Contemporary Forms of Social Justice Activism in Architecture

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The goal of this paper is to share a sociological framework for understanding social justice activism with the intention of improving efficacy of architects' efforts in addressing contentious social issues. The paper draws on recent sociological scholarship on professions and social movements, which give us new ways of thinking about our agency in affecting social change within and beyond the profession. The paper presents emerging themes based on participant observation and unstructured interviews conducted over the past two years, focused on contemporary activism in architecture. We highlight how professionals use their material resources (design expertise and practice) and their symbolic resources (status in socio-economic, political, and cultural systems) in different forms of contentious political engagement. We offer a sociological framework for distinguishing between ways architects use their work and status in their efforts to achieve social and professional change. The analysis offered in this paper is intended to offer politically-engaged architects (professionals, educators, and students) a framework to assist in their efforts toward shaping equity and justice outcomes for the field and for society.

"Refuse together" and "confront the inhumane": these phrases captured two architects' positions in a contentious discussion of President Trump's hotly debated proposal for a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border. The former summarized a strategy for architects to withhold their labor in an effort to slow down or halt the machinery of a system that "benefits the entrenched elite through division."[1] The latter challenged designers to "subvert attempts to dehumanize migrants" by "[encouraging] the government to house immigrant families" in humane and dignified conditions.[2] Their respective calls to refuse and to subvert are both expressions of dissent. One calls on architects to leverage the political power of their status as design professionals and the other encourages them to leverage the power of their design work in engaging contentious political issues.

When we participate in contentious politics, we do three things: first, we articulate a claim, usually in favor of some form of justice (e.g. gender equity). Second, we confront a body that holds substantial power (e.g. a government, a hegemonic ideology, or a profession). Third, through collective action, we instigate change to the unjust order. Contemporary architectural activism has examples of all three things. While not all activism in architecture conforms to this sociological definition of contentious political engagement, this paper focuses on those examples that do.[3]

This specific branch of political engagement brings architects' agency into focus. In order to articulate a contentious claim, confront a power elite, and organize collective action, significant power must be exercised. Be it individual or institutional, architect's power in these situations reveals the potential and the limits of our agency in confronting social problems.

The examples of Architects, Designers, and Planners for Social Responsibility (ADPSR), Colloqate, Designing Justice + Designing Spaces (DJDS), Equity by Design (EQxD), the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA), Rael-San Fratello's border wall projects, working groups on diversity and inclusion of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), The Architecture Lobby (TAL), Who Builds Your Architecture? (WBYA?), and numerous others speak to contemporary forms of architectural activism. In their work toward relieving the negative consequences of injustices, these cases characterize a range of engagement with contentious politics in architecture. These characteristics, their strengths and shortcomings are theorized in this essay.

A grounding in sociological theories of social movements and professions provides a novel framework for critiquing and developing architecture's potential for addressing injustice. After that, we provide an account of our methodology for studying contentious political engagement in architecture. Finally, we share examples from our ethnographic fieldwork to illustrate a conception of the material and symbolic resources that we (can) leverage as architecture students, educators, and practitioners.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK
Sociological studies of social movements build on research and scholarship, spanning over half a century, that examine structures of oppression, liberatory movements, and the agency of individuals and organizations. In their examination of

collective action, dissent, and power, sociologists continue to develop, test, and refine theories of social movements. These frameworks, while not yet applied to architects and architecture, offer reflexivity and nuance. Similarly, sociological studies of professions have much to offer us toward understanding the dynamics of our professional institutions—the ways they affect us and the ways they respond to political and social forces. Unlike the sociology of social movements, the sociology of professions has examined the field of architecture. A small number of sociologists have studied architects and a small number of architecture theorists have drawn from this branch of sociology.[4] The majority of architectural scholarship on politics and political engagement is grounded in humanistic epistemologies. Histories of activism in architecture and philosophical writings on architecture as politics have advanced our sense of agency and social impact.[5] The growing body of case-study and theoretical work on socially-engaged, public-interest, and justice-oriented architecture round out architects' writings on contemporary trends in the field.[6] Introducing sociological and anthropological perspectives will likely aid in connecting theory and practice. Indeed, in the tradition of W. E. B. DuBois, the sociology we advocate is aimed at supporting the work of social justice.[7]

Three concepts from studies of social movements inform this analysis. The first is Jane McAlevey's distinction between advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing.[8] As a scholar of the civil rights and labor movements, McAlevey argues that meaningful social change has historically been achieved through organizing, and not through advocacy and mobilizing alone. Advocacy, as McAlevey characterizes it, involves dedicated advocates targeting power elites. These advocates' efforts alone rarely amount to fundamental social change. Their gains, instead, are often incremental or temporary. These gains do not sufficiently challenge entrenched and hegemonic social, economic, or political orders.

