# ParlourInstaGuest: A Space to Speak?

Alysia Bennett  
Monash University

Tania Davidge  
University of Melbourne

Charity Edwards  
Monash University

Abstract

How are new(er) media technologies shaping the discourse of architecture?

This paper discusses the use of the image sharing social media platform, Instagram, by Parlour, an advocacy group focused on women, equity and architecture. It explores how social media – a digital communication technology that enables the formation of online communities through platforms that encourage exchange, participation and knowledge sharing – is changing the way women participate in architectural discourse and architecture culture.

Architectural discourse is defined by the content and form of the media that disseminates it. Its role in society is established in relation to mass media (periodicals, newspapers, television, exhibitions and the like) through which architecture is produced, distributed and consumed. These traditional forms of mass communication structure the perception and reception of architecture and determine the content we see and those who produce it. Within this space certain narratives of architecture are privileged and made visible while others are ignored, rendered invisible or denied time to develop through engagement with an active audience. Historically, the profiles and practices of women architects have been overlooked in architectural discourse. Although women have moved towards parity in architectural education the literature dedicated to recording and discussing the work of women architects remains elusive. With the rise of digital media platforms, the avenues for architectural communication have multiplied. Although the content published through these mediums is heavily influenced by the structures of established traditional media the way we
interact with and produce content is changing significantly, opening up spaces of visibility for alternative and activist voices.

In light of this shift in the media landscape, this paper explores the question: “If traditional, established forms of media are keeping women out of the conversation, are digital social media platforms, enabled by the increasing prevalence of digital communication technology, a place where women in architecture might finally find a place to speak?”.


The rise of digital media technology has multiplied the platforms for architectural communication. Although the content published through these mediums is heavily influenced by the structures of established print and television media, the way we interact with and produce content is changing. This paper explores how the social media platform, Instagram, is shifting architectural discourse and making visible architectural narratives that run counter to dominant modes of production and professionalism.

To further understand the potential of social media platform Instagram to act as a critical medium, this paper studies the Parlour Instagram hashtag #ParlourInstaGuest, an advocacy group focused on women, equity and architecture. The omission of profiles and practices of women architects from the public record, both historically and contemporaneously, continues to trouble architectural discourse. Traditionally, the preponderance of male architects was partially explained by the low numbers of women studying and practising architecture. Despite the advances made by women over the last half-century in achieving parity in architectural education systems, the literature dedicated to recording and discussing the work of women architects remains limited.↑ If traditional, established forms of media are keeping women out of the conversation, are newer, digital social media platforms giving women in architecture a place to speak?

Parlour is both spatial, referencing a gathering space typically constructed as feminine, and active, drawing on the French parler meaning ‘to speak’. Parlour was established as a strategy to publicly disseminate the findings of the Australian Research Council-funded
The research has led to the development of new workplace and professional policies for the Australian Institute of Architects, mentoring programs and a voice for contemporary women architects with its mission to "expand the spaces and opportunities available to women while also revealing the many women who already contribute in diverse ways".  

Parlour aims to provide a space where women can speak through its website, www.archiparlour.org/, social media accounts, and networking and advocacy events, edited by Justine Clark. One of the critical social media platforms used by Parlour to progress its agenda is Instagram; a social media platform focused on the uploading and commenting on photographs and videos. Launched in October 2010, Instagram has become popular with creative professionals, such as architects and designers, due to the visual nature of its content. Unlike blogging or writing in professional publications, maintaining an Instagram account has proven to be an enjoyable and time effective mode of engaging with colleagues, accessing and reposting architectural ideas and precedents, and sharing insights into practice outputs and office culture.

