

## *PRAGMATISM, FORMALISM & INTERPRETATION*

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I wish to describe the recent design process of a small public building in order to elicit the difficulties in translating historical and cultural issues into a contemporary mode of expression. The project illustrated is for a Black Women's centre in Forest Gate East London E7. The design consists of the provision for new accommodation for certain activities currently housed in the existing building with the addition of some new ones. East London Black Women's Organisation (ELBWO) has inhabited the site since 1979. The existing 1870s Methodist church hall houses crèche facilities, a small library space as well as counselling rooms and offices for administrative and management staff. The present accommodation is supplemented by 2 steel 'porta-cabins', which provide extra child-care facilities. Due to changes in the Building Regulations, the front yard can no longer be used as a car park and instead is an outside play area. This court has a line of mature Tufan trees, which we propose to retain and to make the centre of a new enclosed courtyard space.

I would like to discuss the various levels at which a design process can be described and in doing so I hope to illuminate the discrete yet embedded layers of thinking which comprise architectural creativity. There are many ways one can talk about these inter-dependant dimensions of imagination and experience. I will do so bearing in mind three ways of looking at an architectural project. Firstly, the pragmatic decisions which are demanded from a client and the spatial orders, which we proposed. Secondly, the formal architectural responses to this spatial structure. Thirdly, the ideas, which are latent in the spatial and formal proposition which, relate to the history of architecture and to the site context as well as the broader cultural conditions of gender, ethnicity and image.

In order to gain funds to expand the space of the centre the services provided by my client expanded to include information technology training. The client group consists of the committee of the centre made up of highly educated professional black women. The user group was somewhat different and comprised young children as well as their mothers. The funding applied for is provided to encourage computer literacy in order to promote training and education. A service dependant group such as single mothers or unemployed local people are targets for government policy and financial aid. Conversations with clients concerning the basic physical requirements of a brief, the 'program' etc., also revealed desires, frustrations, ambitions, intentions, doubts and convictions. The motto of ELBWO is 'Unity is Strength'. Our feasibility study was funded by Newham Council's Technical Aid Budget for Public Meeting Spaces. Within the pragmatics of 'product placement' there still lurks the vestiges of idealism.

The basic configuration of spaces comprises reception and learning facilities to the front of the site bordered by a new one storey brick wall, and a taller larger timber volume cleaved to the existing building. The front portion of the new building presents a largely blank brick wall to the street and continues the line of 'garden walls' at the rear of the large houses to the east. The computer suite is designed to have a large glass wall facing north opening onto the sun lit courtyard. Computers are to be placed around the periphery of the other walls housed in built-in Birch ply hand built furniture. Moveable furniture will occupy the centre of the space allowing the room to be used also as an ad hoc meeting space. The ceiling will be made of timber I section beams interspersed with Birch ply lining. Lighting is to be incorporated into the channels of the resulting variegated soffit profile. The IT room is also a passageway through to the other parts of the building. It has no windows to the south and thus presents a secure façade to the street. The walls are to be block work partly lined with the timber furniture pieces and will appear 'warm' and be soft to touch. The floor is to be Linoleum of a similar grey to the courtyard outside.

The area between the two inverted brick walls makes an elongated stretched entrance space with a brick floor also. The reception space is to be made of traditional 'English garden-wall' brick work with no cavity (in order to satisfy thermal performance to meet regulations the 'warm flat roof' is to be highly insulated). The inner walls will be exposed brick. This room has windows, which enable a view from the street through to the garden court and will feel part of this extended antechamber of semi-public space, a garden room. The timber walls to the court are to consist of horizontal and vertical 50mm Cedar planks inside and out. The bricks are to be blue-grey and of European dimension (50mm high), in order to emphasise the height of the walls and to amplify a child's sense of scale. The firing process creates a

sheen on the central area of the surface of the brick due to an increase in the amount of gas introduced into the kiln for a short period. This portion is reflective and highly reactive to light. In sunlight it will echo the surrounding colours of things in the street, cars, clothes, etc. People close to the wall will cast shadows on it as they enter. The presence of human figures will register as darkness, dullness, solidity, mass and weight.

