

Under the Rails

In the early nineteenth century, the birth of the first industrialized railway networks in the United Kingdom was met with an intense mania from the general public, private corporations, and the government. With an increased demand for the transportation of cheap industrial goods and a growing middle class who could now afford to travel further afield, thousands of railway lines were laid out across the nation.[1] In turn, an increased investment in the infrastructural systems supporting these networks developed alongside the growth of the built environment. Standardized structural viaducts were built to support the railway tracks, which created thousands of residual arches and open vaulted spaces throughout the nation. The railway companies seized upon the opportunity to maximize these spaces and began to lease them out, as they had deep void spaces and were easily accessed along the railway roads adjacent to the railways. The arches were initially adapted for industrial use by engineers, machinists, blacksmiths, iron workers, and window blind makers; but were soon inhabited by charitable organizations such as temperance halls and volunteer schools for impoverished children.[2]

In order to expand through established towns and city centers, the railway corporations purchased large quantities of cheap land. These plots were typically in areas deemed slums as well as low-income neighborhoods that had little political agency to resist urban development in their communities. Despite the vast scale of economic prosperity associated with the railways through these new archway businesses, the arches were seen a blight due to their proximity to these impoverished communities. The spaces below the tracks soon became stigmatized as "receptacles of the outcast, demoralized, subversive and unwholesome"[3] by the general public and perceived as centers of criminality by the government. During the 1840s, Friedrich Engels noted in The Condition of the Working Class in England that the bourgeoisie class would celebrate and welcome this process of industrial expansion as a method for abolishing poverty within cities. But, Engels also reflected how this rampant development would simply displace these destitute communities around new paths of industrial expansion. Once built, the viaducts would also operate as new urban barriers, limiting mobility between adjacent parts of the city and serving to segregate once contiguous

communities.[4] As a result, the neighborhoods surrounding the tracks would remain impoverished and neglected by local governments as even more blue collar laborers, immigrant families, and urban transients moved in via the new railway networks.

By the 1870s the adaptability of railway arches had become economically attractive enough to invite a wider range of businesses into these arches. Expanses of their industrial heritage, the archways soon began housing market halls, stables, and even small farms due to the affordable leases offered by the railway companies. Despite later during World War I and World War II, the railway arches were repurposed as air-raid shelters and infirmaries for the Royal Army's horses. Contrary to their early perceptions as havens of unwholesome activity, the archways had become refuges for safety and recovery.

After the Second World War, amidst widespread social reforms, such as the nationalization of the health service, the state took public ownership of all railway lines, thereby becoming one of the largest public landlords in the nation. Over the next seventy years Network Rail and Transport for London managed and leased over five thousand rail and railway arches across the country. Presently, around half of the leases are held by local businesses, ranging from music studios and bike shops to fish and chip shops, all of whom have benefited from the affordable rents the arches provide.

However, in February of 2019, Network Rail sold off their portfolio of properties on a one hundred and fifty year lease to The Arch Company, co-owned by Blackstone and Telereal Trillium, for £1.8 billion with little

1. Bogart, D., Sheehy-Taylor, L., Wu, X., 2018. The development of the railway network in Britain 1825-1911. Cambridge University Press: Online Atlas
2. Rosa, B., 2014. Beneath the Arches: Re-appropriating the Spaces of Infrastructure in Manchester. University of Manchester: PhD Thesis
3. Ibid.
4. McHugh, Dr. D., 2016, 30th June, 'The wrong side of the tracks': The impact of the railways on Victorian townscapes, The Open University

regard for existing tenants, in order to make up for a shortfall in the government budget. Upward trends in rental yields for the railway arches have put pressure on existing tenants who will be expected to pay anywhere from fifty five to three hundred and sixty percent more in rent during the next four years. One of the backing companies, the Blackstone Group, the largest investor landlord in the United States, has a history of lobbying against rent control measures, such as Prop 10 in California, over the years. Due to this, concerns have risen around the future of existing rents and the increased possibility of gentrification as a result of the privileging of wealthier national and international tenants over local businesses. As a result, new organizations such as the Guardians of the Arches have formed to act as a union to protect the existing businesses against the monied interests of these new multinational landlords. The vital culture of local entrepreneurialism and development that has characterized the history of railway arches for the last two centuries is at risk of collapsing.

