Progressive practice in architecture

Fredric Benesch & Jonas Runberger

The concept of "progressive practice" is itself a construct There are no clear boundaries that define one practice as progressive, and another one as not (or even reactionary). This article looks at the practice of architecture through the notion of the progressive, and searches for characteristics that help to define it. Exploration through practice is a wide field, an open-ended process, and the rules must be set by its performers.

The notion of the progressive indicates an advancement of some sort. Most practices obviously prefer success, but it's the nature of this success that this text seeks to examine. Rather than an economically successful business, or conceptually innovative, isolated practices, we are looking for organizations that redefine territories for architectural practice, formulate agendas, and communicate their processes to a wider audience. In the professional setting, innovation is corporate capital, yet cultural development depends on the exchange between different agencies.

Three key elements are sought after in the practices examined in this text.

Innovation – the practice must have an agenda for internal development.

Critical approach – the practice must have a natural evaluation phase in the process, where the effects of newly created situations are assessed and formulated.

External communication – the practice must maintain communication with the discipline in general; through publishing, teaching or other mediators of architectural experience.

Common for the case studies in this text is the internal collaborative process, and the formulation of agendas. Our focus is on the nature of well-defined practices and their internal processes, but emphasis is also put on the use of outside sources and the communication of generated modes of operations.

Project or Proposal

Frequently, practices specialize in a field of architecture, either in certain building types or specific phases of the building process, such as preliminary studies, urban studies or the set up of production documents. One
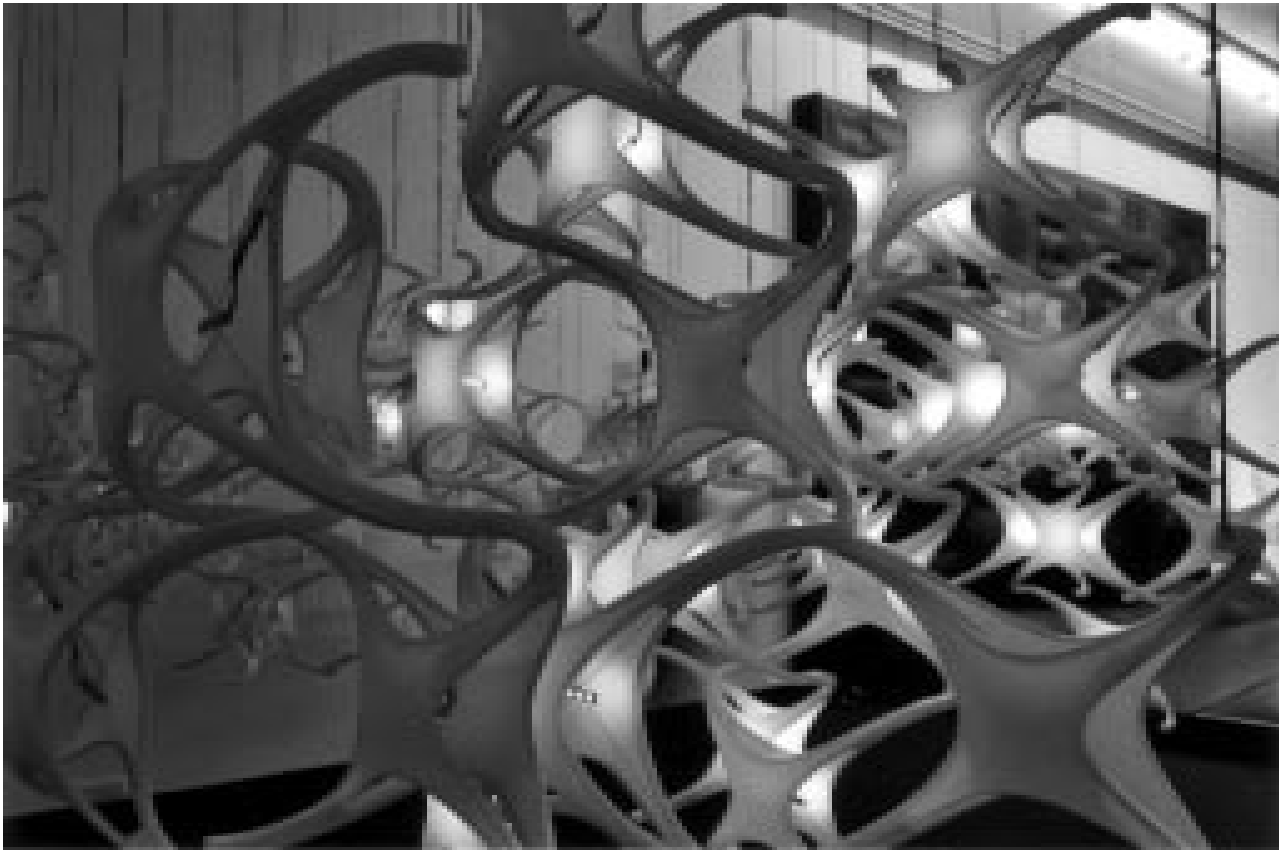
can argue that by continuously refining certain specific skills, the result becomes more predictable and new inventions are less likely to occur. The process turns into mechanical reproduction. Complicated building programs and processes in the building industry might of course demand this specialization. This brings up the status of the project. In its simplest form, the project could be seen as the process necessary to deliver a product which fulfills the client's needs. However, clinging to the idea that the practice of architecture in general seeks a grander goal than merely delivering products, that each individual component which results from the architectural process becomes a part in a larger agenda, the notion of the project has to be redefined.

