Rethinking site as field, field notes, observations and practices

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Aiming to introduce some key issues of fieldwork. Enables an opening up of "the field". Ambition to connect theory and practice, dry paper presentation – messy real making.

The opening presentation of a conference has capacity to act as an intellectual and ethical compass. Andrea Kahn, Founding Principal of consulting practice, designCONTENT, New York, and adjunct Professor of Urban Planning at the Graduate School of Columbia University, delivered this and set a clear tone which established some critical directions in the opening conference lecture of FieldWork. While revising her particular work as contributing editor of Site Matters: Design Concepts, Histories and Strategies (with Carol Butte, 1995), she touched on how we apprehend site, how we delineate boundaries, how we understand site specificities, site scale, and actions and as a site construction. The critical need that she outlined and elicited was from John Dewey’s work, quoting and revising, “Thinking as second to the intervention between Ethics...” She observed and cautioned the conference’s described intentions - perhaps a longing of questions, a saturated, thick concept which might be in danger of leading to a thin discourse of basic questions are overlooked. With rich terminologies, and text-intrinsic theorizing, what are the values that guide us? What values guide site and fieldwork activity in AU of Architecture, or even define discipline the disciplinary field? To what end and whose benefit are these activities undertaken?

The lingering register of Alan’s presentation set the subsequent keynote presentation up as an unexpectedly rich dialogue, where questions blurred into the beginning of Can Altay’s contribution. Can, an architect based in Turkey, who works across the boundaries of architecture, art, urbanism, practice, and research, is an explorer of spatial practices, and acts as what he has termed, a spatial anthropologist. The responsive discussion with Alan was focused on the idea of tools and practices in the urban context, of working with the overlooked and understanding the generative potential of a carefully crafted observational output which might activate and perhaps change some aspect of the complex condition of the contemporary, contextual, public urban domain. He described his aims as exploring limits, tools and methodologies of existing modes and traditions of practice in the city in the architectural and urban professions: always re-examining methods, revising ways of advancing means. Examples included the potential priority of a field trip to enable those in urban authority to see new potential commissions and actions in their city, maps which open up previously unimagined connections, and an extract from the film, White Butterfly, Leached, with Philip Missiroli, which was a moving embodiment of the fieldwork activity in and of Architecture, or even defined from this gathering of academics from across the world. Three keynote speakers had oriented the conference theme, which was addressed in a range of ways by fieldwork, through his oral history and audio essays which are usually based in urban landscapes, and in this session he visually journeyed from a Birmingham industrial estate to Kendal Mael in Paris onto ongoing work in the changing areas of Kings Cross in London. Explaining his ambitions to unlock memories, to explore living memory, to craft a new construction, he exposed his position in relation to an "outside art" of two traditions: voice and sound—which both connect with worlds of poetics, and ultimately potentially create new. The lingering of constructed images through sound and voice are achieved with a close and practiced relationship with particular tools—the microphones, recording equipment, and an implicit relationship with the subject: person and place.

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