

PNYX

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THIS week, with four days to go, the *REAL REVIEW*'s Kickstarter page reached a collective pledge of over £20,000, having last week cleared its original goal. The paper, now poised to launch in December, will be the print media arm of Real Estate Architecture Laboratory (REAL), a new organisation founded and directed by Shumi Bose and Jack Self. Its price is set at £6.33 - the cost of its material production. The *REVIEW* will be online as well, supported by its media partner ArchDaily, the largest online architectural media platform.

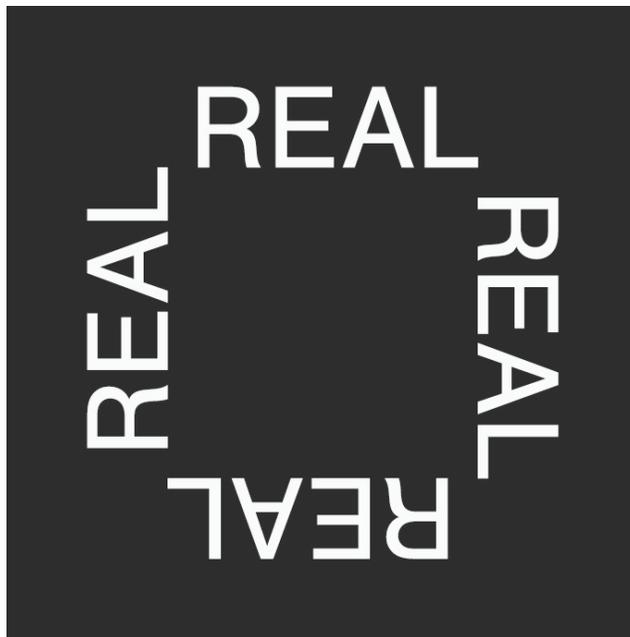
This week also saw the second in a provocative new series of debates known as Turncoats, a project by Phineas Harper, Robert Mull and Maria Smith supported by the Architectural Foundation and property regeneration company U+I. Their media partner is Dezeen, an online design media platform with 1.75 million visitors a month.

For this week's issue PNYX discussed with REAL director Jack Self the architectural media's commitment to analogue print media and the specifics of REAL's agenda to bring architectural culture to a general public. PNYX also attended the most recent Turncoats debate, 'The Consultation Con'.

(Eds.)

PNYX: Could you briefly describe what kind of organisation REAL is?

Jack Self: The Real Estate Architecture Laboratory (REAL) is still being approved by the Charities Commission, but will be a charitable foundation whose mission is to promote architectural culture to the general public and innovation in the built environ-



ment. In practical terms, that means pursuing a cultural programme of publications, exhibitions, events and lectures, as well as working with developers, financial institutions architects and manufacturers to radically change the way we think about and execute architecture. The broader goal is to suggest that architectural thinking is the most powerful design methodology for addressing the pressing questions facing the UK and the world today: social inequality, artificial housing shortages and the morality of financial relationships (the ideology of individualism at the core of debt-fuelled property ownership).

P: You edited *Real Estates* and founded *Fulcrum*, as well as publishing and writing separately. How have your experiences as a writer and publisher informed the mission of the *REAL REVIEW*?

JS: I founded *Fulcrum* with Graham Baldwin and Aram Mooradian, and Shumi joined the editorial board during its last few

terms. *Real Estates* very much emerged naturally out of our editorial collaboration. We struggled with *Fulcrum* to bring subjects of architectural interest to the fore that were impossible to print in mainstream media, primarily the importance of political and economic theory to our own discipline. We treated the social role of the architect as a design problem, and we also pursued a certain democracy that was against elitism and exclusivity - almost every issue features a very well known figure paired with a student, which was our way of rejecting totally the cult of personality that is fostered in architecture. We want to pursue ideas for their own value, not fawn over stars...

P: Beyond the *REAL REVIEW*, what other programs, institutional or not, do you hope to realise?

JS: We are already in the process of publishing several books and two exhibitions, amongst them the curating the British Pavilion in Venice at next year's Biennale.

P: Part of REAL's mission is to 'engage positively with those in power'. What is REAL's definition of power? And what does this engagement look like?

JS: The Italian Autonomist movement of the 1960s famously conceived of anti-capitalist struggle as "against from within." This abandons earlier Marxist ideas of sudden-revolution, instead advocating progressive reform from inside institutional structures. *Fulcrum*'s theory of the Trojan Horse (#99) expands on this. If we accept the neoliberal ideology that society is nothing but agents operating always, and only, in their own self-interest, then we can't really blame the

so-called “1%” for pursuing an aggressive programme of wealth redistribution over the last four decades. We are now in a situation where we can't trust the state to act on behalf of its citizens, we can't expect the government to legislate in favour of the majority and we can't hope for philanthropy at a scale sufficient to make any difference. In this context, we must recognise what incentivises these various agents, and then expropriate those interests to achieve ends that apparently opposed to their ends. In other words, we must work out how to convince capitalists to redistribute their wealth in global society to a much larger base. It sounds impossible, but I believe it can happen.

