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Contributors
Mike Austin
Craig Bremner
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Eva Prats
Leon van Schaik

Interviews & Reviews
Neil Durbach, Tom Heneghan, Richard Francis-Jones, and Wendy Lewin in a conversation with Gevork Hartoonian.
Gevork Hartoonian, and Adrian Snodgrass.

Remembering Harry Seidler, 1923-2006
C. Abel, P. Drew, T. Heneghan, H. P. Oberlander, L. Nield, J. Perry, J. Taylor,

http://www.arch.usyd.edu.au/web/research/publications.html

Close-at-Hand Exercises with Distant Tutors

RICARDO FLORES AND EVA PRATS

Themes for Long Distances

Over the last three years we had the opportunity to run workshops for architecture students in both Sydney and Perth. The challenge of planning a workshop in an architecture school far away from our practice prompted us to think about how students would engage with our interests, and what design themes we should propose in order to construct a mutually interesting dialogue.

What topics would appeal to them? Could we propose exercises related to our own concerns, our way of working and doing research, and would the students trained at universities with a totally different architectural pedagogy be interested in them?

To start the workshop and to open a dialogue, we felt the need to choose topics remote in time, topics from history, suitably removed from a local perspective. At the same time, to open up distant vistas for both parties to consider together, with a point of contact onto which the two interlocutors, students and teachers, could focus their gaze, the need for ideas that might be bounced off that distant plane, and thus set up a constructive dialogue.

Erasing Time Distances

As practising architects, the choice of points for communication with students always relates to the work we are doing at that very moment in our office in Barcelona. In this way, the workshops became an extension of our studio and issues and preoccupations that were partially uncovered and identified, at least to us. The fact of taking our research and inquiry into a university obliged us to differentiate the topics of interest much more clearly, so we could start to speak about and debate them with others.

For us the specific circumstances of any new project always brings out other issues, more distant in time and geography, but in relationship with other historical contexts, architects or artists. The intention of the proposed exercises aimed at addressing the following: to update history, or erase it; and to detect similar problems in other eras and extrapolate them to our current situation. In this way architects of the past are made contemporary so we can look at their work without time and distance separating us, so the possibility of trying to see their approaches to the issues involved in the design of a project as if they were our own, and letting them serve as commentaries, guidelines for our own proposal. This

is perhaps a way of not responding immediately to the problems raised by a particular given situation, but instead going further back into time to see how other architects addressed the same topics, and then try to understand how they reacted to and resolved them. In addition to providing an evolving conception of certain issues of design, this exercise also helps us to better understand what kind of work or research we have in front of us. We like to see this as a way of learning from history and engaging with it in terms of our own preoccupations. We might say that in doing so we configure a fragmentary but practical understanding of different moments in the history of architecture. Therefore, for us, these exercises can have a starting point at any moment in history.

Case 1

A Private Study in a Public Building. Sydney University, 2003

The first year we visited Sydney we put forward an exercise on the intermediate, residual spaces that are often found in every large public building. These spaces may coincide with the boundaries between different stages of the building's growth, from the need to pass from interior to exterior, or with a change of direction in its geometry. Spaces of this kind had emerged in our work on the new Windmill Museum in Mallorca. They are new spaces, tangential to the walls and roofs, large enough for a person to enter, or otherwise disappear and become thresholds (fig. 1). On the basis of this project it could be argued that any building of a certain size would contain extra spaces, minimal in their dimensions that can be transformed into small rooms —study rooms, for example— independent of the core function of the building. In other words, they are inside the building but their use is independent of it. They utilize its support structure, and steal a space from it, taking advantage of some fissure in the building's geometry, seams where two moments in its evolution, whether historical or constructive, meet. The metaphor that helps us to think of such spaces is the interior of a pocket, whose space is inside the trousers yet independent of it. This exercise is based on drawing, and focuses on discovering, within the geometry of the existing building, a possible theft or hideaway.

Figure 1: Interior of a light well at the Windmill Museum in Mallorca, where someone could hide...

In order to make clear what we meant by asking

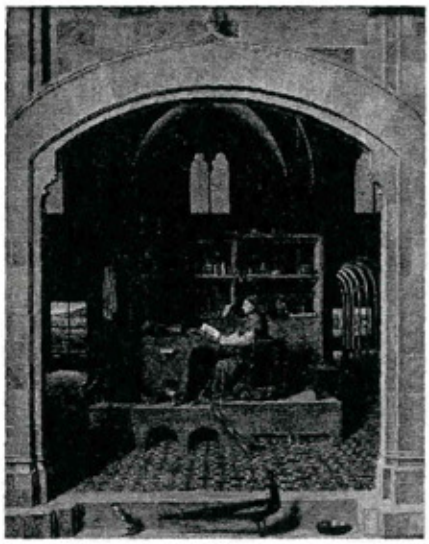

Figure 2: Antonello da Messina, St Jerome in his Study, c. 1475.