Parlour uses Instagram, under the handle @_Parlour, to announce events, initiatives and new articles on the website and the ongoing ‘guest hosting’ initiative, #ParlourInstaGuest. ‘Guest hosting’ is the invited takeover of the postings of an Instagram account by persons other than the account owner or manager. Parlour uses these to curate broader narratives than those propagated by mainstream architectural media. Each week, since November 2015, a different individual or practice posts using the #ParlourInstaGuest hashtag. Hashtags, which are terms listed in content captions that include the hash symbol ‘#’, are a grouping and filing system that allows multiple user accounts to curate a collaborative thread of content. #ParlourInstaGuests have included architectural practitioners, academics, students, and even those typically considered ‘outside’ the profession such as builders, artists, and emerging entrepreneurs. #ParlourInstaGuest hosts are given some basic instructions on how to reach out to the Parlour audience. By examining the content posted by #ParlourInstaGuests between November 2015 and April 2016, this paper explores how Instagram is changing the ways architectural culture is communicated and assesses the potential of social media to establish and give voice to alternative or marginalised architectural publics.
How are new discursive technologies changing the architectural message?

The theorist and historian Beatriz Colomina has argued architecture’s cultural role is primarily defined relative to mass (re)production and the mass media - such as periodicals, newspapers, television, radio and the exhibitions - through which architecture is produced, marketed, distributed and consumed. These established forms of mass circulation structure our perception and reception of architecture. They control the content which we see and authorise the producers of the material. Within the content, specific narratives within the profession are privileged and made visible while others are ignored, rendered invisible or denied.

Media influence is two-fold; it shapes what we see (the content) and how we see it (the medium through which we access that content). The media theorist Nick Couldry, drawing on the philosopher John Dewey, argues that to contest media power “ultimately means developing new forms of communication – that is, new ways ‘in which people come to possess things in common’”. Social media platforms have expanded the range of media through which we communicate culture and are therefore allowing architectural publics to redefine the way we imagine and interact with architectural content in a mediated world. Further, social media platforms afford criticality. Tania Davidge, in the forthcoming “Insta-critique: Critical Practices in the Moment of Social Media”, argues that the Parlour Instagram feed is an example of emergent criticality. It is not a form of intentional architectural criticism such as that presented by a critic or even a citizen critic, rather its criticality lies in opening up narratives beyond those structured by traditional media. Distinctly, it’s where the private life of architecture - “the backstage processes which involve many different kinds of people working in many ways on many different types of projects” - converges with the public life of architecture destabilising existing structural norms, reframing practice and opening up new publics for architecture culture.

Shift in discourse from outputs to processes, top down to bottom up

As danah boyd argues, online communities are ‘networked publics’ which are “simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice”. Networked publics are shaped by the structures of the medium they use - social media - which afford specific forms of sociability. Unlike print media the medium of Instagram is immediate and temporal: posted photographs are not the perfect professional images typically printed in magazines, and their content is more akin to thought than an
essay. In this way posts and views unfold over time and have the potential to document the processes of architecture rather than capturing architecture as a snapshot frozen in time at the moment of completion.

Instagram posts carry comment and sometimes (although not as often as we might like) conversational form in the spaces below the images which, combined with posted images, collectively forms content. While often considered simply as providing individuals with the ability to upload a stream of thoughts and images instantly to their feeds and by extension into the entire world, social media users are typically selective about where, why, by which digital platform, and with whom they communicate.¹⁰

Unlike more traditional mediums, content on social media is not typically controlled by a ‘gatekeeper’ or editor, which allows contributions from people whose voices are excluded from mainstream media. Offensive comments and ‘trolling’ are particularly aimed at closing down the increased visibility and opinions afforded to women, POC, LGBTQIA+ communities, and disability advocates amongst others by the ‘openness’ of social media platforms.¹¹ In response, Instagram has more recently provided filter tools by which these ‘contributions’ can be more discretely ‘managed’.¹² What cannot be dismissed, however, is that while much content on digital media reinforces traditional narratives, other conversations about and around architecture are developing in more interactive domains. It is in this context that @_Parlour guest hosts are developing critical voices and counter-narratives to those that structure more traditional architectural media.

**Interrogating narratives**

This paper focuses on media targeted at architectural audiences. One of the key media that constructs architectural discourse are ‘journals of record’ which are delivered to members of professional bodies as part of their membership package and have a broad reach. As such, they play a significant role in structuring and defining architectural discourse, culture, and practice in their respective countries.

