

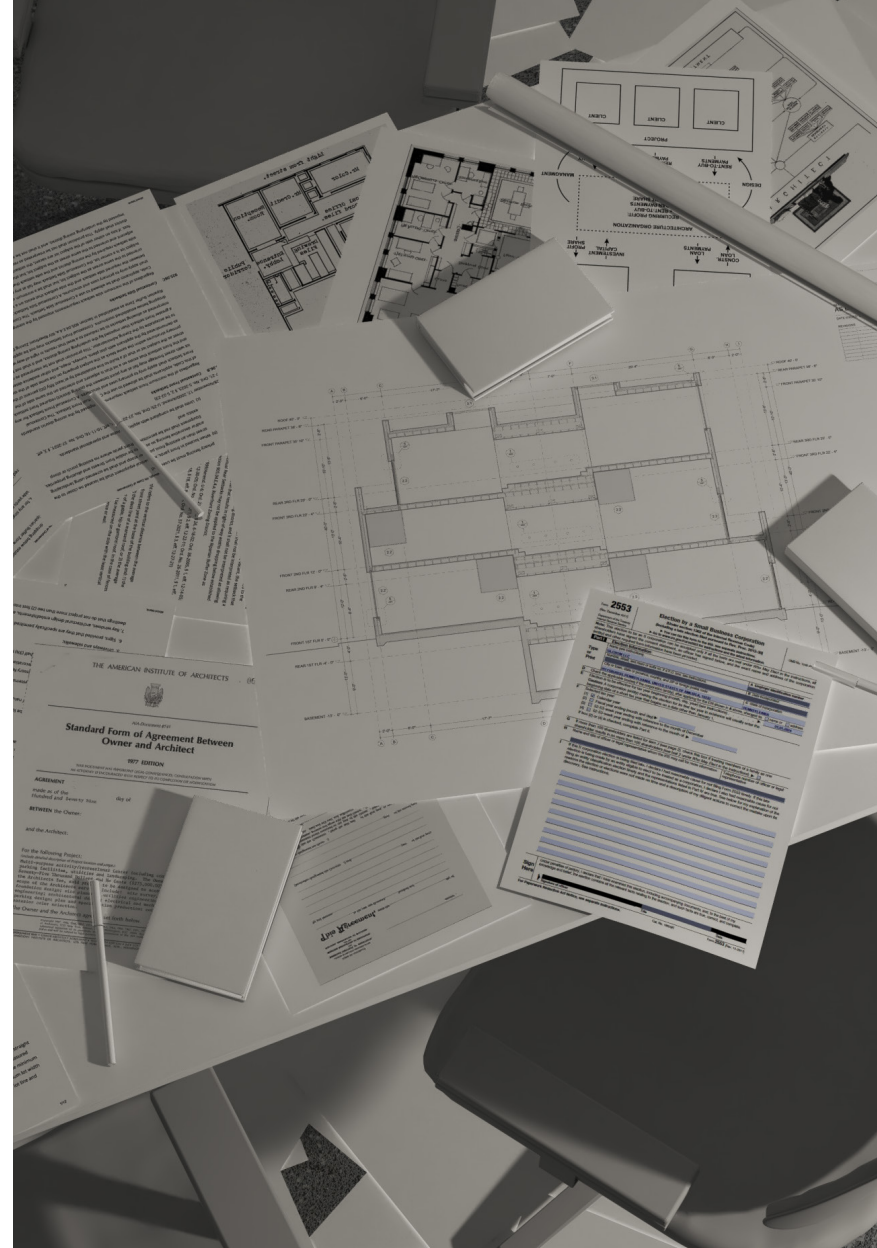
## Approaching Value

Jono Coles

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

We are a cooperative of young architects that 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.

Figure 1.  
The Office's Shared  
Desk. / Rendering  
by author.





Technical drawings and documents pinned to the wall.

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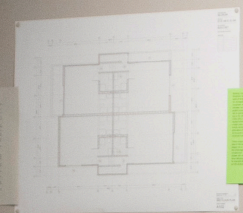
Technical drawings and documents pinned to the wall.

