

Bijlage 1

Interview Hans van der Heijden met Julian Lewis

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What were your own influences and discourse back then when you started your career?

I studied at North London Polytechnic, and found, apart from one or two good teachers, little clear direction in the first and second years. Florian Beigel and the Architectural Research Unit [ARU], was my real way in to architecture from around '84. I never studied under him but sought him out for tutorials and I worked with him for a few years- during my study, and then after my part 2 in around 1988/1989. I was there a little when Adam Caruso was there too. I was introduced by Florian to many key architects: to Walter Segal [I participated in making a drawing for the Festival Hall exhibition; a way to remember a building for ever], Scharoun, Lewerentz [via detailing for a gallery interior], Van der Laan [I attended a workshop with Richard Padovan, organised by Florian and Wilfred Wang]. He got Luigi Snozzi and Jaques Herzog in for lectures in the late 80's. It's difficult to overestimate how exciting this all was for me; a language of ideas in forms that sought clarity over exuberance. We had a rather atelier-like experience in the office together, very close and intense. Ideas were discussed as first principles. The Half Moon theatre was a moment of social architecture that seemed more relevant to the street than anything else. I think Tony Fretton is the other main direct influence for me. We met at the time of his Lisson Street gallery, and whose work exuded an excitement of straightforwardness, alongside nefarious experiences; frosted glass; or transparency for social purpose. Some ambiguity and wit were there. The use of familiar measures, the gold lettering in a solicitors window to denote something shareable.

I taught in Manchester in the early 90's to seek critical dialogue. Kit Allsopp was there, a good straightforward architect and intelligent. I worked for him later, and then in many other offices. Some are well known, including Fosters. I did not enjoy it much and was a poor employee. I never quite understood what to do. Losing my job many times in the recession was partly behind later setting my own practice up!

I won European-3 with a friend for a site in Marl, Germany, but there was no money to build the project. It was all very nice, but it was a time around 1994 when I was getting desperate for some proper new discourse and architectural focus and some critical dialogue.

And when and where did you meet Mark?

It was in meeting Mark at a European AA lecture in 1995 I found an opportunity to work with someone who was also able to simultaneously love and distrust architecture as a culture. Perhaps because in seeking for an 'everyday' architecture, and yet being attracted to precision and clarity in form and meaning, there is a kind of difficult paradox that suits me, and East. Working with Mark, this distrust was supported as a positive aspect by displacing the architectural project from the centre, and turning to places as the method and medium, without buildings, at least to begin with, as drivers for architectural endeavours. For me this was liberating and suited my hunger for meaning in architecture. We developed ideas together in conversation while walking. Ideas about compounds, use, proximity, urbanism as slack space; poorly defined and open. Spaces without rhetoric [yes, the Smithsons were not far from thoughts, but they also were not as fawned upon by us as by others], or much shape.

What were your shared interests?

Initially to study the East edges of London, Rainham, Dartford, Purfleet, Tilbury as places of value, resource, and special spatial qualities, often economically and socially vulnerable by their marginal uses, car breaking, allotments. This activity was a kind of resistance to conventional planning policies that did not value the existing and instead often threatened to supersede what was there. The unitary development plan at the time was a kind of coded plan that defined allowable uses, yet was inarticulate in addressing some of the complexities we were studying on foot. This has since become more complex, and open to interpretation, making clear narratives about places as important as ever towards making changes. Our teaching together at East London extended this place documentary in the same areas of London. Other collaborations were encouraged, and we often had conversations with Adam Caruso and Peter St John, a number of Thames specialist researchers and officers, Peter Salter, Peter Beard, Robert Mull, Jamie Campbell, Irénée Scalbert.

Our first programmatic effort was self-initiated to define a space across the river between Dartford and Tilbury, called 'river places', aimed at presenting marshlands and grassy landfill spaces as a collective visitor destination across the river. We collaged the Cartier Bresson picnic photo into the grass covered riverside mounds to get the message across. We sought research funding but were not successful. The later project 'picnics in the greenbelt', this time successful with RIBA funds, came from this same interest in making public access to places around London's edges, including the countryside.

Mark already had a personal agenda specific to understanding East London's port industry in particular. And he had a detailed knowledge through on foot surveys of industry. This, for many, unattractive brief for studying architecture, an interest in the economy, function, and mundane condition was fruitful for me in developing attitudes towards understanding how these places held buildings and people. How they came into being, and changed. How land was used. The politics of places' presence and history were relevant especially when considering their future. An agenda of conservation emerged through enhanced perceptions of vulnerability of marginal social uses and an attitude towards adjustment and presence through discreet measures, sometimes using just paint and signs was something we developed together. It became a kind of idea about stitching in in the Borough High Street project. Architecture could be 'allowed' when it made positive engagement around the place; or be seen from afar. It could be gentle, sometimes 'rude', or mundane in material. The general holding back of conventional architectural study [at first almost always self-initiated, no client, no money, just the place made its demands], made any design exercise that came about that much more specific and special a task. Was anything needed? If so, why and how little would do? Studying industrial buildings, cement factories; buildings not designed to be looked at, yet often with immense presence, was a particular lesson. The term surgical adjustment was used in an early project in Thamesmead. Borough High Street was our first major project; a site in the public realm; a great exercise to test ways to address places, find ways to design highlights such as big signs, mirrors, and keep the rest as a decent background.

How did things change at East when Mark left?

Marks leaving was the right time and provided the right opportunity for him in the architecture and urbanism unit with Richard Rogers. I was ready to work in a different dynamic with Dann and Judith, who were also involved in those early eastern walks as UEL students, soon after, each able to provide the ongoing critical dialogue that I sought. Apart from the practice moving from a partnership to a company, perhaps the real change is about how we now use our research experience towards methods of practice in all projects we do. In fact, the relationship with Mark did not really disappear, because he was involved in many of the projects we worked on in London. We could continue to experience his critical scrutiny and sharpening of ideas from across the table.

