

Education in Practice

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Fig. 1. PO BOX 2 front cover

Introduction

PO Box 2 is the second research 'zine' produced by Project Orange, the practice I co-founded. This paper reflects on the way research in the studio shapes the design ethos of the practice. We also wished to explore what academic knowledge resides in practice.

By way of a controversial introduction I would like to quote the peer reviewed response to my abstract which noted:

"PO Box 2 seems interesting...(but) as it stands doesn't make a theoretical contribution at all".

In so many ways this throws down the gauntlet by highlighting the tension between the often incongruous agendas of academia and practice. While the process of research and propositional thinking is the life blood within a school of architecture, the same is only partially true within

practice. There is no compulsion to have to explain or justify built work within the same terms of reference as a thesis project. Our starting point, therefore, is not to try and graft a theory of practice onto our work, but rather to set up a critical dialogue both between ourselves and a wider audience.

Another question that also gets asked relates to the relevance and sphere of influence of our own research. Clearly it is self-financed and printed, which until recently, would have attracted the term 'vanity publishing'. However as teacher and critic Leon van Schaik points out, the business of curating and reframing your own work is critical if there is an appetite for self-evaluation:

"Becoming a curator of yourself is a way of: knowing how to handle yourself at each stage of your journey as an individual creative person; locating yourself in the supportive and challenging environments that forge mastery; finding those peers who help you transform mastery into a platform for intellectual change; and seeking out those situations that clarify your creative breakthrough into innovation"¹

In our multi-media centric world there seems to have been a change in attitude: the freedom to self publish is now understood as an opportunity rather than a reflection of failure to find a publisher. So in order for it not to be a piece of marketing or propaganda, the work has to be edited and disseminated. We are looking to trade our currency as critical thinkers. To that end the first PO Box was presented at the "Theory by Design" conference at Artesis School of Architecture in Antwerp. In his introduction Johan De Walsche noted:

"Contemporary architectural theory typically is constructed by academics, and within academia. Connections to practice are few."²

He goes on to expand the theme conference to explore alternative models of research which do not necessarily put academic and practice based knowledge in opposition, but rather asks whether:

"...considering theory as a social practice...can design, in all its meanings, be the medium to have new insights effectively shared? If so, making these processes explicit will advance not only academic architectural research, it will fundamentally impact on professional practice and on architectural education as well."³



Fig. 2. Project Orange Studio, London

Structuring the Conversation

At Project Orange the act of designing is most often a dialogue between 'ideas' and 'instinct'. While we favour a narrative approach, where the telling of the process informs not only an understanding but the outcome, we also have become increasingly aware of how important the notion of intuitive thinking is. This presents a conundrum – if something is invisible, personal and intuitive – how can it be made explicit or described as an intellectual construct? Rather than falling into the redundant binary position where academia is in opposition to practice and theory to intuition, we are interested in synthesising these poles into a conversation. As Jane Tankard notes in her introduction to PO Box 2:

*"...design is a process that enables architecture to manifest itself as a transformative and evolutionary mechanism in contemporary and future social contexts," and goes on to say: "This focus on the relationship between theory and practice through a series of short essays is a useful and timely reminder of the necessity for the profession to consider and act upon these contexts."*⁴

Our belief is that by making space for critical reflection we begin to gather together groups of ideas, interests

and observations that mirror those of our collaborators as well as creating a collective memory.

Information Gathering

As Ruth Silver notes in her contribution there is another dichotomy to be reckoned with; that the process of design is often computational rather than overtly creative:

*"As architects we spend the bulk of the duration of a project compiling information. This information takes many forms whether this is drawings, spread sheets or written specifications. Regardless of format, what they contain is data: grid lines, levels, clauses, thicknesses and constraints. That is, information for building"*⁵



Fig. 3. 'What information is beautiful?'

Looking around the studio on a typical day most people are tapping away on a keyboard, some listening to music. This is punctured by questions, informal discussions, phone calls and gatherings. Our own structure is loose. We all sit in the same space, there is no hierarchy in terms of a seating plan, we have no admin staff so everyone chips in, and most significantly we believe that a good idea is worth pursuing whoever puts it onto the table. Mostly this 'flat' model works until it comes to a question where experience counts. Often this may be a technical or procedural issue or it might be one relating to communicating ideas. However sometimes it becomes an altogether more subjective question regarding more abstract values such as: meaning, style, concept or relevance. Because we do not have what might be known as a 'house style' or an obvious philosophy we need to discuss and debate the matter. This in turn has led to a scenario where everyone is a stakeholder both in terms of the output and the success of the studio. In order to evaluate this process we see the discussion as part of a formative assessment while the research zine is the summative assessment in so much as it is a formal and audited piece of work.

Representation

Increasingly we have found that our thoughts revolve around the question of representation. Not only in the sense of 'how should we draw this' but also addressing the more difficult question of 'what might this mean'. So the brief evolved for PO Box 2 for everyone to take on this overall topic and to triangulate it back to work that they have been doing in the studio. This connection is critical in order to build up a body of knowledge that relates to the practice, rather than a collection of observations that are looser fit. We used a CPD session to present our themes in 5 minute slots followed by a more general discussion. Each person then submitted an abstract to Jane Tankard, our guest editor, who offered feedback and one to one tutorials over a three month period. This live and fast-track programme encouraged the team to take an idea from concept through to fruition with mentoring along the way, while continuing with their main focus of production.

