Points of influence and Lines of development

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Before they actually met, Jeffrey Kipnis once remarked that, judging from his CV, Stan Allen must be either much older than he looks or very confused. Allen's experiences include not only a large number of connections to people and institutions in the architectural world, connections that usually take some time to make, but also some that don't seem to quite line up on any continuous ideological curve. Schooled at Brown, the Institute for Architecture and Urbanism, Cooper Union (where he was under the tutelage of Bernard Tschumi as well as John Hejduk), and Princeton (in 1987–88, a crucial moment of transition for that school), he has worked for Diana Agrest and Mario Gandelsonas, Rafael Moneo, and Richard Meier, taught at Harvard and Columbia, written forty or so articles of criticism and theory, exhibited his own work in both architecture schools and art galleries, has himself built projects for both architecture schools and art galleries, and, well, maybe Jeff was right? While no one should be reduced to their formative influences, everyone, of course, can be. Or almost. The various, often conflicting discourses from which Stan Allen's work has emerged, or better, the working through of these discourses does, for none of these lines of thought are left untransformed. Rather their coordination requires that questions of formal meaning be deposed by questions about the effect or performance of formal organizations, both semiotic and material; that strategies of negation give way to strategies for enabling alternative uses and conceptualizations; and that typological analyses yield to cartography. The constellation that comprises the second of each of these terms is already a rough sketch of what Allen calls "field conditions."

At Cooper Union in the 1980s architecture seemed to draw strength from its original sin of the division of manual and mental labor. To deny the separation and fake an integration (for any such integration could be only fake) was a regression, not a solution. And yet, perspective, the traditional penance for that sin and the primary device for tying an architect's visions to the real, found its filaments unraveling, its precision blunted like any overused instrument. At Cooper Union, the process of...
It risks little to assert that among the most pondered issues in architecture today is the production of effects—the arrangement and distribution of experiential content and expressive content through architectural form. The range of this issue extends from carefully fabricated building details intended to coax out the latent, contradictory, and marginal aesthetic effects of constructed materials to complex, large-scale geometrical systems that promote differentiated forms and structures for programmatic activities. In distinction to "stronger" but narrower models such as functionalism or formalism, the notion of architecture as the production of effects is often associated with "minor" or "marginal" practices, with the consequence that, in some circles, the analysis of effects has all but displaced the concern with form in the conventional sense.

Allen’s more recent efforts surely coincide with this interest in architecture as effect, but his attitude toward form is more particular. "Form matters, but more for what it can do than for what it looks like," he declares. Or alternatively, "Form matters, but not so much the form of things as the forms between things." This attitude seems to me a logical progression from a general concern with the scene of production to this more particular, strategic space between the built thing and the uses it then enables and supports: forms between things constitute a site for actions, a staging of a vantage ground from which effects are launched. Neither function nor
"Theater of Production." Axonometric of artists' housing
form is abandoned. Rather, form is reconceptualized as a condition conducive to certain outcomes, certain possibilities of activity and habitation. Form is an instigator of performances and responses, a frame that suggests rather than fixes, that maps or diagrams possibilities that will be realized only partially at any one time.

If the provenance of semiotics and negative thought is properly located in the 1970s rewriting of modernist aesthetics, something like the binary logic of semiotics and the negativity of modernist aesthetics still bleeds through the fabric of recent theories that claim a more radically proliferated and destabilizing force. In most versions of architecture under the Derridean influence (I'm resisting calling it deconstructivist), the negativity of the modern avant-garde remains but is reconstituted as a specific sign system in its own right, which is then "critically," even "violently," opposed (remember how much those words were used in the eighties?) to the context into which it is inserted. The strident freshness of the new architecture still seeks to perform an essentially modernist function of renewal of perception. But it substitutes for modernism's totalized socioaesthetic, productive package, a practice of signs that shares the same techniques of building production and delivery with another practice of signs that it opposes.

