arq (2021), 25.3, 266–277. © The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
doi: 10.1017/S1359135521000336

A review of Barking Town Square using Bakhtin's dialogic theory offers insights into the production of design knowledge generated from the manipulation of a project's relational field.

Making relationships: interpreting the dialogical field of an architectural project as a design object

Thomas-Bernard Kenniff

In *This Is What We Do: A Muf Manual*, the partners of the firm muf architecture/art wrote that 'paradoxically, in order to make the thing the collaboration has to be about the making of the relationship rather than the object.'[1] This article takes this assertion as its basis and examines the implications of treating the individual and collective relationships that structure an architectural project – which I will refer to as the project's relational field – as a site that can be manipulated in order to affect both production and outcome. This is achieved through the transposition of concepts from Mikhail Bakhtin's work on creative activity, art, literature, and language to design using a case study of muf's Barking Town Square project in London (2004–10).

Data was accumulated for this study between 2009 and 2012 as part of a larger research project that studied the relationship between subjectivity, public space, and critical spatial practice from the viewpoint of dialogism. The methodology followed methods and ideas tied to the critique of anthropological methods using Bakhtinian theories from the 1970s and '80s emphasising the importance of voice, situation, and the everyday. The study involved over fifty interviews with participants in the project and local residents, as well as participant-observation in Barking that overlapped with the completion of the Town Square. The relevance of Bakhtin's concepts to design practice particularly emerged through examining relations that evolved with the project, with muf's own work as well as with other actors involved in the process.

In addition to discussing a designer's responsibility with respect to knowledge produced in common, this article offers insights into the work of design practices, like muf, whose methods are situated in the problematic overlap between open relational aesthetics and closed authorial control. Dialogism can aptly frame the contradictions of such methods because it is itself concerned with overlaps between ethics and aesthetics, and objects and subjects. While the range of concepts tied to dialogism is extensive, here the emphasis is put on dialogue itself: the chronotope as a spacetime unit of analysis, as well as the idea that creative activity can be expressed as an architectonics of answerability.

Framework

The first part of the article establishes the basic framework for the study, focusing on dialogue and the chronotope of design encounters. The second gives an overview of the Barking Town Square, setting up the location for the continuing discussion. The third part, 'setting up the field', develops the concept of a dialogical field in parallel to the Town Square, while the fourth and final part, 'playing the field', transposes Bakhtin's theory of creative activity to architecture.

Dialogue

Although muf's working methods are largely predicated on the notion of conversation, the partners of the firm never claim to be doing any form of participatory design. Rather than structured encounters with potential users – who would either inform the design or actively participate in its creation – their idea of conversation defines encounters that are informal and non-instrumental. Even collaboration, in their work, is usually a matter of the art-architecture relation in the office or formal relationships with other professionals. While the notion of a 'listening infrastructure' that sees conversation as something requiring a formal set-up and an active recording could be used in this critique,[2] their work is closer to Grant Kester's account of dialogical art, or what Nicolas Bourriaud defined as relational aesthetics: a manipulation of conversation and human relationships that is an end in itself. This is the reason why Jane Rendell can write that the provocation of muf's work is that 'architecture can "stand in" for conversation and perhaps conversely that conversation can "stand in" for architecture.'[3]

This reciprocity between architecture and conversation raises two points. First, it places muf's work in relation to methodologies that, as Kester writes, challenge the aesthetics and ethics of practice, and of the art object, because they are based on the idea that the work of art (or in our case architecture) 'can be viewed as a kind of conversation – a locus of different meanings, interpretations, and points of view'.[4] Second, it supports the idea that the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135521000336 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1 Barking Central buildings with Barking Town Hall in the foreground, 2011.

2 Barking Town Square with Town Hall (right), plaza (centre), and arboretum (left), 2010. The building in the background, part of Barking Central, is the Barking Learning Centre and Ropeworks residential project.

meeting of others does not necessarily have to be a generator for the architecture: it can stand on its own without a synthesis. muf partner Katherine Clarke observes:

> *The proposal is not actually created through the conversation. The consultation we do is not to design the object.*[5]

This has been a recurring strategy of their design process, in which, conversation, rather than participation, plays an active role. Close to ethnographic methods in art, conversation is a methodological trope that allows the designers to build up situated and contextual knowledge about a place and potential users, on one hand, and about their project collaborators (clients, consultants, civil servants) on the other. It is not aimed at problem solving, but at defining a relational field for each project. As we will see, far from the rigour of ethnographic enquiry or formal participatory design methods, this strategy constructs an imperfect assemblage that supports the designers' own (developing) understanding of the project's site. It influences a design process that revolves primarily, and not without flaws, around the generation and emergence of knowledge that is dependent on conversation and not available in explicit, recorded form.

The imperfections of this approach and its apparent lack of resolution is in keeping with dialogical thinking. Dialogue, in the Bakhtinian sense, is a process that 'bears the imprint of its own failure' and 'recognises its inherent instability and incapacity for absolute signification'.[6] As opposed to a dialectic process predicated on a future resolution and synthesis, a dialogical process is continuous, fluid, and predicated neither on resolution nor synthesis,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135521000336 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3 Opening ceremony for Barking Central, phase II, September 2010.

