Architecture and Anthropology: Thresholds and Crossings Between Disciplines

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Abstract:
In this paper, I intend to discuss the relationship between architecture and anthropology as disciplines. There is, in this question, a point of threshold: a transition between one condition and another might be observed.

The key difference between the disciplines remains the operational nature of design disciplines as opposed to the descriptive nature of anthropology. In order to understand the relationship between these obviously related disciplines, this fundamental difference must be clearly understood and expressed. Anthropologists are often uneasy with the relative ease with which architects propose change to a situation, imposing their will onto a site. Architects, on the other hand, are commonly confounded at the complication found in the simplest act by the anthropologist: the problematisation of everyday life sometimes jarring with their entrenched desire to act first and theorise later.

This paper charts the development of a new studio and lecture course for architects in Manchester.

1: Form Vs Context

One of the problems I have faced in producing this paper is the precise form which I intend the course to take. This is more than mere indecision, or entirely dictated by the circumstances of the class (2nd year architecture students, some 180 to the class meaning a stricter lecture format must be followed).

The assessment is, to an extent, determined by the sheer volume of students. This makes certain field-trips and discussions whilst visiting museums, walking in the street, etc. much more problematic.

Such pedagogical issues aside, I am faced with the issue of how exactly do deliver a course on architecture and anthropology. The potential for the course is as the beginning of a whole sub-discipline of architecture and anthropology. This is tempting, and opens a great many issues up to the course, but this has the effect of loading too many expectations on what is actually a simple matter of relating the fairly obvious connection between these disciplines to a cohort of students.

In straightforward terms, anthropology offers an understanding of the varieties of possible human life-worlds. This depiction of the discipline may be disputed, but is a good enough working definition that can be unpacked to include all the various constructs common to anthropology.

It is important not to simply relate a traditional course introducing anthropology, however, and make this completely relevant to the architects and their chosen profession. As such, the course needs to be practical and applicable to the everyday problems faced by designers. This cyclical argument returns one to the whole-new-discipline approach.

Architecture has, as part of its own disciplinary methodology, a set of descriptive practices including observation and drawing. This similarity between the sketchbook and the fieldnote is something discussed by Wendy Gunn (2009) in her collection on the topic, and bears further scrutiny as the theme for the course.

Working with this theme, the course can centre more on representation. How do we begin to explore the people and circumstances for whom architecture is intended.

Architecture's own way of dealing with this presents opportunities as well as problems, and highlights many of the curious and fundamental differences in approach from anthropology. One of the key differences is explored by Reiser + Umemoto in their *Atlas of Novel Tectonics* (2006) is the provocative nature of pure form.

In this exploration, a piece of cloth from a lithograph is re-scaled to explore the deformations and recontextualisation the form undergoes as it moves from the human scale to that of landscape. This is a strategy often undertaken by architecture: to provide a form as a provocation, as a context for human activity, something to react to.

Others such as François Blanciak in *Siteless* play with this at the extremes of formalism, positing a sourcebook of scultptural geometry that might be exploited by architects. *Formless* suggests a complete arbitrariness to form that is concerning, but intellectually interesting. If architecture is understood as the provision of context, could it be said that the actual form this takes is, to an extent, not terribly important?

The Highline in New York is an interesting case study in this regard. The project has its roots in a local movement to retain and reuse an abandoned freight railway track on the West Side of Manhattan. This is not, however, the main point of this case-study. As interesting as the prospect of community activism is, the actual *architecture* resulting from this is the more interesting study.

The Highline is a project resulting in an urban park, a space without a definite function. As such, it fails to fulfill the *form follows function* dictum, as the function is indeterminate, contingent, and uncertain. This can be said of many parks, of course, and the play element of such spaces is a welcome relief from the serious business of a working city, particularly one as frenetic as New York.

