

- We are building a house and office for ourselves next to a railway line in London.<sup>1</sup>
- London is not frontal city; it enjoys its backs.
- The building is at the end of a forgotten street.
- The front gate hints at the hybridity beyond; medieval willow hurdles against new steel.
- Letter boxes in the United Kingdom are red.
- Above, a wall of sandbags signals protection - aural and otherwise - from the railway.
- The cloth of the sandbags will gradually decay and the sand, cement, lime inside will gradually harden.
- Leaving a rippling wall of concrete, with the imprint of cloth.
- A wall designed not to shrug off time but designed to let time pass through.
- In a moment of vernacular inspiration, we use railway sleepers left on the site as window surrounds; the builders call it Flintstone architecture.
- The protection of the sandbags gives way to bandages of cloth around the office.
- Offices are normally the antidotes to the domestic - hard, shiny, corporate (and male)....
- ....but our office is wrapped in a quilted duvet, a domestic technology.
- The builders call it the nappy; they understand.
- The office sits on constructions of recycled concrete held in wire cages....
- ...memories of ruins that once stood on the site.
- The elevation of the house brings all the complexity of the domestic interior to the surface.
- The house is protected by straw; thick, comforting straw bales.
- The slick and the hairy; no nostalgic vernacular here.
- Through it all rises a tower, of books....
- ... a vertical library with an eyrie at the summit.

- If we acquire a hundred books a year, it will take forty nine years to fill the shelves to the top of the tower; by this time we shall be too old to climb the stairs.
- We started with the dining table, neatly laid as a plan, which architects would have us believe is a description of the world.
- But then we let time move in, disturbing the impossible purity of the plan....
- ....to leave traces of occupation....
- ....which we then inscribed in a plan, a plan of action.
- An interior interrupted by domestic difficulties.
- A pregnant larder.
- A bodily seat.
- And in the office, dancing rooflights come to rest over the last remaining drawing board in London, from where an enlightened Sarah surveys her scene.

The project described here is a building that Sarah Wigglesworth and I have designed. In the first major publication of the project, the critic described the building as having “too many ideas”. This was not a complement. He also said the design was “self-indulgent.” Again, this was not a complement.

What these two terms, too many ideas and self-indulgent, indicate is a certain tendency in architectural culture, and in particular British architectural culture. It is a tendency of puritanism, in which architecture is taken as a transparent manifestation of simple truths. One idea, rigorously carried through from large scale to the detail, is seen to be enough. Mature architecture is singled by a consistency of approach, clarity in the parts. Mature architecture is seen to fit into a genealogy of architectural progress, from which awkward moments, inconsistencies and hybridity are ruthlessly edited. Architectural critics establish these genealogies through their writings, defining neat packages of styles, method, techniques and taste. If you fit into one of these categories you are an architect. If you define one of these packages you are a great architect. But if you transgress these packages, these categories, you are dismissed as wayward, immature, self-indulgent, maybe even not a proper architect. This, perhaps, could be our fate. But we relish it. Too many ideas? Guilty as charged.

<sup>1</sup> Illustrations to accompany this opening section can be found at [www.swarch.co.uk/eaee](http://www.swarch.co.uk/eaee)

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What I want to argue is that this puritanism that infects the production (by architects) and reception (by critics) of architecture also infects research into design and research by design - and this infection is not healthy. I work in a University whose motto is: "To discover the cause of things." This motto is a paradigm that guides much research. It assumes that there are definable causes to things and that these causes can be discovered in a rational, essentialist, manner. It is a paradigm that has its roots in Enlightenment fundamentalism. This posits that genuine knowledge issues from a procedure of legitimation which subjects all explanations to public and repeatable testing. If the method is one of testing through empirical processes, the belief system is one which is structured around the idea that truth can be reached through rational inquiry. In an architectural context a shadow of Enlightenment fundamentalism can be seen in the adoption of prescriptive design methodologies, the excesses of functionalism, the belief that there is an inevitable logic to construction, the adoption of supposedly neutral technology as mark of objective progress, the typological rules of the stylistic rationalists, the search for perfected form through algorithmic processes ... I could go on. With the modern computer technologies, these methods are assuming new power and being used still more uncritically.