4 Arboretum and Learning Centre arcade, 2011.

which are both seen as impossible and undesirable. The weakness of dialogue, the fact that it begs for an answer back, is its strength as a concept. In dialogue, it is polyphony that counts, the relations between different voices, their individual genres, tones, and affects. On the relation between the dialogic and the dialectic – albeit a version of the dialectic that synthesises and seeks truth – Bakhtin is quite clear:

> *Take a dialogue and remove the voices (the partitioning of voices), remove the intonations (emotional and individualizing ones), carve out abstract concepts and judgements from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness – and that's how you get dialectics.*[7]

Seen in this light, however, muf's approach raises questions as to the effectiveness of dialogical knowledge within design processes and the reception of the resulting projects, especially when, as is the case for muf, the designers explicitly retain control over the aesthetics of the project. The process conversations may not be recorded and represented, but each design contract eventually reaches a conclusion and the project a synthesis. This is what makes muf's work well suited for a study in the transposition of dialogical concepts to design. Like Bakhtin's theory of creative activity, their work acknowledges the imperfection of conversational processes, while at the same time retaining authorial control. As we will see, Bakhtin's dialogic does not, in its celebration of polyphony and incompleteness, overlook the dynamics of individual authorship.

Chronotopic encounters and their manipulation

The effective realm of muf's design process is constituted by the multiple encounters of a project. These encounters are not only productive meetings

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135521000336 Published online by Cambridge University Press

aimed at resolving the project and supporting its progress, but situations in which interpersonal dynamics develop. The claim that an architectural project can be understood as the making of relationships extends views like Jeremy Till's ethical stance towards future social relationships[8] to the immediate context of encounters within the project's progress: a responsibility for the immediate, concrete other. These encounters, then, as situations characterised by both an immediate material-phenomenological context, and a broader social context, have an influence that goes beyond the regular outcome of serving a project. Multiple identities are performed beyond the participants' contractual or professional identities[9] and the fine grain of conversation meshes with rational, predetermined objectives.

The relational space of the project is structured by these encounters so that its transformation can be tracked in time. Understood in terms of this space and duration, the architectural project becomes what Josep Muntañola-Thornberg, following Bakhtin, refers to as a chronotopic encounter. The chronotope, Bakhtin writes in the context of literary studies, is the foremost means of materialising time into space. It is the 'intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature'. Through the chronotope,

> [the] *spatial and temporal are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movement of time, plot and history.*[10]

Thus, the chronotopic encounter is the project as a relational field in space and time that prefigures the architectural object and its specific geographic and historical context.[11] The chronotope can be used similarly to discuss the spacetime organisation of the project as well as its relation to a particular mode of production (in the case of Barking, for example, UK regeneration policies of the late 1990s). This concept also cuts through the relational field of a project to observe the development of intersubjective and collective relationships as fixed moments. In all these cases, the chronotope is multiple: defining a single project, the chronotope of the Town Square, as well as its various spacetime markers such as the chronotopes of urban development plans, art funding programmes, or municipal rivalries.[12]

The type of action of interest here seeks to act on a project's relationships and rearrange its chronotopes: the 'making of the relationship', as muf put it. These actions manipulate the spatial and temporal distribution of relationships and the multiplicity of encounters. The relational field is, in this sense, treated as a site to be manipulated and meetings are conceptualised as potential exchanges of information beyond practical knowledge that generate intangible, tacit knowledge.[13] This can also be said about actions that seek to affect relationships beyond actual encounters but in the design work itself with the interpretation of social relationships into built forms, or in the projection of user behaviour. Flexibility and polyvalence, in this sense, can be thought of as chronotopes for projects that invite user appropriation. This is precisely why dialogism in general, and Bakhtin's concepts in particular, are relevant to the study of design processes. The emphasis on relations between the immediate context of speech – voice, tone, genre, affectation – and the social context of language, located in space and time, serves to extend our understanding of the value of design as a dialogue that is both procedural and imperfect. This is particularly significant when, as is the case for muf, design processes are themselves based on conversation and the entire dialogical field acted upon by the designers can be claimed to 'stand in' for the architecture.

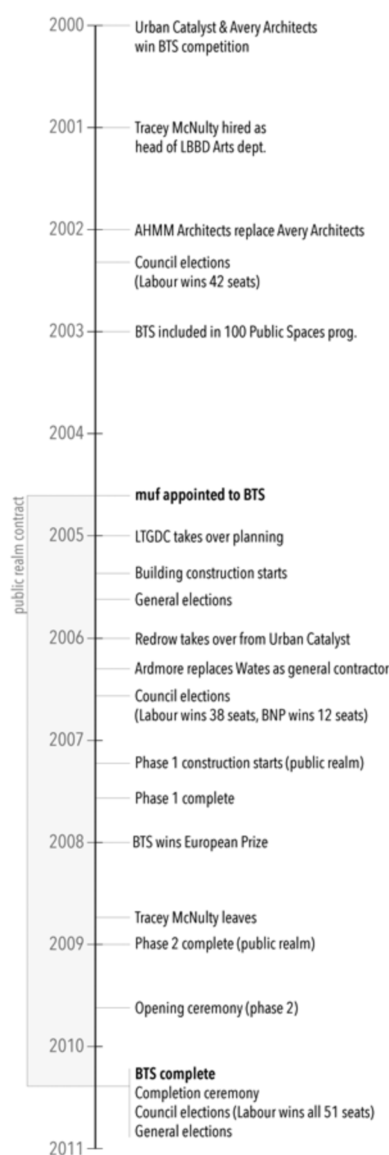
The chronotope(s) of Barking Town Square

The project for Barking Town Square lasted from 2000 to 2012. muf was involved from 2004 on, and their specific contract covered the public realm as part of a larger regeneration project with mixed-use buildings by AHMM Architects *[1–4]*. The project's principal chronotope can be understood as expressing regeneration policies of that period and their spatial production. It encompasses the overlapping visions of stakeholder groups such as Urban Renaissance, Design for London (DfL, or the former Architecture and Urbanism Unit), and the London Thames Gateway Development Corporation (LTGDC), with a public-private partnership financial scheme, residential and transit-led development, and an emphasis on the role of public space in economic and social regeneration. During that period, Barking – marked by a struggling postindustrial economy and some of the highest immigration rates in England – gained unfortunate notoriety when in 2006 the British National Party won nearly a quarter of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham's local assembly (the party then lost all its seats in the 2010 elections). In a context of rapid social and physical transformation, the creation of a new Town Square tapped into a knot of issues related to the way architecture expresses and produces public space.

