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Open Agenda: on platforms for speculative research between academia and practice

Fig. 1. Open Agenda Publication (2011) Front and Back cover scan, DABDOCS 15 (left).

Fig. 2. Salama, T. (2012) Kite Body, Open Agenda 2012, DABDOCS 16, 2012 (right).

This presentation focuses discussion on the modes through which design research is promoted and fostered through a competition format that sits between professional and academic research contexts. Professional practice in research and development terms tends to focus in architecture on near term goals and tools and processes development that lead more or less directly to enhancing project opportunities through efficiencies or project specialisation. In academia, research accounting, a heavy weighting on HERDC outcomes, research cultures that are institutionally oriented and strong research hierarchies also tend to institutionally thwart new approaches to research and highly speculative content. This paper presents a speculative Architectural design research competition, aimed at avoiding the limitations of both of these research contexts, while offering them both a unique opportunity to benefit from new topics and new forms of work.

Open Agenda (2010-2014) is a competition and research platform for early career architects from Australian and New Zealand, aimed at exploring new avenues in architectural research through design and speculation. Established in 2010, Open Agenda is an anonymously juried competition, and annually awards three winners seed funding to develop their architectural research proposals specifically through design speculation towards exhibition. Three winners exhibit their work each year as part of the Architecture Festival in Sydney, and are included in a small annual publication. In 2012 the competition was opened up to include recent graduates from New Zealand reinforcing one of the primary aims of the competition to promote a strong and specifically regional culture of speculative research through design in architecture. Open Agenda is now in its fifth year.

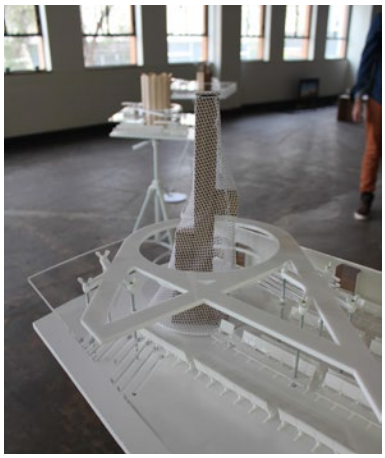

Fig. 3. **Warnock, L. (2013) Exhibition Model, from Architectural Espionage and the superpanopticon, Open Agenda.**

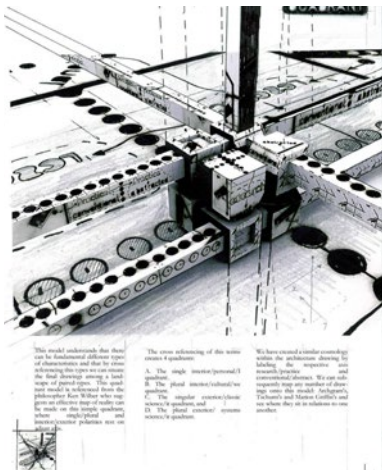

Fig. 4. **Kinnaird, B. & Bennett, B. (2010) The Architectural Drawing Project, drawing, Open Agenda 2010, DABDOCS 13.**

The competition was established not for specific research outcomes so much as to provide a platform to seek out new research opportunities that sit between formalised academic contexts and the profession, and promote those towards further opportunities. The competition is not prescriptive like a design competition, but specifically open to agenda's that are motivating the emerging generation of early career (graduated for less than 10 years) architects. Younger practitioners are typically hamstrung either by opaque academic systems of research accounting and formatting, or by a lack of opportunity and orientation to research within professional environments which Open Agenda seeks to avoid.

The motivation for the competition was the lack of visible space and financial support for a recently graduated generation of Architects in Australia at the time. While this has improved considerably over the last half decade, the architecture awards system is still tightly controlled by the Architects professional institution (Architectural Institute of Australia), and largely still geared towards a beauty pageant of architectural photography in professional practice. Equally, architectural design competitions by their nature remain highly prescribed, limiting the scope for speculation in design and alternate forms of design outcomes and work beyond building propositions.

This context formed the impetus to create a platform that, it is arguable, remains unique in terms of competitions world wide, where there is no theme or project site, no prize money, but seed funding to promote exploration of alternate topics and modes of research approproate to a broader definition of architecture. By specifically calling for proposals that; are of generational concern, challenge traditional forms of communication and have a focus on broad engagement, Open Agenda, as a platform for research aims to bridge the gap between traditional academic contexts, and professional competition formats.

