**Enable: The Work of Orkidstudio**

Introduction

* A traditional architectural exhibition in this part of the world: drawings and models, some screens and everything in miniature. We would be passive observers.

What is going on here then? What can it tell you about the architects, their work and the preoccupations in that work?

* Making architecture in the West has changed fundamentally in the last 35 years since I was a student: procurement and opportunities, specialisms, digital tools, fee structures. There are two types of practice now: SME’s which are close to traditional structures and methodologies and large offices which are increasingly like the former local authority departments they now replace.
* Our perspective on the world generally has changed exponentially. In the last few decades the emerging generation, now in their twenties are more globally-aware, digitally switched on and keen to employ their moral compasses to good and immediate effect. They wish to build.
* I sense that this generation wants to make a tangible difference to people’s lives, particularly those people who they consider in greatest need. And they want to see that difference before their very eyes. What does that mean if they are architects. How do they see their role?
* That same generation also wishes to bypass much of the processes and procedures and take action within timescales which they consider acceptable. This means taking command of a situation.
* That urgency to make a difference and the courage and activism to see it through is characterized in the work by Orkidstudio that surrounds us tonight.
* It seems to me that this is evidence of a group of people trying to figure out some fundamental questions.
* What is architecture?
* What is an architect?
* On what terms do I engage with the people I wish to help?
* How can I fashion build stuff so that it bears the imprint of human life and feeling?
* How can I help individuals and communities in creating identity to their place and leave a legacy they can continue?
* How can I make a living out of this?
* There is a sense of adventure in what they are doing- particularly as it involves, like some humanitarian travelling theatre ensemble, bringing the tools and team for short, intense periods to far away corners of the Global South. There is a performative characteristic to this way of working.
* Why would you put yourself through the logistical and political headaches of this when you can sit on a nice ergonomic chair in a warm office, facing a computer screen?
* In their recently-published book, ‘Space for Architecture’, this year’s RIBA Gold Medalists, the excellent O’Donnell and Tuomey describe Eduardo Souto de Moura’s description of the traditional triangle of Space, Time and Architecture. Souto de Moura observes how nowadays, time has become the real challenge in the working life of an architect, complaining that there is never enough time to make space for architecture.
* It seems to me that, in stepping out of conventional western architectural practice, in being the authors of both the projects and the design of the projects, Orkidstudio are beginning to do just that. They are beginning to see just where that space exists, how precious it is and just where they can be effective.
* Make no mistake about it, this is a revolutionary act, hidden in the modest scale, but huge ambition of the projects on display here.
* From the humblest of starts, there is a redefinition taking place:
* A redefinition of what it is to be an architect at the beginning of the 21st century.
* A redefinition of what professionalism means.
* A redefinition of what the roles of client, architect and builder are.

Closing comment:

* What is going on here I asked at the beginning? What can it tell you about the architects, their work and the preoccupations in that work?

The clue of course is in the title.

Thank you.

*“To make someone able to do something” (Cambridge Dictionary)*

What does our society want of its architects today? This is a pertinent question at the beginning of the 21st century; a time of much ambivalence where many restrictive forces limit the architect’s contribution. In the UK, increasingly risk-averse procurement and construction processes tolerate situations where even a client’s lender or a contractor’s insurance company can determine the construction specification of a project, despite the professional expertise of the architect. Other forces prevent small or emerging practices access to public work, running serious risks of stifling innovation and limiting the opportunities for subsequent generations to develop their skills. In Scotland, the Government’s Architecture and Design Policy is currently unconnected to procurement processes, inhibiting its influence and impact. From an architectural perspective and despite the plans for a 2016 Festival of Architecture in Scotland, the business of finding and delivering architecture seems constipated and anxious; exhibiting a serious lack of confidence in the future and our emerging architectural talent. Given that particular context, it would be understandable to abandon hope and accept that there is little opportunity for new talent, innovation or the chance to practice comprehensively as an architect.

