

APPROACHING VALUE*

*BY JONO COLES

I'd like to address a fundamental fracture in need of repair. Architectural practice is valued *in theory* as a fine art while operating *in practice* as a bureaucratic, managerial service profession. Many frustrations about practice can be attributed to this discrepancy in how the discipline approaches value. So, today I'd like to discuss some alternative approaches to value. Welcome to our office.

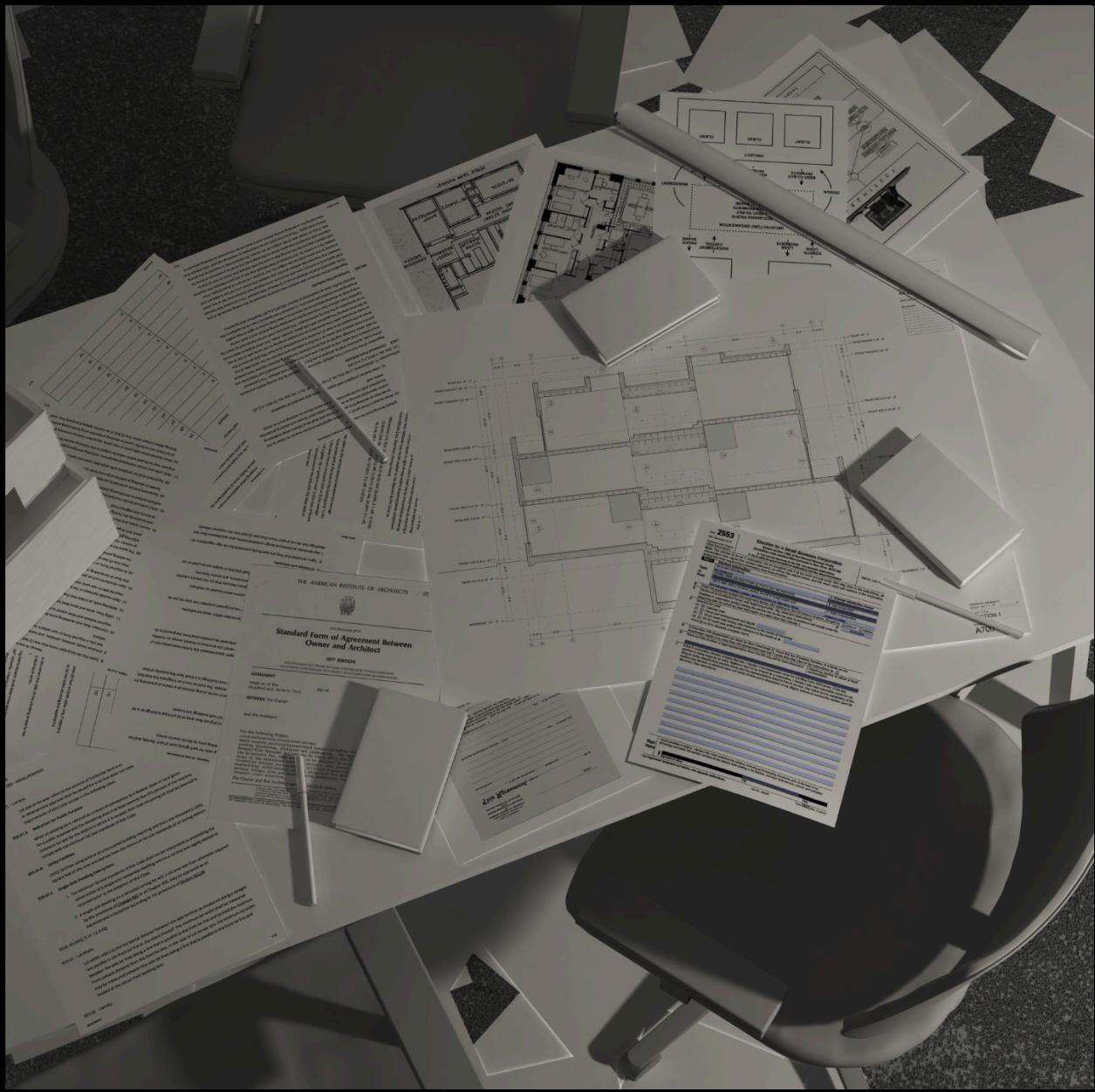


Fig. 1: Rendering of the Office's Shared Desk

We are a cooperative of young architects, we develop and manage our own projects. Just like any office, we deal with a lot of paperwork. However, upon closer inspection, each of our documents reveal an unconventional approach to value.

For example, on our desk is a tax form registering us as an S-Corporation. This class of corporation has a loophole that allows for cooperative ownership between licensed and non-licensed professionals. It also means we don't need a tax guy. We love loopholes, in fact this skirting of the rules is central to our practice. We approach regulatory obstacles with sincere deception.

