

The (re)Currency of what Remains Unchanged

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Introduction

When Giorgio Agamben argues that “those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands”¹, he is opening the issue of currency and how an individual relates to the currency of things in his own time. Drawing on a note by Roland Barthes (The contemporary is the untimely) and on the Untimely Meditations of Nietzsche, Agamben further asserts that it is “precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time”². If we define ourselves as contemporary architects and educators, if we do not dispute the design studio as the place for contemporariness in architectural education, then we must collectively endeavour to enable our students to form a critical understanding of our time – a critical understanding formed by an informed observation of what is current in our time, “which adheres to it and, at the same time, keep a distance from it”

How can we construct contemporariness in architectural education? How can architectural education reassure the cultural role of Architecture in our societies, both as a profession and a discipline? We believe that, in our field, the pressing issues of our time can only be addressed if design studio teaching reclaims the currency of what has been taken for granted (and perhaps neglected in our time) as the basis for the advancement of architectural thinking – the world as our physical context, the history and theory of our discipline as the intellectual foundation for architectural work, the tectonic thinking as the articulation of architecture’s physical substance, the architectural drawing as the ultimate expression

of student’s understanding of the world.

Through an understanding of the physical world, design studio must contribute to the awareness of the cultural dimension of the horizons of our cities. History and Theory has a fundamental role in understanding our current architectural culture. Issues of construction and tectonic order are pressing subjects in a time where craft urges to be redefined, now almost obliterated by the advancement of construction technology. Drawings, models and images are the compositional and representational instruments that substantiate students’ envisioning of how to remake the world.

The Architecture Studio

The practising of Architecture has been significantly transformed as a result of a variety of external forces that have invaded, and therefore reduced, the traditional territory of the profession. A new generation of design instruments and construction management along with new forms of procurement and commissioning have emerged in our recent past with the objective of optimising the financial aspects of architectural projects and construction. Under new procurement structures architects have become exposed to the interests of the construction industry. As a consequence, little attention is given to the *art* of Architecture with the increasing focus being shifted towards the *business* of construction. The value of architectural design has been engineered, perhaps obliterated with the obsessive preoccupation with cost and the speed of construction. Construction databases accelerate the process of business-modelling the architectural project, making it increasingly challenging to give consideration to tectonic solutions traditionally considered as craft. The proliferation of specializations within and at the margins of the profession has fragmented the process of architectural design. The architectural design process has been compressed, often unrealistically so, in order to satisfy political and financial schedules. The technological development of building construction has also reduced the time of site construction. Time for reflection, experimentation, interrogation and consideration has been eradicated from the design process. Despite all of these significant transformations, the architects’ ethical responsibility to give form to the world in which we live remains unchanged. Eric Parry recently reassured our students that, “architects are the arbitrators and are still the only ones who can

materialise a multitude of thoughts and intentions in the form of a building"³. If the cultural role of the profession is to be reassured, one can argue that architectural education's primary task is also to interrogate the premises of current architectural practice. Design Studio should perform as a critical and inquisitive simulacrum of professional practice.

The World

The notion of global culture today has been exponentially amplified by the development of digital technology and the expression of our societies in the virtual space. Digital globalization is not confined to a geographic territory. However, globalization is not new to our world. In the past, maritime nations have disseminated their cultural norms, religious beliefs and rituals throughout the expanse of their empires in order to promote commerce and wealth. Culture was first imposed, subsequently exchanged and ultimately overlapped. In this instance, globalization was territorial, manifested in our cities, streets and squares, places and buildings that form the basis of collective memory. The topographies they form prevail as the primary manifestation of the patterns of our shared and inherited cultures.

The physical world is therefore the outcome of architectural production, and intrinsically the context where our work finds its place. With this in mind, and interrogating the current focus on the individual expression of the architect through the form or skin of buildings, we believe that Architecture, in order to accomplish its role as a form of cultural expression, it must find its bearings in the relationship it establishes with the city, and other works around. These relationships materialize "common ground" through discovered or re-enacted continuities in the topographical and material involvement with the surrounding context – the city as a topographical setting and the city as material ensemble.