In contrast to advocacy, mobilizing work engages large numbers of individuals. The masses participate in protests and demonstrations to denounce injustice. But such mass actions, on their own, are insufficient to bring the power elite to accept demands for change. McAlevey argues that contemporary mobilizations, like the Women's March and climate strikes, tend to have shor-tlived impact. Through social and traditional media, mass demonstrations express discontent. But as sporadic and unsustained actions, they lack the power required to affect substantive change to unjust systems.

Organizing has a fundamentally different approach. A network of organic leaders, organized, are able to not only mobilize large numbers for protests and marches, but they are able to do so in sustained strikes that halt the system and bring power elites to the negotiating table. Organizing work is continuous and it engages populations of workers and community members who collectively have the ability to challenge entrenched

power and hegemonic ideologies. And it is for this reason McAlevey demonstrates, that workplace and other forms of organizing have been aggressively undermined in the wage of the civil rights movement. Policies that prohibit unions and weaken community institutions (e.g. the black church) are manifestations of strategies to disempower organizers.

A second concept from the sociology of social movements is that of contentious politics. Scholar of political revolutions, Sydney Tarrow, defined contentious politics as being characterized by "episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects, when a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants."[9] This definition is expanded and improvised upon in studies of social movements and collective action. We similarly use the basis of Tarrow's framework for thinking about contentious politics in the context of architecture. While some of the cases we study contest the state, others contest professional institutions. In both cases, the tactics used to counter the strategies of a hegemonic apparatus conform to how Tarrow studied social movement formation.

A third distinction frames different kinds of social movements. Reform movements seek to improve an existing order without dismantling it. Revolutionary movements seek to replace a social order. What a government, ideology, or institution is understood as fundamentally unjust, revolutionary movements reject the ability of reform to achieve meaningful and lasting justice. Instrumental social movements seek to affect social institutions and structures. Expressive social movements, by contrast, seek to affect relationships, beliefs, and perspectives. Sociologist of social movements, John Wilson, describes four kinds of movements at the intersection of these characteristics: reformative movements (which are reformist and instrumental), alternative movements (which are reformist and expressive), transformative movements (which are revolutionary and instrumental), and redemptive movements (which are revolutionary and expressive).[10]

Collectively, these conceptions of social movements provide ways of understanding the tactics architects employ to combat social injustice. We pair insights from these conceptions with insights from the sociology of professions, discussed next, to offer an analytic framework for theorizing and empowering architectural activism.

Magali Sarfatti Larson and Robert Gutman contributed institutional and social understandings of architecture practice.[11] Gutman outlined the structural distinctions of the architecture profession from other professions such as law and medicine. His analysis grounds comparisons of the political will and agency of architects compared to other professionals. Larson used the case of architects in the building industries to present a jurisdictional view of the evolution of professions.

She detailed motivations and tactics of professionals and their organizations in emplacing their field in social and economic hierarchies.

The role of professionals in society is not limited to the products and scope of their trade. Their material resources include their technical skills, income, and design works. But professionals also benefit from a set of symbolic resources. These include expertise (as in the social benefits of being 'an expert'), status, and distinction. How professionals leverage their symbolic and material resources depends on the work they are doing. This distinction gains salience when we analyze the work of professionals who tackle social issues. In this paper, we are particularly concerned with cases where architects turn social problems into professional ones. In doing so, their agency to affect change is, we argue, tied to how they leverage their material and symbolic resources.

Robert Perrucci argued that professionals are positioned to make substantive social impact when they expand the scope of their work from their technical domain to a broader political one.[12] And doing so requires they use more than their material resources. In her study of black liberation activism "after the marching stopped," in the post-civil rights decades of action, Joyce Bell offers a conception of professionals as pivotal figures in extending popular social movement work from the streets into civil society.[13] Here too, professionals' symbolic capital— as professionalized, upwardly mobile, and expert workers bound by oaths to promote social welfare[14]—is key to their efficacy in furthering the goals of the civil rights movement.