I'm not really sure how to classify the project I'm presenting to you today, but what it was intended to be was some form of flexible co-housing in Pittsburgh, PA. As a practice, we have a variety of sensibilities, both aesthetic and political. However, our motivation for this project was to put forth a nonconforming, fluid, inclusive model of living. The project considers how buildings change over time, how they are maintained, and who maintains them. These values could be considered *unconventional*.

However, contemporary value systems forcibly smooth out all nonconformities. Zoning, debt regimes, and archaic codes mean that almost all new construction is split between antiquated housing models like spec homes and 5-over-1s.



This is precisely why this project is difficult to classify; to dance around these systems of value, and sneak in some non-conformity, the project exists differently to each of its regulators. It is:

- 1) financed and permitted as two single-family homes,
- 2) legalized and sold as six condominiums,
- 3) and can be occupied as up to twelve studio apartments.

This ability to transition between forms constitutes the social mission of the project, and its novelty as a model of living.

So now I will detail the nitty-gritty that makes this multiplicity possible, starting with the project's subversion of zoning: at the city auction, we purchased two adjacent sites on the hillside overlooking the busway. Despite their great views, their informal use as a parking lot had deemed them to be leftovers, or remnants. Looking for two adjacent sites in a single-family attached zone was intentional; for some reason, Pittsburgh zoning requires on-site parking for detached single family homes but not for duplexes. Additionally, because the adjacent lots are empty, contextual height and setbacks are taken from the multifamily building across the street.

