

9 Architects

Many years ago, I read that the brilliant Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki always worked out his designs in a particular type of sketchbook available only from a particular art supplier in a small backstreet in central Tokyo.

So...I went to the shop and bought myself ten. The size, and the textured cloth cover, fitted beautifully in my hand; and the fine-ness of the paper enthusiastically invited the flow of ink from my pen. But...they didn't make me design as well as Maki.

That was a shock! I realised, then, that there must be something more to architecture!

This exhibition, I think, shows what that 'something more' is.

James and Susan proposed this as an exhibition of sketches, and – despite initial appearances – it seems to me that's precisely what it is! But, just as each of the architects' architecture is very different, so is their meaning of, and their use of, the sketch.

We know that all these are sketches because – obviously – they are not the real thing. Nor are they portraits of the real thing. Panels by Choi-Rophia do re-imagine that which already is, and the renderings by William Smart and the animations by LAVA do attempt an estimation of what might be. But, fundamentally, all are speculations. That is the role of the sketch.

While Super-Colossal's sketchbook is a string of thoughts and observations and found facts and influences, all posted onto a perpetually up-dated internet blog, the sketching that is fundamental to the making of architecture is usually kept private - or perhaps only shown to other architects. We tend to scribble in a kind of visual and written shorthand - with different scales and issues muddled onto a single page – in a way that can be indecipherable to 'outsiders'.

Our sketchbooks are our alter-ego in our internal dialogue with ourselves – a point made clear in Dale Jones-Evan's mind-map, in which his interrogation of his own thoughts is intense. Indeed, the written word is fundamental to the sketching of many of these architects – in the case of Angelo Candelapas, in his very patient observations of iconic works, from which he has learned greatly - as his sketches now allow us to do; in Peter Stutchbury's choice of poetry to help him evoke and then define the essence of the building he is designing; and in Lacoste/Stephenson's instructions to themselves, on the yellow tracing paper, that their gallery be designed to be both 'intriguing' and 'inviting'.

The sketches that accompany these words are not always drawings of something – at least, not of something that is yet coherent. They are a graphic speculations, for example, of how a person might move through a building, what they might see, what the materials and structural system might be, how the different parts of a building might relate and how they might together relate to its context – and all of those speculations might appear in a 3-dimensional spatial investigation as

big as a wall – as with Terroir’s work – or on a single scrap of paper no bigger than an envelope.

Those who are regular visitors to architecture exhibitions know that the world’s most famous architects always like to show initial sketches they made on airplane boarding passes bound for exotic destinations with seat row numbers in single digits, and in the corners of menus from exclusive restaurants. This, I think, raises an interesting and important question of cause and effect: can these people travel and eat first class because they are world-famous architects, or can they only design world-famous buildings when they’re travelling and eating first class? If the latter is the case – and I think it might possibly be – we should really include fine travel and fine food in the university curriculum. Paid for by HECS.

Peter Cook, of the British group Archigram, likes to describe architectural sketching as “taking an idea for a walk” – in the sense of ‘taking a dog for a walk’ - where, when you start, you have no idea where the dog will lead you, and you follow it just to see where it wants to go.

Like the dog, the sketch will often – and this is what we always hope will happen – lead you to a place that takes you by surprise – which you didn’t, in the least, expect. The ideas in one sketch will trigger others, and a chain-reaction leads to a conclusion that often appears to have simply come out of the ether because the thought-process that got you there is too complex, contradictory and tangled for even you to see as a whole, or to explain.

That’s what happened to Glenn Murcutt at the Marie Short House, to Frank Lloyd Wright at Falling Water, and to Louis Kahn at the Kimbel Museum. Their fully formed designs arrived one morning, without warning, on the scrap of paper in front of them – surprising them - as much as it does us - by its completely-resolved perfection. It’s the search for that magical moment that you see being played out in the sketches of this exhibition.

These sketches are not done lightly, and shouldn’t be taken lightly. Peter Cook’s partner in Archigram, Ron Herron, was a superb designer, a brilliant draftsman, and a slab of muscle, as tough as nails. He once told me that the only thing in the world that scared him was an empty sheet of paper on his drawing board. Each time, he was scared that – this time - he wouldn’t be able to think of anything worthwhile to draw on it. The Japanese architect Tadao Ando – formerly a truck-driver and professional boxer – says exactly the same thing. When you start to sketch you issue a challenge to yourself, and it’s almost always a desperate, almost masochistic, self-flagellating struggle.

I think that’s why we architects so reverently and lovingly preserve the scraps of paper on which we’ve made our marks. The paper trail tells us about ourselves and how we think. In a way, our sketches are self-portraits.

Of course, we also keep all our sketches just in case immortality strikes us, and because the Foundation that will, one day, be established in our honour will need to catalogue our drawings in its archives. And, having noted that the archives of the Le Corbusier Foundation include some sketches by the Master that are real stinkers, we preserve only our finest examples.

I wonder if artists keep all their development sketches and speculations? Is it only we architects who cherish them as much as we cherish our buildings? The contemporary artists I know best re-paint and re-paint and re-paint the same canvas – obscuring all trace of their initial marks and subsequent developments. All they are eventually left with is the final work.

We value paintings and sculptures as the final product of a search. And, we value the Leonardo sketch or Henry Moore maquette that led to the final work because the sketch and maquette were also very consciously made as artworks. And, we value written drafts of poems or songs because at each stage of development they might have been the final artwork.

But, architect's sketches are different. Architect's sketches, drawings and models are rarely intentionally made as stand-alone artworks. Our sketches very often have extreme aesthetic appeal, but are they, therefore, art? As we know, children – and even monkeys – often do, by coincidence, produce paintings of immense aesthetic appeal. But, they are not intended as artworks, and are not considered artworks. Intention seems to be the difference, and the issue.

I have 7 or 8 very beautiful sketches by Tadao Ando, all autographed and many with a dedication to me. They would be enough to sell and fund me through a very comfortable retirement, except that - half a million other people also have 7 or 8 very beautiful sketches by Ando, all autographed and dedicated to them. Ando floods the market in order to render his sketches virtually value-less because he doesn't intend them as art. His art, and his autograph, is his architecture.

So, if the works on these walls were not intended to be artworks, is there a way that we can understand them as art?

I think one way might be as suggested by my mathematician friends who explain that while every complex equation has a correct answer, it matters little if a student gets the answer right or wrong – what matters is that they get to their answer by a convincingly beautiful, even poetic and artistic, route. The artistry is in the journey.

Or, we can understand the work on these walls in the way that we understand the works of the 1950's action painters – like Jackson Pollock – where the paintings are seen as simply “the physical residue of the work of art” – that the process of making the painting, not the painting itself, was the artwork.

The sketches and sketchbooks in this exhibition show these architects' beautiful journeys, and indeed their beautiful minds. Although they lead, in most cases, to a constructed building, their artistry is not dependent on construction, although it is (if things go well) amplified by construction. One might, I think, consider these sketches as architecture in its most pure form.

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