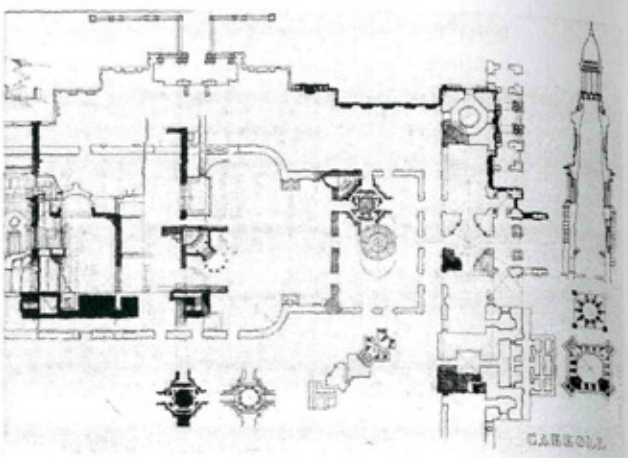

Figure 3: Exercise by Celia Carroll from the Workshop A Private Study in a Public Building, Sydney University of Architecture, 2003.

students to design a study room, we presented some images of St Jerome in his Study, embodying the promise of a tranquil, secluded place in which to be alone with one's intellectual interests (fig. 2). Various artists in the course of the 15th century have depicted the image of this saint in a little room in the great palace, shut away in that minimal cell with everything he needed to spend his uninterrupted work and study at his disposal. And yet a taste for such a retreat was very much in vogue among the humanist intellectuals of the time, many of whom had a little *studiolo* within their palaces and mansions.

Therefore, having defined a first point of contact in time, we then needed a second point of departure: a physical, geographical space, a building in Sydney constructed on the basis of a strict geometric definition. This kind of geometric premise is typical of the neoclassical public buildings of the 19th century. After studying a number of possibilities, we thought that Sydney Town Hall would be an appropriate building to work with (fig. 3).

Case 2

Through the Canvas. University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2004 and Curtin University, Perth, 2004

In our second visit to Australia the study theme was derived from a research process that was relevant to a project we were then completing, namely, the extension to a house near the centre of Barcelona,

originally built for a working-class family.

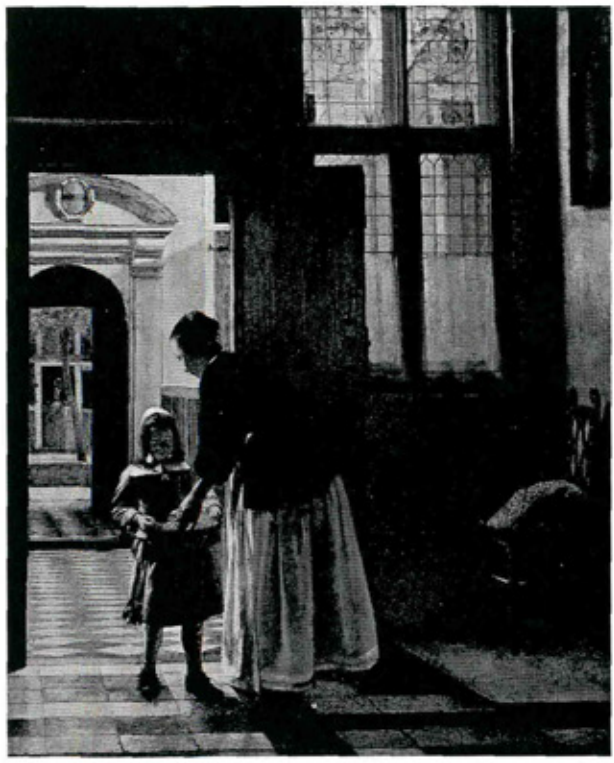

Figure 4: Pieter de Hooch, A Boy Handing a Woman a Basket in a Doorway, c. 1660-63.

This project led us to think about the private houses built in Dutch towns in the 17th century (fig. 4). Pieter de Hooch was one of many Dutch painters who skilfully depicted that hard-working, progressive society. Such paintings invite reflection on the kind of interior spaces that configured these houses and the form of transition from room to room, casting light on the relations between family and society, with a series of spaces that connect private life to the public part of the house, the city and its streets. But above all, the depicted interior spaces gave us the very insight into the kind of clients we were working for in the house of Barcelona: the intensity of use of this house, the domestic life of the family and the pride in possessing a 'tailor made' house became apparent in each one of those scenes, in the domesticity and the everyday life that fill each canvas.