Stan Allen suggests the notion of the performative practice, which would be able to continuously rework the limits of the discipline from within. Rather than seeing the project as a static construct in which theories could be tested, the practice moves towards performance, where consequences and effects are the most valuable. He states that practice is no static construct, but is rather defined by its movements and trajectories. There is no theory, there is no practice. There are only practices, which consists in action and agency".[1] Any act that brings up new ideas or sets scenarios which impact on cultural environments is actually a component of the practice. Maybe we lack forums for these actions. As Allen claims, "architecture is a material practice, working in and among the world of things"[2], able to transform reality through a mix between the real and the abstract. If a project is a construct, defined from a client's brief, transformed by the idea of the architect, it should be re-appropriated by the architect

as a vessel for all aspects of the specific practice, and the built proposal will remain a component of a larger context.

In order to fulfill the first three statements in this article, the project should address the internal development of the practice, it should incorporate a self-evaluation process, and lessons learned should make it to the larger context of the discipline. Obviously not all projects can incorporate all issues that might come across, but if all projects intensely focus on a few of them, conceptually incorporated, a platform for experimentation can evolve. The "final proposal" would be one component of the completed project, and other venues could be used to discuss the complete process.

Survival

In order to maintain a practice you have to finance it. On the traditional building market architects are more or less paid for drawings delivered, the concept stage is often financed by the building phase where the architect's fee is integrated into the building cost. A concept intensive practice often turns outside the traditional building industry to markets where ideas are better valued. In the retail and branding context, the building investment is a lesser part of the total project sum. Concepts are paid for even if architects still sell their ideas cheaply compared with for instance branding agencies. Some architects who focus even harder on concept and idea turn to the art scene.

Can the academic world also be a forum for a progressive practice? Even if the traditional process of building production is far away from the tradition of academic critical thought, the education in itself can be seen as being a material practice along the lines of Allen[3], where projects are developed and assessed constantly. The gap between the academic world and the practice is however sustained from all parties. The notion of academic rigor makes it difficult to accept design-driven speculative research. The practices often see the architectural schools as vocational educations that should provide craftsmen able to immediately take part in production. The task of the progressive practice is to find territories in which it is possible to act critically while directly addressing issues unfolding in society. Not to comment, not to critique, but to confront,

infiltrate or indirectly affect these situations.

There are numerous ways of locating or creating these pockets for progressive works, all have advantages and disadvantages. Shifting a practice into another domain such as advertisement or branding provides time to experiment, and gives new opportunities to perform innovative work, but may also restrict the addressed issues. Infiltrating the art scene sets the work in a tradition of experience and critique, but may seclude it from uninitiated interpretation. Can the practice be attacked from within, through the steadfast exploration of principles, while still providing the solutions asked for by clients? The case studies bring up an array of different approaches, where these new fields are explored.

