

# News from Everywhere: Research, Reportage, and Architecture.

Dear Reader,

Welcome to *Faktur: Documents and Architecture*, a journal that celebrates research as the source of architectural imagination. *Faktur* responds to the concerns of an emerging generation of architects, and aims to bridge the distance between practice and academic scholarship. In the last decade, the field of architecture, its agents, and its audiences have evolved significantly. One of the most notable developments in this evolution has been the proliferation of research-based architectural practices, particularly in the wake of the housing crash of 2008. Along with many other professions, architecture underwent something of an existential crisis during these years. In response, schools of design around the world have expanded and diversified their advanced-degree programs, giving rise to a new generation of professionals eager to incorporate newly-minted and multidisciplinary research skills into what has traditionally been understood as a material practice. In an increasingly media-driven landscape, this shift seems expressly aimed at reinforcing an interpretation of architecture as not merely an economic operation, but a form of cultural production with far-reaching implications. Needless to say, this historical situation has affected, and expanded, the way we discuss the built environment, and it necessitates new venues for dialogue. *Faktur* offers just that: a platform for scholars and designers to publish their research, together with the projects, buildings, objects, exhibitions, photographs, etc. associated with or emerging therefrom. *Faktur* refers to the German term for a concept central to the Russian avant-garde of the early twentieth century, whereby the technical, economic, and social processes involved in the production of an object would be made legible in its final, material form.

*Faktur* is interested in new and innovative methods for presenting and discussing architecture that understand academic and non-academic research as a crucial precondition to developing critical, contemporary projects. We seek to present topics, locations, and architectural concerns that function as micro-narratives that illuminate larger issues of global culture. We are interested in the construction of material arguments from local perspectives, linking them to *long-durée* historical threads within architecture on the one hand, and current political, economic, and cultural concerns on the other. Finally, we are interested in how these investigations affect, inform, or influence the design processes of contemporary architectural practices.

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As a reference, let us consider a literary controversy from the mid-1960s: complaining about the journalistic techniques of a rising generation of writers that would later be identified as members of the New Journalism, Dwight MacDonald, the acerbic literary critic and former editor of the leftist *Partisan Review*, denounced this new style as deceptive, a hoax that sacrificed truth for spectacle by intermingling facts and fiction until they became impossible to distinguish. His critique was, initially at least, in response to a series of articles in *Esquire Magazine* in which a young Tom Wolfe described the American culture of car customization using a particular subjective style, exploiting techniques of graphic textual effects, grammatical onomatopoeias, and abrupt syn-copations. MacDonald dismissed this form of writing as parajournalism, a “bastard form” of reportage far removed from the moral obligation of the press towards objectivity. For him, this way of documenting and reporting on matters of public interest was more than just a fraudulent or excessive subordination of facts

to subjective narratives; this new voice, he stated, represented the capitalist form of “exploiting the factual authority of journalism and the atmospheric license of fiction.”

Ironically, only few years earlier, MacDonald had complained about the “fact-fetishism” of modern mass-culture as an ideological construct that diminished political capacity towards action. In “The Triumph of Fact,” he argued that postwar consumer culture had fostered a taste for the pointless production of “pyramids of information,” a vestige of the scientific mode of knowledge that embraced the logic of mass-entertainment. What turned this quantity of data into fetish was the uncritical incorporation into our lives of masses of documents, figures, and digits, overshadowing other forms of knowledge, such as arts and letters. To MacDonald, raw facts appeared as meaningless entertaining bits of unproductive data and arid statistics, which replaced the rhetorical game of cultural argumentation with an abstract positivist legitimacy derived from proofs and algorithms. Positioning the archetype of the “artist” in opposition to that of the “hunter,” MacDonald advocated for imagination and interpretation over modern mechanical recollection. In hindsight, his choice of the hunter as the quintessential data collector seems shortsighted. After all, as Carlo Ginzburg has stated, every hunter is also a storyteller. Indeed, the hunter was perhaps the earliest narrator: an acute and experienced observer, capable of assembling a series of facts into plausible sequences. Driven by necessity, primitive hunters had to operate between pragmatism, imagination, and projection. They were also responsible for the transmission of knowledge over the territory. Facts are culturally, historically, and geographically constructed, and they respond to dominant ideologies. It was the political and cultural use-value in mass-communication that MacDonald

sacrificed in his later critiques of New Journalism, making the synthesis between recollection, memory, and action impossible.