I feel that since working with Mark East, with the critical dynamic conversation of the office, maintains an interest in places, with a broader and direct view on how places exist and change than many other offices and a more precise and direct interest in place specific design for public realm and building projects alike.

Where would you position yourself in the British architectural discourse now?

I think East has gained a critical urban position that enables architectural discourse and the design process to be invigorated. This critical discourse tends not to be theoretical, but empirical; hence the ongoing interest in walking sites and places. We teach, which helps enable the empirical to be articulated and communicated with precision as ideas as well as designs. I think we are quite an unusual office because we straddle disciplines. We know we tend towards a laconic formal outcome, which suits our interest in any work we produce acting as an extension of the city. At the same time we enjoy any eccentricities which place specifics offer. The generic and the specific aspects of our projects retain the same careful judgement in measuring out design carefully that we have always had. We are attracted by rather few offices. We like biq because of the straightforward tough beauty of your buildings, as well as the thoughtfulness. We like Sergison Bates; their formal measures are careful and limited. We still like Tony Frettons' deft and provocative form making and material handling. We have been rediscovering the fresh play of Lina Bo Bardi. We also enjoy the Belgium offices extreme a-contextual formal and surreal exercises. We sometimes worry about 'high architecture', although I am about to visit the wonderful villa rotunda, so where that worry leads to I am not sure.

And in the international discourse now?

Internationally, we feel something exciting happening for East. Looking at places; their 'realness', seems exciting and audacious when looking from an international perspective, and I perceive a growing interest in this open position in countries such as the Netherlands, Germany and Brazil. I think we would love to build more; to test the city more proactively. We are slowly moving towards housing projects in cities, and will retain a mix of public realm, urban and building projects abroad and in London if we can help it. We are happy to collaborate with foreign architects to do this!

The picture you sent of 'catch and steer': which project was that?

The drawing was of Borough High Street in 1996 or so. We managed to convince London Underground to build their bridge to our specification. A form of 'splicing in'.

Can you speculate on the sustainability of your proposals, the long term effect in relation to their almost improvised and low cost conception?

I think one answer to this is about a belief in the process of architectural praxis that sits across the various things that motivate, excite and produce architecture. This means that the completed building is only one product, and source of value, amidst a range of others. It means that when something is built, what happens afterwards is of consequent and dynamic significance. I suppose I have an idea of social sustainability in this way, in terms of making good cities. Over 16 years I have seen a number of public realm projects, including ours, be influenced by our previous built results as well as written pieces and on site dialogues or visits. There is a kind of resonance that gets produced over the years that means even inexperienced clients are aware that an 'approach' can be taken to designing public realm works, even if they don't know quite what that means. This is the vague part of the answer.

There is also a more straightforward reply. That our design approach, improvised and often low cost, as you suggest, comes from an adept and nimble ability to match a challenging scope, low maintenance requirements, and many stakeholder voices, with good choices in materials, sourcing of materials, and a prioritising of design intent. By which I mean that our projects do not seek to determine experience homogeneously, but to express their presence selectively. Cheap bricks and a particularly nicely considered gutter. Large lumps of granite kerbing with a name sandblasted and concrete flags behind. This has so far been behind a kind of open precision that has guided our efforts. Even Tony Fretton in a lecture in Switzerland spoke about this with some new housing when he explained how the terrazzo lining at the stair walls only goes up the first floor landing. I enjoyed that he enjoyed this.

For instance your Borough High Street, what is still there, have things changed, have your interventions encouraged other improvements, etc?

This is a good example of the above. I recently met a nice graphic designer who cited Borough High Street as his favourite project ever. His particular interest was in the terrazzo mats, with public names in; which was the outcome of a collaboration between us and Paul Elliman, who is a very interesting artist. Last year, the dark clay bricks of BHSt were taken up and replaced with concrete flags and stone flags where the council could afford it. The terrazzo mats, partly through some intervention by me on site with the council and contractors, remain. I initially felt disturbed by what the ripping out meant. Was the project gone? But I could still enjoy the retention of the generous big granite inscribed kerbs and mats. The granite was from Scotland then, rather than from China. The specific stitching in at the edges of the streets in special

materials. The effort in making agreements with private owners for public, ie: lights fixed to buildings. And that some people remember the ideas that came from the project. Whether by having seen it, or read about it. And that these ideas can be used again, anywhere, in ways influenced by place specific circumstances. And actually, most footways don't last 16 years! I managed to convince one contractor to deliver a cart load of the dark clay bricks to my home; so a piece of BHSt now makes an entrance apron in front of my house.

This work was one of a series of economic bridges which have straddled between a rundown deprived area of South London to a vibrant art destination and wholesale food market. Almost unaffordable. All the history of the area has a rich downtrodden quality from traitors heads on London bridge, to dickens prison writings. The Tate Modern and Fosters wobbly bridge were part of the wider project. Borough High Street played its part in stimulating interim quality coffee shops, that unfortunately meant the loss of some of the local cafes that had been there since 1950's. It has often been a question: how do you secure and sustain the very quality of a place that attracts development, the kind of economy that cannot withstand the higher rates through regeneration. The displacement of in replaceable industries and activities. I think that intelligent economic models can intervene and give suppressed rates for some of these uses. Recent examples are at Bermondsey Square where the developer took pains to hang on the market, and elsewhere, Cathedral developers are leading a fairly powerful path in the name of place making with rhetoric on keeping hold of what already makes places work. So I remain optimistic about finding ways to contribute to change in ways that don't throw babies out with bathwater.

Now for lunch!