Dalibor Vesely asserted that, "architects are more aware of the differences that separate them, giving their work an aura of novelty and originality"⁴. This, he continues, "leaves behind the common references and goals that contribute to the long term cultural relevance of their work"⁵. Our argument is that, in Design Studio learning, the aspiration for *the long term relevance* of architectural work can only be

based on what we collectively share, the common ground of the material topography of our cities and landscapes.

Vittorio Gregotti, writing on the work of Alvaro Siza, stated that architecture springs "from archaeological foundations known to him alone – signs invisible to anyone who has not studied the site in detail through drawings with steady, focused concentration"⁶. Embracing the ethos of this statement, in our studio we instigate the deep knowledge of the physical world by prompting the students to develop precedent studies of the sites they will later return to in order to develop an architectural proposal. This initial study, called *Material Unprecedented* aims to transcend the notion of a measured or dimensional survey and the descriptive purpose of a model.



Fig. 1. Dika Lim, *Material Unprecedented*, London Wall, City of London, BA Unit F, Oxford School of Architecture

Set in an intensely urban environment, it consists of translating the materiality of a given building, into a 1:50 model of which construction material and technique express totally different, sometimes opposite qualities to those of the actual building. The model aims to achieve autonomy, transcending its representational purpose in order to reinvent the material expression and hence the architecture of the building. This shift in material expression aims to identify the architectural essence of the building through the features that remain evident in the translation into a diverse technique. The accompanying set of drawings aims to describe the model making technique as opposed to the constructional arrangement of the actual building. In this instance, drawings hold the dual role of portraying the form of the building at 1:50

and the construction of the physical model at 1:1. Through this exercise, students will form an understanding of the expression of building archetypes, their construction technology, material expression and the hierarchy of architectural components.

The complementary counterpart to this exercise is on urban topography; *Immaterial Precedent*, consisting of the production of a sectional model at 1:500 of modernist housing set within a Georgian landscape. In this instance, the focus is the topographical configuration of the terrain in relation to the existing architecture of the Alton West Estate in Roehampton, southwest London.

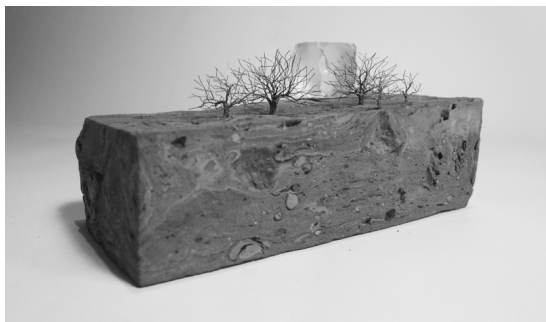


Fig. 2. Richard Bryant, *Immaterial Precedent*, Roehampton, London, BA Unit F, Oxford School of Architecture

Together, twenty five sectional pieces generated a collective model of this modernist landscape. Based on the immaterial expression of a twentieth century painting, the study aimed to explore how light, colour, geometric composition and texture in the flatness of the canvas can be translated in order to capture the essence of topographical and architectural expression of the setting. Students were able to form an understanding of the relationship between architecture and landscape, urban scale and density as well as the relationship between the parts and the whole.

Notwithstanding the erratic condition of our architectural culture and the propensity of architectural production for indulgent image making of objects belonging nowhere, Architecture remains as the physical framework for social engagement. It is built somewhere in our world for human practical needs. Design Studio, must therefore concentrate on the creative power of understanding the given condition as a perennial instrument for the foundation of enduring cultural relevance of Architecture.