Over the centuries the arches have provided generations of labouring families, artists, and entrepreneurs an opportunity to pursue their passions, from being seen as spaces for only the lowliest in society, the arches have transformed into shelters from war and thriving businesses for many local communities. Even though they have hosted a wide range of stakeholders throughout their development, they have always been dependent on the broader economic and political landscapes to survive. The railway arches came into existence as the unintended byproduct of rampant industrialization, and at the expense of the working classes who would soon come to inhabit them. The recent sale of the archways continues this cycle of overlooking these arches as simply generators of capital, as residual or unconsidered space for residual and unconsidered people. And just as the early railways cut through those working class neighborhoods, this new cycle of economic expansion is coming at the expense of those businesses that have sustained the archways and the surrounding communities for the last two centuries.

By Rukshan Vathupola

Consciously Incompetent

On a typical Tuesday evening, in the 4th-floor pit of Rudolph Hall, Nancy Alexander, founder of Lumenaco Consulting LLC, drew in a crowd of about forty students curious to learn about the steps the AIA is taking to promote equitable practices in the architecture profession. Phil Bernstein [a supportive spouse, responsible pro-prac professor, and drunken munchkin-appreciator] could be found in the crowd as well.

The talk focused on how the AIA Guides for Equitable Practices began and how they are currently manifested. Nancy, alongside Renee Chase, the dean of the University of Washington, has been working on the Guides for the past 18 months. We learned about the extensive research, partnerships, and interviews that informed the material for the Guides and the structure and frameworks through which the AIA expects organizations to use these Guides within professional settings. Rather than focus on the content of the various sub-guides and definitions of key-terms, the talk demonstrated an example of how language and design can be combined to create the tools we are missing and need in order to create a more equitable culture. Identifying a problem is a hard first step, but knowing how and with what tools to address the problem is an equally difficult second step.

Toward the end of her presentation, Nancy described the levels of competence that firms progress through as they address their culture and ethics. They start out unconsciously incompetent- unaware of cultural problems with no skills to address them. Then, employees speak up, pressure comes from the discipline or a firm self-assess, and they become consciously incompetent- aware of problems, but unsure what to do. After moving through conscious competence- working hard to make change, a firm is unconsciously competent- respect and equity are built into the firm's culture. It's second nature. When asked where we would place VSofR on this ladder, we looked to our neighbors, shrugged our shoulders, and offered, "Consciously incompetent?"

If we are, in fact, consciously incompetent, then as students, faculty, and administrators we have to decide what to do about it and whose job it is to act.

We came to VSofR for the culture: close-knit studios, group member projects, weekly social gatherings. There are aspects of our culture that make VSofR VSofR, but they're malleable.

Concrete Ruins

In 1934, the construction of a forty-five story building in Caracas, Venezuela was halted due to an economic crisis. The Torre de David may be considered a building that was never formally born, because its architecture was never fully realized. What was meant to be a financial center turned into a contemporary ruin in the middle of the city. However, some years later after a housing shortage, the tower was occupied by hundreds of families. Over almost a decade, people ingeniously turned the abandoned concrete structure into a living community with housing, shops, and utilities; the building was alive for the first time. In 2016, all the residents were evacuated from the tower by local authorities on grounds of safety and security; the vitality that people had provided the tower was quickly extinguished. It was the only life it will ever have.

Decades earlier, in a completely different context, a whimsical concrete garden, called Las Pozas, was created in the Mexican jungle. In 1926, the wealthy British patron of surrealist art, Edward James, migrated to a tropical site in Xilitla. After a snowstorm destroyed his entire orchid harvest he decided to build a set of twenty concrete follies - architectural orchids which could withstand even the harshest snowstorm. These sculptures would outlive their creator, who died in 1934, and survive forever. One of the most important pieces, The Three-Story Tower that Might Have Five, remains a dream-like take on Le Corbusier's Maison Dom-ino. But unlike modernist architecture, this building has no function. It has doors that lead nowhere and stairs that lead to the skies, as if it is in a perpetual state of flux and construction; a structure that was neither properly started nor completely finished. Unlike the tower in Venezuela, this garden was conceived from the outset as a type of ruin, a man-made structure that lies in nature with no apparent life on death.

Both projects raise the question of permanence in architecture and whether the life of a building should be measured on a human level rather than on a formal and material one. The sculptures at Las Pozas and their, conceived both as a friend and foe of nature, founded in a perpetual state of architectural impermanence. On the other hand, the Torre de David was not built as a ruin and was transformed and brought to life by a different kind of human occupation than it was built for- the structure that still stands is a tribute to the constant change of humanity and its desire on the way we construct buildings.

