

Collecting

Niall Hobhouse



Niall Hobhouse speaks to Farshid Moussavi about drawing, matter, collecting, which underpin The Drawing Matter Collections archive in Somerset.

On Drawing

FM: During my recent visit to Shatwell, I discovered that it consists of drawings, models and buildings. Why have you chosen 'drawing' to describe them all?

NH: We interpret drawing very broadly, to include anything at all- a model or the odd manuscript and printed text, and even (if not too fancifully) a building- that evidences an effort by a designer to express ideas. Often that evidence is strongest when the only audience is the designer- talking to himself or herself.

I find myself drawn to the real scraps- the hardest to interpret (often because their authors don't yet know what they were trying to say) and as somehow hostile to posterity, or to ever being fetishized as works of art. And when one confronts material from the 15th through to the 21st century, one sees quickly that the most glorious objects are often just the lucky survivors of a process in which their practical utility has long since passed. Orphans really, and I like them better for that.

You could just say that I am more comfortable personally with the accidental and provisional, or the unfinished. For drawings, a sketchbook more than a rendering, or a discarded idea rather than a resolved project; with a building, in how it might surprise even its designer, how it changes what is there on the site already, and in how it might itself change with time.

FM: I was intrigued to read that your interest is in "what the designer's hand might be showing, or doing, that the building cannot". Whilst drawings discussed in a vacuum have potential beyond what is necessarily realized in a specific building, my experience from our own projects is that the building is always beyond the drawing also. I always find in the built project situations that we simply did not anticipate. So do you think the reality or finitude of buildings is too restricting? Or do you think representation offers more possibility than the building process?

NH: Perhaps I have answered this just now, almost by mistake? Maybe one could say that we, architect and collector, are each hunting for something that is beyond either the project or the drawing. It is absurd to say that a design comes out of nowhere, or that anybody would understand it if it had. Architecture doesn't just happen, but needs to be understood as emerging from a set of shared ideas, that are constantly being challenged and revised; evolving, anyway.

At the same time, it would be strange to privilege any drawing over a great building; but when I am in San Lorenzo or Ronchamp, I use any evidence that is to hand to help me understand how the building came to be great.

I do realize that there are often beautiful things in the completed projects which the designers themselves have not anticipated; it is as though good design- a good design





process- works to produce happy accidents. But there are always disappointments, too; the building does not ever quite live up to the way it was imagined- sometimes through failures of design, but also because of the mundane things that result from a cut in the budget, or a glitch in procurement.

If you like, the Drawing Matter project is about the diverse life that one can observe in all of this unclaimed territory.

We have discovered that one good way to engage a contemporary architect- with *old* drawings, by *other people*- is to show them things that address questions of representation current in their own work. In doing so, it helps to understand that all the traditional modes or conventions available for representing some new idea will always seem to them inadequate for their purpose; and the more urgent and interesting an architectural idea, the greater that frustration. Representation is always being pushed beyond its current limits; so maybe one could say that good buildings produce good drawings- at least as much as the other way round?

If this is true, then it follows that the practice of architectural drawing needs its own historians; or at least a discourse that is independent of what architects or architectural historians find on the page, even if all three need to be present to understand what that really is.

Often, in the archive, I say, “try to treat that word ‘drawing’ as a verb, not as a noun”; come to think of it, just the same might be said about that word ‘building’. In contrast, for architects these issues sometimes go to the heart of their sense of themselves as professionals. Like Justinian, they feel it incumbent on themselves ‘at least to be always right’, and this pressure can inflect the way that they design in very awkward ways.

More than once we have been offered for the collection key development sketches for seminal projects, only for the architect to ask to withdraw those sheets which they now think of as compositional mistakes, false starts along the way. For us, such drawings are simply evidence of the rather benign process- let us call it ‘drawing’ - by which they got it right in the end.

On Matter

FM: The word **Matter** is commonly defined in two ways: to ‘that which exists’ or ‘significance’. So **DRAWING MATTER** could be read as either drawing which exists, or drawing significance. I am interested in this double sense of the name you have chosen for the drawings collection which reminds me of Nietzsche who said “life is not a reaction to matter (what exists), but a seizing of matter and a re-rendering it for one’s own purpose - overcoming its force, going beyond it”. How do you think the double sense of **DRAWING MATTER** is encouraged at Shatwell?

NH: You have responded to the play on ‘matter’ just as we hoped people might, and really in doing so you may have elegantly answered your own question- and better than I can.