The purpose of the Highline is to offer opportunities. To enable wandering and musing, to escape functionalism and allow people to make what they will of the city, experiencing the height from the ground, the experience of appropriating industrial space controlled and closed off to most, the experience of choice. This space is a pure place, as it offers a blank slate to the visitor: not the control of an airport, the compulsion to shop of 5th Avenue, the coded rules of restaurants, or even the convenient stopping point of a city square. The Highline must be visited, but why?

The structure was documented before work began by photographer Joel Sternfeld. His work set the scene for appreciating the space of the line, its relationship with the city and the river.

> 'The High Line does not offer a God's-eye view of the city, exactly, but something rarer, the view of a lesser angel: of a cupid in a Renaissance painting, of the putti looking down on the Nativity manger. That little height makes even ugly things below look orderly and patterned.' Adam Gopnick, *A Walk on the High Line/The Allure of a Derelict Railroad Track in the Spring* (in Sternfeld 2009).

The access to the High Line provided by Diller Scofidio + Renfro / James Corner Field Operations is precisely the kind of project discussed earlier: a provocation, a pure form not in this case inserted into the city, but suddenly made available to the everyday experience of the New Yorker. This is Architecture Trouvé as in the manner of Duchamp's Objet Trouvé, but the key here is the form and its celebration.

Another strategy regarding form is attempted by Kengo Kuma. His manifesto, *Anti-Object*, takes a cue from the stage of Japanese Nō theatre.

> 'The dissolution of the distinction between matter and time and the conversion of matter into time are not themes unique to the dramatic spaces of Nō. We are today engaged in an effort to regain time. Up to now, time has been suppressed by an excess of matter. By stripping away matter, we can restore time. Enabling matter to articulate time, we can excite the flow of time. To do so, we must criticise matter at the same time believe in the potential that is surely sealed into it. The result will be the emergence of something that is not so much architecture as landscape.' 2008:68
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> 'Architecture is another name for the aggregation of matter (i.e. the creation of an object), and 'particalisation' is the reversal of that aggregation. The German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) effected this reversal in philosophy long ago, to counter the Certesian definition of matter as an absolute mass

> (aggregation) that was independent of the mind. ... Leibniz criticised all attempts to create a stable, fixed aggregation, declaring that 'the monad has no window'; neither substance nor accident could come in from the outside. In the same spirit, we must continue to shun the stability, unity and aggregation known as the object.' 2008:119

Kuma's dissatisfaction with the object-oriented nature of architecture is not to move towards the social, but to continue to consider form, but form as apprehended and experienced a part at a time. This phenomenological approach to architecture is gaining prominence, as the monumental falls out of fashion. That the alternative to objecthood for this architect is not a social structure, but an appeal to temporality and the monad is telling.

Such an approach is mirrored in the work of Foreign Office Architects in their Yokohama International Ferry Terminal. FOA, working as a large team, but under the leadership of Farshid Moussavi, played with the project as a kind of 'no-return' diagram which respected the security needs of the programme whilst offering a free-flowing landscaped pier.

This is characterised by Moussavi's understanding of architecture. For instance, writing in *The Function of Form*, he states that:

> "The flexibility of the Gothic system is illustrated in the history of Milan cathedral, which was built over four centuries, under the supervision of more than eight architects and engineers. Each of the architects and engineers had a different idea for the relationship between the central and the side aisles. The differences lay in how it would be realized – the extent to which the side aisles and the central aisle would be visually connected, and whether the orientation would be predominantly axial or also transversal. Most Gothic cathedrals remained under construction for many years, but the inherent flexibility of the base unit enabled it to be varied as it repeated to accommodate specific requirements in different regions of the building, evolving over long periods of time into different spatial configurations with distinct affective properties." Moussavi, F. (2009:31)

> "The Gothic was unique as a moment in the history of architecture when form was both physical and abstract. In all other periods form and matter have been considered in opposition to one another, a duality which is paralleled in Western thought: the empirical world that we see and sense on the one hand, and the non-physical which accounts for the mental and the spiritual world." Moussavi, F. (2009:31)

In other writings, Farshid Moussavi, architect with FOA discusses the function of form and the function of ornament, discusses his approach to architecture with reference to the stage of global capitalism we now occupy. Citing the work of Mies van der Rohe as an example of earlier control-led economies, where rationality was the aim, Moussavi compares his architecture to a piece of gym apparatus.