We concluded, therefore, that the exercise for the students should consist of converting one of the houses, depicted in those 17th century paintings, into a contemporary dwelling for a family of four. The paintings served as a touchstone, a starting point for the projects (fig. 5). In this exercise, the site for the work was the painting itself, as the point of encounter where we could meet and open a dialogue. Into that painting we projected our cultural differences and these were reflected back, revealing the contrast between the different ways of understanding the exercise.

A slow method

Our day-to-day, primary design activities are based on drawing by hand and making models. We are especially interested in continuing to use manual tools —even if we have to switch to the computer— because of the direct contact they establish between the hand and the mind. We still find a paper surface much more sophisticated than a computer screen. The paper allows us to see a complete design at

once, with all the different scales needed, all parts related to each other in a readable order. And while our hands are moving, drawing with two set-squares, we have time to think and observe our actions.

We draw on tracing paper using pencils and pens, rulers and set-squares. This allows us to make changes without rubbing out. We draw time and again on top of the previous drawings, on top of different stages of an idea.

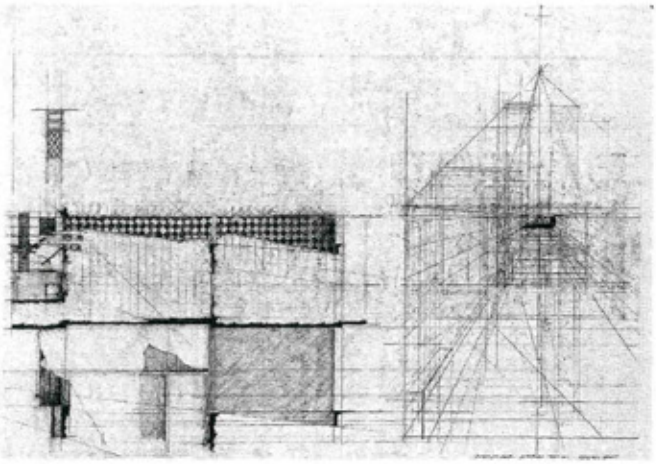

Figure 5: Drawing of initial interpretation of the painting, from the exercise of Andrew Noonan, El-Hassan Amr and Stephen Pratt from the Workshop Through the Canvas, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2004.

In short, our way of working allows us to have the experience of slowness. The tools we use thus correspond to the slow capacity of the hand. This is something that never happens when using a computer. The printouts are too clean and fail to show the densities and the zones with the greatest accumulation of thinking that underlie each drawing, so that there is nothing to bear witness to the history of an idea's development, the process of evolution of a drawing. In our opinion, this is something crucial to understanding the complete project.

We believe that the values we attach to the design process are clearly apparent in the three different workshops we ran in Australia. They were short courses of five to seven days of intensive work, and we knew in advance that the exercise would be only a beginning. But it is precisely there, in these first observations and decisions that we wanted to make a dialogue, through the process, without thinking about the end result. The themes for these workshops stress the value of slow and accurate observation; they do not seek a particular solution, closure or conclusion. This is the reason why we asked students to draw by hand, and to work, in groups of two or three, on large sheets of A0 paper, similar in size to the desks on which they were spread. This size of paper is large enough for several people to draw simultaneously, and large enough for many annotations, which remain in view not only to the team working on it but also of the other participants. This meant that the information was always there, ready to be exchanged and discussed throughout the course of the workshop. We wanted to ensure that, from day to day, these drawings took on the significance of a material document, a unique repository of transferable information, useful to all who were exploring the same theme.

Implicit to the further elaboration of the brief for the exercise was the belief that the proposals of the students would emerge from drawing of that which already existed. These were exercises in observing and drawing, seeking to discover with the greatest care, the point or line that gives us the momentum

for something new to occur. This way of working revealed quickly how a teaching method that was widely used in architecture schools until ten years ago was now uncommon. No wonder that it took some time before we started to get accurate drawings with a sufficient density of information that we could begin to discuss.

The emergence of these drawings was also made slower by the lack of proper tools. Most architecture students today no longer have a decent set-square, let alone a good Swiss compass.

We focused our attention on proposing a theme that would provide a point of contact with the students, but the method opened up a great distance between us. Only a few students could handle a pencil well enough to explore and explain their ideas.

We are inclined to think that with the passing of time the participants will remember this as 'that workshop where they made us draw by hand'...