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Autor: Emerson, Tom

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THERE ARE NO UNIVERSAL ABSOLUTES

A CONVERSATION WITH...

Tom Emerson

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transRedaktion (tr): Tom Emerson, your work has been characterized as a deep independent force that is far from the usual and normal[1]. How would you describe your work? And how would you describe the normal and common practice of architects today?

te: Well that's a difficult opening question. Those aren't my words. I would never describe my work or the work of our practice, 6a architects, as being far from the norm. This is the only thing we do, this is our norm. Whether it is everybody else's is another question.

You do have certain institutions that apply norms from the outside. You have the ‹Denkmalpflege› which tells you how to treat history, building regulations that tell you how to deal with structure, clients with budgets and so on. On the other hand, when you're working on a small scale, there is the very irregular character of the city. It's a condition like a broken biscuit: funny little shapes that don't give you a clear external view of the totality of your work. So if there are any norms in our practice it would be a certain approach which is about finding a specific response to a place the way we find it. And that's partly a physical matter and partly a cultural matter that deals with the layering of history. We are not pioneers here. We are not the first to occupy this ground, because this ground has been occupied many times before. And that leaves traces. Some of those traces are visible, some of them are not, but they are all part of a city's story.

I suppose one thing I'm interested in is the kind of contingency of the world. I'm not interested in an architecture that is absolute in its own terms, in its techniques…

tr: What shaped your thinking on architecture as this kind of ‹non-absolute› response to the multi-layered condition of the city?

te: I think that's largely because we started our practice in London at a very small scale. London is messy, it's not a planned city. It's a city that is both very new but also very ancient. And London is dense, there is no space left. In this situation you're only ever adjusting small things. That's the only condition you have. So norms are not helpful, you could say, because they don't fit, they don't fit anything.

I also started studying architecture at the end of postmodernism, which moved the field of architecture to a much more open paradigm in which history and collage offer a multiplicity of meaning. My generation can't help being post-modern in some aspects. But without necessarily the formal aspects of ‹Po-Mo›, more with the cultural aspects of the city that are much more diversified, layered, nuanced and fragmented than in the 1950s. Practicing in London we found that we had to throw that whole conceptual modernist picture away and find a new one. We need a new paradigm that stops ‹tabula rasa›, the notion that we're starting afresh with something new. In fact we're only ever remaking and re-using things, bringing things together that we have found.

tr: Irénée Scalbert wrote an article called ‹The Architect as Bricoleur›. He understands the term ‹bricolage›, which seems important in your work, as putting order into the things that exist. Norms, regulations and conventions are also typically seen as a way to order things so that they can be understood collectively. However, you doubt their practicality.

te: This article was part of a longer conversation that we've had with Irénée who I've known for a very long time, and he's the first one who applied the term ‹bricolage› to our work. Irénée was refering to Claude Lévi-Strauss's ‹Science of the Concrete› where he divides the world into two sorts of people, the ‹bricoleur› and the ‹engineer›. The ‹engineer› will have a task and will invent new tools to fulfill that task, whereas the ‹bricoleur› will fulfill that task using only tools available to him within his immediate environment. To do that the ‹bricoleur› assembles what Lévi-Strauss calls a set, the means at his disposable. The great ‹bricoleur› in that sense is Robinson Crusoe, who only has what is on his island – that's his materials, tools, and environment. Everything is wrapped up in that island, which could be called his set.

Coming back to the question of practicality of norms, I believe that the ‹bricoleur› is inherently opportunistic. Being promiscuous and responsive to the situation is so much more productive than trying to be absolutist. And that's where the term ‹bricolage› is quite interesting for the contemporary thinking on architecture.

tr: How does the architect in the role of the ‹bricoleur› define his set?

te: You assemble your set from what surrounds you. You grow a project within its own environment, which I understand to be more than the physical set of bricks, trees and asphalt but also contains the sum total of knowledge, experience and history that has come about that place. It's circumstantial and could be a coincidence. The set is the people you work with at the moment – your clients, the users, your colleagues – but also all those institutions like the ‹Denkmalpflege›. That's a massive audience with different interests, quite apart from the physical or financial environment. But you're only making one building which needs to respond to all of those things… And hopefully you will also be doing something useful for someone else in thirty or fifty years. For me it's quite interesting to think that somebody else is going to adapt, change, misuse or do things to your buildings. It's actually quite funny when you have architects that get really worried when their client has moved the furniture around and think: «No, they've ruined everything!»

One of the things we've done a lot during the last few years is contemporary art galleries. And there the users, the artists, just completely misbehave. They never do what you expect them to do. We did one room in the South London Gallery that is super thin, 7 metres high, 3 metres deep and 10 metres long. And there was one wall that was 8 metres by 7 metres into which we put huge effort – there's no lightswitch, there's no skirting, there's no plug. It's a perfect wall, just for artwork. And then the first artist came into the room and used the other walls that has windows, doors, fire alarms and exit signs. I thought: Oh! Of course, they're going to do that!

tr: Is this the sort of fresh, unexpected response you try to encourage in your students at the ETH Zurich? We are thinking about the pavilions you make every second semester, where students are given 24 hours to come up with the first idea, something that forces one to break their own ‹modus operandi› or mental limits.

te: The 24 hours merely are a consequence of everything else. Those projects take place in the first two weeks of the semester. They're a primer. Usually, at the beginning of any studio there's a bit of research. Maybe you do a site-visit, take some photographs, do some drawings… But it always struck me that there is something ineffective about that process. It's not that it's without value, but making a small but complete piece of architecture in two weeks can be as effective as mapping the city.

