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Practiceopolis: Journeys through the contemporary architectural profession

The status quo of the contemporary architectural profession displays an ongoing struggle for economic and cultural capital between heterogeneous cultures of practice, which nevertheless together comprise what can be described as a state of dynamic equilibrium.[1] The term describes a system where different parts of a composition can change freely within a fixed and steady whole. This state of dynamic equilibrium, it can be argued, is what allows the architectural profession to change internally while maintaining its coherence as a field. The various cultures comprising architecture's dynamic equilibrium were each originally associated with particular understandings of the role of the architect and frames of reference where this knowledge is drawn.

Currently, the profession is dominated by what might be called technical-rational practice. The term refers to commercially-driven practices that are often associated with the production of buildings by, or for, multinational corporations, and which tend to echo their values. Technical-rational practice shares an ideological platform with systems thinking and management theory, and with other actors in the building industry, all of whom are invested in discourses of efficiency, coordination and quality control, alongside timely and profitable delivery. This research project seeks to interrogate the values and origins of technical-rational practice with the aim of rethinking the future trajectory of the architectural profession.

The research builds upon two strategies: firstly, mapping the alternative cultures of the present architectural profession, and secondly, identifying the dangers of the increasing closeness in values between the profession and other actors in the building industry. The research argues that these increasingly shared values threaten the unique worth of the architectural profession and the dynamic equilibrium which characterises it. By inventing *Practiceopolis,* an imaginary city of architectural practice, the research aims to investigate the nature of the profession and the particular values it contributes to the built environment. Practiceopolis is a city built on diagrammatic relations between different cultures of practice covering a wide spectrum of the contemporary profession. The city became envisaged through a sequence of five iterative narratives whose specific narrations set the foundation for the next. An initial diagram becomes a map, which subsequently becomes the plan for a speculative city. The narrations

are: the map of practice; the city of practice, Practiceopolis; the Map Library; Practiceopolis as a City-state; and stories from Practiceopolis. They emerged from the iterative process of research-by-design, and speculate on the possibilities for design research as a means for articulating the values of the architectural profession. These narratives comprise two parts: part one is accountable for mapping the contemporary profession by building the complex metaphor of Practiceopolis; while part two explores the inhabitation of Practiceopolis by narrating stories about the competition between prominent cultures of practice in the city's imaginary political scene. The two parts of the research draw on Donald Schön's notions of "reflection-in/on-action" (Schön, 1991).

Part one: Mapping the Architectural Profession

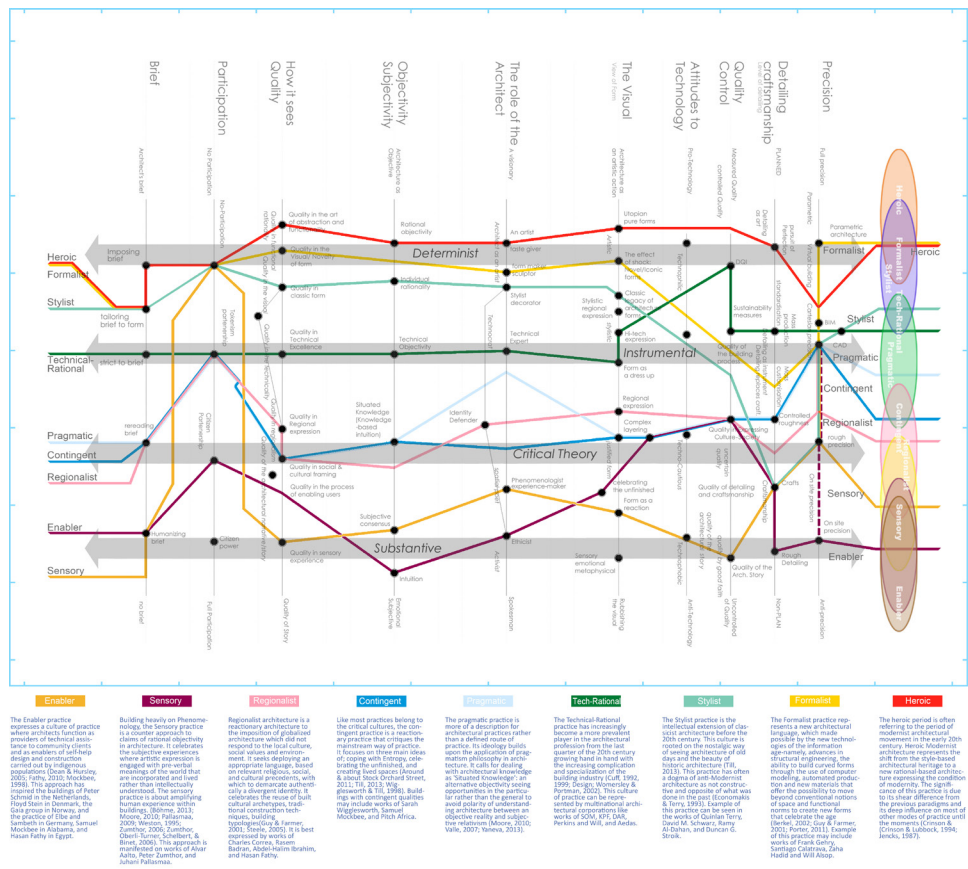Narrative 1
The diagram: A map of practice

