

Urban Blind Spots

Editorial

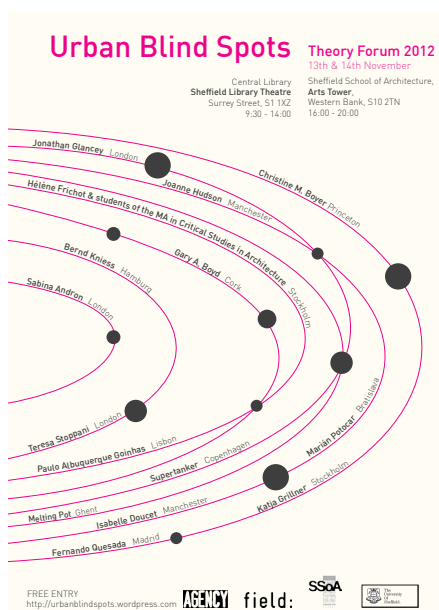
Florian Kossak, Tatjana Schneider and Stephen Walker

field: URBAN BLIND SPOTS brings together a range of authors from different disciplines, academia and practice, exploring and discussing various notions of blind spots in relation to cities and the way they are produced, used, perceived and portrayed. It presents something of a testing ground through which multi-faceted manifestations and understandings of blind spots in cities are observed, explored and theorized.

This collection of essays grew out of a conference¹ we ran as part of the M.Arch and Postgraduate teaching programme at the School of Architecture, University of Sheffield and evolved from a lecture series we give for Year 3 and Masters students called Urban (Hi)stories. Motivated by questioning narrow definitions of cities that continue in circulation within architectural education and practice, the lecture series engages with transforming the ways in which, or the tools with which, both citizens and architects might understand cities more broadly. It investigates the dialectic between alleged 'subjective' and 'objective', of the position of the amateur and the professional, and tests the portrayal of the former against the orthodoxy of the latter. In doing so, it sets out to expand the geographical and cultural range of cities encountered by architectural students, developing tools and ways of seeing that allow their application or translation to any city, which in turn leads to a widened understanding, revealing hidden layers, and telling other stories of these 'familiar' places.

The conference continued these ambitions: it drew together presentations that actively brought together a variety of inter-disciplinary approaches, deployed as part of a developing attitude towards the analysis and portrayal of cities, approaches that go beyond the 'usual' survey methodologies used by architecture and urbanism. By focusing on the

¹ This event— the 'Theory Forum'— has in previous years given rise to **field**: 1 to 5.



‘unusual’ or ‘atypical’ we hoped to achieve greater appreciation of the existence, range and ‘nature’ of what we tend to overlook or blend out when writing and talking about cities in the broadest sense. This shift of focus to the things and objects that are normally overlooked – we called them blind spots – was seen as a space of possibility that offers opportunity for other readings and interpretations.

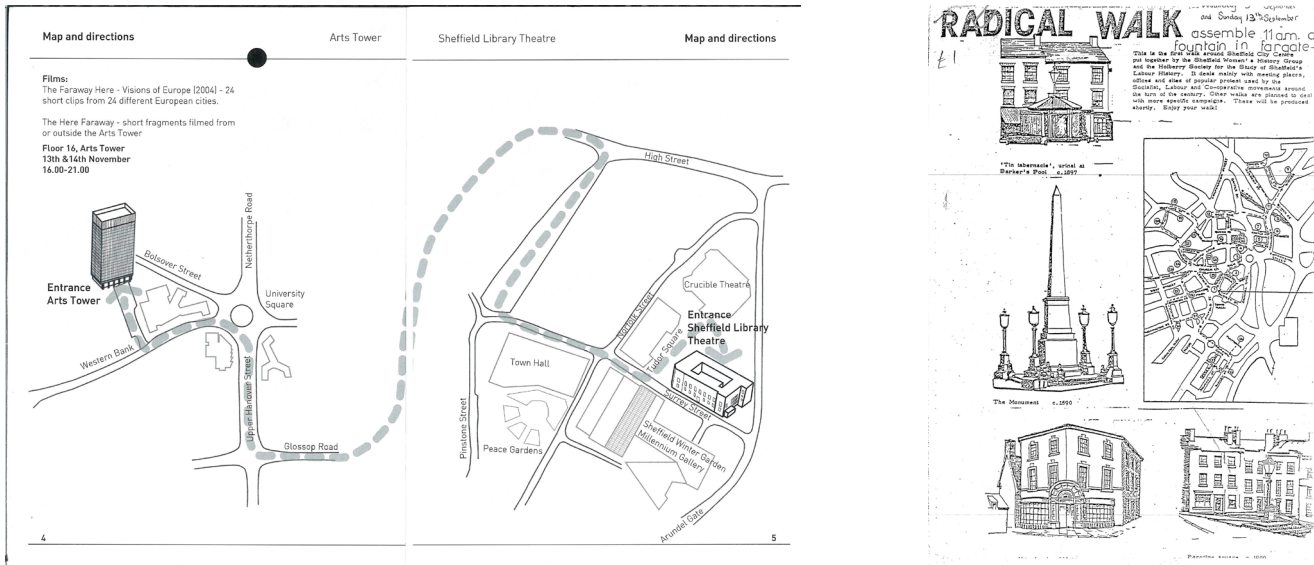


Fig. 1. Directions and route map from the *Theory Forum* programme, and the original 'Radical Walk' tour, reenacted during the Theory Forum

Enacting this shift, we left the university and our ‘ivory tower’ and staged the conference in different spaces in the city and took it into the city itself. A series of walks moved participants of the conference to political meeting places, offices and sites of popular protest used by the Socialist, Labour and Co-operative movements from the turn of the 20th century, or to places where Sheffield music was made – “from the terraced house where ABC first shimmied to the front room where Warp first bleeped”.² Beyond this, the programme combined academic presentations with round table discussion, eating, reading groups and exhibitions.

