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Through examination of the building of a housing prototype by 'Recycled, Environmental, Affordable, Container Housing' (REACH) this paper proposes a role for 'social architecture' as critique.

The limits of social architecture: the tension between aims and actions

Samuel Holden

Defining social architecture

The resurgence of the word 'social' in architecture has been defined as an emergent opposition to the increasingly anti-social and uneven reproduction of the urban.[1] Those engaged with social architecture form a broadly left-wing group who intervene and build in the urban realm as part of this opposition. The term social architecture, as used here, builds upon two things. Tahl Kaminer's 'participatory movement' and the usage of 'social architecture' in an increasing number of literatures.[2] Kaminer used the 'participatory movement' to define the group that:

> *emerged a few years after the anti-globalization movement consolidated in the 1999 protests in Seattle, motivated by the desire to re-establish architectural efficacy in the realm of politics.*[3]

Due to its diversity, Kaminer notes this group is difficult to define, explaining how phrases including 'Tactical Urbanism', 'Everyday Urbanism', 'Guerrilla Urbanism', and 'DIY Urbanism' have all previously been used but have failed to encompass the movement because they only highlight specific aspects and so do not encompass the whole. This is also true of Kaminer's definition, as not all the members are inherently participatory, which is why the term social architecture is used here. In this way, social architecture serves to encompass all these terms to a broader, or lesser, degree.[4]

The word 'social' has seen a shift in urban theory, it was once more commonly related to capitalist subsidies and projects (for example social housing and social rent) but has now 'come to be associated with and used as shorthand reference to community involvement, bottom-up approaches and DIY practices.'[5] It is explained best not in what commonalities any members of social architecture share, but in their opposition to the 'deeply anti-social developments in cities', including issues of affordability, ownership, and scarcity.[6] The term social architecture is also used here in response to the book *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture* where these words encompass a desire to better the urban environment through primarily bottom-up interventions which may encompass everydayness, guerrilla practices, DIY, and participation.[7] Alongside an opposition to the 'anti-social developments in cities', the commonality between proponents of social architecture is not a background in architecture, but a belief that their interventions can positively improve the urban for a variety of goals including inclusivity, anti-capitalism, spatial justice, and equality. As such, although the literature underpinning social architecture comes primarily from architecture, the definition does not exclude non-practitioners of architecture. This again is drawn from *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture* where the values of social architecture are espoused by non-practitioners as, for example, in tent cities and occupation sites, participatory slum upgrading, and spatialised community economies.[8]

While emerging as an opposition to the 'anti-social developments in cities', the aims of social architecture are not unified. Some claim that social architecture is primarily a way of helping others through spatially changing their material conditions, as for example Samuel Mockbee, who calls us to: 'Go above and beyond the call of a "smoothly functioning conscience"; help those who aren't likely to help you in return, and do so even if nobody is watching.'[9] Others argue that the goal is to be part of an 'emancipatory project' that proliferates new forms of survival and production through built interventions.[10] This is itself problematic because there is no unified vision of what form this emancipation may take – some social architectures are anti-neoliberalism, others are challenging capitalism.[11] These disparate positions are a consequence of the failure to articulate the term emancipation, meaning some social architectures may challenge the economic policies of neoliberalism while others take a political stance against capitalism.

Social architecture faces critiques to both the aim of improving material conditions and the aim of emancipation. The aim of improving material conditions is critiqued as limiting social architecture's potential as a vehicle for change.[12] The aim of emancipation is critiqued because social architecture fails to offer a way to build beyond either capitalist or neoliberal urban development, and in many ways reinforces it.[13]

This paper furthers the critique of the second aim through the lens of reification. The argument articulated here is that social architecture presents alternative modes of living in an attempt to move beyond contemporary society, which is a society predicated on the dominance of commodity exchange. However, social architecture fails

to acknowledge that the present social relations within a society dominated by commodity exchange are contained within, and reproduced by, society itself. As such, any attempt to overcome existing social relations by building alternatives are stalled because these relations are continually reproduced. Therefore, only by overcoming contemporary society can new modes of living, away from the dominance of commodity exchange, exist. By introducing reification, this argument builds upon Manfred Tafuri's analysis on the naturalisation process of the city, which concludes that architecture is unable to manifest social transformation. By asserting that societal change is possible through architecture, social architecture fails to come to terms with Tafuri's analysis. Once this argument against social architecture's aim to create an emancipatory political project is formed, this article then asks: can there be an aim for social architecture?