Hopefully, matter is understood as referring equally to the materiality of a drawing and to its content; somewhere, it hints also at how inert and opaque the drawing remains





without interpretation. I started collecting after observing the institutions, with whom I had often worked as an art dealer, often allow themselves to be defeated by their own collections of drawings- by the very things, in fact, to which often they owe their existence. The symptom of this is that the collections do indeed become inert and opaque, to the point of the institutions not collecting any more, or of collecting rather badly.

In this context, I am rather flattered by your idea of a Nietzschean *reach* but, at the point at which I began, I just saw an important job that I thought should be done better; I am only now discovering the enormous act of will required to actually achieve anything, at least without ourselves developing the same strange institutional pathologies we are hoping to modify.

To take this a little further, I believe passionately in taking the opportunity to examine the physical surface of a drawing or model, in the immediacy of the corrections and hesitations, and the understanding of scale- everything that is lost in photographs or online study; we are trying to resist full public digital access for the same reason. Of course, there are blocks of archival material by individual architects where we recognize the importance of offering access at every level, but with the collection as a whole it is in what can be learned almost accidentally from the adjacency of disparate things, in the archive, in exhibitions, or on the Drawing Matter website.

This thrill in informally assembling material of different types from different centuries and places into narratives that are new and unfamiliar is based on probing what can be learned from the drawings themselves. Perhaps also to incite more and more varied use of them as cultural documents, as stimuli to new ideas in design, or as provocations for apprentice architects. Our collaborator, Markus Lahtenmaki, has a good riff about making the drawings into active performers in the curatorial process, and Sasha Brodsky describes his visits as 'swimming through architecture'.

Our approach to exhibitions and the web has been built on those premises- as has our experiments with masterclasses (our own or, this September, in partnership with the Architecture Foundation): nothing definitive, nothing triggered by a theory, all exploratory and but all prompted by the suggestion of what is sitting in front of us. And each directed at different audiences, the less exclusive the better. This was the basis of Land Marks, at Hauser and Wirth last year, and of the much bigger show this spring at the SAM Basel, on alternative post war modernisms. In a similar way the exhibition curated from student work at Kingston and the Cass, came out of field trips to Malagueira and a study visit to see the Siza material in Somerset. I was proud that the work of the students could be exhibited beside drawings by Siza for his unexecuted buildings on the same sites. We conceived the exhibition with studio masters only when we saw the end of year shows; Manuel Montenegro then pieced it together in two months, and talked his way into installing it in every public building in Evora.

In Somerset this October, we asked Brodsky and Robert Mull to choose 100 drawings from the collection for an informal exhibition at Hauser and Wirth, in which they explore the theme of the Shed. We wanted to test a proposition, that what we call architecture might happen where the pragmatic and the poetic intersect. At exactly the same time,

Nicholas Olsberg and Basile Baudez will have opened a small exhibition at the Courtauld Gallery; another open hypothesis, but around cultural and social history, and the role of architect's drawings in the birth of the Enlightenment city, in Paris after 1760.

You will see that, rather late in life, I have been discovering a vocation as a sort of schoolteacher; certainly, no one has been more surprised than I.

On Collecting

FM: **The drawings you collect were once produced for particular uses and specific contexts. Taken out of those contexts, the drawings are in effect the 'excess' that remains from their original uses. They neither belong to the present nor the past. They are ahistorical. This makes me think of Nietzsche again who said that "all action requires forgetting". When I visited the collection at Shatwell, I did for a while forget the present I had left in London, its time and place, politics and culture. Is locating the collection in Somerset rather than London intentionally done to reinforce this detachment of drawings from these 'constraints' and focus on them as a kind of autonomous disciplinary instrument?**

NH: The move to Somerset was partly a question of convenience and space, and it played directly into my idea that the rural and the urban, in the south of England at least, are mainly convenient cultural constructs that try to establish two contrasting conditions where only one exists. When the poor drawings arrived, we found that just this blurring - of the city with the country- was rather a liberation, for them (and for us), and that they sat quite easily with the odd assemblage of buildings on the site, old and new. The collection and the farmyard have together become what is in essence a theatre, for a broader discussion than it is possible to sustain elsewhere. The cows enjoy living in Stephen Taylor's cowshed; and the real triumph will be if the archive building, as its architect Hugh Strange and I hope, proves to be the twenty-cent solution for responsible paper storage. It is constructed of CLT with no insulation layer, and does seem to have minimal diurnal temperature range, low humidity, a highly controllable fire risk; and we have just discovered that untreated timber surfaces discourage silverfish, the nightmare of paper archivists everywhere!

