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Call-and-Response: Group Formation and Agency enacted through an Architectural Magazine, its Letters and Editorials

Current scholarship is increasingly focusing on the productive alliances and relationships arising between late twentieth-century architects and theorists. As independent architectural periodicals are mined one-by-one for their historical value and used to narrate the permutations of the still recent past, the 'little magazine' is being broadly characterised as a node around which avant-garde groups have consolidated their identities and agendas. What is missing from current scholarship is an adequate explanation of the type of agency exhibited by architectural groups and the role that architectural publishing plays in enacting this agency. This paper is an investigation into the mechanics of architectural group formation and agency considering some important mechanisms by which groups, alliances, and their publications have participated in the development of an architectural culture.

This paper investigates the relationships that developed between a number of interrelated groups emerging out of Melbourne's architectural milieu in the final decades of the twentieth century. Central amongst these are The Halftime Club and the independent periodical Transition – both founded in Melbourne in 1979. These groups were used to situate the practices of their members within the trajectory of Australian architecture and as vehicles to promote shifting sets of agendas. Who groups 'were' became as significant as who they 'were not,' and the pages of Transition afforded a public domain in which group membership could be defined and group agendas contested and reset. A close reading of the magazine's editorial and letters sections reveals these texts as a discursive call-and-response mechanism. These texts are central to the argument developed in this paper which adopts sociologist Bruno Latour's account of group formation as the rubric under which to consider the agency of some significant Australian architectural groups.



The little magazine as group-agent?

In 1968 Denise Scott Brown famously described "little magazines in architecture and urbanism" as a "weather vane" for the profession.¹ This characterisation might explain why a growing body of research is turning to these documents to historically contextualise the architectural activity of the final decades of the twentieth century. Focusing on the highly productive but complex relationships that developed between architectural groups, magazines, and institutions, much of this contemporary literature relies upon the periodicals themselves to provide a textual archive of a period still in the very recent past.

Mitchell Schwarzer's description of the role played by the journal *Oppositions* in the sparring between the New York 'Whites' and the Philadelphia 'Grays,' for example, provides a useful historical account of a period of North American architecture. In marking out the terrain for what would become the 'theory wars' in architecture, these groups recognised the potential of the architectural periodical for pursuing conflicting agendas. Schwarzer argues that *Oppositions* (1973-84) and *Assemblage* (1985-2000) were themselves instruments used to "reformulate the linkages among architectural history, theory, and criticism." Joan Ockman similarly describes the relationships between the editorial staff of *Oppositions*, relating them to institutional context of the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS) within which the magazine was embedded. In such historical accounts a little magazine is relied on to provide an archive of usefully chronologic material and sometimes candid insights into significant architectural personalities or events.

Other contemporary literature on little magazines is intended to be more instrumental. Discussing his role with the radical little magazine *October*, postmodernist art critic and historian, Hal Foster warns about the foreclosure implicit in any "premature historicisation" of the magazines of the 1980s, believing instead that "this field is still open in many ways." For Foster, this period of architectural publishing remains an open project and instead of becoming "doctoral projects one by one; they should be allowed to rise again" and not simply be "murdered once more." Sanford Kwinter's account of his own involvement with the independent publication *Zone* provides a fascinating first person account of the architectural culture of the 1980s and 1990s, revealing a period of intense discourse and institutional consolidation. Unfortunately these autobiographical accounts always run the risk of lapsing into exegesis or even potentially more hazardous, the uncritical continuation of an author's original project.

To defer analysis of this period would be to ignore a rich vein of architectural activity, but the consideration of recent groups and their periodicals might lead to scholarly pitfalls. Is running the risk of premature historicisation preferable to the promulgation of existing ideologies? Is there another way of dealing with this material? Those studies by Ockman, Colomina, Schwarzer et. al., which take for granted the presence of architectural groups, (Whites, Grays, or Silvers) most often attempt to position these groups in relation to other objects such as 'modernism,' 'postmodernism,' 'autonomy,' and the 'avant-garde' – themselves fraught terms and subject to shifting and contentious definitions. What is required is a

dispassionate account of the constitution of architectural groups and the mechanisms by which their agencies are enacted. By considering what terms like 'group' or 'agency' might actually mean as they relate to architectural discourse, this paper attempts to sidestep the pitfalls identified with contemporary research on little magazines and open up another way of considering the architectural activity of the late twentieth century.