To test this comparison of professional agency in furthering the aims of social movements, we conducted a study of activist architects engaged in contentious politics, which we present in the following discussions of our method and findings.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK
This paper reports on a two-year study of architects engaging contentious political issues. These include immigration, incarceration, gender equity, and racial justice. We interviewed over 30 architects, observed over 20 events, and collected writings by and about architects engaged in these issues. Similar to the sociologists cited above, ours is a qualitative social study of professionals. Our methods were generally ethnographic. As such, our interviews were unstructured or semi-structured. We were participant observers with activists groups, at organizing meetings, in direct actions, and in debates.

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of our interview and observation transcripts and notes as well as articles gathered. Using an inductive approach, we coalesced ideas (codes) from our documents into the broader themes that inform the argument of this paper.

Quotations from our ethnographic notes are presented in the following section. To keep the identities of participants anonymous (except when their work is publicly discussed and there is no expectation of anonymity), we use aliases, modify organization names, use fictional locations, and combine narratives.

FINDINGS
To illustrate the uses of architects' material and symbolic forms of capital in pursuit of social justice outcomes, we share representative vignettes from two cases of dissent. The first highlights activism that occurred in and around the American Institute of Architects' (AIA) 2018 National Convention. The second draws from a series of conversations on race and architecture that took place primarily in 2018 and 2019.

From June 21 to 23, 2018 the AIA held their National Convention at the Javits Center in New York. As architecture's largest member society, with this event being the largest gathering of architects in US history, one may justifiably conflate the AIA and its convention with a gathering of the profession. We observed four moments that serve as exemplary for investigating the profession as a space of contentious politics. These comprise: panels on equity and justice, the A+ talks on race and gender, the Voices of Plurality Flash Mob, and The Architecture Lobby (the Lobby) protests.

"Equity by Design: Architects as Catalysts for Community Engagement and Social Impact," "Ensuring Inclusivity: Restroom Design in the Era of Transgender Panic," "Agents of Change: When Women Lead," "The Missing 32% (Women) & Missing Small Architects," and "Ethics and Practice in the New Urban Agenda Era" exemplify the minority of sessions dedicated to potentially contentious topics on equity and justice or those at least tangentially connected to broader social movements like MeToo and Black Lives Matter (BLM).

In the most contentious conversation that we observed in these panels, two speakers advocated different positions regarding the architecture profession's responsibility to address solitary confinement and execution as human rights violations. Raphael Sperry, president of ADPSR contended with Thomas Vonier, president of the International Union of Architects (UIA). "Where does social responsibility end and the responsibility of the client begin?" Vonier asked. "Are we trying to make architecture fix a client problem that goes well beyond the boundaries of architecture?" Questioning architecture's political jurisdiction, Vonier asked:

> "I do wonder about using ethics as an argument to try and enforce or convey a set of personal attitudes about what is proper and what is moral. And that's a dilemma I think we all face in life. But I do think that some issues are running under the banner of ethics that may be something else—that may be political points of view or they may be convictions about morality that are in fact based on

individual outlooks rather than the collective professional outlook. It's a question."

In response, Sperry reflected on the profession's response to ADPSR's ongoing campaign to oppose architects' involvement in carceral projects:

"It seems to me that the [AIA] perceived ADPSR's campaign as a political campaign, and thought that—was afraid that—people would see human rights enforcement as a partisan issue in the [context of] the United States, which is not how it functions. I think in the current political climate there are some people who treat it that way… I think that scared some people of the Institute."

Sperry continued: "The profession needs to be aware, at a meaningful level, of human rights as an advancement to the public interest. I don't think we can afford to be bullied by the way this whole thing is [politically] packaged."

Other than this exchange, when dissent was present it was packaged as progress and reform, but not contentious. Speakers articulated benefits of a more equitable profession engaged more thoughtfully with social and environmental justice. Except for one speaker, who made the audience and his moderator noticeably uncomfortable, panelists' messages fell upon eager and agreeable ears—of both the rank and file of the profession in the audience and, likely, with the event's organizers and its' hosts' leadership, who had, after all, vetted and approved the panels, their abstracts, and lists of speakers.