> "Certain parallels could be drawn between the way Mies's forms work and gym equipment. The typical piece of gym equipment is fixed and one-track-minded, developing a single muscle at a time through linear or isolated patterns of movement. A bench-press works your arms, a butterfly-press works your pecs, over and over again." Moussavi, F. (2009:20)

The intention for Moussavi is clear, then, that this is an inappropriate response to the current demands of architecture. His intention is a clear move away from such prescriptive design, and towards one which allows for free movement, free use of space, multiplicity of routes and occupation. Such designs have redundancies and contingencies built into them, and can accommodate wide varieties of activities rather than being programmatically specific. This risks buildings which are also anonymous and unspecific. This is something which Moussavi tackled directly as a competing claim on design in the companion volume 'The Function of Ornament':

> "Currently a number of conditions require us to reevaluate these previous tools for constructing building expressions. These include a growing number of building types that are "blank." Department stores, shopping malls, cineplexes, libraries, and museums do not require any relationship between inside and outside." Moussavi, F. and Kubo, M. (2006:1)

The dictum 'form follows function' was coined by Louis Sullivan, and was wholeheartedly seized upon by the Modernist movement in the 20th Century. The problematic of the phrase revolves largely around the definition of 'function', but form can also be understood to be a theoretically loaded and divisive term.

The concern for form as an a priori and a condition. Does architecture provide conditions, then? Is the discipline essentially the design of the condition?

This ties neatly in to the idea of the ready made or objet trouvé from fine art practice since Duchamp.

Such formalist approaches are problematic, however. Take, for example, the formalistic approaches to urban design taken in morphological studies. Such analyses of urban fabric by the production of figure/ground diagrams alone ignores many of the characteristics of an urban environment, focusing only on the proportion and pattern of built area to public space.

Purely formalist architecture can result in spectacular structure for its own sake: prompting something of an arms race where outlandish forms compete with one another in order to initiate another 'Bilbao Effect'.

How then does Moussavi overcome this in his *Function of Form*: and what indeed *is* or *can be* the function of a form?

Our purpose might not be to rid ourselves of form as a deeply entrenched and highly useful aspect of architecture, but to understand better how the application of form is intended to be a kind of provocation, intervening on the site in order to provoke a reaction or response.

What is the anthropological take on form? Whilst Blanciak's approach is far from typical, there remains in architecture, a fascination for form as one of the primary elements of architecture alongside programme and site. Form is given by the architect's design, whether this is purely abstracted as in the case of extremes of Modernism, or much more closely contextualised and politicised as in the examples of... And ...

Japanese firm Atelier Bow Wow allow the unique conditions of Tokyo to determine their agenda as architects, giving a unique set of form-giving determinants resulting in their theory of 'pet architecture'.

2: The Course Outline

The course was initially designed to be in two parts, with half of the course given over to an investigation of drawing as thinking, and half to the study of architecture and anthropology. As I developed the syllabus, however, it became apparent that it was not only expedient but important to marry these two approaches into a course investigating the relationship between observation and architecture.

As such, the detailed exploration of architectural theory by way of drawing could be explored alongside the understanding of complex social relations and alternative lifeworlds offered by anthropology.

In my work, it has been apparent that not only do architects benefit from an understanding of architecture, but anthropologists gain from an architectural understanding. Such an understanding is based upon the inscriptive practice to a large degree, and this offers a new approach to the familiar debates on 'Writing Cultures' in anthropology, crises of representation, observation, and participation.

Deceptively simple lessons are arranged in which a series of traditional and unconventional forms of representation are experimented with. The constant for the students is the site. A continual engagement with a familiar site is encouraged, with a depth of study being offered by following a programme of description.

