

**One linear mile:
Towards a more hospitable architecture**
Aaron Levy

In architecture today, one could say that our problems are no longer formal, but social. The spatial politics of race and class, the privatization of public space, and the ecological crisis we all face on this planet -- all this is forcing us to think in profoundly different ways about architecture than we might previously have been inclined or educated to think. Our reluctance to take initiative perhaps explains why our work in the cultural sector over the last fifty years is often thought to be more successful at creating claims on progressiveness than at creating progressive change itself.

As one response, I would like to propose the heuristic device of “one linear mile” as a possible model for how we can all negotiate these problems in our practices by thinking differently about architecture and agency, irrespective of place. I understand the concept of the linear mile to function as a metaphor for determining action wherever a thin line of proximity separates communities of need from communities of choice. In doing so, we can be attentive not just to the practice of building buildings, but also to the practice of building relationships.

Now I am not a particularly hierarchical thinker, nor do I approach the built environment from a formal architectural perspective, so I cannot tell you in these few pages what to do or think next. As an educator and practitioner who frequently negotiates the tensions that define the built environment, particularly in urban contexts, I hope that what I say might nevertheless be enabling to you in whatever you do. Throughout, my concern is the severe breakdown in trust between publics and institutions that has developed in recent decades, as well as the agency we have to mitigate this breakdown - an agency that makes us who we are and this society what it is.

Despite the massive data collection and analysis that occurs in non-governmental and governmental arenas, all of this so-called information rarely enables an understanding of what is really at stake for those that live in neighborhoods marked by decades of public disinvestment, the erosion of public education, and a lack of political representation. The challenge is perhaps nowhere so severe, or as legible, however, as in the predicament facing youth from marginal neighborhoods.

Our understanding of the stakes crystallizes in a recent remark made by a social worker at a public health conference in Philadelphia, concerning the current epidemic of violence and sexually transmitted diseases amongst youth. He acknowledged that his colleagues know more about the city’s youth when they are on the autopsy slab than when they are still alive; public knowledge of the individual arrives post-mortem, when it is too late. What does it mean to live in a society in which you are invisible, only appearing to the public when you die? What does it mean for your life to only count in statistical form? How can we work back from these corpses and find value in life?

Part of the art of survival sometimes consists of not talking about what is painful. It can be paralyzing to consider the implications of these questions for architecture and design, as well as the myriad other pressures that define the urban landscape today, particularly on the

neighborhood level. Perhaps we can begin by taking an anthropologist's gaze, if only to recognize that this crisis is in many respects a manufactured one, one that indicts our institutions and ourselves. Our challenge is to imagine practical ways to mitigate these uncomfortable realities, themselves decades in the making.

We need to think of the built landscape as a potent tool - one with the potential to enable social interfaces that can help rebuild lost trust between publics and institutions, as well as civic imagination and participation more generally. The heuristic device of one linear mile can help us think differently and more hospitably about architecture and agency. Mimi Cheng, Ken Saylor, Megan Schmidgal, and others at Slought have helped me develop the concept over the past few months, building from the realization that nearly all the tensions and divisions that define a city such as Philadelphia are typically concentrated within any given ten-block distance.

For instance, I work each day in a cultural institution located at 40th and Walnut Street. I can walk North on 40th toward the Mantua and Belmont neighborhoods, or West on Walnut Street. I can also walk East onto the University of Pennsylvania campus, or South towards Baltimore and Chester Avenues. Regardless of the direction in which I walk, within one linear mile I confront considerable shifts in formal and informal economy, institutional opportunities, and social relations, among other disparities.

My focus here will be on the ten blocks moving South that separate the corner of 40th and Brown from the corner of 40th and Walnut, and specifically the shift in public and private investment that occurs. At 40th and Brown, one encounters a predominantly Black neighborhood with a vibrant and resilient social fabric alongside neglected buildings, vacant lots, and impoverished residents. At 40th and Walnut, one encounters a predominantly White neighborhood, the commercial edge of a private university campus with manicured landscaping, a private security force, and sleek temporary housing, all masquerading as public space. As we walk from 40th and Brown to 40th and Walnut, we move across race and class, from eroded public school to elite private university, and from a landscape of public disinvestment to one of total privatization. If ever there was an opportunity to study architectural agency and its history of well-intentioned mistakes, surely it could be found here.