Fig. 1 Author (2012). The map of practice.

In this diagram, the horizontal lines stand for alternative stances towards architectural technology and technical knowledge, and the vertical lines stand for architectural typologies. The paths of the theoretical routes of practice record the set of values shaping their cultures of practice. Each path connects different stops on the vertical grid of the architectural typology. These stops stand for the position of each route of practice, relative to aspects of the architectural typologies.

The map of practice was an analytical exercise which produced the first iteration of Practiceopolis. The map is a diagram that analyses and outlines prominent modes of contemporary architectural practice. Its morphology derives from correlations between three layers: firstly, a set of typologies covering key aspects of the architectural field; secondly, a classification of architectural stances towards technology and technical knowledge based on an interpretation of Andrew Feenberg's (1999) philosophy of technology; and thirdly, an identification of a series of theoretical considerations of architectural practice. Various intersections

found between these layers helped establish the values defining the main cultures of practice in architecture. Narrative 1 concludes by acknowledging the co-existence of these cultures as a dynamic equilibrium, and identifies the two prominent cultures: the technical-rational and the critical.

Narrative 2:
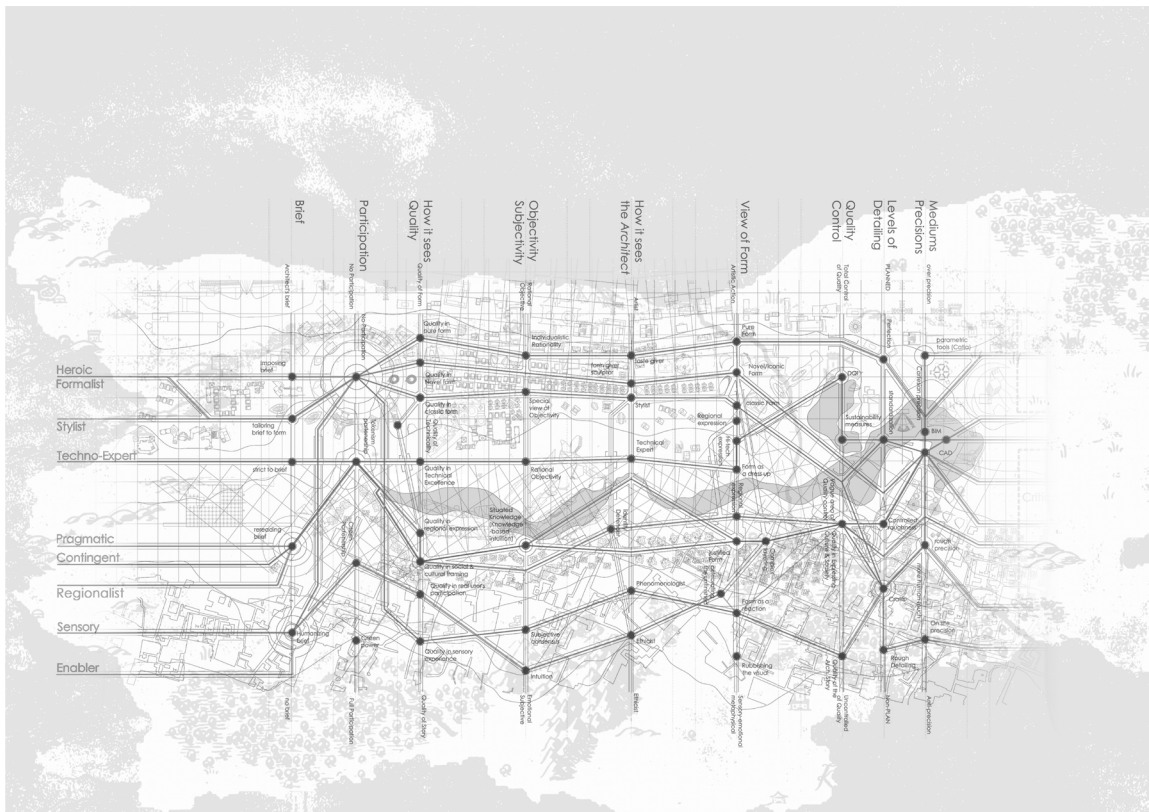**Creating Practiceopolis: the methodological device**

Fig. 2 Author (2013). The map of Practiceopolis.

Each stance towards technology is translated into topography, into a contour line. These become the boulevards of the theoretical routes of practice, the roads of architectural typologies, and the squares or key stops in these typologies. Bridges and tunnels make direct and indirect juxtapositions between routes of practice at different levels. Practiceopolis is populated with buildings from the architectural canon, set out afresh in an alternative, speculative urban context."]