I hope that the continuation and combination of the two walls, both solid brick and timber, will create an atmosphere of anticipation, in-between the interior and exterior of the centre. This sense of a 'swollen passage' invokes participatory inhabitation and is amplified in the design of the windows and openings of the street façade. Bench high window seats allow a child's view through the outer walls of the centre to the world within. The brick walls are cut away to fashion a seat. A canopy encourages people to wait there. Conversely, the 'inner room', the courtyard is open to the sky. This uncanny sense of 'inside-out' space is designed to increase the sense of the buildings immersion in the place. I want the entrance sequence to feel deep and half-buried in the earth - topography of shadow ground<sup>1</sup>.

The inverted geometry of existing gated walls was retained and exaggerated. The existing hall is entered from the left-hand side and in effect we have expressed this asymmetry upon the façade of the new 'garden walls'. Formal issues, particularly concerning the orientation of the building, are currently repressed. In articulation of the entrance sequence, through the procession which we propose, we hope to create also a formal expression of the existing façade of the church hall. In pragmatic terms, this allows the new front portion to be used separately from the rest of the building. This has a series of consequences. Firstly, the design is exempt from VAT payment since we will construct an independent building, an annex rather than an extension in effect (the middle portion, the new hall can also be used separate from the rest of the centre as can the old building – the design enables the centre to accommodate three separate events, to become three distinct properties). Secondly, the childcare facilities are secure from the street. Also, the courtyard and hard brick façade of the front building place the pastoral activities of the centre concerning counselling 'protected' at the back of the site in the old building. This psychological sense of separation establishes degrees of privacy as layers of inhabitation, which connect and also distinguish a spatial sequence from public to intimate. Conversely, the street façade although open the neighbourhood, provides a space for mingling and also for individual experiences of waiting for children, etc.

The new hall is to be partly hung from the existing building. It is to be made of timber Glue-Lam columns resting against pilasters on the existing red brick facade. Simple strip foundations establish an edge to the envelope: this consists at the lower level of pairs of glass doors, four between each column. These open to create an arcade. The raised timber floor extends beyond the limit of the building to create a step to the court. Children can play out in the summer and an outside room is inferred. The scale of the space results from the low branches of the trees and the taller volume of the hall building. Its façade will consist of a vertical plane of Birch ply sheets acting as a rain screen. The position of the structural columns is determined by the existing brick structure. This screen is then to be lined in and out with ply pieces (which have a standard dimension of 2400mm x 1200mm). These wooden boards are to be cut to fit into the order of the column bays. The vertical dimensions determined also by the horizon of the eaves of the old hall. Sunlight will fall on this screen and slight gaps between ply sheets will be visible as shadows. A rhythm of vertical and horizontal sheets articulates the structural system within and also the inherent order of construction of the Methodist hall. The asymmetrical left-sided entrance is retained to this building and one is to pass under the new roof and beside the glass wall to the new hall – through another extended threshold as it were. An existing window is to become a door connecting both halls. In the summer, one could pass from the court directly into the centre of the old building through the colonnade of the new building. The typical spatial situation and 'extended horizontal topography'<sup>2</sup> of a cloister garden is suggested.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to my friend and sometime collaborator Christos Papoulias for this observation. In his book *Hypertopos* he talks of topos (place) in Aristotelian terms as dark and hidden, latent and imminent, (Rainer Kantz, 1997)

<sup>2</sup> This phrase is David Leatherbarrow's and he talks of the relationship between 'Architecture, Technology and Topography' in *Uncommon Ground*, MIT 2000. In particular, his discussion of Frank Lloyd-Wright's notion of architecture as 'vessel' recalls Neil Levine's comments in *The Nature of Frank Lloyd-Wright*, ed. Levine, MIT, 1990. Both concern Wright's mis-translation of the Chinese poet Laotze which he found in *The Book of Tea* by Okakura Kakuzo: Leatherbarrow describes how *An American Architecture* was inspired by Japanese spatial order. F L-W writes of his sense of architecture as essentially spatial rather than objectified: 'The reality of the building does not consist in the four walls and the roof but in the space within to be lived in' (F L-W is paraphrasing Laotzu-cited by Kakuzo: 'Only in vacuum lay the truly essential. The reality of the room, for instance, was to be

The new hall is to be used in evenings and at weekends for dance groups, gospel choirs, theatre performances and also as a crèche most days. One of the clients commented that the timber deck recalled St. Lucian houses of her childhood: 'the sun and the wind through the trees will be like the sound of the sea in the distance', she thinks. Implicit in my research for the design is the spatial configuration of 'yards' in West Indian architecture. 'Yard boy' is an expression of the communal sense imbued by the spatial conditions of settlement there. Dwellings are arranged as loose cluster groupings rather than as streets and suburban houses as in England. Similarly, the houses themselves do not comprise corridors and rooms, but rather are often separate independent structures. The kitchen is often a free-standing object-like construction, which protects the house from fire. One consequence of this arrangement is that the terrace becomes an intensely social space. Another, that the kitchen becomes a specific domain and often a site of more intimate conversation. In traditional West Indian culture, the kitchen is a female realm of common sense and advice. In particular, it is the realm of grandmothers and daughters<sup>3</sup>.

