

**TOPOGRAPHY, TOPOLOGY, TYPE & ARCHETYPE:
ON THE HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY & PRAXIS OF ARCHITECTURE**
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'A work of architecture is always related to a specific situation, but it also has to transcend this situation and make it appear as part of a more comprehensive, meaningful identity... From a set of specific situations man abstracts meaningful forms and principles of organization which makes a more general planning possible. Some of these forms may be called archetypal, as they represent the meaning of man's most meaningful experiences... The architectural symbol system, thus, allows man to experience a meaningful environment, wherever he may be on earth, and in this way helps him to find an existential foothold. This is the true purpose of architecture, to help make human existence meaningful; all other functions, such as the satisfaction of mere physical needs, can be satisfied without architecture.'

Christian Norberg-Schulz

HISTORY

I studied architecture at Liverpool University and I hold a Master of Philosophy degree in *The History and Philosophy of Architecture* from Cambridge University, and I have taught design and supervised dissertations at Kingstons University and the Architectural Association and presently Lynch architects teach a design studio at London Metropolitan University. This short description places me into a particular niche in British architectural culture, and describes an unusual relationship with Praxis. Of all of my colleagues undertaking research under the supervision of Dalibor Vesely and Peter Carl at Cambridge in the 1990s, I am the only graduate that I know of who is not a full-time academic. Most are architectural historians, whose influence upon schools in the UK, Europe and the US can be anticipated from the success of earlier students of Vesely, Carl, Robin Middleton and Joseph Rykwert, that include Alberto Pérez-Gomez, Mohsen Mostafavi, David Leatherbarrow and Daniel Libeskind¹. Central to this particular way of looking at architecture is acknowledgement of a certain tension between the specific and embodied character of typical situations, and the questionable status of tradition and continuity in architecture today. The difficulty in reconciling the concrete with the symbolic aspects of architecture, is seen as evidence of the problematic nature of representation in the modern world, or more precisely "Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production"². This historical approach was strongly influenced by Sedlmayr's work upon the Baroque and by Wöflin, Burkhardt and Panofsky's studies of the relationships between: science, theology and cultural representation mediated by such themes as the development of perspective and experimental method; the iconographic programs of Renaissance gardens and villas and the taxonomy of zoological and cultural artefacts housed there; the role of optics in Scholastic thought and architecture; the status of historical studies in modern architectural production, etc.

PHILOSOPHY

The structure of the graduate seminar course at Cambridge course was similar to Norberg-Schulz's book 'Meaning in Western Architecture', and this chronology began with the origins of symbolic ritualistic topography in the Pre-Socratic world and students read philosophy in order to locate such issues as ethics and practical wisdom with the context of the historical city. This tendency to situate thinking within the political realm that produced architecture meant that we were encouraged to read as phenomenologists; investigating buildings for the historically situated consciousness that created them, and regarding texts as the evidence of a generally accepted paradigmatic complicity between questions that concern theology and the natural world, of which architecture was one mode of manifestation of these concerns. Thesis topics tended to consider questions of historical continuity and the role buildings play within a broader urban setting. The major thinkers that were considered extended Norberg-Schulz's references, and Gadamer and Ricoeur were probably the most articulate interpreters of Heidegger's work on space, time and language, and these themes grounded our studies in examinations of the continuing relevance of the beautiful and of the mytho-poetic tradition of Humanist thought and the artistic sensibility that it inspires. The premise of the application, as it were, of a hermeneutics of Praxis in architecture, is that this tradition of philosophy begins with question about the world and seeks an ethical response to the problems of representation. Which describes how architects are asked to work also, integrating questions that concern material needs with the formulation of responses that articulate our need for orientation and the recognition of a common and ethical life. We give form to the aspirations of our clients and we ground these within traditions of common life that are recognisable to us all.³ The articulation of

¹ This list also includes David Porter, Head of The Mackintosh School of Architecture and Nicholas Temple, head at Lincoln.

² The title of Dalibor Vesely's book published by MIT Press in 2004, arguably summarises the content of his M-Phil course and the work of his design students at Cambridge over 20 years.