Importantly, this reliance on the belief system of Enlightenment fundamentalism is a means by which architecture attempts to legitimate its presence within the academy, inasmuch as the system presumes to construct a stable and testable knowledge base by which the causes of things - in this case buildings - can be objectively analysed, and thus the making of things - buildings - can be rationally developed. Teaching within the academy becomes a matter of learning the rules. Research in the academy becomes a matter of refining the rules in the search for a more precise version of the 'truth'. Practice outside the academy becomes the application of these rules. Strength is found within the academy through the academic legitimation of rational enquiry.

Enlightenment fundamentalism thus becomes a guiding principle of much research into architecture and much so-called research by design. There was much talk in the Delft conference of methodologies, attempting to place a straitjacket over the act of design in a way that eventually restricts it. Having too many ideas is a

challenge to such simple orthodoxies, which cannot cope with complexity or contradiction. The problem with a reliance on rational methodologies is that in the search for universal truths or approaches, the world has to be severely edited. Enlightenment fundamentalists cannot accommodate historical or social contingency. They escape from the awkwardness of the lifeworld, with all its multiple, overlapping, modalities, and find intellectual succour in neat, comforting, packages of thought. In searching for the 'truth', they bypass the real. They cannot tolerate the unpredictable. They reduce human behaviour to a set of norm-based rules.

But in fact Enlightenment fundamentalists are describing something which is not, and never can be, architecture. Architecture turns one way to the muse of genius for artistic succour and the other way to the rationality of science for intellectual legitimation - and in this endless oscillation sometimes forgets to establish itself as a discipline in its own right. There appeared to be confusion at the Delft conference between research into design and research by design. The former attempts to explain the process of design and leaves me confused because the explanation is carried out in such abstracted terms that I cannot recognise myself in the system. I suspect this is because the research is carried out by people who no longer design. The latter, research by design, was the real subject of the conference, but too often we seem to forget what the real strength of this concept could be in the architectural context - what uniquely architecture has to offer to the discipline of research. In looking to legitimate our research through the methods of others, we ignore ourselves. We are too modest.

For me the extraordinary strength of research by design in the architectural context is twofold. The first is that the act of design is a synthetic act of research through which new forms of knowledge are created. Design of buildings, by necessity, has to address a broad range of intellectual, physical, social, and political conditions. This engagement can and should take the form of research. Research into the conditions at stake in a rigorous and ethical manner is the prerequisite for design. The act of design then takes these strands and through synthesis (an intentional not impulsive moment) moves to the production of new forms of social inhabitation and engagement. These forms, let's call them buildings, are indeed new forms of

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knowledge but this knowledge is not apprehended through the traditional virtues of scholarship but through our engagement as cognisant, sentient, beings. If one of the defining features of research is that it leads to new forms of knowledge, then I would argue that design is an exemplary form of research, but only if we allow the definition of what constitutes knowledge to move away from the model of other academic disciplines. Where traditional research is often based on an analysis of the given, architectural research is projective and dynamic. Where traditional research is concerned with the objective, architectural research by design is necessarily speculative. Where traditional research is often obsessed with method and the correctness of the process of research, architectural research by design is more concerned with the outcome. As Ben van Berkel noted at the conference, the most important thing is not the research itself but what you find - a lesson many of the delegates would have done well to learn.

The second strength of research by design is that the act of design is contingent. I would argue that a defining feature of architectural design is its very contingency. Architecture is continually open to uncertainties. It is buffeted by forces beyond its control. The process of design cannot be subjected to method, the process of briefing cannot be fully rationalised (clients are hardly simple beings), the process of building is open to continual uncertainty, and the occupation of architecture is unpredictable. Bring to this rich mix, the social and political context in which architecture is situated, and it can be seen that at every single level architecture is contingent on other forces.