The drawing based sessions are interspersed with anthropological theory which drives a frequent engagement with the site. This builds on architectural traditions of site analysis, looking beyond the topography and geometry of the site.

1: **Sketching and Painting**
Fundamental skills, the sketch allows for movement between representational modes, but also asks questions of editing and selection. What is left out, and what is chosen for a sketch speaks of the focus on an experience. bearing witness by means of sketching is an important record of the everyday, and allows for the recording of an event for later use in the design process. Similarly, many architects paint. How does this affect their practice, and what relevance do fine art practices have to the wider design process.

2: **Notation**
The script/score and the performance are detailed by Nelson Goodman. How does this temporal but prescriptive form of inscriptive practice inform architecture? An extended example of Laban movement notation shall be explored as well as the Sensory Notation developed for urban design, suggesting further developments in descriptive practice.

3: **Orthographic Drawing and the Section**
in a session on section drawing, several classic examples of the section drawing are explored in detail, and the utility of describing volumes placed within historical context. Robin Evans' exploration of the earlier, unrelated forms of section are also considered, with the detailing of furnishing and interiors described by the short-lived folded down drawing.

4: **Axonometric**

the relationship with the model-making process marks this form of inscription out, but with the variables of true lengths versus true angles explained. Variants such as worm-eye views and isometric are also considered, and the way in which the drawing form influences geometry and massing, particularly for Modernist architects.

5: **Perspective**
constructed perspectives (as opposed to sketches) are revealing of an important element of Renaissance thinking related to the finite and the infinite. The notion that the perspective is a purely presentational form of drawing is also challenged, and serial drawings such as Edward Cullen's *Townscape* examples are detailed as developments of the form.

6: **Collage, Play and Appropriation**
The alternative maps and collages of the Situationist International are explored as examples of representing the politics of navigating the city. Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis* provides some of the backbone to this, as does the playful engagement with the city by the Surrealist parlour games. What is the serious outcome of such gameplay? How does this extend to skateboarding, parcour, graffiti, and augmented reality?

7: **Diagrams**
Contemporary architecture is fond of the diagram as an organisational principle. Such diagrams as Peter Eisenmann's famous *Diagram Diaries* are explored in detail, questioning the utility of this design approach as well as considering the presence of diagrams in other forms of practice, such as Deleuze's discussion of the diagram in Francis Bacon's painting.

8: **Cartographic and Other Mapping**
Depicting spatialised data is the domain of cartography, and mapping a phenomenon offers opportunities to understand in terms of a territory. Theories of cartography such as MacEachren's describe the relative fidelity and graphical qualities of maps along with their qualities and uses. Mental mapping procedures developed by White and Gould are built upon by Lynch's famous attempts to understand the *Image of the City*, and contemporary practices of GIS and Google Earth Mash-ups are valuable tools for architectural understanding and representation.

9: **Recording, Photography and Film**
Classic tools of visual anthropology, the nature of photography and film is radically different from many of the pen-and-paper practices already detailed. This lies in the recording and editing nature of the medium, where creative decisions occur at two different points in the process: first in framing and secondly in editing. Issues of privacy are also more heightened in this realm, where permission might be sought and denied. What is the status of the photograph as an object as well as its utility in practice. What is a good photograph, and why do architectural photographers erase the people from their shots?

By describing a site or situation in a variety of different ways, the students are able to see not only the multitude of ways in which any place can be understood, but also the design opportunities afforded by each practice. Similarly, the following anthropological foci are offered as lenses through which to understand a site. This can be coupled with a graphic practice or expressed through field-notes and writing.

