

REVIEW ARTICLE

Palladio's children ... and Vitruvius's grandchildren?

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Stewart Brand (1994) *How buildings learn: what happens after they're built* (Viking Penguin, New York, USA, 243pp. ISBN 0-670-83515-3)

N. J. Habraken (2005) *Palladio's children* (Taylor and Francis, Abingdon, UK, 208pp. ISBN 0-415-35791-8 (cloth) 0-415-35784-5 (paper))

Jeremy Till (2009) *Architecture depends* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, USA, 254pp. ISBN 978-0-262-01253-9)

In a recent Viewpoint on 'Urban morphology and design', Brenda Scheer (2008) responded to 'the flurry of discussion on the relationship between urban design research and practice'. She pointed out how urban morphology's 'association with small scale, traditional urban environments (townscape and New Urbanism) has made it suspect for applications in respected high image architecture' (p. 140). The latest major work by John Habraken, a recent book by Jeremy Till and an earlier volume by Stewart Brand offer further explanations for this neglect.

Although it was published 5 years ago, Habraken's *Palladio's children* has, according to the author's agent, only received two reviews, one in *Open House International* and the other in the *Journal of the American Schools of Architecture* – just the sort of neglect that one would expect of a work critical of the discourse of 'high architecture'. 2008 was also the quincentenary of Palladio's birth and was celebrated with a major exhibition at London's Royal Academy earlier last year. This ran concurrently (by happy coincidence or design?) with a Le Corbusier exhibition in the Barbican Centre. Both these exhibitions support and add new evidence to the main argument of the book.

Habraken, who is Emeritus Professor at the Department of Architecture at MIT, has been

preoccupied with the themes of this book for the last 4 decades and the seven essays the book contains are an easily accessible summary of this work. The author has a penchant for titles: his previous major work was *The structure of the ordinary* (1998) (reviewed by Nasr (1999) in *Urban Morphology*). The present intriguing title comes from his observation that 'we recognise in Palladio's work a familiar attitude to making architecture that we share. We still view ourselves much in the way he may have seen himself' (p. 6).

Palladio was the first architect to publish his works in his lifetime although, of course, from Vitruvius via Alberti to Serlio there had been publications showing examples of architecture. But he was publishing as a practising architect showing his own work as well as ancient buildings he had measured himself. The Palladio Exhibition showed clearly how the author embellished his own buildings for publication: the illustrations in his *Quattro Libri* do not always match the buildings as realized. Habraken points out how this tradition of defining architecture has endured (Le Corbusier published volumes of his own work every few years) and 'reinforced a popular view of architecture as the story of gifted and successful individuals. More than ever having one's work published – preferably

during one's lifetime and including cocktail napkin sketches – became the defining mark of arrival; of admission to the inner circle of those who define architecture' (p. 7). The problem with this way of defining architecture is that the experience of a building through books is very different from visiting it. Both Palladio and Le Corbusier made wonderful buildings but the subtleties of a villa designed by Palladio and its response to its setting can only be appreciated *in situ*.

Architecture, perceived from this viewpoint usually ignores ordinary buildings, the stuff of urban morphology. The prizes generally are given to special buildings – the award in 2009 of a major prize by the Royal Institute of British Architects to a housing project raised a lot of interest just because it was so exceptional. Similarly, the urban fabric 'has remained obscure or self-evident and this has led to the emancipation and the isolation of an entire professional culture from the integrated field of form and people' (p. 28).

In his otherwise laudatory review Joe Nasr observes that *The structure of the ordinary* 'sometimes uses common terms in very particular ways, that the book essentially imposes its own language on the reader' (1999, p. 119). A particular case is the way the term 'field' is used to describe the whole physical and social urban context and, when a poem by Habraken was recently published as part of the editorial of a recent number of the journal *Urban Design* (Thomas, 2009), this term had to be explained in a footnote. However, *Palladio's children* is clearly written and refreshingly jargon free. For Habraken the field extends beyond the competence of any one discipline and he emphasizes that it is subject to a continuous reshaping by the interventions of the people and the institutions that occupy it. This perspective coincides with that of most contributions to the pages of *Urban Morphology* including his own: 'we should emulate the biologist who studies all plants with equal zeal. ... As designers we have been trained to be florists who decide what is beautiful and appropriate and arrange the bouquet accordingly' (Habraken, 2009, p.132). This observation which touches on the

nature of most architectural education will be discussed later.

