When reading a book, there exists the ever-present temptation to read that last page to find out what will happen. When we do, does it spoil the fun? Or does it make us then read more closely what comes between, looking and searching more carefully?

As a closing thought to his lecture here in Dublin in February, the Norwegian architect, Jan Olaf Jensen, presented us with two images, photographs from his days in India.

One, the entrance-way to an Indian home, a mother with her three children. They stand, with a welcome for the viewer. Jensen speaks of the final place in the doorway being filled by the head of the farmer. The family showing us their own reading of the precise dimensioning of the space. The family as a measure of the doorway to their home. The human body as a measure of the architecture.

The other closing image was one of lines. These dynamic lines as man-formed cuts on the steep slope, the way of working the land. The oxen make their way across the ground, turn, and make their way back. A line is formed. These lines form the terraces that work their way down the slope. The oxen work, the water is transported, the people move; thus is the land negotiated by the method requiring the least effort. The land itself transmits its own message through the actions of man made on it.

While on a summer trip, two Norwegian architecture students, Jensen and a friend, visit family friends, missionaries, in the Indian countryside. They receive an offer to design a leper hospital for the missionaries; they go for a three-week hike in Nepal, return to the village to find piles of bricks, tiles and a meitheal of local workmen awaiting. They end up staying a year.

India was unfamiliar territory to the two students. In the images of Indian landscape Jensen presented, I saw a mixture of Tuscan hills and open west-Limerick farmland. But in this landscape there are hidden dangers, secrets known to those who live there—the threats of wild animals, robbers, the strong sun. These secrets of the land dictate how the people live on the land—together, in groups and villages. As he said, 'if you don't take precautions, you can die in this landscape.' They came to recognise the landscape as a living presence.

By nature of its function, the leper hospital is set apart from the nearest settlement. It becomes its own village. Jensen and his colleague re-worked the traditional thinking of hierarchy in such a place. No longer were the outdoor spaces of the head doctors, nurses, staff, and patients all separated from one another. Their hospital is one garden of trees and water for all, wrapped by the barrel-vaulted spaces.

The making of the building had its own stories. Jensen showed images of the settlement under construction, as a skeleton—the dry earth, the brick, the vaults, the joinery, the workers. He spoke of the relationship they had with these Indian family-men, who looked on them as children, since they lacked the manly attribute of the moustache! He told us of the ten or twelve A4 pages and two pencils the missionaries gave them to design the building, and when, at the end of the first week, he asked for more paper, they reacted as if he were Oliver asking for more gruel! Between them they had one scale rule, so an expedition set out to purchase another one in the local village. A good way into the project, discrepancies began to arise in the drawings. When they finally compared the two rulers, there was a good inch in the difference.
These drawings were truly the communication between builder and architect. He carefully described how, at the end of each day, the builder handed back the drawing to the architects for them to work on it further. A special ritual in the making of this building—the real actual drawing—as precious, as a physical tool in the making of the building, a thing that here in our world of computers and reproduction it can be very easy to forget.

Unlike in India, Jensen described the landscape outside Oslo as having no hidden secrets, no dangers. He talked of it not having a square metre of ground that has not been turned by man. His truck garage is set in this worked, used land, among farms, homes, people. As a postscript to our understanding of this territory and as an introduction to his projects in the mountains, Jensen related a radical view on natural landscape, as written by a patron of the painter Munch. This patron abhorred 'the absolute disorder of any landscape untouched by man'.

He found utter chaos in the landscapes of rivers, rocks, trees, mountains and sea. Jensen went on to speak of the forest (a disordered, chaotic landscape ?) in terms of a built form. He talked of the floor, and its changing nature, of the space of the forest and its light, formed and captured by the trees. This large-scale project for the mountains and forests of Norway works on two levels: the architects work with the ground, the floor, unique to each place, understanding its tolerance. They understand the body, its needs as constant, and make mass-producible pieces for it.

At a point along the mountain road they make a slower, meandering car route. A passage through the trees, to drive, to park, to sit, to understand the light and floor of the forest. As he talked and showed drawings of his floor, he described it as a project of addition. The different layers and types of gravel were built up both for the tree and the car, the section changing with the topography and each tree. I felt his real fascination with the section of the ground, how much he had enjoyed the process of discovery of learning about the land, of not cutting a single tree. I start to imagine what it feels like to drive among these trees. Can a car promenade?

Elsewhere in the mountains is a spectacular, wild waterfall, with a viewing point. The area is prone to avalanches and the railings continuously get damaged. Jensen's way to a new railing is to take the geometry of the site and make a plan. The plan forms a series of steel plates and rods that function like a beam and are strong to the
horizontal forces of the avalanche. To determine the curve of other handrails nearby, Jensen describes applying a formula to the complex topography. A set of instructions are compiled—each rod must be, say, 900mm high; they must be set in the rock at most, say, 1200mm apart; the line on plan is fixed. The land is the unknown in the formula. Precision is a function of the site. The method produces the form.

This brought immediately to mind the work of some composers of recent music. The instructions are those of the composer. The plan is the music. The site is the player. The curve is sounded.

This is a way of working to make an architecture—Jensen’s way. Like the oxen on the land, an unknown is allowed to determine the form precisely. In the same way, using the same process, he talked of his row housing—how the existing trees on the site let every plan be different. He suggests getting help to make variation, without having to invent it. A method of release for the practice of architecture?

Jensen accepts that not everything can be controlled, forced, designed. He talked of clients and demands and regulations and governments. Lost in all of this, I wonder do we begin to forget about the family in the doorway? He looks to find the one important part of a project and to hold on to it; to understand what is important in your work. In each project he showed, he builds a reading of the ground. Each speaks of the landscape it works with. The church, another project, sits on the land, allowing the bedrock to appear in the space as the floor surface in places. The bus structures in Oslo airport act as shelters, as signs, as beacons of light, allowing orientation in the horizontality of the cars—the same vocabulary used to describe this hard parking surface as the forest floor.

Maybe it is the early stage that I am at in the journey of architecture, wondering where and how paper and ideas fit into the world of making and building, wondering and questioning directions and connections, but that evening Jensen made sense of a lot of things for me. Not having ever come across him or his work before, I enjoyed his optimism, the way he thinks, makes, explores, talks about and really understands his architecture. There was no pretension, no grandiose reasoning, no verbal palaver; only the site, the brief, his feelings, the project. He presented a simple architecture, specific and deeply rooted in place.

It often seems difficult for a speaker to communicate their architecture through words not of their own native tongue. Too much effort is needed, both to speak and to listen. A message gets lost. For me, Jensen’s use of the English language worked to his advantage. I enjoyed the careful choice, repetition and placing of his words, the pace at which this made him present his ideas, his hilarious little stories. His message was clear. The book had no last page.

I think of the Indian family in their doorway. I think of the lines of the land.

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