Using the case study of atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa), and community gardening more generally, Kaminer critiques the praxis of spatial intervention in social architecture, arguing that the practices do not challenge capitalism and are within its consensus.[14] Using a year-long participatory engagement with the not-for-profit house builder REACH (Recycled, Environmental, Affordable, Container Housing), this paper was able to draw similar conclusions to Kaminer's on social architecture. However, where Kaminer analysed guerrilla gardening this paper explored not-for-profit house production. This paper also draws conclusions from REACH's difficulty to operate within contemporary construction; this could be tested against other social architecture projects to identify similarities and trends.

The engagement with REACH is a unique experience, as it started from a piece of research that was ideologically positioned within social architecture. Initially I thought REACH could be a way to overcome the continuing issue of housing affordability in the UK. However, with further reading of the literature presented here, and more time with the case, this developed to a position of critique. Therefore, the article provides a unique self-reflection on my position and fieldwork as it developed throughout this time. Through the engagement with REACH, this article argues that the aim of social architecture could be to critique contemporary social relations through the physical demonstration that alternatives can exist. Even if these alternatives are unable to create change themselves. In this way social architecture manifests a critique, not a changing or emancipating, of existing social relations.

A critique of social architecture

The present popularity of social architecture, and the engagement of architecture in politics, can be traced back to the lack of political engagement in Postmodernism. Emerging in the wake of the 1999 'anti-globalisation movement', social architecture fought against the postmodern detachment from politics.[15] It found wider appeal with the release of *Spatial Agency*, which was published in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, and it is the various contemporary urban crises that have since boosted its popularity.[16] As Kaminer observes:

> *The recent surge of interest in politics by architects is driven by discontent with the contemporary role of architecture in society, by a desire to take part in the shaping of society, by positing to architecture a demand to do more than merely fulfil its given tasks.*[17]

In contrast to a postmodern detachment that understood the architect as an autonomous being with control over the project, social architecture embraces the contingent aspects that show the architect as a facilitator in the democratic production of space.[18] Practitioners of social architecture believe that their role is to positively transform people's lives through spatial interventions.[19] As such they see their position as facilitators and activists that materialise societal aspirations through architecture in response to the increasingly 'anti-social developments in cities'.[20]

In *Spatial Agency*, the aim of social architecture is described primarily as an attempt to improve people's lives through urban intervention.[21] More recently this thought has evolved with Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal arguing that social architecture can be used to cope with the present crisis of, what they term, 'reproduction' through the production of new forms of space that move away from capitalism.[22] This argument suggests that social architecture is not only about an immediate question of improving people's lives but is also about understanding the purpose of the urban, raising questions of who has the right to engage within it, in an attempt to change the urban to be less 'anti-social'.

While the aim of improving material conditions (as proposed in *Spatial Agency*) may limit the scope of what social architecture can provide, this aim does not raise questions of political efficacy. It is when social architecture claims that it can be 'emancipatory' in an attempt to overcome capitalism, or neoliberalism, that questions of efficacy start to emerge and the critiques to this are explored here.

Kaminer argues that the outputs of 'the participatory movement', in an attempt to better public life through projects such as guerrilla gardening, can aid capitalist urban development through supporting processes of gentrification. As he says: 'such urban agriculture activities are well within consensus, a stimulus rather than threat to capitalism'.[23] Counter to atelier d'architecture autogérée's (aaa) belief that the manifestation of community gardening can create or stimulate larger socio-political changes, Kaminer simply concludes that 'They do not alter the relations of production.'[24] Similarly, Neil Brenner argues that 'tactical urbanism' fails to challenge 'the basic rule-regimes associated with market-oriented, growth-first urban development'.[25]

This paper agrees and furthers these critiques of social architecture. Through these critiques it becomes increasingly difficult to understand how social architecture intends to overcome capitalism or even neoliberal urban development. On the contrary, it could be argued that the built interventions of social architecture, which are well within the remit of capitalism, are serving neoliberal development by providing the services that were once guaranteed by the state. This becomes reminiscent of the UK Conservative government's 'Big Society' policy, which reduced state funding while promoting community control. By filling the gaps created by reductions in government funding, whether that be in access to greenspace (e.g., the guerrilla gardening of aaa), to

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1 **Exterior of REACH Homes prototype.**

affordable housing (e.g., Granby Four Streets by Assemble), to care, social architecture justifies the retraction of state funding that is central to much neoliberal policy.[26] In other words, these attempts to build beyond capitalism are appropriated for profit. Therefore, although proponents of social architecture may engage with urban left literature, as can be seen in Petrescu and Trogal's exploration into Lefebvre and Federici, the outputs of social architecture suffer a decontextualisation that do not challenge the wider urban processes that formed the basis of the action:[27]

> *This logic easily falls into a kind of decontextualisation and isolation: it serves to create islands of social engagement on the one hand while on the other to accept neo-liberalism's leitmotif that 'There Is No Alternative'.*[28]

