**Introduction**

**Anonymity and hidden mechanisms in design and architecture.**

The inside cover of the 1960 Pelican edition of Nikolaus Pevsner’s book *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: from William Morris to Walter Gropius*, featured the following blurb about the book:

Professor Pevsner tells the exciting story of how the efforts of a relatively small group of men lifted our visual concepts away from stale Victorian Historicism and infused them once more with honesty, fitness for purpose, and contemporary expression. He shows how the foundations of the best that surrounds us today was laid then by men who thought and taught as well as designed.[[1]](#endnote-1)

This short paragraph perpetuated two myths, which were central to Pevsner’s history and that to some extent continue to dominate the way we think, write and talk about architecture. The first, is the myth that architecture is the work of a “small group” of professional men, namely architects. The second is that architecture is the collection of finished buildings (“the best that surrounds us”) produced by this small group; meaning that architecture as a discipline and category consists of the thinking, teaching and designing of architects. These myths and the methodology they are based on, contributed to the established canon of ‘great architects’ and ‘great buildings’ that dominated studies of architecture and design for much of the twentieth century.[[2]](#endnote-2) Although much scholarship has moved on from the traditions of this canon and the methods and perspectives it employed; it remains the convention from which other approaches are an ‘alternative’. [[3]](#endnote-3)

This issue represents a different perspective on architecture. It argues that architecture is more than the work of individual architects. While not rejecting the study of individuals or buildings, this issue acknowledges the limits of that narrow perspective and explores what happens if we look beyond (or behind) it. Behind every named architect or designer are teams of actors and behind every finished object are a series of hidden or invisible processes, activities and collaborations. Architecture is therefore a complex field of activity. The contributions to this issue all look beyond individual authors or final outputs to explore the invisible, the anonymous and the overlooked people and processes. With an emphasis on the importance of networks and interactions, this issue interrogates two key questions in the history of design and architecture and in contemporary practice: What kinds of work or practice count as architecture and design production? And, who gets to be called an architect or designer?

These questions are posed in the context of shifting perspectives within architectural history over the last three decades, which have sought to explore the complexity and diversity of what constitutes architecture. For instance, in the preface to the third edition of his book *Modern Architecture: a critical history* in 1991 Kenneth Frampton criticised ‘the cult of the star’ that dominated the history and contemporary discussions and practices of architecture.[[4]](#endnote-4) Then, in 1999, Beatriz Colomina wrote:

Critics and historians are shifting their attention from the architect as a single figure, and the building as an object, to architecture as collaboration’.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The definition of what ‘counted’ as architecture and design was expanding. The definition of producers and practitioners broadened to include media, journalists, clients, users, engineers and builders.[[6]](#endnote-6) There was particular attention paid to the role of media in architectural production. Colomina’s own work situated architecture among mass culture and argued that the discipline and profession had to be understood in relation to mass communication and technology in the twentieth century.[[7]](#endnote-7) Andrew Higgott, also argued that the media (particularly magazines) did not simply represent ‘the reality of architecture’ but rather that magazines edit, frame and presentarchitecture in such a way that they ‘construct a reality’.[[8]](#endnote-8) Kester Rattenbury in her introduction to the edited book *This Is Not Architecture: Media Representations*, argued that ‘architecture’ is ‘a construction’, which is ‘not just conveyed but actually defined’ by the ‘complex system of media representations’.[[9]](#endnote-9) Rattenbury articulated her argument about the role of media in architecture by adapting Nikolaus Pevsner’s adage that a bicycle shed is a *building* but Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of *architecture*; Rattenbury argued that if Pevsner had written about a bike shed, it too would be counted as architecture.[[10]](#endnote-10)

It was the particular focus on media as a form of architectural production that inspired the subject of this special issue. Specifically, two exhibitions of and about architectural magazines: Stephen Parnell’s exhibition *Architecture Magazines: Playgrounds and Battlegrounds*’ at the Venice Biennale in 2012 and *The Architectural Review: A Cover Story* by Alan Powers at Work Gallery in London in 2014.[[11]](#endnote-11) As the title of Parnell’s Biennale installation suggests, the exhibition framed the magazine as a ‘ground’: the location of action, a field of activity. More than just a finished architectural object, the magazine was a site of architectural production. This installation and its title pointed to the inter-dependency between the finished object (the magazine – its front cover and final pages) and the work that went into making it. The meetings, discussions, disagreements and compromises, the favors, missed deadlines and late nights, the cups of tea made, minutes taken and memos circulated, all of which contributed to producing the magazine. When I visited the *Cover Story* exhibition, which combined framed covers of *The Architectural Review* (AR) magazine with some archival material and memorabilia, I was reminded of the cover of the AR in August 1959 (see Fig. 1). This issue’s cover featured the newly refurbished offices of the magazine at Queen Anne’s Gate in London. On this cover, the background workings of the magazine – the spaces in which it was produced, its content debated, decided and laid out – were pushed to the front of the finished product. This conflation of the process and product, front cover and ‘behind the scenes’, sparked the idea for a symposium titled *Behind the Scenes: the hidden mechanisms of design and architectural culture*, which I organized at University for the Creative Arts in 2015. The ideas and debates raised at the symposium went on to form the basis of this special issue

