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The imagination works with eyes open. It alters and is altered by what is seen. The problem is that if we admit to this, then the relation between ideas and things turns mutable and inconstant. ¹

The architectural process is a messy business.

It is physically messy, drippy glue, dirty fingers and pencil smudges, but also intellectually fractured, with false starts, dead ends and discarded ideas. The stages between architectural conception and realisation are fraught with twists and turns, interventions and compromises. The strength of this exhibition lies in its exposure of the breath and depth of the processes through which architects imagine, negotiate, design, construct and live in buildings. It gives lie to the simplistic notion of the architect conceiving a design and then creating a scaled up version of the 'concept'. The architectural process described here is not limited to the design stage, but encompasses mapping and site analysis, design collaborations and negotiations, construction and reflection. The 'Describing Architecture' exhibition reveals process to be both projective and reflective, working towards a built reality, but also involving critical reflection on work completed or as yet undone.

Architects, unlike most artists and sculptors, rarely get to work directly on the object of their thoughts. ² Few architects actually lay the bricks and plaster the walls of their projects. The creation of a building is typically mediated through the representation that is used to describe and instruct. The methods of representation most commonly used by architects, drawings and models, are not neutral transmitters of fact; rather they form an opaque media with their own conventions and limitations. Drawings and models, films and photos are not merely technical facilitators of the process but undoubtedly help shape the results. They alter how the architect views his or her own work, but also present the stimulus to conversation and negotiation with colleagues, clients and planners.

It may be simplistic to say that the process shapes the product, but there is truth here. The architectural process is the site of testing of ideas. Architect David Chipperfield spoke about his hesitation about describing his own work, [we are] *never quite sure whether we are explaining or justifying our work* ³, revealing a constant tension in the

use of representation in the architects working life. The process must be open enough to allow discussion, critique and adaption, but take care not to become a closed internal monologue. The work made en- route to the building should trigger critical analysis rather than merely seducing and convincing. ⁴

Not all things architectural can be arrived at through drawings. ⁵

One notable aspect of the work exhibited is the varied attempts by architects to bridge the gap between representation and built reality. Whether through new media, large-scale models or direct construction, there seems to be a new concern in architecture to make the experiential jump from abstract idea to corporeal reality before the building is built. The traditional displacement between flat two-dimensional orthographic drawings and spatial built form is exposed and challenged. In effect, architects are trying to move the process closer to the product. The efforts shown here, in TAKA and Steve Larkin's large-scale models and more directly in Anne Gorman's rammed earth walls and PRACTICE's straw bale structure suggest a real attempt at investigation that goes beyond scaled reproduction. This work subverts the normal pathway in architectural process from large to small scale with conventional stepping-stones along the way, it asks for sensory engagement during the process of design.

The theorist Robin Evans, when writing about the limitations of architectural drawing, called for architects to invent methods of design and production which took risks: *the direct and the experiential is far more ethical and far more interesting [...] than the indirect and abstract.* ⁶ Some of the work exhibited does just that, taking risks with the methods employed to generate architecture. An analysis of how these types of inquiry affect the outcome is beyond the scope of this exhibition, showing as it does fragments of processes isolated from the resulting buildings. I believe however, that it must affect the results, that asking different questions in the process must influence the answers reached. This is not a one-way street, some architectural interests such as texture and materiality are difficult to explore in scaled models and orthographic drawings, and architects are searching for techniques that allow them to adequately explore their concerns.

Another aspect of the design process illustrated here is its reality as a collaborative effort. Architectural design and construction is rarely singular and insular, it more often developed through conversation with colleagues, clients, planners and collaborators. The architect who builds almost never works in isolation. Architectural process involves compromises and adaptations along the way, not always pleasant or advantageous. The community participation work on view deals directly with the collaboration and negotiation that exists to a lesser extent within all design processes.

It is difficult to think in abstraction of the design process, one tends to rely on personal experience or other architects descriptions of how they work. As an architect I find it useful to explain things graphically. When contemplating architectural process in its various guises, the following images came to mind.

Firstly, this image of Denys Lasdun's office during the design of the National Theatre London captures well the often chaotic reality of design. Unlike the sanitised 'concept sketch' which conveniently gets built, the reality is much more haphazard and open to chance and change. Lasdun's countless models piled high, fragmented and broken illustrate well the lack of preciousness here and a real sense of the urgency at work. Rather than considering the model as artefact, Lasdun's focus seems resolutely on the practicalities of resolving the auditorium design. It is unfashionable now to present the product as superior to the process; post-modern thinking dictates the death of the author and the downplaying of the artefact - but the physicality of Lasdun's pile of models draws one back to the importance of the built form. McGarry Ni Eanaigh's array of study models and Carson Crushell's film capture some of this sense of testing, retesting, of the countless iterations considered and advanced in the course of developing architecture. Similarly, Paul Clark's film on sketchbooks gives real insight to the methods of working which rely on thorough investigation. Designing good buildings is hard work - it takes time and effort.