Although the project came out of local regeneration policies of the late 1980s, it was eventually tied up in broader strategies and programmes at regional, national, and even continental levels (it won the 2008 European Prize for Urban Public Space). Thus, the regions of its chronotopic encounters extend to Europe, the UK, England, London, the Borough, the town of Barking and its Town Centre, significantly affecting its chronotopes and its relational field.

A few structuring moments are important to point out *[5]*: the switch in developers, for example, from the 1999 competition winner Urban Catalyst to Redrow Regeneration, or the inclusion of Barking in the area of the LTGDC as well as in then-London Mayor Ken Livingstone's 100 Public Spaces programme. The involvement of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (LBBD) Arts department significantly affected the possibilities for collaboration and public engagement. Barking, at the time, had successfully established

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135521000336 Published online by Cambridge University Press



5 Timeline of the Barking Town Square, 1999–2010.

interdepartmental collaborations, notably between the Engineering, Regeneration, and Arts departments. The Town Square came out of the overlap of two programmes: the A13 Artscape project and the Town Centre regeneration strategy. muf's involvement in Barking actually predates their contract for the Town Square as they were already working on the Artscape. It was through the LBBD Arts department that muf set up the parallel public art projects and workshops that link with the contract for the Town Square. The chronotopes of the project thus show multiple actors across governance and geographical scales, overlapping public and private sectors and an immediate municipal context that was already set up for interdepartmental collaborations with local communities through public art. This situation significantly enabled the kind of methods used by muf by having the relational field already partly set up and receptive to manipulation.

Setting up the field

The space of the project, extending beyond the physical Town Square, is thus a constantly evolving production made up of dialogical exchanges over numerous years between architects, politicians, civil servants, developers, and local residents. This production can best be understood as a dialogical field that is incomplete, imperfect, and constantly demanding care. In this case, the project is viewed principally through the relationships that define and constitute it.

The first interview I conducted with muf was telling. General questions about the project were answered in relation to a history of relationships: the practice's connections with AHMM, with DfL, with developers Urban Catalyst and Redrow, and with the Borough, with whom, as muf partner Liza Fior comments, they had 'weird family ties'.[14] Many times, in interviews and lectures, she referred to muf as 'double agents' who, while hired by the developer, treated the Borough as their client.[15] In addition to these relationships, a series of parallel projects were set up for public engagement. By the time they were appointed to the Town Square project, planning approval for the public realm had already been granted to Urban Catalyst, so no further public consultation took place on the public realm as it developed. Engagement with local publics, Liza Fior points out, was something that had to be set up in other ways:

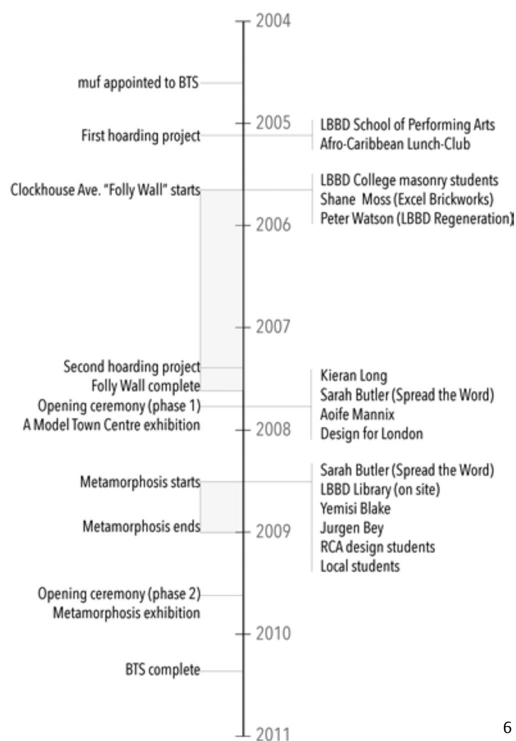
> *It was an interesting situation. There was no requirement for any public consultation whatsoever* [...] *although we had to do a huge number of presentations to the GLA and Thames Gateway, etc., etc. That is why there were, in a way, a series of rogue methods to meet people*, [...] *gently bringing in the public*.[16]

muf's work over the years has been marked by a series of such 'rogue methods' devised, as they claim, to open up projects to other voices. 'Consultation', reads the *muf Manual*, 'can also be about exchange [...] Project by project we designed temporary accommodations for voices and knowledge which [...] were big enough for difference.'[17] Either formalised and given a life of their own, or embedded within another project, it is claimed these actions extend relationships and dialogue with local residents or collaborators.[18]

For the duration of their contract, muf worked on several parallel public engagement and art projects that were set up in direct relation to the Town Square *[6]*. Two significant examples were their first hoarding project (2005), done in collaboration with local theatre students and the Afro-Caribbean Lunch Club, and Metamorphosis (2008), a project that involved multiple actors including local librarians, design students from the Royal College of Art (RCA), Spread the Word and Sarah Butler, poet Yemisi Blake, and local students. The above timeline thus illustrates part of what we can call the 'dialogical landscape' of the project.

