

## Neo-vernacular | Non-Pedigreed Architecture

*Design Authorship And Expertise At The Time of Participatory Culture and Crowdsourcing Practices.*

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### Abstract

This essay focuses on spatial production at the time of participatory culture and crowdsourcing practices. If vernacular architecture is the result of transmitted knowledge from generation to others and the specific answer (and deep connection to the ground) to a geographical/geological context – climate and local resources, neo-vernacular, is the peer-to-peer transmission of knowledge through Internet platforms, over a shorter period of time, and resulting in the situational design of spaces. The plethora of platforms and tools, for example blogs, wikis, social networking sites, software free to download – the Google 3D software Sketchup for instance – and virtual environments such as 2nd Life enable to co-construct various kinds of production. Be it the construction of the self, that of a candidate, a service or a space, all productions seem to follow self-organizing principles, and build on previous knowledge with the goal to reach perfection. In the absence of a unique owner with a particular knowledge, why and how do things get built? The hypothesis is that today design authorship and design expertise are both being shared, facts that offer other alternatives to traditional STARCHitectural practices. In what seems to be a doomed landscape for want to be practitioners, new design opportunities emerge.

### 1. From DIY to “party crashers.”

The election of Barack Obama is a landmark in history of a particular interest to designers. We observed that mobilization is a matter of identity sharing and co-construction.<sup>1</sup> Obama’s strategy to seek solidarity for the struggle ahead aligned with Putnam’s observation, that “inequality and solidarity are deeply incompatible” and led him to victory.<sup>2</sup> Various Internet platforms have now emerged calling for participation to press on issues that matter to particular interest groups (urban designers, architects, environmentalists). In establishing a web2.0 democracy, President Obama challenged two concepts of critical importance to the design field: authorship and expertise.

Authorship has morphed from the individual to the collective, where the power of the individual matters less than the associations the individual builds. In recent years, there is evidence that spatial creation has transferred authorship and expertise from the exclusive (STARCHitectural), to the individual (Do It Yourself) and finally to the communal (Do It With Others) practices. Collaboration is nothing new to architects, but it has happened mainly between professionals. Now, the project emerges from the collaborative effort of experts, semi-experts and neophytes altogether. A new form of “architecture without architects,” the outcome is the product of what Howe calls “crowdsourcing,” “*the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call,*” and participatory culture, where knowledge is established through peer-to-peer learning.<sup>3</sup> This means that none needs to know everything, but that one has to belong to (or momentarily plug into) the right production line.

If vernacular architecture is the result of transmitted knowledge from generation to others and the specific answer (and deep connection to the ground) to a geographical/geological context – climate and local resources, neo-vernacular, is the peer-to-peer transmission of knowledge through Internet platforms, over a shorter period of time, and resulting in the

situational design of spaces. There are many examples illustrating the topics of neo-vernacular or non-pedigreed architecture. Do It Yourself (DIY) practices, possibly the premise of social networking, illustrate the rise of the amateur. The following everyday life observation is an example of the changes in operation: an acquaintance asked for advices from two of his architect friends independently from each other. He wanted to remodel the new apartment he had bought in the outskirts of Paris. To his surprise, both advices concurred (which meant something about architectural curriculum and practice). Yet, he downloaded the free Google software, Sketchup, and with it visualized his personal space. He made few design decisions before going to the equivalent of Home Depot in France. There he sought the advices of an in-house interior architect who, with the help of another software, designed the bathroom and the kitchen using standardized pieces that were sold in the store. What one needs to retain from the above story is one, the fragmentation of the design commission and two, the social network involved, friends, acquaintances, and strangers. In this instance DIY is more like DIWO – Do It With Others.

Doing things with others is a generous idea, but where is the economic value of it? One lesson to take from the internet is that there is no such thing as a free gift. Along with the 'free' software Sketchup which enables users to "use and enjoy the benefits of the service" (but not to copy nor rip the code), Google provides a blog to assist users. In return, Sketchup users are invited to contribute to developing Google Earth by Building 3D representations of bridges that exist: *"simply model your bridge in Google SketchUp, geo-reference it in Google Earth, and submit the bridge by uploading to the Google 3D Warehouse to earn eternal online glory and, if you win, a handsome prize."*<sup>4</sup> A gift, Sketchup for example, represents the transaction between companies and users. To be successful, this transaction should benefit both parties. One potential benefit of the transaction is what Jenkins calls the "spreadability of media." When you offer ideas, you gain publicity for them in exchange. The author and blogger writes that: *"nothing spreads widely in the new digital economy unless it engages and serves the interests of both consumers and producers."*<sup>5</sup> Or as Jenkins writes, *"if it doesn't spread, it's dead."*<sup>6</sup> Spreadability is vital.

