



ST. ANDREWS BEACH HOUSE - SKETCH BY SEAN GODSELL

THINKING MAKING

by *Sean Godsell*

One of my earliest childhood memories was sitting on my father's knee while he drew. The backing paper and masking tape on his drawing board were covered in squiggles of black drawing ink lines - evidence of clogged Rapidograph pens - and to distract me he would sketch the faces of my siblings in amongst the squiggles. His drafting tools - set square, clutch pencil, T square and (very precious) Wild Heerburg compass set were all intriguing to me. Empty packets of leads, broken slide rulers and damaged set squares all became my equipment so that I could make my own drawings on the floor of the drawing office. Best of all though were site visits where, if I was lucky, I would be asked by a carpenter to hold out my hands while he reached into his nail bag and gave me a fist full of shiny new nails or told by a builder that I was allowed to pick up as many off cuts of framing timber as I liked. Armed with these materials I would return home and proceed to make things. Trips to the cabinetmaker were the same and I still have the smell of the saw dust and glue is still in my nostrils to this day. By the time I was six years old I knew that I wanted to be an Architect because drawing and building was so much fun.

My father's working drawings are beautiful. When I look at them today I am impressed by their strength and confidence. His detailing was capable and inventive. His drawings reflected his ability to represent his philosophical standpoint through the individuality of his details. As children he and my mother encouraged my siblings and I to make things. At Christmas and on birthdays we made gifts and cards. We constructed a world of tree houses, billy carts, forts and playing fields. In summer we rolled a cricket pitch with an old tree stump and in winter we marked out the lines of our football field with (plain) flour stolen from the pantry. To his annoyance my father's tomato plant stakes became goal posts. All of this happened within the context of a beautiful Frank Lloyd Wright inspired house, which was forever being finished and I was apprentice to my father the bricklayer, the carpenter, the cabinetmaker. Later, when I started studying architecture I remember he said to me "How can you, as an Architect, criticise the workmanship of a bricklayer if you've never even attempted to lay bricks? How dare you admonish the effort of a man digging a hole if you don't know hard it is to spend a day digging?" He organised laboring jobs on building sites for me when I was a student and it was there that I gained an appreciation for the toil of building.

Regardless of the seductiveness of some computer programmes, the medium of architecture is (and always has been) building. As architects we express ourselves best through the constructed representation of our ideas. Our choices of materials, structural systems, form and so on are driven by our need to represent our ideas in built form so that they are clear for all to see and interpret. The labour of drawing is the first physical moment in the making of architecture; the labour of building the final act. Both are equally noble. In 1985 during my 'grand tour', I went to the Ticino region of Switzerland to see Mario Botta's work. Later the same year I went to an exhibition of his drawings and models in Venice. Each detailed drawing was exquisite - the sections through the series of concrete masonry houses he produced over a decade were so comprehensive and their clarity was directly recognisable in the buildings. The wooden models were equally beautiful, as were the houses themselves - each constructed with the same care that the drawings and models demonstrated. Though I am yet to visit them, I can see the same sensibility in the work of Professor Botta's compatriot Peter Zumthor. In 2006 I visited Finland again for the first time in 20 years. There I was able to see, this time through more mature eyes, the evolution of the detail in Aalto's work from the Villa Mairea to the Saynatsalo Town Hall and my favourite Aalto building - the Experimental House. There is inventiveness in Aalto's detail spawned by Finland's remoteness and climate and nurtured in a 1000 year tradition of carpentry. Each building is a refinement of the previous. Each is 'bespoke', detailed to express the architect's likes and desires and crafted to achieve ongoing refinement rather than static standardization. All were constructed within the context of an industrialised ethos. "In architecture the role

of standardisation is thus not to arrive at a type, but on the contrary to create viable variety and richness which in an ideal situation is comparable to nature's infinite capacity of nuance." (1)

The current homogenisation of critical building elements, caused to some extent by globalization, threatens to irrevocably decay this position. Today I can buy the same extruded aluminium window frame anywhere in the world ... and the same cladding system ... and the same hardware ... and for that matter draw the same looking drawings as everyone else using the same software packages. Artistic expression in architecture has largely given way to expediency. Many Architects no longer detail windows, rather they shop for them by looking through catalogues and in doing so eliminate any possibility for anything other than the most superficial expression of individuality. Spending an hour picking a window system from a brochure is hardly the height of creativity. At best it marginalises the Architect to the selector of colours and shapes.

There is a growing resistance to this situation. Ironically it exists in the sketch, the hand drawn detail, the invented solution, the artisan, their apprentice and the Architect as maker once more, rather than computer programme operator.

Aalto summed it up most succinctly: "Me? ... I build."

(1) Alvar Aalto "The Reconstruction of Europe reveals the central architectural problem of our time", *Arkkitehti* 1941, Helsinki. Quoted in Juhani Pallasmaa, "Alvar Aalto: Toward a Synthetic Functionalism". *Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism*, ed. Peter Reed. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1998

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