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A conversation with Tom Emerson about (his) education



Tom involved in making an open-air cinema in an empty plot, Dessau, 1992

A familiar and warm smile pops up on the screen. Every three minutes the constant flow of e-mails Tom receives punctuate the conversation. But it doesn't seem to catch his attention. Stories are told. Laughs are shared. Enthusiasm is spread.

TM You studied at the University of Bath, the Royal College of Art in London and the University of Cambridge. How did you experience your academic education and to which extent is it still impacting you?

TE I graduated in 1997, nearly 22 years ago. As time goes on, I realise how amazing my education was. It had highs and lows but, on the whole, I was very lucky to be in certain places at certain times, when certain people were around. Many are still very close friends; both students and teachers. It was an incredible group of people. At the time you don't know it, especially in the younger years. You go to your course and there is some old guy talking. Some of it is interesting and some is not. Some of it you understand and some you don't. You have no idea that—in my case—it was half a day with Peter Smithson! I think it's important that you are not too aware of these things, because otherwise you go in with too much awe.

My experiences in Bath, at the Royal College and Cambridge were very different but they were all incredibly rich through the encounters I made. I met my partner Steph at the Royal College. We've been together now for 25 years. I remember being in the bar with her and thought that she was cool. She had a cool coat. It wasn't very profound. A coat, nice shoes, the music you listen to, those are the only things that we have when we first meet people. You don't walk up to a person and ask for their favorite architecture book. That is incredibly boring. It is more about the attitude. That's what is attractive.

I did my bachelor in Bath, then a year of my masters at the Royal College of Art and didn't like it, so I left.

TM What happened?

TE I fell out with one of the professors. We had an argument during the final crit, where he said: «We don't do that kind of architecture here!», so I said I am going to do it elsewhere. I walked out of the room and left my work on the wall. It was dramatic!

TM What was the project you did?

TE I did a project that was probably too architectural. The head of department was called Nigel Coates, he was part of a group called Nato formed in the early 80's at the AA and led by Bernard Tschumi. They were about running actions and events rather than making objects. I guess he would have been more interested in making films about the club scene. He thought my project was a bit boring, too much in the field of architecture.

I was more interested in a new office from Basel. The first time that I saw Herzog & de Meuron lecture was in Bath in 1990 during my second year. It was super radical. They were really young and only had small projects in or near Basel. It was a long time before the Tate Modern. At that time there were two main positions in architecture, at least in the UK: either deconstruction with people like Eisenman and Derrida's philosophy, or post-modernism. It was difficult to find anything else and suddenly these two came out of Switzerland with a moody, highly conceptual, super minimal, tensely material and abstract work. I found it totally inspiring and much closer to conceptual art. It did not sit very well with Nigel Coates. He absolutely hated it. So I left. My partner Steph left as well, she went to study with Peter St John and Adam Caruso at London Metropolitan.

I went to Cambridge and had an amazing time. That's where I got to do things like co-editing the «Scroope» magazine. It felt like one of the most exciting design projects I did there. There was one issue per year, technically quite complicated. Indesign didn't exist. You had to send the printers the original artwork. I did «Scroope» number 9 I think: a yellow one. You would be a bit shocked by the poor quality of the production. We were actually quite lucky to get it bound. «Scroope» 1 is just photocopies stapled together.

For the first semester of your diploma year, you had to write a dissertation. I wrote about Georges Perec. It was six months of just reading and writing. I became completely

obsessed by it. It was an amazing thing to do that has stayed with me till now. Last summer, the «AA files» did a special issue, where they reprinted articles from the previous 30 years. They wanted the article I had published in 2002 based on the diploma thesis. I started correcting all the mistakes. There were a lot and soon I couldn't bear it any longer. What I was doing was rewriting it, which was not the point. So I just said: «Reprint it as it is, I don't care about the mistakes». The funny thing with that article is that it was about an experiment Georges Perec had done about the ageing of his own writing, memories and the places associated with them.

TM How did you come to Georges Perec?

TE When I was at the Royal College of Art, we had a flatmate who was a great experimental poet. We used to go to readings and performances. I was reading a lot of Calvino and I remember him saying: «If you like Calvino, you will like Perec. It's even better». Most of his books were not translated into English, so I had a special access, because I have French. I could write a dissertation that nobody else had written, because it didn't exist in English. It was like finding a secret subject. I was really excited. As I was hanging around with writers and experimental poets, it was sort of a natural topic. A year after I graduated, «Espaces d'espaces» came out in English. So I actually wrote the review for the «Architects' Journal». It was a lucky hunch! Now it is in every architectural bookshop.

TM How was the framing of your education? What was the attitude towards students?

TE I would say it's partly a geographic thing and partly a time thing.

