

John McKean : A career in Historical Studies and Architectural Criticism (1999)

(This autobiographical paper introduced seminars on the Oslo PhD programme over a decade ago; I would write rather differently today.)

My work is in the study of architecture - of urban places, of designers and often of individual buildings. I offer here a few reflections on my experience. Unfortunately, naming this work sometimes seems to cause problems. *Historical Studies and Architectural Criticism*, by the way, is also the title of Reyner Banham's professorial lecture at the Bartlett School of Architecture, London, in which he discussed much the same issues though rather differently, many years ago. (Banham 1963)

Perhaps history is a misnomer for the study of architecture with which I am engaged; there are certainly strong advocates simply to call it criticism. Richard Wollheim, for example:

"Most of the criticism I have of existing art history are already conceded in the name it goes by: art-*history*. Standardly, we do not call the objective study of an art the history of that art. We call it criticism. We talk of literary criticism, music criticism, of dance criticism..." (Wollheim 1987)

Or Northrop Frye:

"Physics is an organised body of knowledge about nature, and a student of it says that he is learning about physics, not nature. Art, like nature, has to be distinguished from the systematic study of it, which is criticism. Criticism is to art what history is to action and philosophy is to wisdom: a verbal imitation of a human productive power which itself does not speak." (Frye 1957)

My own enquiry in the world of architecture, its processes and products, comes from a curiosity: first, about how and what (for so many of us, so much of the time, don't even see that clearly); and then - for only then - is it possible to explore why, to elicit meaning in this physical world around us.

As a critic, there are themes which I repeatedly find useful in my explorations: exposing ambiguity, for example; or, for another, revealing the formation processes in an architectural event. Before naming any other themes, let these two point to their value in the education of designers (which has been the major concern of my career).

Paradox, complexity and ambiguity are inherent in life, indeed they could be called the hallmarks of reality. No work of architecture is without contradiction and paradox, and pointing them in critique makes a poignant link to the situation of contemporary design practice and education for that practice. Similarly the explication of process bears on current design practice; process always engages student designers, as it offers roles for their own practice to model. In a sense those who were involved in the subject under scrutiny became their 'colleagues' engaged in parallel practice to their own, however far apart their actual dates.

Tim Benton once remarked that it was a poor teacher of architectural history who begins: "Gropius designed the Fagus factory". This, he argued, is because a gothic, brick-clad scheme by the little-known designer, Werner, was already on site before Gropius became involved, its pier foundations already cast; then Benschmidt was also

engaged in the planning of both schemes, while Meyer contributed centrally to the built version, not least in its detailing

My response is that that teaching is poor not just because it is inaccurate. Its main problem is that it denies the centrality of the process of architectural formation. In an educational context, this essential engagement with the process in the wider educational field reinforces, enriches and enlivens the concept of architectural design embedded in the social world.

Rigorous study of architecture (call it criticism or history), a concern with its formation - within cultural ideas, following intellectual strategies, bound by wide-ranging constraints - helps a student of design approach Alberti, say, with the same immediacy that a student of creative writing approaches Shakespeare. It seems obvious to me that such a study of architecture is a central tool in the education of the designer. (It is, however, often undervalued.)

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Undertaking such study is often called research, but once again naming can inhibit the practice. Before we get caught between the physical sciences, social sciences and humanities, and the fences erected round what each considers the content and methodologies of 'real' research, we can agree that any good research demands rigour, revelation, relevance and return.

Rigour needs no debate: it presumes an understanding of the field and a precision and accuracy of navigation within it. The emphasis is on a high standard of scholarship; for this reflects a certain care and precision, befitting a designer. It reinforces the first simple rule, as E.H.Carr quoted Housman, "accuracy is a duty, not a virtue." As Carr expanded:

"to praise a historian for accuracy is like praising an architect for using properly mixed concrete. It is a necessary condition of his essential function."
(Carr 1961)

(It is no easy task to convey this simple necessity to today's undergraduate designers. But similarly, educators must clearly see the difference between what is important in design education and what is essential for competent, professional action while often remaining, beyond that, unimportant.)

Rigour, therefore, is often unimportant, being simply essential. Yet, merely by cleaning the lens as thoroughly as possible, and noting what is seen through it with empathetic clarity, this process can illuminate, and thus offer fruitful insight. Even clear articulation of data involves choices; describing the what with care can begin to illuminate the why. And inevitably, of course, it also reveals the enquirer.

Revelation is the contribution to knowledge; obviously we have here the conclusions drawn from analysis of empirical data, the interpretation of quantitative research and the articulation of generalisable propositions. More interesting to me, here we find (as one is allowed in the humanities to say without embarrassment) the production of insight; revelation which can illuminate widely by its very specificity.