New professional arenas

Case study 1: Wilhelmson Arkitekter

Wilhelmson Arkitekter[4] has worked with Saab since 1997. The work of WA is part of the Saab Unlimited program also launched in 1997 with the ambition to unify the Saab appearance worldwide and within different media, with the goal to strengthen and establish the Saab brand as a premium brand. The WA success within the Saab project lies in the interest of Anders Wilhelmson in defining what the Saab brand is about, what it could be, and how to communicate it through architecture. The collaboration with Saab Automobile and the other communication agencies involved has gradually grown and AW is a member of the newly formed creative team, meeting regularly to discuss where the Saab brand is heading.

To the office the work with Saab has meant an exploration of arenas outside the traditional role of the architect, not the least that of architecture as communication, but it has also of course been an arena for exploring architecture. The larger part of the work still concerns traditional architectural areas, as space, organization, detailing, materiality and so on. A thorough exploration of these questions and a very high architectonic ambition set in relation to the Saab brand is what the project is about.

The work consists of three parts, exhibition and event, Saab retail facility design and City Centers. WA are now designing the second exhibition system for the motor shows and all Saab dealers (1100 dealers worldwide) are to be rebuilt according to the facility design program. City Centers, all to be designed by WA, are planned in premium locations in major cities. Saab City Berlin was the first to open in 2001. London, Munich and Hamburg opened for business this year.

The task was as new to the office as the role of commissioning work of architecture was to the clients. The client's experience from motor shows, car design and car production was valuable since this meant that display, light and not the least detailing, materials and quality were of great importance. The client's lack of experience from commissioning architecture gave the office considerable responsibility while providing the possibility for extraordinary design and technical solutions.

In motor shows new materials and communication techniques are tested immediately. Larger motor companies spend enormous amounts on their shows and the competition is fierce. As Saab is a relatively small brand, the concept has been to compete through quality, design, calm and spatiality as a contrast to the overload of the competing brands. In order to create something unique in the exhibition context one can not start with a known material or solution. All solutions for floor, walls, graphics, and displays down to the smallest details are unique in design and production and the work with the motor shows has been a field for exploring new technical possibilities. One example is the 40 x 2300 x 15000 mm undulating carbon fiber strip that is the main feature of the current exhibition system, another is the glass floor lit from underneath. This attitude, not to rely on known solutions, has set the standard for the approach to the other Saab commissions. To WA the experience of working with this attitude has been invaluable and has been brought into other projects.

Internal processes

Case study 2: Natur Orienterad Design

Natur Orienterad Design[5], a group of Stockholm-based landscape architects are highly conscious about their process. For each project they decide upon a process model. In addition to input provided by clients, NOD also incorporates their own Spheres of Interest; agendas they see fit to explore and develop further in relation to the specific project context. A focus is set as a starting point, the concept is defined and the brief is reformulated, usually through a parallel process. The incorporated NOD agenda is set up as an unofficial program, an internal generator acting out in parallel with the input from brief and client. Typically projects are developed in collaboration with outside partners, artists or architects, continuously shifting the conditions for development. The internal agenda acts as a collaborative platform, and all partners add to this common ground.