The anthropologically focused lectures are as follows. The themes are chosen to relate closely to architecture and urban design, the concerns of spatiality and the built environment. As such, a mapping of anthropological theory to spaces and activities allows for an easier integration of social material into the student architect's established frame of reference:

1: Ethnography and Architectural Design: Fieldnotes and Sketchbooks.
Compare contextualised ethnographic engagements with community engagement projects in urban design, thinking about the pitfalls and benefits of each approach. Who is 'the Other' in architecture? What do alternative ethnographies (such as participant-observation, auto-ethnography, visual anthropology) tell us about a situation? How does the visual inform the textual, and is there a 'Drawing Culture' in the manner of 'Writing Culture'?
engage in a short ethnographic process, participant-observation, by taking yourself out of your everyday life and engaging with another's way of life.

2: Home as Biography: Kinship and Domesticity.
Consider the wide variety of kinship patterns explored by anthropologists, linking also with gendered debates. Link this to the design of homes, domestic spaces. What are the implications for a more informed engagement with kinship theory for architecture? Does architecture impose an idealised family onto people?
Write about your own family and home - including extended family. Where do they live and why? Don't make judgements, just accept the living arrangements and consider what architectural response there might be.

3: Agency of the Architect, Agency of the Building.
Working with Gell's Art and Agency, define the term 'Agency' and chart the various agencies and actors at work within the architectural process, within the life of a building, and the people who use a structure. Question these Agent/Patient relationships, and think about what they tell us as well as what they don't say.
Examine a case study and detail the various actors, agents, and patients at work in the design, construction, and operation of a building.

4: Mediums and Lifelines: Perception in the Environment.
Drawing from Ingold's work on environmental perception, dwelling, and inhabitation, question passive models of sensory perception in favour of the fully active, attentive model of perception. We also take James Gibson's work on the perception of the environment, and the movement through a medium rather than a neutral concept of space. Thus, we arrive at the notion that context is everything.
Closely observe an environment by interacting with it.

5: Material Cultures: Materiality as a set of Human:Environment Relations.
Materiality is a concern for architects, and positions taken on the materials use become important to the design of a building. Each material has a life cycle which contextualises it within the larger environment. This includes the extraction of this material from environmental resources (such as land, livestock, etc.) refining processes, working the material, producing goods, distributing them, using them, and finally disposing of and recycling them.
Describe the life cycle of a consumer product in detail, taking in each step of it's refinement from raw materials through to use, and eventual disposal. This could be a book, a computer, a building element, or any man-made item.

6: Gifts, Exchange, and Accounts of the Marketplace.
The marketplace is an example which appears time and again in anthropological discourse. As a site for exchange, it is hugely important, and often offers a zone in which the normal rules of society are superseded, conforming to Foucault's notion of heterotopia. The idea of the gift is also introduced here as a fundamental form of exchange complicated by Mauss to include the potlatch, or ritual destruction of wealth in the honour of another.
Describe a local market situation, such as a farmer's market, shopping mall, or supermarket.

7: Museums, Cultural Display, and Colonialism.
The museum is a special case, a meeting point between architecture and anthropology, a deeply problematic and contested one. What is the aim of displaying materials from other cultures in a museum setting? How does curatorship run the risk of colonialism, imposing the paternalistic will of a former ruler on to the a distant land's concept of itself?
Visit a local museum and give a critical account of how an item arrived there.

8: Skilled Practice, Competence, Apprenticeship, and Learning through Doing.
Marchand's work on building construction sits alongside a new trend in anthropology: the anthropology of skilled practice. Architecture itself falls within this remit, interestingly. What does an interest in skill and the actual practice of making bring to architecture. Pragmatically, the process of building is itself a concern, but we also have the opportunity to be reflective on our own creative processes, being self-critical about the engagement with the world that results in a creative act.
Describe your own working process or that of your design unit based on the criteria provided.

9: Contemporary Anthropologies: the Metro, the Marginal, the Banal.
Marc Augé considers this anthropology of the present, the so-called Supermodern. This is complicated with an approach to space and place, where the non-place of the airport is contrasted with real places where one can make a mark and decide how to inhabit them rather than being channelled and controlled at every turn. Increasingly, anthropologists are working at home, finding as much about the human condition in their own back yard, allotment, kitchen, or subway train.
Take a familiar, everyday event and describe it with reference to the course so far: what anthropologies are appropriate to deploy in your description and where?