Paul Hogben has recognised the contested nature of architectural journals in Australia considering them to be "an intersection of various interests" and a "battlefield over issues of discourse."8 Rather than attempting a sweeping survey of this battlefield, this paper traces some of the smaller, more modest circulations which together formulate important terms of engagement. Situated within a broader research framework this paper has two interrelated aims. First, it is an attempt to enhance understanding of a significant Australian independent architectural periodical and the context in which it was operating. Secondly, it attempts to expand the possibilities of architectural research by bringing forms of sociological thinking to bear on the alliances, objects and other actors that assemble to constitute the discipline. Treating an architectural periodical as an analytic object rather than as an historical narrative, this is an attempt toward an original kind of research on the discipline of architecture. By attending to some highly active architectural groups emerging in Melbourne in the closing decades of the twentieth century it starts to ask: how might a little magazine participate in the formation of architectural groups and how might it contribute to the enactment of their agency? What is attempted here is not so much a critical history of Australian architecture as much as an attempt toward an ethnography of an architectural culture.

Australian architectural culture of the 1970s and 1980s had had not been completely isolated from the skirmishes playing out in Oppositions and other North American publications. Hogben has identified the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) "Pleasures of Architecture" conference in Sydney (1980) with its visiting "mid-Atlantic architects, [Michael] Graves, [George] Baird, and [Rem] Koolhaas" as a "critical moment in the history of architectural discourse in Australia."9 It is significant that the Melbourne-based editors of the newly established independent periodical Transition (1979-2000) took advantage of this event to feature lengthy interviews with Graves, Baird, and Koolhaas. Published shortly after the conference, the editorial of Transition 1 no. 4 (1980) reads as an insistent argument for an improved theoretical articulacy within local discourse, establishing one of the periodical's most enduring agendas.¹⁰ With its publication period loosely mirroring the tumultuous theory wars in architecture Transition was central to the permutations of Australian architectural discourse of the late twentieth century - a time during which preexisting relationships between architectural theory and practice were being forcefully renegotiated.11 Significantly, this was also a period when architecture's position as an academic subject within the university system was being consolidated. By the time the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) (which had provided early financial support and employment for a number of its key figures), took over Transition's publishing in 1984, the magazine had become an effective, if contested, intersection between theory, practice and the university system.



Transition was not the only architectural alliance to emerge in Melbourne in 1979. The Halftime Club, an affiliation of early-career Melbourne architects, was founded the same year. Related to both Transition and Halftime through a shared membership pool was the Association of Women in Architecture (also founded in 1979), which along with its successor group E1027: Women's Architectural Collaborative (1990-92)12, advanced a feminist agenda within architecture through meetings, publications and exhibitions. Many actors were involved with two or more of these groups and several were highly active within all three.13 Transition provided a common domain and a space within which group membership and agendas could be contested. This paper investigates the mechanics of some of these contests as it attempts to develop an understanding of the kind of agency operating within and through an architectural periodical.

Some scholars have recently sought to develop analytic frameworks to describe how many groups are able "to aggregate the intentional attitudes of [their] members into a single system of such attitudes held by the group as a whole."14 Writing in the sphere of political philosophy, Philip Pettit and Christian List have argued that a publication (such as a newspaper) can develop a kind of coherent group-agency by maintaining external rationality and consistency. According to Pettit and List "a coherently edited newspaper can count as a group-agent if it forms collective judgements and preferences, promotes certain goals, holds itself accountable across time and announces revisions of its views explicitly."15 A survey of the literature pertaining to Transition however, very quickly indicates that Pettit and List's definition of group-agency does not hold well for this little magazine. Unlike the rational group-agents they describe, which speak with a "consistent collective voice," there are numerous episodes across the magazine's 21 year publishing span in which the possibility of any singular voice quickly devolves into something more like a cacophony.¹⁶

