Demystify the architect as solo creative genius; no honors for architects who don't acknowledge their staff.
7. Licensure upon completion of degree.
8. Change professional architecture organizations to advocate for the living conditions of architects.
9. Support research about labor rights in architecture.
10. Implement democratic alternatives to the free market system of development.

The Lobby recognizes that the organization of work has moved on from the time when the economy was driven by manufacturing and labor unions were the preferred method to assure job security and proper compensation. What the new form of organizing and collective advocacy are is unknown but vigorously contested. We have internal debates about whether the decline of unions is a result of the economy's move from manufacturing to service to knowledge production or whether it is merely ideology's good work to make unions seem unseemly and old-fashioned. We know that the gig economy is neoliberalism's pretty face on increased precarity and loss of class identification but wonder if its new model of self-actualization at least breaks the back of exploitive, firm-based "professionalism". We embrace the label of "knowledge workers" but question neoliberalism's espousal of its hegemony.

But we do know that architects need to regroup, reorganize, and reinvent themselves. We need to refuse the use of contracts that structurally keep architects and contractors in antagonistic relationships that serve only the developer; we need to use the tools of and share in open sourcing; they need to ensure that those outside the cultural elite have access to architectural education; we need to move beyond (rich) client-driven practices; and we need to resist ever more strongly the move to the right that lies at the heart of our professional organization, the American Institute for Architects (AIA). And here, the election of Trump has pushed new debates.

On November 9, 2016, the AIA, claiming to speak for its 89,000 members, backtracked on years of blustering about diversity, inclusion, and equity with an unqualified statement that they would work with a Donald Trump administration. To the Architecture Lobby and many other architects, this proved beyond a doubt that the AIA's supposed commitment to diversity and inclusion is not at all about equity, but rather a cynical public relations ploy. And it backtracked on its commitment to sustainable building as Trump's policies have done away with all environmental regulation and endanger the very cities that we not only live in but are sworn to protect.

The AIA has subsequently issued apologies for its initial Trump embrace. But architects need governmental work and the AIA refuses to take a stand on the inhumane and egregious Border Wall that lies at the heart of "infrastructure's" call. When President Trump issued a preliminary RFP - request for proposals - for design prototypes of the long-promised Wall on March 20, dozens of prominent architecture and engineering firms threw their hats in for a chance at the multi-billion-dollar project. The concerns that architects voiced in November of professional collusion with the administration's partisan agenda proved dishearteningly prescient and well-founded.

The Architecture Lobby wrote letters to the press denouncing the AIA's initial endorsement of Trump. And when, on March 10, the first round of Border Wall proposals from architects and engineers were due, the Architecture Lobby called for a day of action organized under #NotOurWall. It included a 45-minute walkout of workers in architecture firms - regardless of whether that firm had submitted a wall proposal - to indicate a refusal to conduct business as usual and instead, debate the reasons we wanted to become architects, digest the meaning and obligations of architecture, write and call our congress(wo)men to indicate our refusal to participate in this use of our expertise and the tax payers' money, and sign a petition to never engage in any and all Wall activities.

The Architecture Lobby believes it is possible to push architecture towards a truly inclusive profession, one with organizations that can stand up for the needs of all its members on the basis of their humanity. In lieu of taking egregious advantage of the symptoms of our national problems - the election of Trump - we as architects can use this moment to reflect on our role in constructing the elite vs. everyman dichotomy that has divided us. In lieu of presenting and thinking of ourselves as part of the elite, we can show that we, too, are workers of precarity and concern; that we, like all workers, can and must fight the 1% and all others who threaten human rights and the rights of nature. Only a bottom up approach built on the principles of radical democracy, economic justice, and quality of life for all can achieve that vision and advocate for the needs of architecture workers and the public we serve.



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