To understand the divergence in content between Instagram and traditional media, we analysed six months of material, from August 2016 to January 2017, contained within journals of record. Three journals were selected: the American Institute of Architects’ *Architect* magazine, the Royal Institute of British Architects’ *RIBA Journal (RIBA J)* and the Australian Institute of Architects’ *Architecture Australia (AA)*. The analysis, which excluded awards issues as their focus on buildings skewed the overall results, indicated that the journals contain repetitively structured and narrowly focused content. Building
reviews comprised 43% of the content in *RIBA J*, 45% in *Architect* and 56% in *AA*. The building review, illustrated with beautifully constructed professional images of architectural form, privileges the form of architecture over its processes, practices and people. Tom Wilkinson argues that much online architecture media “regurgitates glamour shots from the architectural PR machine”.¹³ He argues for the polemical snapshot – in this case the image that shows architecture warts and all presenting shoddy construction, awkward detailing and unexpected viewpoints. We argue, aligned with Wilkinson, that the #ParlourInstaguest posts are a form of polemical snapshot although not one that shows an alternative view of the building, but one that opens up alternative narratives of the profession. In this context, it is worth interrogating which narratives are missing in traditional mainstream architectural media and how they are made visible through digital social media platforms. Also, we note that while the Parlour website expands the range of topics addressed beyond building reviews, practice profiles, and the like, its content is typically still in essay form and suitably geared towards (re)publication via more traditional print platforms. Users of #ParlourInstaGuest social media tag, however, represent a radically different mode of information dissemination. They do not just receive discourse from ‘authoritative’ providers. Instead, they are actively involved in the ongoing production and curation of representations on any given topic in amongst networks of others across the planet.¹⁴

**The missing narratives in the message**

Unlike the highly-controlled journals of record, social media exists as a generator of *exchange*; a (relatively) free and open mode by which we can receive feedback and create further discussions - the “new infrastructures of production” as Couldry terms them - rather than merely a loudspeaker of an often exclusive or privileged group.¹⁵ To understand these new infrastructures, we analysed shared imagery and textual responses drawn from #ParlourInstaGuest posts. The guest host posts were examined, noting gender, geographical location, and relationship to ‘diversity’ (where identified). From this, we compiled a series of themes that captured the prevalent messaging across each week and identified keywords that provided more nuanced detail to those themes. Amongst this data, we found a high frequency of discussion corresponding to ‘family’, ‘life/work balance’, ‘historical reconsiderations of the architect’, ‘events’, and glimpses of everyday content showcasing ‘a day in the life of’. It is striking that many of these themes, which we discuss below, were absent from the journals of record and related to the private life of architecture bringing them to public light. This type of practice can be linked to the history of critical activist, feminist positions which use the public sphere to expose private practices, thus highlighting their marginalisation.¹⁶
‘Life/work balance’ and ‘a day in the life of’

The concerns of a ‘life/work balance’ is already the topic of many contemporary practice discussions and think pieces within traditional architectural media formats, and figure prominently in #ParlourInstaGuest posts.

Maintaining life/work balance in architecture is a difficult task, and many women (and men) choose to move out of the profession to rebalance their lives. Representing the experience of many of those who operate beyond the traditional norms of architectural practice in Parlour, is an engaging young professional Phuong Le. She is currently working as a design manager and describes herself as an architect, event organiser, photographer, and nominated leader of an emerging architects network. Her contribution as a #ParlourInstaGuest (as shown in Figure 1) was to ask ‘where do all the women go?’, itself a cry drawn from Despina Stratigakos’ book on gender inequity in architectural practice. Further, she profiled women who have shifted into allied fields following their dissatisfaction with working life in architecture. In her posts there is no admonishment of their choice to leave architectural practice; instead, she reflects on their decisions with admiration, with insights from her role in the construction industry and questions why women would stay with architecture.

Figure 1: Life/work balance as a #ParlourInstaGuest, Phuong Le.