Sociologist of science, Bruno Latour offers a performative account of group formation which proves itself more adept at taking into account contested and contradictory groups. According to Latour, groups are "not objects of an ostensive definition - like mugs and cats and chairs ... but only of a performative definition. They are made by the various ways and manners in which they are said to exist."17 Any agency emerging from a Latourian group will be quite unlike the coherent and highly rational group-agent proposed by Pettit and List. Groups, for Latour, constitute a set of alliances that constantly require making and remaking. They require some group-making effort and when this stops they cease to exist. The agency of such a group lies in its ability to bundle together a number of conflicting agencies "where none of them is really in command." Importantly this bundling includes human group members symmetrically with "non-human" texts and material artefacts which participate equally in this operation.¹⁹

Latour describes the stabilising effect of textual accounts, or "inscriptions," as central to group formation.²⁰ For the purposes of this study, the letters and editorials of Transition are understood as inscriptions which became significant instruments of group definition. Liberated from the requisite good manners and discipline of scholarly or review articles these

less formal texts were frequently used to announce changing or contradictory agendas. When read together these texts themselves constitute an archive able to provide insight into the delineation of group boundaries. Whilst there are numerous instances of editorial call-and-response that could have been developed, this paper is necessarily limited to several examples which best illustrate the shifting agency of the *Transition* group. Clearly this methodology is imperfect, allowing for only an incomplete assay of material. By extracting these fragments and assembling them, however, it is possible to describe an argument that runs through and connects them.

Latour argues that it is in situations of crisis that the complex interactions required to stabilise modern objects and institutions reveal themselves. During these moments of disruption "things" that might otherwise appear as seamless "black boxes" are forcibly opened up, allowing a clearer view of the complex operations which generally ensure their smooth operation. In considering the applicability of Latour's theories to urban studies, sociologist David Madden points out that "when all is running correctly, networks often manage to 'black box' themselves, hiding their artificiality under the illusion of integrality. This black boxing only becomes apparent when networks fall apart."²¹ Fittingly, the textual examples selected for development in this paper are drawn from moments of antagonism. This is not to say that the construction of the discipline occurs necessarily only through internecine warfare. It is simply that during times of conflict the mechanisms underwriting these operations are more likely to become apparent.

Call-and-response: selections from the magazine

An initial episode of editorial call-and-response which begins to demonstrate the kind of group-agency at work here can be drawn from *Transition* 20 (1987). The position customarily set aside for the editorial is, in this issue, taken up instead by an obituary written by architect and *Transition* Editorial Board member, Peter Corrigan, for Anne Butler (an early career Melbourne architect and member of the Halftime Club). Corrigan emphasises the importance of Butler's various group affiliations, even going as far as to say; "as the Convenor of the Halftime Club [Butler is] a particularly severe loss to the Profession."²² The letters section of the following issue of *Transition* 21 (1987) continues the discussion initiated with this first text as a letter, signed by Corrigan, is used to call for an amendment:

Dear Transition

In the obituary I wrote in *Transition* No. 20, May 1987, for Anne Butler, the following was deleted: 'she was not associated with Women in Architecture...' It struck me as significant. I request that this deletion be made public.

Thank you

Peter Corrigan²³

Even after an untimely death, an actor's position in a number of groups was still being contested. In the first text, Butler's membership of Halftime is explicit, but her failure to enrol herself in Women in Architecture was obscured through an editorial act. As a spokesperson for group formation, Corrigan's letter aims to not only correct this omission but to make it



explicit as a point of contention. The effort expended by Corrigan to claim Butler for Halftime indicates the significance of correct group allocation to those involved. Also there is an implication that membership of one group (in this case Women in Architecture) might be considered as inferior or incommensurate to another (Halftime). The idea that a group might need spokespersons speaking on their behalf, delineating their boundaries and articulating their intentions, is central to Latour's account. According to Latour, all groups "need some people defining who they are, what they should be, what they have been. These are constantly at work, justifying the group's existence, invoking rules and precedents ... there is no group without some kind of recruiting officer."24 Corrigan in his follow up letter is clearly acting as this kind of spokesperson or "recruiting officer," publicly policing the boundaries of each group.

