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Can quality be managed and assured in architecture?

Issues of qualification and quantification

Quality

Stephen Kite

'Quality' has become ubiquitous in the management vocabulary of Western societies. In consequence, the word's familiar usage has grown slippery. Formerly grounded in ethical values or skilled craftsmanship, 'quality' is now commonly associated with the management of administrative or technical processes. Whereas the appreciation of quality was founded in the exercise of individual judgement and taste – of connoisseurship – organisations now seek to ground its assessment in supposedly objective systems of evaluation. Practitioners are under pressure to quantify quality, but it remains questionable whether it is possible or even desirable to do so. Several papers in this issue of **arq** derive from a conference exploring such themes around the idea of *Quality*, an event held at the Welsh School of Architecture in July 2007 and reviewed here.

Society relentlessly seeks to assure and manage it, but where does 'quality' in architecture reside? Is it found as often as it is sought? Does it pertain to the object or the subject, or to some slippery realm in-between? Is it analogue or digital, slow or fast, can it be predicted, or is it fortuitous? Might it be a thing created by weathering, or enacted by its users – often despite the discouraging givens of the architect. For – as Aristotle surmised in the *Nicomachean Ethics* – 'chance is beloved of art and art of chance'. Then – in the conference's context of a fine school of architecture – can it ever be taught, accurately assessed, or disseminated? These, and kindred questions, engaged the speakers and delegates in a well-focused conference.

Nature, process and variety

From architecture's origins, an affinity with, or appeal to nature, has been a criterion. I recall Hassan Fathy relating – in his atelier overlooking Cairo's citadel – how the Egyptians seeded the 'roots' of their great lotus columns. In the opening plenary Richard Weston literally scanned this organicist tradition, presenting dramatic digital images of the 'unpremeditated art' of geodes and quartzes, and relating this to Ruskin's fascination with the surfaces of stone, or Utzon's 'process-generated variety'. A number of other speakers gave thoughtful readings of workers in the organic vein, such as John Gamble's (University of New South Wales) interpretation of Aalto's own house of 1935 in Helsinki. Less celebrated than the Villa Mairea, yet dense in the quality of its more ordinary domesticity, its spatial layering, and play of opposites. Hugh Campbell (University College Dublin) drew out the empathetic strands in Louis Sullivan's organicism, his absorption in the world of plants and trees, and the revelation of these qualia of architectural experience in John Szarkowski's luminous black and white photographs that capture the actuality and weight of Sullivan's works. It was a well-timed paper, as shortly after the conference we were reading Szarkowski's obituary. Such photography represents a special scrutiny of architecture, recalling Ruskin's point that we do not feel or understand the quality of buildings because we do not *watch* them. *Watching*, for Ruskin, entails a more engaged, ethical observation than merely 'looking', or flipping through the latest journal for the hottest products of signature architects.

The connoisseur and the author

Signatures – and their valuation – were of pressing material concern in Chantal Brotherton-Ratcliffe's (Sotheby's, London) keynote presentation; a look at quality from outside the frame of architectural discourse and less solemn than most of the architectural presenters who, unsurprisingly, were gloomy about upholding architectural value in present scenarios. In the art market, provenance raises or depresses 'value' in a scale of millions, yet in many cases scientific analysis can only bring judgement to a margin where interpretative judgement of quality is still required – connoisseurship, in short. Paul Emmons (Washington-Alexandria Architecture Center) studied those, in fact, rare examples of buildings signed by their architects, i.e. I. M. Pei's name inscribed on his National Gallery, Washington D.C. (1978).

Indeed, Marc Treib (University of California, Berkeley) summed up what seemed to be a consensual critique, in this gathering, of signature architecture and the limited outcomes of its overweening complexity. Pointing to the sense of wonder attained with limited means in a Pueblo church, or a Barragán compound, Treib characterised simplicity as condensation, just as a cook reduces a sauce. It is a conclusion with which this reviewer tends to agree, while wondering how the debates might have been sharpened by speakers attempting to define the quality criteria of the Sheikhs of Dubai and the hothouse ateliers of their landmark designers.

David Leatherbarrow (University of Pennsylvania) – who has often theorised an architecture of limits rather than excess – developed a subtle argument for the confines of prediction and authorship in quality's causation. He stressed its situated and interrelated character, wherein many of the agencies are given or accidental, such as geography and the effects of climate. These 'necessary qualifications' relate to three times: the *pre-qualified* – those constituent elements that are found before work is undertaken; the time of construction – when elements are *qualified* in assembly and finishing; and the *re-qualification* – when the effects of environment and use endow the work.

Quality as a property or as an attribute?
This sense of quality 'as found', or as conferred by a potentiality of the thing in its discovered context – rather than in the thing itself – recalls the theory of Alison and Peter Smithson; or those aspects of their thinking more evident in their Patio and Pavilion project for the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition (1956) or the Upper Lawn Pavilion (1961), than the polyester and latex House of the Future that Beatriz Colomina (Princeton University School of Architecture) explored as a sensuous domestic choreography. Yet, in the Independent Group and English culture of the 1950s and 1960s the gloss and the grit co-existed. The ephemeral consorted with a more persistent earthy romanticism (though they would all deny the latter) – as in Paolozzi's work, or even High-Tech.

