

Architecture Depends: Review: Richard Weston

Tilling Infertile Architectural Ground

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His title may sound slightly obtuse, but Jeremy Till's argument is readily summarised. Architecture depends on all kinds of circumstances outside the architect's control, yet most of us resist or deny this contingency by retreating from the everyday world where "mess is the law". This begins in the tribal longhouse of the educational studio, where students learn an "alien vocabulary" and develop the arrogance that Till believes pervades the profession. The consequences are manifest on every hand, from declarations of architectural autonomy to reliance on "necessarily reductive" sketches; from the poverty of Vitruvian and Corbusian theory to the rigidities of the RIBA's Plan of Work; from Mies's "opportunistic entanglement with the Nazis" to the vacuities of computer-generated forms.

Rather than attempting to impose order on an increasingly unruly world, Till argues that architects need to embrace contingency and re-engage with everyday experience. In marshalling his arguments for this practice of architecture as transformative agency, he draws on an impressive range of recent literature. Quotations and names, many unfamiliar to me, come thick and fast -- Agnes Heller, Alberto Melucci, Johannes Fabian, Niklas Luhmann, Carol Gilligan, Roberto Mangabeira Unger and the all-pervasive Zygmunt Bauman -- but the basic argument has a familiar sixties-retro ring. Ivan Illich's critique of professionalism; Venturi's advocacy of messy vitality and Main Street; Cedric Price's emphasis on the brief and flexibility; Habraken and Hertzberger's open-ended engagement with users -- in these and other ways we have, as Till acknowledges, drunk much of his new wine from old bottles.

The language of Till's emergent architecture of contingency is, however, freshly minted. Permeated by "slack space" and existing, in emulation of Joyce's Ulysses, in

"thick time", it will be "lo-fi" like an Elvis Costello song, calculated to communicate via a transistor radio on the breakfast table. Rather than being preoccupied with form, Till believes that tomorrow's architects must be driven by a renewed sense of social and ethical responsibility, able to work with people to tease spatial structures out of situations, not stamp all over them.

My problems begin with the dustwrapper, which features four encomiums that make the book sound like just about the most important contribution to architectural theory since Alberti put quill to paper. These anticipate the self-satisfied tone that permeates the content, from the author's eagerness to exhibit the range of his reading, via the anecdotal interjections that demonstrate his speed of observation and wit, to a list of acknowledgments that reads like a who's who of the metropolitan elite in which he moves. These don't negate his arguments but seem surprising in a broadside against the supposed arrogance of others.

It isn't just a matter of tone, however. For all his advocacy of the messy realities of the everyday, Till is far too concerned with what architects write rather than with what they do. This ranges from his facile, relentlessly ahistorical assaults on writings by Vitruvius, Le Corbusier, Mies, Rossi and others, to the dismissal of more recent interests such as phenomenology and tectonics; even the RIBA's Code of Professional Conduct is found woefully wanting.

Could it really be, as he seems to believe, that we have all been so conditioned by our education and the mores of our profession that we operate with little or no regard for others? Faced with the demands of corporate clients and big developers (remember them?), it may be difficult to address the needs of what Aalto called "the little man", but it is insulting to imply that most architects, grappling day to day with the contingencies of budgets and sites, contractors and manufacturers, don't even try.

Till's dislike of most architects extends to most architecture, which he appears to see as an imposition of oppressive order by those in power. In this, presumably, his ultimate master is Karl Marx. But unlike Marx, who famously struggled to understand the aesthetic enjoyment he found in the art of a reprehensibly class-based society like ancient Greece, Till seems immune to what Karl Popper called our "need for regularity".

As to the character of his new architecture of contingency made with and for others, Till offers only one real clue: the straw bale house at Stock Orchard Street in north London that he designed with his partner, Sarah Wigglesworth. Anyone for Athens?