



## RECOVERING THE MATERIALITY OF THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

### *Interview with Richard Sennet*

Purely manual, machine- aided, or performed entirely by the machine, mechanical work is a spatial experience. This basic truth from the high school's mechanics applies in architectural and urban space too. From the beginning of history, working conditions have been shaping human settlements, in the real space and in the reflective Nowheres likewise.

William Morris believed in what he called "socialism from the root up": the fundamental change brought about by spontaneous popular revolution. Disappointed with poor effects of his short political engagement he was rather soon to return to his creative venture; the rhetorical construction of a utopian happier society that would achieve its satisfaction through the creative work. His description of the "society that would produce to live and not live to produce" appears a somewhat strange medievalist- progressive marriage of John Ruskin's romanticist view of the medieval labour with Karl Marx's dialectic of history. Morris understood the indivisibility of an age, its social system and its physical form clearly. Indifferent to machines, he only did not see any trace of technological progress in it . His Sentimental- Socialist Arcadia was historically defeated. Yet, faced firstly with the fall of State Socialism and the subsequent decline of Social Democracy, more recently with the collapse of the global Neo- Liberal economy, now in the context of treads of global warming and environmental change, we may look for another more sustainable vision of the physical environment to deal with. What we probably need is less a constructed utopia and more a practical vision of the consensus society based on sensible relation to natural resources. The present deceleration of the processes in the built environment may give us some time to reflect upon the threatened materiality of the physical environment in general and of our profession in particular.

In our own time, Richard Sennett finds his Craftsmanship's philosophical home within (American) Pragmatism. Its playground is not an idealized society to come but the real physical environment the humans inhabit. Sennett's sound pleading for cultural materialism beyond the doctrinaire Marxist simplifications is certainly worth architects' attention. Urge to "do the job good for its own sake", as opposed to "doing the job just to get the job done", along with interest in process around making of things resonate with what architecture is actually about: from a single brick to the totality of our physical environment.

Of course, considering materially and socially conscious architecture (and/or urban design) a craft, or seeing architectural practice something close to the medieval workshop, many questions arise: What is really new about the conditions that contemporary technologies and social relations provide on urban and architectural scales? Vice versa, how does the physical (to an ever larger extent built, i.e. architecturally defined) context condition prospective social and technological developments? Finally, aiming to recover the materiality of our physical environment, should we consider making of architecture more an individual act or a collective enterprise?

Interview with Richard Sennett was held in March 2010 in rather generic, glazed environment of his London School of Economics and Political Science office.

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Labour conditions have been defining the shape of our cities throughout history. How would you describe the urban condition of the contemporary Post- Fordist developed world?

Let's talk a little about Fordism first. It is not just a division of labour into very

small parts. It is the defeat of the notion of lateral practice which is the fact that when you are doing one thing, you learn from something that is adjacent to it. Fordism is a deskilling of the worker in a sense that the worker is never having any kind of exploratory experience at working with materials, and that is the reason why it is oppressive for workers. In terms of craftsmanship, the way people develop skills is not just by becoming better at doing one thing, but by expanding a number of techniques they are able to do, and by speaking together about these techniques.

In the Gagliano luthier workshop, which was quite innovative, a kind of Pre-Fordism existed. One person did the varnish, one person did the neck of the cello, somebody else would do the cutting of the sides, and somebody else would work with the ebony. People were rotating between these tasks, each one of them bringing something new to the task. The varnishing of the ebony pegs interacted with the varnishing the sides, the cutting of the sides began to interact with the cutting of the belly and so on. This rotation implemented a certain synergy and mutual enrichment between the different tasks within the process. The disaster brought by Fordism was that this kind of lateral knowledge transfer could not occur any more.

The reason why I think why we can enter a Post-Fordist age really has to do with the nature of the technology we have now. A very large factory can be structured avoiding Fordism. Volvo plant in Malmö is innovative in certain kinds of automation. There are constraints, because they produce a steady-state object, but workers are learning from the lateral interaction of techniques there, they are learning from experience. There are many ways to practice the division of labour which do not involve mental skilling. Today, thanks to micro-technologies and to electronic revolution, it is possible to be more creative with the purely technical aspects of the work.

In case you haven't gathered, I believe in technology. But speaking about the city, I would say it still stuck back in the age of Henry Ford. Most of the technologies we use in the city are extremely rigid and deskilling.

What effects has the flexible capitalism with its circle systems based on the decision point in the centre and the peripheral teams, brought to the working environment?

Flexible capitalism has to do with the time primarily. It has to do with the short term labour. In brief, when you head to change the capitalist economy from long term profit seeking to short term extraction of profit, it means a profound change in the structure of corporations. As the profit horizon shrank to a year, to a quarterly result, the knock on effects on corporations were to take apart essentially skill building of the organization people. This kind of organization does not invite the participation of people who are in it any more. If you are more and more constraint to very small bits in units of time, you are not in control of your work and nothing grows out of your work.

A building can invite the uncanny experience of exploration, "what is this", "what should I do" and so on. But in this kind of work regime, there is no invitation, there is no participation. Everything is reduced to just "tasks". What happened in the stock market in 2008 is only the tip of the iceberg of the inability to manage this change of time that was throughout the system.