With regards to architecture, the spreadability of media is a window of opportunity to identity creation, fame, however temporary; it increases serendipity and social networking. By spreading information and co-creating through the appropriate channels, such as blogs and wikis, otherwise unrecognized architects may gain popularity, share useful ideas or get a commission. These are all examples of the transactional value of doing things with others.

In order to spread, content has to matter to users. More than the mere 'transmission of information,' it is the 'transformation of information,' meaning the appropriation or distortion of content, that has a transactional value. The following example illustrates a desire for malleable of content. Building Space With Words (BSWW) an installation organized by Anne-Laure Fayard and Aileen Wilson projects posts and comments from bloggers onto an architecture of fabric. Looking for a little more involvement and (heated) debate, one of the participants asked: *"where are the party crashers?"*<sup>7</sup> The installation relied on and took shape through people's participation, and disruptive action.

These everyday life examples highlight the fact that designing today is a shared activity between stakeholders from various backgrounds and of different levels of expertise. This dispersion of agency can be worrisome to the profession of designers, and challenges traditional pedagogy of schools and institutions.<sup>8</sup> On March 10, 2009, Howe wrote in his blog that Designers didn't like the concept of crowdsourcing: *"Witness the upheaval currently afflicting the design industry, sparked by the rise of so-called "spec design" sites like crowdSPRING and 99designs."*<sup>9</sup> In fact on the crowdSPRING website you read: *"it's easy: just post your project [that of your business], watch the world submit ideas and choose the one you like."* If anyone can become a designer, what is then the shape of today's design

practice? The hypothesis is that participatory culture and crowdsourcing practices introduce a valid alternative to STARCHitectural practices.

In this paper we will first address the 1. reason for people's engagement, to then 2. analyze the strategies employed in the communal creation of space and conclude with 3. principles to follow in order to create alternative design practices.

## 2. "You know what the trouble with life is? There just ain't any background music."<sup>10</sup>

Saul Alinsky, the community organizer who inspired both Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton mentioned crudely few things to remember: people are starving for recognition, and seek power.<sup>11</sup> This observation holds even truer in today's time of participation. A close look at Barack Obama's presidential campaign tells us that the Internet facilitated the co-creation of Obama's collectively imagined identity. "Who is Obama?" The question opponents asked reflected the fact that Obama's identity was left a coloring book, for supporters to fill in." We noted that many creations that participate in the construction of Obama's identity also reveal individual or group self-identities. People contributed to his brand with the tools of production that they knew, also hoping to gather momentum and rise above the crowd. As Saul Alinsky writes, the trouble with life "[is that] it is a desperate search for personal identity—to let other people know that at least you are alive" (Alinsky, 1971: 121). Obama's identity becomes a tool to achieve visibility, and thus strengthen one's own identity.<sup>12</sup>

With regards to architecture, identity creation affords recognition. This leads to more commissions, but the more people on the market, the fiercer the competition is. In a sea of ideas, where the savoir-faire can be acquired through peer-to-peer learning, how do designers run a business and/or earn a living? Is "harnessing ideas from people" – as Studio Wikitecture states – economically viable in a competitive market? It is not yet, as the organizers say on their blog: "*we are looking for sponsors who would be willing to provide much needed funding to carry this project forward*".<sup>13</sup> One danger with the digital is that ideas can rapidly be emulated, and recognition can fade rapidly. Architects need to recognize that ideas have lost their transactional value.

crowdSPRING, a business that provides a platform for entities to outsource (graphic) design jobs, seems to have understood the business value of social networking and competition. A strategy for people to rise above the crowd is to join, even temporarily the 'right' crowd and network with its members. In a comment to a post by Jeff Howe about crowdSPRING, Angeline, crowdSPRING's Community Manager writes that:

*"Our site is fairly new (only 3 months old), and already, we have almost 4,000 creatives at work and 440+ projects. crowdSPRING's goal isn't to take business away from graphic design firms or established designers. They have their place and are necessary. There are many designers on our site who are well-qualified, hold graphic design degrees, and choose to submit entries. We just want to give opportunities to anyone talented who is looking to create, **regardless of where a person lives, how old he/she is, or formal training.***

*People sign up for our site and choose to submit entries with the risk of not being awarded. However, we also offer creatives opportunities to showcase their work to many potential clients and to interact with fellow Creatives. **Many Buyers award a Creative and continue to work outside of our site with them.** We are happy to connect these people, as it helps continue to keep our community thriving."<sup>14</sup>*

Such a process drives competition and creativity. Participants master skills through knowledge sharing (based on users' preferences, behaviors, needs and contributions), and

faster trials (Studio Wikitecture has completed three projects, and is perfecting in no time the technology needed to implement in 2nd Life). In the end, what seems to characterize neo-vernacular practices is that collaboration is not to the benefit of the whole but to the benefit of the individual.

