Localising Architecture

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Cities continuously redefine themselves within their existing framework through a continuous process of re-construction and re-foundation. This fundamental characteristic defines the urban "project" as a slow and long-term transformation, whose temporality is at odds with the faster pace of the individual projects that form it. In order to sustain themselves, cities and urban fabrics must respond to constantly shifting social conditions, programmatic change and new normative values. As cities develop and mature however, the issues at stake for intervention and change tend to increase in complexity and their framework needs to adapt to circumstance and opportunity. Construction becomes complex, costly, frequently challenged by the communities it is attempting to serve and is subsequently met by a context of strong resistance to change. This resistance to the imposition of new orders, to abstract and ideological urban thinking, has always been an integral part of the dynamics of cities and reveals something of the underlying shared collective values that constitute it. Collective resistance to architecture reveals the discrepancy between the urban "project" and the architectural one. The city is the place of convention and permanence whilst architecture, as an artistic discipline, relies on invention and change.

Historically, these irreconcilable values have relied on the slow and considered development of rules and conventions, types and models to be shared and interpreted, to act as mediators between them and provide a structure within which an artistic system can operate without disrupting the collective balance. Faced with the social and cultural heterogeneity of most contemporary societies, the establishment of conventions and their transmission is increasingly problematic, particularly when fixed into the relative permanence of built form. Form connotes something frozen and static, a fixed order that is frequently perceived as a hindrance to the possibility of permanent choice that so strongly characterises our contemporary world. Increasingly the shared symbolic framework that enabled archetypical repetition by mediating between individual creation and the collective has been replaced by building regulations, fire protection codes, industry standards and process-based conventions. This arid and technocratic framework opens the road for an architecture that relies solely on the values of an artistic system to give it significance by producing artefacts whose "raison d'être" lies in their uniqueness and resistance to any relationship to a broader ordering system.

The difficulty of fixing conventions into form and the subsequent near impossibility to pursue archetypical creation is something that architects have nevertheless learned to live with. The question remains open however of what in the contemporary city can constitute a valid framework for an architecture of specificity that can mediate with given collective values? What forms the fine threads that bind buildings to a sense of place, of collective intelligibility and of reinforced atmospheric density? I would like to link these questions with the notion of the local as an understanding of familiarity, proximity, identification and localisation, as an attempt to integrate these values within a given discipline. Localising architecture would therefore imply engaging with the phenomena that distinguish difference within the urban environment, by developing a sensitivity to nuance and to specific conditions and understanding how these originated and how they can be translated into architectural devices.

These questions have formed a constant guideline for the work carried out with