Relevance demands not generalisability as much as the contribution to the field - in our studies that means contributing to the world of building, more widely to society, or more specifically within the discipline of design study itself.

Return concerns the public value or social benefit from the work. This question should be asked of all research. My argument here for my own work would be in its role in helping designers and students understand the nature of the world with which they are engaged, and the role of their own creative contribution in these processes.

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One of my first published critiques, Essex University (McKean 1972), explicitly raised issues concerning the appropriate tools for research in architecture. It generated this comment from Bill Hillier¹:

“Since prevailing ideas still associate research only with techniques involving statistics, computers, graphs and so on (on the whole this is all you can get paid to do), the title research will probably be denied to McKean's "anthropological" approach. This would be a mistake. Research is not about techniques but about theories. McKean's study tests no theories, but it is about all the matters that should be of theoretical concern in architectural research namely how society, with some intervention from designers turns itself into built form. There ought to be a name for this type of anthropological study if only to make it more respectable. I suggest the name : environmental ethnography. Ethnography is always concerned to describe buildings, their design history and social outcomes from as many points of view as possible. The general idea is that the important things to be discovered, understood and theorised about are the relations between the social background of the design, the final form of the buildings and the social effects of both. For Essex, McKean has shown admirably how the social becomes spatial and creates a physical environment that is also a social experience...” (Hillier 1972)

My study of Essex University was published parallel with, and in direct contrast to, another building study by David Canter (later Professor of Psychology at Surrey, now Liverpool University). A note on the contrast may help elucidate my position. I had known Canter for some years (we were both at The University of Strathclyde in 1967-8); I was very worried by the deterministic behaviourist base of his research work. His obscurantist "Psychological analysis" of a new hospital, with many charts based on his extensive 'psychological' data collection and its analysis was a special issue of *The Architects Journal* (Canter 1972). The publication of my study as another special issue of the same journal two weeks later offered an opportunity for the methodological contrast to come into the open.

The journal's full-page editorial made its own comparison, arguing that

"in architectural theory, as in most fields of contemporary scholarship, there has been for some time a powerful trend towards the *nomothetic* approach, a growing preoccupation with making knowledge 'scientific'. [...]

McKean's, on the other hand is a *holistic*, humanities-oriented approach..."

And it put words into my mouth:

"the author does not believe that those aspects which involve human experience can be validly reduced to numerical analysis." (AJ 1972)

Other published comments on my text suggest it achieved some of my goals:

¹ Bill Hillier at that time was head of research at the RIBA before moving to University College and a career centred on Space Syntax

"This report is a powerful vindication of the explanatory potential of predominately non-quantitative scholarship. He has provided an inestimably valuable quality: insight."
(Lipman 1972)

"This study is important, raising again what we mean by research in architecture... This study should be a model for students and research workers.. McKean's study is rich in suggestive possibilities that may have a highly general nature.." (Hillier 1972)

"It gives a very organic view of the hidden processes at work in the shaping of a building."
(Haenlein 1972)

Today, 25 years later, there is a very live debate about whether architectural design can be considered research. A generation ago Hillier supported my rather lonely argument that critical/historical studies like mine might similarly be considered research; an argument now won. My belief is unchanged that worthwhile architectural study must be concerned with the three elements - society, ideology (including architectural "theory"), and built form - bringing to light how they link and influence each other. Hillier's description of 'ethnography' in his concluding sentences quoted above is exactly my area of study.

While happy to let these other voices speak for me, I did join the debate, contrasting my study with the 'science' of Canter's:

"the crux is his search for objectivity, mine for meaning. It seems to me totally subjective for Canter to assume the only reality to be in total objectivity, and to assume numerical measurement to be the only genuine form of appraisal. [...] We all consider it important to develop a way of communicating about the environment and our existence in it. I believe this must be more responsive and 'real' than building science has often allowed; it must constantly be thinking down to the 'lived world' (*lebenswelt*), as it were, rather than raised to fit rarefied mathematical constructs. [...] All my evidence stands by itself in direct quotation rather than processed into graphs of conceptual configurations of satisfaction. Canter says he could read something of me in this study; I only tried to make the author's presence clear rather than pretend it was not there." (McKean 1973)

Over the years, I have investigated methods and ways of talking about buildings, to elicit the rich layers of their meanings - often in my studies it is explicit that only certain meanings can be searched for, while others have to be put to one side. Aware that perception is not a transparent medium, that it can only make sense grounded in the cultural (history) and personal (memory), I have tried to be self-conscious in my studies. At the least, being explicit about prejudice allows another to see the prejudging. In that study of Essex University, for example, I set up a number of frames:

- I listened with utmost precision to those I questioned - client, architect or occupants - noting the precise words they used to describe their aims and their experiences to me; the emphases and the pauses.²

- I quoted images as carefully as words, asking why photographers took the pictures they did, asking why *The Architectural Review* laid out a page as it did; tracing magazine critiques to clients' press statements, and in some cases way back beyond reality to the vaguest of early intentions.