Corrigan's letter is doubly significant as he chooses the salutation "Dear Transition" over "Dear Editors," or, "Dear Harriet Edquist and Karen Burns" (the editors of that issue). As a member of the Transition Editorial Board (a position he held between 1982 and 1998), Corrigan acknowledges the existence of an entity called "Transition" which is other than either simply the magazine's editors or board. In this simple phrase there lies the acknowledgement of some kind of agency embedded within the magazine.

There is a necessary degree of conflict, even antagonism, in the processes of group formation described by Latour. Whenever work is done to trace the boundary of a group, other, "antigroups" are subsequently "designated as being empty, archaic, dangerous, obsolete ... It is always by comparison with other competing ties that any tie is emphasised."25 The formation of anti-groups is a strategic tactic which allows for group definition in relation to other opposing alliances and agendas. The Butler obituary provides a clear example of how anti-groups are defined within the magazine. The combative exchanges which characterise the editorial and letters sections mean that these texts often participate explicitly in the definition of such anti-groups. Identifying and singling out parties who hold contradictory agendas is a tactic used to consolidate the position of Transition's own groups. This strategy is employed throughout the magazine's history. At various times the editorial and letters are used to define and differentiate such anti-groups as The Age newspaper, the RAIA, Europeans, Melbourne University, The Australia Council, The Design Arts Board, Architekturburo Bolles-Wilson, and, International Architect magazine. Characterising these as other to Transition and applying criticism to their positions and agendas was one way that the agendas of *Transition* and its groups could be consolidated.

Another significant episode of editorial call-and-response is initiated by a letter written by architect Doug Evans and published in Transition 34 (1990). Evans' letter is used to criticise the recent editorial direction of the magazine for pursuing a line overly concerned with cultural studies and art-history which, he contends, are "only peripherally related or unrelated to architecture."²⁶ Burns and Edquist's editorial for *Transition* 38 (1992) is used as a response to this kind of criticism stressing the importance of architectural discourse in extending "the boundaries of discussion to include all the arts and observations on the society."27

During this period the agenda of the *Transition* group was being forcefully renegotiated and the editorial and letters were used as vehicles of public sparring, helping to determine which agenda would prevail. Burns and Edquist were replaced as editors shortly after this exchange and their replacement, Paul Morgan, publicly reoriented the magazine to pursue a relationship with theory more "operative" (Morgan's term) than the "critical frameworks" favoured by Burns and Edquist.²⁸ Significantly, Morgan is the first editor to be attributed authorship for an editorial as he announces his "editorial reorientation."²⁹ According to Morgan, "previous editors Karen Burns and Harriet Edquist promoted an examination of the susceptibility of architecture to forms of societal change. This new maturity brings us to a fine awareness of the consequences of theory for architectural production."³⁰ Although it is conceded that Burns and Edquist have played a useful role, as the group has now achieved a "new maturity" they are no longer needed. The group's direction, as well as its membership, can be seen here to be once again contested and redefined by means of the magazine's editorial.

Perhaps the difficulty in attributing any kind of singular rational group-agency to the magazine is most clearly exemplified in another episode of editorial call-and-response; this time between consecutive editors Peter Brew and Leon van Schaik.³¹ Editorial Board Chair, van Schaik's foreword to Brew's final editorial of issue 49/50 (1996) is used to publicly reiterate the magazine's editorial policy and call for guest editors for following editions.³² Brew's final editorial (of the same issue) was used to explicitly criticise the magazine's alignment with RMIT, a relationship he portrays as at odds with the magazine's original mission. According to Brew, the relationship with "the academy" has been negatively affecting the magazine's performance and it is one from which he hopes the independent board would have "the courage to unshackle it."³³ Considering that at the time of this exchange van Schaik was both Chair of the Editorial Board and Dean of the Faculty of Environmental Design and Construction at RMIT this is a course of action that seems decidedly unlikely.

An emphatic response to Brew's attack was provided by van Schaik's editorial of *Transition* 52/53 (1996) which was quick to dismiss the "editorials of the latest wave of Transition [which] have mounted a shrill campaign against an abstraction referred to as 'the academy'."³⁴ Using the analogy of Vittorio Magnano Lampugnani, who is referred to as a "sacked editor" of *Domus* magazine, van Schaik asks of the reader; "can an editor take a magazine where its owners do not want to go?"³⁵ Both van Schaik and Brew are signatories to these exchanges, making it apparent which actor is speaking and about who. Once again multiple voices take advantage of the editorial to publicly contest the identity of *Transition*, its alignments and the direction towards which its agency should properly be directed.