But surely this very contingency is sign of weakness? How could I possibly present it as a strength? Weakness at an intellectual level because of the lack of certainty in being able to analyse the 'cause of things', with contingency seen as an impediment to the establishment of a stable knowledge base. Weakness also at a professional level. A profession cannot tolerate what it cannot control, because what it cannot control threatens its whole *raison d'être* as the holder of certain truths, skills and actions. It may be argued therefore that as soon as one accepts the epistemological fragility in architecture which contingency may imply, then one also has to accept the fragility of the profession and architectural research - or does one?

Contingency is only a sign of weakness if one feels that it inevitably leads to position of relativism. By this I mean an intellectual stance in which no one competing position or argument is seen to have authority over another. Where the Enlightenment fundamentalist clings to a foundational belief system, the relativist rejects it. Where the Enlightenment fundamentalist has no place for contingency, the relativist embraces it as the very condition of intellectual pursuit.

However, what I argue is that the contingency of architecture does not necessarily lead to a relativist position and with it to a position of potential weakness. The philosopher Richard Rorty argues that contingency leads us to a position of individual responses to the world, defined through irony.<sup>2</sup> In the rejection of any notion of foundational truth, Rorty posits the self as a "tissue of contingencies". But architecture cannot afford the solipsism implied by Rorty's take on contingency,<sup>3</sup> not only because architecture is never just the work of the individual self but also, and more importantly, because architecture is part of a public and political lifeworld and in this cannot afford to be structured through a set of individual, solipsist responses. Instead, we must respond to the contingency of architecture in a manner which is responsible - responsible that is to the social and political world that architecture resides in. In this way, contingency leads us to the necessity of making strong interpretations - to what the philosopher Nicholas Smith calls strong hermeneutics<sup>4</sup>. These interpretations avoid the unitary responses determined by orthodox methodologies so beloved by architects and architectural educators. They are flexible in the face the contingency of the world, but not overwhelmed by it, because the interpretations are founded on research and (a grand word) ethics from which judgements arise. These interpretations are thus responsible. They may not be perfect,

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2 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

3 See Richard Bernstein's critique of Rorty's argument and its apolitical nature: "Rorty's Liberal Utopia", in Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 258–292.

4 See Nicholas Smith, Nicholas H. Smith, *Strong Hermeneutics: Contingency and Moral Identity* (London: Routledge, 1997).

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they will not be the same from person to person, but they do carry with them a political awareness.

Early Marx is clear in stating that the contingency of human events should not be seen as a defect in the logic of history but rather as its very condition. He states: “Men make history but not always in circumstances of their own choosing”. If we replace the word history with architecture - men make architecture but not always in circumstances of their own choosing - then my point is made on his great back. Contingency is not seen as a defect in the logic of architecture, but as its very condition. Marx then argues that the role of the historian/philosopher is not to try to rid history of its contingency, as would previous philosophers (most notably Hegel) in their pursuit of exhaustive comprehension. Rather, he argues, the role is understand the contingency and in particular to see history (or for our purposes architecture) as a set of social relations. In this light, contingency, far from a defect, is in fact a catalyst for strong interpretation. And in this light Le Corbusier’s famous call for “ineffable space (which) drives away contingent presences”<sup>5</sup> is doomed to failure.

So if, as I argue, architecture is a contingent discipline, how can we possibly research it through the act of design? Surely the context in which design is set is so open a field, so full of obstacles and conflicting forces, that it is impossible to address it in a manner which has any clarity or goes beyond a relativist response? Everything is just too slippery. My response to this apparent problem is twofold. The first is driven by intent, the second by doubt.

The architect has to act with intent. Where the weak response of the relativist is ‘anything goes’ - and with this there is an abrogation of intentional action - the response of the strong hermeneutic is one surveys and researches the contingent field, then makes interpretations, then acts with intent. In so doing architecture retains a resistive and redemptive potential; it responds to the forces of the lifeworld in a manner which both attempts to play a part in the reformulation of those forces (but not the only part, that was the modernist fallacy) but is also alert to and humble in front of the them. Humility is not something our masculine profession finds easy to accept, but

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5 Le Corbusier, ‘Ineffable Space’, reprinted in Joan Ockman, *Architecture Culture: 1943-1968*, Reprint. (Rizzoli, 1993), 66–67.

the contingent field we operate it demands it. We can only do as well as we can, never be perfect.