In this way there is a tension that is created between social architecture's aim of emancipation and the reality of its actions, the built interventions, which are accounted for in neoliberal urban processes.[29]

This idea, that social architecture submits to neoliberalism, can be further explored through the concept of reification, where:

> *Reification requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange. The separation of the producer from his means of production, the dissolution and destruction of all 'natural' production units, etc., and all the social and economic conditions necessary for the emergence of modern capitalism tend to replace 'natural' relations which exhibit human relations more plainly by rationally reified relations.*[30]

Reification is an objectification of subjects and the subjectification of objects that occurs within a society dominated through commodity exchange and production. On the one hand this means humans can only enter productive relations through the circulation of commodities and thus come to represent the commodities they have. Through this representation, the labour commodity comes to represent the worker – a process of objectification in which the human is defined by their objects. On the other hand, because humans come to represent the objects they own, 'humans are reduced to executing or "personifying" the social characteristics of the things in their possession', leading to a subjectification of the commodity-object and capitalist social relations being mediated through commodities.[31]

Because relations are no longer between humans but mediated by humans through commodities then reification makes commodity exchange, and all social relations that contribute to commodity exchange, appear as natural – or as a second nature where society meets its needs through the exchange of commodities.

> *In this manner a particular (historical) set of social relations comes to be identified with the natural properties of physical objects, thereby acquiring an appearance of naturalness or inevitability – a fact which contributes, in turn, to the reproduction of existing social relations.*[32]

In other words, the defining of objects as subjects makes social relations appear as natural relations as these relations

are inscribed within the object themselves. For example, an object undertakes the social form of a commodity and is inscribed with value and exposed to the social relations of the market, thus justifying the cycle of commodity production. This is not a chronological process, where reification (the objectification of subjects and subjectification of objects) leads to second nature (the transformation of commodity exchange from a social relation to a natural relation), instead it is two conditions that are dialectically linked in the relations of commodity production. This is because, just as reification creates the naturalisation of social relations, reification is enforced by the social relations of the market. Furthermore, these relations are informed and modified by institutions, including the state.[33]

In *Architecture and Utopia*, Tafuri critiqued the process of naturalisation in relation to the city.[34] Through understanding the city as natural, then its social form (a mechanism for capitalist development through rent, speculation, profit, etc.) is inscribed within the city itself. Again, these two conditions are linked and the entanglement of the city with its social form produces an ahistorical condition of the city based on commodity exchange, making it appear as part of a second nature. Analysing Tafuri through the lens of reification, his interpretation of the city reveals the way in which the city is subjectified to embody the social relations inherent to the reproduction of contemporary society. The way in which cities are produced using practices such as land banking, construction finance, and subordinated labour has become naturalised. This makes it appear as though there is no alternative to the endless growth and ensuing inequality of profit-based logics.[35] In this way, Tafuri linked the concept of naturalisation and, by extension, reification as key to the reproduction of the urban. This leads Tafuri to the conclusion that architecture cannot prefigure a society beyond the dominance of commodity exchange.[36]

This exploration of reification demonstrates two critical points. Firstly, a society dominated by commodity production reproduces social relations that inscribe social forms in objects. Secondly, these social relations become naturalised meaning that, in such a society, social form becomes a real expression of objects. Through reification, this paper suggests a critique to those within social architecture that claim to be building beyond capitalism or being a part of a wider political project. This critique expands and builds upon both Kaminer and Brenner's claim that social architecture is contained within the processes of capitalism and Tafuri's conclusion that architecture cannot build beyond contemporary society. It does this by suggesting that social architecture's focus on a limited set of social relations in contemporary society disentangles these relations from the reproduction of society. This makes these relations appear as discrete and never questions the reason for the existence of these relations. By disentangling these social relations from the wider reproduction of a society dominated by commodity exchange, social architecture creates the appearance that the relations are abstracted and can be solved discretely. It ignores the fact that society will continually reproduce these relations as they are the natural relations of a society dominated by commodity exchange.

The argument can be broadly contextualised through the ways in which the built interventions of social architecture become appropriated in neoliberal urban development, as explored above. More specifically it can be illustrated by Kaminer's critique of aaa, Kaminer states that:

> *Petrescu and Petcou attempt to steer a political project with a broad ambition via the small scale of the interstices, working with political consciousness where change is expected to be produced via circumstance and opportunity, with a limited cognition of the wider picture. Or, in other words, to 'activate' the cracks as part of a larger plan, no matter how contingent, dispersed, and decentred such a plan is. Precisely how such an accumulative effect would occur remains vague.*[37]