## **2. Just let go. What space is that anyway?**

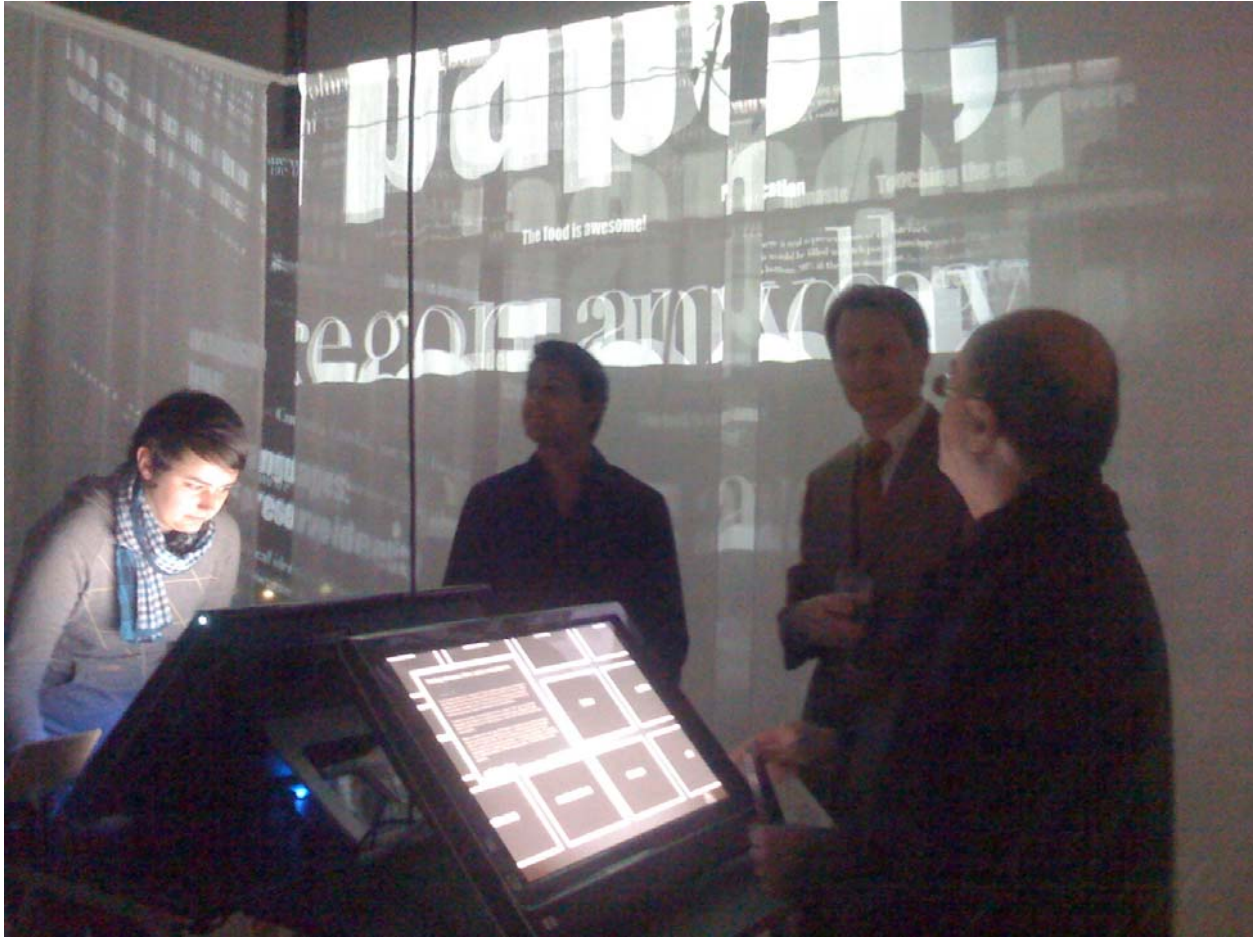
"*Is this Space?*" Lynne Henderson wrote on the Building Space With Words:

*"I do think that the somewhat relaxed sense that developed in me in the exhibit seemed related to a sense of being in a community as well as a space. People at the show could post to the blog, the words moving through the visual area in a rhythmic fashion, the sound of voices in the background. It was like being able to work or just be, with a sense of people around you whom you could consult when you wanted to, but whose voices and words were accessible and connecting..."<sup>15</sup>*

Henderson describes her experience of the BSWW installation, a spatial co-creation. The above quote provides insights into the communal 'production of space.'