Many guest hosts also documented ‘a day in the life’ of various practitioners in the built environment, as demonstrated in Figure 2. Modelling alternative narratives is perhaps only possible on social media, where the personal governs the curation of messages as
opposed to institutionally or commercially driven agenda, and which might well provide the
impetus for many @Parlour followers to make real changes to their work routines. Giving
presence to narratives structured as private by traditional media affords us the opportunity
to create more inclusive narratives around our profession and to bring to light private
practices that sustain and affect our ability to participate in professional life. Undisclosed,
such practices are not open for discussion but brought to light by #ParlourInstaGuests they
have the potential to influence discourse and affect transformation.

Figure 2: Guest host posts range from experiments with virtual
reality, messy model making processes and atypical project
documentation.20

Family
A different example of the contrast between the representation of daily practice in social
and traditional media is provided in the #ParlourInstaGuest posts by Cumulus Studio, an
Australian practice with offices in Tasmania and Victoria. A profile of Cumulus Studio in AA
includes a brief discussion on the history of the firm before presenting extensive visual and
verbal documentation of their significant projects; which is a typical format for the coverage
of practices in industry publications.21 The piece does not reflect the distinct practice culture
behind the work and focuses on the composition of the studio in a top-down manner, which
is evident in both the article content and the office portrait for each respective profile. While
the AA article includes a headshot of the four directors dressed in black, the
#ParlourInstaGuest self- introductory post is a candid photo of the whole team at an awards
ceremony. Another key theme that emerges in Cumulus Studio’s #ParlourInstaGuest posts
is the notion of family. While the inflexibility and ‘un-family-friendly’ nature of much
architectural practice has been reviewed elsewhere,22 actual representations of ‘family’ are
The Cumulus Studio guest posts include examples of ‘traditional’ notions of family (with posts showing office dogs and architects’ children in the office), and also demonstrates broader notions of this social unit: the collective grouping of people within and beyond the studio, both past and present as posted in Figure 3. The broader network is a fundamentally important part of the Cumulus Studio’s collaborative culture, both across the offices and with external parties, captured in the #ParlourInstaGuest posts that present projects by aspects of the design that emerged through collaborations.

Figure 3: A candid team shot and the increasingly porous boundaries of ‘the office’ with small children present during work hours. Beyond the traditional notions, the Cumulus ‘family’ also includes architecturally trained artist Judith Abell’s involvement in Lady Gowrie (a childcare centre in Hobart).

Events

Where print media primarily presents images of architecture at a particular point in time, Instagram can address temporal qualities of architectural outputs and discourse. These fleeting moments subvert the idea of a monumental or canonic architectural presence which privileges the object of architecture over the people who occupy it. Typically, architectural events are reviewed at a point post-event through thoughtful, well-crafted arguments often following one line of thought. However, events unfold very differently on Instagram: views are multiple and fleeting, shared before they are fully polished; some threads get followed, and others record moments in time, as Figure 4 illustrates.
Figure 4: In addition to showing architectural processes, the #ParlourInstaGuest postings document the unfolding of architectural discourse in real time over the course of events. Examples include the *Venice Architecture Biennale*, *Women in Design* in Launceston, Tasmania and through the eyes of a student taking part in a design studio study tour to Auroville, India.

Dr Helen Norrie’s postings on the collaborative making of a filigree brass ‘chainmail’ installation, designed by Eliat Rich and Claire Scorpo, visually describes the community that forms around an act of making. Her posts, which include video content as well as still images, bring to life the concentration, collaboration and engagement that a public act of making inspires. More recently Anthony Richardson, an Australian architecture student, has documented a study tour of Auroville, India. His posts capture his sense of place, cultural differences in construction practices and the participatory processes the studio engaged in to develop a brief for their project, the Udhayam Educational and Cultural Centre, in Kottakarai. While the *Venice Architecture Biennale*, documented by #ParlourInstaGuest Tania Davidge, is a significant event on the architectural calendar, the *Women in Design* event and the study travels of students are stories that are not often captured. Instagram allows different stories to be told, broadening the way they are shared and the way we view them, as they unfold over time.