The greater part of the book is concerned with an explanation of Habraken's concept of the field and uses a range of examples: Amsterdam and Venice, Mexico City and Cairo, Chicago and Austin are used to demonstrate the enduring nature of the field and its change over time. He traces the modern architectural appropriation of this field to Garnier's *Une cité industrielle* (1918), which offered the seductive possibility of a single design controlled by one agent of change for the whole process. From the urban layout to the individual dwelling and its contents this is the Modern Movement dream of designing and being in control of everything from the city to the teaspoon. The built environment was 'to become a matter of a brilliant all encompassing vision rather than patient cultivation' (p. 90). The issue of control is central to the field and has figured prominently in Habraken's work from his studies of Open Housing systems starting in the 1970s.

The post-modern reaction is discussed in the fourth chapter. It is presented as a struggle for architecture to re-engage once more with the field that had been the product of entire cultures. The master builder had been a servant of the field or, in the definition of the Muratorian School of urban morphology which Habraken discusses, a technician of human space.

For Habraken the problems started with Palladio, but in his recent work Jeremy Till takes us back even further to blame Vitruvius. Using translations from a book by Indra McEwen (2003), he suggests that permeating the work is 'the identification of architecture as an act of imposing order, of taking the unruly and making it coherent' (p. 28). While this desire to impose order may be present, Pier Giorgio Geroso (in a personal communication) has pointed out the relative absence of self promotion in Vitruvius when compared with Palladio and how he was concerned to emphasize in the very first sentence of Chapter 1 of the first of his ten books that 'the science of the architect depends

on many disciplines' (Vitruvius, translated by Granger, 1970, p. 7).

In an earlier publication, Wigglesworth and Till (1998, p. 7) suggest that architecture 'privileges the final product over the process, the perfected moment of completion over the imperfections of occupation. It concerns itself with lofty ideals rather than gritty realism, searching for the next novelty whilst forgetting the present'. This formulation echoes the arguments of Stewart Brand which were entertainingly put forward in *How buildings learn* – so entertaining that, unusually for a topic of this sort, it was made into a six-part television series (Brand, 1997).

Brand, a layperson in the tradition of Jane Jacobs, dares to challenge corporate professional solidarity with a perceptive critique. Indeed Till (p. 99) claims that Brand's critique of some of Richard Rogers's buildings so upset the architect that, under threat of legal action, Brand was forced to delete them from the second edition published in Britain in 1997. Brand suggests that a building's life only begins with the architect's departure and that the profession has to acknowledge this in its work. Differing from Habraken he suggests that the origins of the present attitude lie in the nineteenth century when architects sought to distinguish themselves from builders by emphasizing their concern with art. For Brand (p. 54) the problem with this stance is that:

- Art is proudly non functional and impractical.
- Art reveres the new and despises the conventional.
- Architectural art sells at a distance.

Even though the then President of the RIBA, Frank Duffy (one of the many architects cited in the long list of acknowledgments) is quoted at length in the book – for example, 'a building properly conceived is several layers of longevity of built components' (p. 12) – and appears in the television programmes, Brand's work has been neglected by the profession. Till suggests that this is because he 'confronts the architect's terror with time head on ... and in doing so

challenges all those architectural preoccupations with stasis and perfection' (p. 99).

In response to these accusations, architects will point out that in the practice of architecture autonomy is a myth. The savage review of Till's book by Richard Weston (a professor at the Welsh School of Architecture) exemplifies this position. He argues that in practice the activity of the architect is circumscribed by regulation and economics and that this book 'is far too concerned with what architects write rather than with what they do' (Weston, 2009, p. 20).

Nevertheless, for Till the ideal of the autonomy of architecture persists in the profession and is the basis of most architectural education (pp. 17-18). At a recent meeting, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) expressed concern about the poor quality of new housing in England. Of the schemes audited according to twenty criteria (www.buildingforlife.org) around half rated poor, at the bottom of a 4-point scale, while about 20 per cent were good or very good – the rest were average. At the same time the Royal Institute of British Architects was exhibiting the entries for the 2009 student awards. Of more than 100 entries about a dozen could be considered to deal with problems of urbanism or housing while the rest had such titles as *Desert(ed) hotel*, *Biometamorphic architecture – organ transplantation clinic*, *Biomorphic architecture – time machine*. These students guided by their tutors are clearly aware of the sort of projects that win prizes. One of my most gifted students, shocked by being exposed to the mismatch between the academy and the office, threatened to sue her school of architecture for misrepresenting what the practice of architecture is really about.

Central to the work of Brand, Habraken and Till is a concern with the way the built environment changes over time in response to changing social and economic conditions and an understanding of how the agencies of change, which control form, shift according to, in typo-morphological terms, levels of resolution or what Brand calls 'layers'. These are the 'fundamental legacies of urban

morphology' (Scheer, 2008, p. 141) and one cannot envisage any serious study of how buildings interact with space to form towns, which leaves them off the agenda. The omission of a consideration of these concepts is the basis of the architect's neglect.