10: Applications of Anthropolgy in Architecture: Operationalising the Descriptive
A key question remains: how can we make of all this knowledge about the human condition accessible through anthropological discourse? A key move lies in the transition from description to action. This last lecture ties the course up with a theoretical discussion of the close relationship between architecture and anthropology, along with practical concerns about how to move forward rather than have issues complicated into inaction.

3: Towards Drawing Culture

Whilst there is a possibility of loading the curriculum too heavily with both anthropology and the theory of drawing, the possibilities are twofold: a Graphic Anthropology and Anthropological Architecture. More than simply different take on the same topic, these two options represent a coming together of appropriate disciplines for mutual benefit.

Rather than a call to arms, this is a call to adventure in the manner of Joseph Campbell's popular exploration of mythology and the structure of folktales. A hint might be found in the anthropological debate surrounding the concept of 'Writing Culture'.

One way of defining the difference between architecture and anthropology is to consider the eventual outcomes of each discipline. Architecture, in this manner, can be understood to have an interventionist stance, imposing the will of the designer onto the environment. The anthropologist has no such desire to influence, and reports on their observations, makes linkages, and develops a deeper understanding of what it can mean to be human.

This laudable view of anthropology is built on the back of a great deal of disciplinary soul-searching and the rejection of a history of colonialist paternalism. What this means is that anthropology *can be* as interventionist and direct in its approach, merely that this is no longer seen as an acceptable form of practice. Similarly, architecture, whilst lagging in some respects, can be argued to be a form of *Drawing Culture* or *Building Culture* akin to Writing Cultures.

Architecture reflects the culture of the time in a number of different ways. The aim of the architect is to be in tune with the age and to present the way of life of clients, users, and broader groups of stakeholders. Architects do not, for example, have the opportunity to simply create whatever they desire. Even characters such as Frank Lloyd Wright, so prescriptive and demanding of his clients, reflected a broader concern at the time for developing an *American Architecture* with his Prairie Style homes. Wright's work on the Broadacre City prefigured the development of suburban sprawls based on cheap and easy automobile transportation. That this style is problematic and beautiful at the same time is a reflection of the relative merits of Wright's approach. At the same time, social engineering was attempted by European Modernists led by their high priest figure, Le Corbusier. Such attempts were a response to some crucial problems at the time. Massive rebuilding and slum clearance was underway across Europe, and older patterns of house building were no longer relevant.

As heavily criticised as the Plan Voisin and other Utopian impulses might have been, Corbusier and the International Style more generally can be seen historically as a necessary step towards a more engaged and contextual meeting of architectonic needs. Moving away from old forms of commissioning that relied upon patronage and class, towards a model based on social needs and democracy.

Our current problems stem from global capital and the power of multinational corporations, and this does not absolve architecture from its responsibility towards ethical issues and true representation of culture and needs. The route towards this more holistic approach is an anthropologically informed architecture, one which is aware of local conditions, and above all context.

Context can, in architectural discourse, replace Site.

Just as Van Maanen suggests of Ricoeur's *textualization*, drawing also renders non-graphic phenomena accessible to analysis.

In what way can we regard this as a possible course for both architects and anthropologists? How do the themes couple up for the two-hour sessions?

One of the key elements of this confluence of anthropology and architect can be expressed in fairly Bergsonian terms: of *matter* and *memory*. Similarly, other issues up for grabs include *form* and *context*. The formal basis of architecture is often bemoaned, but never really moved wholly away from: it is intrinsic to the discipline.

I am reminded of the fact that temporality is constantly ignored, elided, or otherwise removed from our accounts, be they architectural, anthropological or otherwise. Temporality is balanced out in everyday life, such as the way in which I need to match my passport photograph in order to fly with it, meaning my beard - which is often long, and often clean shaven or somewhere in between. My physical identity is not stable in this simple, biological fact of hair growth, and yet we behave as though it were possible.

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