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The Critical Architect **Jonathan Hill**

While a prospect of the future is implicit in many histories and novels, it is explicit in a design, which is always imagined before it is built. The architect is a 'physical novelist' as well as a (physical historian). We expect a history or a novel to be written in words, but they can also be delineated in drawing, cast in concrete or seeded in soil.

Associated with words not drawings or buildings, and drawing forth of an idea. Dependent on the assumption the writer not the designer, architectural criticism is that ideas are superior to matter and, thus, that intellecwidely known and understood. But it is assumed that tual labour is superior to manual labour, disegno enafew architects are critical. This assumption is open to bled architecture, painting and sculpture—the three criticism however. First, because it relies on a limited visual arts-to be identified as liberal arts concerned understanding of what is architectural. Second, be- with ideas, a position they had rarely been accorded cause it caricatures who and what is critical. To consider previously. Disegno is concerned with the idea of archiboth issues, the history of the architect is a useful point tecture not the matter of building. Leon Battista Alberti of departure.

Drawing Forth

dimensional objects. The Italian Renaissance introduced and Rem Koolhaas more recent ones.3 a fundamental change in perception, establishing the

truthful representation of the building, indicating the critical architecture, independently or together. mastery of architects over building production.

The histories of the architect and the drawing are interwoven with that of design. The term design comes from the Italian disegno, meaning drawing, and The history of design from the fifteenth-century to the

notably states that «It is quite possible to project whole forms in the mind without recourse to the material.»²

Alongside the traditional practice of building, architects acquired new means to practice architec-Before the fifteenth century the status of the architect ture: drawing and writing. To affirm their status as was low due to the association with manual labour and exponents of intellectual and artistic labour, architects dispersed authorship. Of little importance to building, began increasingly to theorise architecture in images the drawing was understood to be no more than a flat and books. Sebastiano Serlio and Andrea Palladio are surface and the shapes upon it were but tokens of three- notable early exponents of this tradition, Le Corbusier

Often a design does not get built and an principle that the drawing truthfully depicts the three- architect must be persuasive to see that it does. Somedimensional world, and is a window to that world, times a building is not the best way to explore an archiwhich places the viewer outside and in command of the tectural idea. Consequently, architects, especially influview. For the first time, the drawing became essential ential ones, tend to talk, write and draw a lot as well as build. The relations between the drawing, text and The command of drawing unlocked the status building are multi-directional. Drawing may lead to of the architect. Interdependent, the drawing and the building. But writing may also lead to drawing, or architect affirm the same idea: architecture results not building to writing and drawing, for example. If everyfrom the accumulated knowledge of a team of anony- one reading this text listed all the architectural works mous craftsman working together on a construction that influence them, some would be drawings, some site but the artistic creation of an individual architect would be texts, and others would be buildings either in command of drawing who designs a building as a visited or described in drawings and texts. Studying whole at a remove from construction. Thus, the archi- the history of architecture since the Italian Renaissance, tectural drawing depends on two related but distinct it is evident that researching, testing and questioning concepts. One indicates that drawing is an intellectual, the limits of architecture occurs through drawing and artistic activity distant from the grubby materiality of writing as well as building. As drawings, books and building. The other claims that the drawing is the buildings are architectural, they are potential sites for

Ideas and Appliances

suggesting both the drawing of a line on paper and the twenty-first is not seamless however, and a significant

departure occurred in the eighteenth century when the forms and proportions, design can draw forth an idea Opposed to utility, the classification of the fine arts — conception, production and reception. notably poetry, music, painting, sculpture and architecture—is primarily an invention of that century, in literature as well as landscape. In the sixteenth cen-Associated with utility, the design disciplines that pro-tury, history's purpose was to offer useful lessons and liferated due to industrialization, such as product accuracy was not necessary. In subsequent centuries, design, are defined as applied arts at best. In the empiricism's emphasis on the distinction between fact Renaissance a form was synonymous with an idea. But, and fiction transformed historical analysis. Rather than especially since industrialisation and the codification focus on individual achievements, the historian began of type, a form may be less about an idea and more to characterise changing cultural, social and economic about a product. Painters and sculptors discarded processes in which the deeds of specific protagonists design once it became associated with collective were contextualised. But this transition was slow and authorship and industrial production. Among the fine most eighteenth-century histories inherited some of arts, which include the three original visual arts, only in the rhetorical approach of earlier histories. architecture is the term design regularly referred to and the newer meaning of design—drawing appliances (factual fiction). The uncertainties and dilemmas of must be critical of the profession.

Designs on History and Fiction

The eighteenth century was pivotal in other ways. lel with the early diaries—autobiographical fictions. Countering the Platonist philosophical tradition in People have written about themselves for millennia but which knowledge is acquired by the mind alone, and the formation of modern identity in the seventeenth the subsequent distrust of the senses in Renaissance and eighteenth centuries is associated with a new emtheory, empiricism emphasised that experience is key phasis on diary writing that Michel Foucault describes to understanding, which develops through an evolving as a \(\text{technology}\) of the self, the process of selfdialogue between the environment, senses and mind. examination by which moral character and behaviour Associating the natural world with subjective experi- are constructed and maintained in conjunction with ence and drawing attention to the conditions that other social forces.8 inform self-understanding, the eighteenth century authors and viewers. The architect associated with and reinvent life while reflecting upon it, altering tect appeared alongside it, exemplifying a new form visual and spatial diary, the process of design-from of design and a new way of designing that valued the one drawing to the next iteration and from one project ideas and emotions evoked through experience and to another-is itself an autobiographical (technology of acknowledged the creative influences of the user and the self, formulating a design ethos for an indivithe weather. The first example of such a design practice dual or a studio. An architectural drawing can be auto-

meaning of a design and an idea changed significantly. that is provisional and dependent on experience at