As Empire of the Sun mentions in their song We Are the People (2001) - whose music video was shot at Edward James' Las Pozas - "Can you remember and humanize? I can't do well when I think you're gonna leave - But I know I try." How might designers create structures that evolve with humanity and try to build an architecture that is in an everlasting state of incompleteness? If we rethink the ruin as a foundational typology, could we rethink the image of building mortality? Or is every building destined for ruination?

By Guillermo Acosta

Is VSofR still VSofR if we hold final reviews in a completely different format? Probably. If the curriculum changes? Yes. If everyone stops playing badminton? Maybe? What is fundamental to VSofR's culture is ultimately up to the two-hundredish students that happen to be living in Rudolph Hall at any given time. [Is VSofR VSofR without Rudolph Hall? It has been.] VSofR maintains its identity even as it changes over time.

As part of the School's long-range strategic plan, Nancy shared with us that preparation has begun for a survey of the VSofR community to help determine the strengths of the School's culture as well as goals for improvement. The School plans to release the survey before the end of the 2019-20 academic year. Although Phil may offer us pizza [fingers crossed] in exchange for a high survey completion rate, we hope that our peers each feel that they have a role in the continued evolution of VSofR's culture, rewards aside. Communication with the administration about what's going on, and how we feel about it, is one crucial vehicle for evolution and an important first step. However, the administration will need to address how and with what tools they plan to act on that information.

It is the administration's obligation to shape an inclusive and representative cultural framework with faculty hires, admissions decisions, and curriculum choices. They also have the power to choose which rules they articulate to faculty and students alike. The School takes clear stances on health hazards like sick smoking and chemical use, and this could extend to a code of conduct. While Phil can't personally punish students for using Zap a Gap in unvetted spaces, the administration's guidelines create a framework for us to make decisions about our personal health [and our deskmates']. Likewise, the administration can't police social values, but they can and should guide them. We recognize the agency we students have to decide which VSofR traditions make the cut, and we know it will take the entire community to maintain a day-to-day culture of mutual respect and equity. However, progress will require small structural changes, led by the administration, that begin to open up the conversation, transcend student-faculty dichotomies, tie generations of students together, and raise the level of consciousness of the community as a whole.

By Katie Lau & Rhea Schmid

On The Ground

Thursday 21 / 08
Tim and Nate appear on the 7th floor terrace with a door-sized steel plate destined for the roof. Lesser-out into its side in a non-sense sans-serif font: "TO ENTRY."

Tammy Eagle Bull delivers the Thursday night lecture, "Indigeneity in Contemporary Architecture," inside Hastings Hall.

Friday 11 / 08
In response with the no-nonsense tone of Steel-Plate-Gate, VSofR Dean's Office sends an email to the students. On the subject of "Access to the 8th floor terrace," the administration has a simple explanation: "It is currently closed."

Second years, too concerned about waving around their daylighting models under the precious November sun, offer not even a shrug to their newly restricted access.

Apartment crawl attracts many a host by proving just how many people can actually fit in their living quarters.

Saturday 11 / 09 - Sunday 11 / 10
You heard it here first, the Final Four of the Rudolph Open International Badminton Es el Camarino. Black culture is followed by Latino culture. In its black phase, the church is spare, as a Latino church, more is more. Later the building splits. A bookstore, but also a health store, the Casa de Nutricion. It sells health stuff combined with magical products. A little place that sells all kinds of medicinal things that are supposed to take care of your problems.

Monday 11 / 11
Visiting Day No. 21 Prospective students ask where to live, how much a model costs, what to put in their portfolios. Also, what do you want to do when you graduate? Live near school, depends how pretty you think basswood is, keep it under 20 pages, who do you ask, are you hiring?

Students, faculty, and guests gather in the second floor art gallery for the launch of Space for Restorative Justice, a book compiling the work of last year's Core 3 studio. Designing buildings for the process of Restorative Justice in three Connecticut towns.

Tuesday 11 / 12
Luke Bulman leads a Career Development workshop entitled, "Portfolio: A Book of Your Work (Part II): format, materials, and production of the book object." (Now all that's left to do is design the projects to go in there.)

Bernstein wisdom of the week: "The standard of Core cares not about your fee, it only cares about your competence."

Rudolph Hall Stress Level Alert: Coffee Stained Paper (Wait, how many weeks? only four?)

