NEGOTIATIONS of IMAGE & ARCHITECTURE
Negotiations of Image and Architecture.

Negotiation: The art of discussion with ambition towards resolution

by Martin Lennon

Preamble:

How do I work? It seemed that as I endeavoured towards a “final project” in this culminating year of formal education I should visit this question as much as possible. A pause in the process offers a space of critique, a place to describe to oneself how one got there, to interrogate it and to refine it.

Ultimately, the aim of this investigation was to define a methodology for practice. As architecture is so expansive, the process cannot be packaged formulaically, but a sense of understanding the process can certainly be discerned. Through this year a tangible whilst malleable starting point for my practice as an architect will emerge that will be remoulded consistently for the rest of my life.

Doubt has always been running alongside any architecture work I have done. Although it is an uncomfortable presence, it is a welcome surveyor, questioning the decisions and cradling a caring consciousness. Doubt is of course a precursor to curiosity which actually tempts action, an experimentation, and a making. It is up to the practitioner to tame this regulator of activity in order to avoid a paralysis of creativity. As the film critic Pauline Kael observed: “A mistake in judgment isn’t fatal, but too much anxiety about judgment is.”

This calibration of self consciousness and free expression is essentially the birthing and proliferation of instinct. Instinct will shape the practice and practice will inform the instinct.

Genesis:

The ease at which one slips into an exclusively visual involvement with our world seems to be lubricated further with every passing day. Stimulated by technology, the environment in which we dwell is becoming more densely polluted with imagery. It is images, rather than the haptic qualities of our living territory that we are preoccupied with. Even something profound or palpable which is presented through pixels can get neglected as we frantically gorge on those images, which only serve as inanimate distractions, one after another. This prolific invasion of images stems from the consumerism which has become a robust cog in the constitution of society, to such an extent that it appears we connect more readily with commodities than we do with our natural surroundings or each other. Images are more truly consumed than reflected upon.

Images only contain the remnants of a connected embodied place, they are provocative illusions. The image of a place is not the place itself. It holds a connection to the place it depicts but is ultimately an image not a place. An image of a site loses its ability to resonate with its audience if the viewer cannot associate the image with their own personal, physical encounter. To an extent, contrasts between places give them their own unique quality but as Juhani Pallasmaa accounts, they affirm a place in our memories because they have impacted upon our bodies and have conjured up a connection to our individual worlds. A memory is imprinted corporeally and the potency of that recollection depends on the robustness with which the experience provokes your senses. As this ingrained experiential data resides in the mind uninvoked through the body it gradually diminishes. Essentially, one cannot rely on memory. The only certain way to maintain an ecological literacy is through regular immersion of oneself, body and mind into the world. This immersion is a practice of sorts.

The public realm is quickly succumbing to the condition of non-place as described by Marc Augé, where there is no sense of social contact, history nor identity. Michel de Certeau defines space as a “frequented place”. Space is only space when it is frequented to its full potential. Space retains its integrity through its activation; the movement of bodies, the presence of consciousness, the circulation of opinions. The old adage, “a rolling stone gathers no moss”, comes to mind. Occupation as opposed to inhabitation keeps the public aware and critical of their built and natural sphere. Materially, spasmodically, socially, politically, this physical engagement facilitates evolution but prevents deprivation of our ecology.

Architects, Architecture, Practice.

1 Pauline Kael
There is a thriving deception hampering our grounding in the world. Images, perhaps through their sheer relentless, have risen to become an authority which governs and perpetuates this deception. An image is an interpretation rather than an actuality. John Berger described them as reconstructed sights. Decontextualised in terms of place and time, these appearances are like artefacts. Although, sometimes rich in knowledge, artefacts are never capable of complete description. Similarly, images are legitimate as comment, and as a way of seeing, but as Berger puts it, they are not a “mechanical record” nor a way of experiencing the world.