One of the most significant drivers of Open Agenda is its focus on discourse and public engagement. The three annual winners are in part selected for their potential to engage an audience, architects and non-architects. A proposals critical form of engagement in this sense forms part of the intellectual positioning of the research proposal. This balance between intellectual rigour and broad interest, and capacity to communicate the research agenda, produces a range of research outcomes that venture beyond expected norms. Open Agenda in this sense activly seeks non-conforming, that is, a-typical interrogative design modes, to some degree legitimzing them through their inclusion within a three part conversation between the winning proposals. As such, past winners have included drawn, collaged, prototyped, performed, modeled, digitally interactive and video content that challenges the form of research enquiry within new areas of investigation in architecture.

Initially, the competition was loosely modelled after the ambitions of the Pamphlet Architecture series by Princeton Architectural Press (1977-), although took the ambitions for publication as secondary to creating the conversation between practitioners of a generationally similar position. Run by a publication house with a board including academics and practitioners, Pamphlet also straddles traditional academic and practice modes of research works, and over the 25 plus years of its publication has contributed significantly to growing the research culture of North American architecture through design, along with other influencers such as the Storefront for Art and Architecture and the long running Graham Foundation grants, which have no equivalent in the Australian and New Zealand context.

While there are other forms of design research, such as small publications, exhibitions, pop-up events and so on, there is merit in gathering together an annual cohort that will in due course deserve its own investigation. Typically past winners of

Fig. 5. **Beson, R. (2012) Atmospheres of Architecture: the quest for composition, Open Agenda 2012, exhibition display Customs house (photography, Michael Ford).**

the competition have gone on to positions in various forms of (typically new) practice combined with academic positions in roughly equal amounts, suggesting this competition sits between these two research poles. Additionally through exhibiting with the Sydney Architecture Festival in highly public venues such as customs house in Sydney, tens of thousands of people have come to or come across the research itself.

As design research continues to grow, there will be more pressure to develop modes of research validation and promotion such as Open Agenda that straddle more institutionally stable reseach modes and focus on broad communication. As a prototype platform, Open Agenda has been modestly successful and is now looking to expand the platform to other regional centres. This symposia offers the opportunity to discuss the successes and failures, merits and draw backs of new design research platforms such as this.

NB: Open Agenda is supported by Architecture Review Asia Pacific, Scott Carver, Sydney Architecture Festival and UTS, and the generous time of the advisory panel, Craig Allchin, Six Degrees, Andrew Benjamin, Monash University David Burns, UTS Photography and Situated Media, Pia Ednie-Brown, RMIT, Richard Goodwin, UNSW COFA, Adrian Lahoud, Course Director Urban Design, Bartlett UCL, Michael Holt, editor Architectural Review Asia Pacific, Nicolas de Monchaux, UC Berkeley, Bob Perry, Director, Scott Carver, Diego Ramirez-Lovering, Monash University, Professor Charles Rice, Head of School, School of Art and Design History, Kingston University , Marisa Yiu, CUHK. Open Agenda is chaired by Prof Anthony Burke, UTS Architecture, and the Competition Co-ordinator is Rebecca Thomas.

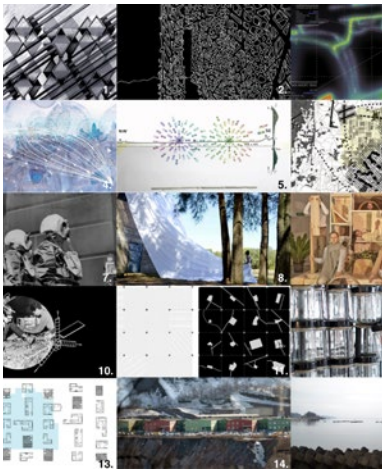

Fig. 6. **Open Agenda Winners, 2010-2014.**

Open Agenda, (DAB DOCs, University of Technology, Sydney, 2010-2014). [Online] Available from: http://www.utsarchitecture.net/openagenda/ [accessed 23rd June, 2014].

Pamphlet Architecture, (Princeton Architectural Press, NY, 1977-). [Online] Available from: http://www.papress.com/other/pamphletarchitecture/index.html [accessed 23rd June, 2014].

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The International Review Committee of Architectural Design Research Symposium received 60 abstracts, out of which 27 papers were accepted for presentation at the symposium and publication in the proceedings. Each paper in the symposium proceedings has been double-blind referred by a member of the International Review committee. Papers were matched, where possible, to referees in the same field and with similar interests to the author. The Chair of the International Review Committee would like to thank those of the International Review Committee who gave their time and expertise to the referring of these papers.

The Symposium Committee would like to thank everyone not already mentioned who contributed to Architectural Design Research Symposium 20-21 November 2014.

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