

Toward a Carrier Bag Theory Of Coauthoring

Structural consistency is a fantasy; the noise of relation's impact, inducing incompleteness where it emerges, is the overwhelming condition that enables the change that, within collaborative action, can shift lived worlds.¹

Let us first tell you about the “we” you will encounter in this text. It is a dialogue between the two of us, so “we” most often stands in for the two of us. Sometimes we want to implicate you as well. And sometimes “we” is a flow in which we are multiplied by each other, by other contributors to this issue, and by the agents they narrate into the topic of contemporary thinking about authorship. We have assembled them to help us describe and imagine the field of architecture orienting around coauthoring instead of authoring. Contemporary conceptions (and forms) of agency in architecture exceed, spill around, and challenge the model of architectural authorship that dominates both architectural discourse and the market. Because most of these alternative conceptions of agency are not codified or stable, understanding them without draining them of their power to shift the tone and the disposition of the field of architectural production may require what Lauren Berlant describes as learning to “walk in the wet sand of the questions that shift on the occasion of an impact by another.”² In other words, our “we” is not universalizing or stable, though it is hopeful; its aim is to carefully hold differences together as we trek through the wet sand of coauthorship together.

To begin moving in this territory we call coauthorship in architecture is to accept the shifting grounds, to enter the space of political and identity negotiations, to relinquish absolutes, and to open up to multiple forms of agency and their manifestations. In comparison to coauthorship, authorship is self-serious. Authorship sucks the air out of the room, it is heroic, it is all ego all the time. It is also a fiction with serious inertia and with material ramifications.

1. Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 125. These final words of the book are specifically credited to Berlant.

2. *Ibid.*

The best figure to illustrate authorship's historical comings and goings might be the ouroboros, the snake that eats itself, only to grow stronger and eat itself some more. Authorship has similarly been on a scheduled eternal-return train. Just as soon as the author is pronounced dead in one corner of culture, it is resurrected through new sets of regulations, bandages, barriers, and pedestals elsewhere.³ At one important moment, when the death of the author was touted on the late 1960s French cultural scene, Michel Foucault offered the "author function" in place of "author."⁴ Despite (and contrary to what we might conclude from) all the dancing on authorship's grave, Foucault suggested, the author function was alive and well. It served many different purposes at any given historical moment and across different disciplines. As some of his critics would later point out, Foucault did not study the author function in terms of its economic efficacies – discursive ones seemed complex enough – yet the author function in any field, and certainly in architecture, has many of its tentacles deeply lodged in the question of labor and its valuation.⁵ Not too far behind "signature" and its transhistorical orientation toward the future⁶ come more mundane topics like the ownership of ideas, liability, copyright, contracts by which authorship is the basis of compensation, organization of labor in offices and on construction sites, use of precedents, and, importantly, resistance to the regulating power (and violence) of some of these.

We are not setting up the author so that we can kill it again – we know such an attempt would only strengthen its grip on the conversation. Instead, we hope to gather some models that are already sidestepping its allure and maybe some of its functions. Since the shift from authorship to coauthorship is a matter of multiplicities multiplying, as opposed to a singular, revolutionary event, it seems important to us to give props where they are due, cross-connect efforts at different registers, and identify some of the key frameworks, barriers, incentives, and tools that control and maintain centuries-old formulations of architectural authorship. Coauthorship registers most clearly against the backdrop of structures that attempt to contain it. As we revisit some of those structures we turn to feminist thought, which reminds us that "siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice." The trickiness of boundaries highlights exactly why we need to enumerate them here. As Donna Haraway writes, "What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meaning and bodies."⁷ We offer three key structures that have tended to

3. Seán Burke cautions about this self-regenerating tendency of the question of authorship in his introduction to *Authorship. From Plato to the Postmodern: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

4. Singularly important in its catalytic power for this discourse, and the discourse on reception, was Roland Barthes's 1967 essay "The Death of the Author." Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author? (1969)" *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984): 101–69.

5. Molly Nesbit both relies on Foucault's definition and calls out its shortcomings, especially his ignoring the market function for the sake of a more abstract, and perhaps cleaner, description of the author function, in her famous essay on Eugène Atget's forms of authorship: "What Was an Author?," in *Authorship. From Plato to the Postmodern: A Reader*.

6. On the function of signature, see Timothy Hyde, "Signed, anonymous: the persona of the architect in the Mansion House debate," in *Terms of Appropriation: Modern Architecture and Global Exchange*, eds. Amanda Reeser Lawrence and Ana Miljački (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 13–23, as well as Seán Burke, "The Ethics of Signature," in *Authorship*.

7. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 595.

maintain the boundaries of architectural authorship: disciplinary and cultural narratives of authorship, legal codification of authorship and ownership of ideas in copyright laws, and professional codification of responsibilities and liabilities. Their functioning and histories are intertwined and mutually reinforcing, but in what follows we offer only episodic glimpses into each of these so that we may use them to orient ourselves in the opposite direction, around coauthorship.