In the short story, "On Exactitude in Science" (1975), Jorge Luis Borges imagined an empire where the cartographers struck a map of the empire whose size was equal to that of the empire. Inspired by this story, narrative 2 sets out a spatialised metaphor for Practiceopolis—a tangible world re-articulating the profession. It translates the diagrammatic relations forming the map of practice into a 1:1 scaled map. Accordingly, Practiceopolis acts as a medium, allowing these relations to be architecturalised in order to explore further the dialogues between varied architectural ideologies. Practiceopolis concentrates these dialogues and expresses them by contrasting tectonic and urban idioms given built form. Narrative 2 concludes by acknowledging the domination of the technical-rational culture of practice.

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Narrative 3:
The Map Library building

Fig. 3 Author (2012). A sectional and aerial view of Practiceopolis showing the concentration of buildings from the architectural canon. The city has a distinctive capacity to illustrate the dialogue between cultures of practice in high concentration. It shows the coexistence of competing cultures of practice manifested in the shape of buildings.

The Map Library building is situated at Practiceopolis, in the district between the instrumental and critical-theory zones, and is centred by the Situated-Knowledge Square. The design of the building traces the four stances towards architecture and technology as the main generator of the form in a shape of four unequal masses expressing these stances. The building is designed around a journey between exhibitions of the theoretical routes of practice which end with the hall exhibiting the original Map of Practiceopolis, whose location in the building is an actualization of the idea of the "Map within the Map"."]