In this example, aaa attempts to 'steer a political project' through a critique of different social forms of contemporary capitalism, that spatially manifest as a community network of small spaces.[38] The social forms they critique include food as a commodity and land as a producer of rent and vehicle for speculation. Through reification, these social forms are intangible from the material objects themselves. By using empty land as a space for local food production, aaa attempt to disentangle the social form from the material object by presenting alternatives to the social forms of food as commodity and land as rent and speculation. Through this attempt to disentangle social forms from objects, aaa attempts to produce new social relations between humans not dictated by the laws of a competitive market economy. Presenting these alternative social forms fails to create any wider change because, in a society of commodity exchange, it is not that 'human relations take on the appearance of relations between things. This, Marx makes clear, is nothing but an expression of the real nature of social relations in a competitive market economy.'[39] Presenting alternative social forms does not alter existing social relations because these relations are intrinsic to, and reproduced by, the 'competitive market economy'. Furthermore, as Kaminer notes above these alternatives may become stimulus to capitalist development. Through this lens of reification, this paper comes to the same conclusion as Tafuri that only through overcoming the 'competitive market economy' can these social relations be altered and not the other way round.[40]

aaa's actions involve the production of spaces to promote alternative economies. The aim of these actions is to create new social relations that will steer a political project. This remains unfulfilled. REACH have similar actions, the production of not-for-profit housing to promote a non-commodified form of housing, and a similar aim, to change the social relations of land and overcome the housing crisis. Akin to aaa, REACH's aim remains unfulfilled. Through the engagement with REACH Homes, the critiques levelled against social architecture were made manifest for me and through this I am able to suggest a new aim of social architecture.

An examination of REACH Homes

REACH Homes, founded 2016, are a small housebuilder in Sheffield, who operate as a social enterprise. REACH's aim is to provide a solution to the housing crisis through the construction of low-cost homes that are protected in asset covenants, such as community land trusts, to stop

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2 **Construction process from the inside. All timber, windows, and doors are from waste sources.**

profit extraction from their labour. To date, they have built a proof-of-concept prototype that serves as REACH's office, and until recently Jon's (the founder's) home, and an office for a self-described ecological building society. REACH can propose a low price because they aim to sell their housing at the cost of production, with no profit being extracted:

> *Our eco-homes, converted from shipping containers, start from just £35,000, cost 90% less to heat than a traditional home and use more than 60% recycled local materials.*[41]

REACH keep their construction cost low, partly from necessity – they lack capital – but also to maintain a more affordable option for potential buyers. They achieve this through constructing primarily with waste materials that are acquired in non-commodity exchanges, usually donations. Only members who do not have other sources of income draw a salary, and the prototype was constructed with volunteers *[1]*. REACH's lack of capital makes them uncertain about the future, and their aim to overcome the housing crisis is stalled by the everyday struggles (primarily around land acquisition and running costs). As such, during my time with them organisational questions, for example becoming a housing association, were often overlooked in favour of the (perceived) more immediate questions.

Like all social architecture, REACH emerged in opposition to the increasing anti-social reality of the contemporary urban landscape – specifically in opposition to recent waves of commodification within the production and consumption of housing in the UK *[2]*. When Jon discovered he couldn't afford a house on his police pension he decided to build his own. Through using waste and directly engaging in the construction processes he realised he could significantly reduce the cost of the build. Realising he was not alone in his exclusion from the housing market, Jon decided to found REACH. Apart from some carpentry, Jon had no experience in house construction, or the sector more generally and this was where my involvement with REACH was invaluable.

My one-year engagement with REACH Homes (from August 2018 to August 2019) formed the backbone of this research project. I had two initial aims – to identify key areas in their construction practices that could be improved, and to support REACH in their expansion beyond the prototype. Subsequently I used my experiences of this engagement to inform my reflections on the definition of decommodification, which was a key aspect of their construction practices due to the lack of capital available to them. My time with REACH was not specifically focused on an understanding of social architecture, however it was through this engagement that the critiques in the literature were made manifest for me.

My methods were varied throughout this time, performing tasks as diverse as photographer, meeting secretary, website designer, and newsletter editor; I engaged in building design, land procurement, and construction. It was through this first-hand account that the critiques of social architecture became justified, and I had a case study that wasn't challenging the logics of contemporary housing because it was struggling to even operate within the contemporary housing sector.

Unlike much housing activism that looks primarily at the consumption and distribution of housing, for instance many Community Land Trusts (CLTs) and co-operative housing developments, REACH also operates within the production of housing as a specific means to minimise profit extraction by developers. This attempt to produce without profit, alongside their lack of capital, means REACH must navigate and find alternatives to normative modes of construction to build *[3]*. REACH faces further challenges in this alternative construction method because in order to gain legitimacy as an alternative to present housing conditions they build within the confines of contemporary construction. To gain legitimacy, REACH act legally by obtaining planning permission, land rights, and conforming to regulations. This means they are constantly struggling to expand beyond their already completed projects.