² Essex University was written as part of my masters degree, 1971. It was accepted by The Architectural Press as a book, but subsequently published, condensed, as a complete special issue of *The Architects' Journal*. Its methodology was strongly influenced by *Pessac de Le Corbusier* by Philippe Boudon (Paris, 1969); I had also recently read Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. When Boudon's book was subsequently translated (as *Lived-in Architecture*, London 1972) I enthusiastically reviewed it in *The Architects Journal* (10.1.1973).

- I proposed a dialectic frame of my own within which I placed the various positions of the actors, often thus exposing (at times fatal) flaws in their various models.
- I used other critical tools as well; for example metaphor and analogy. Tricky, slippery, difficult; but with care they can aid precision, attention, help offer insight. Moreover the personality of the author is never denied, another quasi-transparent layer is added to the palimpsest.

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My blurring of history and criticism allows me to bring 'the historical imagination' to bear on work of our own time. I cannot see the problem which calls for 'historical method' to be applied to data over half a century old, but gets agitated about memory - with its inherent fallibility, potential for fabrication and simply its fading - being a major resource when engaging with more recent material.

The distortions of memory, insofar as we acknowledge them, are in themselves most revealing; its persistence shapes how we frame our action.

A few years ago, the English historian and critic Jeremy Melvin wrote a piece based on the contrast (taken from Hegel's *The Philosophy of History*) between a history written by those engaged with the events and one written out of reflective and philosophical method. He argued that the 1950s - a period whose buildings I have studied - lies on the cusp between two eras: on the one side is the dominance of fresh memory, a land where historical method is an unwieldy baggage; on the other side is the fading distortion of memory and increasing theoretical strength given by critical distance. (Melvin 1992)

While appreciating his argument, I replied (inter alia):

Melvin seems seriously to limit the possibility of critical history by sticking with his polarity of "experience" versus "interpretation"; of "history written by those who lived it" versus one written by those "using reflective and philosophical methods." The latter being only possible when distanced at least as far as the '50s are today; the only difficulty for us being that the former - the participants - still survive.

Were he to allow that critical methodology can be directed to the present, and not just await the privileged new generation far enough away from the data, he might notice a wider range of possibilities - stretching from scientific laboratory methods, anthropological and sociological methods, via the psychoanalytic to the critical methods of artists - all of whose data is, inevitably, now.

We (as architects) have burned our fingers so badly with misapplying the methods of others - both in the processes of providing buildings and in those of observing them - that we seem now utterly scared off. As producers, cynically accepting face values, as observers either criticising with the same acceptance or leaving our trust in neatly footnoted, acceptably methodological, and adequately distanced historians. (We can all sense the irresistible rise of the connoisseur of Modernism in the UK today.)

We need distance, Melvin admonishes us, for memory distorts. But what's wrong with memory? Especially if we acknowledge how it distorts - that in itself is most revealing. The very historiography of Modernism through which Melvin wades

exemplifies the truth (always acknowledged by the best designers): the meaning migrates.

What's wrong with anecdote? If used with precision! Anecdote as used by Reyner Banham as much as by Le Roy Ladurie or Carlo Ginsburg. When I said, in a recent study of building in 1949, that "every British housewife queued for two hours each day," it is obviously anecdotal. Is it useful? Is it literal truth? I immersed myself in the sources of the moment before daring to say that; but who knows it's not just the flip remark of a survivor? Readers can only judge from experience and context. (By the way, *anekdoton* to the ancient Greek meant "something new, unknown; something secret which is revealing." It recalls Nietzsche's remark that historical truth is revealed by anecdote: "one can sum up any historical character," he said, "with three anecdotes." *Anekdoton* taps directly into myth, which is basic to our understanding.)

The recent history of building can be removed from the monocular, omnipotent perspective of the designer, first separating what was intended from what they said they did, and both from what they actually did; next showing the roles of all other agents, so it can also be grounded in the reality of its social and material formation. To investigate recent architecture like this, demands a more difficult, coherent world view. But, with effort, we may find our wits sharpened - and even our designed results improved - improved, to use Zevi's fine phrase, by more "history written with a dagger".