In the risky business of siting boundaries, origin stories are enticing to revisit and may be useful, as long as no one forgets how reductive they tend to be. One such origin story involves a Renaissance treatise that offered an early formulation of architectural authorship. Around 1450, Alberti, who at the time had no documented architectural expertise, offered a detailed procedural imagining of the design and building process. It was by all accounts a “deeply strange, problematic and impracticable proposal in its time,”⁸ yet it has been routinely naturalized as the radical beginning of the discipline of architecture, or as the original division of architectural labor, including the emergence of forms of exactitude and immutability of architectural ideas. It has also been seen recently as a temporary disruption of a more “natural” and pluralistic order of making that has now been restored by proliferating new technologies that enable architectural work by many agents simultaneously.⁹ When considered from our time, Alberti’s imagined architectural process and definition of authorship resonate with the discipline we know, such that its initial irrationality and failure to truthfully describe the reality of building in the 15th century are hard to grasp.

In his own recent retelling of this story, historian Marvin Trachtenberg describes the way in which the episteme of the literary and social world of Renaissance Italy motivated Alberti to transmute the dominant literary authorship model into the now widely accepted definition of architectural authorship. Trachtenberg focuses on the emergence of fame from within the “new time consciousness.”¹⁰ With “the invention and proliferation of the mechanical clock in the Trecento, which has been understood ever since Marx as a key to the emergence of modernity,” arose “merchants’ time,” whereby labor measured in units of time could begin to be understood as having monetary value.¹¹ While merchants and bankers “transform[ed] temporal into monetary value, the humanists interpreted the value of limited human time in explicitly personal, existential terms of individual literary study, achievement, and fame, in a powerful discursive

8. Marvin Trachtenberg, “Ayn Rand, Alberti and the Authorial Figure of the Architect,” *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011): n.p., paragraph 12.

9. See Mario Carpo, *The Alphabet and the Algorithm* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).

10. Trachtenberg, n.p., paragraph 15.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Ibid., paragraph 23.

13. Ibid., paragraph 42.

14. See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism, Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), and Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

15. From Johan Fichte's 1793 article "Proof of Illegality of Reprinting: A Rationale and a Parable," quoted in Martha Woodmansee, "The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the 'Author,'" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17, no. 4, Special Issue: The Printed Word in the Eighteenth Century (Summer, 1984): 445.

current that vied with early capitalism in dynamic energy."¹²

Alberti's script for architectural authorship was deeply indebted to the emergent merchant temporality and shaped by his own participation in the literary discourse of his time, which included single author validation of texts as well as very precise ideas about the sanctity of a text. Alberti's architect author transformed the old meaning of *auctor* as founder-builder into "originator, validator, adjudicator of the entire form and meaning of the work."¹³ Large swaths of contemporary architectural production continue to uphold forms of authorship contained in this formulation. However consequential the imbrication of the architect author with merchant clocks was, other temporalities – and therefore, other relationships between the self, production, and authorship – were not only possible but also actively unfolding during the 15th century elsewhere (as well as in Alberti's midst).

Contrary to what capitalist realism or settler-colonial logics have trained us to believe, time is not a universal construct, and neither is the author.¹⁴ Other ways of organizing and valuing agency are available if only we could see beyond the pervasive naturalization of the notion that the politically mutable has become immutable.

To understand authorship critically, we must look beyond statements that authors make about themselves, argues art historian Molly Nesbit. For her, the legal definition of authorship becomes a "reliable standard of measurement" for understanding it as a framework of possibilities at any given time. The many histories of copyright law begin with book publishing and book pirating, and thus with the financial interests of publishers, booksellers, and, eventually, authors. With the expansion of publishing in the 18th century, the question of ownership of ideas occupied Enlightenment thinkers across Europe. Johan Fichte, for example, divided the book into its material attributes and its content, then divided the content into ideas and the form that those ideas are given by a specific author. To the extent that the reader "is able, through intellectual effort, to appropriate them, these ideas cease to be the exclusive property of the author, becoming instead the common property of both author and reader. The *form* in which these ideas are presented, however, remains the property of the author eternally."¹⁵ German Romantic thinkers developed this concept further, offering that reading itself entailed "divination into the soul" of the author, sponsoring thus the entire hermeneutic tradition which took for granted the author as that person who owned

16. Molly Nesbit, "The Author," in *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 90.

17. Foucault makes much of this link, a "work" of literature, art, or architecture is only recognizable as such – as coherent – insofar as it is attributed to an author, who is then reciprocally deemed whole and coherent. Both author and work are linked to an actual person empirically involved in the shaping of material or in writing. However, the link is not made simply, or spontaneously, through attribution, but rather through projection and a complex and precise process of finding and fabricating coherence.