Figure 1 Denys Lasdun - National Theatre models

The drawing of the Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa's house in Colombo represents a different aspect of the architectural process. Bawa bought one small terraced house 1959, and over a number of years acquired its three neighbours to convert into his own home. Bawa lived and worked here for 40 years, he extended, altered and adapted it to suit how he lived. The plan isn't easy to understand; rooms don't line up neatly nor is there an obvious logic to the organisation of the house, but the reality has a profound sense of a lived process. The result is an introspective labyrinth with a complexity rarely achieved in a singular design stage. Jonathen Janssens and Jennifer O'Donnell's drawings and the photographs exhibited here by Dorothy Pederson, and by Roland Bosbach and David Blackmore refer in various ways to this same sense of the cumulative process of living. They chart of how we live, occupy and alter the places around us. The end point of the architectural process is not when the design is complete or when the building is built, it continues into the inhabitation and alteration of the building.

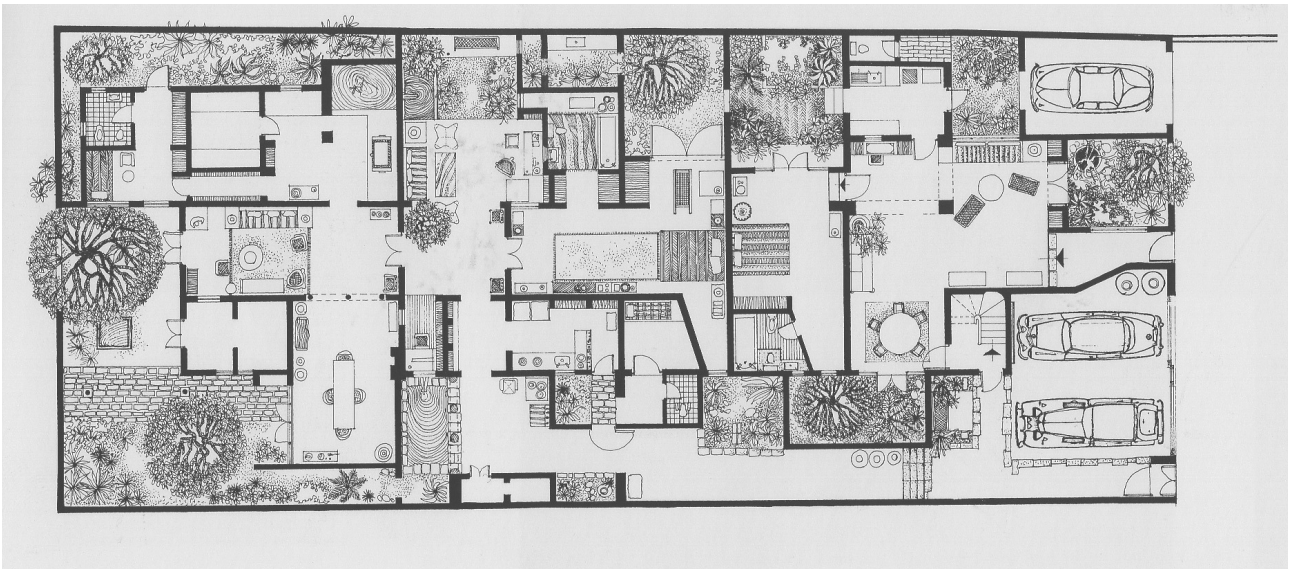


Figure 2 Geoffrey Bawa - Plan of 33rd Lane Columba

'The putting down on paper is what transforms the work. The relationship between the idea and the drawing is therefore not one in which the drawing represents the idea: the drawing in fact becomes the idea, and this idea may spawn others.' ⁷

Carlo Scarpa's drawings, such as this one of the Castelvecchio Museum Verona, are almost shorthand in architectural circles for process, showing traces of work at different scales, of erasure, addition, scribbled notes, technical details and doodles. The drawing itself is the site of the mind's work; not simply a method of representation, it is the medium through which ideas are developed and advanced. The type of 'working' drawing is far removed from slick, consumable presentation drawings. The inclusion of the working drawings of Stephanie Moloney in this exhibition reminds me of the potency of Scarpa's drawing. The design process is a cumulative act. Not every aspect of design and investigation contributes directly to the finished product but the dead-ends and doodles do stack up.