The aim of the event was to explore the places, practices and people that were hidden in most conventional discussions of architecture and design. For instance, the sites of production like the office, the conference room, the bar and the objects that furnish them. The overlooked, anonymous designers, the ordinary and everyday people rather than the ‘great’ or extraordinary. The ephemera of design culture – minute books, invitations, posters, leaflets, correspondence. The overlaps between professional and personal interactions, such as when an editorial meeting turns into an evening in the pub, or when the studio overlaps with the sitting room and when colleagues are friends or lovers. Over two days, six panels of speakers, explored subjects ranging from ‘Ordinary Buildings and Lesser Known Architects’, which looked at the anonymous architects in local authority or commercial firms that produced ‘everyday’ buildings; to ‘Personalities and Networks’, which explored the complex relationships and interactions that occurred in the background of architectural and design culture. The focus was on embracing the complexity and diversity of characters and narratives in design and architectural practice and history.

Elizabeth Darling’s keynote paper at the symposium posed the questions: Who gets to be called an architect and why?[[12]](#endnote-12) Darling argued that architecture includes many different producers, as well as mediators and consumers, all of whom are involved in the production of architecture, but only a select few are designated as ‘authors’, through the title of architect. These designations of ‘architect’ or ‘author’ restrict who has access to acknowledgement, authority, recognition and even remuneration. Darling argued that while the named ‘author’ held a persistent lure to historians and others studying architecture and design, this perspective ignored many narratives and silenced many voices. Darling called for a ‘decentering’ of the study of architectural and design production, away from individual authors, to make space to explore the complexity of production and diversity of authorship.

Darling’s argument built on Griselda Pollock’s critical ‘re-viewing’ of art history, described as ‘differencing the canon’.[[13]](#endnote-13)

In 1999 Pollock described the canon in art history as a ‘record of autonomous genius’.[[14]](#endnote-14) A record based on the idea of ‘naturally revealed, universal value and individual achievement’, which denies any selectivity.[[15]](#endnote-15) This is akin to the description of Pevsner’s history as the story of a ‘small group of men’. But of course the canon is selective. It is structured by gender, geography, race, class and sexuality; it excludes people based on these structures. Thus it is a partial and impoverished record of a subject. Pollock argued that the canon rests on these exclusions, for instance it relies ‘upon the category of negated femininity in order to secure the supremacy of masculinity with in the sphere of creativity’.[[16]](#endnote-16) In this vein, we can argue that the canon of architectural history excludes collaboration, complex authorship and ephemerality in the maintenance of the position and mythology of the individual ‘creative genius’ (the architect). Pollock goes on to argue that any attempt to insert or include ‘different’ people (women or people of colour for instance) into the canon, simply reinforces their ‘other-ness’. The opposition of ‘the norm’ and ‘the other’ is maintained. Therefore inserting alternative people or perspectives into the canon ‘cannot ever relieve the Other of being *other* to a dominant norm’.[[17]](#endnote-17) It is not enough to insert these alternative narratives or perspectives into existing studies of architecture and design. Instead, Pollack calls for a paradigm shift, which she describes as a ‘re-vision: an eccentric re-reading, re-discovering what the canon […] would conceal: the entanglements’.[[18]](#endnote-18) This paradigm shift challenges the canon by deconstructing the perspectives and processes on which it is based. This is the ‘de-centring’ of architectural history that Darling described in her keynote.