Technical drawings and documents pinned to the wall.

Green sticky note.

Technical drawing.

Technical drawing.



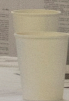
Green sticky note.



Green sticky note.



Green sticky note.



Technical drawing.



Technical drawing.

Papers and documents on the desk.



Figure 2 (previous).  
Office Installation.  
/ Photograph by  
author.

On our desk, we have a tax form that registers 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, skirting the rules is central to our practice. We approach regulatory obstacles with sincere deception.

I'm not sure how to classify the project I'm presenting to you today. It was intended to be some form of flexible co-housing in Pittsburgh, P.A. Our motivation for this project was to put forth a nonconforming, fluid, and inclusive model of living.

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 why the project is difficult to classify by contemporary standards. In order 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.

Figure 3.  
Office Installation.  
/ Photograph by  
author.

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

I will proceed to 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. We were intentionally looking for two adjacent sites in a single-family attached zone. 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.

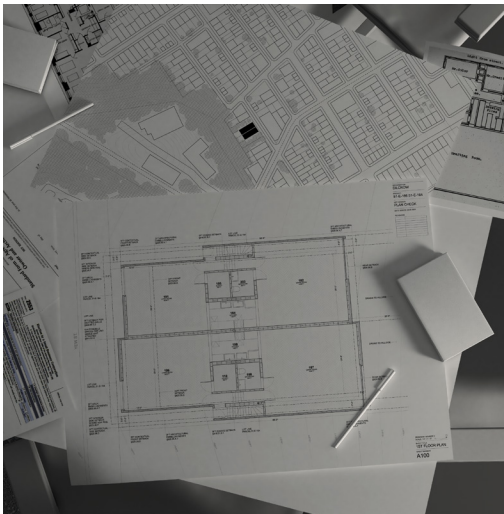


Figure 4.  
Site Plan and  
Ground Floor Plan  
as Shown in the Per-  
mit Set. / Rendering  
by author.

Loopholes like these can be found in many codes if you look hard enough. The code itself can be viewed as a historical construct, whose strata reveal different regimes of control. In Pittsburgh, for example, ordinances dating back to the 1950s caused a range of incongruent entitlements from overlay districts and layers of hazy exceptions, making a manipulation of setbacks possible.

We adhered to the setback that was intended for porches without creating a porch. Instead, residents enter through the side setback, giving a stoic, non-confrontational character to the building. The floor area is maxed out, resembling an inflated bootleg of a standard barbell plan. The living spaces



Figure 5.  
Section Model. /  
Photograph by au-  
thor.

themselves are vast, undetermined, and unconventional. They function as blank voids with subtle variations in proportion and fenestration. The approach to space is abstract and elemental; only light and air dictate interior conditions, barely prescribing a particular way of living. These non-descriptive spatial conditions are both a requirement for social fluidity, and a product of regulatory reinterpretation.

The building's relationship to its building code is as hazy as its relationship 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 allows the 9" tread depth, or the quadruple winder stair,



Figure 6.  
The Utility Core as  
Shown in the Build  
Set (Top Left) and  
Permit Set (Bottom  
Right). / Rendering  
by author.

an efficiency that is typically illegal in multifamily projects. The stair narrowly ducks the requirement for two means of egress when the building is used as several studios.

The building's undetermined classification also influences the drawing sets. The permit set includes slightly scaled-up entourage, communicating the building as a single family home smaller than its actual size. On the other hand, the construction set excludes any cabinetry and finishes on the central plumbing wall, only demarcating conspicuously placed drains and plumbing outlets, which will not be visible during inspection.

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. Even its faux replacement, brick veneer, is considered a luxury finish. Before brick was economized as veneer, weeping joints were used when the labor of tooling the joint was deemed excessive. Now acting as a rain screen, brick veneer is pointed with a mortar tube after being hung. Translating the weeping joint to this contemporary faux-assembly deliberately produces an informal, fuzzy condition, appearing as both brick and goop.