Misrepresented and misinterpreted, our haptic, emotional and political relationship with our world has become obscured with the dawn of the technological age. We are somehow estranged from our own tools for living. As Juhani Pallasmaa suggests; the obscuring of our place as individuals in this world could be related to a “pathology of the senses”. Architecturally, this pathology coupled with many architects’ reluctance to consider what they do more widely as a general cultural set piece and as part of history’ is inhibiting our ability to respond to our environment, reducing our interventions to superficial gestures. The image orientated cloud we find ourselves in presently, is surely culpable for such a degeneration in endeavour. It rewards the production of non sustainable things which are consumed and which rapidly exit from relevance.

Consequently, architecture manifests as “retinal art of the eye”. If architecture disregards the extent of the wells it should be be drawing from it will quickly exhaust its value in society. The process of making architecture should be eclectic in its response to a brief which will surely be diverse in terms of the impact its realisation will have. The answer is not found through aesthetics even if the answer will have its own aesthetic.

Architecture as an eclectic practice is being terrorised by “The tyranny of the new” as Adam Caruso describes it. The influence and integrity of practice is lost with architectural responses being conceived and choreographed by the economic authority. The shift in practice towards satisfying a market is creating a culture where the market becomes the sole element to respond to and hence the architect becomes part of this production system which Caruso labels as “guilt free”. This “guilt free” status implies that architecture would subscribe to what Richard Sennett defines as “constrained labour” where the consequences are outside the activity as opposed to “work” which deliberately considers consequences as part of itself.

In order for architects and the practice of architecture to express useful critique of current development Caruso maintains it should frame its polemic from within our existing places of value. If architecture is to be an effective opponent of the extremes of contemporary development, it needs to confront wholeheartedly the emotional presence of our existing places of inhabituation. Robert Venturi’s call for an architecture of inclusion is once more relevant, if a stronger emphasis on fabrication is adopted to prevent architecture from being diminished to style.

The suggestion is not that we should adamantly refute the contemporary tendencies of society in terms of market or image but rather that we see it as our prerogative and opportunity to identify the junction between this reigning order and the integrity of architecture.

Curation of historical culture, the brief of the present and the anticipation of the future is the task of the practicing architect. The richness and value of this curated production is dependant on how vastly diverse the historical culture is. Knowledge of historical context is the foundation of any artistic endeavour. When considering Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Philip Webb, and Adolf Loos, Caruso notes that they all “had strong ethical positions which allowed their work to transcend empty aesthetic rhetoric.”

In addition to practicing architecture in dialogue with the past as with the present there should also be a desire to envision a future. Of course, it could be said that the future is unknown and hence it is a futile exercise to digress into the mindset of a prophet. However, despite the future being speculative and avoiding complete fantasy, it is usually grounded and derived from a past and current condition which potentially reveals a trajectory. This trajectory is as much a historical moment as is history itself and should be treated as such.

Architecture plunges into banality if it solely addresses aesthetic. The potential of any work is encapsulated in the process of its materialisation. If the process is manoeuvring through a plethora of influences then the architecture will do likewise. In other words it will give as much as it gets. Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty is potent in the way that it aligns a familiar form and a normal means of production. Executed with versatility, it reveals a potential and a new condition which is generated through a reconfiguring and collaging of ordinary actions. Caruso describes how it lucidly depicts how refocusing perception and behaviour can reveal unexpected opportunity.

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Craft and Perception

Immanuel Kant; “The hand is the window onto the mind”16

Prehension is the physical motions the body makes in anticipation of touch. Development of this acuteness begins by the time we are two week's old. Anticipating the need for a tactile understanding of the world we begin to stroke and grope at adjacent objects and surfaces. This haptic knowledge we gather through our bodies in these early moments is stored and practiced until becoming instinctive. Maneouvring towards and through space and objects is initiated by delving into this accumulated resource of sensory knowledge. Each tactile engagement informs, refining the prehension, making our response more fluid and more appropriate.17 Like a hiker traversing a terrain, delicate, unsure at first, building familiarity until their negotiation of the ground is fluent.

The eyes and the images they feed our brain are only given authority through an appraisal that is presided over by the sense of touch. We begin to trust what we see because we have associated it with a previous tactile encounter. The mind becomes an aggregator between the image the eye sees and haptic memory. These images become a shorthand to experience.