The idea, based on Mireya Folch-Serra's analysis of Bakhtinian concepts, is to recognise the reciprocity between text and landscape so that the latter may be 'denaturalised' to uncover its ideological aspects:

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135521000336 Published online by Cambridge University Press



6 **Parallel projects in relation to the development of the main contract.**

> *A dialogical landscape indicates the historical moment and situation (time and space) of a dialogue whose outcome is never a neutral exchange. Landscape becomes not only 'graphically visible' in space but also 'narratively visible' in time.*[19]

Read thus, Barking Town Square can stand in for the dialogues that brought it into existence, produced it, and continue interpreting it through use and management. Similarly, these dialogues can stand in for the Town Square. The series of actions that seek to create 'space for difference' and other voices can be understood as treating an architectural project's relational field (between individuals and associations) as a dialogical landscape in order to set it up as a site for the production of design knowledge. While the term landscape is used by Folch-Serra in reference to the framing of a territory as a text that can be decoded, I suggest that the term dialogical field is more appropriate in our case. The field is less structured than the landscape, but captures the fluidity of something generated by a polyphony of voices and generative of a multiplicity of potential chronotopes.

The principal characteristic of this dialogical field is that it presents the relational space of a project as something that is continuously transformed and worked at, rather than given. Indeed, the chief contribution of Bakhtinian dialogism to the theory of discursive space has been in asserting the importance of the immediate material-phenomenological context in combination with the broader social context (between the utterance and language, for example).[20] What is therefore significant in relation to architecture is that the dialogical field of a project includes not only decisions and meetings in relation to official encounters and relations, but the 'everyday gross reality'[21] of simply working with others, from the tone of conversation to seemingly insignificant encounters and off-side remarks. This was the case in my research in general, where individual interviews used to recreate the dialogical field of the Town Square and were conversations in multiple genres, oscillating between the formal and the informal within the span of a single exchange.[22] Indeed, at many points during my research on the Town Square I had to omit things reported by interviewees – for ethical reasons – because they touched on the personal. Yet those things were brought up precisely because they had significant bearing on the development of the project.

The contextual, 'worked-at' dynamic of the dialogical field therefore came up in the way interviewees acted during conversation, shifting the position of their speech between different roles. The space of dialogue is not only the space of conversation, but the space produced by an exchange that remains unfinalised or unresolved. This exchange, presented by Bakhtin as a 'gift' between one and the other,[23] is the fundamental dynamic of dialogism. 'No being', summarises Todorov, 'can be conceived outside of the relations that link it to the other.'[24] The identity of a person is thus conceived as something that is produced by a set of relationships and never something given or finalised. The dialogical field of a project, then, also produces identities. That is, evidence from fieldwork suggests that the roles of architect, client, or public, those fixed in contracts or documents, were never so clear or unchanging when looking at particular situations. Identities and roles were performed and produced in the interplay between the immediate situation and identities predetermined externally. The dialogical field of the project evolved constantly in terms of the relationships that constituted it, but also in relation to the identities that it supported and transformed.

Relationships with the public

It is in this context that we should look at muf's above assertion towards 'gently bringing in the public' into the dialogical field of the project. The public, in this case, is a loose entity constructed by the manipulation and reading of the dialogical field and to which the project's development is intertwined. 'Rogue methods' is a qualifier that does not reflect reality apart from indicating an alternative approach to the standard consultation practices operated by the Planning department and already met by negligible participation. The methods referred to by Liza Fior were, as was noted previously, parallel projects done in collaboration with the LBBD *[2 refers]*. These, however, did not bring in a representative cross-section of local communities, as they focused on select groups. As Tracey McNulty, Director of the LBBD Arts department at the time, comments: 'We'd just bring in groups of people that we had to have relationships with [...] depending on

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135521000336 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the project'.[25] The people brought in, then, reflected the Arts department's conception (and in most cases the conception of collaborators like muf) of the appropriate publics for each project: those they 'had to have relationships with'.

Engagement, in this case, is selective in its expected results from an already selective representation of the project's publics. That is, while the engagement itself may yield unexpected results, the actors in the dialogue are at first predetermined, there because of a decision made by the designers (or someone else in a position of authority). As Liza Fior comments:

we recognise that absolute inclusive space is impossible. There is always a degree of exclusion.[26]

The desired results of engagement show that, as there is no wholly inclusive space (exclusion is inevitable), there is also no wholly inclusive engagement with the public. Engagement is always partial in relation to an ideal public, reduced to prescribed encounters with particular groups: a social club, a class of students, apprentices and masons, librarians, other artists, other designers, and so forth. As Liza Fior recognises in a lecture, you 'can't necessarily work with everybody but perhaps you can work with a small number of people with a degree of intensity'.[27] In muf's case, engagement selectively reaches different participants in the process so that conversations with local residents or collaborators uncover voices that would remain silent or knowledge that would have no effect otherwise: the importance of a local shop, attitudes towards the public realm from a minority group, dreams and aspirations for one's town, fraught relationships within a project's organisation, cultural and economic tensions and prejudices.