Far from eluding our grasp or sense of responsibility on account of their abstract nature, the tensions we find along this linear mile can also be negotiated within this same distance. We can aspire, for instance, to amplify and empower neighborhood voices and opportunities along these ten blocks, and to facilitate exchange between the everyday knowledge of neighborhoods and the specialized knowledge of institutions of higher learning. But rather than perform here additional analysis of the demographics and socio-economic disparities of this particular linear mile, it may be more productive to simply state that architects and others can enable interfaces between neighboring communities wherever they are found. It is in this sense that I propose the concept of the linear mile as a starting point for designing in response to the profound challenges we face.

Conceptually, the idea of the linear mile is informed by sociologist Elijah Anderson's ethnographic study of eight miles along Germantown avenue in Philadelphia, which stretch from the prosperity of the Main line suburbs to the North Philadelphia ghetto, and the Indian author Arundhati Roy's analysis of the proximity of the billionaire Mukesh Ambani's 27-story-high

residence in Mumbai, the most expensive dwelling ever built, and the adjacent slums that are home to the impoverished and dispossessed. The concept of the linear mile also builds upon architect Teddy Cruz's research along the 60 linear miles that separates the favelas of Tijuana, Mexico from the wealth of La Jolla, California. It is Cruz's understanding that density can be more productively conceptualized in terms of social exchanges per acre, rather than the more conventional defining of housing units or residents per acre, and that architecture's task is thus the production of housing units that multiply social exchange. Cruz provides an important prompt to understanding architecture beyond building. He has argued for a definition of architectural practice that envisions buildings not as isolated units of private housing, and rather as essential elements in the construction of vibrant, diverse, and affordable neighborhoods.

Is this recognition of architecture's relationship to the urban fabric and the need to rethink its fixed role not the founding impulse of the Venice Architecture Biennale as well? Let us not forget that Vittorio Gregotti's inaugural impulse in 1975 with *A proposito del Mulino Stucky* was to critique the tendency to focus on an anthropological collection of the most recent output, and instead to recognize architecture as a fundamentally creative act - one that enables relationships and has the potential to transform the urban and social fabric in which we live.

We would do well to also remember that architecture was once understood as a seismograph through which to understand and negotiate contemporary conditions. Let us urgently rethink systems of display and power in a way that recovers and responds to this forgotten history. In doing so, we can be attentive not just to the practice of building buildings, but also to the practice of building relationships. We may need to re-conceptualize our understanding of architecture as well, at least as we generally have understood it, if only to imagine a different way to go about talking about what architecture can mean today, the structures and relationships it can generate, and, fundamentally, who will have access and opportunity to this potential. Moreover, we will need to think not just about the sustainability of materials or building performance, but of the social relations that are the real infrastructure of mixed neighborhoods. Let us begin, then, to approach every building, every site, and every exhibition as an opportunity to enable neighborhoods and communities that are more equitable - and in more than just name.

July 22, 2012

13th Venice Biennale of Architecture
David Chipperfield Architects
11 York Road
London SE1 7NX

Dear David Chipperfield and Kieran Long,

I am writing to inquire after the status of my contribution to the Common Ground reader accompanying your 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale. It has come to my attention that the publication went to print this week but that my contribution, entitled "One Linear Mile," was excluded at the last minute from the publication, along with other contributions as well.

As you actively solicited my contribution, and my essay departed neither from my initial proposal nor the regular updates I provided to your in-house editor throughout, I do not understand the reason for the last minute elimination of my essay without explanation or notice. I am also troubled by the possibility that other essays that may have also introduced socio-political positions were excluded as well.

Acts of censorship are always problematic, and particularly in this case as it undermines the stated intent of your own Biennale, which clearly aspires towards some sort of "Common Ground." By excluding contributions from the reader that raise questions of race and class, wealth inequality, and affordable housing, to name some of the urgent ethical and architectural topics of our time that I tried to foreground, one might conclude that common ground is precisely what you are trying to avoid if not eliminate altogether. It may also be construed to imply that you are making a claim about the importance of reaching consensus without intending to perform accordingly. One of the key points in my contribution was precisely this point: we need to move beyond the tendency to claim the mantle of progressiveness, and instead enable and perform progressive change itself, messy and complex as this may be.

I am writing this letter neither out of personal humiliation nor injured pride at my exclusion from the reader; rather, because you have suppressed voices that need and deserve to be heard. In my contribution, my intention was to amplify voices that are typically marginalized and go unheard. I sought to do so in a sensitive and subtle way that might help architects understand the pressures and tensions that define urban neighborhoods, and offer practical suggestions of how they can practice architecture in response. Regardless of whether you

agree with my specific argument, or whether it has been formulated within contemporary architectural discourse as you prefer it, you are responsible as a curator for enabling voices and positions besides your own - and especially so in a Biennale that claims to be concerned with consensus and the common ground.

