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PERSISTENCE DISTANCE ARCHITECTURE

Lindsay Blair Howe

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Pierre Abélard, a French intellectual born in the late 11th century, was renowned for his advocacy of disputations, or attempts to establish intellectual truths in science and religion through the art of debate. However, he has since gained greater historical fame for his extramarital affair with the maiden Héloïse, as recorded in the autobiographical *‘Historia Calamitatum’*¹ – a history of the lovers’ calamities. The affair became the subject of a 1717 epic poem by Alexander Pope. In the poem, the two lovers are consigned to lives of silence in a monastery and nunnery and exchange letters fifteen years later. Héloïse describes her envy of the other nuns’ innocence:

«How happy is the blameless vestal’s lot!
The world forgetting, by the world forgot.
Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind,
Each prayer accepted, and each wish
resign’d.»²

Unable to escape her memories, Héloïse wishes only to forget her past. The two were eventually reunited upon death and buried together in Paris, a small posthumous consolation.

If one were to write a history of calamities for contemporary culture, the story of our misfortunes would read: «We have forgotten the art of reflection.» Today, sources of stimuli are omnipresent, and – unlike Héloïse – we are burdened more by our inability to remember than our inability to forget. Through the wide variety of available technology, contemporary society enjoys constant communication and incessant access to information. However, this is a double-edged sword. Endless distractions and constant busyness propagate an alarming level of triviality and lack of personal introspection.

On the Internet, both facts and opinions can be posted without verification or consequence, and the sheer volume of information available means that it is difficult to ascertain the reliability of a source. The most insignificant events with a high entertainment value can ‘go viral’ within an instant and more intellectually challenging topics can be easily neglected. One can seek out a target audience and customize information to suit its needs, as evidenced by the re-

cent election campaign in the United States. Although the Internet contains the enormous potential to provide transparency of communication, in this case, obvious mistruths and outright lies were regurgitated at lightning speed by social networks and even the mainstream media. Meanwhile, issues such as what could have been accomplished with the six billion dollars that financed the candidates’ campaigns were, unfortunately, largely ignored.

Furthermore, utilizing the Internet to browse and socialize for leisure generates a worrisome lack of physical interaction and of critical discussion. Smartphones and tablets have transformed the way people communicate and access information: constantly and instantly. A 2012 University of Zurich study reported that almost fifty percent of Swiss youth, ages nine to sixteen, have mobile phones advanced enough to surf the web.³

On a recent train ride between Zurich and Geneva, one of the only open seats was in a wagon filled with teenage schoolchildren on a class field trip. I sat, expecting to be bombarded by morning chatter – could I have been more wrong! The teens pulled out their iPhones as soon as the train departed, and silence pervaded the wagon. One of the few conversations I did overhear went as follows:

Bored girl:

«Hey [insert name]! Talk to me!»

Boy playing with phone:

«Well.....about what?»

Bored girl:

«I don’t know! What are you doing this weekend?»

Boy playing with phone:

«Ummm.....stuff. I don’t know.»

Bored girl:

«Okay, well then what are you doing for Christmas vacation?»

Boy playing with phone:

«I dunno yet. Stuff with my family.»

¹ Abélard, Peter: *‘Historia Calamitatum’*, [Available at: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/abelard-histcal.asp>, Accessed January 2013]

² Pope, Alexander: *The Poetical Works of Alexander Pope*, Volume 1, [Available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9413>, Accessed January 2013]

³ Waller, Gregor; Prof. Dr. Süß, Daniel: *Handygebrauch der Schweizer Jugend: Zwischen engagierter Nutzung und Verhaltenssucht*, Forschungsbericht, April 2012, Zürcher

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Exasperated after less than a minute, the girl gave up on conversation and returned to the digital world – whether to philosophical debates by text message or to pictures of cats with badly spelled captions, we will never know. Abélard may have rolled over in his Parisian grave.

The rapid, casual nature of our information-exchange-based society both enables and perpetuates the ‘glorification of busy’. This culture of instance is driven by activities rather than ideals; it asks to be stimulated rather than to reflect. It translates not only into our culture, our ideologies, and our work, but also into the role that architects play in impacting the built environment. Traditionally, architecture has spanned the fields of design and engineering, a profession both creative and technical. In an ideal world, the contemporary architect devises a theoretical concept while incorporating complex factors of technology, constraints, and required expertise into its execution. Developing a concept to address the social, cultural, typological and physical layers of the built environment requires extensive local knowledge, as well the ability to interpret and visualize these observations. The artistic and analytical facets of architecture require the formulation of a deliberate stance, a product of time and reflection.