One strategy for 'communal space making' is to orchestrate an experience. BSWW users would change the spatial configuration of the piece through words (Fig. 1). The participatory nature of the installation is similar to the project by Lozano Hemmer, Vectorial Elevation, Relational Architecture 4.<sup>16</sup> Hemmer provided an internet platform where users could log in and reconfigure the lighting of the plaza, and hence the physical space that people experienced. Whether with words, as in BSWW, or the action of placing lights on a plan as in Vectorial Elevation, there are various tools that can remotely mediate a change in physical space. These changes address the senses. We experience the place.

A second 'strategy for communal space making' is to play up the multiple nature of spaces. Spaces are physical, digital and mental (discourse). In the physical world, building space happens not only through brick and mortar but also through "inhabiting" it – in Henderson's words, "a sense of being in a community as well as a space." Space making in the digital world is not so different than space making in the physical world. For example "propinquity" and "privacy" are concepts that belong to both worlds. The space of the BSWW installation is for example multiple: it is physical (with boundaries made of fabric), it is digital because of the blog platform and it is mental, as the discourse is meant to challenge our understanding of physical and digital spaces.



(Fig. 1) iPhone picture of the BSWW opening taken by Laura Forlano, PhD.

In the configuration described above, the trace of every individual's action does not fade with time. On the contrary, any comment left on the blog can spur further discussion and revive a thread – the digital increases the serendipity of encounters. In theory, if the physical structure of BSWW were to remain in place, the space – a living architecture – would change shape according to people's involvement, disruptions, disorder and order. Though built together, under the vigilance of gatekeepers, spatial reconfiguration happens remotely and at a faster pace than for traditional vernacular architecture.

These examples highlight that when architectural creation is left to the crowd, there is still a need for a master of ceremony. They suggest alternative roles for architects, that of the monitor, the coordinator, or the conductor.

### **3. Are you talking to me?**

Crowdsourcing practices and participatory culture have in some ways democratized the design industry. Yet, we live in a market where consumers are more 'digitally' aware, and the offerings are surpassing demands. In light of what we have learned throughout, the following introduces you to common mistakes and provide a conceptual framework for inventing an alternative practice:

Crowdsourcing has its limitations. Alinsky's rules for radicals in mind, we understood that what drove people to action, and to making, is emulation, a sense of ownership, identity seeking, power and fun.<sup>17</sup> In a gift economy, companies need not to forget to give back to the people they have extracted knowledge from! Through activism, and appropriation consumer will spread (distorted) knowledge about things. In a discussion about spreadable media, Jenkins writes that:

*"Spreadability as a concept describes how the properties of the media environment, texts, audiences, and business models work together to enable easy and widespread circulation of mutually meaningful content within a networked culture."*

And:

*"This new "spreadable" model allows us to avoid metaphors of "infection" and "contamination" which over-estimate the power of media companies and underestimate the agency of consumers."<sup>18</sup>*

What is the agency behind the use of blogs, wikis, and social networking sites etc.? These mediums are used to reach people as much as to spread and communicate the work of the few. The more malleable the tool – a slogan for example – the faster and wider is the spread. Yet, how can one benefit from the design? In a humongous market place, where friendship rhymes with business, the beneficiary of the design is a middleman, organizing the meeting between businesses and designers (this is the role crowdSPRING takes).

Amongst these who can do design, you find the retired, these who hold a great experience and skills, less skilled workers, who through peer to peer learning manage to rise above the crowd. The "amateur" who rises the highest, is the one who mastered the craft, who got involved more. The wiki or social networking platforms provide with extensive possibilities of expression and influence. They are portals that are unavoidable in order to reach one's goal... to make it in life. The period in which we are now resembles a period of transition in which craftsmen are still learning to perfect models and spaces. Will there be a point where this will freeze, or do we trust the fluidity of the medium, to encourage new vernacular projects?

