

## *'ARCHITECTURE, CRAFT AND CULTURE' BY JOHN TUOMEY*

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John Tuomey took a sabbatical from 23 years continuous studio teaching at UCD in 2003. Whilst working on the Stirling Prize-short listed Glucksman Gallery, he found the time to write his MArch dissertation, which is the basis of this small and beautiful book. Concerning both material culture and the history of ideas in architecture, it recalls the pensive meditations of Alvar Alto, Peter Zumthor and Alvaro Siza, similar architect-teachers to whom Tuomey refers. "We carry novels in our pockets on holidays", he says and a catholic cast of poets, musicians and filmmakers jostle together as if at the bar of a very good pub alongside architects that share Tuomey's sense of "social responsibility and a more private vision". Tuomey has practiced alongside his wife Sheila O'Donnell since 1988 and this book is a form of critical reflection upon their practice. At once philosophical and poetic, Tuomey's argument is book-ended by two juxtapositions. Firstly, the strange relationship between the autonomous aspects of architecture such as the discipline of structure on the one hand and the vernacular tradition of construction and craft on the other. Secondly, the tension between what Seamus Heaney calls, "two orders of knowledge, the practical and the poetic", which Tuomey seeks to reconcile as a sense of personal duty to the ethical function of architecture.

His style is eclectic and references are piled up like layers of a conversation that resembles a collage. He repeats Zumthor's reiteration of Carlos Williams' quotation of Heidegger's observation (or misquotation) that 'ideas exist in things'. This observation recalls Tuomey of a photograph of Luis Barragan's studio, which he compares to Vermeer's painting 'The Geographer'. That ideas exist in things, he declares, "is not an esoteric thought, since buildings are widely understood as evidence of human intelligence to be interpreted as part of the material culture". He continues, accepting the paradox that there is "an element of mystery in this everyday phenomenon which makes us want to slow the world down, to sit at a table ... daydream". Architecture is a reasonable, but not an entirely rational activity, he suggests. Tuomey laminates past and present without regard for what he calls "linear art historical categories". In a chapter entitled, 'Time, permanence, continuity and the living present' he declares an interest in buildings that appear "old and new at the same time". For Tuomey, "continuity and renewal is the task of the architect". Architecture requires of an architect "knowledge of typology, historical research, and intuitive analysis from first principles", in response to "social process of exchange and consensus" that acknowledge "the tectonic and economic" reality of "constructed landscapes". For Tuomey, this mode of practice puts "thought before action to defend the threatened territory of meaning", dismissing the narcissism and formlessness of most contemporary, ostensibly avant-garde design ("we don't need to re-invent the wheel"). Tuomey places his faith in the history of architecture, which is a language open for reinterpretation and creative renewal. An architect's "intentions are embodied", he claims, "ideas are communicated by buildings which speak to each other across time". Two aspects of architectural language are identified, firstly, he asserts that "buildings, while primarily perceived in terms of space and surface, take their measure from structure and constructional systems". Secondly, the phenomenological qualities of materials are considered in relationship to the deep reciprocity of form and structure via construction (a discourse traditionally known as tectonics). Tuomey has particular interest in excavation and carved composition and also in the heuristic activities of drawing and model making. In particular, like Alvar Aalto, he sees in the vernacular tradition the possibility to relate nature to culture via ecology and craft, enabling the architect's duty of care to the "concrete realities of construction, purpose and place".

This book is an architectural autobiography full of wisdom. "Life often conspires against our best intentions", Tuomey muses, "and frustration surrounds us in our work, but a lived-in building, loved in use, is one of the rewards that reminds us of the worth of an architects' effort and makes us, in turn, feel useful". The "purpose" of space is considered to be a more communicative notion than use understood as function. And Tuomey evokes the poetic force of memory to explain how "a new building should feel familiar... the legibility of its organisation can be intuited by your feet, telling you where to go...the ideal of building that we have been seeking is one that can consolidate and transform both situation and purpose". He continues to describe this as the "poetic task for architecture, but its heft and urgency are of a civil kind pertaining to ordinary life and responding to social occasion". This is not simply a matter of formal typologies, or of program, but also of the atmosphere that a building exhibits in response to place and the events that re-occur there. The potency of time in architecture is

considered both as a living tradition and as an aspect of existential experience; architecture is a Humanistic art of memory, occurring here and now.

Tuomey proceeds to discuss with elegant brevity some of his practice's buildings whose precise description imbues them with archetypal and poignant qualities that makes them memorable, like short prose poems. He describes in detail the construction of "A House in the Ground"; "A Home by the Sea"; "A School in the City"; "A College in the Country" and "A Pavilion in the Trees". Uniting at once typology and site in a clear demonstration of his desire for:

"a way of thinking which would provide an integration between construction and the site, a re-casting of the redundant craft condition which by tradition would exploit local materials and harness indigenous skills...embedding an initial sense of strategy which could remain evident in the eventual experience of an actual building."

Tuomey admires and is seeking to emulate Alvaro Siza's capacity to manifest a hermeneutic capacity to exhibit a masterly control of historical references alongside "subversive reworking of typology in the service of the meaning and significance of form". Tuomey is primarily concerned with character in architecture, what he calls Siza's "extreme sophistication" combined with "charm of a childlike simplicity".

What matters in architects' writings as in design work also, are those moments when we gain the sense that we are overhearing a conversation. Like hearing yourself think, we are astonished by the power of memory and the freedom this offers us. Tuomey's greatest insight is that to practice is to profess: Praxis seeks to reconcile the artifice and gravity of thought. He declares "we are agents in the continuity of architectural culture", professional knowledge and experience of life combine to enable "perseverance to hold the line or the courage to change course". The lesson of this book is that perseverance and courage are not isolated from the broader context of human Praxis, and that the daily choices we face as architects are not "the reaction of an individual moment, but the exercise of an established craft in the continuity of time".