Although it is becoming clear just how important the editorial was in delimiting groups and setting their agendas, the examples developed thus far have dealt with actors enmeshed at the core of *Transition*. One final example, drawn from the letters section of *Transition* 3 no.1 (1982), demonstrates that public group attribution was not limited to the inner-circle but extended out to its broader readership.



No More Dear Editors, I regret to say that I do not wish to continue to receive Transition. Professor Gordon Stephenson Nedlands, WA36

If there was ever a definitive and final dissociation from a group it is affected with this one-line letter from Stephenson. This time the wider membership and readership of the group is at stake. The decision to print a perfunctory letter cancelling a subscription publicly identifies an academic and practitioner no longer aligned with Transition. He is voluntarily, but very publicly, excommunicated from the broader *Transition* group.

Although far from exhaustive, what these examples do demonstrate is the difficulty in attributing a singular and rational group-agency to Transition. While the intentions of key actors coalesced around a set of common ideologies (for example, the prospect of an identifiably Australian architecture was generally considered desirable) it is the specific attitudes toward architectural theory that proved most divisive. Those like Morgan and Brew who saw the 'operative' potential of appropriated theories as a means of generating architectural strategies and forms were countered by others, like Burns and Edquist, who were more cautious in their use of theory, applying it to evaluate the relationships between architecture and society. Unsurprisingly, group members also developed conflicting agendas that shifted according to political alignments, career goals, and professional affiliations. Also clear from the literature surveyed is the relative instability of group boundaries. Neither Transition nor Halftime published a manifesto which could be relied upon to deliver an enduring stylistic direction and leaders and spokespersons changed as group membership was reallocated. Actors at the centre were removed and replaced regularly (as happened first with Burns and Edquist and then later with Brew), and agendas were reset periodically.

Conclusion – expanding the boundaries of discourse

This paper has characterised *Transition* as a contested domain, it does not however follow that this magazine and its groups have been ineffective. Sandra Kaji-O'Grady and Julie Willis contend that "after [Robin] Boyd it is perhaps the journal Transition which ... has had the most influence" on the development of Australia's architectural discourse. 37 Although the magazine claimed for itself a reactionary position at the 'fringe' of Australian architecture it is significant how many of the actors involved with Transition now hold respected positions within the established centres of Australian architectural practice, governance and education.

The fact that the magazine was at times less than fully coherent in pursuing its agendas does not seem to have been any limit to its efficacy. It is possible to argue the opposite, that it was the multiple, contradictory voices which existed concurrently within the periodical that afforded it particular dynamic effectiveness in shaping disciplinary boundaries. For every group formed there arose the opportunity for a number of anti-groups to be described. For every position claimed, other, opposing positions became available for occupation. As

the artefact that bound the group together, the magazine was quite literally able to inscribe group boundaries and agendas, affording them some limited permanence. There could be no group without its text, imagery and typography; its paper and ink. The physical artefact of the magazine is the ultimate means of stabilisation holding group boundaries steady until the next issue where they would be refreshed or contested all over again.

It is clear that the architectural groups considered in this paper exhibit a kind of agency. It is also clear they are far from rational or unified agents. *Transition* and its associated groups fit more closely with the account of group-formation proposed by Latour, only performing themselves into existence for limited times and stabilised by the cumulative effect of texts and material artefacts. Considering architectural activity in this way may assist in the avoidance of the pitfalls of either premature historicisation or overt instrumentalisation identified at the outset of this paper. It might also indicate another way of doing architectural theory, relying neither purely on social construction or technological determinism to define the parameters of architectural culture. This is perhaps a way to move past any limiting theory/practice binary and consider architecture for what it is; a vast construction site in which countless actors, through their constant negotiations, participate in the assembly of the discipline.