³ It is not my place to attempt to précis the depth and breadth of the critical enquiry of my tutors, but it is interesting to note that unlike many other 'theory' teachers, they were still actively involved in studio teaching and acted as grey eminences in the practices of their ex-students. Now that I am a tutor and an architect I can appreciate the scale of the endeavour

cultural differences, and the reconciliation of this with the pressing need for recognisable places that do not ignore the ruptures with historical continuity that constitute modernity, these contradictions describe the site for our current architectural action. This requires an interpretative approach as much as analysis, and hermeneutics makes one conscious of the power and dangers of any theoretical language that seeks to find answers for questions that cannot be understood as abstract concepts or 'philosophical problems'.

PRAXIS

I describe the work of our practice as the 'anti-thesis' of my unwritten PhD (the M-Phil third of which concerned the 'Theatricality of the Baroque City' of Pöppelmann's Dresden projects for Augustus The Strong). By which I mean the built other to an unwritten study, but one which acknowledges that architecture is a language, and that 'only language makes possible the transmission of experiences from one generation to another.'⁴ Put very simply, my research concerned the consequences of a Protestant Duke becoming a Roman Catholic King upon acceding to the Polish throne, and his creation of a festival place in place of a fortified city wall to celebrate his pseudo-imperial advent each Shrove Tuesday. The typical building program of a Baroque Prince included also salons that situated his love of all types of scientific and literary achievements within a quasi-naturalistic setting such as a Belvedere, whereby he made spatial his ambitions to bring to appearance the invisible realms of reality. In other words, Baroque town planning is both an analogue of an ideal order, and yet all aspects of culture from brewing to building are seen to collaborate in 'the unity of the arts' manifest and made visible in festivals. Thus all are seen to exist within a temporal and spatial structure that is at once fully incarnate and phenomenally grounded; and also richly illusionist and charged with theatrical depth both through the use of perspective and the iconographic content of buildings adorned with statues, stucco and painted surfaces simultaneously dappled with light and reflections of real and seeming-real marks of exaggerated age and decay, rebirth and renewal. Nature and artifice are cultivated to suggest ambiguous relationships between human imagination and the divine realm of ideas that situate them. Reciprocity is suggested between memory, imagination, reason and sensation. And yet the Zwinger and the Catholic Cathedral and later, Semper's opera house and art school and galleries and his synagogue, established an analogical structure for representational spaces that nonetheless had to respond to an existing medieval city structure and to its riverine topography and enable future expansion (Fig. 1). Generally speaking, a Baroque building program acknowledged history and nature and is evidence of an agile attitude towards change and transformation, and we can see the unfinished nature of this project in cities as diverse as Naples, Oporto, Vienna and Rome, and to a lesser degree in Protestant cities such as Berlin and London. In the latter cities, representational buildings are built without regard for the elastic spatial structure of festival movement that holds the mundane and dramatic in a pregnant imminence, but which were and continue to be built, nonetheless.

It is clear to me that it is hubristically short sighted to attempt to elaborate either a design practice or a teaching position based upon the assumption of an unbroken tradition of such fecund and imaginative representation. But the extreme moment of doubt in the power of theoretical efficacy, and of confidence in poetic technique, that typified Baroque culture, remains, a counter point to our age's current obsessions with technological virtuosity on the one hand, and the autonomous cult of the individual creative genius on the other.

Nonetheless, I feel that our role is to identify those moments when the invisible and visible aspects of our history and geography can be revealed to all as the structure that supports everyday life as well as the more emancipated aspects of the cultural life of a city. Our design approach involves intense scrutiny of what already exists, and we are often drawn to reconstructing or rebuilding the site, since the ravages of modernist town planning (aka 'traffic engineering') have produced great rifts between recent construction and the continuous development of the historical city. Revealing these 'rifts' could be compared to Heidegger's emphasis upon the project of reconciliation that hermeneutic thinking engages with, the 'recovery' of lost or forgotten knowledge. Heidegger's emphasis upon the etymological origins and shifts of meaning of language-concepts can be compared to an architectural approach based upon looking at what exists and what used to exist somewhere, prior to the influence of quasi-scientific language upon architectural discourse and this tendency to view the past through the lens of modernity. The force and prevalence of technico-instrumental thinking has distorted contemporary architectural thinking to the extent that modernist

involved in attempting to articulate the effects of historical forces upon the phenomenal essences that underlie the reciprocity between praxis and culture, from the weak position of didactic pedagogy oriented toward ethics, within a university system dedicated to the production of knowledge as theory.