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building mortality



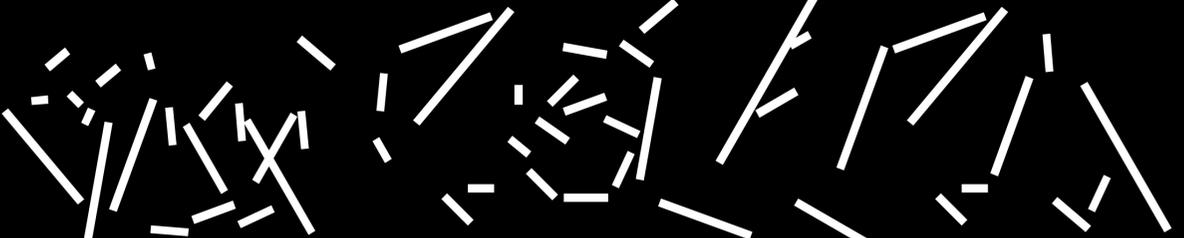
The Department of Energy claims that the typical building in the United States lives for seventy-four years before being demolished. In China, new builds average a mere thirty years before being razed. With building lifetimes now shorter than our own, how should architects address the global challenges and consequences associated with high rates of building mortality?

We've spoken to prominent figures who seek to transform the ephemeral material culture of the built environment in

different ways. Francois Héré told us about local manufacturing culture in Gando, Burkina Faso, and the civic responsibility people share for building maintenance across generations. Meanwhile Billie Tsien and Tod Williams expressed a clear set of values that give their buildings a lasting identity while also reflecting on the loss and pain that architects might experience during their own lifetimes. For Camilo Vergara, the built environment is in a constant state of cultural and memorial accumulation and posits that there is no unifying

conclusion we can draw from a building's finite lifetime.

What we've learned is that there are multiple understandings of a building's physical or figural lifetime. The diversity of our contributors' answers urges us to be conscious of our broader professional responsibilities to conserve resources but also to exercise our authority as designers of cultural artefacts that might exist longer in memory than they exist as material.



"Where's Your Beginning, Where's Your Middle, Where's Your End?"

Camilo José Vergara began as a street photographer in the mid 70's as he moved to New York. Intrigued by the complexities of environmental influences and its effects on urban landscapes, Camilo is well known for his systematic rephotography capturing changes of urban spaces.

Elihu Rubin is Associate Professor of Urbanism at the Yale School of Architecture, with a secondary appointment in American Studies. His work bridges the urban disciplines, focusing on the built environments of nineteenth and twentieth-century cities, the history and theory of city planning, urban geography and the cultural landscape, transportation and mobility, architectural preservation, heritage planning, and the social life of urban space.

Camilo José Vergara: I first encountered "Greater Holy Life," a storefront church at 7316 S. Broadway in 1992, a few months after the Rodney King Riots. The white building had a false front consisting of three pediments added to the building, each one topped by a cross. Its windows and doors were protected by iron bars. It was a store that was altered as it became a church.

Elihu Rubin: The false front creates a forced perspective, the illusion of depth. Like all false fronts, it aggrandizes a modest structure. And if you look closely, you can see that there had been bigger openings that were patched and stuccoed over when it became a church.

CV: Protection is often a necessity, particularly in the case of churches which are empty during most of the week. Those narrow windows and bars show that the neighborhood is in a high crime area. By 1998 the church has become Iglesia Cristiana Jesucristo Es el Camino. Black culture is followed by Latino culture. In its black phase, the church is spare, as a Latino church, more is more. Later the building splits. A bookstore, but also a health store, the Casa de Nutricion. It sells health stuff combined with magical products. A little place that sells all kinds of medicinal things that are supposed to take care of your problems.

ER: They are connected. Both are there to serve the public, to attend to both the spiritual and the physical needs of the people.

CV: But it's interesting to see the combination of the two things. You would think that religion would sort of take care of those things without the pills and magic potions.

ER: The cars and people in all of these photographs, they become very poignant.

CV: What happens is that I usually have to take the picture

several times. One of the main objectives is to try to get neighborhood people walking by the building, so that it's always a picture of a building that includes the people that live in the neighborhood. You see people riding bicycles, skateboards, pushing baby carriages and shopping carts.

ER: One very small detail: in one photo, there is a public telephone. Then it's gone in the next image.

CV: Yes, it's interesting how buildings accumulate all these things.

ER: The building accumulates material culture even as it weathers. It happens at the same time, shedding and accumulating. In many of your series, it's always very captivating to see the rhythm of change between the left and the right. When is it repainted and when is it allowed to weather? It's like they're having a little ping pong match, a back and forth.

CV: It's just a snippet in the life of the city. But I don't think this building stands alone. It stands for many other buildings that went through similar transformations.