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Sometimes, trying to take in too wide a focus, may allow the subject slightly to slip in definition - that lets the reader off the hook, as it were. I will exemplify this with my *Crystal Palace* (McKean 1994a). In that book I tried to join two threads. One was a narrative through time, echoing the linear, "common-sense" logic of the building's designers. It was written in the present tense and thus stressing the urgency. The other was a contemplation on the sense of openness, light, formlessness and so on, and thus how this new spatial context reframed the contemporary cultural achievement. Perhaps these two were inadequately integrated; for it seems to have allowed readers (or at least reviewers) to hold on to an image formed by their own expectations.

Let me show that in two reviews: On the one hand, a respected historian of the 19th Century writes:

"An excellent account of how the building was constructed ... as in 1851, McKean shows a perceptible decrease in interest once the building had been completed. It was the way in which it was constructed that caught the imagination John McKean seems reluctant to consider the fact that it remained a prototype with few imitators.." (Thorne 1994)

and the tone of the rest of Robert Thorne's review criticises the limitations of writing from what is presumed as the author's modernist architect's position.

On the other hand, a well-known modernist English architect writes:

"The Crystal Palace is our prototype for prefabrication... McKean's interest is in philosophic and aesthetic issues, rather than engineering and the techniques of manufacture and construction... McKean is unhappy about many aspects of the modern world and hence the Crystal Palace... He takes a few sideswipes at the Modern Movement..." (Winter 1994)

and the tone of the rest of John Winter's review criticises the limitations of writing from what is presumed the author's anti-modernist position.

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At other times, I have interwoven different threads more self-consciously. In *Learning from Segal* (McKean 1989) for example, there were alternate chapters on his biographical career and on his philosophy of architectural practice. In addition, one chapter near the centre, 'The Colour Supplement', was consciously in another voice. (None of the book was literally published in colour.) This was the only place where the subject was called "Walter" and the author appeared as "I"; where psychological speculation on his personality was allowed and private photographs of his person appeared.

The differing voices being quite explicit (and the use of long quotations from Segal clearly in conversation rather than in writing), aimed to clarify the authorial role. Avoiding also uncritical hagiography, the goal was to portray the many facets of an unusually integrated character who (I argued) exemplified the professional architect. Happily, reviews suggested it achieved some success; for example

"..McKean's written portrait of Segal is an almost exemplary text for architecture today..." (Krawina 1989)

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With another project the text was approached as a range of facets, in conscious memory of Hokusai's *Thirtysix Views of Mount Fuji* (Hokusai 1831) but, more close to home, remembering Henri Riviere's *Les Trente-six vues de la Tour Eiffel* (Riviere 1902) and then, the logical conclusion - where the mountain or the tower has become a banal incident of no intrinsic interest beyond its varied portrayals by a range of different voices - Raymond Queneau's brilliant *Exercices de Style* (Queneau 1947).

In my study of James Stirling and James Gowan's Leicester building (McKean 1994b), I used a range of voices very consciously, each indicated by its chapter title ('The Art Critic', 'The Functionalist', 'The Psychology', and so on. Some are lengthy; one chapter 'Signifier and Signified' is just three short sentences.) The range of voices, which can even contradict each other, keeps live the essential ambiguities I mentioned right at the start. In this case it also helped integrate the perspectives of two very different architects, one of whom, having recently died, was inconveniently unavailable for comment, the other keen to tell his now incontestable story.

I feel *Leicester Engineering* has been my most successful attempt to develop this technique so far, and I am encouraged that it is appreciated by readers:

"John McKean's text fluently re-evaluates its historical context and explores its background... It interweaves intellectual context, architects' intentions and description in an absorbing and unlaboured way.

This book is informative, entertaining and hits just the right tone between critical seriousness and the deadpan humour so characteristic of Big Jim himself - I recommend it wholeheartedly." (BD 1994)

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I have used other tools as appropriate, framing the material in particular ways: such as a building complex seen as a garden, or a city seen reflected in the various building type-forms of one architect. The former was used in a study of Carlo Scarpa's Brion tomb (McKean & Daffarra 1995); the latter in a study of the 19th Century Glasgow of Alexander Thomson, arguing that this approach might illuminate both Glasgow and Thomson.

Scarpa's Brion tomb, and his nearby gipsoteca for Canova, I returned to with a close study in video (1995-6). Here, the focus on touch, sound, weight, scale, warmth - not to mention the steadycam's simulation of human movement through space - offers, inevitably, a quite different evaluation of these places.

