

1 Hopkins is far from the only architect from among the great and good to be guilty of this - but his clever combination of a soothing, conservative, aesthetic with technological sophistication is exemplary of a certain kind of distraction from wider social issues.

2 Scavenging round the edges like Mockbee, our own work employs found materials - sandbags, railway sleepers, straw and quilted cloth.

3 It is now twenty years since the publication of Frampton's seminal essay on Critical Regionalism. The trouble then as now was that, despite Frampton's Frankfurt School influences, his regionalism was not actually that 'critical', relying more on aesthetics and tectonics than a political engagement with place. The work of the Rural Studio fulfils the promise of the term. The Studio produces buildings tied to their place, to their time and to their people - buildings which then empower their users. It is likely that the work of the Rural Studio will be held up as an exemplar of how to respond to a world of diminishing resources and increasing poverty gaps. In its dialogue with the local, the architecture - as product and process - will also be seen as a pioneering counterpoint to the homogenising tendencies of globalisation, a critical regionalism in the true sense of the word critical. It is here that Mockbee's contribution shows both depth and breadth. Breadth because in its engagement with wider forces it provides an example as to how others may operate beyond the specifics of Hale County. Depth because work of such complexity, and in its attention to the making, does not arise out superficial encounters with context; it comes from a profound understanding of the issues at stake in the processes of architecture.

It was the dog days of the early nineties. In the UK, the death throes of true Thatcherism were being announced as an ineffectual Conservative Government attempted to wrap her iron fist in a softer glove. But the damage was done. A lasting damage. The world had bought the lie, promulgated by Thatcher and Reagan, that because the free market was based on rational - for which read 'neutral' - principles of exchange it stood outside the political realm. Buildings, as part of that exchange system, are thus reduced to objects of capital, and at a stroke supposedly divested of any social role. It was in the eighties that architects finally relinquished their political responsibility and capitulated to the insatiable demands of the marketplace. A few glamorous arts projects provided aesthetic distraction, a few technologically advanced buildings suggested progress was being made - but nothing could really disguise the malaise.

It was in those dog days that we went to a lecture in Chicago by a big Southern man with a big beard. Samuel Mockbee. Never heard of him before. But that lecture was one of those moments of revelation when what one has clumsily been thinking about is both articulated intellectually and enacted practically. In the lecture Mockbee contrasted his work - "for the poorest man in the world" - with that of Michael Hopkins who was then building for "the richest woman in the world" (the Queen). He contrasted his vision of a social and political role for architecture with Hopkins' denial of such a role¹. Afterwards we wrote to Sambo and asked if we could publish his lecture; in our subsequent exchanges, and engagement with his work, Sambo became a mentor. Funny to have a mentor that one has never met, but such is the power of his work that we feel we know him well.

How, it may be asked, could work that is so marginal be so powerful? The Rural Studio works on the margins in every way. Spatially, they removed themselves from the centre of institutional control, taking students away from the comfort of pedagogic structure and authority. Materially, the Studio turns away from the limits of the centre (let's face it, there is only so much one can do with brick, steel, glass, wood and concrete) and scavenges the edges for inspiration.² Socially, the Studio engages with communities consigned by poverty to that forgotten territory, that terrible analogy, of the other sides of the tracks. Constructionally, the Studio uses marginal labour, some unskilled (students), some of it disenfranchised (prisoners). Geographically, Hale County is off the national radar.³ Economically, the Studio operates beyond the limits of the market, offering a service to those who could otherwise not afford it and funding it through soft sources. Pedagogically, it challenges many of the accepted norms of educational behaviour.⁴ Margins all round.

4 The causes of the malaise in the architectural profession may be traced back to education. Four weeks into first year and students are exposed to the barbarity of the review/crit/jury. Power, hormones, fear, vanity, genius and individuality form a rich mix that sets the ethos for what is to come. Architectural education is still guided by the Victorian values of the (male) individual genius architect silently supplying aesthetic delight for rich patrons. The Rural Studio explicitly challenges these paradigms. It champions collaboration, communication, and process over product. It exposes students to a range of issues that they are sheltered from in normative architectural education – group working, social responsibility, lateral thinking, building skills, new ways of building procurement, sustainability, contingent creativity. But at the same time one should not get too misty-eyed and see it as a completely non-authoritarian structure. Mockbee and his successors are far from shrinking violets; one needs this overarching vision (and it is vision not mindless control) to avoid the work descending to a level of worthy mediocrity as so easily could have happened.

5 There is the temptation when describing the Rural Studio to use words such as ‘worthy’, ‘decent’, ‘honest’ - liberal sentiments that invite us to see the work as part of the centre. In fact the Studio is more radical; operating from its strong margins, it produces work that can hold its own in any architectural beauty contest (the final objects are spatially and technically innovative), but also providing lessons for the centre to open up its eyes to wider possibilities.

Too often the work on the margins is marginalised, pushed off into a corner, treated with disdain or patronized with interest, where it is rarely effective in making changes. However, another reading of the margins, that of authors such as bell hooks, suggests that there is a latent strength in the margins. The first strength is that it is only from the margins that one can clearly view the centre, and thus unravel all its closures, corruptions and limits. The movement suggested by this unravelling is not that the margins should move inwards to be accommodated by the centre (because that leads to a homogenizing suppression), but rather that the centre should disperse to accept the multiple values and diverse cultures that the margins address. A second strength lies in the freedoms that the margins offer away from the normative concerns of the centre; the margins offer, for bell hooks, “a space of radical openness”.⁵

It is these two strengths – of reformulation and freedom – that Mockbee initiated within the Rural Studio. His legacy lies not just in the continuing, and continually inspirational, work of the Rural Studio, but in asking such major questions of the centre. In particular his call to recognise the social context and content of architecture is crucial. The objects (buildings) and conditions (space) of architectural production are embedded in the social life world. It follows that if we choose to deny that context, in turn it will shun us as an irrelevance. As long as the architectural centre fixates on polished objects, formal gestations and technologically determined production, it will inevitably get marginalised (in the weak sense of the word). It is only by working through the values set up by Mockbee’s strong margins that architecture can once again become relevant.

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