NOD defines the character of their projects as having an "easily understandable surface with a complex
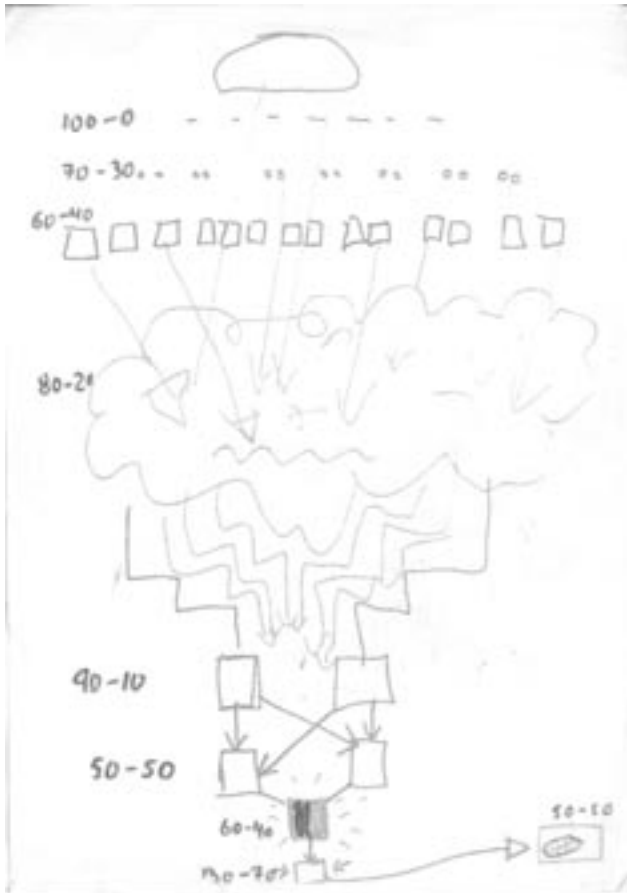
content", where the process may be read as layers of information to be discovered. In addition, each project must bring additional value to the participants, apart from the success of a competition, or the realization of a proposal. The initiating process is often a very conscious set up that makes possible for many actors to participate while maintaining economy. The final presentations and proposals are formatted with the client in mind. Knowledge and experience that are not integral parts of proposals are channeled to external actors through participation in debates, lectures, teaching and open invitation to anyone interested to take part in the continuous discussion within the office.

In the competition for Biblioteksplatsen[6], in the univer-sity area of Södertörn, Stockholm, a meticulous work-shop was set up that allowed seven partners and colla-borators to side by side research and develop concepts for the proposal. The process collected ideas based on either "the fantastic" or "the pragmatic", and the different steps were evaluated according to the ratio of programmatic contra form characteristics. Economi-cal aspects demanded that some phases used the full idea potential of all collaborators, while others where performed as high efficiency production.

The internal processes are well documented as a part of the unofficial program. Generated information not making it to the final proposal is collected and adds to the conceptual foundation of NOD.

Context through alienation

Case study 3: Foreign Office Architects

Foreign Office Architects[7] work with alienation as a ge-nerator for architecture. They see themselves as fo-reigners working in a new context and also as estrang-ed to conventional architectural practice, and have turned this into their working model. By constantly exposing themselves to foreign elements, FOA tries to keep an edge in their work.

In the approach to a given assignment, or a com-petition, quite often in a part of the world FOA has no previous engagement in, the office set up teams con-sisting of Sherpas (locals who know the territory) and Gurkahs (mercenaries who act on FOA's behalf)[8]. These metaphoric roles become the means to handle the gi-ven task and situation. Always looking at the unfolding of processes, in relation to re-readings of present situa-tions, the office tries to avoid making fast conclusions. "Processes are far more interesting than ideas. Ideas are linked to existing codes, operating critically or in alignment with pre-existing systems of ideas."[9]) In all projects a "micro history" is generated as a specific narrative, setting up an open-ended system designed to be able to cope with new information coming into the project.

Farshid Moussavi and Alejandro Zaera-Polo, the foun-ding members of the office, have reformulated their agenda in the FOA Code Remix 2000[10]. During years of development of their winning proposal for the Yoko-

hama Port Terminal, they have refined their techniques of collaboration with contractors and clients. The principles of dealing with the vast amount of information to create working drawings had to be reinvented, and the systems had to be open-ended to incorporate changes that shaped the complete project, while still being manageable by all involved actors.

During early 1999, when the Yokohama Port Terminal turned into a project to be realized, the office consisted of seven to eight people. Three of them were paid staff members, with different responsibilities. The rest were externally financed researchers, un-paid, who focused on different topics more or less relevant to

the production. This set-up enabled certain issues to be thoroughly explored, disregarding the deadlines of the project. The result of this work was evaluated, and components were incorporated in the project work.