Of course there are many architects who contribute to and practise with these concepts but they are mainly in the Latin countries, as Jeremy Whitehand (2007) has pointed out. It would be easy to attribute the responsibility for this neglect of serious contextual study to an 'anglophone squint'. However, the practitioners of 'high architecture' flourish in Latin countries as well. There are the usual anecdotes of recent graduates being expected to work for no wages in the offices of these stars.

A possible explanation for this greater interest within Latin countries may lie in the different structure of the design professions there. In Britain, the United States and the British Commonwealth town planning has been recognized for nearly a century and occupies a distinct territory of professional activity – albeit often regarded by some architects as an unwelcome occupier. In contrast in Latin countries the town planning profession is much less well established and there are many more architects. The activities of town planning and urban design are almost exclusively carried out by architects. Because of the nature of their practice they are therefore more often involved than their anglophone counterparts in work for which the context cannot be regarded as fixed in time and under a single control.

Another reason may be the fact that Italian architects have for half a century questioned Modernism's neglect of context and history. Forty (2000, p. 134) describes at some length 'the specifically Italian debates about *continuita*'. This was part of a critique of the functionalism of orthodox modernism which started in the 1950s as a 'uniquely Italian phenomenon' with 'history's readmission to the discourse of architecture' (Forty, 2000, p. 199). Italian architects trained over the last 50 years are much more comfortable about dealing with *ambiente* or context than their

anglophone contemporaries.

All three of the authors discussed come from different starting points and they have very different backgrounds, but they are all aiming at the same target and marshalling similar arguments over, in the case of Habraken, several decades. Yet this critique has had relatively little impact on the mainstream discourse of architecture as presented in the press and represented by the work of the schools. As an instance of their marginality to architectural discourse, Forty's *Words and buildings* (2000), an encyclopaedic work concerned with pronouncements and publications, does not mention either Habraken or Brand. Perhaps it is the very diversity of their origins which renders them so ineffective outside the narrow circles of their own acolytes. They, and other notable critics such as Christopher Alexander and Lucien Kroll, do not come together into a critical mass which is big enough to challenge the coherent corporatism of the architectural profession.

Habraken ends on the hopeful note that thematic design is resurfacing in new ways. But a glance at the architectural press shows just how far we still have to go. For instance, when this paper was being drafted, the *Architectural Review* of May 2009 illustrated seven award winning buildings. Not only did it contrive to show them all uninhabited, and they included a housing development and a community centre, but one of them was a library which had been photographed before any books had been placed on its shelves. 'You get work through getting awards, and the award system is based on photographs. Not use. Not context. Just purely visual photographs taken before people start using the building' (Clare Cooper Marcus, quoted in Brand, p. 55).

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Fourteenth International Planning History Society Conference

The Fourteenth International Planning History Society Conference will be held in Istanbul, Turkey from 12 to 15 July 2010. The theme is 'Urban transformation: controversies, contrasts and challenges'. Urban transformation, as one of the major issues throughout planning history, has an even greater significance within the context of rapid globalization, especially during the last two decades. It is of increasing importance today to share professional and academic knowledge and expertise across the world in order to deal with controversies, contrasts and challenges that cities are facing as they seek a sustainable future.

The conference provides an opportunity not only for a broad investigation of transformation aspects in planning history across the world, but also for

sharing expertise on Istanbul, the European Capital of Culture. In recent years Istanbul has become the focus of a number of transformation initiatives, which have provided challenges to urban governance, cultural and social structure, and historical preservation.

The conference is organized by Istanbul Technical University Faculty of Architecture and Planning and Istanbul Technical University Urban and Environmental Planning and Research Centre. The Conference Convener is Professor Dr Nuran Zeren Gülersoy (e-mail: gulersoy@itu.edu.tr). The Conference Secretary is Assistant Professor Dr Hatice Ayataç (e-mail: ayatac@itu.edu.tr). Further information is available from www.iphs2010.org

Space is luxury

The Twenty-Fourth AESOP Annual Conference will be held from 7 to 10 July 2010 at Helsinki University of Technology, Finland. The Centre for Urban and Regional Studies at the University invites planning scholars and professionals to come to Finland to discuss the manifold issues of 'space is luxury' and explore the many related planning issues.

Topics to be discussed include:

- Planning theory and methods
- Planning history

- Urban planning and physical form
- Culture, heritage and planning

On 3-5 July there will be a PhD workshop offering PhD students an intensive course to support the development of their PhD studies.

The secretaries of the local organizing committee are Timo Heikkinen and Eeva Mynttinen, Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, PB2200, FIN 02015 HUT, Finland. E-mail: aesop2010@tkk.fi