Some of the academic presentations found their way into this issue of field.

With a nod to Pécoc and Benjamin before him, Gary A. Boyd’s article entitled *Rent: prostitution and the Irish Apartment Block*, pays close attention to the unforeseen consequences of the speculative apartment building boom in Ireland. In combination with the rapid growth of the Internet, Boyd argues that legislative, material and real-estate blindspots were creatively exploited in ways that significantly changed the spatial practices of prostitution.

² <http://sheffieldpublicitydepartment.blogspot.co.uk/> —Sheffield Music City walk led by Tom James from the Sheffield Publicity Department

In *A Monument and a Blindspot – On the Precarious State of Modernist Architecture in Bratislava*, Marián Potočár discusses a blind spot in plain view: 'Námestie slobody' – the 'Freedom Square' in the centre of Bratislava – which is related to the cycles of construction and reconstruction blown by the winds of architectural fashion and political favour.

The two articles that follow both grew out of significant and sustained collaborative teaching projects at KTH Stockholm and Hafencity University Hamburg respectively. Multi-authored and multi-vocal, *Urban Biopower Stockholm and the Biopolitics of Creative Resistance*, Hélène Frichot and Sara Vall with Sara Brolund De Carvalho, Döne Delibas, Oskar Gudehn, Matilde Kautsky, Anna Kulin, Katla Maríudóttir, Alistair Nancarrow and Malena Norlin discuss the deployment of feminist design power tools in order to emphasise different voices, relations and subjectivities in the mapping and discussion of environments.

Why should one care about such a shack and its final five years? Assembled and edited by Bernd Kniess and Ben Pohl with contributions from Monika Alovjanovic, Benjamin Becker, Aron Bohmann, Sebastian Bührig, Maria Burkhardt, Stefanie Graze, Charlotte Herbst, Katrin Hovy, Tabea Michaelis, Meghan McAllister, and Hans Vollmer, this article presents the University of the Neighbourhoods, a project that oscillated between education, research, design and practice, as a point of departure for discussing and re-considering contemporary practices of planning and urban design as well as the role of education.

In *Deleuze's Fold as Urban Strategy*, Francesco Sebregondi runs a theoretical exposition of Gilles Deleuze's philosophical considerations alongside an account of the redevelopment plans for Highgate Estate in London, arguing that references to such sites as 'voids' emasculates their complex operation and contribution to the city. Instead, Sebregondi suggests that the operation of such voids needs a more nuanced understanding if they are to withstand simple appropriation by the forces of capital and real-estate development.

Finally, in *Relational Architecture: Dense Voids and Violent Laughters*, Teresa Stoppani also addresses the notion of the void, providing a sustained engagement within the blindspot set out and theorised particularly by Georges Bataille. Re-reading work by Peter Eisenman and Rem Koolhaas, Stoppani offers a sustained meditation on the architectural void.

The essays are framed by a postscript, written by us – the editors of this volume – where we argue that one needs urban, social and economic blind spots for culturally and socially innovative forms of activity, practice and critique to happen. But, of course, the question at hand is about whether

the focus on blind spots, the making visible of that which was previously invisible, will essentially and forever eradicate those blind spots' inherent qualities and positive contribution to the urban. Can we create designs, structures, spaces that are open enough to accommodate, with or without our knowledge, blind spots? By analysing blind spots carefully, are they enhanced or hampered or destroyed? Is this a well-meaning but naïve project and should we rather just leave them alone?

Acknowledgements: The **Urban Blind Spots** conference, on which this issue of **field:** is based, was conceived and organised by Florian Kossak, Tatjana Schneider and Stephen Walker. We are grateful to the University of Sheffield for financial support in the form of a *Methodological Innovation Fund* grant. Thanks to our fellow Agents at Sheffield for support and chairing of the sessions, to Dovile Botyriute, Elizabeth Dodwell and Alexander E. Maxwell for organisational help; to James Dacre, Kerry Dragon and Neill Grant for technical support; and to all the fifth year and PGT students who engaged so fully in the symposium and debate. We would also like to thank Richard Beeby, Sheffield Library Theatre and Events Manager, Tikka Masala Restaurant, Walkley, Mark Parsons and Adam Park.

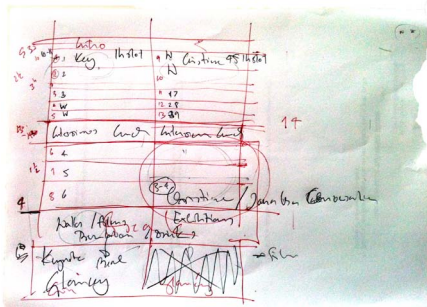


Fig. 2. The **Urban Blind Spots** programme takes shape, with input from many helpers