

Architecture Depends: Review: Robert Mull

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Boldly and elegantly, in his new book *Architecture Depends*, Jeremy Till asserts that architecture is absolutely dependent upon the 'contingent', difficult and perverse factors that architects have long tried to ignore in an effort to be pure, self-important and professional.

He suggests that both the makers and the users of architecture would be better off if architects could embrace the 'contingent' (users, budget, weather, waste and so on) in the way they think and work. Surely an obvious point, you're thinking, and Till knows this. In his introduction, he relates a conversation with a sceptical architect while taking the lift together up the Arts Tower at the University of Sheffield – his elevator pitch.

When challenged on his thesis, Till explains to his companion that his book argues that we need to 'open up to dependency not as a threat but an opportunity. That the inescapable reality of the world must be engaged with and not retreated from. And that in that engagement there is the potential for a reformulation of architectural practice that would resist its present marginalisation and find new hope.' By the 14th floor, the sceptic concedes that he may buy the book. If he does, I can vouch it'll be worth it.

Architecture Depends is Till's first book since he swapped his professorship at Sheffield for the post of dean of architecture and the built environment at the University of Westminster. Densely argued, it articulates and re-articulates the ideas, debates and insecurities that run through architectural education and practice. Till's achievement is to nail these conversations down, to give them intellectual bottom – and to make them entertaining.

He does this by providing intellectual jump leads between fields of reference and practice that rarely engage with each other. He collides the world of writer James Joyce and sociologists Henri Lefebvre and Zygmunt Bauman with the more base spheres of waste management and quantity surveying. He quotes Peter Guthrie's maxim that 'all architecture is but waste in transit' and reminds us of the powerful part that time plays in the production, inhabitation and reuse of buildings.

Till tilts at virtually every aspect of architectural culture. One of many skirmishes with convention, he considers the drawing, the photograph and the computer, and the way they can distance architecture from the 'temporality of the world'. As an alternative, Till promotes the value of storytelling as a way of capturing and working with the complexities of an architecture that can live with, and exploit, the 'contingent'.

And what a great storyteller he is. In a less serious typeface than the main text, he introduces his own anecdotes throughout. These stories are often where the argument is at its most immediate. This makes it conveniently (or contingently) possible to skim through the densely referenced text, in the serious typeface, and go straight to the dirty bits: Till having a gun pulled on him while searching for stones to fill gabions at his and Sarah Wigglesworth's straw-bale house in London (2001), where the gunman apologises, 'only joking, mate, just thought you looked a bit of a wanker'; or the reaction of the building trade to their sample straw-bale wall at Interbuild in 1997: 'I am standing in front of a fucking haystack and they are calling it the future.'

Expounding on lo-fi technology, Till introduces an anecdote about singer Elvis Costello to illustrate how the reader should embrace the complicated world of contingency. Costello would develop his tracks in the technically pure world of the recording studio – but then judge them by how they played on a cheap transistor radio over breakfast. Till wants us, like Costello, to become adept in both pure and fuzzy contexts.

In a chapter he describes as 'plain tough', Till discusses ethics. He attacks the codified ethics of the ARB and the RIBA and the 'sanctimonious sentiment... that allows architects to enter into a comfort zone in which they believe that they are doing good by doing what they do best, namely making beautiful things'.

Instead Till advocates 'architectural intelligence rather than architectural knowledge' and 'transformative agency' rather than problem solving. He restates this central point, writing 'that architecture's dependency, far from being its weakness, becomes an opportunity, with the architect acting as open-minded listener and fleet-

footed interpreter, collaborating in the realisation of other peoples unpolished visions’.

Just like the straw-bale house, this book is bursting with ideas. To criticise this is to miss the point. The bewildering density of thought and breadth of reference seem to simulate the complicated, contingent world that Till asks the reader to enjoy. Like his writing style, the form of practice Till describes is generous, humane and enduring.

Ultimately though, it is unclear if Till is really rejecting the idealist and the formal or not. Bets are hedged, and in the final page Till even concedes that ‘my argument could never be complete anyway, because this would presume to all the certainty and universality that this book has resisted’.

But because circumstances are changing fast, this last caveat is appropriate. In the deepest recession since God knows when, Till’s ‘contingent’ is not a clever stick with which to question the pretensions of the architectural club, but a reality that threatens the whole structure and the livelihoods of all of those in it.

Surely, like the man in the lift, no architect can doubt anymore that the profession is highly dependent on factors beyond its control. Those factors have shown themselves with brutal clarity. Equally, no one can still wholeheartedly believe that they can be fully protected by any of the strategies of separation that Till has described.

To survive the recession, it could be argued that a reinstatement of the purest, most elite form of practice based on the object could be the profession’s best form of resistance. Conversely, engaging with and reshaping the ‘contingent’ could be the route to survival.

Who knows? What Till’s book achieves is to set out with great clarity the territory in which the debate around future action must take place.

Ironically, those who have lived with the ‘contingent’ for so long without time to reflect, may now at least have time to read a book. Architecture Depends would be a good place to start.