18. Ursula Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (Barcelona: Terra Ignota, 2020), 28.

19. Le Guin, 19.

20. Elizabeth Fisher, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Evolution," in *Woman's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980).

21. Le Guin, 35.

the form of their ideas. In the French *droit d'auteur*, from 1793, studied by Nesbit, "authors retained property rights over the fruits of their labor even after their work was sold to somebody else."¹⁶ Authorship here was not (or no longer) tied to artistic prestige, the quality of ideas, or their form; both high-brow and low-brow works were equally covered by the early copyright laws. The only distinction in France was between industrially produced works and those that bore the trace of an author's personality. From here on, law would have to keep up with the cultural definition and valuation of that specific intersection between different media and persons.

But even in its more equalizing mode, copyright law has maintained the link between ideas and their ownership, ideas and persons, and the coherence of those persons (as authors) and their "works."¹⁷ With authors as originators, validators, adjudicators, and owners of the form of their ideas, culture, and by extension architecture, organized its narratives around heroes, and as sci-fi novelist Ursula Le Guin suggests when teaching us to sidestep hero stories, "Heroes are powerful." Everyone and everything become part of heroes' stories. "Before you know it, the men and women in the wild-oat patch and their kids and the skills of makers and the thoughts of the thoughtful and the songs of the singers are all part of it, have all been pressed into service in the tale of the Hero. But it is not their story. It's his."¹⁸

Following feminist anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher, Le Guin offers that "the earliest cultural invention must have been a container to hold gathered products and some kind of sling or net carrier,"¹⁹ rather than a weapon, as is more commonly accepted. She subscribes to Fisher's "Carrier Bag Theory of Evolution," and though "collecting oats" and carrying children might not have provided enough action to compete with the heroics of hunting and war making, when it comes to telling stories, it seemed to Le Guin that the competitive hero narrative was coming to an end.²⁰ In order to write different stories, life stories instead of hero stories, Le Guin maintained her own "carrier bag" full of "wimps and klutzes, and tiny grains of things smaller than mustard seed, and intricately woven nets . . . and a mouse's skull; full of beginnings without ends . . . and far more tricks than conflicts."²¹ Please hold on to this image of a carrier bag, we will get back to it.

Hero stories of architect authors have been and continue to be easily co-opted by contemporary financial imaginaries; both, writes Reinhold Martin, are "cultural constructions through which circulate other cultural constructions, like

22. Reinhold Martin, “Financial Imaginaries, Toward a Philosophy of the City,” *Grey Room* 42 (2011): 65.

23. *Ibid.*, 78.

24. Hyde, 18.

25. Martin writes about this cryptoreligious faith – a feeling and a language – that underpins the global rise of the private real estate developer and signature architect. He does not see the link between these phenomena as a simple expression of the patronage relationship but, more significant, as forged specifically through a kind of “religiosity that architecture and money still share,” and in which the architect author plays a major role. Martin, 67.

26. George Barnett Johnston, *Assembling the Architect: The History and Theory of Professional Practice* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 8.

27. For more on the professionalization of architects, see Mary N. Woods, *From Craft to Profession: The Practice of Architecture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). On contract documents and their history, see George Barnett Johnston, *Assembling the Architect*.

‘money,’ ‘credit,’ and ‘architecture.’”²² A glimpse at skinny, supertall, UltraClear glass towers confirms that the unstoppable, deeply symbiotic duo – the mythical private developer and “signature architect” – continue to refine their core and shell models, making ever more heroic their concrete architectural offerings to the rest of the “circulatory abstractions that make up the contemporary city.”²³ Signature, which as Timothy Hyde writes, is the “translation of personhood into a medium other than the actual person,”²⁴ is key to achieving the necessary buzz about, and confidence in, the wisdom of parking money on the 90th floor with a clear, expansive view, as well as “faith” that, well, the whole thing can just keep going.²⁵

Architecture’s hero stories facilitate the consolidation of capital through real estate, which in turn perpetuates the single genius model of practicing and teaching architecture. In professional practice the legal and cultural codifications of architectural authorship are intertwined through routines of behavior, codes of conduct, and agreements. In fact, routines (interpersonal hierarchies, systems of payment, areas of risk taking or liability) are enforced through codes of conduct and agreements, and vice versa. These exert their own kind of inertia of small print. The very narrow sense of “how we do things” is codified in contracts and codes, which, in turn, are ingrained in the next generation of architects through accredited education and licensure, and reiterated through the actions of professional organizations.