The conversations at the Architect Magazine space on the expo floor, amidst scores of product booths, were more pointed. Some had "activism" in their titles. Panelists sat on the small stage branded with "AIA + Architect" to the right of an extension of the wall were slides were displayed. In one session, the moderator pried into his panelists' notions of justice by asking about activism's role in "both covert and overt structural disenfranchisement." The question was pointed to the disenfranchisement of racial minorities in the communities that the panelists worked, not at the profession and its institutions. Michael J. Ford spoke about ways architecture, influenced by hip hop, could serve as "critical to discussions of activism," with its history as "a medium of the black voice." Bryan C. Lee Jr. shared his platform for "organizing, advocacy, and design," with its explicit discussions of power structures and injustices. In the Whitney Young Jr. Legacy conversations, panelists Danei Cesario and Venesa Alicea talked about "the social responsibility to build the profession up" while simultaneously elevating the status of design as protest. The discourse of dissent at these panels engaged ideas about the work and labor of architects—their material and symbolic resources, respectively—as participants considered architecture as activism, empowerment, and a tool for social justice. The discourse was, however, sanctioned by the AIA, curated

by the joint organizers of two of the professions most influential institutions: its largest member society and its flagship trade publication.

Minutes before the A+ session, "Architectural Activism Then and Now," approximately 100 attendees assembled in front of the Javits Center for the Voices of Plurality Flash Mob (informally referred to by attendees as the Women's Flash Mob, Figure 1). The action was organized by a group of architects active in the profession's mainstream including the organizer of Equity by Design EQxD symposium (Rosa Sheng) hosted by the San Francisco chapter of the AIA (AIA-SF) and the organizer of the petition to recognize Denise Scott Brown with the Pritzker Prize (Caroline James). Located on the exterior of the Javits Center building, the small stage and speakers set up for the event were approved for placement on the convention center's property. A manifesto was read. A slate of five advocates, activists, and organizers shared statements and the crowd endorsed the action with waves of their fans. The speakers shared "a collective commitment to pursue equitable practice, equality, recognition, fairness, and inclusion," but no direct demands were articulated. Similar to the panels and A+ talks, the expression of dissent was not contentious in essence, even if it appeared so in form.

An action that drew less attention than any of these was the Architecture Lobby (TAL) protest, also outside the Javits Center. About ten Lobby members took turns reading from their manifesto, each point punctuated by the group chanting "we are precarious workers, these are our demands." Each manifesto point was articulated as a demand upon the profession, including: "change professional architecture organizations to advocate for the living conditions of architects." Following their action, members of the Lobby handed out flyers 10' outside the Javits Center, where the property line ends and the public sidewalk begins. This protest was neither acknowledged nor condoned by the convention; security confronted the protestors who maintained that they were on public right-of-way and had legal authority to hand out flyers.

Architects at the events around the 2018 AIA Convention in New York considered the profession as a site of their dissent. However, those speaking in the panels and A+ talk sessions inside the Javits Center also viewed the profession as primarily the subject of their dissent—enabling the advancement in the status of architects and architecture by adapting to broader social changes in their communities and becoming more diverse. Their dissent aims at professional change by re-defining the context of professional work for those thinking to enter and those within the profession, though not challenging substantially the content of professional work i.e. the practices of architects and how or when they design. This is different from the dissent of professionals participating in The Flash Mob and TAL protest outside the Jarvis Center, which used the profession as primarily its tool—using the status

Figure 1. The Voices of Plurality Flash Mob at the 2018 AIA Convention, New York. (Photograph by authors.)

of architecture to challenge the practices of architects and how or when they design by voicing more contentious issues and expanding the profession's jurisdiction. The professional change they asked for attempted to shape the content of professional work—re-defining the scope of activities to be considered architecture work.

The following set of observations exemplify ways architects articulate their work and their material resources in service to communities as part of their dissent against injustices manifest in cities. Recounting the work of black architects in Washington, DC in the aftermath of the 1968 urban riots that erupted after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., architect Harry Robinson III recalled how "for the first time, communities had a front-row-seat say at what was going to happen [in DC]. So what we did is we went to the communities and became their architects and we had a great time doing it." In the contested terrain of the architecture profession in the late 1960s, white architects were reluctant to cede their effective monopoly on architecture work to the first cohorts of young black architects. It was in that context that Robinson's following point gains salience: "whenever there was pushback against our doing this, we invoked 'power to the people.'" Through their symbolic and material capital, architects like Robinson in DC and J. Max Bond Jr. in Harlem used the profession as a tool for larger social reform in their community engagement. Indeed, the same ethos is reflected by today's emerging architects, 50 years later, where architecture students discussing the continued operations of racism in the profession compelled an exploration of "the agency of the design profession to address and dismantle the institutional

barriers faced by our communities" as a subject of the 2017 Black in Design conference.

