

ARCHITECTURE DEPENDS



Jeremy Till

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For Sarah

Who was always with me when I wrote this book

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Preface : Mess Is the Law

It started to go wrong quite early.

The graffiti went up in the toilet of my School of Architecture sometime in my first year.

Less is more: Mies

Less is a bore: Venturi

Mess is the law: Till

Maybe I should have been flattered to be placed within such a distinguished genealogy of architectural greats, but actually I was hurt. Some wag was acting the schoolroom bully. The wag did not have a prescient sense of my later obsession with the everyday in all its glorious mess; he was mocking my complete inability to master the use of ink pens.

It started to go wrong quite early, my relationship with Architecture.

We had been issued a shopping list in our first week and this included 0.25mm and 0.35mm Rapidograph pens. These were soon put into use in a precedent study exercise, in which each of us had to trace a complete set of drawings of some piece of iconic architecture. This was boot camp pedagogy; by slavishly copying the masters the hope must have been that some of their aura would be transferred to us innocents. Others in my year quickly graduated downward to 0.18mm pens, even to the holy grail of 0.13mm, because these narrower instruments were neater, more professional, and more expert. Somehow these putative Architects managed to keep these needle-thin nibs running smoothly over the tracing paper. For

whatever reason (I now put it down to weird bodily electromagnetic forces), my pens clogged up and trailed blobs of ink across the paper. I soon gave up on the 0.25mm and tried to do the whole exercise in 0.35mm. Try tracing the precise minimal lines of Mies van de Rohe's Farnsworth house with a stuttering fat line of ink blots and you will know the meaning of architectural humiliation. In a strange way I have never forgiven Mies. That is why I put him on the front cover with Mark Wallinger gently roughing him up by walking round the precious spaces of Mies's Berlin National Gallery in a bear suit.

My drawings were, indeed, a mess. In terms of my student career this was a disaster. There was an almost precise correlation between the ability to master a 0.13mm Rapidograph and the gaining of good grades. I left the School of Architecture with my tail between my legs.

It has taken me this long to work out that maybe architecture is a mess; not an aesthetic mess but a much more complex social and institutional mess. It has taken me this long to have the confidence to shout back to the wag: "Yes, Mess Is the Law," and be proud of it. It has taken me this long to get to a point of discovering that this mess is not a threat, but an opportunity. This book sets out the case.

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Introduction : The Elevator Pitch

The essential argument of this book is straightforward. During the course of its writing, people have often asked, “What is it about, Jeremy?”

“Short or long?” I ask.

“The elevator pitch, between floors.”

So, getting in on the ground floor, I say: “It is based on two premises. First, architecture is a dependent discipline. Second, architecture, as profession and practice, does everything to resist that very dependency. The book explores that resistance.”

By this stage we are at the first floor.

“So, what do you mean by dependency?”

“I mean,” looking at the indicator clicking from 1 to 2, “that architecture at every stage of its existence—from design through construction to occupation—is buffeted by external forces. Other people, circumstances, and events intervene to upset the architect’s best-laid plans. These forces are, to a greater or lesser extent, beyond the direct control of the architect. Architecture is thus shaped more by external conditions than by the internal processes of the architect. Architecture is defined by its very contingency, by its very uncertainty in the face of these outside forces.”

“But that is kind of obvious,” my elevator companion says, “so what is the big idea?”

“No big idea, but maybe a big problem, namely architects tend to deny this dependency. They feel more comfortable in a world of certain predictions, in linear method, in the pursuit of perfection.”

“But that’s kind of obvious too. Doesn’t sound like much of a book if it just states two truisms.”

He has hit a nerve here. I have wondered for years why others never mention an argument that I think is obvious. Is it because it is so obvious

that it is not said for fear of being seen as simple? Or is it because it is too uncomfortable to say, a kind of taboo that we all know to be the case but fear acknowledging? I am hoping that the latter is right and say as much: “Right, but what if that book is about the clash of those two truisms and the gap that opens up between them? The gap between what architecture—as practice, profession, and object—actually is (in all its dependency and contingency) and what architects want it to be (in all its false perfection). What then?”

He does not answer, but makes a face somewhere between a smile and a grimace (he’s an architect, you see), maybe acknowledging his own frailty while at the same time wanting to shrug it off. A both/and face that is appropriate for an argument that, as we shall see, resolves itself in a both/and solution.

“And what if,” I continue, pressing home my advantage, “the book argues that we must bridge that gap by opening up to dependency not as a threat but an opportunity? That the inescapable reality of the world must be engaged with and not retreated from. And that in that engagement there is the potential for a reformulation of architectural practice that would resist its present marginalization and find new hope. What then?”

“Then I might buy the book.”

We get out together at the fourteenth floor.

I CONTINGENCY

Part I traces architecture's relationship with contingency. Chapter 1 looks at the way that architecture has avoided engagement with the uncertainties of the world through a retreat into an autonomous realm. It argues that this retreat is deluded. Chapter 2 examines how architects have attempted to maintain a defense system against the overwhelming forces of modernity through maintaining barriers behind which an ordered world can be erected. It argues that this defense is impossible and that only a semblance of order is created. Chapter 3 specifically addresses issues of contingency, working through philosophical and sociological constructions of the term in order to arrive at a point at which contingency is seen as an opportunity for the intentional reformulation of a given context.

