

INTRODUCTION |  
ETHICS AND PUBLICS  
BY  
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## OPENING THOUGHTS

The key ethical responsibility of the architect lies not in the refinement of the object as static visual product, but as contributor to the creation of empowering spatial, and hence social, relationships in the name of others.

— Jeremy Till

LIKE EVERY spoken word, every line drawn is a social act: a division, a wall, a river, a connection, a window, a bridge, perhaps all at the same time like Michel De Certeau’s spatial narrative ambiguity. Every such act is social because it constitutes a proposal to redistribute social relations in space. Doubly so because it takes place within particular sets of social circumstances, modes of communication and production: a line drawn as threshold in a design studio, another drawn as a strategic security fence between geopolitical regions. As Francis Alÿs’ *The Green Line* (opposite) poignantly shows, the simple act of drawing a line can be deeply political indeed. The idea is excruciating, inescapable, but in the best possible way. It forces us to take position, to take responsibility and to answer. The single most important question you can ask a design student, Kathryn Moore once told me, is ‘why?’ and then ask it again, and again.

It is with this in mind that the double topic for this issue of *On Site review* was developed. Ethics and publics not as separate issues, but as inseparable aspects of any intervention, proposed intervention or interpretation of the built environment.

Transformation and interpretation, from any disciplinary position, inevitably involves these two things. First, a deep sense of deliberation fundamental to any design act (either thinking before, or thinking through, action) whether a line, a room, a conversation, a critique or a text. Every design act, in this sense, constitutes the turning of values into form. Second, an inescapable relation to other people. No act can exist outside the relations it has with others (a fictional user, a real client, a new public, an audience, an already existing dialogue); no project is without its publics. Within the many disciplines that deal with the built environment there is indeed neither individual alibi nor social isolation.

As I write these notes from Québec City, new allegations are emerging from the Charbonneau Commission on corruption in the construction industry. With moral failure and criminal behaviour in both the public and the private sectors intricately tied to the transformation of our built environment, it becomes increasingly urgent to take position and assert everyone’s right to the city, however difficult. It is both urgent and important to never stop questioning what we are producing, how we are producing it, why and for whom. Two seemingly unrelated issues appear highly relevant in this morning’s paper. The provincial government just published its controversial lists of values, re-opening

the debate on the public display of religious symbols and raising valid questions on those spaces we qualify as public. Simultaneously, Québec City’s mayor, who we thought had supported the dialectic between good urban design and civic identity over the last six years, is backtracking on the city’s Sustainable Mobility Plan with Rob Ford-like plans for increased car-oriented development (elections are looming). The point is that like the Charbonneau Commission, these two developing issues have potentially significant social, and thus spatial, consequences. The polyphonic landscape of spatial production, as Mireya Folch-Serra reveals, is ‘a dialogue whose outcome is never a neutral exchange’.

The call for articles on ethics and publics opened with Giancarlo de Carlo’s 1969 rhetorical question, ‘who is architecture’s public?’ which he answered himself saying that the public of architecture is anybody who uses it. The quote can be understood in its historical context as a humanist counter to the abstraction of Modernism’s Universal Man or what Adrian Forty identified as the ‘subject of the welfare state’. Aside from the construction industry’s relationship with state-supported housing programmes, ‘who is architecture’s public?’ is still relevant for any project of transformation or interpretation of our current built environment. It forces our reflection toward those affected by our actions, their right to the city, and our modes of practice. As Jeremy Till suggests, responsibility runs deep within design. If we accept that the built environment has any effect on social behaviour (and vice-versa) then treating design other than a social act might amount to what Jean-Paul Sartre disparagingly called bad faith.

What *On Site review*’s open call sought to capture was what might be called an ‘ethical turn’ that has developed over the last twenty or so years. Quite positively, reflections on practice, responsibility, agency and representation are now common and fundamental. There is a rising interest in modes of practice that integrate critical participation, and in interdisciplinary methods that open up possibilities for collaboration. Design acts, rather than being seen as end products, are now seen as actors in larger networks. The reflection is both timely and vitally needed.