We took a similar approach with reclaimed tile and parquet floor. Once a classic in old Pittsburgh homes, the parquet floor is now considered a premium. In fact, many contractors cannot do it nowadays. We

created a mockup of top-nailed plywood to demonstrate its installation and get the effect affordably. Its exaggerated size also miscommunicates the scale of each room on the single-family permit sets.

These material studies convey high-value in spread-sheet-form, but achieve an architectural sensibility of betweenness. It's 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



Figure 7.  
Weeping Joint and  
Parquet Floor Material  
Mockups. / Photo-  
graph by author.

fractured tile appear conventional *on paper*, while *in practice*, they materialize 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*. These appraisals vary in subjectivity from an average of comparable sales, yielding an appraisal of \$1.5 million, to a simple multiplication of some random averages collected from Zillow.

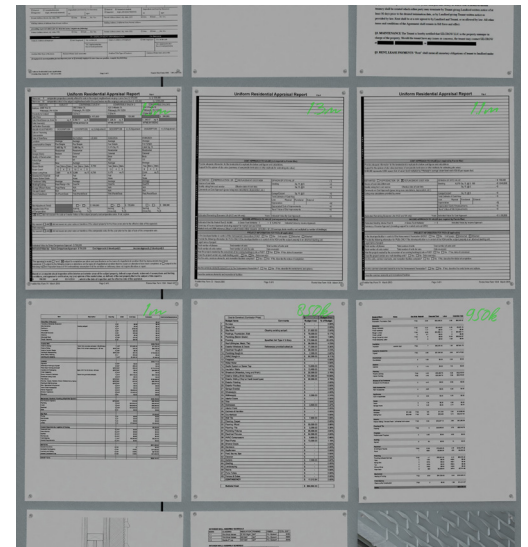
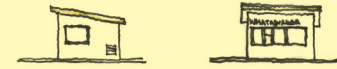


Figure 8.  
Appraisals and Cost  
Estimates. / Render-  
ing by author.

Their corresponding cost estimates provide similar subjectivities: the weeping joint lowers the cost from \$15,000 in the most arbitrary estimate, to \$40,000 in the one 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 were left to derive their own assembly and corresponding price tag. In the case of these estimates, a connection is drawn between architectural representation and economic value. While subverting codes or misusing materials can generate alternative spatial relationships and aesthetics, this connection reveals intrinsic subjectivities in the exchange value of architectural labor.

To be clear, the real project is not just this building. It's about staging practice within the latent domain of the value systems that circumscribe design. Zoning, building codes, proformas, loan applications, cost estimates, appraisals, corresponding contracts, and drawing sets define our discipline's structure and position by regulating economic value. Through a practice of bootlegs, hacks, and loopholes, this project puts forth a subversive relationship to these regulatory systems, proposing a methodology to adopt other value systems within our own discipline. By choosing how we interact with value, we can dictate the conditions of our own value production, or our *labor*. In order to develop unconventional models of practice centered around autonomy and non-conformity, we must approach value.

The text is adapted from a verbal presentation of 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.



## 1950

Figure W2.  
Whataburger No. 1 /  
Sketch by author.

A small, neon-wrapped, white burger stand opens in Corpus Christi, Texas. Inside two people dream of making hungry customers exclaim, "What a burger!" Harmon Dobson and Paul Burton have just cooked up the Lone Star State staple: Whataburger.

Founding their business on the idea of a bigger better burger, Harmon and Paul introduce the original twenty-five cent Whataburger as a quarter-pound beef patty on a five-inch bun—a 200% increase from the industry standard two-ounce patty on a two-and-a-half-inch bun. The business is an instant success. The partnership between the two founders, however, only lasts one year. Even with Harmon assuming full ownership and increasing prices to thirty and then thirty-five cents, the burgers keep selling.\* Where will Whataburger go next? Only time, and a few pages, will tell.

\* Jones, "Whataburger," *Handbook of Texas Online*.