Yet, the dialogical field that is set up is imperfect and changing, deliberate and exclusive. The different narratives that muf are trying to uncover are made up of voices from a preselected field, a constructed 'public' from a particular time and place. While this may at times lead to unexpected knowledge, it also runs the risk of solely confirming certain preconceptions about their site and its population. Difference, in this case, qualifies information that could not have been obtained or given through regular channels; it describes dialogical knowledge that emerges from a specific distribution of the relational field of the project. Above all, this brings up the condition that the dialogical field is conceived as a design object, manipulated by the designers to simultaneously challenge and support their understanding of the site.

In their study of Bakhtin, Julian Holloway and James Kneale reinforce that dialogue connects each of Bakhtin's concepts together spatially, from the relation between self and other to the relation between utterance and language. Linking the chronotope to the contexts of dialogical landscapes (monological, or social, and dialogical, or material-phenomenological). They write: 'Space is constructed by the constant dialogical interaction of a multiplicity of voices; at any point in space and time it is possible to see a chronotope which is more or less fixed depending upon the strength of competing centripetal (monological) and centrifugal (dialogical) forces.'[28]

Thus, cutting through the dialogical field at any point reveals the chronotopes at play and the organisation of the project. The dialogical field is thus itself a chronotope that structures the spacetime of the project – who and where, what relationships, movement, phases, transformations, etc. – with varying tendencies (forces) between the heterogeneity of 'everyday time' and relative stability. This oscillation between stability – clear identifications of the architect, the client, or the public, for example – and instability, either predicted in purposely designed encounters or unpredicted via chance occurrences and encounters, is what defines the setting of the relational field as an architectural project. The desire to affect the relational field transforms the project's stable chronotopes, which are in turn found as the structure for a new stability given by the exclusiveness of encounters. These are eventually subject to further destabilisation following predictable lines like time, or unforeseen developments of the project: a constrained budget, the abrupt termination of a contract, a switch of actors.

Playing the field

As we have seen, muf's design process seeks to affect particular situations in order to make room for unexpected or non-predetermined knowledge. This is a process constrained by fluctuating chronotopes and intersubjective relations, and by a specific responsibility for others and the knowledge generated in conversation. Yet, it was also established that this approach is not without its contradictions, particularly with regards to exclusion. If we look at the design process itself, a similar ambivalence as the one identified above is observed between the way dialogue opens up the process to other voices and non-predetermined outcomes, and the way this opening up is repeatedly closed by the designers themselves. As Katherine Clarke notes:

I don't know whether it's disingenuous to say the process is open-ended because it's closed as far as there is an expected outcome. But I do think that there is a degree of openness in terms of the inclusion of expertise, whether that's the expertise of living in the place and being seventeen or knowing how to make bricks. There is that sense of 'what can you bring' if you're a participant in the project. What they bring can shape the project. Perhaps this is mirrored in the outcome [...].[29]

However strong the focus on conversation or dialogue may be, it does suggest that the significance and meaning of similar design processes and products should be concretely situated and determined in dialogue. This is close to Kester's definition of dialogical practice, where what emerges from the encounter is 'a new set of insights, generated at the intersection of both perspectives and catalysed through the collaborative production of a given project.'[30] Similarly, for muf, openness resides in the dialogue with others which can influence the resulting outcome, the 'new set of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135521000336 Published online by Cambridge University Press

7 Small chair in the arboretum, 2011. The chair and floor were commissioned by muf to RCA students and Metamorphosis participants Merel Karhof and Bethan Laura Wood.

insights'. But this does not, as Katherine Clarke noted above, change the fact that there is always an expected outcome – regardless of how open the process is. As Liza Fior reflected, collaboration 'gives another voice to the work, although we remain complete control freaks'.[31]

Architectonics of answerability

These issues can be explored through Bakhtin's early aesthetic theory in an attempt to describe architecture as a process of 'making relationships'. What follows is a transposition of two main Bakhtinian concepts towards design while reflecting on related observations from fieldwork: architectonics, tied to the duration of the chronotope of a particular moment, and answerability, tied to the overlap between the personal and the professional. The early essays of Bakhtin fall under what Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist have called 'the architectonics of answerability'.[32] As they point out, these early essays are focused on the relationship between parts and whole – the architectonics – and on situated actions in space and time – answerability. This architectonics of answerability, then, describes the field of relations that frames every answerable action by an individual. The relevance of these ideas to design is further supported in the way they are developed through an exploration of creative activity and authorship.

In these early texts, Bakhtin puts forward the idea that a given entity cannot be understood independently as a thing in itself, but rather as part of a structural moment that also includes the act of understanding.[33] He describes this structural moment as architectonics or, as he writes, 'the intuitionally necessary, nonfortuitous disposition and integration of concrete, unique parts and moments into a consummated whole.'[34] What architectonics suggests is that a work of art or architecture, a person or a public, is characterised by the process of understanding it and its relations to others. In this case, architectonic wholes do not, for Bakhtin, have intrinsic or essential meanings, but meanings that are the momentary constructions of thinking subjects situated in space and time.[35] Architectonics' significance, in relation to design, is to present the project or its participants as a field of relations whose meaning is constructed rather than given. muf's dictum about the making of relationships and their approach to social engagement through conversation are, in this sense, a desire to affect the architectonics of the project. Furthermore, there is, in Bakhtin's theory, no absolute viewpoint from which to perceive an object or a person fully and completely, there is always a need for another viewpoint outside our own. Paradoxically, then, an architectonic whole is always, to use Bakhtin's term, unfinalisable.