Against a yet more swamping, more sanitised consumerism, numbers of recent makers and thinkers have discovered

authenticity in the refractory stance, and sheer stubbornness of the Smithsons. As a spokesperson for this generation, Adam Caruso, somewhat disappointingly, chose not to show any of his projects – surely a touchstone of quality for many at the conference. His presentation was a reminder of the wide intelligence from which Caruso St. John's projects derive, in a sensibility which considers architecture as a liberal as well as a practical art. He offered another riposte to globalisation and the consumption of space, in examining the integrated cultural outworkings, and rich iconography of the English landscape tradition. Ruskin's 'thinking eye' was again invoked, and the stress on sensibility and experience evident both in his work and that of his idol, Turner – Caruso St. John designed Tate Britain's major *Turner and Venice* exhibition (2003).

Quantifying quality
All the above contributions involve profound judgements of quality – but none that would completely assure a management team. From the standpoint of his facilitator work with the Construction Industry Council (UK), Sunand Prasad (President-Elect RIBA) described the 'Design Quality Indicator' as an attempt at a systematised assessment of quality in design. DQI's advocates claim a 'whole project quality', and there is some encouragement in the fact that the Vitruvian triad of commodity, firmness and delight finds a place in the 'indicators', representing – apparently – space, matter and mind. Some non UK-delegates saw Prasad as representing a world of politics and time and motion, unaware of his pedigree in the work of Penoyre & Prasad, out of Cullinan. Did that

work need the intersecting bubbles of 'Functionality', 'Impact' and 'Build Quality' as midwife at its genesis?

In architectural education – driven partly by the demands of the student 'customer' – quality assessment is measured more and more through a roster of learning outcomes and related tick-grades. Some of this has been fruitful, shaping a more inflected pedagogy project by project, and an interlocking of teaching, learning and quality appraisal shared and agreed by student and critic. Withal – in the undoubtedly more protected environment of the schools – a more nuanced criticism and self-criticality of value seems to have survived to date, one more genuinely holistic than the DQIs appear to promise. In these areas Helena Webster (Department of Architecture, Oxford Brookes University) examined the impact of externally defined benchmarks on schools of architecture; Erland Flygt (KTH School of Architecture and the Built Environment, Stockholm) brought the Swedish experience of quality assessment in the evaluation of school design; while Adam Sharr (Welsh School of Architecture) stressed the positivist aspects of Leslie Martin's thought – a strong influence on architectural education in the 1950s and 1960s and its still-debated role in the academy.

Representation and making
Schools of architecture are much preoccupied with representations as, with little chance to build, these are all there is to define architectural intent. If the making and interpretation of quality leaks away in the three time-frames defined by Leatherbarrow, much of the fault may be laid at the door of representation: inadequate

readings of context, static in communication with the builder, crude readings – with little Ruskinian *watching* – of the outcomes, leading to thin lessons learnt, and re-applied in an unvirtuous cycle. Hand-drawing can still not be bettered as a phenomenological engagement with the actuality of the city; a sketch turned to years later can, Proust-like, re-evoke the sun burning on the back while making it. Such *pre-qualification* of building context was demonstrated in Alison Dutoit's (Welsh School of Architecture) paper on drawing with students *in situ* – 'looking as enquiry'. Bob Sheil's (Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL) presentation showed the possibility of a total 'transgression from drawing to making' whereby CADCAM elides any slippage between design and making. Structures made in architectural residency at Kielder Northumberland adumbrate an evolutionary symbiosis: in real-time each generation of components ruthlessly decides its fate and the outcome of its descendants. The current experiments look like bionic art-installation – but the possibilities would go far beyond any 1960s dreams of 'flexibility'. Equally, Bradley Horn's (The City College, New York) suggestively complex thesis circumvented the polarisation of some computational debates by coupling both digital and analogue processes; in this 'analogue-digital-analogue' circuit, 'computers are bracketed on either end by human minds engaged in representational activity'.

Interpretations of quality occur in psychologised and acculturated spaces, as another keynote speaker from a different discourse – Catherine Belsey (Department of English, University of Wales, Swansea) – insisted in her lively reading of Lacan's theory of culture. For Lacan, the meaning and signifying power of an object is internal to language and culture; in this relativist position there are no universals, no 'benchmarks' that can be externally applied in judgement. Richard Neutra's notion of 'the space of stereognosis' was a personally eccentric development of the Viennese lingo of psychoanalysis as explored by Jin Baek (School of Architecture and Community Design, University of South Florida), linking Neutra's phenomenology to that of Merleau-Ponty. Certainly the Kaufmann House (1946) enacts a potent engagement of the body between uterine interiors and the cosmic extent of desert and sky.

Frampton's foregrounding of the tectonic as an outpost of meaning, and as a point of resistance to consumption seems to be less explicitly debated nowadays; indeed, in much work, materiality itself seems to have been consumed as a source of irony or kitsch, or folded and subsumed in pursuing an architecture of flux. Nonetheless, many of the sixty plus papers presented at this conference were unquestionably seriously engaged with the tectonic and the built, with matter and the joint. Flora Samuel (Department of Architecture and Civil Engineering, University of Bath) was disappointed with Firminy Church in its detail final realisation – a lack of overall narrative cohesion had marred the bare grandeur of the space. Mhairi McVicar (Welsh School of Architecture) – in interpreting Lewerentz's St. Peter's Church, Klippan, and the naked primitivity of its uncut bricks and joints wiped with sackcloth – spoke for an architecture of risk and extremes against the mediocrity that paradoxically results from attempts to certify quality. A reminder that there can be no taking the eye off the ball in the quest for quality – even if finding it is a chance encounter.

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