

Practice, Theory and Intuition

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Practice

Contemporary architectural practice is far removed from the world of theory. In many ways it is an antithetical world, of high-pressure material action and reaction rather than cerebral reflection. The practitioner inhabits the trenches; the muddy defensive lines which we dig in the field of the instrumental property development and construction industry.

What the architect desperately needs within this environment is time, but of course this is what the industry has sought to remove—speed is its paradigm. Ironically the building processes themselves have changed relatively little: they are not significantly quicker, but the speed and volume of information surrounding the projects have exploded. Projects are now developed within a sea of information. But speed frequently wastes that which we hold most precious and that which it was supposed to overcome—time. We rush more and more hectically, transmit information ever more quickly and in greater volume but paradoxically have less and less time.

Within this world of practice, how does the architect launch the architectural project and thoughtfully respond to contemporary theoretical issues?

Intuition

It is perhaps through the avoidance of thought, through thoughtless action. The drawing of the first line across the site intersects the site with the programme, simultaneously exploring, discovering, and uncovering the project that is in some ways already there.

Thought and theory are ironically sometimes an impediment to understanding; at least the understanding that comes directly through action. Certainly they are impediments to intuition, and intuition is perhaps the primary means through which the architect engages, via the architectural project, with the pressing cultural and theoretical issues of our time.

Intuition is an existential quality: it is beyond the rational. It is rooted in our connection to the world we inhabit; it is our feeling rather than our knowledge. It is a manifestation of the interconnectedness of all things. Remarkably, it is the means for a holistic response to the vastly complex nature of our human condition. It is a response that comes less from us than through us.

But this first intuitive line drawn across the site, this formal concept, must be transformed, constructed, and assembled from materials to become architecture, and this will require direct engagement with the market and industry, with all its limitations, and possibilities.

Engagement

The architect must take this precious intuitive insight and jump into the fast and dangerous flow of the development and construction industry. This is a difficult swim and it is important to know the waters, the rips and the undertow.

The natural flow or outcome of the development and construction industry is not architecture at all, but building, understood as an optimised investment object, minimising cost, utilising standardised conventional techniques and presenting the most market-driven image with the least means and least substance. This is its natural course.

The planning and regulatory environment attempts to mediate this instrumental flow through protection of the public realm, environment and amenity: however, this is necessarily a defensive action and will therefore generally be inherently conservative.

These are the waters into which the architect jumps or is thrown. To assist the near-drowning figure, we will throw them 'architecture' and say "hang onto this, don't let go or you are lost". However, within these waters, the 'architecture' we are saying to hold onto is very heavy, like a lead weight. It does not help at all, but indeed, without it we are lost.

The only way to survive is to find shallower, safer waters in the form of sheltered supportive commissions or to understand the ebb and flow, the tide and character such that we can move with it, while still clinging to our weight, and in doing so perhaps make small changes to the direction of the current.

Theory

The architect gets tired in these waters; our first intuition is behind us now and it can be difficult to know where you are heading, where the shore is. Only when we stop for a moment and step out of the tide that we are trying to swim with or against, will we be able to look back at what it is we are doing, reflect on its nature. And this reflection is vital to understand what it is we do, the values, ethics and meaning behind the work, and how it affects the public good. We need a platform to rest on for a moment.

This is the space of theory; this is the space for which the architect yearns, a temporary rest on a platform. It may still bob around with the current and is not always so comfortable and in the end will throw us back in, but without it, without this respite and reflection, we may let go of our heavy load and be lost. This platform is the meeting place between the academy and the profession, and at this moment, at this conference we are in this space, on this platform together. Soon we will be washed off again, but hopefully we will be slightly better swimmers.