A New Framework for an Architecture of Coexistence

Ivan Illich Re-Read

Ivan Illich’s *Tools for Conviviality* criticizes the negative social consequences of industrialization that were perceived during the 1970s energy crisis, which provoked new understandings of limits to growth. The general gridlock of social institutions such as schools, the medical system, and transportation in this period is a starting point for Illich. He defines conviviality as “the opposite of industrial productivity,” and he develops the notion of conviviality through his critique of modernization theory—characterized as a blend of technocentrism and belief in growth—which he finds in both capitalist and socialist countries in the 1970s. He stresses conviviality, by contrast, “to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment.” Despite being grounded in a critique of the social issues of the 1970s, this polemic pamphlet of the Austrian philosopher, priest and social critic can also offer insights into the present. Illich proceeds analytically, formulating a positive, prospective position on the basis of his diagnosis of contemporary life. He is concerned with the dimensions of both the individual and the community. Conviviality is aimed towards “individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value.” Central to his argument is a call for the creation of new tools that do not enslave people, but serve them, helping them to communicate, develop and live together. The concept of tools is interpreted in the broadest possible sense, encompassing devices and services, instruments and means. He differentiates between convivial and restricted tools, exposing the exploitative nature of the latter: Re-reading *Tools for Conviviality* today as a potential framework for a critical architectural practice suggests that architecture can not only represent a consumable product for differentiation, self-presentation, profit maximization or exploitation, but that it can become a tool that supports a sustainable way of life.

In light of increasing resource depletion and new government austerity programs, *Tools for Conviviality*, with its understanding of development in social terms, can offer guidance to architects and designers. While the effects of technology on life have changed fundamentally in the digital age, Illich’s language and rhetoric, as well as the emphases of the pamphlet, may therefore appear outdated, the basic requirements of global society remain unchanged. Twenty-five years after the end of the bipolar Cold War world order, the politics and economics of growth-oriented societies remain based on the exploitation of resources and labor, as well as environmental degradation. Illich repeatedly challenges the notions of the good life that emerge from this model. In his view, the good life can neither be measured collectively in terms such as gross national product nor individually as satisfaction through the maximum consumption of goods and services. Freedom and justice arise only on the basis of autonomy from, rather than control by, institutions and tools. *Tools for Conviviality* is a convincing precursor of a contemporary social critique, conceived both economically and ecologically. Illich manages with foresight to address the control of the individual by dominant social institutions, while also anticipating the digitization of society.

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The Swiss sociologist, planning theorist, and social critic, Ivan Illich, in *Tools for Conviviality* published in 1973. What follows is a reflection on common room’s diverse interests and activities against the backdrop of Illich and a critical reading of those themes and threads which are central to Illich’s argument and relevant to architectural practice today.

**Practices of common room**

Founded in New York in 2006, and since 2010 also based in Brussels, common room is a socially engaged architectural and cultural practice concerned with the built environment, art and politics. As practicing architects we seek to provide the potential for communication and interaction by challenging and shifting given institutional and cultural boundaries. We understand our work in architecture, publications and exhibitions as a dialogue that always explores and expands the contingent relationship of place to community. Conceiving architecture as an effective tool of conviviality, we apply architecture as an aesthetic, social and political tool to engage in a spatial practice.

Spaces that we occupy emerge from our living in them together. As a practice we take this as a starting point to reconsider how architecture is defined. Architecture provides not only the means to occupy space, but also offers the tools to understand and engage with space productively in order to begin forming it collectively. This occurs though both the design of physical structures and the production of knowledge and relationships of exchange such as education programs, publications and exhibitions. common room 2, an occasional gallery located in the rear elevator lobby of our office building in New York since 2006, displays works and projects that engage the local community in a dialogue about the infrastructures of the built environment. Through the various designs and representation systems of the exhibitions, the use and reading of...
space beyond the limits of current architectural practices. As an educational model, it does not apply a traditional set of values related to success and failure. The event is fundamental and results are secondary. Meaning is then acquired through the varied forms of engagement of the participants: means become ends.

common room’s projects are never finished. We see architecture not as the end product of a design process but a midpoint. At Yale Union (2012), an art space in Portland, Oregon, our design of a set of frames and platforms allows a large open space to be differently configured for a range of varying and still-to-be-defined uses. In order to make the project financially feasible the design was to be constructed by the client, had to accommodate outside uses and was intended for rental. As the architecture developed, it helped to define the needs of the art space by facilitating different appropriations of the space according to its different users.

In our proposal for the Natural History Museum (2009) in Copenhagen we proposed a similar strategy at an urban scale. A monumental framework extends over the botanical garden into the new Natural History Museum creating a single continuous structure. This structure was intended to open the institution up to the public, to an undetermined and unbiased notion of history, to the outside and thus to a new understanding of the museum. For common room, architecture becomes a tool for the users to define their own dimensions for living together within a specific context.