

Margins of Safety: Occupying the side-effects of fire-safety legislation

Liam Ross

This paper considers the design of the built environment as a 'regulatory space' [Hancher & Moran 1989] comprised of simultaneously legal and spatial opportunities for occupation. Taking a series of Acts of fire safety legislation, it studies the effects they have had on the built fabric of the City of Edinburgh, reading the city both as a history of competing govern-mentalities [Dean 2009], but also as catalogue of their unforeseen consequences, a space through which alternative concerns emerge, and are accommodated.

Focussing then on contemporary debates surrounding the promise of performance-based codes for fire-safety, it considers how architects have been involved in shaping this simultaneously legal and spatial context. Drawing on existing technical literatures [Brannigan 2000], it will suggest that the governing rationale of such codes depends upon an aesthetic connection between scientific and political notions of economy, one which obscures the fundamental goal of such standardisation - the setting of socially acceptable margins of safety. The paper concludes with a search for alternative aesthetic concepts which study the spatial side-effects of prescriptive standardisation.

Biography:

Liam (Liam.ross@ed.ac.uk) is an architect, lecturer, and a doctoral candidate in architecture research by design at the Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture. His principal teaching and research interests concern the relation between architectural design practices and their governmental frameworks, results of which have been published by journals including ARQ, Candide and Volume, and exhibited at the Venice Biennale.