The position of this special issue is best described in the words of Teresa de Laurentis, who wrote that the opposition of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the canon, the position of the ‘norm’ or the ‘other’, can be displaced by a ‘view from elsewhere’.[[19]](#endnote-19) Laurentis describes this ‘elsewhere’ as ‘the blind spots… the spaces in the margins… the chinks and cracks’ of the dominant discourses.[[20]](#endnote-20) Things that were always there but which were overlooked or ignored. This issue presents such a view from elsewhere. By looking *behind the scenes*, it explores the ‘scenes’ which were ‘already there’ but which remain ‘as yet unrepresented’.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Anonymity is one of the keys to exploring *behind the scenes* and the ‘entanglements’ that Pollock mentions. Architectural culture is still fascinated by the myth of the individual ‘genius’, the ‘starchitect’. In this context, turning our attention to the anonymous is a critical act in differencing the canon. My interest in anonymity was inspired by the words of J.M. Richards, in his essay in *Circle: the international survey of constructive art* in 1937, in which he wrote that he longed for the day that the personality of the individual architect became ‘culturally irrelevant’.[[22]](#endnote-22) For Richards, anonymity was a source of authenticity in architecture. He believed that anonymous architecture moved beyond the architect’s urge to satisfy their personal expression and that by escaping the individual ego, architects could pursue (what to his mind was) their proper function: to design for and improve the conditions of the time. However, in historiography and research, anonymity has meant absence, invisibility and silence. This issue in an experiment in making the individual architect ‘culturally irrelevant’ in research, or at least, contextualizing the architect within the complex networks and practices of architecture. The contributions explore what happens if we study architecture, without focusing on the individual work or expression of named architects. This issue seeks to explore anonymity as a means of re-discovering the hidden actors and mechanisms of architecture. By looking at collective practices, anonymous authors and acknowledging the contingent and dependent nature of all activities, the contributions to this issue complicate and enrich the study of architecture and design.

The contributions respond to the ideas of anonymity and hidden mechanisms from different perspectives, through different forms of research and writing.[[23]](#endnote-23) The articles spread across disciplines and time periods, including reflections on contemporary practice and analysis of historical sources, but they are unified by their focus on the invisible, overlooked or intermediary aspects of architecture and design. Several of the articles engage, to varying degrees, with Actor Network Theory (ANT). Originating in the sociology of science and technology, ANT has been developed by scholars such as Bruno Latour and used in studies of design and architecture to explore the relationships between ‘material artefacts’ or non-humans, and ‘human actors’.[[24]](#endnote-24) ANT in particularly relevant to studies that seek to understand architecture as a ‘process’; it facilitates thinking about the ‘complex interactions between people and things’.[[25]](#endnote-25) In this special issue, ANT is employed in the study of ‘co-production’ and the interaction of the ‘social and the formal, of humans and non-humans, of meaning and matter’.[[26]](#endnote-26) In the spirit of ANT and in opposition to the conventional myths of architectural history, this issue insists that the study of architecture is more than researching ‘the work of architects’.[[27]](#endnote-27)

The issue is divided into three sections, which focus, in turn, on specific networks of people and places involved in producing architecture and design, the anonymous, diverse and sometimes inanimate actors engaged in and impacting on the practices of architecture and design and lastly, the overlooked, neglected or intangible people and processes that constitute architecture and design practice and research. The themes of collaboration and the complexity of authorship thread through the different sections. There is an emphasis throughout the issue on people, place and things whose anonymity, working practices or role as a mediator or facilitator has led to them being overlooked by conventional perspectives on named authors or users.

The first section, ‘Mediations and Mediators’ is testament to this special issue’s origins in the historiographical shifts towards studying architectural media. This section looks at the role of journalism and magazines in architectural and design culture between the 1950s and 1970s. It also explores the friendships and relationships that underpinned New Brutalism, The Independent Group and *Architectural Design* magazine during this period. It contains an article by Stephen Parnell, whose research inspired the idea for this issue. Parnell’s article dissects three years in the life of *Architectural Design* (*AD*) magazine. It reveals the wrangling between editors, owners and publishers that were behind the changes at the magazine in the 1970s. Parnell reflects on how this change in editorial agenda and the style and format of the magazine is linked to architectural history’s preoccupation with individual architects. His article explores how personalities, life experiences and relationships impact on the production of architecture. Similarly, Juliana Kei focusses on the context and significance of a single article in *Architectural Design* magazine in 1955. Kei is reassessing the existing historiography of New Brutalism which focusses on the writing of Reyner Banham. Kei looks instead at Theo Crosby (journalist and editor, later designer) and what his relationship with the Smithson’s can reveal about their work. Anne Massey also critically engages with existing historiographies. Focusing on Richard Hamilton and the Independent Group (IG), Massey demonstrates how the historical perspective that focused on individual male artists, has masked the role of women in the group (particularly Dorothy Morland and Magda Cordell) and the importance of collaboration and interaction in the group’s work and identity. Rather than focusing on images produced by IG members as finished objects, Massey explores the images as constructions; she delves into the details of the people and places that made them, revealing alternative perspectives on authorship within the group.[[28]](#endnote-28) *Architectural Design* magazine and Theo Crosby feature in all three articles as a key site and actor in the reassessment of mediation and mediators in the production of architecture.