**Historical reconsiderations of the architect**

An international initiative that Parlour has facilitated in the Australian context has explored the writing of women into the history of the built environment. WikiD is an ongoing series of free workshops and events, which emerged from International Women’s Day Wikipedia editing events held in New York, Berlin and Melbourne in March 2015, providing editing instruction and Wikimedia support to assist in adding the biographies of women architects.
onto Wikipedia. However, as Wikipedia only allows the addition of pages that can reference at least two quality print publication sources it further propagates under-representation. Instagram’s lack of verification requirements allows for the quick and easy posting of the profiles and practices of ‘inspirational’ women from history, often for the first time and to a new audience, as illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5: The historical re-presentation of women in the built environment emerges through photoshopped award listings, the remembrance of local women’s contributions to professional discourse and practice and architects who merely failed to receive recognition.

Typically, where architectural discourse is disseminated through traditional media platforms, a canon of notable historical figures and projects can be easily identified. When discussed, expertise is most often represented by an ‘art history’ model: a chronological sequence of ‘great buildings’ and the lone male ‘genius’ that authored them. As Karen Burns has also argued, such representations work at many levels - “the cultural unconscious of a discipline writes on individual editors even as they write upon it” - by shoring up ‘acceptable’ accounts of what is important and what can be relegated as ‘surplus’ to discussions of architecture. However, when opening up media to less controlled curations of ‘precedence’ and ‘significance’, interesting new perspectives can emerge. All the more so when those producing the content come from ‘outside’ the profession, as is the case of Scott Burchell, a #ParlourInstaGuest who initially studied architecture before moving into construction, as shown in Figure 6.
At the beginning of his guest hosting Burchell states that his role was to present posts that were “limited to providing some historical context from some that have gone before”. Initial content included depictions of the post-World War II era ‘good life modernism’ in popular mass communication to candid photos of already well-known notable female figures from architectural discourse. As the week continued, the posts became more free-flowing, relaxed and inclusive of Burchell’s reflections and anecdotes from his encounters with examples of (a gendered) architectural history: from quiet admiration of Marion Mahony-Griffin’s performative costumes and Denise Scott-Brown’s Pop Art-inspired wedding dress to his mother. Burns reminds us of the transformative potential of such ‘anthologies’, which we argue are produced via new social media platforms by initiatives like #ParlourInstaGuest. Indeed, Burchell’s diverse and reflexive posts work to gather different content in surprising new collections of what constitutes architectural discourse. Media practices like these work to resist existing canons of spaces, people and events that typically matter, and construct new arenas of what is critical to the practice of architecture - in Burns’ words again, “dissent is the murmuring of different voices”.

Discussion
#ParlourInstaGuest demonstrates that social media can facilitate culture building within the profession in two ways. First, platforms like Instagram can expose the practices and profiles of minority practitioners that are traditionally underrepresented in academic and professional publishing. Secondly, in the context of a skill based industry like architecture, social media can provide a platform that allows academics, practitioners and non-architects in related fields to engage with architectural discourse collectively. Viewers of the traditional
architectural press are typically passive. However, on social media, audiences have the opportunity to participate as publics and as citizens in the space of the digital public realm which shapes discourse.\textsuperscript{32}Within the #ParlourInstaGuest feed, where people are finding and developing voices to speak on issues of structural inequity, and outside, where Parlour’s body of research is gaining traction in the academic and professional realms of architecture.\textsuperscript{33}

Although the ‘new infrastructures’ of communication are transforming who has access to and produces media, the shortcomings of the medium also need to be addressed. The ability and right to access social media platforms is not open to everyone due to economic and censorship constraints. Uncritical technological optimism, as described by communications theorist Christian Fuchs, stress the enabling aspects of platforms such as Instagram, but do little to consider the asymmetric relations of power and visibility that comprise contemporary social media participation.\textsuperscript{34} While convergent social media have the potential to create larger publics, many social, cultural, political and economic groups are excluded, thus limiting genuinely democratic engagement. Furthermore, platforms are owned by corporate entities and are therefore invested in turning a profit through leveraging user data. In this context, the boundaries between promotion and self-expression are not always clear. However, profit need not preclude activism and the development of critical public voices.

