

Once year, on Open House Day, London's public buildings are opened to the public. It must have been soon after we moved in that we offered Stock Orchard Street to Open House for an afternoon. We were completely unprepared for the influx of over 1000 people in the space of four hours. They were all well-behaved in a National Trust kind of way, obediently following the hastily improvised route through the house. Except for one trait. As we were cleaning up it became apparent that drawers (of mementoes, of clothes, of cutlery) had been opened; nothing had been taken but it was a very unsettling intrusion into our most personal spaces. One might have thought that just entering the building would have been enough to satisfy curiosity, but apparently not. There was a need to go beyond the public pronouncements and displays, and delve deeper, quite literally, into our private world, as if that would offer up personal secrets and habits that the architecture did not.

On reflection, however, these unwelcome intrusions were maybe not so surprising. An architect's own house is a poignant symbol of the tension between public and private lives. Public, because of the way that architects' houses compact their concerns and aspirations into a single calling card, the most visible expression there is of internal thoughts. Private, because the architect has to live out her life in this public display, which at the same time becomes a manifestation of personal patterns of living, of taste, even (it appears) of choice of private belongings. Where the public and private realms are traditionally kept apart, the Open House visitors had no hesitation of putting them in a mixer, so better to soak up the spirit of the architecture. And who can blame them? We had opened ourselves up, in many ways, to this scrutiny. We had even answered the siren calls of vanity and offered ourselves up to television, hoping against the odds that our image would survive the rapacious gaze of the Grand Designs lens.

Where most Londoners play out their lives behind the protective walls of anonymous, repetitive terraces, we had chosen to turn things inside out and project an all-to-visible expression of our identities. For some, this inversion was tantamount to showing off; thus the letter to the *Architectural Review* from Shona Mordak (it took a team of us ages to crack that anagram) that somehow manages to mix sexual innuendo with architectural intemperance. But this wearing of our hearts on our sleeves was

never intended as a new trick in the history of architectural gymnastics. Rather it was a consequence of an inherent aspect of the public/private tension which the architect's own house sets up, namely that it inevitably melds architect as professional with architect as person. Of course we were keen to get pent-up architectural energy out of our system (an energy fuelled by the fact that multiple ideas had pent-up in our teaching and writing, and that this was our first sole-authored building, with all the expectations that brings), but at the same time this was to be the place where we would live out the rest of our lives. It was not so much a question of tempering architectural exuberance with personal and pragmatic concerns, but seeing them as one and the same.

I suspect that it is this elision of the personal with the professional, the private with the public, in architects' own houses that account for their particular character. Looking through a collection of architects' houses, *100 Houses for 100 European Architects*,¹ one is struck by an unexpected gentleness, particularly in the interiors. Apart from an over-preponderance of Miesian chairs, Corbusian chaises, and unlikely light fittings, these houses generally belie the aesthetic associations of order and refinement, and the behavioural clichés of architectural intolerance and arrogance. It would appear that architects are prepared to inflict their will to experiment more on others than on to themselves. The oft-repeated tales of architectural negligence – of leaking roofs, of discomfort, of deaf ears – are attached to clients who had the bravery to commission the modern masters. It is these tales that are used as sticks with which to beat up contemporary architects, as if we all must share the perceived megalomaniacal traits of the masters. But in the case of the architect's own house these simplified tales of us (the architect) and them (the client and public) do not work, because the two roles are merged. Any calamities that are inflicted are self-inflicted, and equally any delight that emerges is something to be shared by architect and dweller alike.

In the case of Stock Orchard Street, that tension between public/private, professional/personal, architect/client was always with us. Because of our relative inexperience as architects, the non-architect side probably dominated, which may

1 Gennaro Postiglione, *100 Houses for 100 Architects* (Taschen GmbH, 2008).

explain the difficulty some have found in placing the building firmly in an architectural canon. We brought to the table all the interests, influences and ideas that had been accumulated over the years, and used the building as a means of exercising them. If other authors in this book sense the guiding hands of precedent in the building, then that is an inevitable consequence of the way that architectural genes accrete in us all over time (it is hard to spend one's life with eyes shut and without forming allegiances) and then release themselves visually in instances, there to be read by other like tea-leaves. But that release is not fully controlled in Stock Orchard Street, which never started with the ambition on our part to place ourselves intentionally in a particular architectural genealogy.

What is less clear is how those interests, influences and ideas see the light of day in architectural projects, and why some of them emerge but not others. The standard histories of architecture tell stories of batons being passed, of X seeing Y and so doing XY, of styles evolving one out of another. The better architectural histories attempt to place these architectural ties in a wider social and cultural context. The more reductive ones attempt to wrest them from uncontrollable external forces and place them in an autonomous line of cause and effect. There is very little exposition of the mundane aspects of architectural practice,² in which the unexpected minor event is almost certainly as influential as the major architectural narrative.