The empirical method stimulated innvoations

In valuing direct experience, precise descriptoday. Many people associate design with the newer tion, and a sceptical approach to 'facts', which needed design disciplines, which informs how architectural to be repeatedly questioned, the empirical method design is understood. But in the discourse of archi- created a fruitful climate in which the everyday realism tects, the older meaning of design-drawing ideas- of a new literary genre-the novel-could prosper as -are both in evidence. The architectural profession is personal fortune and identity in a vibrant, secular more compatible with the newer concept of design, society were ripe for narrative account. Notably, Daniel and is a significant hindrance to critical architecture. Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, 1719, which is often de-Since the nineteenth-century, architects and non- scribed as the first English novel, is a fictional autoarchitects alike assume that it is natural for the archi-biography.⁵ Defoe describes another novel, Roxana, tect to be a professional and that there is no alterna- 1724, as daid in Truth of Facts and thus (not a Story, but tive. To the apparent benefit of practitioners, consum- a History, a claim echoed by other novelists throughers and the state, the professions reflect the desire to out the eighteenth century.6 History's uncertain and manage capitalism's excesses and reduce the threat of evolving status supported authors' claims that the first economic and social disorder. Professionals are neither novels were in fact histories. Even Jonathan Swift's expected nor paid to generate ideas, whether critical or Gulliver's Travels, 1726, is presented as true. The fronnot. Focusing on technical competence and acquies- tispiece depicts Lemuel Gulliver, a ship's surgeon and cence to commercial and regulatory forces, the archi- captain, who claims to verify his story in a number of tectural profession wants neither architecture nor ways, including by reference to the stingers of three architects to be critical. To be critical, the architect gigantic wasps, which he teasingly claims to have donated to the first home of the Royal Society. Swift gently mocks empiricism while using its method.⁷

Focusing on the fate of individuals, the early novels—fictional autobiographies—developed in paral-

Objectivity may be an aspiration but no diary fundamentally transformed the visual arts, its objects, is entirely truthful and the diarist cannot fail to edit disegno was in its infancy when another type of archi- the past as well influencing the future. Equivalent to a occurred in gardens and garden buildings because they biographical, as well as a means of negotiation between were closer to nature and more subject to seasonal and an architect and others, and thus subject to a more yearly change. Rather than refer to universal ideas, complex authorship. A building or landscape can also

combined autobiographies of its many protagonists, cast in concrete or seeded in soil. with some getting more attention than others.

simultaneous and interdependent emergence of new earlier architecture not simply to replicate it but to art forms, each of them a creative and questioning understand it as unfinished and open to further develresponse to empiricism's detailed investigation of opment. Twenty-first century architects need to appresubjective experience and the natural world, namely ciate the shock of the old as well as the shock of the new. the picturesque landscape, analytical history and English novel. The picturesque landscape is equivalent to a history, formulating an interpretation of the past in the present through classical reconstructions, antique Architecture is usually experienced habitually, when it sculptures and imported trees. Equally, the picturesque is rarely the focus of attention. But, as empiricism landscape is equivalent to a fiction, triggering fractured made evident, habit is not passive. Instead, it is a quesnarratives, unexpected digressions, and reflections on tioning intelligence acquired through experience and identity and society. The conjunction of new art forms subject to continuing re-evaluation. Rather than necesinstigated a new design practice and lyrical environ- sarily a deviation from habit, a critical and creative use mentalism that profoundly influenced subsequent can instead establish, affirm or develop a habit that is centuries.

The Physical Historian and the Physical Novelist

To design, the architect must decide what to remember Just as the reader makes a book anew through reading, and what to forget. In 1969 Vincent Scully concluded the user makes a building anew through using, either that the architect will «always be dealing with historical by a physical transformation, using it in ways not preproblems—with the past and, a function of the past, viously imagined, or in conceiving it anew. 10 Architects with the future. So the architect should be regarded as do not have a monopoly over architecture. And neither a kind of physical historian ... the architect builds do they have a monopoly over critical architecture. visible history»⁹. Like a history, a design is a reinterpretation of the past that is meaningful to the present. Whether implicit or explicit, a critique of the present and a prospect of the future are evident in a history and a design, which is always imagined before it is built. Architects have used history in different ways, whether to indicate their continuity with the past or departure 3 from it. From the Renaissance to the twentieth century, the architect was a historian in the sense that a treatise combined design and history, and a building was expected to manifest the character of the time and knowingly critique earlier historical eras. Modernism ruptured this system in principle if not always in practice, but it returned in the second half of the twentieth century as modernism's previously dismissive reaction to social norms and cultural memories was itself anachronistic. The architect is a historian twice over: as a 5 designer and as a writer.

Histories and novels each display a concern for the past, present and future. The historian acknowledges that the past is not the same as the present, while 8 the novelist inserts the reader in a place and time that feels very present even if it is not. Histories and novels both need to be convincing but in different ways. Although no history is completely objective, to have 10 any validity it must appear truthful to the past. A novel may be believable but not true, convincing the (reader) to suspend disbelief. While a prospect of the future is implicit in many histories and novels, it is explicit in a design, which is always imagined before it is built. The

be an autobiography of its principal author, even if architect is a ophysical novelists as well as a ophysical many people are involved in its design, construction historian. We expect a history or a novel to be written and use. Equally, a building or a landscape can be the in words, but they can also be delineated in drawing,

Creative and critical architects have often The early eighteenth century stimulated the looked to the past to imagine the future, studying an

Postscript: The Critical User

itself unexpected and evolving. In contrast to a singular focused activity such as reading, use is a particular type of awareness in which a person performs, sometimes all at once, a series of complex activities, some habitual, others not, that move in and out of conscious attention.

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