Exercising the collabration between the eye and the senses is something that should be ongoing, it does not reach a climax. Practice through experience is part of its continuance and also its amelioration. Sennett uses the practicing musician, who suffers the rough feedback from their instrument as they feel their way through its materiality to describe this dialogue. Exploration involves getting lost and in the process of unravelling one’s disorientation a “physical security” arises. Substitution of the experiential with some form of neat, ready made illustration stunts our understanding and subsequently we are inept in our response.18 At the scale of an individual craftsman or artist, if you don’t know your material but rather you plainly see your material inevitably you will be incapable of tactfully working your material.

The artist James Turrell defines the aim of his art as a wish to summon an awareness around the idea that we are part of creating that which we think we perceive.19 We craft and compose what we perceive the world to be. It is not preexisting. If we are to think of ourselves as craftsmen we would become more conscious of the material we are working with because not everyone who makes is a craftsman. “People who make things usually don’t understand what they are doing.”20

In-between

Juhani Pallasmaa, in The Thinking Hand notes that our bodies are exercised within the faculties of sport and dance but that our embodied experience is not commonly emphasised as a rudimentary aspect of our consciousness and that it is the medium through which we inhabit the world.21

Earlier this year I accompanied a friend to what was described beforehand as a performance piece in Limerick city. Specifically, the venue was 69 O’Connell Street, which is better known as the Belltable, a theatre venue. On entering the building, we arrived at a spattering of people congregated in the foyer space preceding the main theatre. Also noticeable were the words “Follow me” - #SpacedLIMERICK where the performance was being broadcast. Most people present brandished some kind of electronic apparatus and those who didn’t were huddled in alongside someone who did.

Having entered the twitter conversation, comments from unknown characters started ambling onto the screen. At this point an aura of curiosity manifested. Who were the participants? Were they in attendance? Was the space relevant to the commentary? This atmosphere was punctuated by whispers, conversation, doors opening, doors closing, chatter, sneezes, murmurs, laughs, rustling jackets, coughs and footsteps, all harbouring a slight confusion and anticipation emanating from image dispensing devices, and captured by the material space we were all standing in. As the image feed of text and photo rolled through the screens, the interrogation of the room by its occupants, or alternatively the audience, sharpened. Simultaneously, there was an awareness of the space and the images of the screen. This was roused through the audience’s separate but common attempts to decipher whether / if there was a correlation between the content of the screen and the constituents of the room which consequently created an overall terrestrial experience.

The communication and tension between the two realms, the physical realm and the virtual realm gave each a new relevance. We may read the world through vision but we do not experience it that way alone. Depth, proximity and materiality are read by the eye but are translated somatically. The body informs the image with space and time. The intertwining of the performance in this way demonstrated the potential in integrating the physical experiential world with the digital more image based world to create a contemporary terroir of occupation. Cooperation between

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the two realms lead to the discovery of an in-between as opposed to dissociation. Within this in-between, perhaps there is a way of generating architecture.

Alvaro Siza when speaking about the relationship between nature and architecture stated: “What we must look for are the contact points between these two worlds so they make a new one.” At this moment in our history it seems that the worlds we inhabit have expanded. However, the challenge still lies in identifying the contact points. Nature and Architecture now have to contemplate a world of manmade data and images.

The Proposal of Architecture:

What is it to propose architecture? The process of proposing architecture is initiated non-invasively and by invitation only. It happens unbeknownst to the public and it is usually specifically commissioned. The form in which the proposal first makes an appearance is usually as a polished image which conceals any trace of process. Architecture is hesitant when it comes to allowing its process to be introduced into the public arena for scrutiny. The process, for the practitioners of architecture is what instills value in the profession. Despite this, the process and dialogue that surrounds a project is kept within the offices, schools and publications of architecture which rarely reach the general public.