To conclude, there is no single formula that prescribes the shape of neo-vernacular practices. Yet, here is below a list of suggestions that designers of today and tomorrow shall be aware of:

1. Who are you building for? Are you building for ivory towers of designers? This is not the only market for your offerings.
2. You are building for entities and people in needs of your offerings.
3. Look for needs. Diversify your offerings.
4. You offer an experience.
5. Sharing is not free.
6. Ideas are cheap. Ideas do not sell well.
7. What sells is the product of a "savoir-faire," not only a computer skill, but the ability to gather knowledge, manage teams and funnel it toward a precise goal.
8. Find channels of information and distributions; and if they do not exist, create them.
9. Transgress, transcribe, transfer, transform.

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<sup>1</sup> Abbas, Y. and Dervin F. *Technologies of the Self*, forthcoming publication 2009

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<sup>2</sup> Putnam, R., *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community*, New York, London: Simon & Schuster paperbacks, 2000; p. 294.

<sup>3</sup> Crowdsourcing, <http://crowdsourcing.typepad.com/cs/>, last accessed April 6, 2009. According to the author, this is the "white paper" definition of the word crowdsourcing.

<sup>4</sup> According to the software term of use.

<http://sketchupdate.blogspot.com/2009/03/help-model-world-one-bridge-at-time.html>, last accessed April 6, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Jenkins, H., *If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead (Part Three): The Gift Economy and Commodity Culture*, [http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if\\_it\\_doesnt\\_spread\\_its\\_dead\\_p\\_2.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p_2.html), last accessed April 6, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> It is the main title of eight blog posts by Henry Jenkins, who is "*serializing a white paper which was developed last year by the Convergence Culture Consortium on the topic of Spreadable media.*" [http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if\\_it\\_doesnt\\_spread\\_its\\_dead\\_p.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p.html), last accessed April 6, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Building Space With Words: <http://blogs.poly.edu/bsww/>, last accessed April 6, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> On the blog of Studio Wikitecture you read: "*Studio Wikitecture assumes the principles of good design are universal enough that they can be learned in one discipline and applied in some fashion to another. Through Studio Wikitecture, we are trying to provide a channel where these individuals can apply these skills to the design of a building. This does not negate the fact that a certain foundational knowledge is still necessary to design a building that will actually function and standup, but SW feels that this knowledge can be acquired through a number of channels and should not be restricted to just architects and their particular educational path.*"

<http://studiowikitecture.wordpress.com/about/>, last accessed April 6, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Crowdsourcing, <http://crowdsourcing.typepad.com/cs/2009/03/is-crowdsourcing-evil-and-other-moot-questions-.html>, last accessed April 6, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Alinsky, S. *Rules for Radicals*, New York: Random House, 1971; p. 121: "*People hunger for drama and adventure, for a breath of life in a dreary, drab existence. One of cartoons in my office shows two gum-chewing stenographers who have just left the movies. One is talking to the other, and says, "You know Sadie. You know what the trouble with life is? There just ain't any background music. [...] But it's more than that. It is a desperate search for personal identity—to let other people know that at least you are alive."*

<sup>11</sup> Michael C. Behrent (2008) *Saul Alinsky, la campagne présidentielle et l'histoire de la gauche américaine* in La Vie des Idées: [http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Saul-Alinsky-la-campagne.html?decoupe\\_recherche=obama%20saul%20alinsky](http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Saul-Alinsky-la-campagne.html?decoupe_recherche=obama%20saul%20alinsky) (Last accessed January 15, 2009). Saul D. Alinsky inspired both Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama (Clinton wrote a thesis about the community organizer; the thesis is available online here: <http://www.gopublius.com/HCT/HillaryClintonThesis.html>, Last accessed April 6, 2009. My thanks to Thomas Watkin for the article.

<sup>12</sup> Abbas, Y. and Dervin F. *Technologies of the Self*, forthcoming publication 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Studio Wikitecture, <http://studiowikitecture.wordpress.com/about/>, last accessed April 6, 2009

<sup>14</sup> Crowdsourcing, <http://crowdsourcing.typepad.com/cs/2008/08/crowdsourced-de.html>, last accessed April 6, 2009. My emphasis in bold.

<sup>15</sup> BSWW, <http://blogs.poly.edu/bsww/2009/03/24/is-this-space/>, last accessed April 6, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Vectorial Elevation, <http://www.alzado.net/>, last accessed April 6, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Abbas, Y. and Dervin F. *Technologies of the Self*, forthcoming publication 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Jenkins, H., *If it Doesn't Spread, It Is Dead*:

[http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if\\_it\\_doesnt\\_spread\\_its\\_dead\\_p\\_1.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p_1.html), last accessed April 6, 2009.