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Drawing in architecture

Lecture given at Aarhus School of Architecture (DK), on Friday 11 December, for the international prize « Drawing of the Year 2015 ». The year's theme was « Sustainability Through Architecture ». 120 students from 45 nations participated in the competition.

Drawing. How to talk to you about it? How to evoke one of my closest friends, the one who poetically underlines my daily life, who throws me a lifeline when it comes to tying together a little humanity with a little form and matter?

And while confiding this to you, how to convince you at the same time of how overwhelmingly ferocious this friend can be? How to tell you of my apprehension regarding him, or it? Because the force of his, or its mere presence can cut us off from the world and what motivates it : life!

And furthermore, how to bring love into this relationship, in the light of today's situation, which is erudite, public, frontal?

The relationship architects have with drawing is full of emotion, of the joy found in inventing shapes, in having projects succeed, of the disappointment in unfulfilled projects, the emotion found in discovering the dexterity and shortcomings of our hands and minds that aren't always sufficiently honed, in meeting people, including students struggling to get to know this vital friend and struggling with theories that are sometimes well-founded, some times unworkable.

In this daily exercise of passion and doubt lies the pleasure of mastering a few secrets, tricks of the trade, along with the fear of being mastered by other ones. There are rash rejections, and there are intuitions, flashes of inspiration, or slowly matured intuitions, some shared, some kept under wraps until a similar vision is revealed by others.

From this experience, and from its repercussions, I have learned that *décrire n'est pas écrire. Dépeindre n'est pas peindre*, as Georges Braque's said. To describe is not to write, is not a scribe's work, to depict, is not to paint a picture.

Even if, for this very reason, the drawing tools aimed at describing physical space can fail when it comes to writing the said physical space, they have no less influence on that writing, because what drawing contributes is both instrumental and conceptual.

The use of drawing in architecture requires vigilance - a vigilance all the greater because obligatory. This need for precaution is comparable to the one linked to the impact construction technique in the architectural process.

I strive to avoid the traditional pitfalls of drawing in architecture. These are particularly connected to the idea that architecture is an art and that the architectural work should be understood above all from the point of view of its form and the evaluation of its form – aesthetics.

Architecture must be beautiful. This aesthetic necessity is an ethical demand.

Another premise for this vigilance comes from the triple nature of geometry: descriptive, metaphoric and loquacious.

One of the main developments that comes with the passage of euclidean geometry to fractal geometry lies in the integration of the temporal dimension into the shape. Euclid poses the fundamentals, which are simple states. Then, with time, geometry detaches itself from states, investing formal mechanics, i.e. proposes theoretic constructions that contain the embryos of an unfolding in time, not only in space.

This passage from a geometry of states to a geometry that integrates time echoes a more general movement of thinking, as much in science as in art.

The pre-existing form is nature and the world that already exists. The shaping is a consequence of the project. The drawing that describes the form serves the realisation, the shaping of the project. If you're not careful, drawing as a tool for shaping the project takes over the project. But when the tool does the work in our place, the bare essentials that give architecture its very meaning, its very purpose, are lost.

The architect and the town-planner know from daily experience that, as everything takes shape, the project takes shape; that the drawing is there to support, to underpin the passage of the idea to the shape it finally takes. There are forms of geometry for use, for matter, for time, that are assembled into a realisation, a construction, in a passage to the reality of desires for ways of living, of living wishes. Some of us think that we need to start from the form. As for me, I think that if we want to get to it, we are better off not starting off with it, but letting it come to the project, come from the project.

It must be awaited, expected, but not forced. The project is more vivid when it ends up taking shape. Sometimes we get there, sometimes we don't. Some never manage to. Each project is a part of the general form and, in this sense, it manifests the general form.

If we want to allow for the arrival of the un-thought-of, which is to say, to give life its chance on the forefront of architectural and town-planning projects, it is primordial to delay to the latest possible point, the arrival of geometry, the moment of form, the moment the project takes on a shape. Why? For a thousand reasons.

The first is the great difficulty everyone has reading into an architectural form the space that it leaves, and the great weakness of only addressing this from an aesthetic point of view, sometimes even from the weak spot of aesthetics, which is the question of taste.

The second is that each and everyone, and the average person, when presented with a drawing of a project, thinks that it is written in stone, that nothing will change. Form contains the answer to a desire for eternity perceived in it by everyone.

The third is how attached the conceiver of the project is to his or her own work: laziness and complacency come into play when it comes to not wanting to retouch a first draft that is seductive in form. To delay the time of geometry is to leave open a space for listening, discussing, sharing. Geometry belongs to affirmation. It belongs to conceptualisation, which is to say to removing, to withdrawing away from the world of sharing, which is not my world.

The Romans drew for temples and palaces paving with nameable geometric forms. For the *vulgum pecus*, man in the public street, nothing like the *opus incertum*, randomly placed, uncut stones, the shape you don't take the time to draw, uncertain, because un-named, because not geometric.

For me there lies in the uncertain work the very meaning, the very sense of our work.