Potential to scrutinise and experience architecture is only afforded to its public once a building is complete and the scaffolding is down and the doors are open. The public conversation about architecture seems to be cast into obsolescence once it has reached that stage. However, the building at its completion is the only tangible moment the public identifies and shares with architecture as a discipline.

James Corner, when speaking about landscape, reiterates the common post modern critique of synoptic representation, which include aerial and perspective depictions of landscape, stating how they package and deliver landscape as an object which is divorced from the subject experientially. Within the task of proposing architecture, tactics, which resemble what Corner is commenting on, are creating a distance (intentional or not) between the designers, the process and the community of people to which the proposals are delivered. What results is an aestheticised proposal which is presented as object or even product. The only thing we really understand about this architecture is that it is new. Architecture is neither object nor product. Products destined for the market can avoid public engagement prior to their release. In these instances the critique from the public comes in the form of market response. The products sustained survival is dependent on the public purchasing that product. Architecture should not be viewed, considered or realised in the same way as a product, because the implications are of a broader range. Built architecture affects people beyond the clients who commission them. There is no such market parliament which is capable of decisively rendering a building out of the built environment. Market conditions may influence whether or not the building is occupied but ultimately the physical presence of the building, once constructed, will be retained for a significant time whether it is appreciated or not.

“The pictorial impulse” as stated by Corner leads to a decay in our relationship to the earth and profoundly damages our ability to assemble an improved way of inhabiting and interacting with each other. This misguided emphasis on image is not only stunting society’s relationship to its built and natural environment but also its perception of architecture as a practice. Architecture has to rethink how it communicates with its public. Corner argues that if architects are to charge themselves with the responsibility of facilitators, instigators and diversifiers then the formation and deployment of “more performative forms of imaging” is vital to maintaining their relevance. Reattaching the process of design and the act of proposal together with the context in which it will be erected would serve the discipline in order to prevent an overly aestheticised mode of architecture from prevailing.

Architecture, through its approach to the public acts as a tool to be critical of the present condition in which society resides. It is a provocateur as opposed to simply shelter. However, if it hides in the flatness of image and the picturesque it is abandoning its duty to extend society a lens through which they may question their status, their role and their environ. Architecture gives us a moment for us to form our objections, our desires, our agreements. Architecture is more than shelter and more than space. Dr Anna Ryan when describing architecture states; “at its most powerful, [it] changes the individual, even temporarily; changes their sense of themselves and their relations with others and with their surroundings. If and when it doesn’t, architecture collapses into building.”

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23 Sensing Spaces: Álvaro Siza and Eduardo Souto de Moura
26 Rowley, Ellen. I.e. Patterns of Thought. 346.
The site.
The car park stands adjacent to an abandoned shopping centre which originally opened as Athlone’s first shopping centre in the 1970s. After considerable redevelopment and the construction of the car park, the centre reopened in the year 2000, however, 5 years later it closed once more as it failed to compete sufficiently with the other existing retail outlets in the town. It remains closed to this day.

At present the car park is a building in Athlone with no meaningful narrative. It lies as a void in the centre of a town in the centre of Ireland. It opens only on Thursdays when a man attends the station inside the main entrance and on occasion clamps a vehicle or two in the adjoining car park. The opening and closing of the gates is basically a symbolic gesture as the space still maintains a constant emptiness through Thursdays as with every other day of the week. Even during the time where it was permanently open and functioning as a car park, it held no significant cultural liveliness. It was the resting spot for the cars of the people who went next door to shop. It was a non-place; it was storage. Given that this building sits in the heart of Athlone its emptiness is an awkward obstacle which wants a more justified narrative. I began exploring the potential narrative of this site through film because of film’s potential to host and combine image, sound and writing to describe the places fictional, potential, or real narrative.

Image and moving image can be provocative because although it is flat and immediate, it alludes to something existing or surrounding us, something that has happened and hence could happen. It becomes something less provocative and more about consumption when the connection to the surroundings becomes distorted or less considered. In this kind of a scenario, the world starts to be considered through images rather than it being considered as it really is tactually and sensually and where images are used as modes of description in order to reminisce or provoke.