The Worlds of Others

Mark Wigley once defined the idea of foreignness in architectural travelling as “a passionate embrace of leaving the familiar world behind and having all one’s assumptions challenged by the strangeness of the encounter with things that are thoroughly other, palpably alien”⁷. Conversely, in the midst of these *things that are thoroughly other*, traces of familiarity and expressions of universality emerge in the realisation of prosaic affairs of life, enabling the cultural bridges to be surpassed. We all live, work and learn, we all dwell and relate to nature, regardless of our cultural territory. Within our Design Studio, travelling is the vehicle for learning from the world of others, a world we partly belong to. The house is the cultural *condenser*, the micro-cosmos embracing the entire range of values and culture of *others*. Thus houses are the primary destination of our study journeys. Habits of living are accommodated by a familiar programme, architectural thought emerges from a specific cultural setting, and forms of construction derive from a local material culture and establishing a specific web of relationships to the topographical setting. The fundamental characteristics of Architecture are condensed in a scale students can control and understand in depth. Hosted by the architect, the client, sometimes both merged as one, in these long visits students observe as they listen, discovering and studying the essence of the Architecture through an intense afternoon of sketching.

It is not only the works of architecture which form the itinerary of our learning journeys. Equally, our visits to architectural practices and local schools of Architecture (where lectures, debates and workshops are organised with local students and professors), take the students to the depths of the local architectural culture. Architecture as a discipline in the school, as a profession in the practice and as a form of cultural expression in the city is complementary and comprehensively understood. In our studio, continuous revisiting History and Theory of Architecture gives context to this learning journey, not as a matter to be inertly professed by professors, but rather more importantly as means to interrogate the present and understand our culture in relation to the culture of *others*.

In order to crystallise the learning experience, a site is chosen amidst the natural landscape – humanised and transformed over time for common practical purposes just like our cities – is elected to develop a project. Back in the studio, the work will express students' *challenged assumptions*, revealing the *strangeness of the encounters* and their experience with the *other* culture. Whenever possible, the once hosting professors travel to Oxford as visiting critics to offer their views on the work produced. Here, different approaches are confronted, architectural cultures are cross referenced and the student's horizon is broadened.



Fig. 3. Ruby Wilson, *The Hermitage*, Tavora Valley, Northern Portugal, BA Unit F, Oxford School of Architecture

Returning to a site and a city closer to home, students develop their main project to which interests have already been identified and an approach initiated through the earlier precedent study and latent ideas from abroad remembered and translated. It is our belief that learning from travelling and designing in an unfamiliar cultural and geographical setting dissolves the border between local values and universal quests, positioning the work of the student in a wider frame of reference.

(P)re Making a Crafted World

When Alvaro Siza arrives in The Hague in late 1980's to continue to build his first generation of works outside Portugal he acknowledges the difficulty in the encounter with a tectonic culture that is *thoroughly other*. In northern industrialized Europe standardization, regulation and construction efficiency had already been

imposed largely by the urgency of post war reconstruction, having since developed a wide range of construction techniques now on offer. In peripheral Portugal Siza's early work evolved through the close dialogue with builders, artisans and craftsmen, learning from the long established techniques of vernacular construction, continuously developed, gradually transformed and modified over the long course of history. Siza summarises the experience recognising that "exposure to construction in the North of Europe prepared me, in a certain manner, to face the technological change we were undergoing in Portugal"⁸. Apparently diverging, the intersection of these two cultures – the assemblage of pre made architectural components and the on-site routines of crafting raw materials – is a pressing issue in architectural production today. Therefore, it is upon this intersection that Design Studio must base the debate and set the lines of inquiry into the current tectonic and material culture. Whilst we must accept that compliance with regulation and technological standardisation can no longer be avoided in Architecture, we must also recognise that craft, as the tangible human dimension of construction technology, is still appreciated and current in our time. If Architecture is to reclaim the lead in the construction of our cities, the idea of craft urges to be redefined. With the use of water and the cutting and moulding of raw materials removed from the routines of site construction, with craftsmen replaced by installers and assembly technicians, craft in Architecture resides in the ability of the architect to construct a sense of wholeness from the fragmentary nature of pre made components. These, of multiple origins, bear no relationship with site until assembly takes place. And it is when assembly takes place that the architect's ability to craft is expressed. The articulation of architectural elements will give the once *siteless* pre-fabricated components a place in the world, contributing to the formation of the setting through the enactment of topographical and material relationships between the architectural object and its physical context. Craft has shifted from the hands of the artisan to the drawing board of the architect. Design Studio must therefore acknowledge that "standardisation of construction remains partial because the unique characteristics of sites, climates and environments always influence building practices, unlike the stable situation of a factory or a workshop interior"⁹. Articulation of materials