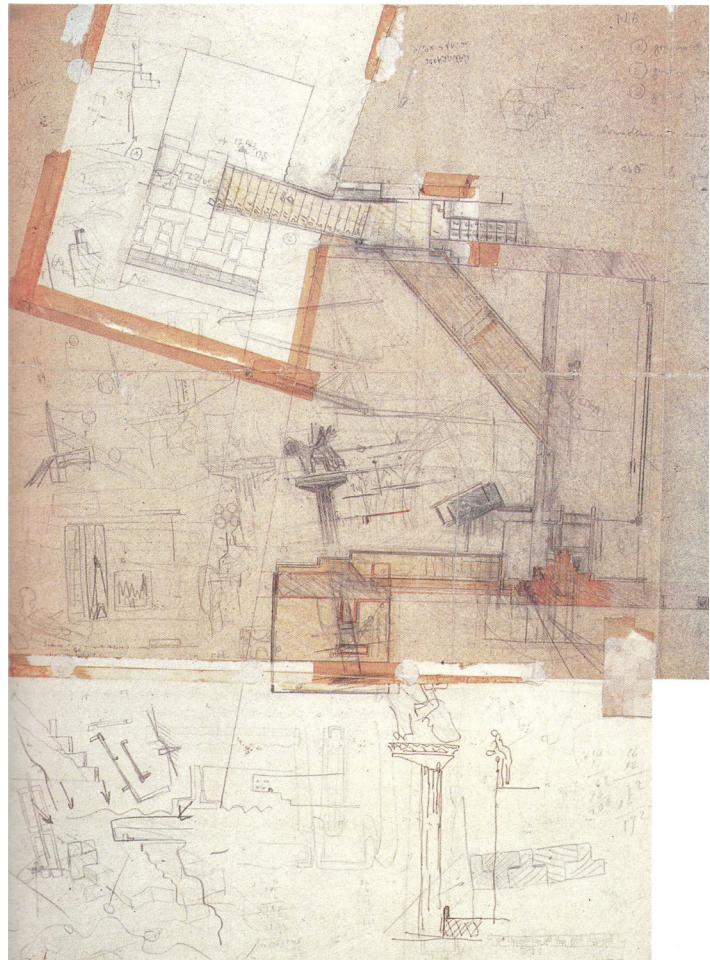


Figure 3 Carlo Scarpa - Drawing of Cangrande space

The architectural process is commonly thought of as projective, a trajectory towards a building. However, when construction doesn't happen or the process is abandoned, the design has an afterlife in the mind and work of the architect, and sometimes beyond. In the same way that no book read can be unread, no design process is fully erased from the mind of the designer; the work lives on in altered states. The reflection that can occur long after the process of design means the ideas don't disappear but often ferment and reappear in other guises in other projects. Architectural design is not always a linear process, starting with idea and ending with building. The image here of the model of Edwin Lutyens' design for Liverpool Catholic Cathedral illustrates this point. Lutyens' design for the Cathedral was left incomplete but has had impact on generations of architects who know the project only through drawings and models. The evocative images of McCullough Mulvin's city abandoned morgue project and the drawings of the skeletal Limerick Parkway centre by David William carry a sense of the imaginary potential of unbuilt or incomplete work. Likewise TTT's project shows the potential afterlife of a project cut short or abandoned. These exhibits take the architectural process into the realm of memory and reflection.



Figure 4 Edwin Lutyens - Model of Catholic Cathedral

Architectural process is a messy business, but also an exciting and energising one. The work exhibited here testifies to the scope of architectural thinking, but also places it firmly in the present. The inclusion here of much work that is of its time and place, post-boom Ireland, reveals the real-world concerns of architecture. Architectural design is framed and supported by its built reality. There is no singular architectural process, and no answers here about the success or failure of approaches to process, but the exhibition reveals some of the range and complexity of how architects work.

Endnotes:

1. Robin Evans 'Architectural Projection', in *Architecture and its Image*, Eve Blau and Edward Kaufman (eds), Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal (1989), p.19
2. Robin Evans expands on this point in his seminal essay - 'Translations from Drawing to Building', in *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays*, AA Documents 2, The MIT Press, (1997). He argues that drawing is distinct different from architecture, and that architectural drawings play a much larger generative role in the making of architecture than is generally acknowledged.

3. David Chipperfield, 'Searching for Substance', RIBA Gold medal acceptance speech
<http://www.architecture.com/Awards/RoyalGoldMedal/175Exhibition/WinnersBiogs/2010s/DavidChipperfield.aspx#pres>
4. 'Working through drawing closes off some possibilities of learning about building as much as it opens others'. For more on the potential and limitations of architectural drawings see: Edward Robbins, 'Drawing & Architectural Practice revisited', in *Why Architects Draw*, MIT Press, (1994), p.297
5. Robin Evans, 'Translations from Drawing to Building', p. 159.
Evans also sounded a note of caution about 'risky' design processes, saying that in practice they were often dull and obstructive and based on artistic pretensions.
6. Robin Evans, 'Translations from Drawing to Building' p. 161
7. Mark Price, 'The Trouble with Drawing', *Building Material*, issue 15 'Paperwork', article 4, p. 1

Image references:

1. Denys Lasdun - stack of National theatre models in the Lasdun office, p. 119 in William J.R. Curtis, *Denys Lasdun: Architecture, City, Landscape*, Phaidon, London, 1994
2. Geoffrey Bawa - Plan of 33rd Lane Columba, p 233 in David Robson, *Geoffrey Bawa: The Complete Works*, Thames and Hudson, London 2002
3. Carlo Scarpa - Drawing of Cangrande space, Castellvechio Museum Verrona, p 29 in Sergio Los, *Carlo Scarpa*, Benedikt Taschen, Cologne, 1993
4. Edwin Lutyens - Model of Catholic Cathedral of Liverpool.
<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/conservation/departments/models/lutyens/gallery/views/index.aspx>