This is an idea of making film to provoke in a very localised manner. The images here would aspire to the Francis Bacon philosophy where images are “concentrations of reality with a short hand of sensation”, where sensation is beyond simple sensationalism. In other words, it doesn’t only incite reaction but rather it sheds a new memory of the place onto the subject who sees it.
Below is the first written piece submitted. It was written after seeing a film at Athlone’s only cinema (the building below). Even at this early stage a carpark niggled my thoughts!

Standing on the desolate asphalt carpet polluted by chewing gum freckles and white lines slapped regimentally across its emptiness, I wonder if this is really it? This is our forum? It feels like I have been ushered out of a nightclub for being drunken and disorderly, except I am abstinent and for the entirety of the evening have behaved quite affably! The car door claps and from where we just emerged the lights snap dark.

The Spanish have a word, “sobremesa”; which when interpreted through English closely translates to; “the time after eating spent chatting”. The gesture of conserving such a specific act in language conveys sharply the peoples affinity towards, what some might classify as, quite a routine occurrence. Equally, it speaks starkly about the value we place on cinema and film when considering our non-facilitation of commentary after the final credits have rolled.

Cinemas are degenerating from their role as houses of culture and art, towards a new role of fast image consumption chambers. They reside in a context of dissociation and transience (carparks) which displaces the value of the art in society. Altering cinemas experiential manifestation both geographically and in terms of medium has a profound influence on the impact it deals society.
Existing
An unused multi-storey car park located in the centre of Athlone town.

Concrete structure allows for manipulation in staged process
The crafting of different material objects was the first move in order to start testing the site, to try and manifest a new spacial narrative for the car park. The objects were made of timber, concrete and card and they became tools that were collaged into the site. Film became the means by which this negotiation of object, site and image were arbitrated.

Depth, proximity and materiality are read by the eye but translated somatically or physically. These principles were not only explored through the making of the physical models in terms of joint and finish but also in the collaging of the images of those manufactured things onto the site. A calibration between body and eye was required.
Notional sectional sketch of the objects in place based on the film
The projection of a new proposal for an existing site in-situ; the proposal is not detached from its physical site but rather is presented in tension with the existing. A tension between what exists and what alternatively could exist, between image and physical reality.
The proposal would become an event within the carpark where the design process and overall strategic vision for the site would be exhibited along with projected displays which overlay the proposed interventions so they appear in position optically as they would if completed.
Demonstration of on-site projected proposal conducted in a corridor of the main building in the University of Limerick. The proposal for the purpose of the demonstration was the placing of a stepped ground into the corridor. When one sat in the chair and looked down the corridor they could see the proposal sitting in the site.
1:200 Scale cardboard model of car park with cuts removed
View from inside concrete carpark model
1:40 Scale concrete and timber car park and insertion
The final proposal for the car park involved an incremental construction process that would firstly open the site up to the public creating a route through the structure connecting the north and south. There would subsequently be 7 more stages which involved the removal of further concrete and the insertion of large glulam structures.

In terms of program, the proposal initially provides a new town centre location for the Athlone Institute of Technology. The building further develops with the introduction of industry which would occupy the car park in conjunction with the institute as it became viable. The concrete becomes the scaffolding for the new configuration of space within the building in terms of construction, but also circulation. The cores containing the ramps remain and the new spaces orbit this residual infrastructure.

The film that communicated the proposal attempted to demonstrate this incremental construction whilst also describing the proposal spatially. The suggested narrative of the film brings the building from a dark and closed space to a light and open one, from underground to overground. Dealing with an existing building allowed me to remain hyper aware of context and meant I was constantly referring to the physical site when calibrating the space and the visual frame of that space through film. The process of creating a final piece to communicate the proposal, and the process of designing were brought closer together. The film and the methodology in calibrating and crafting the film could become the tool for design rather than it being something that is created after the design process as a means of communication. The integrity of the design was not compromised by the making of the film but rather it acted as a means of scrutiny for the entire architectural piece.
Stage 1

Concrete cut away from North and South facade. Concrete also removed from the centre of the structure to bring light into the depth of the plan.

