

Cleaning the space syntax spectacles

Teaching and practice continued

The results of research – or preference?

There is a telling moment in a published conversation about the work of Wittgenstein between the philosophers Karl Popper, Peter Strawson and Geoffrey Warnock when Popper, berating Wittgenstein's preoccupation with linguistics, declares 'I have spectacles and I am cleaning my spectacles now. But spectacles have a function, and they function only when you put them on to look through them at the world' (quoted in Bryan Magee, *Modern British Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 1986, c.1971).

I was reminded of this when reading Sophia Psarra and Tadeusz Grajewski's essay 'Architecture, narrative and promenade in Benson + Forsyth's Museum of Scotland' (*arq*, 4/2). Space syntax, their chosen system of measurement is a technique of examining spatial structure that one feels should be essentially quite simple but seems to take an awful lot of explaining. Indeed a large part of the essay is devoted to unpacking and cleaning the space syntax 'spectacles'. Yet having been so assiduously polished they reveal little more about the museum than is readily self-evident.

We are told how permeable the plan is, how susceptible to alternative route choices on the part of the visitor, and how the variety of spatial forms – especially the central atrium – is of assistance to user navigation. However, all this is fairly unexceptionable precisely because of the self-explanatory character of the building itself. After reading the piece several times I was uncertain whether space syntax was being used to

examine the spatial characteristics of the museum or whether the museum was being used to examine the limitations of space syntax. That the authors approved of the building was abundantly clear, but whether this was due to their research findings or simply because they liked it was rather less so.

I do not doubt that space syntax has a uniquely valuable function in the toolbox of design analysis. Of course its neutrality is both an asset and a limitation – the former in the sense that in its clinical search for such measures as axes and isovists many of the formal and emotional qualities of buildings to which architects (and critics) are inclined to give primacy are set aside to reveal another 'reality'; the latter in that its preoccupation with spatial structure predicates a sort of mechanistic world view so partial in its account of human motivation and experience as to be somewhat self-marginalizing – a factor not helped by the opacity of much of its language.

Such insights as I have gained from colleagues who know, indicate that its real strength is best manifested in comparative study. Analysis of the degree of spatial integration at the Museum of Scotland surely tells us little unless compared with that of another such institution and then related to their respective performance in use. If, for example, the Museum of Scotland's permeability was only typical of the genre then its success might be more attributable to other factors.

In this instance there was surely the perfect comparative vehicle, namely the adjacent Royal Scottish Museum which the authors characterize only as

'complementary' and 'neutral'. It would have been interesting to hear how the RSM's spatial structure compared with its more glamorous and newsworthy neighbour, and the extent to which this served its particular curatorial programme. After all, it is hardly less legible and has an equally prominent atrium. No less interesting for that matter, would be a comparative space syntax assessment of the Museum of Scotland with some of the other celebrated contemporary examples – Stuttgart, Stockholm, Bilbao, Barcelona, *et al.* – or indeed with one or two of the other finalists over which Benson + Forsyth's design triumphed at the competition stage. The raw material is surely all there.

The application of this intriguing tool to museums as one of the key cultural building types of our age could offer a rich seam to be mined. However, while not wishing to discourage the authors here, I must declare a doubt as to whether this particular study does justice either to space syntax as a serious analytical technique or to the Museum of Scotland as a unique amalgam of rationality and passion.

All the same, I'll certainly give my spectacles a good polish before my next visit.

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John Allan practises as an architect in London and was one of the contributors to the book on the Museum of Scotland reviewed in arq 4/2

The critical (ordinary) practitioner

I am pleased that my essay 'The architect and the academy' (*arq* 4/1) has provoked such thoughtful and

broadly supportive responses from Robin Webster, Mohsen Mostafavi and John Wright in *arq* 4/2. Their letters suggest that the question of the role of the practitioner-teacher should be at the forefront of the continuing debate about the nature of architectural education in the UK.

My intention in writing my essay was, primarily, to address the contradictions which arise from the predominance of the Research Assessment Exercise in implicitly prescribing that the academic activity of schools of architecture should be defined by the criteria of the 'conventional' academic disciplines in the sciences or the humanities. As I tried to point out, the nature and history of architectural education, and its practical and intellectual relationship to practice, argue that the 'critical' practitioner should occupy a key position in the academy alongside, not in place of, scholars working in architectural science and history.