And by the way, we would all go quite mad if ever the study of architectural drawings becomes an autonomous discipline. Rather the idea is that, perhaps, in a farmyard in Somerset, all the representatives of other disciplines- historians, theorists, curators, artists and architects (archivists, even!) could talk less to themselves, and more to each other.

Perhaps that is too ambitious; it would enough if they were simply less ruthless in taking from the drawings only what was of use within their own professional fields, and tried instead to let them speak for themselves again.

FM: **I presume embedded in the idea of collecting is chance - what becomes available - which leads to drawings becoming in the company of other drawings in previously unimagined ways. When I visited The Prada Foundation in Milan, I was struck by the conscious display of this element of chance that is involved in collecting. The artworks are not displayed as they are in museums, side by side each other to create planes of intersection between them, but presented**

in separate rooms or on separate walls that do not invite the visitors to look at two at a time. Visitors therefore experience the artworks as a collection of parts rather than any kind of unified whole. The collection at Shatwell is something in between. The drawings are in separate drawers but models are displayed side by side each other. How do you describe the approach to the display at Shatwell?

NH: We haven't yet solved the model storage question, but there is certainly something nicely random about arranging them by size. With the drawings, the random element is the alphabet which we use to label the drawers; it makes for great juxtapositions.

More generally, a big reward is sending a sheet or two away to a loan exhibition- things we have previously added it to the collection with a particular idea in mind; six months later they come back changed by the way that someone else in some other country, has approached and presented them.

I think this drives the policy decision we have recently made- actually, nobody made it, it just crept up on us- to encourage others to come to us with their own curatorial stories- and then to value the curatorial and collecting process at least as highly as any exhibition that might result.

So, with the Sheds, we filmed Robert and Sasha arguing over their choices; the exhibition itself will last less than a week, and the drawings will be labelled only with a name and a date. The project provided the impetus for early discussions of the acquisition of material of Peter Maerkli for the Congiunta (Peter is not quite ready to part with the material, so we have borrowed four sheets for the show); also, from Paul Robbrecht for his Documenta pavilions. Both of these are great projects, in which the architects are fully themselves; and both of course are 'sheds' of a very sophisticated kind. In the same sort of way, the planned publications by Marikka Trotter on Ruskin and Martin Bressani on Viollet le Duc began with an idea of exhibition in which we juxtaposed the work of the two great figures of the 19th century in England and France; the exhibition has since fallen by the wayside, in favour of the two very scholarly monographs.

FM: **As you know, the Function books I have published are filled with drawings. I think of the books as archeology rather than collecting. They use drawing as a way to create a plane of intersection, or a common ground between architectural projects originating in different times and locations, to make a specific kind of "thought" possible. By containing the drawings [which are not 'original drawings' of the architects, but their ideas], the books become spatial mechanisms, each creating a new conversation or thought across the projects - such as a new way of thinking about ornament, form or style. We can also talk about the books like focusing a camera on a horizontal plane through history. However, committing to a particular plane of intersection or thought across the project means giving up on the total openness that a collection engenders.**

I think this is a lovely description of how architectural thinking can progress in the best of all possible worlds.

You might say that we are trying to retain the freedom to write that book of yours anew every day. I would only argue beyond this that the aesthetic is really less in the objects

themselves, than in the relation between the ideas they try to represent and the way they have been made

FM: If the limit of the archeology is space and time it requires to construct it, what is the limit to a collection? How do you assess what belongs to the collection and when it should end? Is it a Borgesian collection - a Library of Babel?

NH: Space and time; also money.

There are, besides, as many answers here as there are drawings in the collection- like the map in the Borges story, drawn to be as large as the country it represented. And the possible answers have changed with time: what began as the opportunity I described earlier became a cautious critique of the mainstream museums and archives- even, at times, a sort of tough love. Our current operating principle is gentler, and it requires that we try to go where the larger dedicated institutions are almost bound to struggle. To borrow from the architectural world, we generally find ourselves on those difficult residual sites, with impossible gradients and weak infrastructure, which all require carefully configured collaborative relationships.

And I will know that the collection is finished- both poetically and pragmatically- when one day I open a drawer and see a drawing that I don't recognize.





720

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Niall Hobhouse is a collector and writer on architectural issues.

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