ER: Yes, the building is a fragment that reveals something about the larger city. When you start clipping through it quickly, you see a short film of the social life of the city unfold. As an exercise in visual literacy, it's very powerful. Over time, buildings become like people. And just like people, we add things to ourselves and we subtract things. When you track time like this, it's deeply humanizing.

CV: What I find frustrating about doing time sequences it is that people expect a conclusion. They ask, where's your beginning, where's your middle, and where's your end? Please come to the point! Well, often there are many points but no overall conclusion. Even if the building is demolished, a new one may be built; one has to return and document the next episode.

ER: Yes, but what would you say to architecture students who are interested in how buildings have life cycles, how they age and change, how they have lives and afterlives?

CV: Architecture is such a precious profession. The most sophisticated and the most intelligent people put their forms out there. In urban areas such as South Los Angeles, ordinary people that never set foot anywhere near an architecture school are shaping the city.

with Camilo José Vergara and Elihu Rubin

"I Will Do Have a Very Long Life"

Francis Hare has become one of the most distinguished contemporary architects due to his pioneering of a communal approach to design and his commitment to sustainable materials as well as modes of construction. Before Francis Hare received a scholarship to train as an architect in Germany, he was a carpenter who worked in Quaedroobou, the capital city of Burkina Faso.

With senior critic Martin Fimo, Francis is guiding an advanced studio located in Accra, Ghana, under the new Law Tools. The studio is challenging students to rethink architecture as a social, ecological mediator within the limited environment of West Africa.

Sean Yang: In your projects, the local community is of the responsible for constructing and maintaining the building, how does that affect the way the building is put together and then changes over time?

Francis Hare: In my projects, the local community does not have control of the quality of all the building elements. It's about all the products in a building, from a door handle, the builders in your neighborhood, the street types to the things that give you a high quality. So at Burkina Faso, the streets are always bad, and after six months, the products will break.

What I'm doing now is to create a company with the people of Bambo to create products, and now we have around two hundred employees.

Hanzah Ahmed: How do you take on that extra responsibility and risk in an entrepreneurial way? Does that deepen involvement with projects affect the decisions you make about designing lasting buildings?

FR: I formally discuss with the client all the issues within the design process. The client will check everything that I design, including all the windows and their total cost. The client doesn't normally care how you achieve high quality design. The risk I take is the people I work with. The biggest challenge is done within the budget that we maintain very high design quality together.

FR: That's interesting. The way you're describing it sounds like you're engaging with architecture as a product-based industry rather than a service-based one.

FR: In Burkina Faso, that is the only way you can create a high quality that lasts for the whole lifetime of a building. The idea of the competition company started in 2010 when I began several projects with my own team in Bambo. I just raised enough money to start construction, and we go to create whatever we needed to, to do it here, because no one could do it. But we wanted to do in Bambo. How we wanted to use clay was new to the industry. The way I wanted to use laterite was new. The way I reinforced roof trusses, there was no reinforcement bars was new. There was no projects, so I had to sign off on the myself. From then on, people started to be interested in what I was doing.

Another project of mine was a governmental one, and I began designing policies. Learning from the German context, where I have an office, and applying its principles to Burkina Faso. I learned about the systems that control construction businesses. Policies affect everything from the transparent bidding process to cost estimation. Although the corporate structure of the industry is meant to be good for everyone, it also obliges you to do something or use something that you don't want, but the best part of projects were made with bad materials and were disappointing.

People kept trying to convince me to keep designing within my own context. So I tried to make each design element a supplier to build, so people could create structural elements. I even made all the furniture of our projects in the Bambo. In the end, we designed very well. It was built from quality materials, so I was dissatisfied again.

Then I began saying to clients, stop trying to let me build my own design with my people, or you look for someone else. I don't care about the price, I don't care about people saying an architect should build on his own because of corruption or conflicts of interest. I am able to build my own design. I'm honest. I want to have quality, and that should be enough for the client. That's how we started.

How we're starting a university project and also a large clinic in Bambo. And I began. I had a project with the challenge that it requires very high quality. We're trying to expand our role in the building process and scale up the business. The main purpose is to control the quality of the building.

FR: In your case, do you separate your construction and architecture activity into two separate companies?

FR: Yes, in Germany, and other parts of the world, there are strict rules about the company structure. In Burkina Faso, these separate structures are company, the thinker, and maker, is one.

A building itself has a lot of headwork that you need to control, and you often have a lot of things to be checked on site. Like the quality of the concrete or the structure, whereas for a door, you

need to know how to buy and manufacture things in advance. In both strategies, you have to be very careful, and you need knowledge and experience, knowledge of structures make things complicated. If other professionals decide that a building should be torn down in fifty years and then rebuilt, you are forced to do so as an architect.

