

Hand Drawings
Patrick Lynch

One of the first things that I noticed about Dalibor was his hands.

I don't know if they were large or small, perhaps because they were hardly ever still. They were very fleshy though, and almost constantly in motion, articulating a sort of dexterous emotion. He spoke with his hands. He also smoked with his hands of course, and he smoked as he spoke, voluminously.

Dalibor drew almost constantly it seems, and even when he didn't have a pencil in his hand, it was as if the air were paper and he was drawing anyway. Cigarette smoke added a sort of magic to his performances - leaving spiral drawings swirling and dissolving in front of you.

Dalibor interrupts his arguments in *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production* at various points to describe the act of drawing, and to point to its central role in architectural imagination.

These interruptions have perturbed me since the book's publication. Last year, thinking about him, I found myself pondering his remarkable hands. I had the idea that what Dalibor meant to remind us of, and to direct our attention towards, in his emphasis upon hand drawing - was its mimetic potential.

Mimesis, he suggested, is "creative imitation in which something with the potential to exist is recognised and reenacted as a significant gesture; it may be sound, as song and music; visible reality, as image or pictures; or ideas, as articulated and structured experience." ¹

Sometimes Dalibor's hands were silent, not only when he was listening to you, but also sometimes when he was speaking - or, it seems, listening to himself.

There are a number of these moments recorded on film. ²

In December 1976 Dalibor spoke at a symposium organised by the AA, where he was still teaching, not yet quite on his way to Cambridge. He's incredibly lithe and handsome in the film, dressed in a black polo neck sweater in what was in effect 'a club for European intellectuals'.

The resemblance to one of Diploma 1s drawings is remarkable in fact: filmed in black and white, in front of projected light and ghostly slide images hovering on a wall, Dalibor's hands and steady voice attempt to describe something lost at the heart of contemporary architecture.

He reflects on a recent visit to the building site of Centre Beaubourg, made with Richard Rogers earlier that year: "the building is somewhat impressive", he suggests, "mostly due to its size. If you walk in one is slightly puzzled: the richness of the world which the centre is supposed to represent is somewhat invisible." His left hand is clasping his right shoulder, and the right hand rolls somewhat listlessly, as if turning the pages of an empty book.

There is a lack of vitality in his stance, but also a sort of tamped-down tension. "Centre Beaubourg appears like a large boat floating on the Parisienne Sea without much relationship with the Parisian scene", he concludes. This terrible judgement is disguised in such beautifully alliterative poetry, and is uttered from a pose of such vulnerability, that you can understand in this moment why so many arrogant people feared him.

He looks like one of Michelangelo's Captives: a slave to good manners at the epicentre of British architecture, yet the tension in his relationship with his subject matter and audience is clear in his posture.

DV reveled in paradox and in almost irreconcilable moments of tension between figuration and allusion, declaring somewhat elliptically - and in a kind of self-description I think, that "mimesis reveals the mystery of order as a tension between its potential and actual existence." ³

The loss at the heart of modern architecture is the problem of mimetic representation. Dalibor recognised that mimesis was debased in architectural terms as "imitation of reified precedents, such as the primitive hut, the Solomonic Temple, exemplary buildings and so on, or to such generalised notions as 'the imitation of nature'." ⁴

Nonetheless, he held fast to the idea that the modern imagination draws inspiration from the tradition of poetic mimesis, and that this "poetic paradigm (or poetic mythos)" ⁵ has the power to overcome the distancing effects of "the science of poetics, known better as aesthetics" ⁶. Poetic architectural work is still possible he believed, because of the potential of each new commission to become part of a whole, since: "each project, however small or unimportant begins with a program - or at least with an anticipated result. Such a program or vision is formed in the space of experience and knowledge available to each of us." ⁷

Paradigm and program are interchangeable with plot or myth for Dalibor, and although he is exquisitely aware that whilst human relationships and situations might be continuous throughout the history of architecture, they are not open to direct imitation in a typological or formal sense.

Situation was such an important word for Dalibor because it grounds abstractions -such as space or function, in a resolutely human world. Situations suggest their possible articulation in an architectural sense - but they continue to recur anyway, despite architects.

The task of "restoring the practical nature of situations as a primary mode of design enables us" Dalibor claims, "to move away from inconclusive play with abstract forms and functions" that usually just form a "contemporary version of poetics often reduced to technical innovation and aesthetics." ⁸

Sensing the appropriate way to accommodate the variety of situations that we encounter as architects is an act of poetic decorum, best drawn out of the possibilities of a situation, Dalibor suggested, via gestures, bodily craft, poetic making: sensible imitation.

This imaginative search is comparable to a poet's quest for the right words, it involves rhythm, movement, work; drawing something forth. In order to emphasise the profound reciprocity of articulation and embodiment, Dalibor suggested that artistic work is actually exactly like the search for a mislaid book; both succeed only when you actively reach out your hand for it.

The spatial character of memory, and the dramatic nature of architectural performance, is one reason why, Dalibor insisted, we can still "speak about poetic mythos as the soul of all the creative arts, including architecture."

Dalibor's insights are the most suggestive and convincing argument for the role of drawing in architectural disegno since Michelangelo first drew human bodies in specific situations moving and working in the rooms that he was imagining. ⁹ In both cases, drawings are less representations of anything i.e. illustration, than records of creative thought - the mimesis of praxis ¹⁰ (and *praxis is the mimesis of praxis*, the essence of praxis itself, as Peter Carl reminds us). ¹¹

What is missing between the gesturing body and the invisible, non-figurative aspects of architecture? What role can the other arts play in its recovery?

This is the subject of Dalibor's "hand drawings" and something that he thought could only be expressed in a paradox, one that is the basis of my research and search as an architect:

"the silence of embodiment is always to a certain degree a voice of articulation, and it is only under these conditions that we can understand the language and cultural role of architecture." ¹²

End Notes:

1 Vesely, Dalibor, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production*, MIT, 2004, p.287.

2 <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=l2yTKr43axE>

3 Architecture, Op. Cit., p.288.

4 Ibid, p.366.

5 Ibid, p.368.

6 From an unpublished manuscript version of *Architecture*. Cf. *Ibid.*, p.8.

7 *Ibid.*, p.13.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Cf. Brothers, Cammy, *Michelangelo, Drawing and the Invention of Architecture*, Yale, 2008 and Lynch, Patrick, 'Only Iron Forges Fire', in *Drawing the Process*, ed. Leo Duff & Jo Duff, Intellect Press, 2005.

10 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451b10, cited by Vesely, *Op. Cit.*, p 367.

11 Cf. Carl, Peter, 'Praxis: Horizons of Involvement', in *Common Ground: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Chipperfield, Kieran Long and Shumi Bose, Venice Biennale of Architecture 2012, Marsilio: 'Architectural design is not simply a talent or expertise; it is part of civic praxis. Drawing upon Aristotle's *Poetics*, Dalibor Vesely argues that architectural interpretation (*mimesis*) is a hermeneutics of typical situations.', p. 76.

12 Vesely, *Op. Cit.*, p.107.