As I have written elsewhere,³ it is the tendency of architectural culture to suppress the contingent event in order to assert the authority of a discipline untroubled by external dependencies. However, the design of one's own house brings these contingencies firmly and continuously into focus, not least because one is so bound up in the economic, pragmatic and emotional aspects during the course of design and construction, and also because one must live with the consequences of that

2 Albena Yaneva's ethnographies of OMA are exemplary exceptions, showing how even the most famous of architects go through the most mundane of processes. Albena Yaneva, *The Making of A Building: A Pragmatist Approach to Architecture*, 1st ed. (Peter Lang Pub Inc, 2009). Albena Yaneva, *Made by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture: An Ethnography of Design*, 1st ed. (010 Uitgeverij, 2009).

3 Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009).

construction in the future. As Gennaro Postiglione notes: "it is only with his own house that the architect realises that construction sites are not complete after they have been handed over." It is not just that the actual process of construction is never complete, but also that time moves in and makes continual social and spatial adjustments.

In our case economic circumstances and pressures on time (we had to get out of the caravan) meant that the building was never, and never will be, 'complete'. This incompleteness was too much for the first jury from the RIBA Awards Group, who barely entered the building, such was their discomfort. Measured against the standard architectural values which are perpetuated by awards systems, incompleteness is seen as a mark of weakness, since only in the completion of the parts can order and perfection be found. Stock Orchard Street is not a conscious critique of these values (because that would be to replace one fixity with its equally stubborn obverse) but it does accept that accidents might and do happen, and that this is not necessarily a bad thing. It also understands, even welcomes, the fact that things do and will change during the course of construction and occupation. This does not mean that Stock Orchard Street is a random collage or a relativist architecture. Although this might sound like an interesting architectural experiment in abstract terms, the personal takes over the professional to ensure that intent about the way we might live guided the progress of the design through the various competing forces. However, an openness as to exactly how that intent might be spatially realised allowed adjustments to circumstances along the way, sometimes surprising us in their outcome.

This inexactitude was helped by the relatively cumbersome state of computer aided design at the time, which meant that the design developed through hand drawings and models rather than being exposed at an early stage to the stage lights of a full rendering. The hand drawing works through hunch, anticipating but never fully determining the spatial experience, whereas the computer render works by foregrounding the physical structuring of space, forcing one to concentrate on its technical and aesthetic construction as opposed to its social occupation. I suspect that if we had taught ourselves to use computers earlier and better the building would have been ironed a bit flatter, losing those gawky moments and with it, some of the

surprise. Such lack of total control may appear counter-intuitive to professional behaviour, which almost by definition is about retaining mastery in order to maintain professional authority, but it is inevitable given the multiple contingencies of architecture practice. Design needs to be read as a set of continuous adjustments to changing circumstances rather than as an untroubled linear route towards a predetermined vision of perfection.

Memories are now fuzzy as to the way that Stock Orchard Street really unfolded as a design, and how far this model of adjustment and contingent influences played out in practice. Some things are certain: the straw bales came directly out of a dinner party conversation with the environmental journalist Kate de Selincourt (but then what would the house have been made of if that conversation had not happened?) The sandbags came from a slide we often used in lectures at Kingston Polytechnic, a picture of people attempting to keep a semblance of normality as they took tea in a Kardomah Coffee House during the Blitz, the plate glass window protected by a wall of sandbags. The raising up on stilts was a direct response to the height of the surrounding ground. The orientation and glazing of the main elevation was there to catch the sun. And so on. But other things are less certain. The tower may come from a compaction of dreamy stories of Rapunzel, of climbing through stacks of books, of retreat, of Iranian windtowers, of Tuscan hilltowns, of heads with mullet haircuts, of the draw of long vistas.

This lack of certainty in the design genealogy in turn suggests an openness as to how the building might be read and experienced, so that interpretations have been thrown up that at the same time surprise and delight us: Swiss friends who stood looking up the railway line and said the expansiveness reminded them of building next to a lake at home. Giles Worsley in the dining room saying it was pure medieval manor house, a public hall with a minstrels' gallery. And Samantha Hardingham who best captures the ambiguities inherent in the project: "part farmhouse, part allotment, part modernist villa, part castle, part bunker..."⁴

Such ambiguity is something that much architecture attempts to rid itself of; clarity, consistency and categorisation are upheld as strengths. It is not so much that

4 Samantha Hardingham, *London: A Guide To Recent Architecture* (London: Batsford, 2003), 184.

we consciously overturned these accepted architectural virtues, but that the process of designing one's house inevitably introduces contradictory forces. Our inclination was to accept and enjoy the ambiguities rising out of these forces, rather than suppress them in the name of order and reason.

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