- Denise Scott Brown, "Little Magazines in Architecture and Urbanism," Journal of the American Institute of Planners 34, no. 4 (1968): 223.
- 2 Mitchell Schwarzer, "History and Theory in Architectural Periodicals: Assembling Oppositions," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (1999): 343.
- 3 Joan Ockman, "Resurrecting the Avant-Garde: The History and Program of Oppositions," in Architecture production, ed. Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988).
- 4 Beatriz Colomina, Craig Buckley and Urtzi Grau, eds., *Clip, Stamp, Fold: The Radical Architecture of Little Magazines, 196x to 197x* (Barcelona, Spain: Actar, 2010), 40-41.
- 5 Colomina, Buckley and Grau, eds., Clip, Stamp, Fold, 40-41.
- Sanford Kwinter, "Plumbing the Urban Azimuth (at the End of the Age of the Book)," Harvard Design Magazine 38 (2014). Zone is independently and infrequently published, sharing characteristics with Scott Brown's little magazines.
- 7 Paul Hogben, "The Aftermath of 'Pleasures': Untold Stories of Post-Modern Architecture in Australia," in Shifting Views: Selected Essays on the Architectural History of Australia and New Zealand, ed. Andrew Leach, Antony Moulis and Nicole Sully (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2008), 163-64. Hogben refers specifically to Architecture Australia.
- 8 Hogben, "The Aftermath of 'Pleasures'," 163-64.
- 9 Hogben, "The Aftermath of 'Pleasures'," 156.
- 10 "Editorial," Transition, 1 no. 4 (1980): 3.
- 11 Sandra Kaji-O'Grady and Julie Willis, "Conditions, Connections and Change: Reviewing Australian Architectural Theory 1880-2000," *Architectural Theory Review* 8, no. 2 (2003): 222.
- 12 Karen Burns, "E1027: From Modernist House to Feminist Collective," in *The Design Collective: An Approach to Practice*, ed. Harriet Edquist and Laurene Vaughan (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).
- 13 Halftime controlled two *Transition* issues with one issue devoted to Women and Architecture, aligning it to the agendas of Women in Architecture and E1027. Founding *Transition* editors, Ian McDougall and Richard Munday, were among those responsible for founding the Halftime Club and *Transition*'s two longest serving editors, Karen Burns and Harriet Edquist, were associated with E1027.



- 14 Philip Pettit and Christian List, Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 40-41. A particularly relevant example developed by Pettit and List is The Economist newspaper which, they argue, is able to achieve a highly rational form of group-agency through its editorial coherence and consistency.
- 15 Pettit and List, Group Agency, 59.
- 16 Pettit and List, Group Agency, 59.
- 17 Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 34.
- 18 Bruno Latour, "The Promises of Constructivism," in Chasing Technoscience: Matrix for Materiality, ed. Don Ihde and Evan Selinger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 31-33.
- 19 Latour, "The Promises of Constructivism," 31-33.
- 20 Latour, Reassembling the Social, 35.
- 21 David J. Madden, "Urban Ants: A Review Essay," Qualitative Sociology 33, no. 4 (2010).
- 22 "Obituary," Transition 20 (1987): 2.
- 23 Peter Corrigan, Letter in Transition 21 (1987): 65.
- 24 Latour, Reassembling the Social, 30-34.
- 25 Latour, Reassembling the Social, 30-34.
- 26 Doug Evans, Letter in Transition 34 (1991): 103.
- 27 "Editorial," Transition 38 (1992): 10.
- 28 Paul Morgan, "Editorial," Transition 39 (1992): 5.
- 29 Morgan, "Editorial," 5.
- 30 Morgan, "Editorial," 5.
- 31 Brew also edited a number of issues of Backlogue: The Journal of the Halftime Club.
- 32 Leon van Schaik, "Foreword," Transition 49/50 (1996): 3.
- 33 Peter Brew, "Editorial," Transition 49/50 (1996): 9.
- 34 Leon van Schaik, "Editorial," Transition 52/53 (1996): 6.
- 35 Leon van Schaik, "Editorial," 7.
- 36 Gordon Stephenson, "No More," Letter in Transition 3, no. 1 (1982): 44.
- 37 Kaji-O'Grady and Willis, "Conditions, Connections and Change," 222.