⁴ Meaning in Western Architecture, Christian Norberg-Schulz, Rizzoli, New York, 1980, P.222

architects use the language of industrial design and engineering to discuss architectural problems that can be best addressed from within the humanistic discourse of hermeneutic philosophy. How often do we hear the use of inappropriate metaphors cribbed from the natural sciences, such as 'flow', 'circulation' and 'dynamism' to describe public spaces and civic monuments? Hermeneutics enables us to think in historical terms, and provides a conceptual understanding of the deep reciprocity of language and type, ritual and place, that underlies the material culture of the city. Appropriate metaphors might be 'background' to describe the influence of hermeneutics upon design, and phenomenology - the study of the poetic essences of things in their situations, could be described as the 'ground' upon which we erect spaces to house the mundane and representational content of our lives.

I will attempt to illustrate the ways in which this 'hermeneutics of praxis' can be explored in teaching and grounded in the world of professional architectural production today through reference to actual projects.

PRAXIS 1: MADDER ROSE GALLERY & APARTMENT

'These characters constitute the true subject matter of architecture, and the task of the architect is to create places with a particular, meaningful character, for without all the dimension of character all the levels would remain mere abstractions, like a country or a town we know only from a map.'
Christian Norberg-Schulz

TOPOGRAPHY

Madder Rose gallery is designed in response to its Clerkenwell context, just beyond the London city wall. The scope of works comprises the renovation and conversion of two Georgian houses to create two apartments and a private gallery for contemporary art, set within the St Luke's Conservation Area. Whitecross Street runs from Hawksmoore's church (recently refurbished) south to The Barbican, and is one of the few streets close to the delights of Shoreditch and the power of the city that retains a slightly Dickensian character of urban lawlessness, and a street market each weekday has a semi-legal status that is now being stabilised in a new landscape project that acknowledges its presence and creates spaces for *alfresco* dining (Fig. 2). The project was partly funded by Islington Council with a grant from English Heritage, who approved the creation of a new shop front and insisted on the reintroduction of sash windows in one of the houses. The two early Georgian terraces that abut each other vary in size, scale and construction, and are offset between 1-2 degrees as the road bends to acknowledge the presence of subterranean streams. This slight misalignment becomes noticeable in an open plan space, and we have exaggerated this difference to take advantage of the 'natural perspective' that results from walls that are not parallel, nor perpendicular. New wall linings take up some of the tolerance between the two houses, and structure and services are encased within this 'poché'. The plywood-plasterboard lining adjusts and amplifies the offset to between 4-5 degrees at the rear, creating a sense of dynamic movement from one space to the next.

TOPOLOGY

The plan diagram enables free movement from space to space in a figure of 8, and avoids the dead ends and resulting senses of boredom and oppression that can arise from the use of perspective in the composition of gallery spaces. The resulting sense of surprise emphasizes the way we discover things in spaces, and makes us aware of how we chose to look at something, offering artists and curators a variety of challenges and opportunities to think outside of the conventional 'white cube'. Already, a number of artists have decided to make site-specific installations, including a cast ceramic wall sculpture in the top-lit space, paintings that form corners of space, a timber hut in the courtyard and light boxes that can be viewed from the street at night. In contrast, landings on staircases enable work to be displayed in the sort of context they might be housed in once purchased by private collectors.

TYPE

The origins of the art gallery are domestic. The typology of the renaissance villa includes a space associated with the entrance - usually a long 'gallery' or sequence of spaces forming part of the introduction to the main salon - where paintings and sculptures would be on display. The villa gallery was an essential manifestation of the residence's - and the residents' - decorum, situating the family culturally and historically. The rear gallery takes advantage of the 'hot' sunlight that falls in from high roof lights, ranged around a suspended cube that forms the roof terrace of the apartment above. In contrast, the double height lower gallery that drifts under firewalls between the

three properties is a 'cold' east facing space, and a long view is offered down the street towards Bunhill gardens cemetery. These two spaces are almost the same size and proportion, and yet are detailed to have very different characters and atmospheres in response to their orientation to the sun and to the morphology of the building, thus intimating how they are used. Consequentially, although quite small, Madder Rose shows a variety of media and types and scales of artworks, group shows and retrospectives.