The "Map Library" building registers the ideological positioning of the map of practice itself by giving it a specific location within the analytical frame of Practiceopolis. This exercise explores how Practiceopolis is not a neutral tool but is determined by the researcher's position as an architect who brings his own insights, values, and personal baggage to his/her study of the profession. This is expressed through the allocation of a building that houses the imaginary original map of Practiceopolis: the Map Library Building. The building design expresses in microcosm the values underpinning Practiceopolis. In the narrative of Practiceopolis, the relations between cultures of practice are neatly ordered. However, in the Map Library these cultures become inseparable and interwoven, enabling a critical exploration of the intersection of their values. Narrative 3 concludes by acknowledging the significance of critical culture's discourse within the contemporary profession. The narrative reveals that this culture—though slippery to define and to describe tectonically—is a prominent and influential agent in maintaining the balance of the dynamic equilibrium of the profession.

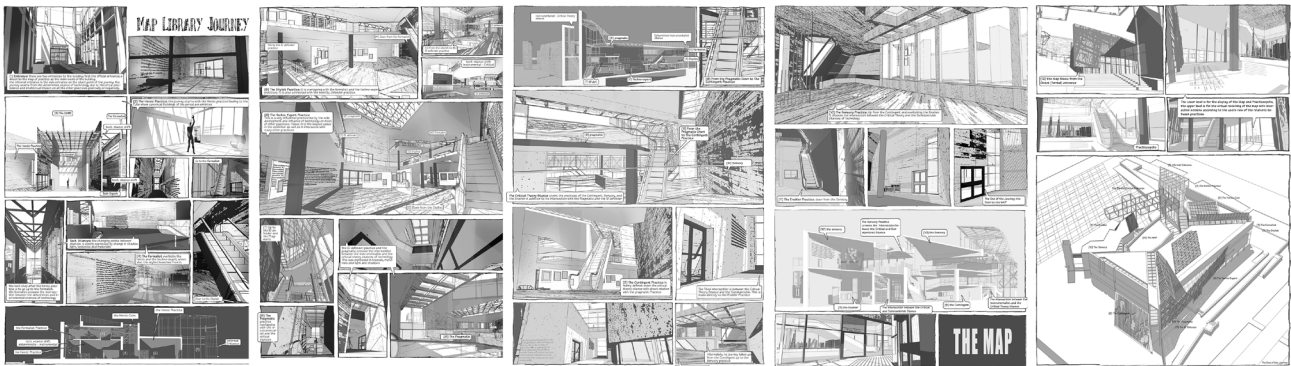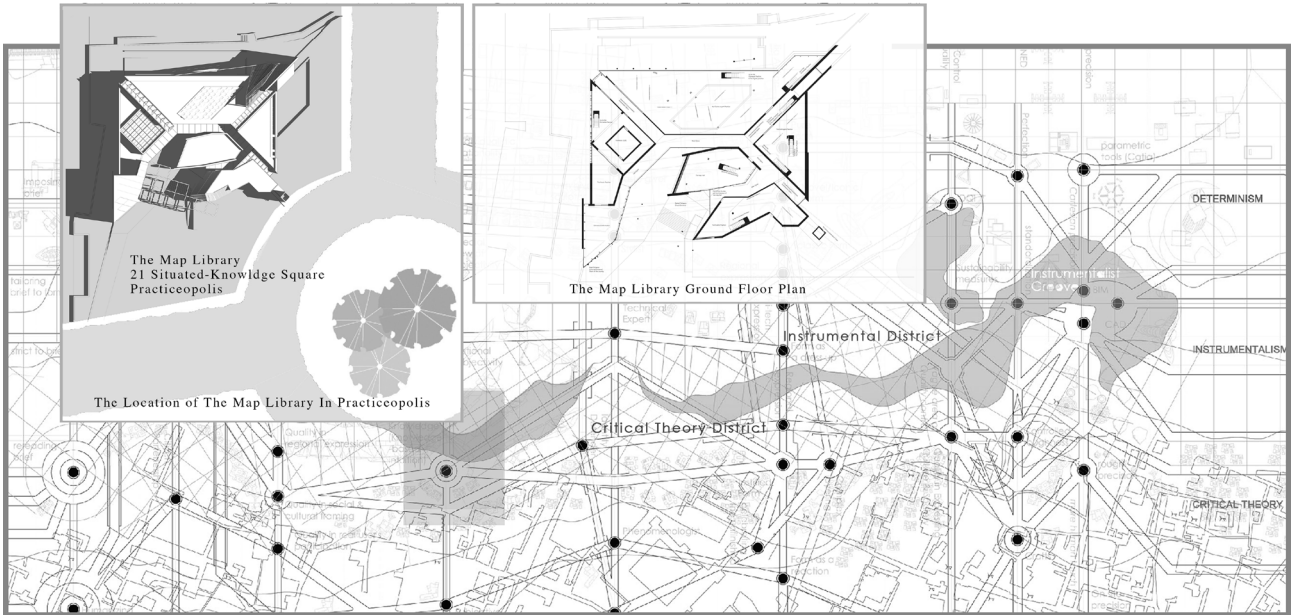Narrative 4:
Practiceopolis the city-state