Drawing Inspiration

Taking the document as a whole there are a number of threads that are worth looking at in more detail. Firstly there is the idea that the act of making a drawing becomes the starting point for a project. These tended to be smaller installations or competitions such as the RHS Chelsea Garden or Room for London. Another theme is that of curation, which is especially true for our hotel projects, and unpacked by Emma Elston in her piece 'Rules of Representation'. There was also a sense that the role of the sketch was part of the intuitive design process. As Guido Vericat explains in his piece:

"Sketching is a way of thinking about architecture and space making. It is a medium by which one can 'annotate' one's thoughts, track the internal conversation and make it visible to be refined, shared and further interrogated".⁶

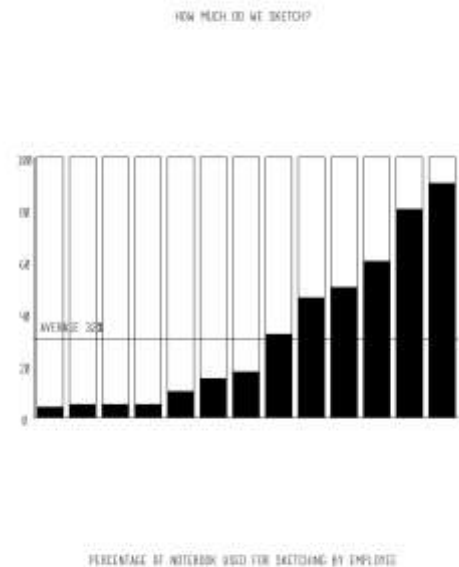


Fig. 4. 'How much do we sketch?'

Here the observation revolves around the notion of iteration and how something tentative becomes a process through which design is discovered. By contrast Thomas Partridge questions the ever-evolving role of computer modelling commenting:

"The tools now at the disposal of anyone with a computer allow the creating of exceptional architectural imagery where nothing is exceptional about the architecture; seduction without substance".⁷

He questions the power of the seductive image and goes further to speculate on the future of digital models to communicate far more than just a photo real perspective view. Both points of view are valid and relevant, and by juxtaposing them in print we are able to consider each in turn, debate the conversation and perhaps try something new at the next opportunity.

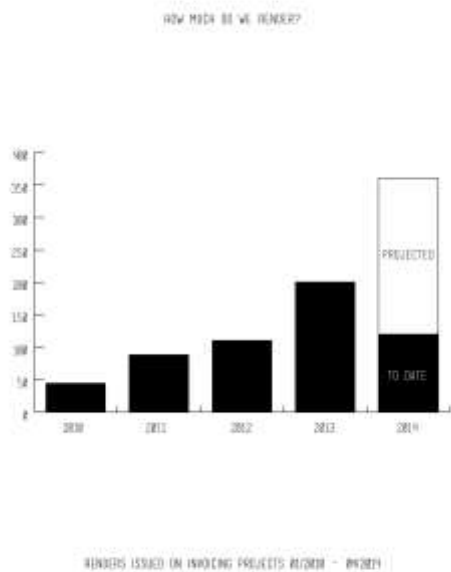


Fig. 5. 'How much do we render?'

Live(ly) and (A)live?

With reference to the theme of this conference it is legitimate to ask why is the putting together of a collection of essays in anyway a 'live' project? I suggest the answer lies in the context. At School the simultaneity of learning experiences is part of the course, though the synthesis of different knowledge bases happens within the studio. In a professional context the space and ability to reflect is compromised often in part due to the complexity, and tedium, of procuring buildings. While at a design level the outcome from the school and the practice may look the same, the translation from model to 1:1 demands considerable resource. Making space and time therefore creates the condition for reflection and calling it a project helps. So by (re)creating the milieu of a school we can tap into a sense of enquiry based on real time observations rather than, say, historical precedents or the edge conditions of architectural speculation. Even more critical, is the sense of direct participation. There is a palpable dynamic between the discussion and the project; in other words the act of taking and formalising a view through writing, starts to influence the actual design process. In this sense I believe the value of this kind of research is that it proactively examines, catalogues and questions past projects in order to look forward to future ones.

Conclusion

The outcomes from the publication were two fold. Firstly we have produced a document for public consumption; we have put our ideas onto the table. Secondly we have collectively opened up new ways of thinking for ourselves, some of which were implicit while others the result of the process itself.

How this enters into mainstream academia remains ambiguous. If Architecture itself is to be understood as a cultural entity then buildings must represent a significant part of the outcome. It may be for others to assess, critique and debate. However by engaging the debate internally the processes and ideas that shape the practice become more apparent, and by being prepared to open this further propels the narrative into another field, that of research. In my own essay I reached the following conclusion:

*"We therefore continue to nudge, uncover and reveal different ways of thinking and designing as architects. We draw because that is what we have been taught to do, but we do it in ways that surprise us. We are open to suggestion."*⁸



Fig. 6. POBOX 2 launch

References

- ¹ Van Schaik, Leon. "Introduction" in *Mastering Architecture* Wiley-Academy: UK. 2005. p 21.
- ² De Walsche, Johan. "Why Theory by Design is a valid Option" in *Theory by Design* Artesis Univeristy: Antwerp. 2012. p 19.
- ³ Ibid p 24.
- ⁴ Tankard, Jane. "Foreword" in *PO Box 2 Project Orange*: London. 2014. p 3.
- ⁵ Silver, Ruth. "What information is Beautiful?" in *PO Box 2 Project Orange*: London. 2014. p 47.
- ⁶ Vericat, Guido. "Drawing the Internal Conversation" in *PO Box 2 Project Orange*: London. 2014. p 24.
- ⁷ Partridge, Tom. "Simulating the Future" in *PO Box 2 Project Orange*: London. 2014. p 71.
- ⁸ Soane, James. "Drawing Inspiration" in *PO Box 2 Project Orange*: London. 2014. p 8.