

Critical Practice: Tactics vs. Strategy

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SIMULATION

In the work of a painter, a writer or a musician, the formulation of ideas may occur at the same time, at a similar scale, and with the same media as that of the finished work. The idea and the realization of the idea may occur in close temporal, geographical and material proximity. Architecture, on the other hand, is produced as simulation before it is constructed. The intent is separated in time, space, scale and material from the realization in the form of a building. The physical and temporal space that exists in architecture between the formulation of ideas and the actual building might be called a "landscape of making". The focus of this paper will be a careful examination of the landscape of making, between architectural intent and its manifestation in built work.

In many discussions of architectural works, the landscape of making is overlooked or suppressed, and in doing so a very complex process is abstracted to a binary format of intent and result. This abstraction is particularly significant when it completely ignores the existence of a landscape of making, confusing or equating intent with result. Besides ignoring significant aspects of the process of making, this oversimplification has the effect of preventing careful examination of significant problems currently confronting the profession. When the entire process of idea to substance is seen as an abstraction, we are unable to recognize the ways in which the process acts on the intent, or discern the effects of intent from the effects of circumstance.

Most importantly, this abstraction dissimulates significant opportunities for the architect. By recognizing the existence of a landscape of making, we can begin to measure the effects of slippage, or the ways in which the process acts on the intent to affect the trajectory of the project. Critical Practice might then be defined as a strategic and tactical engagement with the forces that act on architectural intent. By formulating architectural intentions that have the added ability to resist, assimilate or perhaps even recuperate the forces acting on a project, an extremely fluid and uncertain moment in the process may be transformed into a potential series of opportunities.

THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK: STRATEGY

"What almost nobody really understands about architecture is that it is a paradoxical mixture of power and powerlessness. I think therefore that it is very important to make a separation in terms of motivations that are imposed and motivations that are internal."¹

- Rem Koolhaas

Since many of these forces originate in conflict between the various actors involved in the process of making, it is important to outline aspects of this collaboration. In the industrialized world, the production of architecture is institutionalized, bounded and regulated by convention. The result of the social division of labor, it is compartmentalized to form a complementary network of administrative, technical and political responsibilities. There are many institutional actors in the process. Each of these brings particular skills, expectations and objectives to the task. Professional qualifications and contractual agreements define the territorial boundaries of each individual institution, and serve to regulate the modes of interaction between them. But while they are not diametrically opposed, the interests and objectives of the various actors (city officials, clients, architects, engineers, builders for example) are significantly different from one another. This creates a potential setting for conflicts that cannot all be resolved within the institutional framework.

The architect is only one of the actors in the process. Like others, the architect's real power and influence as an institution among others is defined and limited. But unlike many of the others, the architect's real interest (and potential contribution) lies in a synthesis of all aspects of a project. In attempting to offer solutions that are a synthesis of problems or constraints, the architect exerts (or attempts to exert) pressure and influence on others in the process. While the discrepancy between the institutionally defined responsibilities / expertise of the architect and the true vested interest of the architect might be considered a setting for conflict, it is also a potential field of opportunity for the critical practitioner.

It may be argued that our culture is able to assign value to the objective and quantifiable more easily than to the subjective. The term better may be more easily quantified by the engineer or contractor in the form of lighter, cheaper, stronger, faster. Since much of the potential contribution of the architect is in the realm of the subjective, this puts the architect's work at a potential disadvantage. The profession also faces increasingly large and complex projects, and operates within an increasingly complex legal, technical and regulatory context. In such a context, the architect's broad-based knowledge and interest in all aspects of the project, normally an asset, is perceived by many as a liability. As a result, the institutional boundaries of the profession have been subject to re-definition from within and without in the form of design or production firms, design-build, client-architects, etc. One significant consequence of the tendency toward specialization by many firms (and particularly by individuals within firms) is that it will be much harder to achieve the comprehensive broad-based view that has enabled architects to propose solutions derived from the synthesis of many problems.

