

Book Review

Author: Peter Cook

Title: Drawing - the motive force of architecture

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The book is a survey of and a commentary on contemporary architectural drawing by Peter Cook, architect, educator and critic, and reflects his career-long interest in the topic. The survey amounts to personal selection of drawings, including iconic as well as less celebrated architects, which illuminates the creative and inventive significance of drawing at the end of late 20th and early 21st century.

The book has nine thematic chapters; motive, strategy, vision, image, composition, expression and atmosphere, technics, and surface, with each chapter further divided into subheadings. The themes and the many subheadings, however, are more evocative than descriptive resulting in a rather loose and somewhat fragmented presentation of the material, part narrative, part autobiographical and part academic, which require an attentive reader rather than a browser. The language, however, is engaging and inimical of Cook, as experienced in his public lectures: rhetorical, argumentative even lyrical but also informational and inspirational.

But more than a series of stimulating essays on architectural drawing, and therefore of particular relevance to drawing research, the book raises important questions about the role and place of drawing in the digital age. And although a high proportion of the drawings in the book represents propositional architecture rather than built projects, Cook's investigation is topical including a set of propositions which, without being prescriptive, contributes to the current drawing debate of interest to practitioners and educators alike.

So for example, Cooks rejects the need for paper, or any other ground for mark making in order to make a drawing arguing that drawing is a gestural act of decision making. Or, given that many of the drawings represented in the book were made for competitions, Cook asks if the drawn building is more pure, more concentrated than the built building. His answer is that the built building is the real thing but the drawn the *true* thing although sometimes the real and the true can overlap, which he exemplifies with Zaha Hadid drawings.

As Cook himself is versed in paper-rather than screen-based-media it is perhaps not surprising that he should talk sceptically about what he calls the 'religiously pro-digital'. Critical of the 'disengaged' illustrator he also argues that the 'render' on a computer may have had a bigger say in the appearance of the built work than the architects themselves – at least, he adds, as far as more commercial or middlebrow architects are concerned.

But he acknowledges that under the influence of graphic design and publicity graphs explorative drawing has shifted to the digital mode, and finds that the computer has brought back composition to full strength. And meeting the challenges of the digital media, he asserts that the lack of pencil does not prevent computer-generated imagery being a process of drawing, for example, that animation-based software imagery is a drawing in the sense that it is 'the visual statement of an idea'. Moreover, he notes that the notion of waywardness and metamorphosis are easier to depict in digital processes than with pencils, pens and templates.

Further questioning the primacy of the pencil, Cook considers a myth that the sketch is the designer's first statement and holds that the sketch and subsequent 'worked' drawings are a continuous part of a single process. Yet despite Cook's apparent enthusiasm for things digital one is left with an impression that his embrace of computer-generated drawing is sometimes more rhetorical than real, or at least ambiguous. For example, he suggests that the pencil rather than the computer better captures drawing of atmosphere, and he misses the charm of the 1950's 'blueprint'.

The autobiographical content of the book is strong and so Cook tells us about his drawing experiences and preferences, for example, how to introduce clues of scale without cluttering the composition is one of the hardest tasks of drawing, or that the section is the aficionado's choice of drawing type. And he describes and illustrates his own techniques of drawing which is essentially the traditional system of drawing in ink, gouache, coloured pencil and collage, ranging from the Plug-in-City (1964) to the Oslo Collage Drawing (2005).

The book also reminds us of the many influences on Cook's Archigram drawings, which represented the early English 'High Tech', for example, the cartoonist William Heath Robinson, who, in Cook's words, was a perpetrator of 'English silly'; Frank Lloyd Wright (Living City 1958); and Cedric Price (Fun Palace 1959-61). As to the selection of drawings, however, one may wonder why, for example, Corbusier's seminal 'Radiant City' (1930) is not included whereas the Unite d'Habitation is, although in connection with Archigram member Ron Herron's 'Walking City' (1964).

The book is richly illustrated with some 150 drawings, of which around twenty by Cook, and most of them in colour, providing not only the necessary information but visual stimuli too making for an interesting reading. But although the illustrations are of high quality and well captioned, the relatively small paperback format means that the scale-down drawings invariably lose some detail. Also, one would have liked to see each illustration numbered for easy cross-referencing, particularly as the provided index falls short of acting as an effective aid memoir for reference points. A comprehensive contents

listing would have added to the book's usefulness as an academic or student textbook although overall, as a monograph, it is a welcomed resource for all those interested in what is drawing *for*?

Is then Cook's argument that drawing is the motive force of architecture convincing? Perhaps, but only as much as one agrees with his position that drawing in the digital age consists of almost any kind of two-, three-, or four (time-based) dimensional representation that conveys an idea. The problem with such a souped-up hybrid notion of drawing, however, is that while it matters little for the purposes of presentation or marketing it poses both a theoretical and practical challenge to our design schools, that is, if we can't define drawing how can we teach it? Yet for those who might think that everything has already been said about architectural drawing, Cook bounces back with a fresh and delightful approach to the topic.