In April 2013, the Danish Architecture Centre (DAC) hosted the conference “Dedicated to Architecture - Institutions as Drivers of Change”, gathering in Copenhagen many of the world’s leading architecture institutions. The Hong Kong Architecture Centre (HKAC) was invited to give a keynote presentation, and contributed to the vigorous debate and exchange of ideas exploring future visions for the Architecture Institution.

This three-day international symposium (17-19 April), arguably the first of its kind, identified and presented various challenges and opportunities architecture institutions face today. Within the subthemes of Impact, Conditions and Methods, the conference discussed in earnest the possible roles and value of architecture centres and institutions, their rationales and operations in contemporary society, especially in the wake of recent global economic crises, shifting geopolitical agendas as well as changing audience expectations. Convening in DAC’s delightful current premises, a converted 18th century warehouse, allowed delegates to take part in intense debate, communicate the latest thinking on initiatives, and build valuable connections.

From New York to Paris, London to Rome, Vilnius to Houston, Oslo to Singapore, participants and presenters ranged from large well-established institutions and museums such as NAi in Rotterdam, Cité de l’architecture in Paris and V&A in London, to smaller high-profile organizations such as Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York and private operators such as the Crystal, Siemens’ new exhibition centre on sustainable cities in London and Germany’s Vitra Design Museum. Attendees were mainly based in Europe and then the United States, while the two Asian representatives were HKAC, still finding its feet, pitted against Singapore’s mighty URA.

Despite varying organizational setups, cultural contexts and political circumstances, there was consensus on crucial issues to be tackled – to reconsider architecture’s inherent value, relevance and potential to make a difference in contemporary public life; to actively adapt and seek out fitting collaborations and partnerships to ensure survival, not to mention flourishing; to clarify one’s mission, whether as communicator, facilitator, promoter or active agent driving change through architecture while remaining open and accessible, outreaching to engage and attract a wider audience; to accumulate knowledge (and ‘smart thinking’) and consolidate common interests with fellow institutions.

Before delving into the conference themes and presentations, it is important to understand the larger contexts. First there is DAC’s planned move, from its current colonization of a historical building to being housed in a few years’ time within the new Bryghusprojektet by OMA; and how this hybrid assemblage of a building on Copenhagen’s last vacant waterfront lot will act as a vital catalyst for the long term re-strategization of this “merchants harbour” (from København, the city’s founding name one millennium ago) into a “cultural harbour”.

Then there is DAC’s own establishment, rooted both ideologically and financially in a public-private partnership between the philanthropic association of Realdania and several government ministries. DAC’s dedication to promoting architecture forms part of a concerted effort together with Realdania and Copenhagen’s municipality to deliver innovation and excellence in design to effect positive lasting change. Multi-media initiatives like 2002-2012 Copenhagen X or the international travelling exhibition COPENHAGEN SOLUTIONS continue to showcase the exemplary range of visionary architecture and sustainable urban living realized during Copenhagen’s impressive transformation in the last decade.
Denmark: Architecture as Policy and Partnership

opposite page below: Bryghusprojektet is financed by the Danish philanthropic association Realdania. Designed by OMA, it will frame the future activities of the DAC.

top: 8House, mixed-used collective residences by Bjarke Ingels Group, Ørestad, Copenhagen (2010).

In turn, such achievements reflect national alignment with Denmark’s 2007 Architecture Policy, which insists on: high quality design as making long term economic sense, encourages education and awareness of architecture for citizens, stresses pride in the country’s architects. Building regulations are relaxed to enable more innovative designs, and collaborative efforts between key government departments and DAC obliges the private sector cultivate an “environment of architectural ambition”.

The humanistic tradition and Scandinavian flair in Danish design is well-recognised, from Arne Jacobsen’s mid-century restraint to Jørn Utzon’s elegant iconicity at the Sydney Opera House. Yet in firms like BIG, with their memorable works such as the Danish Pavilion at the Shanghai Expo and 8House, we can sense a new generation of Danish talent whose social engagement also comes with a confident and stylish brashness.

For Copenhagen, its ongoing urban regeneration builds on its urban liveability and love of bicycles championed by urbanists like Jan Gehl. The city’s stated ambition to become the world’s first carbon neutral capital by 2050 testifies to the joined-up ecological thinking and action on many levels - from nurturing design talent to innovating built fabric and environmental design, from policy directives to effective philanthropy and DAC’s civic advocacy. Hong Kong is by no means unaware of these achievements, as Carrie Lam (then as Secretary for Development) visited DAC in 2011 and Secretary for Environment Edward Yau led a green tech mission to Copenhagen last April. How much our government officials have really absorbed (of the effort required and the real impact architecture can make) remains to be seen.

Nevertheless the DAC’s work to broaden architecture’s long term impact in Danish society remains unfinished, CEO Kent Martinussen explained. The new OMA building itself will question what the architecture centre’s form and function should become. With the future DAC embedded in cafes, restaurants, residences, underground carpark and rented offices, the complex will act as a waterfront landmark while generating a liveable neighbourhood together with designed adjacent public spaces and urban connections.

As the fulcrum project of one of Copenhagen’s biggest urban paradigm shift for centuries (to a cultural harbour), the Bryghusprojektet will exemplify Martinussen’s call for “Architecture promoting architecture”. The expanded DAC aspires to be an international crucible whose functionality is to “orchestrate change” by networking and attracting people, projects, activities and investments. The conference is then a vital step in this direction, hence the Beatles paraphrase from DAC Board President Flemming Borreskov in his welcoming remarks, “We need a little help from our friends.”
Conference: Impact, Conditions, Methods

For the conference’s first subtheme Impact, presenters considered how architecture centres might create value, achieve impact, and contribute to positive change in a world where less than 3% of buildings were created by architects. Conditions examined how the organizing and financing of architecture institutions is affected by larger economic fluctuations, and how different forms of partnerships and interaction with various stakeholders are played out. Methods discussed architecture centres’ presentation and dissemination strategies, as well as the effectiveness of participatory involvement of the audience and local community.