and components with site conditions remain fundamentally current in architectural practice. This level of articulation is developed through the elaboration of the architectural detail. The articulation of façade materials in relation to the time of nature, anticipating the ageing of the building and weathering process of its surfaces, devising ways of joining or separating materials, negotiating changes in surface texture and tone in relation to exposure to natural light, physical contact or ground, dimensioning joints and window reveals to disclose depth or emphasize surface planarity in relation to orientation; all these considerations are the tangible manifestation of an architectural idea that will dictate the appearance of the building, its architectural expression and urban presence over time. In our profession, what we mistakenly call “production information” is the essential stage of design that ultimately defines the material topography of our cities.

Design studio must recognise that the full tectonic, spatial and ultimately cultural potential of Architecture stems from its capacity to articulate the poetic and the technical qualities of its own physical substance. We must promote the sense of responsibility in the work of our students, through the consideration of issues of tectonic order, to address the temporal dimension of currency and committing to the long term cultural significance of our architectural work. It is in the meticulous and thoughtful articulation of pre made components, crafted in relation to place and time that contemporary architecture must lay the foundations of a revised tectonic culture. Architects do not make buildings nor architecture students see their projects erected, therefore great emphasis must be placed in the capacity of the architectural drawing to express the students’ understanding of building production.

Drawing the World

“When one travels and works with visual things – architecture, painting or sculpture – one uses one’s eyes and draws, so as to fix deep down in one’s experience what is seen. Once the impression has been recorded by the pencil, it stays for good, entered, registered, inscribed.”¹⁰ For Le Corbusier, sketching and drawing were instrumental to develop a continuously deepening intimacy with the object being seen or designed. Nearly a century after Le Corbusier’s statement, a new generation of digital

instruments sets the relationship with the design process at the opposite end of the spectrum. From the simple task of aiding the design process, digital instruments have developed their potential towards fabrication and production, initiating the post digital era, “closing the circle in the return to materiality”¹¹. This move from *aided* to *generated* to *produced* means an increasingly autonomous and self-contained design process. Software packages can now generate building forms of extreme geometric complexity, and from a three dimensional model generate plans, sections, elevations, structural diagrams, even physical models, schedules of components and bills of quantities. Digital experimentation in architectural education today is at the risk of annihilating rather than complementing the more traditional instruments of the architect – the sketch drawing, the sketch model, the plan, the section, and the elevation.

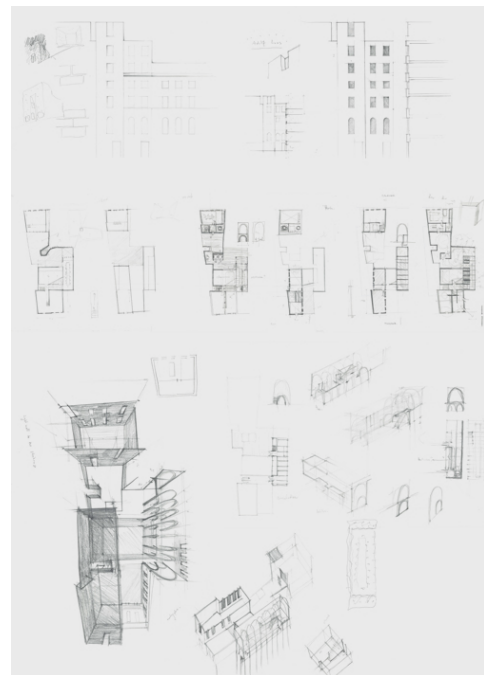


Fig. 4. Diana Grecu, *Material Topography*, Moorgate, City of London, BA Unit F, Oxford School of Architecture

