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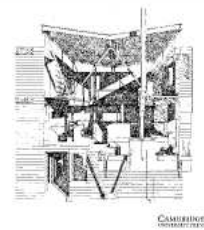
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Other people's places

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David Chipperfield
interviewed by
Charles Rattray



'you have to find ways for people to become fond of buildings. I'd like people to be fond of mine'

Other people's places

Do you enjoy being interviewed?

It depends. I had an interview with someone this morning from the *Financial Times* and they asked me 'what is your ideal weekend?' which I found completely painful ...

I won't ask that, then.

Being interviewed is something of an occupational hazard for David Chipperfield. We talk about the most recent book on his work (David Chipperfield Architectural Works 1990–2002, with an interview by Rik Nys) in relation to a previous summary (El Croquis 87, with an interview by Adam Caruso and Peter St John) and he suggests that the work of his practice has been a series of fragments: 'for fifteen years I've had to pretend there was a body of work based on a few frock-shops and the odd building in strange places and one wooden museum. And so we always tried to keep that perspective, always tried to do competitions, always tried to teach, to write and always tried to put the sort of practice you could do in this country into some sort of context'. He is disarmingly self-deprecating. He mentions a forthcoming monograph to be published by Electa:

... more like a complete works?

Encyclopaedic. It sounds pretentious. The whole thing of publishing is slightly embarrassing. And so it's like all these things, you have to set your own agendas for it and see what happens. I'm slightly averse to the monograph as a professional brochure – a professional brochure with a critical essay at the beginning. I find that very dodgy – and very English.

This book certainly isn't like that. The essays by Jonathan Keates were very enjoyable with much more sense of narrative.

I wanted to get away from architects writing about architects. I thought it was quite nice that someone else was writing, who actually doesn't know anything about architecture, but knows a lot about other things. Why should architecture become the domain of architects? When I get introduced in Italy, then people will explain my work in a very touching and moving way and the explanation is often humanistic, starting off from how the individual sits or his position within the building. The Italian critics enjoy this approach which is not formalistic and I quite like that the architecture appealed to Jonathan in exactly the same way. He wasn't saying 'the section is interesting' because he doesn't know what a section is. I liked the idea that it was, in a sense, a much more mundane description. I don't believe that the section is important to the viewer: that's technique. It's a bit like saying how a writer uses certain words and sentence structures: it doesn't matter. Of course it does matter, because his skill in the end takes the writing over, but you don't need to know it.

The art that conceals art ...

Yes.

One word that crops up a lot in the book is 'character'. Jonathan Keates, talking about the houses for example, mentions 'the obstinate diversity' that they have. I wondered how you approached



Contextual messages: physical (house in Corrubedo, Galicia, 2002) ...

'I don't think context is deterministic, it's just something that you use'



... and cerebral (house in Berlin, 1996)

the bestowing of character – what factors are involved in it – assuming you approach it at all.

That's how we do a project, completely. The slightly over-repeated Louis Kahn statement about what a building wants to be is always at the beginning of our discussions of what a project should be about, and of course context is part of it ...

... in the widest sense?

Yes. Certain contexts are physical and very emotive and therefore they are easy to respond to. Other contexts don't offer you so much on the ground. At the house we did in northern Spain, the physical context is so powerful that it tells you things – or at least one can extract from it. At Berlin the physical context for the villa is much more neutral, it's pleasant suburbia. It's very different. In that case the reference was more to do with what makes a villa in the German context, what materials

can you build out of nowadays in a domestic way so that it isn't a little museum or a little office building. References like that. Mies's brick villas were probably just as much a context for the villa as the granite base was in Galicia. But it's not something that is on the ground, it's something that's in the air. And it's not scientific and it's not deterministic. I think the problem is that architects always try to give a much bigger justification for why they do things – High-Tech architects tried to convince us of a certain sort of technical determinism and now Daniel Libeskind has invented a kind of intellectual determinism – all trying to justify a bigger picture. I'm not sure that those bigger pictures are really there.

Maybe especially in the houses, and certainly in the products you have designed like the plates and cups, I like the bit of simply asking what qualities they might have.

Cuppiness ...

... yes, cuppiness ...