The flat above the gallery is open-plan, but a series of volumes are created with room-like characteristics, that can be closed down or opened through full-height doors, that act like moveable walls. Whilst the bedroom on 2nd floor is a large tent-like volume, the first floor living spaces are quite low in contrast, culminating in a west-facing terrace (that is formed by the clerestory glazing to the gallery below). The terrace is a room open to the evening sunlight.

ARCHETYPE

The ground floor entrance facade is designed to open completely during private view parties, extending the new streetscape design by MUF architects through the gallery out into a west facing rear courtyard (as yet incomplete), and the monthly private views occur like periodic street festivals, bringing two exotic worlds into confrontation. Once the proposed ground works are completed, the new public spaces will extend to connect back to remnants of the streetscape of old London, and an artist's studio (for one of our clients, a painter) will occupy the garage that is currently unused at the rear of the gallery, opening, we hope, further dialogue with the passers-by and the street market, and the night life and domestic realms that sit side by side together in typical urban complicity and mutual co-dependence. Understood as an intrinsic part of the layers of life that make up this part of the city, where an intensified relationship between production, work and display occurs without interruption by modernist planning codes, the gallery and flat can be seen as thresholds between domestic and public life; each retain a quality of imminent transformation, both are open to change, both enable work and play to reside and for something of the sacred character of both to co-exist.⁵

PRAXIS II: MARSH VIEW

'As nature is not man made it keeps us at a certain distance and offers great but relatively undifferentiated experiences.'
Christian Norberg-Schulz

TOPOGRAPHY

Marsh View is located in an 'area of outstanding natural beauty' on the North Norfolk coast amongst fresh and saltwater marshlands (Fig. 3). It sits at the end of a lane beside four 1950s bungalows in a small hamlet close to fashionable Burnham Market. Our project comprises the demolition of a bungalow and the reconstruction of parts of this building within a new composition. The bungalow had been built from a pattern book of designs, applied by a builder to a regularly divided plot of land, and took no account of the setting. The primary sensation of North Norfolk is the extensivity of the horizon. The ground is often moist and subject to tidal fluctuations which blur an obvious distinction between coast and hinterland. Rare birds draw your attention across the broad sky, whilst human figures and buildings enable you to gain a sense of scale in the vastness of wind and watery light. Our design seeks to explore the building's relationship with the landscape and the marsh view. Marsh View is a house for inspiration for our clients and their friends who are fellow artists, filmmakers and writers. North Norfolk has a peripatetic community of artistic weekend dwellers who make up an itinerant community sharing cinema nights and conversation.

We retain two walls of the old bungalow in which new windows modify the existing openings. The windows are set forward in the walls to emphasize the continuity of the surface and to reflect the surrounding landscape into the garden. This at once reinforces the coherence of the form as one single folding surface, and seeks to de-materialize the windows, as they become huge mirrors. Paradoxically, the use of black paint to unify the fragments of old and new walls seeks to repress distinctions between original and recent construction, in order to create a coherent formal expression of a single building whose external spaces are powerfully volumetric.

TOPOLOGY

Morning sunlight reflects off of the east pond onto the white glass of the bathroom windows as you lay in your bath. At evening, the setting sun projects in the high west window and anticipates the red light of the fireplace. Orientation to the village and the marsh as 'front and back' conditions,

⁵ See Architecture Today, 175, February 2007. Pagination?

combines with the orientation sunlight gives, to suggest the location of typical situations: breakfasting in the east; lunch on the patio; evening fires in the west; sun and moon above; a water garden below and a horizon of shadows in-between. As well as enabling a visual connection to the horizon, the project encourages movement from inside to out in a variety of ways. A heated black concrete floor extends throughout the ground level and unites the various external and internal spaces as a sequence of 'rooms in the landscape'. These spatial conditions are seen less in terms of fixed functions and more as a fluid series of places for participation within the overall architectural setting. This includes the garden and the marsh. Robin Evans writes of the Villa Madama by Raphael, '... as in virtually all domestic architecture prior to 1650, there is no qualitative distinction between the way through a house and the inhabited spaces within it... Once inside it is necessary to pass from one room to the next to traverse the building... the villa was in terms of occupation, an open plan relatively permeable to the numerous members of the household, all of them-men women, children, servants and visitors-were obliged to pass through a matrix of connecting rooms where the day-to-day business of life was carried on...it was the rule of Italian palaces, villa and farms that hardly affected the style of architecture (which could equally well be gothic or vernacular), but which most certainly affected the style of life... The matrix of rooms is appropriate to a type of society which feeds on carnality, which recognizes the body as a person and in which gregariousness is habitual'.⁶