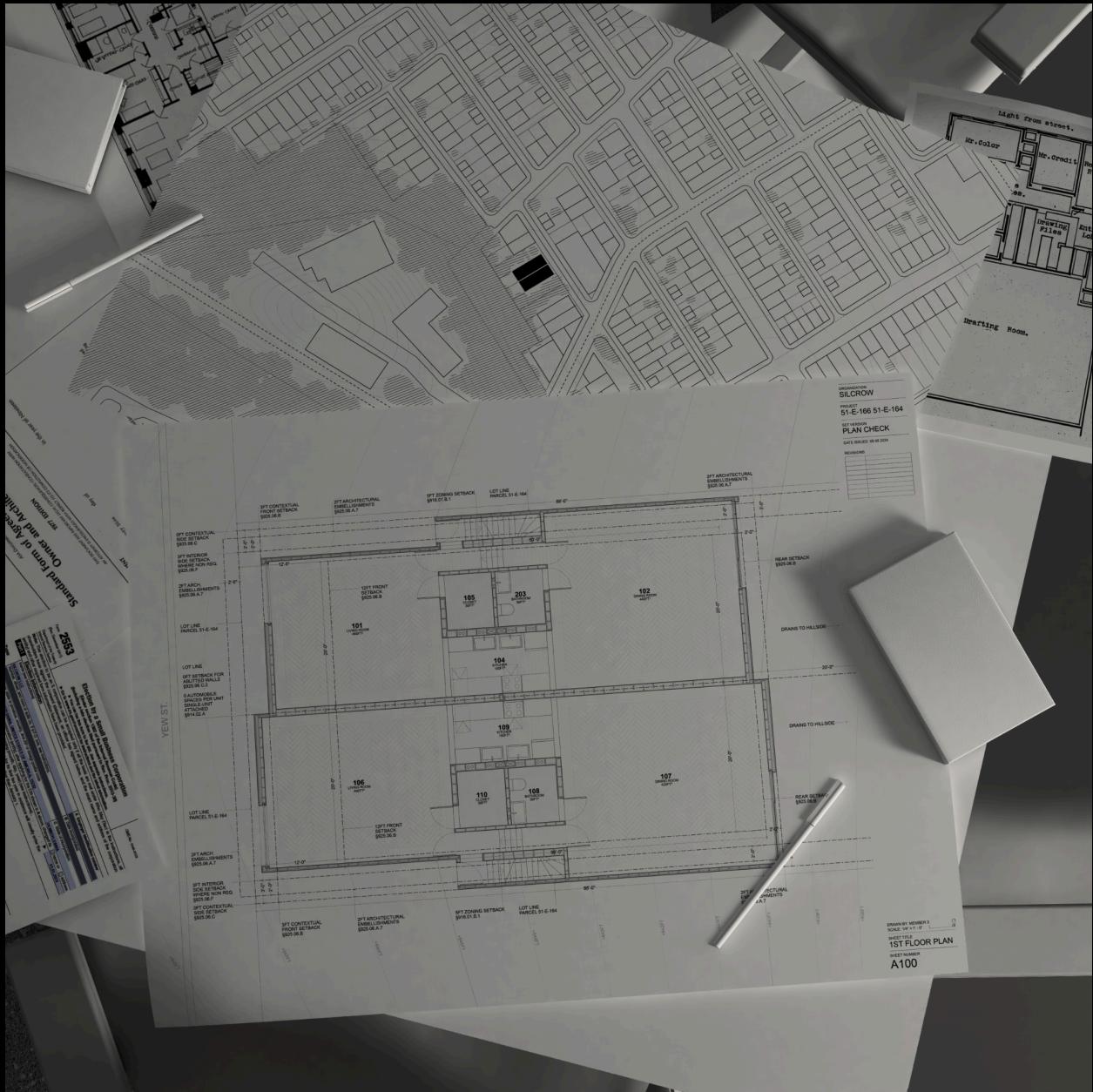


Fig. 3: Site Plan and Ground Floor Plan as Shown in the Permit Set

If you look close enough, the zoning code is full of loopholes like these. For example in Pittsburgh, there are a range of incongruent entitlements from overlay districts, and layers of hazy exceptions caused by ordinances dating back to the 50s. It's as if the code itself could be viewed as a historical construct, the strata of which reveal different regimes of control.

Anyway, we adhered to the setback that was intended for porches without creating a porch; instead, residents enter through the side front setback, giving a stoic, non-confrontational character to the building. Otherwise, the floor area is maxed out, resembling an inflated bootleg of a standard barbell plan. The living spaces themselves are vast, undetermined, and unconventional; functioning as blank voids, and varying only subtly in proportion and fenestration. The approach to space is abstract and elemental; only light and air dictate its conditions, a particular way of living is barely prescribed.



Fig. 4: Sectional Model Photograph

The building's relationship to building codes is equally as hazy as its relationships to zoning. The standard international building code is not required for single-family permits. Instead, the project can select statutes from local and state residential codes. This is precisely what allows the 9" tread depth, or the quadruple winder, efficiencies that are typically illegal in multifamily projects. In the case of its use as several studios, the stair narrowly ducks the requirement for two means of egress.



Fig. 5: Utility Core as Shown in the Build Set (Top Left) and Permit Set (Bottom Right)

The building's hazy classification also influences the drawing sets. The permit set includes slightly scaled-up entourage staging the house as a single family home, whereas the construction set excludes any cabinetry and finishes on the central plumbing wall, only demarcating conspicuously placed drains and plumbing outlets.



Fig. 6: Photograph of Weeping Joint and Parquet Floor Material Mockups

Because we finance and operate our own projects, I'd like to explain our approach to value engineering. Historic zoning mandates a brick facade, however real brick hasn't been affordable for decades. And now, even its faux replacement, brick veneer, is considered a luxury finish. Before brick was economized as veneer, weeping joints arose in industrial masonry where the labor of tooling the joint was deemed excessive. Now that brick veneer acts as a rain screen, and is pointed with a mortar tube after being hung, as opposed to before being laid, this weeping joint can be exaggerated, becoming a fuzzy, part-brick part-goop, result of economization and fake semiotics.

We took a similar approach with some reclaimed tile, and also with some parquet floor, which is a classic in old Pittsburgh homes but is now also considered a luxury. In fact most contractors don't even know how it's done now. We created a mockup of top-nailed plywood to get the effect cheaply and demonstrate its installation. Its exaggerated size also miscommunicates the scale of each room on the permit sets.

These material studies communicate high-value when in spreadsheet-form, but achieve an architectural sensibility of betweenness; it's both rough and fuzzy, sloppy and refined, cute and ugly, forthright and stoic. In other words, it's just how we like it, toeing the line of definition. Sagging brick, exaggerated parquet floor, and fractured tile appear conventional *on paper*, while resolving *in practice* as slightly unfamiliar and sincerely deceptive, teetering between standardness and nonconformity, and supporting a model of living that does the same.

This evaluatory haziness really shows its influence in the documents we gave to the bank; each configuration of the building – duplex, condos, and studios – were appraised using different approaches to value. They vary in subjectivity from an average of comparable sales, yielding an appraisal of \$1.5M, to a simple multiplication of some arbitrary averages collected from Zillow.

