

Architecture Depends: Review: Steve Parnell

Steve Parnell: Published on The Sesquipedalist blog: 17th March 2009

Jeremy Till always gets a reaction because of who he is and the arguments are often ad hominem. People tend to either be very for or very against him, never ambivalent. This may explain the vast difference in two reviews of this book: firstly by Richard Weston in BD and then by Robert Mull in the AJ. Weston is your old school unreconstructed modernist architectural academic whereas Mull is a more socially oriented, reconstructed architectural academic. Weston hated Architecture Depends, Mull loved it.

So who is the author? He's an architect that doesn't practice and the only building you may recognise in which he had a hand is his straw bale house that he designed and built with his architectural and life partner, Sarah Wigglesworth. He's an academic who has never solely authored a book - this is his first. He's also an Eton and Cambridge alumnus, which is enough to turn people against him before he even opens his mouth. Yet he's always popping up in the architectural press or at architectural events probably because he always has something controversial to say (and influential friends), and this long-awaited book is being reviewed all over the place and even debated on Radio 3. Jeremy Till is a strange, contradiction of an architectural phenomenon. On the inside leaf of the dust jacket, he sets himself right up there with Mies and Venturi and you can't really tell if his tongue is in his cheek or not.

I should probably declare right now that he was head of the Sheffield school when I did my Diploma there a few years ago and also when I started my PhD there last year. This, however, is only coincidence, as I have never been directly tutored by him. But it does give me some insight into his book. Till's method of writing, as he explained in a lecture, was to read, read, and read again. He would collect quotes in a spreadsheet and organise them by theme, according to the chapter structure he had set himself.

He would then glue them together with his own narration (strangely enough, writing by hand rather than on computer). This entirely explains the nature of this book. One of Weston's criticisms is the amount of citations that Till uses to reinforce his argument and I have to say that I agree. I read somewhere that Walter Benjamin's ultimate ambition was to write a book composed entirely of quotes from elsewhere. In the first half of this book, Till makes a good attempt at this, which is a shame, because he is a very good, coherent, clear writer who is at his best when writing freely. The personal anecdotes he sprinkles about the book in a sans serif typeface, show a softer, more vulnerable underbelly and offer relief to the almost Tafurian density of proper nouns and footnotes. These footnotes are annoyingly collated at the back and so any academic type who devours footnotes for further reading (a trait I share with Till), will have to have one finger in the back of the book at all times, constantly flicking from current page to notes. With an average of almost 5 notes per page of text, this is tiresome. Constantly having to slow down to accommodate the change in voice with the numerous quotations is equally irksome. So, like his straw bale house has been criticised for having too many ideas, his book is criticised for too many references. As he hints at a couple of times in the book, this is probably due to a paranoid attempt to make his argument watertight - a most incontinent concept. The positive side to this wide reading is a refreshing influx of new ideas and influences from outside the staid world of architecture as a new source of thinking.

Enough of the author and the book, what of the content?

Architecture Depends is about contingency: about the everyday reality that gets in the way of the best laid plans. It's about the contradiction between architecture as a contingent practice that has to deal with this everyday reality and architecture as an autonomous discipline that doesn't. Till uses the analogy of Elvis Costello recording his tracks on the highest spec equipment but immediately listening to it through a lo-fi transistor radio in order to understand how it will sound to the lowliest listener. Till has the luxury of being located within the autonomous discipline while talking about contingent practice, which he views from a distance (the unkind might say an

ivory tower). While this doesn't negate his argument, it does mean that he forms an ideal view of the stereotypical architect to argue against. The ideal stereotype is, of course, an incontestable entity that exists in autonomous academia rather than in the messy real world, but the stereotype exists because these architectural caricatures do actually exist (and in quite large numbers). We all know them - black polo neck, chunky framed glasses, unable to see past the architect's own world view etc. My last boss was one. However, there are also many, many architects who deal with the contingent every day and even some, like Muf and Chora, who are redefining their practice to benefit from it. Till is aware of these, of course, but ignores them to build a theory against contemporary architectural culture, the cause of the stereotype. And the cause of architectural culture is, of course, architectural education, with which Till is heavily involved and strongly critical (at one point he rightly criticises the traditional "crit" method of feedback, and yet I've personally been on the receiving end of a Till tirade in such a crit).