That attitude toward architectural work and communities extends to a group of architects' response to the 2017 Take 'em Down movement, which saw the removal of confederate monuments such as the Robert E. Lee Statue in New Orleans. By organizing community participation in reconstructing narratives of their city, the Paper Monuments project of Colloqate forces its public to "consider de-lionizing the individual and consider what communities are actually being served. So it's not just about an individual to be put back up on top of a pillar, but it's actually about what are the movements that shaped this city and how were those movements distributed across our city." Brian C. Lee, Jr. told and audience of architects at a NOMA panel on advocacy about how, "we always talk about the fact that there's a continuum along design that goes from individual and ephemeral to collective and permanent. And our skillset has prepared us to design up and down that continuum. Whether that is a building or it is a set of posters or billboards—you are impacting and changing the way people interact with space. [Paper Monuments] tries to span that continuum" (Figure 2).

Through projects like Paper Monuments, architects connect their work and their material resources to aspirations for social change and social justice. "In this moment where we're questioning what democracy is, and how we can sustain or save our democracy, I think architecture should be engaged in those questions." A Howard University alumna noted that the Department of Architecture at Howard played an important supporting role in preparing and planning the Million Man

Figure 2. Colloqate, "Paper Monuments," New Orleans, 2017. (Image (c) Colloqate.)

March. "We don't only work and advocate in architecture. Those of us who practice, we have a much broader mission and there are very many ways we fulfill that." These examples are important in their distinction from forms of dissent that are aimed at changing the profession. They connect participation in social movements through the symbolic and material resources of architects leveraged toward social change. Cy Richardson of the National Urban League told a gathering of architects commemorating the past 50 years of activism in architecture to "embed yourself in the work—the technical skills that you have. That is Civil Rights today." The connection between work and historical social change is suggestive, in its rhetoric, of ways professional work, versus our symbolic resources, can be imagined in service to justice causes.

DISCUSSION
These examples show important distinctions between how architects leverage their material and their symbolic resources to address contentious political issues within the profession and in society.

There is ongoing disagreement in architecture scholarship over the relationship between socially-engaged modes of practice and those more conventionally directed toward the market. This article is motivated by the belief that continuing to assume an opposition between these two modes of practice feeds an outdated simplification that hinders architecture scholars' research and understanding of their field. We

draw upon sociological theory and our ongoing research of socially-engaged architects to argue two main points. First, contentious practices that challenge the status quo are a normal part of working life in any professional field, including architecture. Second, the current forms of activism that we observe among architects suggest that this diversity shapes the frames through which social problems become architectural problems, and the strategies through which these frames are enacted. In addition, we provide a conceptual framework to make this diversity both intelligible and useful for architecture's educators and practitioners.

We highlight how professionals use their material resources (design expertise and practice) and their symbolic resources (status position in the socio-economic, political, and cultural system) in these different forms of dissent, to facilitate thinking on the implications of such professional contention for the future of professional work in architecture.

Popular conceptions of social movements suggest that activism is the prerogative of morally driven individuals who join a cause when they find like-minded peers. Contemporary sociology disrupts this narrative, showing how movements are diverse processes in which cultural meanings are activated in various institutional settings. So, when Milton S. F. Curry the moderator of a panel entitled "Activism in Architecture and Planning: 1968 in Review," asked the panelists whether activism is "something that should be an individual's choice" or

"something that should be institutionalized within some form of our educational structure," he confronted the assumed opposition between individualized, local, and more institutionalized expressions of dissent, questioning the myth of the irresolvable tension between the client service and public service logics of the profession. While sociologists' work helps address this issue, it remains neglectful of the role that activist professionals play in shaping conversations around moral politics among their peers. With this article we hope to begin remedying that neglect, demonstrating the diverse messages and techniques of architectural activism. We hope to have shed light on the conditions under which challenges from within institutional systems may lead to substantive change, versus the many activist movements that flare up and then fade away.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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