TYPE

Modern and post-modern architecture reduced the qualitative character of spaces to the expression of their use (typology as the signification of functionalism). Resulting in the confusion of visual and haptic experience with signs. We are less interested in interpreting typology as signs, and are more curious about the power of an image to become a symbol. In this case, the chimney seems to suggest that a much older mode of inhabitation has reestablished itself on the edge of the marsh beneath the wide sky and deep horizon, and curiously, it seems to have always been there. Rather than appearing ordinary, we want our work to seem mundane – worldly – rooted to a place with all of the strange complexities of ritualistic and everyday activity that dwelling implies.

ARCHETYPE

When we remember and also as we see, meanings and nuances slip back and forth from the actual to the suggestive. New art can have an archaic quality, and a new building can appear older than the one it replaces. Our loss of an intellectual centre, and its architectural analogue in the hearth or Temple, throws us outwards to the natural world and we fall back upon our own resources and the company of friends. In writing and reading, thinking and drawing, we experience this gap as an opportunity for pleasurable reflection, a release from the negotiations of daily life. A holiday might be the time when some serious work is done. Just as a hearth provides actual warmth, as important is the sense that it offers as an image to warm our souls.⁷

PRAXIS III: GIANT'S CAUSEWAY VISITOR'S CENTRE COMPETITION

'The rediscovery of the total, concrete character not only enables us to make our new environments meaningful, but it also brings past environments to life again.'
Christian Norberg-Schulz

TOPOGRAPHY

In myth, Ireland was connected to Scotland via the Giant's Causeway, and Northern Ireland sits between the two cultures framed by history and geography, related by language and religion and a common heritage, and distinguished by the common characteristics of a particular identity and nuanced views of the world. The visitor centre is part of this exchange of cultures. Situated overlooking this grand view you can expect to be moved to think about our place in time today; and for the architecture to open you to a larger scale of human experience inspired by the awesome feelings of wonder that simple basalt rocks evoke.

Our design offers a beautiful view over the sea to Scotland and across the bay to Donegal, making visible at once recent history and human geography, as well as ancient myths and geological time. The Causeway connects together these strands of culture, and we feel the scale of our significance in the face of the natural world, and the age of the cosmos dwarfs us. We propose that visitors should be able to respond to this awesome beauty as we always have: in telling stories and acting

⁶ 'Figures, Doors and Passages', in *Translations from Drawing to Building & Other Essays*, Robin Evans, AA Documents 2, 1997, p.63.

⁷ See *Architecture Today*, 140, July 2003; *Icon* 2, May 2003; *ARQ*, volume 9, number 2, 2005, etc. Pagination?

out the memories of our places and the events that affect us. The question is: 'How can a passive tourist experience become meaningfully public?'

Our response is to make an excavation and to build a mound, within and on top of which, you can experience the many scales of time. A large amphitheatre is proposed. The evening sun illuminates a stage at the foot of the amphitheatre, whose backdrop is an orchard of fruit trees. Visitors for festivals can appropriate these performance spaces. Locals can hire the inner auditorium for dances and parties, as well as for concerts and plays that can become part of a regular series of events, linked to both the educational facilities of the centre, and its internal auditorium and program. Whilst the upper amphitheatre, lit from behind audiences heads by the evening summer sun, acts as an invocation to visitors to commemorate and imagine the past and the future of this place in music and drama and song (Fig. 4).