He employs Banham with his last ever essay, "A Black Box: The Secret Profession of Architecture" where he describes the tribal longhouse of architectural education, nothing short of a cult. In this essay, Banham later writes, "What is it that architects uniquely do? The answer, alas, is that they 'do' architecture." In other words, architecture is the product of architects. However, Till is unsure of exactly what the product of architects is. On page 50, it's buildings, on page 85 it has shifted to the design of buildings and by page 154, it's architecture. This may seem a trivial point as architecture has always implied building, but that's not necessarily the case as architects give away more and more of the practice of getting buildings built and constantly look to redefine everything. Buildings are necessarily of the world and therefore contingent. Architecture, on the other hand, is simply defined by architects and therefore can be anything that they define it to be, which may be building, or it may be design, or it may be writing. The very word "architecture" is in fact contingent and, as Till correctly notes, can be applied to the profession, the practice and the product of architects. Up until this point, he has been arguing that architects'

designs are impossible visions, the quality of which the built reality cannot attain. From this point on, Till recommends that architects shift their focus away from problem solving and the fetishised built object towards the user in order to make a business developing briefs and being an "interpretative agent" for an architecture that is a "transformative agency". He offers no real world examples, favouring to keep the argument well controlled within the world of the text. The recommendation is for a social architecture that puts people in the centre, rather than the building and is taken from Henri Lefebvre's "(Social) space is a (social) product." (Lefebvre's parentheses). This is radical stuff and almost every architect out there will turn their nose up at it because of their indoctrination.

To get to this point, Till has grown a theory of contingency, employing some quite esoteric social thinkers, the most prominent of which is Ziggy (ok, Zygmunt, but I couldn't resist the rare opportunity to write "Ziggy") Bauman (incidentally and completely irrelevantly, the father of architect Irena Bauman). Ziggy is the rock upon which Till stands to scorn modernity's incontinency and the dais from which he pours cold water on the modern movement's heroes - Corb, Mies, Giedion et al all get a showering down. We endure "thick time" and "slack space" and learn of modernism's incontinentencies: the intolerance of dirt, time, mess, the weather etc, the way that the unpopulated architectural photograph has to match the spotless computer render, the privilege of representation over reality, control, architecture's autonomy and architects' uncritical defence of it. I am surprised he didn't quote Tanizaki's brilliant "In Praise of Shadows", which in this context could be argued to be a celebration of non-Western contingency.

Professionalism is itself a modern concept and in part III, Till turns his attention to that of the architect, the chief sustainers of architecture in the Petri dish of architectural culture. The RIBA and ARB receive short shrift, particularly their codes of conduct, as Till redefines architectural ethics to be all about "the other" and is as unconcerned with aesthetics as it is with the client. This is the shortest, but strongest

part as Till seems to argue with assurance rather than having to constantly quote others. It's also the part that is most likely to get up architects' noses as Till calls for a redirection of the architect's attention away from what (s)he's been trained to do (design buildings) and towards a profession that is "part of the networks of others" which "confronts it with its very worst fear, that of being normal." While it's tempting to think that a recession such as today's could initiate such action, in reality, it will take a whole paradigm shift away from professional protectionism to attain.

This is an iconoclastically thoughtful and thought provoking book that should be read with an open mind by every fourth year student going back to school and every unreconstructed architect, whether in employment or not. The ideas here are not necessarily entirely new, after all, it's just a 21st century version of the 19th century debate, "architecture: a profession or an art?" However, they are situated in a wider social context and stale old architectural clichés are put out to pasture in favour of newer, fresher thinking. I shall certainly be putting it on my future students' reading lists.