

## **The traces of the relationships people make with one another: The work of architectural practice, Hawkins/Brown**

[The following excerpts are taken from 'Traces of the relationships people make with one another', was written for architects, Hawkins/Brown, and published as 'Traces of the relationships people make with one another', in *&/also Hawkins/Brown*, (Black Dog Publishing, 2003).]

Some time in the mid-1990's, I went to visit a friend doing research at the sociology department at the University of Southampton. My friend was not fond of much contemporary architecture, finding it cold and arrogant, but he wanted to show me a new building on the campus that he had already grown fond of. It had only been completed a few months previously, but despite its newness and the use of quite raw materials, unpainted concrete and steel, the building had comfortable atmosphere. Even early on a Saturday morning, it was full of students. It already felt lived-in. It wasn't until several years later, when I was asked to write a piece on the architecture of Hawkins/Brown, that I realized this was one of their buildings.

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The artist and critic Suzanne Lacy has suggested with reference to 'new genre public art' that artists can adopt a range of activities in the process of making art and that audiences are composed of people, each with their own relationship to the final work. This notion of art as a social process and one that is negotiated differently by each person involved, provides an interesting starting point for considering the various interactions in architectural practice between architect, funder, client, occupier and the building. When I asked the directors of Hawkins/Brown what their architecture meant to them, instead of describing a series of objects, they told me some stories about the people they had worked with. For Hawkins/Brown 'architecture is layered': the same building is understood differently by each individual involved with it.

A discussion of Hawkins/Brown's architecture raises a number of issues that are paralleled in recent theory, in particular the turn to 'space' in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Cultural geographers, such as Edward Soja and Doreen Massey, have described the relationship between society and space as two-way – we make spaces and spaces make us. Architecture is at once a trace of the interactions people make with one another and their surroundings, but it also forms and transforms us both personally and socially. Architecture occupies a pivotal position temporally, on the one hand, buildings are accretions of social processes

that have already taken place; on the other, and they are catalysts for future action.

To negotiate the territory between theory and practice is no easy task, but I believe this to be the role of the contemporary critic. The theoretical ideas that I am interested in exploring here do not seek to prove a hypothesis or 'test' a theory in the manner of a scientific experiment. For me, theoretical work provides something else - a chance to reflect, not simply to contemplate, but instead to use the imagination to seek to change the world. Rather than take examples of architecture as illustrations of theoretical positions or apply theoretical insights retrospectively to modes of practice, I construct the relationship between theoretical concepts and architectural objects and processes through conversations. The theoretical ideas I refer to in relation to Hawkins/Brown's work are not ones that they have used to generate their architecture. This is not the point. Instead I hope the following dialogues and my theorized reflections upon them open up a new way of understanding Hawkins/Brown's architecture, so shifting the position their practice occupies in architectural criticism in some way.

I don't seek to be an apologist for a certain kind of practice nor am I interested in choosing to study only the sort of architecture that 'matches up' to my own agenda. Instead I am fascinated by the way, in which the critic adopts a particular standpoint in relation to artists, architects and the objects and situations they create. Perhaps it is my background in architectural design that has had a spatial effect on how I think and write about art and architecture. I tend to think of criticism as a form of site-specific writing or 'situated practice'. Conversing while moving through their work has been the most fruitful way to engage with Hawkins/Brown's architecture. In researching this piece, I journeyed with Hawkins/Brown through their work, from the earliest projects in east London to ideas still nascent in the office. What I am after is the production of a certain kind of 'scene', a place where, through dialogue, conversation and exchange, new ideas and ways of considering architecture and art can be invented.

[...]

### **'the guarantor of two intentionalities'**

The French philosopher, Luce Irigaray has written much on the politics of relationships. In reconfiguring the phrase 'I love you' as 'I love *to* you', she argues for the importance of the word 'to' as a sign of mediation between two people. The 'to' for Irigaray avoids reducing a person to an object, and guarantees two 'intentionalities'. This reconfiguration of language allows us to think about how relationships are constructed between two subjects, rather than between objects and subjects. In turn this provides a way of rethinking the kind of personal

relations and intentions involved in architecture in terms of reciprocity, rather than possession, ownership or annihilation.

Related to the idea of reciprocity, is Irigaray's understanding of 'caress', a gesture that 'unfolds as an intersubjective act, as a communication between two'. Irigaray's 'caress' is a 'gesture-word' that describes an interaction between two people rather than the imposition of one on another. This provides an interesting way of considering the 'intention' of the architect and the notion of 'concept' in architectural design. Instead of generating abstract formal concepts that get applied later on, Hawkins/Brown's projects suggest that it is possible to generate a design out of a relationship with the site or the brief. These ways of working are often more evident in the early stages of project design rather than the finished building.

One of Hawkins/Brown's new projects is for a Maggie Cancer Care Centre in Sheffield. The centre aims to provide non-institutional care for people diagnosed with cancer and their carers, families and friends. It is part of a larger programme of further buildings for cancer care being developed by architects such as Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind, or Frank Gehry. Hawkins/Brown explained to me that when Maggie Jencks was diagnosed with cancer it was in a hospital corridor with fluorescent lights. The environment was very impersonal and in her writings she expressed a need for 'domesticity' during her illness, for a place that was much more homely. The site for Hawkins/Brown's building is an Edwardian villa built of sandstone, located near to the Royal Hallamshire Hospital in Sheffield, with views out to the surrounding hills.