... and bowliness. And you are naked. You can't say 'well, it's all about the efficiency of pouring the liquid' or whatever. In the end you say does it feel better in the hands.

Having the facts, the question is what you do with them.

Yes. The alternative – the unacceptable alternative – is to say that anything can be about anything. You've got to put some discipline there, you've got to have some other picture. But I'm not convinced it's a deterministic picture and in that sense I don't think context is deterministic, it's just something that you use and there is no guarantee.

And one can define other contexts besides the physical, such as a cultural context.

Yes. I think that things have got to have meaning. I was at school when Post-Modernism appeared and in my opinion that was a sort of wake-up call for Modernism saying don't forget silhouette and shape, and colour and form, and meaning and memory play an important part in the way people receive things – which is a very well-established concept in literature and most



Brickiness (house in Berlin, 1996) ...

'architects try to justify a bigger picture. I'm not sure those bigger pictures are really there'



... cuppiness and bowliness (ceramics for Slegten and Toegemann, 1996)

other things. The idea that we were building a brave new world that could have its own rules, figures and forms, and as long as architects understood it then it was OK, somehow got trashed at that point. You have to find ways for people to become fond of buildings. I'd like people to be fond of mine.

In this book there are a lot of pictures of models and models seem to take up a lot of space here around the office. How do you use them?

We use models as process, as an examination tool. For this project

we're working on, seven big models have happened in the last five days. We examine through model because that's how you can put yourself outside the thing. Whenever I teach I always set the students quite precise sites but ask them to present at scale 1:30 in model form; there is no drawing. I don't mind if it's made from old brown boxes and there are no windows in it but the important thing is to make a proposition about the volume and then start to think about other things. You take a knife and cut a hole in it and call it a window. What is interesting is that it puts the student at a

distance from their work. And it's very interesting to stand back and look at something as a simple proposition. Then you can say where would the entrance be and how would you deal with the windows and all of a sudden you are both talking about the same thing; you are making physical observations and observations on form and matter. And so in the office it's a way of getting out of the project, stepping back from it, and also getting in as close as possible and to make decisions based on physical choices as opposed to speculative ones. Of course everything is speculation – models are speculation – but our belief is that you can get closer. I suppose it also comes from the fact that I spent the first ten to fifteen years doing very small projects, so making 1:30 models isn't such a problem. It's actually a very standard scale in Japan for doing interiors.

It's big.

Well, I think it's the first scale where you can see exterior and interior together; 1:20 is a nice interior scale but 1:30 is I think the smallest interior scale you can get; 1:50 is too small for interiors. So all the houses were designed at 1:30 in model form and all the decisions were made on the models. We never make decisions on drawings. In the old days we would tend to make more models for presentation but now we make fewer and fewer for presentation, we just tend to make them for working through and then we clean them up and show them to the client.

They tend to emphasize robustness and abstraction, too ...

... yes, absolutely ...

... and although in almost all your buildings you are interested in materiality – at the Berlin villa, the sensuous qualities of brickwork, for example – one might have thought that it was a secondary issue: that one of the qualities of the work is that you could imagine it being made out of a very cheap material and still having the same qualities of the light, mass and space.

Well I think that the construction industry now is pretty synthetic, so there's not much tectonic – certainly in small projects – so you

are trying to put materiality in another way. Even at the brick house, for example, we investigated the possibility of using load-bearing brick, but it was not viable. You are right in a way: you could have done that house in a number of materials. I think in the end it develops certain rules and ideas based on the fact that we wanted to play with the brick. The fact that you could use it on the floor and on the walls and on the soffits became part of the playfulness of the building. So we started to do things there to demonstrate the brickiness which you wouldn't have done if it had been a stucco building.

Chipperfield worked for both Foster and Rogers but his own work is relatively low-tech, more clearly in the Modern tradition. He took inspiration from both architects – ‘it was an enormous lesson to work in those offices and just see the lengths people went to so as to get things right’ – but the main influences on his work have come from abroad, especially Japan, where he built his first buildings

When you say Japan, you mean traditional Japanese architecture?