Building is about relationships between people.

Gregory Dreicer, CAF

In the ensuing discussions, skepticism surfaced regarding the uncritical acceptance of “progress” and growth. A sense of crisis and loss of “gravitas” in architecture’s and the architect’s general influence in the built environment raised the question of alternative “forms of gravity” propagated by new relational modes of knowledge and interaction. Architecture as authentic destination for moments of solidarity in experience was reinforced, as was the priority to “think out of the box” to convey the relevance of architecture especially to decision makers, and active agenda-setting with architecture as protagonist. Among the wide-ranging presentations, certain contrasts and comparisons are highlighted below.

Architecture as Process

Gregory Dreicer from Chicago Architecture Foundation started by explaining how to have impact by treating “Architecture as Process”, as activities inseparable from everyone’s lives rather than as enigmatic aesthetic objects. Besides their notable docent-led architecture cruises that account for 70% of the CAF’s annual revenue, he also introduced CAF’s mission to inspire people to “discover for themselves why design matters”. CAF’s message that “building is about relationships between people” is illustrated by their pioneering participatory approaches in exhibitions like “City of Big Data”.

Architecture as Tactic

Larry Ng showcased how Singapore’s URA was “Curating the City” with its strategic planning and judicious resource management, delivering impressive achievements on liveability and sustainable growth benefitting the city-state’s residents. In contrast, Rick Bell from AIA New York Center for Architecture focused on “results” of public outreach, elaborating on programmes addressing health and social dimensions of design, or ones such as “Design as Activist” that bolster the civic spirit in design. Fellow New Yorker Eva Franch i Gilabert of Storefront for Art and Architecture persuasively voiced out the intellectual necessity of advancing more provocative positions to “inform, agitate and enact” as well as deploying unconventional tactics such as serving paella to attract diverse audience.

Architecture as Dedication

Ole Bouman (now curating Shenzhen’s Bi-city Biennale) recounted his deep involvement in the Netherlands Architecture Institute’s (NAi) remarkable makeover from being an introverted bastion to a welcoming civic space, while all the time cherishing the valuable autonomy of architecture as a distinct discipline. Bouman’s dedication to architecture at the NAi translated into numerous imaginative initiatives, with the Urban Augmented Reality (UAR) smartphone apps being the most technologically-enabled re-experiencing of architecture.
How do we take change to the streets? ... By talking about ‘Design as Activist’...by doing something that pushes design to the forefront, within a very clear civic spirit ... we have half a chance to make something happen.

Rick Bell, AIANY

In contrast, Francis Rambert from Paris’ Cité de l’architecture upheld quality exhibitions on urban architecture that blur boundaries, whereas Kieran Long from London’s Victoria & Albert Museum relies more on the presence of conventional artefacts including full scale models while adopting a multi-disciplinary curatorial approach.

Architecture and Independence

Michael Stevns of Siemens spoke about The Crystal in London as a large new-built facility to debate and exhibit sustainable urban solutions as well as connect the public with city decision makers globally. Such involvement of private corporations in architecture is presented as a viable way forward for innovative partnerships with business. Vitra Design Museum’s Marc Zehntner represented another type of independent institution, one which focuses on networking and cooperation with other private actors. Maarten Gielen of Rotors in Brussels is also an independent operator of critical practice. In his concluding keynote, he questioned the representational and discursive modalities of architecture institutions while reflecting on the constructedness of spectatorship in exhibitions. Gielen also brought up the nature of change and the question of “how institutions become drivers of change?”, an appropriate topic that was deliberated in the closing discussion.

Architecture Centres should lead rather than follow, by virtue of their contacts, knowledge and judgement ... they ought to be able to say this will be a good idea to discuss, or to make an exhibition of.

Paul Finch, CABE / WAF

Architecture for All

HKAC’s well-received presentation introduced its mission to communicate “Architecture for all” and the many aspects of outreach and engagement. Being Asia’s only representative of a self-initiated, non-profit organisation, there was much interest in HKAC’s bottom-up, opportunistic nature of operation, and its involvement of volunteers from grassroots to professionals. In particular, the HKAC’s project Centre-under-Flyover received affirmative attention as an ingenious approach to utilizing leftover land in the city. Announcing its presence on the world stage, HKAC also received copious constructive comments and ideas for its future – there is much to learn!

We have to learn a new way to speak to politicians ... to find the new position for the architect. Because the traditional idea of planning, urban design are all dead, they don’t work, they are too slow...

Pippo Ciorra, MAXXI Architettura

DAC’s success in establishing a real platform for exchange with the conference is thoroughly commendable, and one hopes that the genuine desire for follow-up discussions and collaborations that was expressed by all would eventually materialize, in the form of a second conference, or even a recurrent event.

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Overall, by sharing insights and inspiration from different perspectives, the conference fruitfully addressed the question of the architecture institution’s self-understanding as a cultural organization. Untapped opportunities and initiatives were identified, yet severe challenges ahead were also recognized. Carlo Ratti’s technologically driven work at MIT serves as a timely reminder of the importance of staying in touch or expanding with new possibilities and tools available without losing architecture’s physical presence.

We’ve got to be able to get that message from the politician to the person on the street ... If we are the safeguarders of our built environment as architects...

Angela Brady, RIBA President

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*All photos courtesy Danish Architecture Centre and Line Juul Greisen.

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