TOPOLOGY

A powerful sense of enclosure is desirable on this windswept promontory, and the encircling form of the boundary walls is repeated in the café garden, where an orchard is sheltered behind a curving brick wall. Descending the lower narrower ramp you pass besides a stratified chronological and geological map that also places human events into the context of cosmic time. Along the upper reaches of the ramp you access three small shop units. At the base of the ramp you arrive beneath a first story cantilever into a small sunken court, where you can pause along your route into the building. From this court the auditorium can be accessed at night when the remaining building is closed. Continuing beneath the covered path you pass by classrooms that also open onto the courtyard, which is fringed with glue-lam timber columns, quite densely spaced. The ramp culminates in another triangular space, the entrance foyer. Passing the reception you arrive in a 10m tall hall. The timber ceiling and joists incline towards the focus of this space. Situated at the convergence of the walls is a small fireplace, lit from above by a similarly triangular roof light. The creamy brick of the facades is continued on the inner walls and floor of the courtyard and then on into the entrance exhibition space, which we have called 'Walkers' Hall'.

From Walkers' Hall you can perceive the whole of the building. If you remain on this lower level you will find the classrooms close-by and passing them and reception you gain access to the usual conveniences, and beyond them you enter the paying galleries. These are designed to international art gallery standards and are air-conditioned and the levels of illumination can be controlled by the manipulation of artificial and natural lighting. The lower gallery extends into a smaller north facing room with a view of the causeway below. On this level the galleries are linked to the auditorium space by a small bar and foyer, lit from above by hexagonal glass roof lights. The auditorium floor surface is level beneath a raked ceiling plane - the underside of the ramped amphitheatre above. The auditorium is of course acoustically controlled and natural light can also be blocked. We see this space as both an extension of the galleries and as a small lecture theatre that can be used when the connection to the main body of the building is secured. Thus the auditorium can operate independently of the visitor centre as a small private theatre or public hall. It has its own bar and small foyer that opens onto and is accessible from the sunken courtyard.

Two stairs rise from Walkers' Hall. A smaller thinner stair winds up to the staff facilities and administration offices, which are connected to the upper gallery, forming a bridged archway over the entrance doors below. The offices overlook the upper ramp looking across the tops of trees in the sunken court below. A much broader grand staircase connects the lower hall to upper gallery, following the line of the back wall and the undulating roof above. The upper gallery is also accessible from the top of the upper ramp and Belvedere, and visitors can mingle in this space without the need to pay an entrance fee nor disturbing the specialist exhibition spaces below. A grand colonnade sits beneath the sail of the roof soffit adjacent to an external fireplace, set into a thick brick wall. Continuing on beyond the canopy you are presented with a view of the surrounding headlands, petering away to Donegal and on a clear day, so the story goes, across the sea to Scotland.

Returning down the broad ramp you arrive at the base beside the tourist information and the café, or you can walk out under a covered bus shelter onto the picnic orchard, planted with fruit trees. The café is a simple brick and timber hall with glass doors that open onto a smaller walled orchard garden. Its fruit trees create shade and unite the picnic area to the ramped auditorium through a continuous horizon of branches. The rhythmical spacing of tree trunks echoes the inter-colonnation of the cloisters.

TYPE

In dispersing the various building functions across the site we reduce construction to single volume structures in the main, creating also a cluster of spaces animated by the external areas. Resulting in a sheltered enclosure that establishes a strong sense of connection back to the land beyond and to vernacular typologies. The Spanish *Cortille* seems an obvious analogue - and recalls the sailors shipwrecked on this coast during the Armada of 1588 - part farm house, part stables, part grand hall: a settlement that creates its own context whilst fore-grounding the context that it disappears into.

ARCHETYPE

Our design seeks to amplify and to intensify the experience of visiting the Giant's Causeway. We do not seek to copy or to repeat this natural wonder, but instead to contrast these abstract phenomena with a building that re-establishes the history of architecture as a continuous tradition of "call and return", a choral piece, and not a solo. Thought of in analogical terms it is a farm yard and a theatre, an earthwork and a garden wall, a city fragment and a village green; part-architecture and part ruin; part archaeology and part science fiction; a collection of architectural memories poised between nostalgia and spectacle. The building should appear very old, but also an archetype, like a memory from a dream. Nonetheless, everything is here for the casual visitor, placed in response to the sun's path and to the gorgeous views. An invitation is proffered to you: here you will find seasonal fruit trees in a sunken courtyard, spontaneous buskers and ancient drama; pagan festivals and rock concerts; wild meadows and reassuring fireside gossip; a refreshing cup of tea in the orchard; the loneliness of a wanderer beneath the dome of the sky; the simple pleasures of descent and ascent; the freedom of a view. Three chimneys mark these moments, recalling an older form of inhabitation, reminding us that we are all visitors to the enduring causeway, and marking the building from afar.