In our design we have responded in part to this tradition. Also, the image of a church porch inspired the desire for an entrance space which really comes to life when used as an exit. The casual use of such spaces makes them appear 'un-designed'. It is as if another less formal event can occur in an unselfconscious manner because of and, in a sense, despite the architecture. In this way, the formal problem of the existing hall – its lack of clear entrance, repressed asymmetrical 'frontality', etc. - have been resolved in the new asymmetrical entrance. The lack of iconography and spatial representation of the 'flexible' Methodist hall has gained a layer of hermeneutic interpretation – a new reading of a ritual entrance as a mundane portico. There is drama inherent in the sequence of arrival - glimpses through to the middle ground of the court; darkness; enclosure; the revelation of another realm beyond. The court itself will be transformed intermittently as a site for explicit theatrical performances; the veranda becomes a stage, the trees a proscenium, the courtyard an orchestra. During weddings and parties the whole of the front of the building can become a festive setting<sup>4</sup>. The building/s are conceived as inter-related volumes. The design is inspired also by the paintings of Georgio Morandi<sup>5</sup> and the writings of Luce Irigaray<sup>6</sup>, although this is perhaps a private conversation indicating the inner-life of a designer. In more wordly terms, the building is in part an image of sanctuary and also a vessel, an open envelope of extended and retractable spaces. Trevor Garnham has written that the scheme establishes, 'A series of horizontal and vertical layers... throughout the design to mediate the boundary between outer and inner life; this enables the creation of places where grounds can be occupied and Being secured'<sup>7</sup>. The appearance of the centre is to be fulfilled in your view of people gathered together – their figures', and one's recognition of them there, complete the architectural image in an act of imagination combining the matter of the building and the memory of human action.

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found in the vacant space enclosed by the roof and walls, not in the roof and walls themselves'). Lloyd-Wright's comments are interesting as they come from a time in which one could think a national identity as a new project. For our discussion, what is of particular note, as Leatherbarrow reminds us, 'Okakura introduced this explanation from Laotzu to clarify the relationship between the part and the whole, or more concretely the relationship between oneself and the world of others, of friendship. For both the person and the house, potency results from essential openness, for that is a precondition of co-operation with the whole', (*Uncommon Ground*, pp. 181-2). In many ways, the architectural problem can be described as one of translation, of carrying meaning from one place to another and renewing it there. ELBWO has always been a site for dialogue and a space for encounter of a particular immigrant British cultural exchange. It is a place of friendship in the city and in a sense could be compared with a Venetian Scuole. It is a modern political 'embassy' of gender and certain racial experiences, a 'centre' of identity and difference.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Carol Tulloch, director of the National Archive of Black Culture, for this insight during conversation.

<sup>4</sup> This is inspired in part from Serlio's 'Rustic Order of Architecture', in which he suggests the use of half-ruined elements in garden design to extend a villa into the landscape as a series of fragments as settings for drama – both formal and informal. See Sebastian Serlio, *Five Books of Architecture*.

<sup>5</sup> The design period coincided with a trip to Bologna to the Morandi Museum and the influence of the loggia and arcades there also is probably more clear than I appreciate. The Pazzi chapel by Brunelleschi in Florence also struck me very clearly as an 'inhabited gap' – an extended portico of space at once in the garden of Santa Croce and elsewhere, autonomous.

<sup>6</sup> In particular, her sense of place as peripatetic, as an envelope similar to a pregnant woman. See her critique of Aristotle *Physics IV*, 'Place, Interval' in *The Ethics of Sexual Difference*, The Athlone Press, 1993: 'it seems that a fetus would be in a place. And a man's penis for as long as it is inside the woman. Woman is in the house, but this is not the same type of place as a living body site. On the other hand, place, in her, is in place, not only as organs but as vessel or receptacle. It is place twice over: as mother and as woman', p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> 'The Encounter between here and there', Trevor Garnham, in *Encounters between here and there: Houlton Taylor, Dow Jones, Patrick Lynch Architects*, exhibition catalogue, Architecture Foundation, London, 2001.