THE "LANDSCAPE OF MAKING": TACTICS

It has been said that if strategy is the art of using battles to win wars, tactics are the art of winning battles. The strategic conditions for practice are established by the institutional framework that regulates the various actors in the process, such as the architect, client and contractor. While this framework is intended to regulate general modes of interaction between the different groups, they are not (and cannot be) explicit enough to cover every situation. The differing objectives mentioned above lead to situations of conflict that fall outside of institutional procedures, into the realm of the tactical. These conflicts occur within specific projects and situations and between specific individuals. They are part of the uncertainties of the process and as such cannot be anticipated, and must be negotiated on a case-by-case basis. The landscape of making is essentially tactical. The great military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz wrote: "A tactic is an art of the weak... The weaker the forces at the disposition of the strategist, the more the strategy is transformed into tactics."² This recalls the relatively limited institutional power and influence of the architect within the process, and underlines the importance of engaging the tactical dimension. Michel De Certeau characterizes tactics in a variety of ways:

"A tactic is an entity that cannot count on a spatial or institutional localization... Because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time- it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing.... clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, hunter's cunning, maneuvers, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike. ... The space of the tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a

foreign power. ... It is a maneuver within the enemy's field of vision", and "within enemy territory."³

However, while architects have typically recognized the importance of the tactical dimension, it has very often been employed in a defensive posture. In these situations, the landscape of making is portrayed as a potential minefield within which uncaring clients and incompetent contractors would dilute and misinterpret the original intentions of the project if they were not carefully watched.

The landscape of making is also seen as a moment where the tectonic aspects of the project may be diluted, or sustained and developed. On this, Vittorio Gregotti has written:

"There was the illusion that quotation is a sufficient substitute for the detail as a system of articulation in architectural language, and that an overall 'grand conception' can dominate and automatically permeate every aspect of the project and its realization, by the very abstention of the detail, thus polemically underlining the lack of influence of building techniques as an expressive component. Often the outcome of this idea in built terms is an unpleasant sense of an enlarged model, a lack of articulation of the parts at different scales: walls that seem to be made of cut-out cardboard, unfinished windows and openings; in sum, a general relaxing of tension from the drawing to the building."⁴

CRITICAL PRACTICE: APPROPRIATING THE TACTICAL DIMENSION

A productive ongoing engagement with the tactical requires an ability to conceptualize practical experience as well as an ability to practice concepts. By conceptualizing experience gained "on the task", or within specific situations, the use of tactics may then become strategy in subsequent projects. In developing the notion of "The Reflective Practitioner", Donald Schon writes:

"When someone 'reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case. His inquiry is not limited to a deliberation about means which depends on a prior agreement about ends. He does not keep means and ends separate, but defines them interactively as he frames a problematic situation. He does not separate thinking from doing, ratiocinating his way to a decision which he must later convert to action. Because his experimenting is a kind of action, implementation is built into his inquiry."⁵

In the context of his book, when Schon refers to the act of conceptualizing experience, he refers more to the process internal to the search for an architectural solution (the design process itself) and less to the process of building the ideas. Schon points out that the act of conceptualizing

experience is already a part of what the architect does. But while general issues of making (durability, gravity, general cost) are present in the design of any building, I would argue that a much more extensive set of uncertainties and constraints exist that apply specifically to the actual construction process, or the time frame within which the ideas are actually realized. These uncertainties may be physical, such as uncertain soil conditions. They may be political or institutional uncertainties, such as the selection of more or less qualified contractors, labor or material shortages, or a client program that evolves or changes as the building is constructed. These uncertainties are forces that originate within and apply to the “landscape of making”, and can have a profound effect on the architect’s intentions as the ideas are realized.

An ability to recognize and capitalize on situations at the tactical level implies a broad-based view rather than a specialized one. While the work of the architect has traditionally involved synthesis, architectural intentions must be developed that include a more thorough consideration (and recuperation) of forces present within the landscape of making. By introducing a strategic or tactical nature to the intent, we are adding an element to the intent that is dedicated uniquely to the moment of its positioning within the world. Consider the ovalized bolt holes of an industrial object that facilitate its assembly. This feature of the object has been formed only to facilitate its “positioning” and for no other reason. Elaborating intentions in this way may allow the architect (and perhaps the profession) to transform a situation of uncertainty and weakness into a situation of advantage and opportunity, anticipating, facilitating as well as enriching the project’s entry into the world.