Fig. 4 Author (2013). The Map Library location and design.

Narrative 4 depicts Practiceopolis as a city-state within a union of states representing different actors in the construction domain that together form "*Constructopolis*"—the confederation of the building industry. This narrative adds missing dimensions of history, social connections, and political competition to Practiceopolis. It portrays how the architectural profession is not autonomous but implicated in the values and agendas of other actors in the industry with whom it cooperates. Narrative 4 concludes by acknowledging the conflicting values between the prominent cultures of practice, i.e. between the technical-rational and the critical. In addition, this narrative introduces the possible inhabitation of Practiceopolis by preparing it as a backdrop for stories that will further investigate these value conflicts in the second part of the research.

Part Two: The Inhabitation of Practiceopolis

Narrative 5:
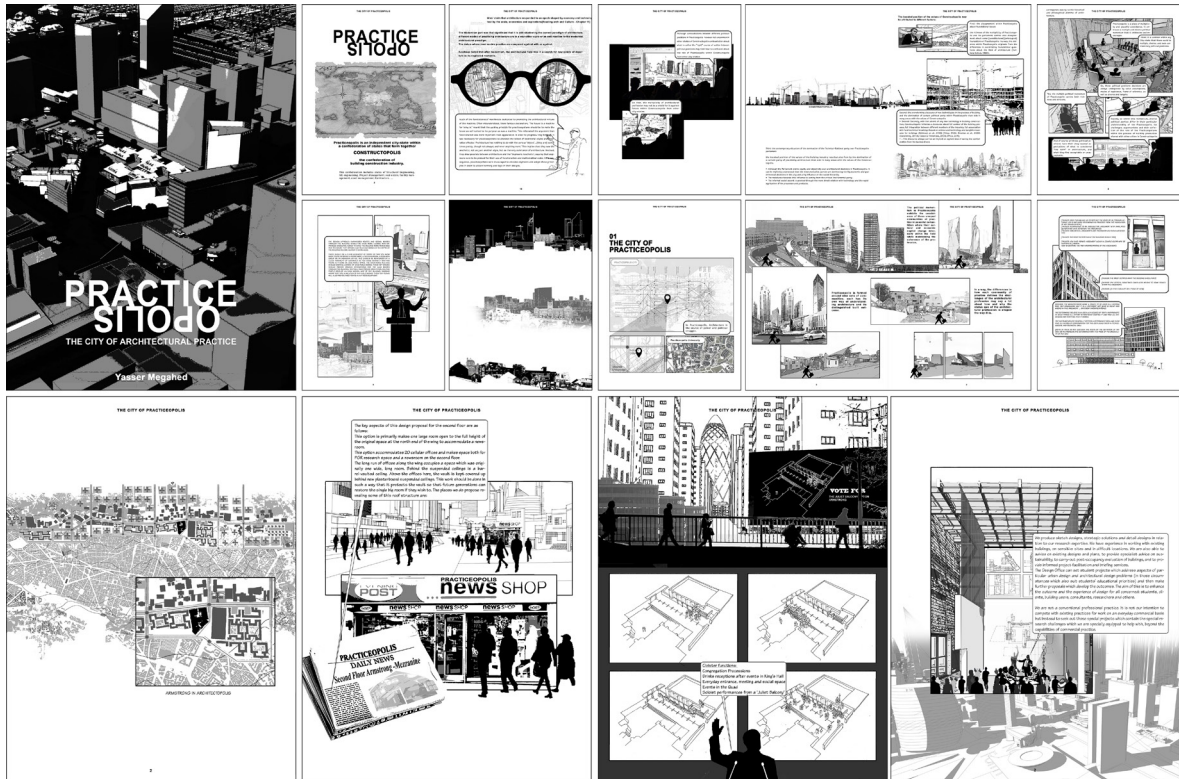**Stories from Practiceopolis & exploring the conflict**