My second response to the slipperiness of the contingent field is driven doubt. How, you may ask, can doubt be a strength or the basis for research? Let me turn to Merleau-Ponty for an answer. He opens his inaugural address as Professor of Philosophy with the following words: “The man who witnesses his own research, that is to say his own inner disorder.”<sup>6</sup> A philosopher who opens his inaugural with a profession of doubt - and philosophy the presumed harbour of truth - it is wonderful. The point is that Merleau-Ponty sees doubt as an essential condition of his life as philosopher and researcher. To understand this, he argues, we must remember Socrates. Socrates who refused to flee the city, but insisted on facing his tribunal, because he does not see his philosophy as some kind of idol that must be protected but as a mode of thinking which exists in its very living relevance to the Athenians. He is killed in the end because he inflicts on others the unpardonable offence of making them doubt themselves. Seventy-five years later Aristotle will leave the city, arguing that he cannot allow the city to commit a new crime against philosophy. Now is it too much to liken some strands of architecture to Aristotelian retreat, a mode of intellectual protection of the purity of buildings against the stains that society will wish to inflict? I think not. And is not Socratic engagement the better model? I think so. This model is one that proceeds through doubt, in a constant unravelling of what may be wrong in order to make it better. But this engagement is not one of hopeless capitulation. Merleau-Ponty argues for a continual movement between retreat - and radical reflection - and engagement - and intentional action. “We must withdraw and gain distance in order to become truly engaged.” Architectural research assumes this movement from retreat to engagement - never fully immersed (because then uncritically overwhelmed) but never fully distanced (because then implausibly pure). The movement is underpinned by a condition of doubt, without which we are in continual danger of deafness to, and imposition on, others.

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6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1963), 60.

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This doubt is also an essential part of education. Without it, teaching becomes the inculcation of orthodoxy. Power is asserted by the tutor over students which tends towards prescriptive methods, rule-based learning and the continuation of the status quo.<sup>7</sup> Doubt, on the other hand, encourages the development of what Dewey calls ‘reflective intelligence’, whereby each student begins to develop their own structure of thinking with to face a variety of competing positions. In architecture, the development of this reflective intelligence is an essential preparation for the contingency of the architectural world.

The architect, the architectural researcher and the architectural student must operate in the territory that the philosopher Gillian Rose calls the ‘Broken Middle’<sup>8</sup>, away from the battle between the impossible purity of foundational beliefs and the damaging fragmentation of the individuals ‘tissues of contingencies’. Interestingly Rose identifies architectural design as a mode of thinking (or in her terms a structuring of concept and learning) which allows one to manoeuvre within this broken middle. But architecture, and its research by design, can only do this if we are confident enough to talk about it as a discipline in its own right without recourse to the legitimation of art and science, and also if we are confident enough to accept the condition of its very contingency. If we are, then I would argue that architecture becomes an exemplary mode of intellectual pursuit and active engagement, and that research by design within the contingent field becomes not only possible but also absolutely necessary.

I started with a discussion of our house and office. We are both academics and both architects, operating in that transgressive field of theorising practitioners and practising theoreticians. Part of our approach in its hybridity and gawkiness may be a frustrated reaction to the dominance of late modernism in the United Kingdom, the anally retentive mode of architectural discourse. More seriously, we always saw the project as a piece of research by design, attempting to synthesise, to bully, our intellectual preoccupations into some kind of material form. And if these

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7 This attitude is typified in the truly frightening books issued to delegates at the Delft Conference.

8 Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 300.

preoccupations are multiple, sometimes contradictory, sometime inconsistent, then so be it. That is the way of the world. That is the nature of the contingent field we operate in which cannot be policed by the intellectual straitjacket of simple methods, which cannot be reduced to a single idea. Too many ideas is OK.

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