PRAXIS

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PRAXIS 8 RE:PROGRAMMING

Re:Programming

Amanda Reeser Lawrence and Ashley Schafer

"A programme is a description of the spatial dimensions, spatial relationships and other physical conditions required for the convenient performance of specific functions." —*John Summerson, "The Case for a Theory of Modern Architecture," 1957*

"A contemporary sense of program … might not privilege architecture in the conventional sense." —*Anthony Vidler, "Towards a Theory of Architectural Program," 2003*

Some twelve months after deciding to devote an issue of PRAXIS to the most ecumenical of architectural topics, we still find ourselves asking: what is program anyway? What began as an innocent inquiry into the status of program today—some thirty years after it was first resuscitated from modernist functionalist doctrine—quickly became a venture into labyrinthine and contested territory. The more we tried to clarify what program is and how it operates in contemporary discourse, the more elusive its definition became. For while architects almost universally address the most pragmatic understanding of program—a listing of specific uses and requirements, often accompanied by square footage allocations—this definition of program as "brief" fails to capture the range of implications the term has acquired in architectural parlance and practice. Beyond this simple and simplifying denotation of program lies a complex, ambiguous, and ultimately paradoxical set of ideas. We found that the mere mention of this issue's topic often elicited a highly contentious debate regarding its relevance and implication for designers today.

The dispute over the significance and instrumentality of program as a design consideration is not surprising given its equivocal architectural status over the last half century. By the mid-1970s, postmodernism had all but banished the term from architectural discourse, as program's association with the overly deterministic rhetoric of modernist functionalism had exhausted its agency for architects. For early modernists, program was effectively equivalent to function, with the resulting development that just as "form followed function," so too "form followed program." Post-war models of efficiency that mandated a direct correlation between form and use only further sanctioned the nearly direct translation of program into form—what John Summerson, in 1957, fittingly called "the physical conditions required for the convenient performance of specific functions." The result of which provoked the post-modern neo-avant-garde's near-total rejection of program as an obsolete vestige of functionalist polemics.

It was this debased status from which Bernard Tschumi and Rem Koolhaas 'recovered' program and imbued it with the legacy of indeterminacy that it maintained for the next thirty years. With Manhattan as their research laboratory Tschumi and Koolhaas simultaneously, but individually, recaptured the notion of program and reconceptualized its use through theories of indeterminacy and excess. In both the *Manhattan Transcripts* and *Delirious New York* (both 1978)[1], program was liberated from its affiliations with functionalism and a prescriptive relationship to form. As Tschumi wrote, "in today's world where railway stations become museums and churches become nightclubs a point is being made: the complete interchangeability of form and function, function does not follow form and form does not follow function."[2] These seminal works recast program's parameters to include multiple configurations of spaces and, reciprocally, proposed the possibility that a given form or space could house any number of programs. This new conception of program became almost the exact opposite of its linear modernist predecessor: programs could be crossed ("pole vaulting in the chapel"), superposed ("the quarterback tangos on the skating rink"), juxtaposed ("eating oysters with boxing gloves,

naked, on the nth floor"), or redeployed (using the section of the Downtown athletic club as the plan for La Villette.)[3]

While there are significant parallels in their development of programmatic theory, there are also substantial differences in both form and content. Tschumi's *Transcripts* take the form of theoretical drawings, with accompanying text, while Koolhaas's "retroactive manifesto" is a journalistic text accompanied by "fictional" drawings. Koolhaas establishes a generic, or formally indifferent, attitude toward program: all programs, however diverse, are subject to the same formal logic (witness his competition entry for La Villette in which he establishes a relentless series of dimensionally invariable bands uninflected by the program they house). Form is generic, but program is specific. In Tschumi's La Villette, on the other hand, form is specific and program generic. The grid of highly articulated red follies has no predetermined program; form and function are interchangeable. Together, these works constitute a body of research significant in that they transformed program from a spatially (and most often formally) determinant instrument to an indeterminate one, reintroducing program as a generative tool.