This concrete is reused in reforming the ground of a new public space in front of the south facade which will eventually open the site up to the main street in Athlone.

The concrete which has been removed is reused to create steps which will be placed on the north and south facade thus creating a route through the centre of the car park. Addition of a blockwork wall around the newly cut atrium.
Stage two

Removal of concrete from the centre of the car park. This concrete is reused in reforming the ground of a new public space in front of the south facade which will eventually open the site up to the main street in Athlone.

In place of the removed concrete there is the addition of an auditorium which will be a new space occupied by the Institute of Technology. The structure is made up of glulam beams sitting on concrete walls. The Auditorium is hung from the roof by steel lengths.
Stage three

Removal of concrete from the north west corner of the site. This concrete is reused for the new public space to the south of the site.

A second auditorium and classroom spaces are added. These are constructed of glulam columns, which are fixed to the ground with steel, and glulam rafters which are also fixed to the column with a steel plate. The rafters splay from the columns to form the roof. The roof is clad in oak shingles.
Stage four.

Removal of concrete from the north east corner. Again this concrete is reused as benches and paving for the new public space.

A library is added which is of the same method of construction as the stage before, glulam columns fixed to the concrete ground, with glulam rafters splaying from the tops of the columns.
Stage five.
Removal of concrete from the east side of the site. Removed concrete brought to the construction of the public space to the south.

Large studio space added for industry which is constructed from glulam timber. The large structure also acts as a light well bringing light into the adjacent concrete spaces of the left over car park structure.
The film attempts to capture the building gradually being constructed and emerging incrementally as it was considered within the design process. It was an attempt to merge the thought process with the representation of the proposal as opposed to simply displaying an image that shows newness and newness alone. This image was exposing/communicating the fact that the building will have a gestation period, that in terms of the design process and the overall development of the proposal, it is more than “newness”. Within the design process, the pregnancy of a building is always in focus as much as the finished piece, so this is an attempt to bring that side of architecture to the public in representation. The argument that is sometimes made when speaking about this is that the public don’t want to know how the watch is made they only want to know what time it is. However, the reason the public are satisfied with the time alone is because they trust the mechanism from which the time is sourced. They trust the watch. That faith has not been confirmed with regard to the public and architecture so therefore, the mechanism of architecture needs to be transparent in order to develop such a trust.
Stage 6

Removal of concrete from the south side of the site. Removed concrete brought to the construction of the public space to the south.

Office and studio space make up the south facade. Constructed of glulam timber and pinned back to the existing concrete structure using steel.
Stage 7

Additional office space added by bridging with glulam beams between the studio space and the first auditorium.
The mechanism of architecture has become so disorientated that it has lead to individual architects scrapping amongst each other in order to keep themselves from drowning in a harsh market place. The method in which architecture is being induced causes a desperation among architects to present themselves, individually, as valuable as opposed to presenting architecture as a whole as useful. Even the competition format of enticing creative architectural solution distorts how we propose architecture. The competition format distorts the approach of the architect to a point where they propose in order to be commissioned as opposed to proposing the architectural solution purely inspired by their creative intuition and reaction to the site they are faced with. Competitions simply do not encourage the moral development of architecture. The competition culture within architecture is working more effectively in disrupting and fracturing the architecture profession to the extent that it is justifying the actions of architects who abandon their architectural integrity in order to capture the commission.
Architects do not provoke change, but rather they are reduced to waiting for permission to provoke. We are responsible for allowing ourselves to become circumscribed by the market (the commissioners of work) rather than being proactively involved in the dialogue of commission and proposal. If we are trained to handle the built environment, to consider it, to reposition it then we need to be provoking from a top down point of view as opposed to a bottom up. Partly one would have to surmise that the discrepancy between what an architect believes they are capable of providing society and what they are actually capable or permitted to provide emerges from an inability to effectively communicate with their public. In order for architects to gain the trust of sceptical public and embody their role as provocateurs, they must find a way of communicating not only their final proposals, but also their process.
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