The use of a building for parties and celebrations, both secular and religious, means that it has obvious significance as a focus of local community. Festivals are popular means by which a sense of communal origins elsewhere, are celebrated. In particular, communities renew their sense of identity through events which establish a bond between foreign soil and other traditions. Words and common territories make up linguistic communities with shared memories and myths of 'home'. They also serve as a means to incorporate new immigrants into local ex-patriot and indigenous cultures. Festivals and gardens are hybrid loci of here and there, a mestizo melange of tropical vegetables, strange fruit and momentous cooking. They evoke an emotional mix of longing and remembrance articulated within a temporal frame at once spontaneous and memorial. A different rhythm of life is encountered, the music and dances are resonant of somewhere else and something other than the brutal fact of the here and now. These places exhibit an embassy-like state of diplomatic immunity; the garden becomes a fragment of another place during festival, situated in the imagination of the participants in-between past and present<sup>8</sup>. A garden space used for festivals is a declaration of 'permanence' as a state of cultivation, temporality and care. Husbandry and artistic expression, such as amateur dramatics, articulates an assurance of cultural renewal in the future which is at once timeless and constantly possible. In this way, ELBWO already exists as a space of symbolic potential; of renewal of their motto, 'Unity is Strength'. Our design seeks to amplify this condition of latent and implied communality, to enable, allow and encourage its users to participate with an architectural setting as one does with the world at large.

The practical and then formal aspects of architecture drove the initial models and drawings. The architectural task was to mediate the autonomous aspects of the building and the specific nature of the site. Within this experience, the criticism of my clients ran as an undercurrent. When I responded to the comment about the 'veranda' and confessed to a certain glee that the design could be considered to have a particular Caribbean quality, the financial and practical aspects were invoked as a warning against any premature poetics. An architect could not assume the cultural assumptions of my clients. Once I knew of the cultural spatial resonance implicit in the design, I was able to talk about them with my clients as political ideas. However, they were critical of any explicit universal image of 'Blackness', and the physical and cultural conditions of East London today fire our shared ambitions. For the planners the design was problematic. 'Won't your wall seats, as well as hiding the bin store', I was asked, 'just encourage people to congregate on the street?' This was seen by the planning officers as an odd thing to want to do, and the application took nearly nine months to gain consent. Government SRB money has now been agreed pending match fund raising from the private sector.

Architectural ideas, I suggest, represent a fusion of pragmatic, formal and interpretative thinking.

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<sup>8</sup> In New York's South Bronx Puerto Ricans make spaces for carnivals out of gardens made in abandoned plots of land. 'It is within this imposed economic, political and social marginality that poor people of color struggle to change existing conditions in which they live, by creating spaces of their own design that serve as locations of resistance to a system of inequity and domination', 'Return to the Future: Puerto Rican Vernacular Architecture in New York City', Joseph Sciorra, in *Re-presenting the City: Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Metropolis*, ed. Anthony D. King, Macmillan, Hampshire GB, p. 61. Sciorra talks of the 'poetics and politics of memory' embodied in these gardens as 'salvaged topography' which has 'the evocative power to transport New York *puertorriquenos* back to a place and time they remember... people clear the detrius of urban decay to cultivate bountiful gardens and construct wood-frame structures typical of the Caribbean' (ibid, pp. 75-6). Sciorra invokes Bakhtin's phrase and also his description of a festivals as an 'artistic chronotype' where 'spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out concrete whole' (cited Ibid, p. 75, from *The Dialogic Imagination*, M. Bakhtin, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1988, p. 84). One regular visitor to these 'landmarks of memory', one Juan Gutierrez, said to Sciorra: 'You see, when you're there the whole scene transforms. All of a sudden you forget that you are in the South Bronx... Your mind travels to Puerto Rico, sometime, somewhere' (ibid. p 76). (In the same collection, edited by A. D. King Saskia Sassen considers the tradition of immigration and the role of this in making America, 'Rebuilding the Global City: Economy, Ethnicity and Space', ibid, pp. 24-42. Joseph Rykwert charts the rise of NY made by the influence of immigrants arriving in the harbour as 'human cargo', in 'The Heart of the City and the Capital of the Globe' in *The Seduction of Place: The City in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 2000, pp. 189-219).