The Thomson essay was first published in Italian, in a book on Glasgow; hence the self-conscious, and slightly ironical, use of the terminology and methodology of Aldo Rossi's *The Architecture of the City*. (McKean 1991a). Later published in English, in an Edinburgh University Press book about Thomson (rather than about Glasgow) (McKean 1994c), though the text is virtually identical, it has become a different essay.

For the same Italian book, in the late 1980s, I also developed a quite different way of working on the city of Glasgow - using a dialectic of light and dark. In an essay on the "personality" of the city (more influenced by Walter Benjamin than Nikolaus Pevsner), I developed some threads stretching back at least to my Essex study 20 years earlier - particularly in my use of 'evidence' (images and their juxtaposition, etc) and in the setting up of a dialectic frame (here 'dark and light') whose ambiguities I could then debate. (McKean 1991b)

I had earlier used a similar set of dialectic opposites in a long, fragmentary essay on Santa Maria della Scala, the mediaeval hospital of Siena then about to be vacated as a hospital and considered for reuse. This had originally been a lecture, in 1984, to teams at the *International Laboratory of Architecture and Urban Design (ILAUD)* design master-class who were starting to propose the building's transformation. (McKean 1985)

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Most of my work has concerned the 19th and 20th Centuries. However, the final example I will mention focuses on an architecture far more ancient even than Siena's mediaeval hospital: the Athenian Parthenon. Can we avoid being the architectural tourist, dumbly consuming the foreign country which was this distant past? (Just as our cameras consume it, in "taking" photographs.) I have published two studies, both of them partial and both part of larger work in progress. Progress is currently halted through the indecision of the initiating publisher, though I have recently received a research award to encourage me to continue. But if I get a go-ahead, how will I proceed?

While I have studied the actual building process (procedures, finances, techniques) and its object (archaeologically reconstructed), I have not added to the considerable publication in this area. I was interested in what no-one seemed to be writing about: "what was it all for, then?" and "what does it mean for us, now?"

My two (partial) essays, "Searching for the Parthenon" and "Looking at the Parthenon" approach from diametrically opposite ends. The one in the 'light' of all we know today, the other in the dark interior of the new Akropolis temple in the 5th Century BCE.

The former Parthenon essay begins:

"How can I ever reach this place, which has been used as a mirror held up to current culture for so many centuries? Navigating upstream, we first pass centuries of heritage which has become billboard or backcloth..."
(McKean 1998)

And I look at its use to validate everyday experiences, to support contemporary culture and, obviously, to inspire architects from the 1990s back through Kahn, Corbusier and Cockerell to Sangallo; collaging fragments in foreign brains through deconstructive theft from Elgin back to the Roman general Sulla in 86 CE; its meanings through Ottoman, Byzantine, Roman and post- Periklean Greek times.

The latter Parthenon essay begins:

"Black. Thick black; not an absence of light but palpable, solid blackness. Darkness as a dense vapour, thick with the souls of the dead . . . At first it is completely dark; deep, cool, limitless, throbbing, hollow; . . . absence of sound leaves it quite pure. It is known, this glorious cave; it is in the heart of every Athenian, but in this completeness it is experienced only by Athéné herself." (McKean 1997a)

My aim (in this essay in a refereed, learned journal) was, initially, to attempt to inhabit this distantly lost place; to understand what it might have been like, slowly letting light into it; and thence to explore why. My work here was largely bound up with close study of the pan-Athenaic rituals.

Finally I have also used the metaphor of standing and sitting - studying the myriad meanings of the contrast between the standing and sitting positions - to elucidate meanings in the two Akropolis temples, that we call Erechtheion (sitting-couchant) and that we call Parthenon (standing-rampant). (McKean 1997b) Here, once again, I come back (in true Athenian fashion, of course) to a pair of dialectical opposites as an armature for argument and, hopefully for insight - just as I did with the opposed concepts of "university" and "anti-university" in the study of Essex University.

At that time, reviewers beyond the world of architecture commented on my Essex study:

"It pinpoints absolutely the problem of the modern university."
(Times Higher Educational Supplement, 1972)

"Stimulating, well- researched and impressive. It will be a long time before the university gets equally careful, fair and sophisticated analysis."
(Essex 1972)

"Very impressive and interesting. I like the style of analysis very much and the way it explores the underlying contradictions of the university's conception. I think it would be well worth publishing as a book - an aspect of social history as well as an architectural critique."
(Marris 1972)

I keep hoping that my more recent work might also be able to break through the closed professional doors. For:

"The important things to be discovered, understood and theorised about,"
to repeat Hillier's words quoted earlier,
"are the relations between the social background of the design, the final form of
the buildings and the social effects of both"

And this aim is of importance to us all.

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