FR: So does that mean you're also venturing beyond just designing these products and components for your buildings but also starting to generate a company that's selling them to other folks?

FR: Exactly. In Africa, this potential exists. This is what I'm working on.

Hyoee Lee: Are you also looking to take more control over the projects in the US that you've started to do?

FR: Yes, it's possible. Here it depends on the client. For example, Pet Center in Monarch, 2009. The clients are architects and they create a very clear brief. But in other projects, they don't know they want to support them to be satisfied with the results. The project was a giant canyon out of wooden logs. It was very sophisticated. If you don't control and work with the fabricator, you cannot produce work like this. You also need a good client to be able to do that. But someone who just says "Mr. Architect... stop! In Germany they would often say: 'schless, schloss', no more negotiation.

But they want to support you to create something for them, they want you to be an artist - or architects in this case - and to be happy. So with that kind of client, you are able to control the built quality. The process is part of the project. But for places where they say 'I have x square meters and this is what I want', you will not be able to control quality.

FR: Perhaps the next logical step if you're going to take control of the design process, is to have a client yourself. Are you interested in that?

FR: I see it as a danger because the consideration of financial aspects may come before than the design of the building. I can't see an industry where you have architects, and you have engineers, and you have the construction team to get them into the house. The construction team, then you have to be very clear about what you would have engineers, who take these decisions, and don't pay them well. Because the profit, for me, is key. For me, it is all about quality. I can achieve with an artisan directly. I can achieve higher quality and I will pay him well.

FR: Are you thinking about scaling up the manufacturing side of your business? Mass manufacturing can create a lot of waste and is tied to vast consumption of resources.

FR: In Burkina Faso there is a huge demand for these kinds of products. We designed a chair for a school, since we were not able to buy them from the market at a reasonable cost and quality. We sketched them on a construction site and built them by welding. They were so good that everyone who came to visit asked where we bought this furniture. So the manufacturing business really happened out of necessity because people were so interested in that we were better.

I'm the designer and the maker. Sometimes I laugh because I need someone that can sell the thing that I'm doing.

FR: How are the products and the buildings maintained in Burkina Faso?

FR: In the places where I grew up, you maintain your own home. The government has a strategy that is supposed to maintain the public realm, but it really nobody properly maintains the infrastructure.

However, with my village, for example, most of the infrastructure, I'm creating. The people feel it is their own, they create the building and then they care for it, and they have a team who work for its maintenance. You have to care for it. If you don't care, it's affecting the quality of the building, which is reducing the lifespan.

FR: Why are people so attached to the buildings in Bambo?

FR: Because of the feeling, it is our building. We did it, it is ours. Because they participated in the making. That is a very strong link, and it's the main reason why they maintain it.

FR: Do you think that it is possible to scale up this model to larger projects?

FR: That is a big question. The larger this becomes, the more complex they get. This requires more people to believe in a project. It's good for the building maintenance of large infrastructure. Including things that you can see. This makes it a goal on dirt, and then take extra that to assess the underlying structure, you always need a professional to do that.

FR: So you feel that, as you scale up, you still are going to need that professionalism.

FR: Professionals need to assist each other. It is not easy to change everyone's behavior, because there is already a

"Don't Expect Showers When You're Not Ready"

Billie Tsien and Tod Williams co-founded their eponymous firm, TWTB, in New York City in 1986. They work primarily for institutions, including schools, museums, and not-for-profits, that value long-term aspirations of timelessness and beauty. Their award-winning buildings emphasize notedness and attention to texture and material detail that reveal some of their core values: a commitment to creating architecture that ages well and has a lasting cultural character.

Their advanced studio at Yale this semester is situated in San Antonio and urges students to consider how the adaptive reuse of the Lema's nightclub building in the city's Westside neighborhood might catalyze a broader social and cultural movement associated with the district's historic performing arts scene.

Sean Yang: Your firm is committed to designing buildings for institutions that have a longer lifetime than most clients. How can architects become involved with projects that will last longer, and what are the pitfalls of working with clients who are so strongly invested in their own vision?

Tod Williams: I didn't have any expectations that we would be building for the long run. When I was young, we were doing commercial interiors and it was disappointing, because they would get torn out so quickly. That hurt me because we put our heart and soul into them. I thought we were doing really serious projects, but because they were commercially-based, they largely disappeared.