Fig. 6 Author (2015). Excerpts from the graphic novel "Stories from Practiceopolis".

Since Practiceopolis occupies a middle ground between fantasy and actuality, cartoon techniques are deployed as a way to narrate stories about the inhabitation of Practiceopolis. Inspired by Jimenez Lai's "Citizen of No Place" (2012), these stories narrate the architectural everyday. This tactic makes readable the value conflicts between different cultures of practice."]

Part two of the research situates a set of quasi-realistic stories within Practiceopolis via the conventions of the graphic novel. These stories narrate situations experienced by the researcher: a self-confessed technical-rational practitioner as experienced through his work with Design Office, a research-led practice which seeks to pursue a critical approach. The stories revolve around the researcher's role in the renovation of a Grade II listed building in the UK. The stories reflect upon the value conflicts that occurred during the project's Progress Meetings and Value Engineering meetings. These meetings highlight the two cultures converging around the practices of the Design Office—one culture represented by a critically-oriented concept designer; the other by the estate managers, a rational/technically-orientated client liaison.[2] In these meetings, different values played-out around attitudes to efficient, profitable and timely delivery, themselves composing a technical-rational template shaping the performance of participants. The discussions made the researcher a kind of participant-observer, acutely conscious not just of the values of Design Office but of certain priorities in architectural discourse, and the legacies of architectural

training. The stories relocate these meetings within the city of Practiceopolis and dramatise them as conflicts between the two cultures, both of whom articulate competing visions for the future of Practiceopolis.

The research ends with speculations about the role of the architect, and the values of the architectural profession. The research calls for celebrating the richness of its multiple cultures and refutes the claims to dominance of a single culture as a totalising mode of practice. It shows that multiplicity and diversity in the contemporary profession provide one of the particular values that protect its dynamic equilibrium. Subsequently, the research points out that an increasing proximity of the values of a techno-rational approach to those held by other actors in the building industry threatens to unbalance this equilibrium.

The research highlights the necessity of defining, communicating, and marketing the values that architects add to the process of building production. To do so, it introduces an idea of the *critical instrumental approach* as an intellectual framework to deploy specific architectural knowledge in an actively critical way. It calls for foregrounding the incompatibilities and collisions between technical-rational culture and critical culture to produce new accounts of the particular values of the profession. Critical-instrumental understanding could potentially replace the search for a single technological epistemology in architecture with the pursuit of architecture 'in good faith'—a quest for the best result possible outcome rather than a standardised perfection as default. It encourages architects to guard against claims of truth by recognising divisive political values and practices, resisting the potential reduction of practice toward a singular approach, however complex or comprehensive.

Fig. 5 Author (2014). The Map of Practiceopolis—the City-state.

