

## Thought comes first - the work of John Glew

by

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John Glew's practice and life describes the trajectory taken by many people who are highly active in teaching and introducing ideas into architecture, and yet who are perceived to be outside the accepted conventions of architectural practice.

As well as working in his own practice he has worked in a network of interesting offices; in Los Angeles and New York, for Trevor Horne, and Jeremy Dixon & Edward Jones and also collaboratively with Wilfried Wang. At the same time he has taught in The Architectural Association, The Royal College of Art, was the external examiner at The School of Architecture in Lille and Guest Lecturer at the University of Carlton in Canada. He is at present Guest Professor at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art in Copenhagen and Academic advisor to the School of Architecture in Lund, Sweden. Threaded through these activities is incessant travel and observation from which a photographic record has emerged that crystallises the issues in his teaching and constructed work. He would say that he has not built as much as he would wish, but then almost all-good architectural practices are working at less than their full capacity. From these circumstances his creative desire and intellectual curiosity have created a cultured intelligence, which is his practice and which he brings to his work and to students.

In relation to the photographs he quotes the Swedish Architect Sigurd Lewerentz, 'we have had enough of the extraordinary, what we need is the self-evident', and Christian Norburg Schultz on Lewerentz: 'he found secrets because wherever he looked, he looked hard'.

His photograph of Bombay shows in 23 games of cricket taking place simultaneously in an open space within the city. From the light we see that play is occurring in the evening after work, and from the high viewpoint, that the dense form of the city surrounds the field of play. We see a vision of a city constructed of a peculiar mixture of reasons-political ambition, theories of city planning, financial or political gain, which is construed by the people who use it as real and where they play out their lives.

Of the leper hospital in Lasur India by the Architect Jan Olaf Jensen he writes: 'Remote and isolated, the building offers the inhabitants great dignity and repose. An infinitely elongated courtyard with vegetation integrated in a chameleon like way, detail is subsumed to effect and the comfort of the inhabitants remains the priority, their presence barely discernible from the fabric of the building. This architecture is made to be seen at close range were the building can be touched and felt.'

The Richard Serra Installation 'Torqued ellipses', at the DIA center in New York, reveals to him that, 'the initial apparent, straightforward, perception, gives way to the viewer becoming closer to the actual function of his perception in a very enlightening way. Space shifts and moves in wholly unexpected ways, dependent not only on sight but anticipation and memory, with the heads experience at odds with that of the feet'. This sensitivity to the interplay of ideas and objects and the relation of objects and activities to their context is evident in his constructed work and projects.

His design for the installation for the domestic glasswork of the Danish artist Tora Urup was preceded by a photograph from the exhibition space from a distance of the quarter of Copenhagen where it is located. The glass pieces are presented at abrupt heights on giant display furniture in an exaggeration of the familiar positions of table, cupboard and shelf, and there are indirect but compelling relations between the furniture and the streetscape outside the gallery. To illuminate this simple work he says, with Malevich, that art does not need to be complex to provide the viewer with a complex experience.

For the lightweight chair designed in collaboration with Wilfried Wang's office, SW Architects - a fragile stair for fragile life styles - the construction would be from stock aluminium extrusions and 3.5mm aero ply and the chair packed flat for assembly on arrival. In the process of design there is an affinity with the work of Danish designer Hans Wegner in that both designers invent on the basis of previous examples - in John Glew's case the super-leggere chair of Gio Ponti - of which the level of comfort and technical problems are known.

In the alterations to his garden flat the three interior rooms are articulated with furniture in a similar way to the Copenhagen installation, but here each object has to cope with the quotidian necessities of life while expanding the sense of scale by creating differing ambiances. The treatment of the garden is in the tradition of oriental gardens that are simple and yet full of mood. This is an interior statement, both in the architectural and personal sense which is consistent with

his understanding of Serra of the power of associative and abstract forms, and yet one which his photograph of the view from the neighbouring window, shows to be in place in the world.

At a larger scale, this sensibility and others, informs the work he has made; in the Church Hall in Camden, the competition entry for Copenhagen Zoo, and in the strategic work for which he has been commissioned of the abandoned Quarry at Caserta. And, at present the long-term infrastructural proposal for the World Heritage Site, Parco di Cilento in Southern Italy.

What then can be understood from his work and from that of others in this situation? To find this out we have to set aside the idea that architectural work can only be considered if it reaches a certain scale, quantity and success. We can recognise that original ideas in Architecture arise unbidden from people before they are recognised. This is as true for Mies as for Norman Foster, who would acknowledge some of the origin of his work in Reliant Controls or the Fred Olson Building. But it is not only designers such as these which cause the development of architecture but a wider and more continual process in which people such as John Glew play a part by accumulating and diffusing knowledge in discussion, writing and teaching, and by their very personalities being part of the nerve fibre of the work we do. The value of this area is hard to recognise in the condition in which architecture now finds itself, where the ideas of the market economy lap into education, the production and use of images and ideas are confused with images.

The tension between business-like necessity and the undemanded aspects of creative activity is experienced by all architects, who manage it with the principal aim of sustaining creative practice with profit often being a the rear of the equation is very different from mainstream business. Other aspects make it distinct too - the interplay between practice and teaching and the early and often continual working for clients who do not have extensive funds, but are participants of a great project, where a lot of work is done for the fee because it was very probably the only job is fantastically rare, and would not be allowed or possible in general business. This description may seem to run counter to reality but does it? The growth in public awareness of the value of the voluntary sector - the so called non profit area of the economy - represents a belief that business values do not provide all the answers and are often inimical to how we want to live, and the emergence of the concept of intellectual capital, where the creative thought of architects is valued more highly than the labour of executing the work, points to a changing state which favours the thinker.

To have a strong society space has to be created for original creative thought, and this space is under constant threat not only from pragmatism but also from the confusion of designers themselves. How many of us confuse validity with conventional success? How many of us can see the indirect but potent connection between creative thought occurring undemanded and at a distance, and the development of the forms and styles of architecture? How many of us understand that the awkward and critical truth is necessary for effective politics and that limiting criticism and defining ourselves as consumers is the worst kind of political infantilisation?

A structure if not a body of creative thought, exists and continues to develop which in architecture is separate from quotidian values, while remaining deeply related and in creative tension with them. This part of the equation is in place it remains only for its value and possibilities to be recognised.