FOA's original concept of the foreign (hence the name) is sustained in the internal processes of the practice. The Sherpas and Gurkahs help by keeping a distance to the specific situation and the micro-history of the project sets up a new, internal context for development. The choice of shipyards for the Port Terminal construction evades the claws of the entrepreneur. The intense development of that project and the systematic negotiation with constructors even remo-

ves FOA from their peers, the digital-oriented practices that emerged during the nineties. This distance does not exclude contextual knowledge completely, but makes it possible to assess information from different angles without prejudice.

Conversational models

Case study 4: Servo

The design collaborative Servo[11] presently exists as an ephemeral agency visible in numerous exhibitions and publications. The group identifies itself as a collaborative constructed through contemporary modes of communication and lifestyle. The four founding members reside in Los Angeles, New York, Stockholm and Zürich. Individual projects frequently involve exterior design teams based in the city appropriate for that project. They have chosen conversation as a metaphor and strategy in relation to new technology, seeking interactivity in the design-, production-, and distribution phase of a project in an attempt to challenge the definition of the author, replacing it with multiple authorship.[12] The notion of the conversational model has connotations of sampling and live mixing in the music industry, both conceptually and through the technological implementations of production methodologies pushed into the realm of performance. The individual projects conceptually explore themes of collaborative design processes, loss of exclusive authorship and the purveyance of architecture.

The practice is acting in a semi-academic environment through two specific contexts.

• The art scene, invited to participate in exhibitions

and receiving scholarships.

- The architectural critique context, participating in conferences on digital media and through numerous publications.

The Servoline_1/urbantoys[13] project set up a digital design environment which allowed the visitor/client/co-designer to interact with a digital model with certain characteristics. The scale-less interface gave the participant the opportunity to define for him/herself the scale, function and context for the design. The web-based site was part of the Nordic N2art exhibition, the first major on-line art show with participants from all Scandinavian countries. The graphic representation of the site suggested a commercial purveyor, where the finished designs could be ordered as models produced through rapid prototyping[14]. Included in the set-up was the possibility to sample a previously saved design by another participant. The N2art manifestation had a prequel; during the CRAC exhibition at Liljewalchs in the fall of 2000 a prototype of the project was screened. The chosen model was the showroom; the gallery space was altered to support the first preview of the project, sampling models of presentation from the manufacturing industry.

Servo exists through their media. Technology makes it possible to present the practice as a coherent agency. The change of venues for their work is further promoted by their locations over the world, which makes possible a number of separate networks to act in. They have collaborated with different associations and the vehicle industry. While still doing un-commissioned work funded through various means, Servo is exploring models that can be implemented in a commercial setting. The set-up for collaboration with outside partners, the conversational model, works though the handing over of an open-ended system, as in the urbantoys project. This is implemented in the Lattice Archipelogics project[15], in which Servo designed a networked system of modules produced through rapid prototyping, in which the Smart studio of the Interactive Institute created the Responsive Field. The two components of the project support each other and shape a dynamic interactive audiovisual environment.

Dispersal, reflection and communication

The four practices in the case studies have different modes of operation. They have found ways to act that enable them to disperse into "new" arenas and include them in the architectural context, sustain a critical internal process and communicate with external actors. Rather than being progressive in the sense of the new, they are challenging the prevailing notion of architecture. Through dispersal, reflection and communication they keep the discussion on the nature of architecture alive. The key elements of Innovation, Critical Approach and External Communication defined in this article must be seen in this sense and with this ambition.

The most common container for information exchange between practices and society is the actual product; the completed building, accessible by visit, through architectural critique or through direct communication between the different actors in the industry. This vessel does not contain all the information generated in a practice over a given time; the internal documentation within the practice is often limited, the external documentation through marketing material or publication is streamlined according to the preferred projected image of the practice, and valuable experience is forwarded on a need to know basis.

Internal criticism and evaluation are basic requirements for the progressive practice. Presentations at conferences, through publication and so forth, enable external critique and discussion that can re-enter the practice. A conceptual platform is necessary to place the work in context, both as a basis for internal communication, and to make complex processes open to outside interpretation. This platform acts as the theoretical foundation for how the practice performs research, processes ideas, relates to society and develops proposals.