As early as 1986, Allen had already assimilated (from Paul Virilio, Michel Foucault, and others) the fact that, in the face of electronic communication, air travel, global financial markets, and the like, it would be a combination of naiveté and hubris to think that traditional architectural semiotics could any longer manage mass communication and perception. Not as a proposed solution but as an expanded cartography for understanding this condition, Scoring the City, executed in collaboration with Marc Hacker, juxtaposed simultaneous and incommensurable presentations of cultural, temporal, and spatial information—including time zones, aircraft navigational charts, images from advertising and stock markets, and underground transportation diagrams—in order to register the complexity of cognizing the global representational territory architecture would henceforth have to reckon with. In 1989, Allen's more tactical textualization of Piranesi's Campo Marzio, what he called an "excavation—through drawing and writing—
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Allen's first built works seem, on a gloss, to depart from issues of notation and framing, and mark what will become an ongoing interest in minimalism. Surely the architecture of the small galleries in Manhattan done around 1990 is minimal in the grossest sense of the term. But a statement of Allen's made around the time these projects were designed already interconnected and redirects our first tendency to look in these galleries for a simple minimalist aesthetic: "The minimal language of the projects...should not be misunderstood. The claim is not for unmediated presence or for the 'specificity' of the object [à la Donald Judd]. I am interested in a minimal language not for its materiality but for its immateriality; not in the clarification of form but in its dissolution; not in what is revealed but in what is covered up; not in self-sufficiency but in incompleteness." What joins and reconciles these projects with Allen's earlier research into the notation of architecture's infrastructural dimension is not minimalism's objective materiality but what Michael Fried disparagingly called minimalism's literalism and incurable theatricality (think again of the "theater of production"), which is "concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work...The experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation." Referring to a story told by Tony Smith about a nighttime ride with some students on the still unfinished New Jersey Turnpike in the early 1950s (a story Allen has often referred to), Fried underscores how minimalism seduces through its banality and the lowness of its address. Smith:

"It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes, and
colored lights... It seemed that there had been a reality there that had not had any expression in art.

The experience of the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.²

Allen switches the valence of Fried's analysis of minimalism from negative to positive. What Allen draws from minimalism is its disruption of formal autonomy ("you just have to experience it"); its relation of situation, performance, and notation ("the experience of the road was something mapped out," punctuated by infrastructural props, lighting, movement, and bodies); and a programmatic latency that remains unannounced, perhaps even unformed, but is nevertheless spatialized, future-directed, and inescapably social ("mapped out but not socially recognized"). And while Smith finds "there is no way you can frame it," that is, hang minimalist experience on a wall and thereby sanction it institutionally, Allen insists that its very lack of determinacy, its doubt, produces its own frame, or better, a field condition. Conventional architectural compositions and even "decompositions" (as Eisenman once experimented with) can at most estrange architecture from itself by subverting its founding assumptions in an endless process of dismantlement and reinstitutionalization; they cannot be both of architecture and in advance of architecture's uses in the present as a felt moment of historical time. Yet field conditions can be, through their metonymic emission of multiple simultaneous performance vectors and programmatic surfaces, often conflicting and always in different rhythms and relations.

The American city is itself only the most obvious manifestation of a field condition: an enormous deterritorialized plane, its boundaries contingent on a particular geography and topography (stopped by a river or mountain range or an arbitrarily legislated property line), reterritorialized by any of various patterns (grids, patchworks, mosaics), some of which are inscribed on the ground, many of which may lie beneath the...
thin, occupiable surface. Insensible yet controlling—infrastructural points and lines of force whose positions and relations have been determined by a notational language conventionally understood and translated by the multiple agents responsible for putting them in place. As much as by the partitioning off of areas, the type and intensity of activity on the surface is regulated by a kind of rheostatic apparatus below that also senses changes on the surface it now charges (we need more cable here, another tunnel there). The bodies on the surface are so many metal filings on a plate, forming patterns (flocks, swarms, neighborhoods), which are also charged with group alliances and specific cognitive and practical ways of negotiating the templates that enable possible performative events.

Understood in this way, Allen's field condition is also available for conceptualizing conditions different from the modern city's culture of congestion—edge cities, suburbs, "West Coast urbanism," the "thick two-dimensions" of Asian cities, and others; it is a docket of the emergent posturban life that has heretofore seemed unmappable and unmanageable. A practical, architectural construction of such conditions is what Stan Allen's work promises. Most architecture looks pretty pictorial after that.

NOTES
Contextual

"Montage is the determination of the whole..."