These have always supported the conception of architectural design as instruments of spatial composition, of prospective representation of an idea, but fundamentally as instruments of reciprocal control throughout the process, before becoming instruments of external communication. In architectural design, in the same way that a drawing cannot be entirely read in isolation – always referencing other drawings

to fully describe its partial content –, no design instrument has ever encompassed the full generative power to work in isolation. This insufficiency was already acknowledged in the famous composite drawings by Palladio where the architectural composition of a villa is represented in part sectional, part elevational drawing aligned with a plan. In 1899, engineer and historian Auguste Choisy¹² publishes a series of axonometric projections of historical buildings combining the three dimensional projection with plan and section aiming a comprehensive description of the architectural structure.

Different instruments of architectural design attest to issues of different order. Proficiency in handling a certain design instrument is not a skill in itself. The skill of the architect is to comprehensively represent an architectural idea and describe the way it can be executed. This can only be achieved through the continuous dialogue between design instruments of different natures. Digital instruments should be incremental to the architect's way of describing the world. Sketch drawings and models, plans and sections remain relevant voices in the choir of instruments and reveal qualities and issues otherwise unseen. Therefore, Design Studio must prompt our students to develop a critical approach to the methodologies of architectural design. In discovering the intrinsic relationship between design process and the architectural outcome, architecture students must aspire to demonstrate that "several ways of seeing things are integrated into one way of knowing the world"¹³.

What remains unchanged

If we, like Louis Kahn, believe that "no greater service an architect can make as a professional [man] than to sense that every building must serve an institution of man, whether the institution of government, of home, of learning"¹⁴; if our schools of architecture are amongst those institutions of learning; if amidst the variety of our cultural backgrounds we identify common ground to set the foundations of our shared values; if our schools of architecture are true schools of thought rather than ordinary places of employment, then our mission must be to give our students the opportunity to develop and consolidate the knowledge of the fundamentals of architectural design. This will not be possible if we refuse to acknowledge that in the

permanent values of our discipline – the relationships with the physical, historical, theoretical, material, technological, and ultimately cultural context, prospectively expressed in the architectural drawing – is the genuine currency of what remains unchanged.

Notes

¹ Agamben, Giorgio. "What is the Contemporary?" in *What is an Apparatus? And other Essays*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 2009, p 40

² Ibid, p 40

³ Eric Parry statement occurred in the context of an informal conversation with a group of undergraduate students from Oxford School of Architecture in a visit to the office.

⁴ Vesely, Dalibor, in *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation* The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2004, page 12

⁵ Ibid, p 12

⁶ Gregotti, Vittorio, in *Thoughts on the Work of Álvaro Siza*, essay published for the 1992 Pritzker Prize awarded to Álvaro Siza, The Hyatt Foundation, Los Angeles, California 1992

⁷ Wigley, Mark "The Myth of the Local" in *Architects' Journeys, Building, Travelling, Thinking* Buckley, Craig and Rhee, Pollyanna (edition), GSAPP Books, New York, 2011, p 209

⁸ Siza, Alvaro, "Getting through turbulences: interview with Alvaro Siza by Alejandro Zaera", in *El Croquis 68/69*, El Croquis Editorial, Madrid, 1994, p 27

⁹ Leatherbarrow, David, "Architecture is its Own Discipline", in *The Discipline of Architecture*, Piotrowski, Andrzej and Robinson, Julia (edition). University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2001

¹⁰ Le Corbusier, "1900-1918", in *My Work*, The Architectural Press, London, 1960, p37

¹¹ Cruz, Marcos, "Testimonial: Architecture is Slow to Absorb New Concepts", in *Jornal dos Arquitectos 244*, Published by Ordem do Arquitectos, Lisbon, 2012, p 34

¹² Choisy, Auguste, *Histoire d'Architecture*, 2 volumes, Gauthier-Villard, Paris, 1899

¹³ Leatherbarrow, David, *ibid*

¹⁴ Kahn, Louis I, *Conversations with Students*, Architecture at Rice Publications Princeton Architectural Press, Houston, Texas, 1998, p 19