When I turned forty, I spent six months at the American Academy in Rome, which was my first real experience stepping back from the teaching, doing these interiors and the often experimental projects we had been doing. And I realized that it's not important where the building is but the way that it connects to the earth that really interests me. And I began to realize that there was a life that was far beyond our lives, and we might be able to work on it.

When we eventually began to get institutional work, it made me more anxious because suddenly we were building for the long run. These were buildings that they wanted to keep around longer, usually, because the institution has been around for a while. At first I felt very intimidated by the responsibility of long-term building, but soon began to realize that the way to get more deeply invested in that was to be very clear that we would do no more commercial work. So our focus shifted only, through belief, you have to believe in what you're doing.

FR: Did that shift happen due to the projects you were starting to receive or did you start to seek out specific projects?

Billie Tsien: It wasn't as if people were breaking down our doors and giving us projects. But after a few not-so-good experiences, you realize that you need to say no to certain things as best you can.

TW: And by doing that, you open yourself to more years of other types. Not everyone gets the chance to say no to work, but when you do get the chance, you need to know when to let go and when to grab on. I'm constantly reminded of things that I didn't grab on to that I should've kept hold of. But you can't do more than when you made that decision, and when the opportunity is gone, it's gone.

Hanzah Ahmed: What did you like about the institutional clients that you began to work with that showed you that they valued your approach to architecture and the increased responsibility that you took over the design?

BT: I think that most institutional clients have some kind of aspiration, which might not be particularly articulated at the time they give you a brief. They somehow want something that goes beyond the financial side of the project.

TW: The basic institution defines itself. The fact that it chooses to be an institution... is an aspiration, but it doesn't necessarily have a deeper social or intellectual value. And those more abstract values began to have a stronger resonance in our designs.

BT: Quite early on we determined a kind of model, which slowly became a more clear set of values that we believe in. And it really came down to trying to make work for people whose values we share. If you are clear about those values, then I think it's easier to find clients who in some way share those values with you and then try to articulate the values which come out in the architecture. When we won the competition for the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago (under construction), we didn't go in with a design without first talking about our values.

TW: There were values and ideas that were bigger than the design. Those values in an institution can occur in an interior too. I remember my very first interior was a small computing company that was a completely ordinary room. We were mainly setting up stations for the plugs for the computers. It could not have been more basic, but it was an important thing for them. When I was organizing the locations of all the outlets, I did it in a way where I believed that the electrical distribution and the way people sat in the room was significant. So it doesn't have to be the most important job, but that means you've got to take that particular assignment seriously. I still believe it doesn't have to be a big project; there are small steps that lead to bigger steps and those that we go through as we mature. Billie is always saying that we need to be able to talk to our clients or people who are not architects. We try to be able to speak to them in plain language, and we have to convey values because a lot of people can't see design.

FR: You spoke of finding the clients who aligned with those values or resonated with those values. Is it a lost cause in your experience to try to convince a client who may not have expressed those values initially?

FR: I don't think so. Clients come to you with an assignment that is usually not perfectly clear. You need to believe that the client doesn't always know exactly what to present to you, so that's why it's not about convincing them, because you need to make sure that you pull out of them those deeper values that may not be as first apparent.

One of the things that somebody observed about our practice is that if you look at people considered our peers, they're often doing competition-based work based on images that they produce. Our practice is much more relationship-based. So there is a back and forth conversation between us and the client, trying to understand what values can be expressed and how we can together clarify the central project.

For the Presidential Center, the President is our client and yet we're working for the Obama Foundation under completely different contracts. One client is individual and aspirational, while the other is based on collective operations; these two things have to come together. You have to believe that those two different characters are one. So we have to be able to make the client complete in our imagination and present ourselves as a whole.

FR: What happens when one client is exchanged for another? For example, the Folk Art Museum (2001-14) changed hands after the building was built and was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) who demolished it to make way for a very different kind of development. What happens when the crucial entities that govern managerial and economic relationships change altogether?

TW: Well, I would love to blame MoMA only, but I can't. I don't think we saw it clearly so part of the blame is on ourselves. For a time I wanted to put a stake

in MoMA's heart. But the point is, we've gotta be able to look inward and say what was out there that we might've been able to read differently. I do think we can read things a little differently, and I think the client was not as well organized as we believed. They were putting two different kinds of collectors together. One of them was a very traditional folk art collector and the other one was much more interested in contemporary art. They were actually very different kinds of people, but they were absorbed under the collective rubric 'Folk Art'. There simply wasn't the financial support on their side or the justification of that vision from our side. I think we made a mistake, because we were going in stronger than they were. And the problem is that if you're too strong for your client, then you will can be your downfall. I think Paul Rudolph (1918-2007) was a perfect example of that: he had the whole thing under control. That's both the strength and the weakness of his buildings. We see this time and time again where the building survived his vision, but it really could not have survived.