Robin Webster suggests that, by quoting 'luminaries', such as Kahn, Scarpa or Zumthor, I am raising expectations that schools would have to attract such outstanding figures, to promote the 'star' system. In arguing for the practice of teachers to be, in some way, distinguishable from 'ordinary' practice I did not mean that this may only be achieved by the 'stars'. I share Robin's concerns about the risks of the architect as rock star. The point I was trying to make is that the commitment to teaching may, almost inevitably, influence the approach to practice by transferring something of the range of the tutorial discourse into the office. Christopher Platt's essay 'Sticks, stones and the bones of a concept', in the same issue of *arq* as my essay, is a first-rate illustration of this point. Incidentally, it is worth remembering that Louis Kahn and Carlo Scarpa both practised and taught with distinction for many years before their work attracted critical attention. The same may also be said of the more recent experience of Peter Zumthor. Perhaps these cases make my point.

Mohsen Mostafavi raises the question of the relationship between theory and practice and the risk that teaching from a base in practice may deprive teaching of a place within 'a larger theoretical framework'. I share this concern, and, in particular, agree with his

assertion that it is essential to 'discuss the specific attributes and frameworks of particular kinds of practice ...' I tried, through my analogies with music and literature, to argue that the nature of this relationship in the field of creative arts is of necessity complex, reciprocal and dynamic.

John Wright makes an appeal for the design studio to function as the locus of integration where research is brought into relationship with the issues of the process of design, construction and the business of practice. This holds out a further dimension for the role of the practitioner-teacher within the academy.

In the range of their responses these correspondents have added great weight to my initial argument. I am grateful for the time which they have devoted to this subject and hope that others will add their views in the interest of the defence of the core of the discipline, teaching and practice of architecture.

DEAN HAWKES
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Disdain challenged

Catherine Cooke's polemic on the saving of buildings ('What is the point of saving old buildings?' *arq* 4/2), combines serious remarks about the principles of conservation with a certain disdain towards its everyday practice and humbler practitioners. The latter shouldn't go unchallenged.

In complaining (with respect to Britain) that too many buildings are listed by 'bureaucrats' without any clear cultural justification, and that the burden of their preservation is often intolerable, she misses a simple point. The various national and local codes and systems for protecting buildings are not, and cannot be made to become, sophisticated critical statements about cultural value or about equity. That is because they are primarily empirical tools devised to serve the planning process.

There are many minor buildings that, individually, do not say anything unique about a culture but nevertheless have some value and need to be looked at with care and respect when their practical future is addressed. That is what

the day-to-day business of the historic buildings process is all about, whether in Britain or in any country. Any civilized country must have a comprehensive system in place which can deal carefully with more than great masterpieces and high principles.

In my experience, architects too often take a high-handed view of the ignorance of the officials who deal with applications for altering listed buildings. If they saw the abysmal cultural and technical level of most applications that confront the average conservation officer, they would be less contemptuous. There is a difficult balance to draw between consistency and flexibility. Undoubtedly the officials and their committees often fail to find it, or to recognize virtue in courageous schemes. In this respect, Catherine Cooke's call for better education is good. But the education that is most needed has more to do with techniques and experience than with the understanding of some abstract - and always disputable - set of criteria or excellences.

Nor will it do to lambast listing because of the burdens that fall upon owners. Cases vary enormously. For every listing that imposes a burden on an owner, another adds to the value of a property. Grants are supposed to minimize inequities, and if they fail to do so, it is the grants system for historic buildings that Catherine Cooke should gun for, not listing. I should certainly vote for some of the grants that go to over-restoring National Trust properties or tarring up English Heritage ruins being diverted to the Bexhill Pavilion.

Finally, her piece gives the misleading impression that only in Docomomo have the principles involved in conserving modern buildings been thought through. That is to disregard the broader worldwide debate that has been going on about architectural conservation in the past few years, since the writing of the Burra Charter. In part this has occurred because the Modern Movement has become historical and the legacy of its buildings, with their all-too-frequent technical defects, has had to be urgently and practically reassessed. Docomomo has done fine work in drawing attention to neglected Modern Movement buildings, famous or obscure, and in addressing technical questions. But its tendency to perpetuate the

sectarianism that lay at the heart of the original Modern Movement crusade has been regrettable.