In reality, this process is severely restricted by deadlines, regulations, and budgets; the architect must often act as a project coordinator rather than a designer. Particularly in the case of developer-led projects with limited budgets, the architect plays a subordinate role to the interests of the economy. This has serious consequences for the architectural quality of the built environment, as reflected in the fabric of world cities. Suburban sprawl and massive apartment complexes have reduced the livability and sustainability of urban settlements. The production of large-scale, bottom-of-the-line quality construction projects were also a contributing factor to the 2007-2008 global financial crisis, repercussions of which are still present in international markets. Considering that we, as architects, bear responsibility for our built environment, we must distance ourselves from the busyness and stimuli of popular culture to critically reflect on what we construct, both today and in the future. We need persistence and distance.

The etymology of the word ‘persistence’ comes from the Latin ‘persistere’, or ‘per’- thoroughly and ‘sistere’ come to stand, cause to stand still. Distance originates from ‘distare’, or ‘dis’- apart, off and ‘stare’ to stand. Analyzing these two words together implies the idea of deliberately and purposefully halting to stand apart. Just as we need sleep, our brains need non-stimulated, passive processing time. We must make the time to critically evaluate our work as architects and students of architecture in the context of our environment, culture, education, and system of values.

The relationship between a design concept’s content and the methodology of its depiction is one of the central questions of architectural education. Every institution with an architecture department has built a reputation on its own unique discourse of theory versus praxis, form versus function, art versus engineering. Harvard, the Architectural Association, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) – each name represents a specific stance on how young architects should be formed. For example, the ETH approach emphasizes the production of architectural design; of creating, manufacturing, and delivering a complete architectural package. ETH studios cultivate perfectionist designs; meticulously laser-cut models and photorealistic renderings animate minimalist line drawings of plans and sections. Achieving this level of detail is a time-consuming, high-resource process.

Architects are, by nature and necessity, curious and rigorous; each minute of an architecture student’s day is dedicated to the pursuit of perfection. Students quickly disperse into their own worlds, headphones on, in front of the computer monitor. Other coursework is neglected, relationships are ignored, and nothing exists except for studio, studio, and more studio. However, while indeed architecture affects every part of our lives, it must not be the only thing in our lives. While focus and dedication is laudable, one-sided obsession is perilous. It hinders the design process because there is not enough time for critical thinking and passive reflection.

There are several phases of development that occur as architects begin to learn how to create a design concept. The first stage is imitation: mimicking or copying an element used by a role model or found in a precedent with a prescribed methodology. The second stage is emulation: using an existing template of tools to express the comprehension of complex architectural elements. Finally, the third stage is interpretation: re-construing both elements and representative tools to create a unique form of personal expression. A student must be taught to understand the parameters of a design challenge through critical thinking and analysis, in order to achieve the final level of learning.

The tool with which one develops architectural ideas – digital or analog, meticulous or messy – plays a crucial role in the process of creating design. When drawing, the brain makes connections in complex layers and non-linear processes while the hand records and revises. Layering of trace paper sketches, each thought influenced by the one before, or working models made from scratch materials are therefore infinitely valuable tools. As requirements for models and visualizations continually increase, demanding extreme amounts of preparation and busy-work, a loss of connection is precipitated between an object's concept and the object itself. Intricacy is not necessarily tantamount to quality, particularly if it means that not enough time is allotted to critical reflection.

Regardless of the method one chooses to represent an architectural idea, an extremely undervalued tool essential to achieving persistence and distance is writing. This act of intellectual processing is the most direct way a conceptual, experience-based instinct meets with the logic of observation and knowledge. Returning to Alexander Pope, in his most famous body of work *Moral Essays*, *Epistle I: Of the Knowledge and Characters of Men*, he states:

«To observations which ourselves we make,
We grow more partial for th' observer's sake;
To written wisdom, as another's, less:
Maxims are drawn from Notions, those from Guess.»⁴

Pope asserts that the maxims of the philosopher and conclusions of observation are superficial on their own, but where these two methods are united in the form of writing, these speculations become valid principles. As he so eloquently describes, both experience and observation are essential elements in the continual advancement of artful knowledge – or the persistent pursuit of critical thought. In the face of resource scarcity, climate change, and globalization, questions of sustainability and the social responsibility are increasingly more significant to architectural design. Architecture and urban planning leave a concrete impact on the environment, lasting traces of our society and its values; as such, it is essential that architects and architecture students actively reflect on the direction of the profession. Are we service professionals and project managers, elite intellectuals and artists, a combination of both, or are we something more? We need to enter into discussions and debates, not only in formal contexts, but casually among friends and colleagues.

Architects must take the time to allow their fascination with a design challenge to influence their ways of constructing realities – of creating works of substance, not instance. Teachers must support their students in developing their own paths as critical thinkers, and show them how to move beyond imitation and emulation to their own level of interpretation. In an interconnected world, we are responsible for creating our own legacy as a generation of designers. This reflection requires vigorous persistence and distance, if we want to create objects of meaning, rather than monuments to our busy culture and its endless series of distractions.

Lindsay Blair Howe, born 1984

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⁴ Pope, Alexander: *The Poetical Works of Alexander Pope*, [Volume 1, Available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9413>, Accessed January 2013] <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9413>, Accessed January 2013]

