

Civic Ground

Patrick Lynch's reflection on the craft of architecture should be read by every serious practitioner, says Michael Badu

'Civic Ground: Rhythmic Spatiality and the Communicative Movement between Architecture, Sculpture and Site'
Patrick Lynch
Artifice, 208pp, £25

Just as encountering your child's teacher at the supermarket rather than at their classroom is weird, similarly, the sense of dislocation and even alienation we often feel in post-war urban environments stems from the same kind of mismatch between protagonist and situation. The idea of sculptural form as an 'empty vessel', an objet d'art, a pure aesthetic experience in the round, is a lie that is toxic to civic life. Rather than being some kind of Duchampian art practice, architecture is in fact a craft which only really progresses by way of practical wisdom. The invocation of craft is not meant to validate the sort of studio-based neurosis that some deem to be a modern substitute for skilled manual labour, but rather, craft denotes 'praxis', a term from classical western philosophy that in this context speaks of advancing the discipline of design by actually being involved in the all practicalities and implications associated therewith.

Why is it that modern urban interventions have consistently failed to equal the efficacy of those that characterise our favourite cities — Florence, Cologne, Istanbul? We have made the grave mistake of thinking that it is possible to replace traditional institutions (which have developed from notions of and reflections on man's place not only on the earth but in the cosmos) by the instrumental philosophy underpinning natural science, manifested in the rise of the traffic engineer and the 'landmark building' as architectural brief. Replacing the concept of God with that of the gene has not further illuminated the human condition, or as Hannah Arendt quoting Erwin Schrodinger had it, the products of science are often "not perhaps as meaningless as a 'triangular circle', but much more so than a 'winged lion'".

These ideas represent the work and thought of the late Dalibor Vesely, of Peter Carl and of Joseph Rykwert, and are the principal foundation of a new book by Patrick Lynch which takes as its subject the question of the 'civic' vis-à-vis architecture.

By discussing specific works by artists such as Richard Serra, and by architects such as Sigurd Lewerentz, not as an academic but as a practitioner and (most importantly) human being, and taking in examples such as the Calais 'Jungle' and public space in the Gaza Strip, Lynch aims to demonstrate that there really is no real architecture without 'rhythmic spatiality' and communicative movement between it, site and art. He thereby highlights the essential hollowness of the concept of autonomous or autopoietic architecture propounded chiefly by Eisenman and Schumacher, but also (unwittingly) by mainstream architectural culture, in guises such as the banal battle of the styles (the latest being between supposed liberal Postmodernism and socially conscious Brutalism), and by our image-obsessed contemporary publishing culture, which in a globalised world has become the principal means by which architecture is experienced — or rather consumed.

While these are absolutely vital arguments, they are not necessarily new ones, with the best architects having always been aware of their importance. Even in the bible of architectural technological determinism, 'Vers une Architecture', Le Corbusier seems to argue for a more haptic characterisation of architecture than he is often given credit for, writing "a man has only two eyes at a level of about 5'6" off the ground". Thus it isn't necessarily that some of the best modern architects have somehow been 'doing it all wrong', but rather it is the way in which we have been taught to view their work, through the prism of natural science, and abstract logic, that has proven problematic.

Lynch's book is not perfect — the long-winded subtitle is perhaps symptomatic of tendency to verbally (and verbosely) describe things that would be better demonstrated for those without PhDs — but then again, it did start life as a doctoral thesis. Architects however, must not be put off as 'Civic Ground' is a unique, substantive and much needed work of 'practical scholarship' on the discipline, that warrants reading by every serious practitioner of it. **✓**

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Sketches by Patrick Lynch analysing site, architecture and sculpture at St Peter's Klippan by Sigurd Lewerentz.