In the next section, ‘Hidden Producers, Anonymous Authors’, the articles explore the diversity of authors and actors involved in architecture and design. They open up the concept of authorship and explore the contribution and significance of anonymous workers and objects. This section echoes the question posed in Elizabeth Darling’s keynote in 2015 – who gets to be called an architect or designer and why? Zoe Hendon maps the complexity of authorship and the different types of labour involved in the textile designs of the Silver Studio in the 1920s. Hendon looks specifically at the studio diary, maintained by the office secretary and what it reveals about the complex processes of sociability, interaction and record keeping that were integral to the work of the studio. This discussion of the significance of objects continues in Camilla Hedegaard Möller’s article, which explores the environmental and spatial actors involved in the design of a New Nørrebro Park in Copenhagen, Denmark. Möller’s study of the different iterations of the design for the park and the completed space, highlights the role of ‘actors’ such as soil composition, trees and signage in the production of space. The diversity of actors in architectural production is also the topic of the following three papers. Rebecca Preston and Lesley Hoskins consider the interaction of various agents involved in the design and building of inter-war suburban shopping centres in Britain. They emphasize the contribution of developers, commercial organisations, municipal planners and users in the design of these everyday spaces. Xiang Ren’s photo essay of rural Chinese architectural practice and accompanying text, highlights the complexity and anonymity of architectural production, which contrasts with the model of single named authorship imported from the West as part of the urbanization of China. However, this model is itself a myth, which Naomi Stead explores in her article on the faces of architectural practice in Australia. Based on a project that sought to highlight the diversity of practitioners in Australian architecture, this text and photo essay challenges the gender, racial and professional biases that are reinforced in the pervading representation of an ‘architect’ as a male, dressed in black, often wearing glasses. Stead’s critical engagement with the ‘image’ of the architect, also highlights that architecture is not solely the work of architects.

The final section, ‘Invisible processes and practices’, maintains a focus on complexity and diversity but looks at methods and practices in contemporary and historical practice and research. With an emphasis on inter-disciplinary practice and collaboration, this section returns to the question of ‘what counts as architecture and design’? Robert Mantho’s article is a reflection on his collaborative practice. The essay details the experiences and negotiations of collaboration and the challenges of extending collaboration between two practitioners to a larger group of people. Mantho’s reflection on the methods and priorities of collaboration, highlights the ‘invisible’ factors such as trust, confidence and respect that play such an important part in practice. In a similar vein to Zoe Hendon’s article, Mantho reflects on the diversity of types of work that constitute architecture and design. Ann Pillar interrogates the working principles and practices of Edward Wright, a graphic designer, who worked on architectural projects. Wright was a prolific but anonymous practitioner, meaning that there is little research into his work. Pillar explores the ideas and ideals behind his working practice and what they contribute to the historiography of modern design and architecture. Finally, Huda Tayob looks at the tools and methods of research in architecture. Reflecting on her research into the subaltern architecture of townships in Cape Town, South Africa, Tayob looks at how research constructs meaning and value in architecture. She argues that exploring alternative methods of research can reveal alternative narratives about places and buildings.

Conclusion

The phrase *behind the scenes*, refers to things that are hidden or out of view. Looking *behind the scenes* involves ‘revealing’ that which has hitherto been unseen or unacknowledged. It involves asking why these things have been overlooked or ignored, re-focusing our attention and challenging perspectives that continue to exclude. These actions have the potential to expand existing perspectives and reveal a richer or more authentic picture of architecture, beyond the mythology of the individual ‘great’ architect or ‘great building’. The perspectives offered in this issue are valuable for the challenges they pose to the persistently narrow perspective in many studies of architecture; but they are also subjects in their own right. This is not simply an ‘alternative’ to the existing ‘norms’ of architectural research, but a viable methodology to for the future of research. All of the contributions in this issue explore the relationship between the types of sources used in research and the resulting narratives. Several of the articles are based on the authors creating their own sources through field work (Tayob, Stead, Ren); while others explore new types of sources (Hendon, Parnell, Hoskins and Preston) or rethink existing sources (Massey, Kei, Ren and Pillar). This diversity and experimentation with sources results in narratives that explore the complexity and diversity of the activities, actors and types of labour that ‘count’ as architecture and design. They are all focused studies or micro-histories that do not seek to invent or reproduce grand-narratives but instead, to explore the ‘the blind spots… the spaces in the margins… the chinks and cracks’ and reveal a more nuanced picture of production and practice.[[29]](#endnote-29) As such, they contribute to the ongoing ‘differencing’ of the canon in these fields. They add to the growing body of research which is challenging the myth that architecture consists solely of the work of a “small group” of architects.