Although the accuracy of the facts upon which the narratives of the New Journalists relied has been questioned (Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* being perhaps the most notorious case), the postmodern tension between fact and truth represents yet another chapter in the transformative value of reportage and its reclamation by cultural practices. Indeed, every narrative relies on its technical capacity to effectively compose an image or illustrate conflict, and thereby to foster social change. Consider Ida B. Wells’s investigations of lynching at the end of nineteenth century or, more recently, Ryszard Kapuściński’s disclosure of the daily governmental activities of the Ethiopian ruler Haile Selassie as an analogue for the mechanisms of the ruling Polish Communist Party. In these instances, the non-fictional content of the reporting, in combination with the literary qualities of the narrative, renders the text both culturally relevant and socially effective. But the intermingling of both aspects also opens up the space for multiple and varied literary perspectives, from David Foster Wallace’s urban anthropology at the US Open tennis tournament, to the praxis of resistance in Latin America developed in the journalistic work of Alma Guillermopietro and Gabriel García Marquez.

The productive juxtaposition of journalism and fiction has rendered new literary styles, as well as permeated the visual arts, particularly cinema. Whether documentaries, fictional films, fake documentaries, or “quasi-documentaries,” the relation between facts and their aesthetic interpretation has allowed us to rethink the political effectiveness of visual narratives. For example, the false dialectic between truth and facts pervades the work of German filmmaker Werner Herzog. In his

*Minnesota Declaration*, Herzog underscored his constant efforts to reveal subcutaneous social truths in his work. His filmic techniques blur the difference between fiction and documentary as a response to the “primitive and fact oriented” *cinéma-vérité*, which relies on the supposed objectivity of the movie camera. For him, facts were at the core of the process of cultural normalization, whereas truth had a revelatory aspect that opened up new perspectives within the same process. Herzog’s technical capacity to review a topic, an object, or an event with critical lenses goes hand in hand with the aesthetic strategies behind the film experience.

Wolfe’s influence in architecture as a pioneering illuminator of Las Vegas is beyond question. How, if not within the genre of visual analysis and conceptual reportage, can we understand Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown’s work in the late 1960s, be it in Las Vegas, the American suburb, or the study of New York train stations? Indeed, there was a trans-geographic preoccupation with the genre in the last quarter of the twentieth century within the field of architecture. Think, for instance, of Martin Pawley and Bernard Tschumi’s recollection of the formation and whereabouts of Unité Pédagogique N°6 in Paris in the aftermath of May 1968, or even of Rem Koolhaas, whose training as a journalist informed his formal, cultural, and political analysis of the Berlin wall, reconstructed years later as a “memoir” that portrayed the wall as a formal membrane of individual stories brimming with critical potential. *Faktur* endeavors to continue and expand upon that tradition of inquiry, to bring new light to understudied territories, geographies, conflicts, and topics that may be understood in a new light when viewed through an architectural or spatial lens. Today, surrounded as we are—perhaps more so than ever before—by those meaningless mountains

of information that MacDonald deplored, we feel that architecture must recuperate an idea of social, cultural, and political context, together with the design tools for action and effectiveness. We believe that a slow and documented form of architectural research will open up new perspectives for meaning and action, providing an operational tool to understand our culture, as well as to present new truths based on documented facts. Research journalism necessitates a will to engage directly with obscure territories and uncomfortable circumstances. It is within this space that architectural insights might crystalize. In publishing a journal that pairs journalism and design as a form of research, we are responding to what we perceive as an urgent need to provide new grounds on which to discuss architecture. To paraphrase MacDonald, it is between the factual authority of research and journalism, and the atmospheric and material licenses of architecture, that this journal will operate. We will respect the facts and celebrate the imagination necessary to materialize the results through design, visualization, fabrication, and stylization. At *Faktur*, we believe it would be a mistake to look for unequivocal formal identifications. Rather, we like to entertain the idea that the different topics and geographies explored will render a myriad of forms and representations, and vice versa. The journal is intended as a counter-model to the utopian genre of William Morris’s *News from Nowhere*. Rather than the ideal, ex-temporal, and ungraspable political space that operates at the intersection between representation and ideology, we offer a materialist critique of contemporary culture. We look forward to reading news from *everywhere*, enjoying the spatial responses that research generates in any media or form.

The Editors