In fact, the enabling of diverse voices and positions has been a central element of the Venice Architecture Biennale throughout its history. I concluded my essay on the "One Linear Mile" by invoking Vittorio Gregotti's inaugural exhibition in 1975 at the Venice Architecture Biennale to emphasize this point. Gregotti's exhibition took the form of a response to the tumult of 1968 and engaged concerns that the Biennale was not sufficiently responsive to the socio-political developments of his time; in response, he involved a diverse array of community voices, artists, architects and others in order to explore the future of the Mulino Stucky Granary Mill and the city of Venice more generally. Similarly, Francesco Dal Co's Biennale sought to foreground student voices for the first time, while Massimiliano Fuksas attempted to foreground a variety of ethical perspective as a challenge to the aesthetic focus of the Biennale in preceding years. While each past director has clearly approached their Biennale differently, all have acknowledged the importance of foregrounding heterogeneous perspectives throughout. Your act of exclusion is thus troubling not only because it violates your own curatorial statement, but also because it departs from the vernacular history and tradition of the Biennale more generally. But this is perhaps familiar to you already, as it is a central theme in the living history of the Venice Architecture Biennale that William Menking and I recently published with the Architectural Association - a publication around which our correspondence with you first began.

As you may recall, my introduction to the publication recounts the experience of my colleagues and I in curating the US Pavilion for the 2008 Venice Architecture Biennale, and the challenges we negotiated throughout. At the time, we understood that we had been given an unusual opportunity: to engage in open conversations with diverse publics about the state of architecture at a moment (during the second term of the George W. Bush presidency) when a profound breakdown in trust between communities, institutions, and the field more generally had emerged and demanded another response. Much like your intentions with "Common Ground," we sought to build a viable interface that would enable architects and others to explore ways of coming together despite - or perhaps even because of - their differences, in order to respond to the socio-economic challenges, environmental rifts, and lack of political representation that define our times. One could

critique the exhibition we ultimately organized, which took place in a foreign country on only two months notice, with minimal financial support from our government and nearly twenty grassroots voices at the table, but at no point did we consciously exclude voices as you have done with your reader, and at no point did we infantilize the publics we were trying to engage by shielding them from complexity - as you have also done by excluding those essays that attempt to speak with complexity about today's challenges. Precisely because one can never know the outcome or future life of a project, you could have perhaps been less hasty to exclude contributors from your reader. In our case, for instance, we never imagined that our modest intervention at the Biennale would shift the barometer for how the US Pavilion is curated in subsequent years.

Indeed, a key question for those involved in the Biennale is often what one's exhibition will leave behind, and what its legacy will be for future generations. What precisely will your biennale aspire towards and achieve? The importance of this question for previous directors of the Venice Architecture Biennale was one of the central insights I took from my interviews with them, and maybe it is something you are considering as well as the opening of your Biennale approaches. I hope that this letter, and specifically the concerns I am raising here, will be enabling in this regard. Perhaps you can organize some public forums during the next months in Venice where perspectives besides your own may emerge and find amplification or even affirmation.

I don't altogether regret writing the "One Linear Mile" for your Biennale, for it is itself the consequence of a series of conversations with neighborhood youth as well as other practitioners, and in time it will reach other publics in other ways. However, it has required much time to develop and write and has taken me away from the communities I serve in Philadelphia and the extremely fragile, volunteer non-profit organization that I direct. It may be hard for you to understand how difficult sustaining a small non-profit is, the extraordinary sacrifices it has entailed over these last ten years on my part and those with whom I work, and how disheartening it can be to have your voice or the voices of those around you suppressed. It may also be difficult to understand how problematic it was that you at no point offered suggestions or feedback that could have helped me to strengthen my contribution or simply meet your concerns. Given how much time you were asking me to contribute by writing for the reader, and with little to no financial recompense, you could have also made it clear from the beginning that mine was a token invitation at best, and that a socio-political perspective was neither of interest to you nor sincerely extended to me in the first place.

I look forward to your response to this letter in the coming days. In the meantime, I request that you reinstate my contribution as an addendum or insert to the printed reader, along with other contributions that have been unnecessarily excluded. If this is not possible, I ask that you display these contributions in some other capacity at the Biennale for the public to access and read. I would also welcome the opportunity to continue this conversation in a more public forum during your Biennale, in whatever manner and under whatever framework you think would be enabling for others.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. Levy'.

Aaron Levy
Executive Director
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