Similar thought is given to value, which, rather than being attributed a fixed moral code, is something developed in process, contingent on a situated architectonic relationship between two or more people.[36] Thus, an architectonics of answerability refers to the indissoluble relationship between a person's action, their unique position in space and time, and their immediate relational context. The one who acts, Bakhtin indicates, is affirming their position in the world which is, for every human being, unique. A particular action or deed can only be performed by one person, the only one who happens to *be* at this occurrence in time and space. Thus the 'actually performed act [...] once-occurrent, integral, and unitary in its answerability'[37] becomes the foundation of ethics exactly because it is subjective and embodied. This is, as Bakhtin succinctly puts it, our 'non-alibi in being'.[38]

The connection here to the ethics of design can be restated in terms of an architectonics of individuals exercising situated and answerable judgement – that is, contingent on their own place, their relationships to others, and the developing processes of design – rather than relying on predetermined codes or

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135521000336 Published online by Cambridge University Press

8 One of the arboretum's planting beds, 2012.

absolutes. More specifically with respect to the study of Barking Town Square, the decision to engage with particular groups, for example, reveals an answerable position by both muf and the LBBD Arts department to work with specific people but not others. Each parallel project also makes sense of and expresses values attributed to particular relationships in the project (for example, the relationship between the LBBD Arts department, the local library and muf). The responsibility of the designer is thus intimately tied to the structure of the dialogical field set up for the project, the 'multiplicity of voices' that extends well beyond the object.[39] Each design action expresses the designer's own unique position within this field, so that we may recast Bakhtin's maxim to say that there is, indeed, no alibi in designing.

Making relationships

Early Bakhtin texts explore creative activity through the role of the author and suggest that the activity of making sense or giving meaning to our environment and ourselves is a form of authoring. For Bakhtin, our environment is not given but rather 'presents itself to us as a project, something to be completed through creative human practice and an ongoing process of value-creation'.[40] Every event of our existence, in this model, is a creative act because we are adding something new to this construction.[41] Design, in this sense, is equivalent to Bakhtinian authoring in-so-far as it is an act that 'shapes values into forms'[42] or, in other words, turns the particular architectonics of a situation into a design proposal. Furthermore, the process of giving form to relationships, in Bakhtinian terms, always implies another point of view. 'The aesthetic whole is not something co-experienced, but something actively produced, both by the author and the contemplator.'[43] This idea also found its way into his later linguistic writings and the concept of dialogue. 'From the very beginning', he writes, 'the speaker expects a response from [others], an active responsive understanding'.[44] There is a strong suggestion, here, about the inescapable polyphony of creative activity, which Bakhtin supports without much restraint. Yet, this is a position that resonates strongly with design processes that intentionally build up a dialogical field *as a project*, before giving it form, thus authoring a particular manifestation of the field into a realised project. Understanding design according to Bakhtinian authoring is similar to seeing architecture as a production of socio-spatial relationships, moving away from an ethics directed at a finished product to one founded on relationships.[45] The act of design, in this sense, means setting up valued relationships (that are generative of situated knowledge) and shaping these values into form.

In its expectation of an answer, dialogue implies a process that has the possibility of feeding back onto itself. Design as conversation, then, would ideally imply a continuous process of refinement and adjustment, with knowledge acquired in encounters influencing further decisions and actions.[46] As Sarah Butler, with whom muf collaborated on the Metamorphosis project, says, 'there is no point in having a conversation if it's not going to have an impact'.[47] Yet during the same interview you can sense her hesitation on the appropriateness of engagement in the first place. She wonders how to genuinely engage a community in an honest and realistic way before saying:

> *I use all these terms: involvement, engagement, consultation. But why do you want to talk to people in the first place? 'You know, I have a great idea. We're going to put an arboretum in Barking. End of story.' I'm getting to that point where … I don't know.*

Her comment raises a question with respect to the knowledge generated by engagement, its appropriateness, and its eventual use. The author bears responsibility for setting up relationships, shaping them into form, and deciding to use some or none of the knowledge generated by playing with the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135521000336 Published online by Cambridge University Press

9 **Barking Town Square site plan.**

Legend
1. Town Hall

Barking Central:
2. Learning Centre (library and borough services) and Ropeworks (residential)
3. Lemonade (residential)
4. Pianoworks (residential)
5. Bath House (residential)

Town Square:
6. Arcade
7. Planting beds
8. Small chair
9. Plaza
10. Arboretum
11. Folly Wall
12. Stage

dialogical field. The ideals of openness and dialogue are cut down by the act of design itself, the one that inevitably closes the possibilities and ends the dialogical process.

In terms of the knowledge engagement generates, Kester writes that '[dialogical aesthetics] is based on the generation of a local consensual knowledge that is only provisionally binding and that is grounded instead at the level of collective interaction.'[48] He describes a local and temporary chronotope, one that structures a specific moment. The dialogical field, like conversation, is by definition immediate and transitory. According to Bakhtin, recuperating or integrating this commonly produced knowledge elsewhere at a different time and place would describe a different chronotope and architectonics. The knowledge generated through the dialogical context will always be external to the situation – like the creative act it is 'exotopic'.[49] That is, knowledge is always an external interpretation – even for those encounters in which we participate. Although this describes dialogical knowledge as consensual, co-authored, and tied to the interpreter's own answerability, it does beg the question of its transmissibility. Dialogical knowledge, being exotopic, is difficult to make meaningful to those excluded from the process.