If these programmatic propositions no longer appear to embody the radical potential they did in the seventies, it is only because they have been fully assimilated into contemporary architecture culture. As such, we felt sufficiently indebted to these programmatic fomenters to begin the issue with an interview about their early work, as they have undeniably transformed the way we understand program today. Nearly thirty years later their programmatic speculations have been concretized: in Tschumi's "event-spaces," such as the hub of Lerner Hall and the central space at The Marne School of Architecture, and in Koolhaas's Seattle Public Library, whose shifted programmatic strips actualize the diagrammatic analyses of both the Downtown Athletic Club and his Park de la Villette proposal. These projects manifest the development from a theory of program to its application in practice. With the neo-avant-garde experiments of thirty years ago now realized as multi-million dollar buildings, the opportunity for re-assessing program has re-emerged. The actualization of these ideas in built form has liberated a new generation of architects to move beyond these prescribed solutions; paradoxically, the formalization of programmatic ideas has re-opened avenues of inquiry into program once again.

What, then, are the opportunities for program today? While virtually every architectural project addresses program as brief, the projects in this issue are unique in that they move beyond not only the modernist, deterministic application of program, but also beyond the 1970s models of programmatic indeterminacy. If Tschumi and Koolhaas repositioned program's role from the composition of spatial arrangements —in which function was prescriptively translated into form—to the generation of relational scenarios—that accommodated heterogeneous and unforeseen events—the definition of program appears to be expanding yet again. The architects in this issue of PRAXIS are reappropriating program in two important ways: one, by questioning the received architectural understanding of program, further distancing it from its modernist associations with 'use' or 'function'; and two, by elaborating various strategies for organizing and accommodating matter and information as program. Building skins, material technologies, forms, abandoned structures, and even actions are now potential sites for programmatic operations.

This new programmatic material is imbued with a particular use or function in accordance with its inherent characteristics. For example, R&Sie's dust-collecting skins, draped between white gallery boxes to capture and envelop the B-mu museum's collective functions, or the layered skins of VJAA's Tulane Student Center that define a fluid and permeable zone between interior and exterior. Beyond the incorporation of new materials into the repertoire of what is programmed, these architects are also extending the tactics for how material is programmed, further elaborating possibilities for developing program as an organizational strategy. In the "Program Primer," WORK Architecture Company provides perhaps the clearest elaboration of this approach, offering a set of coded instructions that propose myriad tactics for working with, and manipulating, various programs. In the seventies, programmatic theory preceded its implementation, but today the reconceptualization of program is emerging largely from practice. This is part of the reason why the term remains so problematic—not only because of its complex legacy but, more importantly, because it is continuously redefined in contemporary architectural practice.

This elusive definition of architectural program is also caused by a broader shift in the term, specifically to its increasingly dominant associations in contemporary culture. With the emergence of the personal computer as a household accessory in the last decade, "program" has acquired an entirely new set of connotations, once reserved for computer scientists. The term is now ubiquitously understood as a function of software, and increasingly the specific and technical definition of program as "a set of coded instructions"[4] is pertinent to architects both literally and as an operation aligned with its deployment as an organizational strategy. This recent transformation has empowered architects to see what was traditionally understood as a given program as something that can be reprogrammed at will.

More than merely accommodating a fixed and passive program, one can now choose to define the fundamental parameters of what is to be programmed, reintroducing architectural agency into the act of programming.[5] As program's material palette expands, so do the opportunities and range of operations for its architectural application, enabling it to become generative once again. Program is longer simply acted upon but is itself active. In short, it is requalified from a noun (a known entity) to a verb (an action latent with multiple potentials). Armed with an opportunity to program, an emerging group of designers isn't "getting with the program" it is programming.

1 *The Manhattan Transcripts* was first exhibited in 1978 at Artist's Space in New York and subsequently published in 1981.
2 Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge: MIT Press), 1996, p. 255.
3 Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, "Spaces and Events" p. 146, Tschumi, *The Manhattan Transcripts*, p. 11, Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, p. 155.
4 The most digitally-savvy architects are literally writing codes and scripts which program outcomes.
5 As PRAXIS editors we have also taken up the polemical challenge of rethinking program—specifically how one might "re-program" a journal. Working with Alice Chung and Karen Hsu of Omnivore, we used this issue as an opportunity to reconceptualize our format, jettisoning the underlying grid and adopting an organizational strategy based on the content itself, responding to a desire for greater flexibility and a more fluid relationship between text and image—ultimately, even, to generate a contested space between the two.