P: Your mission statement mentions spatial equality. What do you understand by this concept and how do you make it amenable? How does it tie to civic freedom? Aren't these ideas highly contextual?

JS: Spatial equality is both tangible and intangible, and is a term that comes from Henri Lefebvre's *Production of Space*. It means both a dedication towards material equality in the built environment (we should all have access to the same, high standard of living) and also equality of access to a shared, common realm (the privatised corporate property of Canary Wharf or Westfield standing in opposition to this).

P: The bill for housing benefit in the UK per year is now something like £25 billion, and the Conservatives have recently announced an extension to the Right to Buy scheme to include housing association properties. But by many accounts this action will only intensify the housing crisis in the UK, while for many young people the idea of owning their own home is already a fantasy. The issue of housing is obviously a 'common concern', as you put it, but it is always framed as simply that: the issue of housing, not articulated as something to do with architecture. Moreover, many architects themselves do not seem inclined to make the connection.

Does REAL propose to reconcile the public's perceptions of architecture and housing? Is the disconnect between the two this simple?

JS: The government's subsidy is in effect a direct transfer of money from the state to the elite, in the form of rent. This is because all parts of the political spectrum are ideologically opposed to the construction of new

housing. No matter what policies are being implemented, they are only fuelling demand, and not increasing supply. The disincentives to the private market to build more homes are extreme, and include both planning restrictions and financial models that reward under-supply. In this sense, both the housing bill and the housing shortage, are artificial crises imposed on a populace in the interest of furthering wealth inequality.

It is REAL's position that the social role of the architect must be expanded, to include self-initiated, non-corporate and even non-profit projects. Financial, political and ideological structures are primary architectural design parameters, although they are not historically part of the architect's vision of themselves. Today, the general aspiration is to emulate the starchitects' elitist monuments. But if we think about what the modern architect has been charged with – the material improvement of society at large – then it is clear that without the state to drive this, we must assume the responsibility ourselves.

P: REAL's media partner is ArchDaily, but the *REAL REVIEW* also takes the form of print journalism. How will copies of the *REAL REVIEW* reach the more general audience you want to engage?

JS: We will allow [ArchDaily] to publish a limited number of articles from each issue online in exchange for a modest advertising campaign. The *REAL REVIEW* is a print-only publication that is primarily by subscription. When you publish online, you have little idea of who you're writing for – whereas print always implies a physical audience.

P: Print journalism is both slower and more expensive than digital media. You've mentioned that the expense attached will focus the content. But might the timeframe of the printed cost REAL topical urgency? Or will it be to your advantage?

JS: You can't beat the internet for immediacy. But you can beat them on critical reflection and commentary. We feel a bi-monthly magazine is the right balance between financial sustainability and temporality.

THE CONSULTATION CON The Women's Library, Aldgate

Organisers Harper, Mull and Smith's view is that architectural debates 'are rubbish'. They look to counter the situation in which a panel of mutually sympathetic speakers avoid the most pressing issues facing the discipline, and challenge the belief that architecture and design are not equipped, intellectually or morally, to deal with them.

The layout of Friday's event had the two opposing teams literally facing off each other from across the room, reflecting the organisers' embrace of properly confrontational debate. But the atmosphere was relaxed, the language was informal, and the chair irreverent. This was no in small part due to the mandatory shot of vodka the debaters and audience all took at the start of the debate.

Arguing for the motion that community consultation in architecture and planning is 'a con', Mark Hanson argued that the process was cynical, monstrously bureaucratic and ultimately a PR stunt that gave people the illusion they had an input into changes in their built environment, when the opposite was the case. Adding to this last point, Mark's teammate



Holly Lewis resorted to an anecdote of a landscaping project on her estate in which she and her fellow residents were consulted but very quickly sidelined.

Arguing against the motion was Daisy Froud, who championed the moral imperative of including the community in projects, even if the process sometimes was arduous and bureaucratic. Her teammate John Paul Maytum argued along similar grounds, claiming that consultation was the only way in which architects could engage with the communities into which their designs might land anyway. The kind of consultation that involved door-knocking, rather than box-ticking, was to the benefit of everyone.

Halfway through the debate, the teams were asked to 'turncoats', cross the room, and argue the opposite position. Both Daisy and John Paul's reversed position was made considerably less convincingly, making it obvious that all four were more or less against the motion of the house, and that consultation, although flawed, is far from a con.

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