Take, for example, the American Institute of Architects’ design and construction contracts. “We might wonder, which came first, the architect or the contract?” writes George Barnett Johnston, a historian of the profession.²⁶ To negotiate the messy overlaps of agency, responsibility, and the domain of ideas and expertise between architects, drafters, builders, tradesmen, and clients, in 1911, as one of its first acts, the newly formed AIA established the Standard Forms, a series of contract documents that are the core of the contract documents still used across all scales of practice. The contracts worked to separate roles, risks, and responsibilities for owners, architects, and builders: legal language taxonomized and regulated issues like constructability, material knowledge, end results, client relationships, and the ownership of ideas.²⁷ In 2022, in the US, we continue to practice within this largely unchanged legal and professional framework.

Architects’ Instruments of Service are defined as “representations, in any medium of expression now known or later developed, of the tangible and intangible creative work

28. American Institute of Architects, A201™ – 2017 General Conditions of the Contract for Construction, §1.1.7 Instruments of Service, 2017.

29. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 125–26.

performed by the Architect and the Architect’s consultants under their respective professional services agreements.”²⁸ The establishment and endurance of the Instruments of Service construct and maintain the architectural author by holding on to the rights of cultural production (the “tangible and intangible creative work” describing the content within the realm of ideas), while elsewhere in the standard contracts, it is also used to maintain that an architect’s work is the reproducible product of technical expertise, which builders must always defer to but not reappropriate for their own ends. In the daily “life story” of actually doing this work, things are much less clear, as they involve negotiation and coproduction by architects, engineers, and builders across scales.

If in a disagreement you get to the point where you are referring to the legal terms of the contract, it’s already too late for resolution – or so we’ve heard. Negotiations, informal mediations, and compromises around project disputes – on means and methods, financial responsibility, and process – are always happening in real time, between individuals and groups. While contracts are duly signed by all parties, they are (anecdotally at least) routinely ignored in favor of the constant 1:1 forms of collaboration and resolution. Architecture and architectural work are always happening under the pressure to both maintain and demolish singular authorship. It may not be easy to recognize in these conflicting pressures the possible pivot points or opportunities for unraveling. But they are there. We know that these pressures, sometimes unbearable and sometimes usefully catalytic, shape us and the built environment daily, and have for centuries.

Like these enduring construction contracts, cultural and disciplinary narratives, as well as legal definitions of authorship, have ways of issuing “calls to order” for architectural authoring. As cultural theorists Fred Moten and Stefano Harney might suggest, these different types of “calls to order” interpolate the looser, less legible forms of agency which bounce around architecture into compliance with the architect-author model.²⁹ A call to order might be issued in the name of profit imperatives or a hero story of some other kind, through pedagogy, licensure, algorithms, zoning language, Google Docs, map projections. Answering a call to order, which is here specifically a call to making agency in the discipline of architecture more legible as authorship – makes that agency more easily extractable and governable. But, indeed, what might happen, as Moten and Harney ask, if one does not answer a call to order, or better yet, if we refuse to issue

such a call? “What new kinds of things might emerge out of the capacity to refuse to issue the call to order?” What kinds of making of architecture might be happening before, during, and after, as well as outside, the various calls to order of architect authors? Who and what has the agency to shape architecture while disregarding or sidestepping that deeply codified role?

In this issue of *Log*, and alongside Le Guin and Haraway, we acknowledge the agency of the world as a witty trickster, maybe even with “an independent sense of humor” that does not sit easily with anyone set on seeing that world as a resource.³⁰ “The world” is always multiple worlds, and the objects, agents, and values that those worlds include affect outcomes in different ways. If we reorient authorship around these many forms of agency and invite them into both our knowing and “authoring,” there can be no more blank slates; authorship itself can never again be understood as a singular act of will or as simply giving a form to an idea, but always as a negotiation. Proponents of situated knowledge, who only see *tabula* as *plena*, might help us think about the ways coauthorship moves, how it links like and unlike things, and imagine what kind of epistemology it may require. We know that for trekking through wet sand we might be best served, as Haraway writes, with “partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology.”³¹ We also believe that this situated thinking is capacious enough to include nonhuman entities, temporalities, and intelligence.

Imagine, then, what follows in these pages as the contents of our “carrier bag,” for a carrier-bag theory of coauthorship in which we must include some of the frameworks above because they continue to operate on what is possible, and add to them passionate construction; silicone sealant and the critters who want to traverse it; webbed connections; unfinished objects as both objects and agents in the processes of making; rules and regulations; hopes for organizing a disciplinary commons; contestations of regulations; useless products; traces and scars of violent histories; new ways of valuing work; anonymous signatures; developers; financial interests; political allegiances; solidarity, both willed and nonconsensual; metaphors, and technologies that enable communication. It is okay; this bag is big enough. That hopeful “we” with which we began does not just carry the bag, it is included in it, for “we” also designates all of its contents, as well as all of the friction, tact, and tenderness that enable exchanges of transformative coauthoring.

30. Haraway, 593.

31. *Ibid.*, 584.

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