The core of Docomomo interest has always been the achievement of the European Modern Movement, which in its purer forms only ever constituted a fraction of twentieth-century architectural culture. So it has not been able to appreciate, as commentators in countries less central to Modernism like America, Australia and Britain – and, very interestingly, France – have more readily done, that as the reassessment of the past proceeds, modern architecture becomes part of a broader history and culture which belongs not just to art-historians and architects but to a wider public.

You cannot run history for ever as a record or defence of the avant garde, which must compete for its place in a richer, less dogmatic context. Ruskin and Nietzsche and Raphael Samuel, to name three authors whom Catherine Cooke cites, all recognized the universal, unruly and irrational human appetite for the past. That appetite takes many forms. It cannot be satisfied only by dishes made up from masterpieces cooked up by professional or philosophical experts.

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Daylighting for sports

Mary Anne Steane's paper ('Flashing blades: the lighting requirements for fencing', arq 4/2) is a timely reminder of the increasing need to consider daylighting and better lighting for sport. For many years there has been a trend to design 'blind boxes' for sports activities. It was felt that artificial lighting provided the best conditions for control and for satisfaction: many older sports spaces with roof lights and side lighting, which had been designed in an uncontrolled way, caused glare problems for the rising performance standards of sports users. Now there is a need to reconsider natural lighting for both emotional and environmental reasons, and we have a better understanding of how to do it.

David Morley's award-winning cricket school at Lord's, London has imaginatively solved the problem

of providing natural lighting, while meeting the exacting performance standards demanded by cricket. This paper shows us what can be done for fencing.

The author's extensive notes and references include volume four of the 1981 edition of the *Handbook of Sports and Recreational Design*, edited by Helen Heard and I. Readers might like to know that this was followed by a second edition in 1995, jointly edited with Kit Campbell. Volume two contains the relevant material.

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Performance and preference confused

William Fawcett's 'insight' piece – 'An unsugared pill' (arq 4/1) – was clearly written as a response to my 'stinking review' (arq 3/4) of Jack Nasar's book *Design by Competition*. I hope, therefore that I may be allowed to defend my position.

While there is a clear purpose in researching and publishing the objective performance of buildings, the same cannot be said for research into subjective preferences and I felt that these two areas became confused in Nasar's book. My difficulty here is, where does this research lead? Nasar's book and Fawcett's paper conclude that architects' preferences are different from those of other groups. I am not at all surprised by this but are they suggesting that architects should design in accordance with popular taste? (The 'man-in-the-street' may like pitched roofs, but he also wants to bring back hanging!). If not, what is the point of the research?

Most architects would like their buildings to be popular, but there is a substantial difference between buildings that are well liked – e.g. Stansted Airport by Norman Foster – and buildings that are populist. The research appears to be pushing us towards the latter category. As is well known, popular opinion is prone to rapid change and is markedly different from one group to another. What Nasar identified as a preference in 1982 may be completely different two decades later. Indeed, modern architecture is now relatively popular, whereas only 10 years ago it was at its lowest ebb. Architects understand very

well that they may have tastes and preferences that diverge from those of the general public but I believe that we have no choice but to design for the longer term and, in consequence, stick to our personal convictions.

My own experience with public meetings and presentations is that an architect with good ideas and conviction will receive respect, even if their designs do not conform to the majority view at the outset whereas, in contrast, pandering to popular taste patronizes the public and is likely to be exposed.

As for a more democratic architecture, we already have democracy in the planning process, whereby the elected representatives vote on design quality. Despite a raft of well-considered government guidance, this process is frequently abused by vested interests and it is hard to see how any further extension of approval or censure into the planning process would result in anything other than quagmire. I am in favour of public consultations, local planning workshops and so on, but the prospect of answering more closely to public opinion fills me with dread, not because I am elitist but because of the suppression of creativity and the stagnation of culture that would certainly be the result.

Where I do agree with Nasar is that architectural competitions are an extremely unreliable method of procuring good buildings. Although elitist juries are sometimes to blame, the more common source of trouble is the underlying principle of an enforced separation between Client and Architect at the most critical stage of a project.

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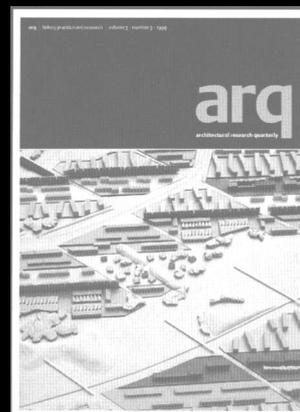
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