Practiceopolis reflects an embodiment of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital in the architectural field (Stevens, 2002). Extending the concept beyond Bourdieu's use of the term, Practiceopolis becomes a city-state in which architectural practices are in ongoing political competition. The nine theoretical routes of practice are represented by nine political parties competing for power and influence in the Practiceopolis parliament, whose chambers are imagined to be housed in the Map Library building.
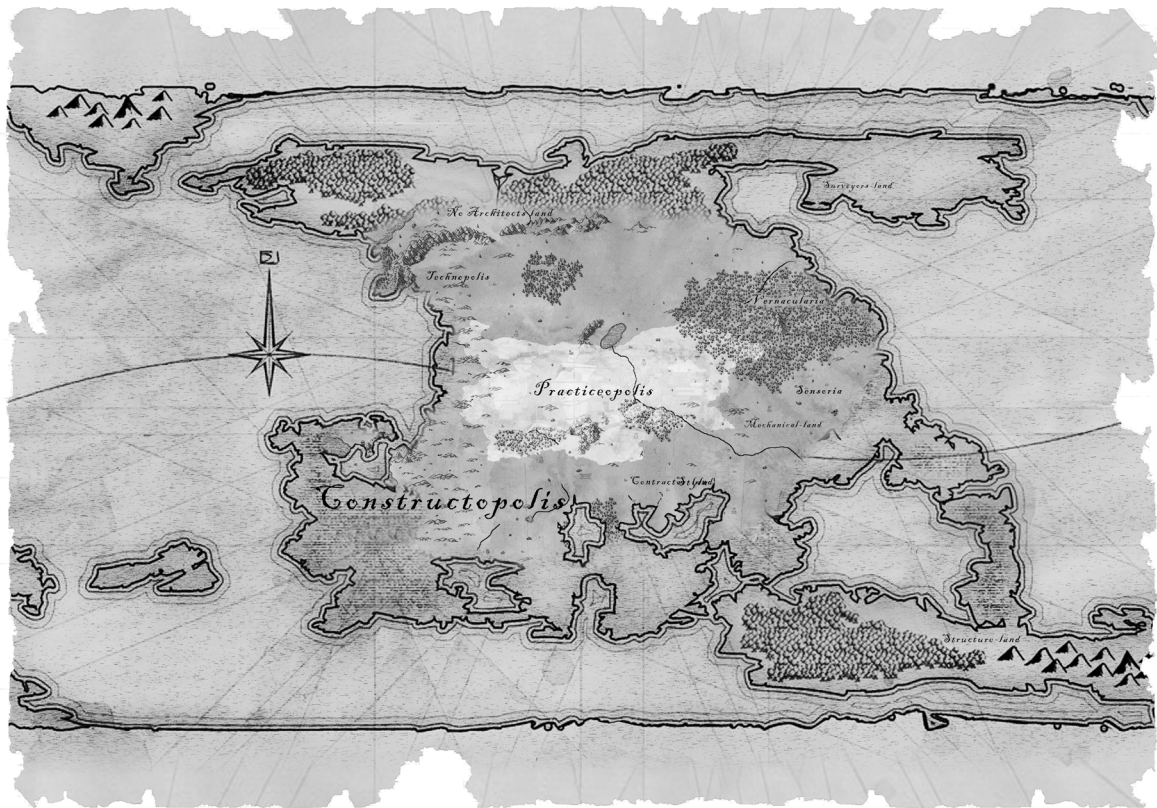
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INTERSTICES **17**

Endnotes

[1] A dynamic equilibrium is a term used in physics, chemistry and biology to describe a state of balance between continuing processes. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Sports Science & Medicine (2006), dynamic equilibrium is a form of equilibrium in which short-term changes are superimposed on a background state which is itself changing. This allows open systems to remain stable over long periods of time. As such, it describes that a composition or mixture does not change with time (Cartwright, 1983). In this research, the term not only describes an architectural field where different practices coexist in peaceful competition, but one where change does not compromise the coherence of the field.

[2] Commonly in the UK context, university institutions are run by a facility management entity called Estate Support Services responsible for the acquisition, development and maintenance of the land and buildings of particular universities.