Central to REACH's expansion issue is their ability to acquire land for further projects. As such, land acquisition without capital is central to REACH's activities and is an issue they overcame with the prototype but have since struggled to overcome. The following exploration of REACH's attempts at land acquisition contextualises this paper's argument.

The land for the prototype is leased from Heeley City Farm – a local not-for-profit with environmental goals. Rather than REACH paying for their tenure of the land in money, they connect their solar panels into the farm's energy network and any surplus energy generation goes to the farm. As the prototype uses only 10% of the energy of a traditional house, it has not required a fuel bill since construction and has also produced a considerable energy surplus. As a one-off project this works well because the environmental aims of the farm align to REACH's inability to pay a consistent rent. REACH struggle to implement their attempts of non-normative forms of land acquisition with other potential partners who operate in the construction sector and are used to the normative profit-based logics of land acquisition. An example of this is REACH's relationship to the local authority.

For much of my engagement with REACH we were attempting to acquire land on the basis that Sheffield City Council (SCC) had one of the longest waiting lists for social housing in the country and that REACH could provide a low cost and rapid solution to the issue. As a pilot study, SCC identified a plot of land and REACH developed a proposal of twelve houses including funding, plans, and construction strategy. In December of 2018, I was at the meeting where REACH's proposal was rejected by SCC, the main reason being SCC wanted REACH to have proof of funding for their development. REACH did have a promise of funding for £75,000 from a charity, however this would only be released on REACH's acquisition of land. Both parties, SCC and the charity, entered a deadlock where each required REACH to have the other (land/funding) before providing their side. As such, REACH received neither funding nor land. In normative construction practices this wouldn't happen because capital is provided through finance. Investors provide money to get a return on their investment through profit on the building.[42] As REACH intentionally do not make profit this was not a route they could take.

This encounter revealed to me the way that financial relations scripts the procedures by which construction unfolds. REACH, from a technical standpoint, can build but are constrained by financial restrictions. Where Kaminer critiques community gardens for not completing their goal

3 **Applying DPM and secondary structure to the shipping container.**

of altering relations of food production, REACH are not challenging the housing issue because they are unable to break down these relations.[43] As such, they are operating on the margins of house production, only able to take on projects that circumnavigate this wider reality. Although REACH can, with the prototype, demonstrate an alternative mode of land acquisition, existing financial relations prevent REACH from entering normative construction. This is a further demonstration of the way in which changing the social form of an individual object (in this case the land of the prototype) fails to alter wider social relations.

REACH's inability to enter the mainstream of housing construction connects to a wider issue that social architecture primarily operates on the small scale.[44] While working on the small scale enables a social improvement to the lives of those involved, specifically for REACH Jon gained a home and the farm gained energy generation, it suffers from not being able to engage with wider aims, specifically for REACH, providing a solution to the housing crisis. For social architecture, these wider aims may often be displaced:

> *Talking about 'social' projects rhetorically furthermore allows displacing the anti-social conditions in all their complexity (privatisation, developer-led planning), ascribing the latter to forces seemingly beyond reach (e.g., 'market forces', gentrification) and delegating its examination to other disciplines and realms.*[45]

This delegation of wider forces 'to other disciplines and realms' occurred with REACH. In their newsletter, REACH accused SCC of wanting:

> *to gentrify the S2 area with executive homes well out of the price range of local people and to exacerbate the problems which have led to a [council housing] waiting list of 33,000 people in Sheffield while 6,500 properties stand empty.*[46]

In the newsletter, SCC is depicted as deliberately manifesting housing inequality. Specifically, SCC becomes an embodiment of this inequality.

I examined this claim and while SCC did intend to gain £17.7 million from the sale of surplus assets, the sales were as part of a wider strategy to fund SCC's services following budget cuts.[47] Through this investigation, SCC changed in my mind from a figure deliberately implementing policies that exacerbate housing issues to a struggling Council attempting to fund critical services. This is supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, who found that during the budget cuts of both 2010/11 and 2015/16 local authorities attempted to minimise the impact on the poorest communities while attempting new strategies to manage austerity.[48]