This aspect was felt most strongly in the Barking Town Square project with respect to the relationship between the project and the central library. This relationship was set up early on in the project by muf and Sarah Butler in order that the Town Square design would parallel regeneration plans in general and those of the new library in particular. But in interviews, librarians complained about the disappearance of the ties created during the project. The relationships created during Metamorphosis, however, materialised by elements of the completed Square, are not explicit. The relationships end with the terms of the contract. Some things, like the small chair in the arboretum, *[7]* that 'stands-in for that class of children',[50] have implicit links, but, as librarian Denise Lovelace says: 'nobody knows this.'[51] Indeed, with the absence of any permanent plaque next to the object or information readily available within the library, this knowledge, residing in a few librarians' memory who were on the verge of retirement at the time, is unlikely to be preserved. Making relationships necessitates sustained care, especially because the knowledge generated through the dialogical field is always tied to a unique moment. This was evident in setting up project relationships (between the LBBD Regeneration, Engineering, and Arts departments, or between muf, the developer and the LBBD Arts department, relationships that petered out after the project, especially with the departure of Tracy McNulty who nurtured the links between the LBBD Arts and Engineering departments), in parallel projects of short duration. A recurring complaint from interviewees was that the engagement initiatives were of such short duration that no viable and effective dialogue could actually develop between

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135521000336 Published online by Cambridge University Press

actors. Similarly, there are questions over post-completion material care – particularly with the planting beds [8], for whose care muf had to argue with the local authority who eventually hired a gardener – and sociocultural care – especially in the fraught relationship between new residents and long-term residents, or regeneration projects and local history. It was, overall, the speed at which 'making relationships' had to take place and the lack of explicit measures to preserve the knowledge generated in the process that posed the most difficult challenges to the project.

This is another reminder that the approach taken by muf in this project as well as in others contrasts with methods where the recording of conversations and data produced in the process – apart from the work itself – is part of what lends such methods a measure for evaluation as well as what makes them potentially sustainable. In our case, the dialogical field that we can read as the project has to be understood as an aesthetic object and a site. Bakhtinian concepts can help us frame the encounters that generate this field and the moments when the project oscillates between aesthetic object and acting subjects, neither fully synthesising each nor keeping them apart. There lies the answerability of the designers, whose task is to constantly shape relational fields into concrete forms, and think of concrete forms as relational fields. This significantly complicates ethical responsibility by extending it beyond the limits of legal contracts and projected publics into the realm of interpersonal exchanges, and reminds us that all knowledge generated – especially in the dialogical field – is knowledge that we are answerable to others for. Over time, a project's relational field should require the same maintenance and care as the physical artefact.

Design, in a dialogical sense, and reading from Bakhtin, is the act of configuring the architectonics of a project, bound in time and space, in such a way that the resulting dialogues prefigure the coming form and influence the knowledge that this form supports. Its process, as observed in Barking, is marked by a desired fusion between ethics and aesthetics, a clear imbrication of dialogical knowledge with a project's chronotopes, and an overlap between personal and professional relations that extends the responsibility of the designer from the object towards human relations and the knowledge that emerges in conversation. An architectural dialogic, constructed from Bakhtin's concepts of dialogue, chronotope, and architectonics of answerability, is revealing of such messy design processes in which encounters and conversations are considered active design objects, and contradictions and incompleteness are acknowledged and embraced. It supports, in other words, the view that the making of architecture is, indeed, the making of relationships.

