

The Architecture of Doubt | Paper Neil Gillespie | October 2011

James Attlee writes, in his book *Isolarion*, that writers and artists when they are immersed in a project, 'experience the everyday as if saturated with significance', every overheard conversation, radio report; article in a newspaper seems somehow connected to their project. And so it was in struggling with the notion of Doubt that I began to experience this sense of connections expanding in all directions. The territory of doubt opened up alarmingly before me. Every grey heron, every skene of geese or roe deer hesitant in the thin light of early morning train and more difficult to frame. I am indebted therefore to Professor Peter Davidson and a recent chance conversation for the idea of a Claude Glass as a metaphor in reflecting on Doubt in Architecture. In the 18 century small convex black mirror was used by artists, travellers and aesthetes to view a sublime landscape. Turning your back to the view and looking at it reflected in the black mirror, the glass had the effect of abstracting the scene, simplifying the colour and tonal range and thereby containing and imbuing rude nature with a painterly quality. The idea of a mirror is a recurrent idea in our work that I will hopefully be able to touch on.

As an architect who is primarily involved in the making of space, I understand that architecture is a practical art that exists to serve, yet we all know it is much more than that. Ruskin talked of an architect as having two responsibilities, one to create shelter – I read this as the ability to create a functional, appropriate plan and section. The other responsibility is to imbue this armature with the ability to touch us deeply. The first we must and can achieve without exception, the second may only be an elusive ambition. Why do some buildings and places move you yet on the face of it, their image is almost indefensible; the difficult building; the visually challenging; the awkward plan; lately it seems as if only difficult tastes satisfy, I seem to have lost my sweet tooth.

We are told that we are living through a time of great upheaval. Many are troubled and unsettled there is an increasing air of doubt about the future. However is not with the political or social or economic sense of doubt where my interest lies. It is in architecture and aesthetics where I believe our constant companion, doubt, should shadow our every mark. I am interested in the vague, the half truth, the peripheral, the indecisive; my interest lies increasingly in the aesthetics of marginal conditions and architects.

Doubt and Certainty go hand in hand. As an architecture student of the 1970's doubt was inexcusable, architects needed to understand a brief, know how to solve a problem, know how to make a consistent, rigorous plan and develop that plan in section then render it in the most truthful. The architectural fruit of that period, a kind of rational fundamentalism, now lies as windfall, rotten and ignored. Black and white, true or false, good or bad, doubt was missing and along with it, joy. Doubt lies between known things. It is on the margins, at the edges; something tenuous that connects certainties, fragile and ephemeral. It is well known that discoveries and revelations happen between disciplines, between art and science, between medicine and physics maybe between art and architecture and hopefully philosophy and architecture. These are the territories of the creative mind. Art is something which lies in the slender margin between the real and the unreal. The American artist Robert Rauschenberg echoes this sentiment when he says 'painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. I try to act in that gap between the two'.

Melancholia has always been associated with both doubt and the creative state; it seems to me that melancholia too, inhabits those marginal places and tenuous connections. AC Grayling writes, the 'state in question is not misery or grief, but a kind of melancholy, in which it is possible to feel and understand things not available in other moods – for our moods are like tunings on the wireless, picking up truths at different frequencies'. I am thinking of angst as opposed to anxiety, of melancholy as opposed to depression, both angst and melancholy crucially contain an element of hope. This reflective state of melancholy seems to heighten awareness, a kind of sad sensitivity.

Gavin Morrison and Sigurd Sandstrom their haunting publication, *Grey Hope*, the persistence of melancholy, state that, 'the sense of melancholy persists; its mellower existential reflective form is a gentle but penetrating sadness that may even be an actively sought companion...they aim for melancholy to be culturally understood as an active psyche and not an affliction requiring elevation'. It has been said that we in the North are predisposed to the rising of the dark humours. Robert Burton writing in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* in 1621 states that 'the worst climate for provoking melancholy is thick, cloudy, misty, foggy air'. He concedes however that melancholy was not without benefits; comments that melancholic people were imaginative, the best wits and capable of profound study and deep meditation.

This impression of sadness in the land may be due to the sense of unpopulated open space. The Caithness writer Neil Gunn in his wonderful essay *Highland Space* talks of the *Horror Vacui*, a fear of the void, vacant places and sterile distances that can afflict visitors from the labyrinth of the south. In thinking of the in between it is perhaps the nature of light and twilight, in particular, that contributes to a feeling of sadness, stillness and our very particular sense of place. Peter Davidson so eloquent in his book *The Idea of North* describes the geographic zone 50-70 degrees north, the land of the twilight. Shetland, land of the *Simmer Dim*, lies on twilight's meridian of 60 degrees north. He talks of 'the region of the white nights, the antechamber of the true north'. Peter is currently writing an eagerly awaited book, notionally, called *About Twilight*. F. Bollnow in *Human Spaces* describes other twilight spaces including, fog, falling snow and the forest.