The other aspect is a pragmatic one. Before coming to the ETH I was teaching in Britain in studios that are little more than a dozen people. I came here and there suddenly were 48 students the first semester! How do you do that? How do you build some sense of community within the studio? Because if you want a studio to be more than a collection of fifty individual projects you need some way of facilitating communication and collaboration. If there is anything that forces people to talk to each other then it's doing something together. So why not build a building, a whole building? Could we do that in two weeks?

We try doing projects which are very low-tech so everybody can participate democratically. Everybody can learn how to knock in a nail during an afternoon, and everybody can learn how to cut a piece of wood even if they have never done it before. By the end of the process, people can walk up to a piece of wood and know instinctively how heavy it is. Their eyes are starting to do much more than seeing purely the appearance of things. So, when people come back and open their computer and start clicking away, there is still some residual feeling of how hard it was to put up the frame on a really cold February afternoon. After those projects there is an embodied knowledge about what it means to make architectural drawings. Then you realize that the beautifully abstract double lines of a plan are incredibly difficult to build. Those perfect lines represent so much knowledge, so much technology, so much architectural history. It's nice to know that, it's nice to have a measure of what it means to draw a line.

tr: You describe the human element in making the pavilion, about working in the community as a whole and working with your hands as an individual. Are you also trying to create an awareness of human scale and proportion, now that every measure is defined by the abstract norm of the metre?

te: Everybody was looking for an universal unit of measure in the 18th century. It was mainly economic, because when trade started becoming international, a foot was different in every region and a pound of grain had a different weight. Trade was very difficult that way, so there was the necessity to standardize things in metric measurement. In contrast, I like George Perec's book ‹Species of Spaces and Other Pieces›. There's a bit in the book where he starts saying: «Try to live for a week in imperial measurements. Try to understand your space in relationship to your thumb, your arm, your leg, your foot, your height and you'll see the world completely differently.» It's important to remind ourselves that units of measure are highly abstract, whether metric or imperial. They aren't universal truths, they are culturally constructed instruments.

tr: But don't you think there are some universal norms in architecture like for example… proportions?

te: No, no no, no.

tr: We recently held an interview with Peter Märkli, who argues that good proportions are the essence of every good building.[2]

te: Oh, I'm sure he would. I hugely admire his work and his refinement in that field is amazing. And one I can't do. The golden section and all those perfect proportions of classicism are so Western, they do not have the same use or meaning in non-European cultures. Culture is very important in that it sets out certain values, meaning I don't oppose refining proportions and developing a sophisticated understanding of composition. But I don't believe in going from there to universal. I'm more interested in the human values, the fact that we need cultural constructs to define us, to give us ways to talk to one another, to make us human. Constructs that are as abstract and artificial as the metre, and wonderful because only the human imagination sets those things out in those terms. (pauses) I'm not sure if the universal is very desirable…

tr: However, these constructs seem to be getting more universal, as the world appears to be getting more globalized. Do you think one has to take a side, whether one acts globally or locally?

te: I'm not sure one has to. We have worked many years in London, but also in Milton Keynes, Cambridge and the Devon coast. I wish we were working more internationally. I'm not sure if we would then have to decide whether to be local or global. That's a dialectic that's somehow being invented quite artificially. Anthropologist Bruno Latour has two nice lines that say «there's nothing global about globalization» and «nobody sees the world globally». So you could say globalization is a slightly glib, lazy term for certain things going on in the world. The world has been global for a very long time in terms of trade. Things are certainly faster and some things are becoming more evenly spread today… but at what point did the world become global? I'm not sure you could pin it down to something like the internet, which is just one step among many. So global or local, I'm not sure.

tr: Maybe the question is more about universal and specific, whether you can work in a specific way within the global context?

te: I slightly doubt those two oppositions. I think you can work specifically globally as well as highly unspecifically locally. It goes both ways… I'm uncomfortable with these paradigms because they don't really exist. They're invented oppositions.

But in the end you could say that the imaginative processes that makes us creative are quite similar across time and across space. The way in which people has been inventive is quiet universal. Occasionally people manage to construct something entirely new out of their world that touches people through its beauty, elegance or economy. We are all more or less made up of the same stuff.

1 Introduction to Tom Emersons inaugural lecture ‹We Were Never Modern›, Sacha Menz, 07.10.2011.
2 See: ‹Der Irrtum ist ein Privileg der Jugend. Ein Gespräch mit Peter Märkli›, in: ‹trans›, no. 24, p. 56–61.

Tom Emerson, born 1970, studied architecture at the University of Bath, the Royal College of Art and the University of Cambridge. In 2001 he founded 6a architects with Stephanie Macdonald in London. Tom Emerson has taught at the Architectural Association and the University of Cambridge and published articles on architecture, literature and art. In 2010 he was appointed Professor at the ETH Department of Architecture in Zurich.

The interview was conducted and recorded by Julia Hemmerling, Stéphanie Savio and Matthew Tovstiga in Zurich, December 2013.