Notes

1. muf, Katherine Shonfield, Adrian Dannatt, *This Is What We Do: A Muf Manual*, ed. by Rosa Ainley (London: Ellipsis, 2001), p. 29.
2. Kristen R. Moore and Timothy J. Elliott, 'From Participatory Design to a Listening Infrastructure', *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 30:1 (2016), 59–84.
3. Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), p. 161.
4. Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), p. 10.
5. Katherine Shonfield and muf, 'Public Territory', in *Architecturally Speaking: Practices of Art, Architecture and the Everyday*, ed. by Alan Read (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2000), pp. 63–85 (p. 72).
6. Tim Beasley-Murray, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin: Experience and Form* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 131.
7. M. M. Bakhtin, 'From Notes Made in 1970–71', in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 147.
8. Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), p. 178.
9. Thomas-Bernard Kenniff, 'Bakhtinian Dialogism as Framework for Participant Architectural Research', in *Considering Research: Proceedings of the ARCC Spring Conference*, ed. by Phillip Plowright and Bryce Gamper (Detroit, MI: Lawrence Technological University, 2011), pp. 169–78.
10. M. M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Toward a Historical Poetics', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press Slavic Series No. 1 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 84. The chronotope of the open plan, for example, points to a particular organisation of labour in space and time, while simultaneously pointing to a particular period of history that transformed working environments, real estate, and architecture.
11. Josep Muntañola Thornberg, 'Le projet architectural comme rencontre chronotopique [The architectural project as a chronotopic encounter]', *Nouveaux Actes Sémiotiques* (2008) <http://revues.unilim.fr/nas/document.php?id=2123> [accessed 12 October 2010].
12. For a discussion on the multiplicity of chronotopes within a single project, see Thomas-Bernard Kenniff, 'Identity in Peripheries: Barking and Its Others', in *Peripheries*, ed. by Ruth Morrow and Mohamed Gamal Abdelmonem (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013), pp. 40–53.
13. For a discussion and definition of tacit knowledge, see Rachael Luck, 'Dialogue in Participatory Design', *Design Studies*, Common Ground, 24:6 (2003), 523–35 <https://doi.org/10.1016/S0142-694X(03)00040-1> [accessed 23 November 2021].
14. Personal interview, 26 October 2009.
15. Liza Fior, 'Tailgating as Municipal Housekeeping', unpublished lecture presented as part of the 2007 Bartlett School of Architecture lecture series (London, University College London, 24 October 2007); Liza Fior, 'Barking Town Square: Brief Disobedience', unpublished lecture presented at Real Time (London, London Metropolitan University, 9 February 2010).
16. Personal interview, 26 October 2009.
17. muf, Shonfield, Dannatt, *This Is What We Do*, p. 12.
18. Examples include: 100 Desires for Southwark (1997); Scarman Trust (1998); Pleasure Garden of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135521000336 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Utilities (1998); Tilbury horse parade (2004); Making Space in Dalston (2009–); Hackney Wick and Fish Island (2010); and their curating of the British Pavilion at the 2010 Venice Biennale.
19. Mireya Folch-Serra, 'Place, Voice, Space: Mikhail Bakhtin's Dialogical Landscape', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 8 (1990), 255–74 (p. 258).
20. Julian Holloway and James Kneale, 'Mikhail Bakhtin: Dialogics of Space', in *Thinking Space*, ed. by Nigel Thrift and Mike Crang, Critical Geographies (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2000), pp. 71–88 (p. 78); Ken Hirschkop, 'Introduction: Bakhtin and Cultural Theory', in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1989).
21. Michael Gardiner, 'Wild Publics and Grotesque Symposiums', in *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*, ed. by Nick Crossley and John M. Roberts (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 28–48.
22. For a discussion on the use of interviews and fieldwork in architectural history, with specific mentions of the research methods used in generating the material for this article, please see Thomas-Bernard Kenniff, 'Making Room for Difference: Altering Research through Interviews and Fieldwork', in *Speaking of Buildings: Oral History in Architectural Research*, ed. by Naomi Stead, Janina Gosseye, Deborah van der Plaat (New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2019), pp. 173–97.
23. M. M. Bakhtin, 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 22.
24. Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle, Theory and History of Literature* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 94.
25. Personal interview, 19 October 2009.
26. Personal interview, 19 February 2010.
27. Fior, 'Barking Town Square: Brief Disobedience'.
28. Holloway and Kneale, 'Mikhail Bakhtin: Dialogics of Space', p. 82.
29. Personal interview, 26 May 2010.
30. Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, p. 95.
31. Personal interview, 7 December 2010.
32. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984).
33. M. M. Bakhtin, 'Art and Answerability', in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, p. xxxviii.
34. Bakhtin, 'Author and Hero', p. 209.
35. Michael Holquist, 'Introduction: The Architectonics of Answerability', in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, by M. M. Bakhtin (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. xxiii.
36. M. M. Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. by Vadim Liapunov (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993), n. 20, p. 74; and Bakhtin, *Ethics and Mechanics*, ed. by Valerie Z. Nollan, Rethinking Theory (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), p. xx.
37. Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy*, p. 27.
38. Ibid., p. 40.
39. The multiplicity of voices is how Jeffrey W. Murray qualifies dialogical ethics. Jeffrey W. Murray, 'Bakhtinian Answerability and Levinasian Responsibility: Forging a Fuller Dialogical Communicative Ethics', *Southern Communication Journal*, 65:2–3 (2000), 133–50 <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940009373163> [accessed 23 November 2021].
40. Michael Gardiner, 'Alterity and Ethics: A Dialogical Perspective', *Theory Culture Society*, 13 (1996), 122–43 (p. 139) <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327696013002009>.
41. Deborah J. Haynes, *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 55.
42. Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 10.
43. Bakhtin, 'Author and Hero', p. 67.
44. M. M. Bakhtin, 'The Problem of Speech Genres', in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. by Emerson and Holquist, p. 94.
45. Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, 'The Invisible Ethic: The Motivations of Spatial Agency', presented at Ethics and the Built Environment (Nottingham, UK, 2009); Neil Leach, 'Less Aesthetics, More Ethics', in *Architecture and Its Ethical Dilemmas*, ed. by Nicholas Ray (London: Taylor & Francis, 2005).
46. For further commentary on the link between conversation and design, see Thomas-Bernard Kenniff and Ben Sweeting, 'There Is No Alibi in Designing: Responsibility and Dialogue in the Design Process', *Opticon1826* (2014) <https://doi.org/10.5334/opt.bj> [accessed 23 November 2021].
47. Personal interview, 1 October 2009.
48. Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, p. 112.
49. Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 96.
50. Personal interview with Liza Fior, 7 December 2010. The chair was commissioned by muf to RCA design student and Metamorphosis participant Merel Karhof. The 'class of children' refers to the local children who participated in Metamorphosis workshops with muf, Spread the Word, the RCA, and the Barking Library.
51. Personal interview, 18 February 2010.

Illustration credits

arq gratefully acknowledges:
Author, all images

Acknowledgements

This research was made possible by the following two funding sources who provided funds for regular doctoral tuition at University College London, but played no role in the conduct of the research or the writing of this article: Canadian Humanities Research Council, Doctoral Fellowship, 2008–12; University College London, Overseas Research Scholarship, 2009–11. The author would like to thank the two **arq** reviewers for their comments in the preparation of this article.

Competing interests

The author declares none.

Author's biography

Thomas-Bernard Kenniff is a professor in the Environmental Design programme at the School of Design, Université du Québec à Montréal (University of Quebec in Montreal). He holds a PhD in Architectural History and Theory from the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, and a professional Master of Architecture from the University of Waterloo. His work addresses the relationship between the built environment, design processes, and society with a specific interest in public space.

Author's address

Thomas-Bernard Kenniff
kenniff.thomas-bernard@uqam.ca

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135521000336 Published online by Cambridge University Press