From REACH's perspective, SCC is an embodiment of housing inequality in Sheffield that is upholding the social form of land as a speculative asset, and this lead to hostilities by REACH towards SCC. However, the decisions taken by SCC are just one part of contemporary society's reproduction of land as a speculative asset and, as was revealed, SCC has very little autonomy in this reproduction. REACH fails to realise this and so struggles against SCC while contemporary society is never fully identified by REACH as reproducing these relations. Furthermore, this illustrates the tension between REACH's aims and actions, a critique common to social architecture more generally.[49] The tension emerges from REACH's inability to identify the cause of housing inequality, which is a society dominated by commodity exchange, and instead blames it upon SCC. This leads to REACH's actions, the newsletter critiquing SCC, being not directed at the cause of housing inequality. In other words, REACH's actions are misdirected against SCC and so their aims become unachievable. Beyond the SCC encounter this tension remains, REACH's aim is to overcome the social form of land (as speculation and rent) to provide a solution to the housing crisis, this solution is predicated on land no longer being understood as a speculative asset. Through their prototype, REACH have demonstrated that land does not need to be scripted by the social forms ascribed to it (including rent and speculation) however the prototype has failed to create any wider change. This is because, as this paper has argued, architecture cannot prefigure a society beyond the dominance of commodity exchange.[50] The REACH example reinforces this paper's critique, namely, that attempts to change social relations and thereby change contemporary society fail because the same social relations are reproduced in contemporary society. Therefore, it is only through overcoming contemporary society that social relations can change.

Without identifying this tension, REACH's aim becomes redundant. It is by working through this tension that this paper proposes a new aim of social architecture could emerge.

An aim for social architecture?

The critiques explored in this article have demonstrated that the aim of social architecture to overcome the increasingly 'anti-social developments in cities' has not been achieved. The case study of REACH contextualised and enabled an expansion of these critiques through a first-hand account. Through REACH the tension between the aims and actions of social architecture, as identified by Richter and others, became an issue of struggling against the housing crisis by proposing an alternative.[51] This has not been achieved and an argument for this failure is articulated through the lens of reification.

Working through the tension between social architecture's aims and actions requires an acknowledgement of social architecture's inability to change society through its actions of materialising alternatives. This must be accompanied by an understanding of reification, where objects embody the social relations of commodity exchange and the accompanying naturalisation that makes these social relations become a second nature and therefore reproduced by contemporary society. Through this, an aim for social architecture could start to emerge that does not attempt to build beyond capitalism but serve as a critique. This argument emerges from Tafuri who states that:

> *one cannot 'anticipate' a class architecture (an architecture for 'a liberated society'); what is possible is the introduction of class criticism into architecture. Nothing beyond this, from a strict – but sectarian and partial – Marxist point of view.*[52]

If social architecture were to acknowledge its inability to change social relations and its inability to create an 'emancipatory project' through building alternatives, then I suggest that its aim could be in a critique of contemporary society by physically demonstrating that alternatives to existing social relations can exist. Rather than 'anticipating' alternatives to move building beyond capitalism, the aim of social architecture's built forms

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4 **Interior of REACH Homes prototype.**

would be to reveal the nature of contemporary society through the demonstration of an alternative. This must be supported by explaining why these alternatives cannot be widespread – because existing social relations are the natural expression of a society dominated by commodity exchange. In this way, rather than being a change-based aim, social architecture's aim would be an educational aim that reveals the absurdities of the present through an understanding and demonstration of reification.

This aim is not new, it is drawn from Marx's analysis on producer co-operatives. Marx saw the usefulness in producer co-operatives not because they could move beyond capitalism, and judging by the past two hundred years they haven't, but because they showed that a different way of producing was possible:

> *The value of these great social experiments cannot be over-rated. By deed, instead of by argument, they have shown that production on a large scale, and in accord with the behest of modern science, may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands; that to bear fruit, the means of labour need not be monopolised as a means of dominion over, and of extortion against, the labouring man himself; and that, like slave labour, like serf labour, hired labour is but a transitory and inferior form, destined to disappear before associated labour plying its toil with a willing hand, a ready mind, and a joyous heart.*[53]

Marx is not saying that co-operatives are providing an alternative to capitalism. In 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' he explains that they are only changing the present conditions of production, not moving beyond capitalism as they aimed to.[54] Marx argues they are proving, through deed, that large-scale production is not reliant upon a ruling class.

It was through REACH's prototype that Marx's analysis manifested itself to me in relation to social architecture. Throughout my engagement with REACH, and the slow estrangement between their aim and myself, the prototype never failed to excite my imagination. The following is an extract from my fieldnotes following my first visit:

> *Once inside, the house – through its act of simply being – raises the absurdity of professionalised and abstracted labour in the construction industry. Small though it is, it is perfectly homely and designed to a far higher, and infinitely more personalised, standard than houses found on the glossy pages of estate agent brochures. The space resembles a studio apartment. I am greeted by a stylish kitchen of what look like reclaimed wood cupboards, with a lounge over to my right – laying claim to the glass facade, and a copper curtain rail with desk and raised bed behind. An alcove behind the kitchen hints at a bathroom. The high ceilings, large windows, and hardwood floor erases from my mind visions of dank shipping containers and is more reminiscent of a Nordic chalet.*[55]