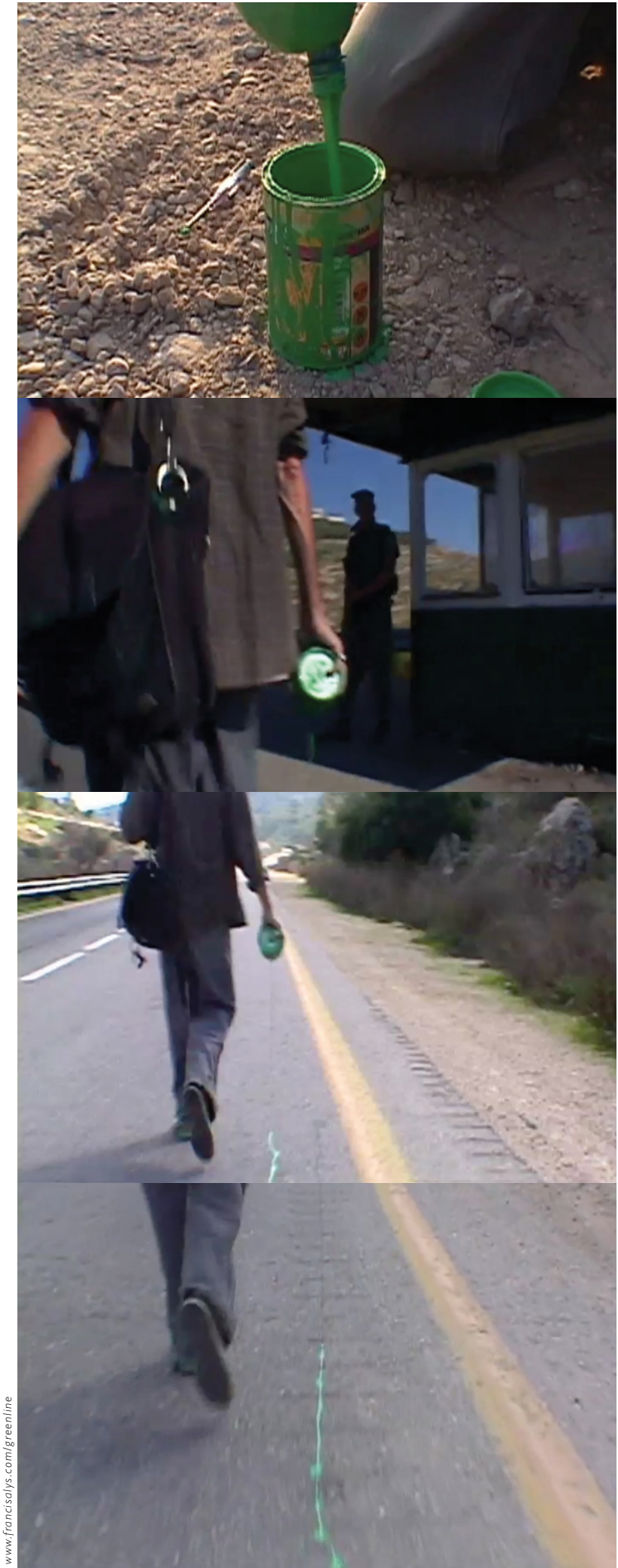
The range of subjects that are addressed in this issue of *On Site review* indicates the importance of such reflection, whether it is at the scale of one’s own window or the scale of war crimes. We have evidence of the current significance of what Jane Rendell calls critical spatial practices in the assembly of unheard voices

Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic.  
— Francis Alÿs

*The Green Line, Jerusalem 2004*  
In collaboration with Philippe Bellaïche, Rachel Leah Jones and Julien Devaux  
17:34 min

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Francis Alÿs traced, with a dripping can of green paint, 24km of the Green Line that in 1948 had been drawn on a 1:20,000 map of the Jerusalem area. It signified the position of the Israeli front line after the agreed cease-fire.



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in the midst of urban development and in the theatre of development dynamics. Relational art practices, the concept of the Commons, infrastructure in informal settlements – all are reminders that indeterminate territory and basic needs and services can be common ground.

On the other hand, the failure of representation of both the city and its multiple publics – the paradoxes of public space and the relationship between architecture and dialogue, point out the difficult task of transposing particular collective connections, institutions and traumatic experiences into architecture. Ultimately, this issue is about the assemblage of public space and the agency of its publics.

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Tim Beasley-Murray writes that ‘dialogue bears the imprint of its own failure’, meaning that, quite positively, dialogue fails to signify completely because it leaves room for response. The call for articles that went out was more the messy text of a conversation between Stephanie White and myself than a cleanly wrapped call, and one that indeed generated some reflection and exchanges on the ethics and publics of *On Site review* itself.

The proposals that came in covered a wide range of subjects in the best possible messy way. Some had direct relations to ethical dilemmas and aspects of public representation, others teased out the latent ethical and representational issues within projects and processes. What stands out is the degree to which each contributor deals with critical self-reflection and sets up their own particular capacity for response. Each raises specific questions about assumptions, methods and hypotheses, courageously failing to signify completely.

Whether it is in inviting critical reflection on ethical dilemmas at varying scales, or inviting a performative yawn/bark in the best dialogical way, the words and lines assembled here are opening thoughts, begging for response. □

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Forty, Adrian. *Words and Buildings*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2000

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