In the UK, universities have much less hierarchy than Swiss ones. With someone like Peter Smithson in the building, you are not really aware that it's an important professor. You are aware that he is old but that's it.

In Cambridge, every student has a director of studies. This is not somebody who teaches you directly but takes a broad interest in your progress through education. You could meet with them once a semester to say hello. Or, if you get on well, you might meet them once a week for a coffee and talk about how your work is going, what you are reading, what films you are watching, if you are having a bad time with your girlfriend, or just talk about life pressures. My director of studies was Peter Carl, who was amazing and totally inspiring.

He is the one who told me Perec would make an interesting subject to write about. We were only 22 or 23 people in my year. It's a really small group, so we all knew each other.

My design unit was taught by Eric Parry, who was a great teacher, but also had a really busy office. He used to leave London at about 6 pm when he was teaching, arrive around 7.30 pm at the department and give tutorials till 3 am, and then get up in the morning and go back to work. That was totally crazy. He had this amazing energy and everybody thought that he must be chemically assisted. It was never proven though. It was a really good time. He was inspiring. Everybody worked hard.

There were fewer boundaries between us students and tutors/professors. I think we didn't really know who was a professor and who wasn't and it wasn't really relevant. It was more about who you are talking to, where is the best conversation and where do you get your stimulus from.

There was also a lot going on beyond the course; a big music, theatre, and performances scene. People would miss the crit because they were in Amsterdam producing their first play. That's not exclusive to the UK but the university system has more of that other stuff going on around you in quite an energizing way. At ETH everything is very focused on the course. Everybody is concentrating very hard on achieving and producing the best possible work within that structure. The architecture department at ETH is very big. You can't know everyone. You need a system and then we all behave more systematically. You couldn't just go free-form informal with 2000 people! The whole place would collapse.

Maybe it was also the time. I think things have become more structured in Cambridge since. The whole system was slightly more fluid. There were no credits to collect or grades and education was still free.

TM What did you keep with you from the time you were studying?

TE I would say this basic proposition that Herzog & de Meuron came crashing in with in 1990. That architecture is a kind of fundamentally physical act. Before it's representational, it's visceral, sensual and physical. That's where you start from. Then you are able to give to that experience some kind of meaning through the discipline—or the undiscipline—of architecture. There is something «other», almost metaphysical about it. Their early work still has that direct-

ness. It's super radical. There is something anthropological about it. You react to it in a very human way.

TM How did it feel after seeing this lecture in Bath, to actually teach with them?

TE I got to know them later. I had a funny moment with Jacques Herzog when I started to teach at the ETH. I was really excited to meet him at a professors' conference. At the apéro I approached him and said: «Excuse me, in 1990 you did this lecture in Bath, it was a tiny lecture, and I was there. I was one of the fifty people in the room and it blew me away. It completely changed everything». He answered: «Yes I remember that. It was the first time I had a scone».

Since then he has been really supportive and encouraging about the work that we were doing in the office, at 6a. He sometimes sent beautifully handwritten postcards, with a short critique of the work. They are really nice. With time, they got quite into the work that we were doing ETH. This is why he and Pierre proposed to do the «Lange Erlen» semester in Basel together.

TM How amazing is that?

TE It was like working with your heroes. It was fabulous, a great experience. That was a moment that started during my education which shot through into the present, nearly 30 years later. And still relevant to things I do in the office and at ETH.

TM That's quite inspiring! I'd better go to all ETH lectures now.

TE Yes, you never know which one is going to be the one! Sometimes I miss them on Tuesday evenings because we are having crits with the studio. I always think: «God, I might be missing that one!», the one which is not necessarily the most high-profile, but where new ideas are unloaded in front of you. It's completely thrilling.

So all of those things happened during my education, alongside studio work and all the classic stuff. It was more a series of encounters with people who introduced you to things, ideas, work, architecture, and then you pull it all together in your own work. I don't remember the bad days so well. I mean it's not about

being totally romantic. You have to stay critical but it's more about building on the things that you think are productive.

That's also where we met Richard Wentworth. It was at the Royal College of Art. He has become a very valuable friend in teaching and in life, a kind of mentor. There was an attention to and celebration of the very small things in the city. Small moments of design and fabrication, done almost unconsciously, but somehow revealing of our culture, generating meaning without ever being representational. It is about the particular way of seeing which is not the way they are represented in «Architecture» with a capital A. It ties it all together back to George Perec's «L'Infra-ordinaire». The idea that those small things in life constitute your experience.

If there is anything that I carried with me, it is the relationships and hopefully an attitude toward things rather than the actual thing itself. The thing changes but the attitude and the curiosity that comes with it can keep you going.