PRAXIS IV: 'HEART HOUSE' TEACHING

'To grow up signifies to become aware of meanings.'
Christian Norberg-Schulz

I have described in some detail the way in which our projects develop from considerations of the ground into which they are to be placed and the character of this topography and how we wish to preserve and modify this; the topological arrangements that situate things where and which describe a series of relationships between these territorial characteristics - how we move between them; how these spatial and temporal relationships are organized in geometrical and structured form (typology); and how this form is considered as an analogue and so can be seen not simply as an object or a classification of a thing, but as the symbolic fragment of a series of meanings that coalesce around particular spatial structures. This is effectively a movement from the mutability of the ground and of matter, towards the mutability of meanings - from the stability of historical meaning to the instability of existential interpretation and to the mutability of our experiences of human artefacts and situations. In sum, this design process progresses from scrutiny of materials towards spatial organization - by way of structural and geometrical organization, whence to the formulation of an architectural image, and thence to the dissolution of one image into many readings of the ambiguous, fragmentary and ambivalent character of architectural ideas.

Our students' projects reverse the order of the process of my own work described above, starting with an image of spatial archetypes and slowly progressing to grounding these in the world. For example, last year our undergraduate students drew upon memories of dwelling, often in homelands that they are exiled from, in order to explore Gaston Bachelard's notion of the 'Heart House': 'The space we love is unwilling to remain enclosed. It deploys and appears to move elsewhere without difficulty; into other times, and on different planes of dream and memory'. In other words, the personal memories of particular places are revealed, through study of the architecture of these places, to be common places, created by and for people, for particular purposes and strongly affected by both the *Topos* and *Oikos* of these places.

It was a simple step to then study what in Oporto is known as Alvaro Siza's 'House of Architecture' for the university school of architecture. In particular, strong associations between the spatial characteristics of the town and of typical local houses were revealed, that contribute to the quality of the architecture that possesses a strong local atmosphere as well as the cosmic dimension of being both a town and a house - as analogue and microcosm. It was clear to the students then that their own design projects, for a house to live and work in (Fig. 5) and then for a new architecture school for their own department, should be at once a place embedded in and apart from the city of

London – an analogical and an actual 'home' for the department as a new part of the 'town' of the university campus, close-by the fine art school at Whitechapel.

Our students' projects progressed from memories of spaces towards the concretization of these typical, even archetypal spatial characteristics in drawings and models and their eventual re-composition in a new place. Memory spaces were scrutinized so that their material and geometrical qualities could be seen to reveal the latent aspects of use and inhabitation. These spaces were then re-composed in to what Bachelard calls a 'topology of spaces'⁸, ranging from cellars to attics with all of the life of a house in between. Our students, like all architects, became used to the re-configuration of typical spatial relationships and adept at the recognition of typological characteristics. This analogical method has worked well also in the study of a number of diverse cities and our students at Kingston and The Architectural Association worked on sites in Oporto, Naples and Florence⁹, usually situated at the edge of the 19th century industrial suburbs and treating these 'pathological typologies'¹⁰ as analogous towns (Fig. 6). Latent or repressed spatial characters can be seen as a language that has been forgotten, or has passed into disuse, but whose structure and meaning can be inferred.

In many ways, designing is a way of finding out about the history of the place where we are working– and scholarship also involves a certain amount of imaginative reconstruction and empathetic engagement with sources. The study of history shows an architect that somehow we can adapt ourselves to different times and different places, just as a language renews itself elsewhere. Norberg-Schulz even goes so far as relate the study of architecture to the study of the structure of our Being, and this seems to be true for all of us engaged in a serious, playful dialogue with our discipline: '... architecture too is a language, if we study it as the history of meaningful forms, we will also discover man, nature and God. Thus we will learn who we are, and be helped to take a stand, and thus architecture becomes a mode of existence.'¹¹

⁸ The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969.

⁹ See Visions for the Future, The President's Medals Student Awards 2003.

¹⁰ See The Architecture of the City, Aldo Rossi, MIT Press, 1984.

¹¹ Op Cit, p. 220.