**DB:** In our proposal for the Maggie Centre, we choose some evocative images of home. One of them was of Vita Sackfield West's library at Sittinghurst. It is an image of just one room, but it contained everything we thought that our client wanted in the building. We presented images superimposed with words, so that people could read the two together. I think this fired up the clients because we didn't show them an object or a thing, no super-gesture.

**JR:** This super-gesture is what a lot of architects call concept, but it is often nothing more than an unusual form and rarely contains an idea that is social or critical.

**DB:** Yes, and then the programme is punched into that formal gesture. I think our approach is very different and just as important to this particular project.

At the Maggie Centre we looked initially at presenting something that didn't commit, yet was rich enough to take forward certain aspects of the brief.

In the case of the Maggie Centre, Hawkins/Brown's initial response to certain emotional qualities of space suggested in the brief has been to use image and text to evoke a sense of the place they hope to create. Working with the juxtaposition of image and text allows the viewer to perceive a 'third space' that is not determined by the word or the image but suggested by the space between the two.

In another project also nascent in the office, the Roald Dahl Museum and Children's Literature Centre, the site has been the most important starting point. The site, acquired by Lizzie Dahl, is a collection of ramshackle buildings, formally a coaching inn, in Great Nissingdon. The new building will include galleries, an archive, a studio for a writer in residence, a shop, offices and an interactive studio. Since some of the buildings have appeared in Quentin Blake's illustrations of Dahl's stories, they are already part of Dahl culture. This has presented a particular kind of problem to Hawkins/Brown:

**DB:** The site is quite a challenge. Because a lot of the material is already there, we've got to tease the project out of the site.

**RH:** I think our intervention on the Roald Dahl project will have quite a light touch and deliberately so. There are parallels back to the New Canteen where we also had a light touch, but that was forced onto us by a complete lack of budget. Here we will have a light touch that comes as a response to the buildings we are working with.

**DB:** It is quite interesting for us to explore things in different ways. Small projects allow us to look at a conceptual approach to projects. They provide a seed bed for other ideas, bigger ones.

Hawkins/Brown have also been working on a private house for the artist, Rachel Whiteread, which has just been completed in east London. For almost a decade, from her first public work, 'House' (1993), the cast of a Victorian terraced house in east London, to her more recent intervention, an inversion set on top of the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square, Whiteread has been working with notions of absence. In plaster and resin, she takes hollows, gaps and cavities, sometimes of existing structures, other times of imagined spaces, and makes emptiness manifest.

For example, Whiteread's Holocaust Memorial, Judenplatz Vienna, (1995), is a concrete cast of a library, with double doors, a ceiling rose and lined with

thousands of books, that sits at the northern end of the square on the excavations of a thirteenth century synagogue. The site has a turbulent history, in the fifteenth century Jews committed mass suicide by going down into the crypt and burning themselves alive. Like most public monuments Whiteread's memorial is a solid and visible historical marker, but its quiet presence does not attempt to confirm the facts, rather it makes their absence tangible. Her rewriting of history is not the insertion of more text, but a marking of the places that history has never allowed to exist: the gaps between the lines, the silences between the words, the stories that get left untold.

Whiteread is a private person and so her house designed by Hawkins/Brown has not received any publicity. But given that the artist demonstrates a particular characteristic to her work - a tactic of making absence present - many have wondered whether she would take her ways of making art into the design of her home. It turns out that this is the case, but in a subtle and unexpected way. Her house is not a cast, nor does it contain the casts of any objects or spaces; the connection with her artwork is more tangential. Her new home is located in a 1958 synagogue in east London. The former religious hall is now her studio and archive. Whiteread has chosen to situate her work in a space with a powerful history. Is this a place where the past has been emptied out, or where the memories of that past are still present in traces. Hawkins/Brown's work has been characteristically low-key. Two new roof-top pavilions housing an apartment and a library are lightweight structures built from cement fibre cladding systems. There is no 'super-gesture' here, rather in Irigaray's terms, this architecture is evidence of two intentionalities, a 'gesture-word' that gives space for the artist's and architect's intentions to co-exist.

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There was a period in the 1990's, when the architectural avant-garde assumed that social architecture was unlikely to produce inspiring buildings, presumably as a response to the lack of aesthetic innovation of much of the 'community architecture' of the 1980's. Will Alsop's Peckham Library, the building that won the Stirling Prize for Architecture in 2000, seems to have changed all of that. Community architecture is fashionable again. So does this mean that we can have ethics and aesthetics rather than choose between the two? I hope so, for this would make space in current architectural debate for Hawkins/Brown. Rather than locate aesthetics solely in the field of the visual, Hawkins/Brown practice architecture in a way that rethinks aesthetics in terms of ethics, and take architecture as a social process as well as a product. Hawkins/Brown's architecture demands to be understood less as a collection of objects and more as

collection of social processes - as the traces of the relationships people make with one another.

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