For the twenty-something graduate today, a global awareness and ethical perspective has developed throughout childhood, particularly at school (in some ways we do live in an informed and enlightened culture). Consequently, much more of the world has become tangible in all its beauty and horrors. Whilst that in itself may have no influence at all on how a young architect might detail a façade element or deal with a building contractor, it will certainly have an effect on their ‘gathering place’ of ideas which informs the cultural hinterland and value system which they carry with them. According to Minja Yang, *“..By 2025, the UN projects that nearly two-thirds of the world’s population will be living in cities.. “* The 21st century is already one of increasing oscillation between proximity and distance, local and global, tradition and innovation and this looks set to continue.

As we in the Global North become exponentially logged in to the world and the magnitude of its issues, we will increasingly be confronted with the question within our increasingly global community of who we are. Our neighbour is no longer someone just in the same street, town or country, she is also at the other end of the world.We are increasingly dwelling in one part of the world whilst designing and building in another and often for short periods. The responsibility to leave a relevant and meaningful mark is enormous. The shadows our buildings cast on the planet must be benevolent ones. A country’s identity is experienced and understood to a large extent through its built environment and this will increasingly be the case as urbanization accelerates across the planet. As the world becomes smaller in both our imagination and our experience, so must the importance of creating particularity in places increase. Minja Yang adds,

*“…Defacing a city – places charged with spiritual, emotional and symbolic values – is tantamount to violating part of our identity..”* The creation of identity, both individually and communally has been and perhaps remains the most significant expression of any architectural act. This will increasingly become a key issue for societies everywhere as the 21st century gathers momentum and we continue our engagement in more than one country throughout our lives.

It is against this backdrop, that the work of Orkidstudio can be understood. Founded and fuelled by youthful energy and idealism since student days, their work is characterized by a redefinition of traditional professional boundaries coupled with an urgency and impatience for making a difference to people’s lives now. Where a void exists for those opportunities to create architectural products in the UK, they have instead seized the chance to innovate architectural processes. They have created a one-stop-architectural shop for their clients borne out of necessity and inclination, as their projects so far have been set in a variety of Global South settings. Their approach and ‘gathering place’ of ideas combines entrepreneurship, architectural activisim, building contracting, research, education and knowledge exchange and an extraordinary ability to bring together different groups of people for a common purpose. Working with the poorest and most disadvantaged of communities has brought them face to face with the most important question of all, namely, ‘what is my role as architect here? What role has architecture at all here?’ This they have answered in an eloquent and beautiful manner in countries as diverse as Rawanda, Uganda, Bolivia and Sierra Leone. They choose to work in the Global South because that is where their particular working approach can be integrated and be effective. Their client base are the disadvantaged, the poor- those with no access to any help, let alone professional help. Perhaps only studio Mumbai offers a comparably recognizable model; one where a group of thinkers and makers collaborate under one umbrella to execute building work of care, sensitivity and sublime beauty.

The consequences of their work goes beyond the three dimensional and has the extraordinary ability to generate hope in those disadvantaged communities as well as create real opportunities which enable those people to live more enriched lives. Hope makes us look beyond the ‘now’ moment. In these cases, hope for education, for a new chance, hope to have influence over our circumstances, hope that life can be better for us and our children. In these cases, the architect’s role becomes more mentor and facilitator. Craft and vision are still visible in three dimensional forms (and Orkidstudio are passionate designers and builders), but more importantly in the approaches and processes of scoping out, finding the right teams and realizing a project. Orkidstudio set themselves the task of overcoming helplessness by helping others do something and leaving them the confidence and the knowledge to do it themselves next time. Their work strengthens a sense of identity in those places and communities. This is a profoundly educational, social and political act.

It is fitting therefore that this approach, interest and energy is also finding a home in the Mackintosh School of Architecture in Glasgow where Orkidstudio’s co-founder, James Mitchell is a lecturer and studio tutor. A socially-engaged, student-centred, art and craft-informed school of architecture with international ambitions like the Mac, must be operating in the Global South as well as the Global North, as the community we identify with is a truly global one. The Mac is seeking partnerships with others in the Global South where education and skills can be a two way street, with the ambition of energising a new generation of people with opportunities to create authentic forms of architecture which support people as individuals and communities.

In the meantime, the work of Orkidstudio can be seen as a powerful shot across the bows of the western architectural establishment and a call to arms to the emerging generation to seize the initiative and simply ‘do it’.

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