ANTICIPATING THE “LANDSCAPE OF MAKING”

The process of “making do”, or operating on a case-by-case basis, exploits the architect’s broad-based knowledge in order to capitalize on those aspects and moments of the project that are fluid and undefined. But since a solution that works in one situation may not work in another, the nature of the tactical is such that it cannot be institutionalized as a set of procedures, and for the same reason the tactical nature of practice is rarely documented. But that does not mean that it has an insignificant effect on results, as the following examples illustrate.

Engaging the tactical dimension may literally be a question of timing. In a lecture at the Architectural Association in 1976, Ralph Erskine described how he was able to acquire the money necessary to build balconies on his Byker Wall housing project in Newcastle. By simply waiting for the day of the year that the government raised the cost yardstick for housing projects, and going out for bids before the contractors had adjusted to the new prices, he was able to provide an additional element in the project.

The new Kansai Airport Terminal in Osaka, designed by Renzo Piano Building Workshop, offers an example of how

the interests of other actors in the process may be reflected in the tectonic development of the project. In this case, the scale of the project, the complexity of the forms and the speed with which they needed to be fabricated and installed were considered. Identical or near-identical elements were imagined to produce a complex form. “Here all 90,000 stainless steel cladding units will be identical, each designed to take up tiny accumulative tolerances. Identical too are all secondary structural elements and most primary elements. The rest of the latter are made from an identical jig and merely trimmed as required.”⁶

In several of his projects, Jean Nouvel has anticipated, exploited and recuperated forces existing in the “landscape of making”. A small project in Nimes might serve to illustrate the notion of conceptualizing “on the fly”. A team of painters was repeatedly asked to re-do unsatisfactory work, without success. In the end, Nouvel returned to the client to announce that the concept of the project had been changed to a battle with the painters.⁷ In his Anselme-Hermet housing scheme on the outskirts of Paris, Jean Nouvel was able to produce 48 housing units that contained 50% more surface area than standard government sponsored housing, but at the same cost. This single-minded objective was achieved in several ways. The building envelope was a literal translation of the maximum envelope permitted by zoning setbacks and code requirements. The objectives of the contractors were reflected in an extremely simple modular concrete construction system. Finally, the standard context within which the buildings were priced was modified by the fact that the very simple building shell was sent out for bids without designating the building as housing. As a result, the contractors submitted unusually low bids.⁸

Rem Koolhaas has repeatedly engaged the tactical dimension in his work. A scheme for the French new town of Melun Senart was based on a network of landscaped voids rather than solids (architecture) because: “the built and the full are uncontrollable, abandoned randomly to political, financial and cultural cliques intent on perpetuating transformation.”⁹ “It is our thesis that if this system of bands is established, the town of Melun Senart will be guaranteed beauty, serenity, accessibility, and urban services, regardless of the architecture that is to come”¹⁰

CONCLUSION

A critical engagement with the “landscape of making” should be a posture defending ends and recognizing means. A critical practice might begin by working within existing institutional boundaries, accepting and “making do” with conditions as they are rather than simply arguing for a redefinition (enlargement) of the institutional boundary of the architect. Architects may then begin to use the tactical dimension as a way of re-ordering the institutional boundaries of practice.

NOTES

- ¹ Rem Koolhaas quoted in Alejandro Zaera Polo, "Finding Freedoms: Conversations with Rem Koolhaas", in *El Croquis* (February/March 1992) p. 6
- ² Carl Von Clausewitz quoted in Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984), p. 37
- ³ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984), p. 37
- ⁴ Vittorio Gregotti, "The Exercise of Detailing", in *Casabella*, (June 1983)
- ⁵ Donald A. Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner, How Professionals Think In Action* (Basic Books Inc., 1983), p.68
- ⁶ Peter Buchanan, *Renzo Piano Building Workshop* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1993), p.24
- ⁷ Patrice Goulet, *Jean Nouvel* (Paris: Electa Moniteur, 1987)
- ⁸ "Saint-Ouen Anselme-Hermet", in *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'hui* (September 1987) pp. 11-14
- ⁹ "Urbanisation de L'espace Central Melun-Senart", in *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'hui* (April 1989) pp. 98-99
- ¹⁰ Jacques Lucan, *Rem Koolhaas-OMA* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991) p.114