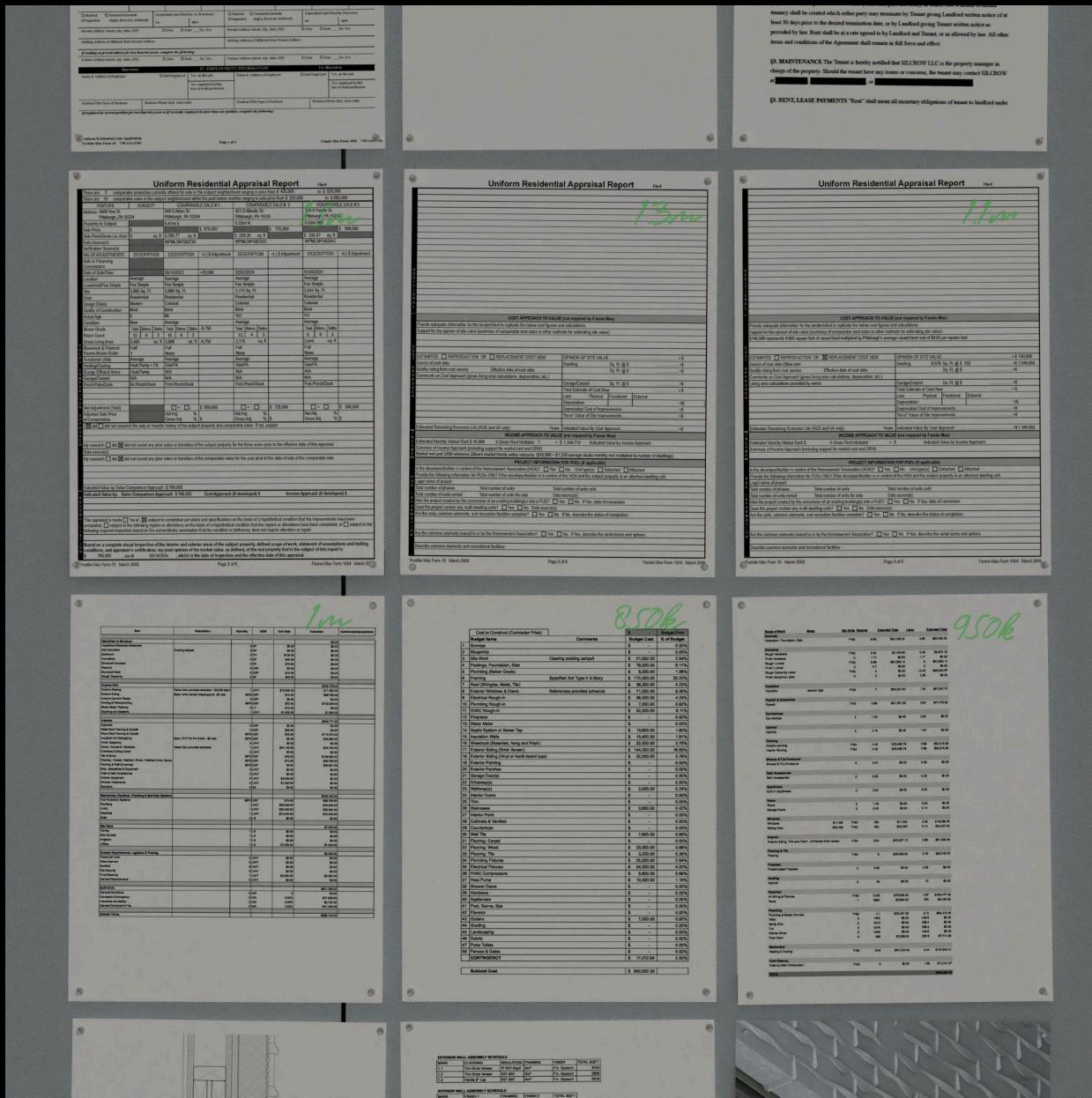


Fig. 7: Appraisals and Cost Estimates

Their corresponding cost estimates provide similar subjectivities: the weeping joint lowers the cost from anywhere to \$15k in the most arbitrary estimate, to \$40k in the estimate that includes a unit price for labor. Additionally, each contractor was not sent the same documents; those who were sent details of the abstract window treatment added a premium to window installation, whereas the one that was sent just a render of the window meeting the facade was left to speculate the price of their own method for creating that effect. Through these cases, architectural representations are staged as the communication of different values to different constituencies.



Fig. 8: Installation Photograph

To conclude, I'd like to make it clear that the real project here is not just this building. It's about staging practice within its latent domain, the value systems that circumscribe design. Zoning, building codes, proformas, loan applications, cost estimates, appraisals, and our corresponding contracts, and drawing sets, define our discipline's structure and position by regulating value. Through a practice of bootlegs, hacks and loopholes, this project puts forth a subversive relationship to these regulatory systems, but also a subversion of the structures of authorship and hierarchy within our own discipline. We can choose how we interact with value, and in doing so, we can begin to dictate the conditions of our own value production, or what we could call our *labor*. In order to develop unconventional models of practice, models centered around autonomy and non-conformity, we must approach value.

This text was presented as an M.Arch Thesis at UC Berkeley in May of 2024, conducted under the instruction of Dr. Neyran Turan and Andrew Atwood. The images were taken from its installation, exhibited in Bauer Wurster Hall, and are supplemented by renderings of a parallel digital model of the installation.