William Morris once wrote about society that would produce to live and not live to produce...

While producing, people have deep experience of being alive. If you are an artist, you can have it. If you are a craftsman, you can have it too.

Can the Post-Fordist time really come in the Fordist physical context? Is the social change possible before the urban space itself has changed?

In the history of all the technologies, tools were invented before people knew how to use them. I am a real physical determinist, I am a real materialist, and I think that such a change comes out of changes in the material condition. But the problem in urbanism is that we are very timid, we worry about efficiency, we worry about waste, and we worry about coordination in making urban spaces,

which means that we just reproduce the existing order in terms of division of functions. We should insist on the *Verfremdendes Effekt* instead, which basically means on making things strange. When the technology does that, it has a displacing effect that makes the people pay attention to what they are doing or what they are. And I think that this is what architects should be doing. Practical experiment that interests me is removing traffic lights in the cities, to make people very attentive to what they are doing.

One way is through the incomplete form, that is when you have to learn a building through use and when a building is sufficiently flexible and unfinished that it invites; it does not tell people what to do. And that is not the same thing as making open space, which does not give people anything to work with.

Incompleteness of form extends to the context of buildings. Great architectural monuments can stimulate building around themselves. But most of what Modernism focused on was completion, particularly iconographic completion of the objects being absolutely self-referential. And those kinds of objects take away people's freedom. What I hate about "Star Architecture" are these objects because they are closed systems and they are not stimulating. They are anything but displacing, even if the stairs end nowhere. Another kind of practical experiment that interests me is removing traffic lights in the cities, to make people very attentive to what they are doing.

From a social point of view, a closed system means a passive using.

My new book is going to be based on changes in construction methods and building technologies. I'm not a Ruskinian and I don't believe going back to just the handmade. But the trouble today is that materials we use are so neutral and it is very difficult to recover the materiality of the physical environment. We need much more invention.

#### Architectural Practice

... That relates directly to architectural practice because building codes that we have to follow are so tyrannical that the notion of discovery while you're building is grouchily defeated by the system. The state is really omnipresent in architecture. On the other hand, architects building in environments whose state control is fractured, working with people who have to build their own spaces that are disorderly heterogeneous can still produce good architecture out of this disorder.

Very often, the protectionist agendas like the environmental protection or the historical preservation are only seemingly opposed to the consumption system.

They work hand in hand absolutely. Particularly the historical preservation, I would say. The museum effect in modern cities does not happen of love for the old but for producing a saleable simulacrum. It is paralyzing for the development and in class terms it is a nightmare. Every act of preservation seems to be really an act of social expulsion.

The word "protection" is misleading. Like in the restaurants that charge double amount for the organic food, you are buying a simulacrum. It is just a way of increasing the prices.

Faced with the recent developments in CAD techniques, architects sometimes act from a very passive position. Can the digital revolution contribute to the disciplinary progress of architecture?

Our problem is not machines but how we use them.

I have never believed there's a technological logical domination. We are choosing how to make use of the machines and I do not think that using CAD inevitably destroys people's feeling of materials. If you want to have the sense of the difference between one brick and another you just need to pick them up. The machine is depending from you. For instance, building models is a good way to learn about architecture, particularly for people who are not very visually gifted. You can program the machine to do the model building for you, but what's the point then? If a machine solves a problem for you and you can't explain what the machine is doing, then that is not the intelligent use of the machine. One way to

avoid this is to work with the resistance and not look at it as the enemy. When we work with resistance, we are learning the limits of something. It is a fantastic revolution that we're leaving through... this electronic revolution is incredible, but we have to be smarter than machines.

Speaking about architecture seen as craftsmanship, I will ask you a question: Do you think that there are ways in which architectural work cannot be compared to the craftsmanship of making musical instruments... or a film?

We deal with human life, we are giving shape to the society; in a way we are also organizing the society.

That's what I think too. If you put this in academic language, architecture is not an indulgent skill, it is not self-containing and the judgment of whether is worth doing is never near the architects, whereas the filmmaker can practice an indulgent skill.

If architecture is not an indulgent pursuit, if it is what is technically called situated cognition, then the other is always present in architecture.

What follows is a whole set of other issues for architecture; should it be focused more, as a practice, on communication; should it become a more verbal craft?

That really implies a whole different kind of professional training in making of physical objects which have got dialogical properties that are discussed. We have just gone through the exercise of designing hospitals thinking about what it means to be sick in a hospital. What we are trying to do is to advance our social understanding in advance of physical practice. What does a democratic building look like? Take the Norman Foster's New City Hall for London, and tell me if it represents to you in any way the practice of democracy. I would say almost every detail relentlessly prohibits any kind of democratic encounter there. There is simply no understanding of what democratic process is about, zero.

That is where the architects absolutely screw up: the notion that open equals democratic. It's so crude. And it is a very complicated problem; it is the same complication of how to build a hospital where sick people have to live ...

Interview by Krunoslav Ivanisin and Jorge García de la Cámara, London School of Economics

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