FR: So in a way, the strong values you imparted upon that building were both its strength and its weakness?

FR: They always are. And all the values are the strength and weakness of the problem. They actually wanted to have one floor for the conservative stuff and another for the more outsider art, with a temporary gallery that was in between. We said it should all should be read together, which would give them an extra floor. So we did two things: one that were useful for the collectors and for the budget. But it was very hard to work operationally, and everyone both loved it and felt slightly dissatisfied in the end. The client isn't strong enough, your voice can convince the client to do things that maybe they're not up to.

So in a way, embedded in the solution was a description of the problem. So that's why you really look deeply at it, it was doomed, and MoMA was convinced that they never wanted it anyway. I don't regret what we did; I just take responsibility for it.

I wish the Folk Art Museum was listed and saved, but what good would it be unless it was loved?

BT: With the Folk Art Museum, its strength and its weakness was its desire to express a character. In its desire to express the idea of art made directly from the hand, it was a very particular building. So for its strength is that it was one with the client. But of course its weakness was the space to show contemporary art, which is where the financial support comes from. And that asks for a not very particular kind of building: it asks for a much more neutral kind of space.

TW: This problem with values has also come up with the Presidential Center project where we have a requirement to park four hundred and fifty cars on the site. Why should we have to park so many cars? Surely we believe in public transportation, and what will happen to cars in the future, and the broader values that we believe in. On the other hand, we felt that it was critical to people from suburban Chicago who would drive there in the cold weather to be able to park nearby. It's a big challenge, a very big challenge, when you don't believe in all the parts of the brief but you believe in the client. That makes architecture really interesting: we want the architecture to evolve as a relationship between the client, the site and the material, which slows things down and tangles them up. But I think it's important to slow this world down because it was going so goddamn fast.

FR: You used the word responsibility, and I wonder how architects can responsibly advocate for the permanence of the built environment. How can we develop the positive agency that people feel when they take care of buildings? Should we engage with political intervention, or fold it into the design process? Or can a building itself have qualities that attract people enough to look after it?

BT: There's a zoomed in view of responsibility once you're already involved in a project. For example, there's the responsibility to a client to advocate for a better material strategy or a more expensive, better-performing window system. But, there's a form of responsibility that's a little bit further away, which I think has to do with our broader environment. There's the responsibility of whether something new should actually be built at all.

Our studio project is based on the renovation of a very modest building. The easiest thing would be to tear it down and put something else in its place. But as we think about how we will continue to live in the world, our responsibility extends to what already exists.

TW: Responsibility is making sure that you are pushing things enough, but also in the end, taking responsibility for your actions when they actually occur. That's really tough. When you're younger, it's a little more so and also it gets tough when you're older.

Here's a very dumb aspect of responsibilities: I'm incredibly happy if I have a client that I can talk to about the fixes and cleans the building, because if I at least last longer than the ones that I would have made before and it will be less of a pain in the ass for everyone. My and I have spent so much time discussing the most mundane spaces, like bathrooms and figuring out and saying, you've got to come into this bathroom: you've got to check out the men's room!

BT: As somebody else said, if you've ever had a bad experience in a public bathroom, it lessens the architectural because most people aren't even appreciative of the architecture. They're thinking about their actual experience.

FR: Perhaps the other side of responsibility is the authority to make decisions. There's a perception among young architects that we're losing authority over time and the authority that we have.

BT: When you're in school, you think that your job as an architect is to enforce the purity of the vision that you've designed. But your job as an architect in the field is to understand that your intention as a designer must align with those of the person who's constructing the building and the client. So the idea of authority is not vested in one person. Authority comes from the collaboration of all the people involved in a project, so it is not a singular authority. It's a collective authority, which has more resonance than the power you wield as a single person.

TW: It is just that you need to trust and believe in yourself, because if it's only on your shoulders, you will be crushed. And if it's not on your shoulders, and a strong sense of shared authority with the client and any other consultant, and it's anytime. You've got to take responsibility for your end of any relationship.

It's also a continuation of a myth of singular authorship, which is a very difficult and impossible thing to achieve. Building is a parallel process. It's not entirely collaborative and it's not totally individual.

To work out what your own values are takes time; it doesn't come right away. It can come from loss and pain, or life in general. Just don't expect answers when you're not ready.



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