Yes, and contemporary in the sense of trying to find abstract qualities. The enjoyment of abstraction is something that runs through Japanese society and Japanese design. And you know as well as I do that England is very claustrophobic. Everything is very judgemental. I think there was an enormous freedom – a cultural freedom – in working outside England, in someone else's context.

A phrase in the book describes the work as encounters with new places.

It would have been very different if I had established myself here and then been invited to other places to do buildings. But that's not what happened. There is no body of work here. Instead I've had to develop my work in other people's places, always asking 'what could this be about'. It's daft to go all the way to Japan and then not to take advantage of things you could do there better than you could do here. What is the point of building in southern Italy and not taking advantage of the climate, the materials you get there, and also the disadvantages, the fact that they can't do certain things or that you're not building in Switzerland? It's the same if you are going to



Working at home: the Japan-influenced River and Rowing Museum, Henley-on-Thames, 1997

‘there was an enormous freedom in working outside England’



Working abroad: the stairhall, Landeszentralbank, Gera, Germany (2001)

Iowa or doing social housing in Madrid or wherever. Everything takes on its own rules. If you are Tadao Ando and everyone comes to you because they want perfect polished concrete walls and that's what they expect when they employ you, or if you are Richard Meier and people come to you because they expect a white metal

panel building, then the only question is how you do a white metal panel building in Frankfurt or in Shanghai. Or in Ando's case, how you do a concrete wall in Switzerland. We're not in that situation. We have to ask how we use our budget to best effect in this or that context. And also, to put a more intellectual spin on it, it's to

do with trying to locate something and, again, looking for meaning and not just novelty. I think it's difficult to work in other people's places and say we're doing something novel. In Britain one has the feeling that ideas are being lost. It's about cleverness as opposed to intelligence. With few exceptions, in my view there's not much going on: Caruso St John, Sergison Bates, Tony Fretton, Florian Beigel. The success of architects in this country tends to be based on their professionalism, on their ability to do the job on time. All the questions that we get asked at interview are about project management. If you want to get work in England, you've got to talk the talk. I can't do that. In this office, just about every project was won as a competition, everything we've got. And not won because we knew the chairman of Ofco or something like that – I didn't know anyone in Iowa or Mexico or Seville. We have no power-base whatsoever.

It's strange but perhaps it's also a relief.

Yes. I'm terrified of parties. As soon as someone says 'I'd like you to meet so-and-so because they're very important' I immediately ...

... lose interest?

No, I don't lose interest, I just don't know what to do. I'm not pretending to be pure about this, I'm just embarrassed by the obviousness of it. In Berlin, for example, culture itself has enormous power whereas here it seems to be the other way round: you are supposed to be flattered by the idea that people might take a superficial interest in culture because they are powerful. And also jobs are given out and I'd much prefer that you got it on merit. Having said that, I'm certainly not averse to someone coming through the front door and saying here's a job. It's a hell of a slog to have to win everything, but I think it does mean that we have a certain autonomous position. Competition is a sort of intellectual exercise. As soon as you've got a client you have to have permission for everything you do. If you do a competition, you don't have to have that.

You've already set out your stall and they've bought into it.

You are speculating about what a



Ruin as context: Neues Museum, Berlin (1997–), spatial studies ...

'a competition is conceptual free space'



... and detailed responses to existing surfaces developed with Julian Harrap Architects

client might cope with, but if you've done a competition and you win it you've already got the mandate for doing it and you've explored ideas. And so a competition is conceptual free space – a conceptual vacuum – where you have nothing to blame things on. So you have to fill that vacuum with ideas. That value of competitions is very underestimated in England.

In somewhere like Spain or Switzerland you find that the work is more intellectually driven. In Britain ...

... it's how to get the job ...

... and a reliance on clip-ons.

Absolutely. A number of good practices in Britain have taken the brunt of dealing for years and years with the planning system here and have learned to find their architectural satisfaction in details and small things – balcony details or whatever. But it doesn't have that bite because they've been beaten up for so long by the system: how to get the job, how to get it through planning. This office has benefited from the fact that we've grown up outside that culture.

David Chipperfield: Architectural Works 1990–2002, with essays by Kenneth Frampton and Jonathan Keates (ISBN 84-343-0945-9) is published by Polígrafa, Barcelona at £59.00