Despite the prototype's basic construction and the numerous critiques of container housing and despite my disillusionment with REACH's aims, the prototype still demonstrated a value in their work *[4]*. Akin to Marx's analysis of producer co-operatives, the REACH example suggests that while it is unable to overcome the housing crisis it does demonstrate an alternative to normative construction and occupation. Its act of being demonstrates that land could be acquired based on mutual support and need, even though land is currently primarily acquired through finance. It demonstrates that building construction doesn't require a ruling class to oversee workers, nor that materials need to be treated as a commodity. Through this

analysis, this paper suggests that the aim of social architecture could be to critique the illusion that there is no alternative to current social relations. This is not to say that REACH has the solution to the housing crisis, but that REACH's presentation of an alternative can serve to reveal the absurdities of the present. Furthermore, REACH's inability to realise its aim becomes a demonstration that disentangling discrete social relations in individual projects does not challenge contemporary society.

An audience for social architecture

A tension exists within social architecture. The projects struggle to move beyond the small scale. This leads to the tension between their aims, to create political projects that change the 'anti-social developments in cities' by presenting alternatives to existing social relations, and their actions, which are accounted for within the processes of commodity exchange.[56] The inability for their actions to challenge these anti-social relations creates a displacement of these very same relations, they are beyond social architecture's ability to change.[57] This is where the tension between aims and actions emerges, and without working through this tension '"social" engagement is doomed to remain locked in affirmative self-actualisation subscribing to one or another version of "doing good"'.[58]

While the aim of doing good is lauded by some as social architecture's primary aim, others do not acknowledge this tension and claim that social architecture can change the 'anti-social' relations of the city.[59] Through an engagement with REACH, this paper supports the critique that social architecture fails to alter the increasingly 'anti-social' nature of cities.[60] The REACH case demonstrated the tension between the aims and actions of social architecture through apportioning blame to SCC for their inability to gain land as opposed to understanding the wider urban processes that meant the Council themselves were constrained to balance their books. REACH also revealed the way in which finance scripts the processes of construction and that without overcoming this, REACH could not expand because they did not have the capital to acquire land. These scenarios demonstrated that presenting alternatives to existing social relations fails to provide a way for overcoming contemporary society.

It is through these critiques, that a new aim for social architecture is suggested. Namely, that even if social architecture fails to provide a way to move beyond a society based on commodity exchange it demonstrates that alternatives to present social relations could exist. In this way it serves the same purpose that consumer co-operatives do for Marx. This, however, raises a further, final, question – who is this alternative being demonstrated to? It is unclear who today values producer co-operatives in the way Marx did, many understand them just as a more 'ethical' business model. Unless there is an audience to understand this critique, then social architecture will remain unable to achieve more than 'doing good'.