Forums for discussion outside of a given practice ensure formulation, add one more layer of evaluation, and bring architectural experience into a larger context. New arenas for architectural practice bring internal issues to a wider audience, and bring new issues into practice. The conceptual platform becomes a tool to be used to enter new territories, and acts as a catalyst when external partners enter the collabora-

tion. New modes of operation and new territories can give freedom in previously restricted issues, but also add new conditions.

Notes

1. Practice: architecture, technique and representation, Stan Allen, G+B Arts International, 2000
Essay: Practice vs. Project, p XVII
2. Ibid., p XXI
3. Allen distinguishes between hermeneutic and material practice, rather than theory – practice. The material practice transform reality by producing new objects or new organizations of matter, whereas the hermeneutic practice always points toward the past. Ibid, p XVII.
4. Wilhelmson Arkitekter was founded in 1988 by Anders Wilhelmson and is located in Stockholm.
www.wilhelmson.se
5. Natur Orienterad Design (NOD) was founded in 1998 by Johannes Gezelius, Petter Hauffman, Anders Mårsén and Johan Paju, and is located in Stockholm. Anders Mårsén and Johan Paju, founding members NOD, were interviewed in Stockholm August 2002.
www.natur-orienterad-design.se
6. Invited competition for a square in the university area of Södertörn, south of Stockholm in 2001. Client was Huddinge kommun. The proposal was not short-listed.
7. Foreign Office Architects was founded in 1993 by Farshid Moussavi (Iran) and Alejandro Zaera Polo (Spain) and is located in London. Julian Varas, former employee at FOA, was interviewed in August 2002. Verb Processing, boogazine, Actar, 2001 Article: Rollercoaster Construction, Alejandro Zaera Polo, FOA Article: Development of the structural design, Kunio Watanabe, Structural Design Group
www.f-o-a.net
8. Sherpa: A member of a traditionally Buddhist people of Tibetan descent living on the southern side of the Himalaya Mountains in Nepal and Sikkim. In modern times Sherpas have achieved world renown as expert guides on Himalayan mountaineering expeditions.
Gurkha: 1. A member of a Rajput ethnic group predominant in Nepal. 2. A member of this people serving in the British or Indian armies.
Source: The American Heritage¨ Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition
Copyright © 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company.
9. Foreign Office Architects, international architecture review, 2G, 2000, p 125
10. Ibid., p 121
11. Servo was founded in 1999 by David Erdman (Los Angeles), Marcelyn Gow (Zürich), Ulrika Karlsson (Stockholm) and Chris Perry (New York)
www.s-e-r-v-o.com
The Servoline_1/urbantoys project is available at: www.n2art.nu/servoline_1/urbantoys
12. Designing For A Digital World, ed Neil Leach, Wiley-Academy, 2002 Essay: Electronic Purveyance Practices in Architecture, Marcelyn Gow, Servo Contemporary Techniques in Architecture, guest editor Ali Rahim, Architectural Design, John Wiley & Sons Limited, 2002
Essay: Interactive Opportunities, Servo
13. The Servoline_1/urbantous project was developed in the fall of 2000, and was presented first in the Crac exhibition at Liljewalchs, Stockholm in September 2000, and finally in the N2art exhibition in November 2000, organised by the Nordic netart foundation. Crac, Creative Room for Art and Computing, is organised by the non-profit organization SKODK and The Foundation MediaLab.
N2Art can be visited at: www.n2art.nu/servoline_1/urbantoys
14. Rapid Prototyping includes various techniques of producing physical models and prototypes directly from digital 3d-models. These methods are frequently used by many industries to shorten the development of new

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products and ensure higher quality.

15. The Lattice Archipelogics project was a collaboration between Servo and the Smart studio of the Interactive Institute, and was presented at the Latent Utopias exhibition in Graz, November – March 2002–2003.
    smart.interactiveinstitute.se
    www.latentutopias.at

Authors

Progressive Practice of Architecture originated in the Progressive Practice workshop, lead by Fredric Benesch and Jonas Runberger.

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