In Casper David Freidrich's painting *The Chasseur in the Woods*, a soldier is hastening into the arms of death. Northern romantic artists have long sought that sombre quality of fading light as a medium for their tragic narratives. They have actively sought its ambivalence and uncertainty. Casper David Freidrich expresses an aching longing in his paintings. Wilhelm Hammershoi painted his Copenhagen apartment over and over again. Stripped of all signs of domestic life these stark interiors evoke a sense of loneliness and silence. The white doors seem to be in quiet conversation with one another. Here hope manifests itself in the glimpsed light of the adjacent room. Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space* explores meaning in architectural space. He talks of 'the polarity of cellar and attic, the marks of which are so deep that, in a way they open up two very different perspectives for the phenomenology of the imagination. Indeed, it is possible, almost without commentary, to oppose the rationality of the roof to the irrationality of the cellar. A roof tells its *raison d'être* right away: it gives mankind shelter from the rain and sun he fears...the cellar...it is first and foremost the dark entity of the house'. The attic with its clear view, lofty and lucid ideals lends itself to an early modernist view of the world, ordered, democratic, white. A legible plan elevated without angst or trouble. The cellar however conceals deeper more difficult intimate passions.

Michel Foucault refers to Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* an essay *Of Other Spaces*. 'The spaces of our primary perception, the spaces of our dreams and that of our passions hold within themselves qualities that seem intrinsic; there is light, ethereal, transparent space, or dark, rough, encumbered space, a space from above, of summit, or on the contrary a space from below of mud: or again a space that can be flowing like sparkling water, or space that is fixed, congealed, like stone or crystal'. Foucault talks of *Utopias* and *Heterotopias*. If I understand correctly, a *Utopia* is an unreal vision, a perfect place while *Heterotopia* is a real place but a place that is also apart, it has a sense of otherness. It is neither here nor there. Foucault talks of a mirror being heterotopic, looking into a mirror you are both here and somewhere else. Modernism tended to *Utopian* vision, unrealistically optimistic, clear, confident and collective. Another parallel approach may be to create a heterotopian visions, real, hesitant, discreet, incomplete and individual.

An *Isolarion* is a 15 century map that describe specific areas in detail, but does not provide a clarifying overview of how these places are related to each other. The Situationist Movement of the late 1950's who proposed the creation of situations, situations that would fulfil more primitive human desires in a critical attack on capitalism's banalisation of people's lives. They coined the term; derive, to drift, akin to Walter Benjamin's aimless wanderer, the flaneur. The city is experienced directly through the everyday; they actively sought happenchance and surprise. The idea of drift is personal, erratic and inconclusive; linked to ideas of tolerance in architectural terms this is the space allowed for in order to make different and often conflicting elements come together. It seems to me that this position of doubt, of drift, is an important state of mind in the current world situation where capitalism is on the ropes and the majority now view the world with less than an optimism. Are the marginalised becoming the centre? I enjoy the idea that the city is merely a hugely complex shifting and accumulating layering of each citizens personal *isolarion* not something that can be planned or controlled. The city is an accumulation of stories and acts, unaccountable and un-measurable. Nimble and flexible architects and artists are moving into the gaps rendering the visionary masterplan redundant. What is required to my mind in artistic and architectural practice is an open and loose frame of mind coupled to almost surgical levels of skill and observation.

Japanese culture fully understands the concept of the space between, twilight spaces, They have a term for this space; *Ma*. While the goal is the creation of a sense of space and distance enveloped with a pervading stillness the techniques used are far from vague. The execution needs to be precise, practised and superbly controlled. Chinese artist Ai WeiWei using literally millions of handcrafted, hand painted porcelain sunflower seeds creates something of huge power and silence.

Italo Calvino in his Six Memos for the Next Millennium describes the qualities that were close to his heart and critical to literature. In the lecture on exactitude Calvino drew on the qualities of the vague initially to act as an opponent in his argument on favour of exactitude. Vague is derived from vago – to wander, noting that in Italian vago also means lovely, attractive. Vago, wandering, Calvino continues – ‘carries ideas of movement and mutability which in Italian is associated both with uncertainty and indefiniteness and with gracefulness and pleasure. asks what qualities we need to savour the beauty of the vague and indefinite’. concludes that what is required is ‘a highly exact and meticulous attention to the composition of each image, to the minute definition of details, to the choice of objects, to the lighting and the atmosphere, all in order to attain the desired degree of vagueness. ...The poet of the vague can only be the poet of exactitude’. Writers of Japanese haiku would recognise these qualities.

Japanese architects explore the the ethereal, the transparent, the half said, indeed a traditional plan lacks any clear distinction between the functions it contains; it is at once a dining room, a living room, a sleeping room. It is an immaculately conceived shifting space that moves to accommodate the acts of life. in Foucault’s words the space flows like sparkling water. As we move to extreme positions in either direction the real architectural programme to create for shelter humans is lost and the building becomes about the architect. The notion the Architecture of Doubt is not concerned with being paralysed by indecision but by that delicious feeling at the beginning of a design when all is possible and you are lost in the labyrinth of ways to go – to drift through this world of architecture, literature and art with no fixed target, no real scholarly agenda, and no end game, drawn by the attractions of the terrain. “I used to be uncertain of my confidence, now I have confidence in my uncertainty.” William Turnbull.