1. Nikolaus Pevser, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: from William Morris to Walter Gropius*, (Pelican: London, 1960). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This can be traced back to the origins of art history and Vasari’s *Lives of Artists* in the 1550s. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For instance, at the time of writing this introduction, the number one bestselling book on Amazon.com in the category of architecture is *The Lego Architect* by Tom Alphin. The book is a potted history of architecture (the last 500 years), told through a chronology of iconic styles, architects and buildings– reproduced in Lego. Although the book is predominantly a testament to the popularity and longevity of Lego; it is also evidence of the persistence, in the public imagination and popular discourses, of the canon of ‘great architects’ and ‘great buildings’. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: a critical history*, (Thames and Hudson: London, Third Edition, 1992), p.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Beatriz Colomina, “Collaborations: The Private Life of Modern Architecture,” *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians,* 58, 3 (1999), pp. 462-463, in, Kjetil Fallan, ‘Architecture in Action: traveling with actor-network theory in the land of architectural research’ *Architectural Theory*, 13, 1 (2008), p. 91. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See for example: Elizabeth Darling, *Reforming Britain: Narratives of Modernity Before Reconstruction*, (London: Routledge, 2007); Helene Lipstadt, ‘Polemic and Parody in the Battle for British Modernism’, *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Oxford Journals, (1983), pp. 22-30; Sarah Williams Goldhagen, ‘Something to Talk About: Modernism, Discourse, Style’, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 64, No. 2, University of California Press, (June, 2005), pp. 144-167. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Beatriz Colomina, *Public and Privacy: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, (MIT, Second Edition, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Andrew Higgott, *Mediating Modernisms: Architectural Cultures in Britain*, (London: Routledge, 2007), p.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Kester Rattenbury, ed., *This is Not Architecture: Media Constructions*, (London: Routledge, 2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Rattenbury, *This is Not Architecture*, p. xxi, (2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. In 2007 Beatriz Colomina had organized the exhibition and publication *Clip/Stamp/Fold: the radical architecture of little magazines, 1960-1970* which explored the role of printed media in avant garde architecture. Parnell and Power’s exhibitions focused on the ‘mainstream’ media, such as *Architectural Design* and *The Architectural Review*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Elizabeth Darling, ’Jam and Architecture’, at *Behind the Scenes: the hidden mechanisms of design and architectural culture*, University of the Creative Arts, June, 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: feminist desire and the writing of art’s histories*, (London: Routledge, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, (1999), p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, (1999), p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, (1999), p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, (1999), p. 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Susan Hardy Aiken, ‘Women and the Question of Canonicity’, College English, 48, 3, (1986), pp. 288-299, in Grisellda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, (1999), p. 6 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Teresa de Lauretis, ‘The Technology of Gender’, in *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 25, in Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, (1999), p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Teresa de Lauretis, ‘The Technology of Gender’, in *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 25, in Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, (1999), p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, (1999), p.8. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Richards was an architectural critic, author and editor of *The Architectural Review*. He was preoccupied by anonymous architecture; he wrote about industrial buildings (*The Functional Tradition*, 1958) and the suburb (*Castles on the Ground: the anatomy of suburbia,* 1946). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Inspired by Darling’s keynote paper, after the symposium I rewrote the call for papers for this special issue, with a greater focus on the theme of anonymity. Several of the articles contained in the issue were developed from papers delivered at the symposium (Parnell, Massey, Hendon, Kei, Hoskins and Preston), and the other articles were received in response to the renewed call. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Kjetil Fallan, ‘Architecture in Action: traveling with actor-network theory in the land of architectural research’, *Architectural Theory Review*, 13:1, (2008), pp. 80-96. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Fallan, ‘Architecture in Action’, (2008), p. 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Fallan, ‘Architecture in Action’, (2008), p. 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Fallan, ‘Architecture in Action’, (2008), p. 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. See also Anne Massey, *Out of the Ivory Tower: The Independent Group and Popular Culture*, (Manchester University Press, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Teresa de Lauretis, ‘The Technology of Gender’, in *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*, London: Macmillan, (1987), p. 25, in Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, (1999), p. 8.

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