Different forms of media structure engagement in different ways. Traditional architectural media presents structured professional narratives, and social media and Instagram lend themselves to more personalised and social narratives. In many ways, posts on social media present an idealised, contrived and staged version of the self. However, in terms of this discussion, we see the #ParlourInstaguests as forming part of a critical narrative that falls outside of traditional architectural media. We found that the #ParlourInstaguests did not subvert the typical uses of Instagram but rather used its more personalised mode of story-telling to broaden the stories we tell about architecture and women in architecture through the media.

One of our primary observations from #ParlourInstaGuest is that it is a predominantly positive space. In many respects, it is wonderful to see the celebration of women in architecture that unfolds across the feed. However, it must be noted that this does not reflect the full criticality of the content on the associated Parlour website. In many ways, this is due to the design of the medium of social media. Instagram only has two primary modes of interaction through the ‘like’ and ‘comment’ buttons; there is no dislike button.
Critical content of real depth often takes time to develop and, in the immediacy of a medium such as Instagram, comments can be misread or just not well thought out. Social media can be intentionally and constructively critical, and it would be interesting to see this criticality being more actively cultivated in keeping with the content on the Parlour website. However, the @Parlour Instagram feed provides nuance and complexity to the discourse surrounding women, equity and architecture. Social media does not merely offer a secondary platform for under-represented stories and themes but instead allows marginalised narratives to create a more complete picture of architectural culture. Indeed, media theorists Nadav Hochman and Lev Manovich remark that the benefit of platforms like Instagram is in their strengthening of the capacity and reach of multiple interrelated networks of marginalised voices. That is, “exploring diversities of singularities not through hierarchies and categories but rather through relations, transition and sequences, while moving from the singular to the plural, from the close to the distant”.35

Architectural discourse rarely steps outside of established frameworks to consider what might be required to tackle systemic obstacles that impede women’s capacity and visibility to succeed, enjoy life and work. Social media technologies have the potential to act as disruptors to this framework, provoking change. If architectural discourse were able to suspend its presumption of the essential ‘rightness’ of its long-held working practices, how might our profession be able to reconfigure itself in response to widespread inequity and underrepresentation at the intersections of race, class, and gender? Discussions of cultural diversity (let alone economic, sexuality or otherwise) may be limited in architecture.36 But the succession of ‘personal vignettes’ and subtexts that emerge from the Parlour guest hosting process contribute to a new kind of highly personal architectural discourse that appears to be developing a community of like-minded and affirmative individuals that can share a personal recalibration of life and work during challenging times as a professional. This blurring of the personal and the professional is extremely rare in traditional architecture media where academic publications observe and analyse from a position of research ‘objectivity’ and journals of record stylise and structure the working experience to maintain benchmarks of professionalism, valuing architectural form over the process of making architecture. In this context, @Parlour is providing a media space via #ParlourInstaGuest that is shaping the way we both speak about architecture and address expectations of the profession.

2 The researchers on the project were Dr. Naomi Stead, Professor Julie Willis, Professor Sandra Kaji-O’Grady, Professor Gillian Whitehouse, Dr. Karen Burns, Dr. Amanda Roan, Ms. Justine Clark and Dr. Gill Mathewson.


14 Boy and Uitermark, Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers.

15 Couldry, “Beyond the Hall of Mirrors: some theoretical reflections on the global contestation of media power”, 44.


18 Stratigakos, Where Are The Women Architects?

Chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 2016. 

were presented at Equity by Design: Metrics, Meaning, and Matrices hosted by the San Francisco chapter of the American Institute of Architects.


Parlour has presented their research through the ARC funded project Equity and Diversity in the Australian Architecture Profession: Women, Work, and Leadership at numerous academic conferences and the research was also integral to the development of the Australian Institute of Architects Gender Equity Policy (accessed May 1, 2017, http://wp.architecture.com.au/news-media/landmark-decision-for-architecture-profession-on-gender-equity/). An output of the research project, the Parlour Guides to Equitable Practice (accessed May 1, 2017, http://archiparlour.org/parlour-guides/) are referenced by the Australian Institute of Architects and were presented at Equity by Design: Metrics, Meaning, and Matrices hosted by the San Francisco Chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 2016.


Nadav Hochman and Lev Manovich, “Zooming into an Instagram City: Reading the local through social media”, First Monday, June (2013): no pagination.