Notes

1. Anna Richter, Hanna Katharina Göbel, Monika Grubbauer, 'Designed to Improve?: The Makings, Politics and Aesthetics of "Social' Architecture and Design', *City*, 21:6 (2017), 769–78 (p. 771).
2. Tahl Kaminer, *The Efficacy of Architecture: Political Contestation and Agency* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 77; see Paul Jones and Kenton Card, 'Constructing "Social Architecture": The Politics of Representing Practice', *Architectural Theory Review*, 16:3 (2011), 228–44; Richter, Göbel, Grubbauer, 'Designed to Improve?', pp. 769–78; Nina Gribat and Sandra Meireis, 'A Critique of the New "Social Architecture" Debate: Moving Beyond Localism, Developmentalism and Aesthetics', *City*, 21:6 (2017), 779–88.
3. Kaminer, *The Efficacy of Architecture*, p. 75.
4. Ibid., p. 77.
5. See fn. 1 above; see Jones and Card, 'Constructing "Social Architecture"', pp. 228–44; Gribat and Meireis, 'A Critique of the New "Social Architecture" Debate', 779–88.
6. Richter, Göbel, Grubbauer, 'Designed to Improve?', p. 775.
7. *The Social (Re)production of Architecture Politics, Values and Actions in Contemporary Practice*, ed. by Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 2.
8. Ibid., see chs 3, 10, and 17 in particular.
9. 'the "other" – be it the builder, user, viewer, or reviewer – should always be in the mind of the spatial agent, as their prime matter of concern, even if the final effect is intangible. In this light, the final word in this chapter on the motivation of spatial agency must go to Samuel Mockbee: "Go above and beyond the call of a 'smoothly functioning conscience'; help those who aren't likely to help you in return, and do so even if nobody is watching.' Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 51.
10. *The Social (Re)production of Architecture*, ed. by Petrescu and Trogal, p. 4.
11. See Neil Brenner, 'Is "Tactical Urbanism" an Alternative to Neoliberal Urbanism? Reflections on an Exhibition at the MOMA', in *The Social (Re) Production of Architecture*, pp. 116–26; Awan, Schneider, Till, *Spatial Agency*, p. 80; Petrescu and Trogal, *The Social (Re)production of Architecture*, chs 7, 14, 20, 21 in particular.
12. Richter, Göbel, Grubbauer, 'Designed to Improve?', pp. 772–3.
13. Kaminer, *The Efficacy of Architecture*, pp. 15–16, 78, 112–16; Brenner, 'Is "Tactical Urbanism" an Alternative to Neoliberal Urbanism?', pp. 116–26.
14. Kaminer, *The Efficacy of Architecture*, p. 113.
15. Ibid., pp. 11, 75.
16. Richter, Göbel, Grubbauer, 'Designed to Improve?', pp. 769–78; Awan, Schneider, Till, *Spatial Agency*.
17. Kaminer, *The Efficacy of Architecture*, p. 11.
18. Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends* (Cambridge, MA; London, UK: The MIT Press, 2009), p. 25; Awan, Schneider, Till, *Spatial Agency*, pp. 27–31; Tatjana Schneider, 'Notes on Social Production: A Brief Commentary', in *The Social (Re) Production of Architecture*, pp. 22–7.
19. Awan, Schneider, Till, *Spatial Agency*, p. 19.
20. Doina Petrescu, 'How to Make a Community as Well as the Space for It', *SPACE SHUTTLE: Six Projects of Urban Creativity and Social Interaction,* Belfast: PS^2 (2007), pp. 45–50.
21. See fn. 9.
22. See fn. 7.
23. Kaminer, *The Efficacy of Architecture*, pp. 112–13.
24. Ibid., p. 112
25. Brenner, 'Is "Tactical Urbanism" an Alternative to Neoliberal Urbanism?', p. 116.
26. See Kim Trogal, 'Caring: Making Commons, Making Connections',

in *The Social (Re) Production of Architecture*, pp. 159–74.
27. Kaminer, *The Efficacy of Architecture*, pp. 1–15; Richter, Göbel, Grubbauer, 'Designed to Improve?', pp. 772–3.
28. Ibid.
29. See Brenner, 'Is "Tactical Urbanism" an Alternative to Neoliberal Urbanism?', pp. 116–26.
30. Georg Lukacs, 'History & Class Consciousness' (Merlin Press, 1967), in *Marxists Internet Archive* <https://www.marxists.org/> [accessed 21 September 2020].
31. Val Burris, 'Reification: A Marxist Perspective', *California Sociologist*, 10 (1988), 22–43 (p. 28).
32. Ibid., p. 23.
33. Ibid.
34. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), p. 7.
35. Ibid.
36. Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture* (London: Granada, 1980).
37. Kaminer, *The Efficacy of Architecture,* p. 112.
38. Doina Petrescu, 'How to Make a Community as Well as the Space for It', pp. 45–50.
38. Val Burris, 'Reification: A Marxist Perspective', pp. 22–43.
40. Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*.
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42. Tony Merna, with Yang Zhu, and others, *Project Finance In Construction: A Structured Guide To Assessment* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
43. Kaminer, *The Efficacy of Architecture*, p. 113.
44. Richter, Göbel, Grubbauer, 'Designed to Improve?', pp. 772–3.
45. Ibid., p. 772.
46. Fieldnotes, *REACH Homes Newsletter*, 20 December 2018.
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48. Annette Hastings, with Nick Bailey and others, 'The Cost of the Cuts: The Impact on Local Government and Poorer Communities', *Joseph Rowntree Foundation* (2015).
49. Richter, Göbel, Grubbauer, 'Designed to Improve?', pp. 769–78.
50. Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*.
51. Richter, Göbel, Grubbauer, 'Designed to Improve?', pp. 769–78.
52. Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, p. XV.
53. Karl Marx in Bruno Jossa, 'Marx, Marxism And The Cooperative Movement', *Cambridge Journal Of Economics*, 29 (2005), 3–18 (p. 4).
54. Karl Marx, 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970) in *Marxists Internet Archive* <https://www.marxists.org/> [accessed 1 May 2021].
55. Fieldnotes, REACH Homes First Visit, 17 August 2018.
56. Brenner, 'Is "Tactical Urbanism" an Alternative to Neoliberal Urbanism?', pp. 116–26.
57. Richter, Göbel, Grubbauer, 'Designed to Improve?', pp. 769–78.
58. Ibid., pp. 772–3.
59. Awan, Schneider, Till, *Spatial Agency*.
60. Kaminer, *The Efficacy of Architecture*, p. 112.

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