

The Studio and the Cultural Significance of Architecture

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Dalibor once described to me his own preference for a school of architecture cloaked by what is now thought of as an outmoded term 'civic design'. What he meant by this, rather than the formal jargon of town planning; urban design; landscape design; and public realm studies become clearer when one surveys the remarkable consistency of the briefs he conjured for his studio teaching over a period of thirty years between the mid 1970's and his last Cambridge studio of 2005. Although as the first session today has made clear his parallel and deeply intertwined passion for the study of the history and philosophy of architecture and a much broader cultural field might suggest the reclusiveness of academia I have frequently mused on what his trajectory might have been had he not chosen an English exile after the suppression of the Prague spring in 1968.

There is a fascinating and particular Czech tradition of bridging political thought and cultural achievement, not only in the well recorded period of Václav Havel's presidency of the Republic, but stretching back for instance to the close relationship between president Tomáš Masaryk and celebrated writer and playwright Karel Čapek. I imagine in this vein Dalibor might have become for instance a significant city architect – particularly to a city like Prague. This role has of course been a foundation of most central European cities as we now know them, for instance the German *Oberbaudirektor* or the French *Prefect*. It is a reflection of the curious void in English city making that between politicians and project managers no such role exists today other than peripheral advisory panels. Indeed local authority architects and their teams have been successively cut away and therefore locked out of what has become ever more a quantitative calculation or even charade of political short term appeasement. Whilst fundamentally Dalibor's contribution has been one of 'Bildung' – the education of architects rather than the design of buildings he came close to implementing ideas on several occasions. By example I never pass London's Limehouse Basin without thinking of the three years study of that place by successive Cambridge studios and lament

the outcome of the Planning Inspectors decision at public enquiry in favour of the mediocrity and privatization of the developers application scheme that can be seen today – it could have been so different.

The Architectural Association was an important place for Dalibor in the development and honing of his well-established thinking about city making, particularly once studio teaching had moved from the fifth year thesis project to units led by small teams of teachers sharing, at least on paper, a common theoretical platform. At the AA the competitive irritation of more than ten Diploma studios bristling with the self-confidence necessary to survive rather led to artificially clear counter positions. In the projects review of 1978 Dalibor wrote, with a clear message to his neighbours:

“the most disappointing tendency in the current search for meaning in design is the belief that meaning can be restored merely through a cleverer manipulation of forms, materialisation of private fantasies or heroic large scale solutions, in other words through something that we can manipulate or see as a mirror of our own imagination”. 1

Rather he set out the unit stall with the premise of sharing, of a collective of individual contributions to the study of sharing, of a collective of individual contributions to the study of the possibility of urban archetypes; dwelling; block; street; square and the city. That study also included the depths of design understood through typicality and situation – a liberation through constraint and quite the opposite premise to the prevailing fashion of that moment.

Moving forward to 2005 in the equivalent Cambridge review he summarized:

“In our projects we have addressed issues which are, by their very nature dependent on and thus potentially open to sharing. In our case the place is treated as a mosaic of individual projects that culminate in a series of key proposals linked together in a setting – the equivalent of a forum”. 2

Between these two poles of time, 1976 to 2005, lie more than 1000 days of studio teaching, countless seminars exploring the inventive possibilities of these archetypes, and critically two forms of specific research. The first is of urban precedent in the European City. These field trips were intense and laden with vivid speculation. Personally I count Paris, Rome, Amsterdam (and other proximate cities), Vienna, Prague, and of course London. There were many more as successive studios witnessed. Memorably it was the European city understood comparatively through a carefully structured gradation from formal to informal presence, that like a palimpsest slowly builds up to a conscious whole through a Daliborean 'mosaic of fragments'.

The second design research was based on shorter or preliminary projects, often a particularly treacherous individual rite of passage to reveal the depths of typical situations apposite to the intended direction of the major collective project to follow. It is worth pausing to reflect on the brilliance of these:

The Diorama 1977:

"In its appearance diorama is a form of theatre. Here we must remember that until very recently theatre as performance was almost identical with the image of city itself". 3

The Cemetery 1978:

"Hence, the goal of the project was not to design a cemetery per se, but to establish a territory in the centre of the city which will be a permanent symbol of its destiny and, like death itself, an ultimate criterion of its meaning". 4

Installation Design 1985:

"The emphasis was on the understanding of objects and their possible spatial and historical setting. We tried to establish a new and more concrete understanding of architectural space". 5

Medical Centre 1986:

“As the first of two preparatory projects for the medical centre we chose to study one critical phenomena, that of solitude”. 6

Film studio 1987:

“The main purpose of the project was to study more closely the conditions and possibilities of a kind of representation most characteristic of the current sensibility which also strongly reveals the paradoxical relationship between the privacy of personal experience and the abstract universality of the message”. 7

These projects were effectively the means to make available the marvellous in the everyday and to open the formal borders of design exploration to a broad and rich cultural fecundity.

Beyond the archetypes previously mentioned one stands out as a common thread in many of the settings – the urban garden. The block interior of Kentish Town in two significant manifestations; the vertical gardens of Spitalfields and the river edge garden of Deptford and Vienna, are very briefly each cleverly juxtaposed within a broader context.

In conclusion Dalibor summarized his position, reflective of the importance of place to him and of his careful selection of sites year on year in his introduction to *Architecture and Continuity* (1982):

“To avoid the meaninglessness of the contemporary city it is not necessary to search for some ideal order in the pre-industrial past. It is possible to start from the given reality of any existing city and to discover, in most of them, a residuum of tradition sufficient to support a consistent, imaginative and sometimes even radical reinterpretation of the status quo”. 8