Are Words Good Enough

Reading these proposals at pace and with concentration is both a privilege and trial. To read so many proposals, so constrained in format, produced across a whole year by such a great range of people is a little dizzying. It's the view of a crowd from a height, a view which both reveals and occludes. The volume and breadth of proposals, together with the constraints of the format amplify this: what holds the proposals apart is hopeful and encouraging, what they have in common is an accidental diagnostic - a scan of an invisible skeleton that holds together our thinking and conversation.

Shifting through the set of proposals each time faster and faster creates yet other perspectives, including some dream-like qualities, there are jump cuts, flickering montages, magical logic, uncanny recurrences. Some words loop and swing through the dream cloud like birds diving for insects at dusk: ‘suggests’, ‘opens’, ‘enables’, ‘reveals’, ‘invites’, ‘explores’, ‘provokes’, ‘inhabits’. These words are open-ended, loose, tremulous words. Where are these words coming from, and what place do they have in a discipline so long and so deeply attached to certainty, and the elimination of ambiguity? Do we mean what we say when we say them? Do we know how to do what we mean to do? Do we know what it means to do it?

In the text that follows, I’m going to use a reading of the language used to describe these proposals as a way to reflect on those questions. My proposition is a fairly good picture of the language of recent European and North American architectural discourse as presented by these proposals, taken as a whole, and most particularly in the way that language has been received, adopted and deployed by students, young practitioners and educators. Perhaps that seems like a rather bizarre thing to do, a sort of wilfully obtuse cross-reading, concentrating on the basket and not on the eggs. I hope I’ll persuade you otherwise.

In architectural practice, we are rather accustomed to think of images as the primary conveyor of meaning and language as a kind of prop or backdrop without real technique or culture - something that can simply be produced without reference, reflection or precedent. Leave language to the theoreticians. But language, like politics, is far too important to be left to those who are paid to think about it. And it is precisely because language is less considered than other forms of sharing meaning that it can be so revelatory. How we talk about things matters, because it's the closest we can get to describing how we think, and how we think matters, because it shapes, animates and sustains what we do. This is the view from the train, and the landscape is both blurred but also unfolded.

In her much lauded, shimmering memoir, *Argonauts*, writer and academic Maggie Nelson reflects on her relationship with the language, reflecting on Wittgenstein's

> What is inexpressible is contained, inexpressibly within the expressed

Nelson describes how, up to that point in her life, she had always understood that to mean that words *are* good enough, that anything they couldn't express was somehow contained in what they could. And while our use of words might be limited, messy or inadequate, words themselves are not. Words are good enough. Are our words good enough?

What is strange and surprising about this exercise is not the diversity of the proposals in terms of outlook, concern and method, but the similarities in tone and language: the techniques of thinking, the words that stand in place of thinking, and the urgency of the thinking that is struggling to find the words. Words are not transparent - they are not a screen through which we see clearly into each other's minds. But neither are they totally opaque, a brick wall. Rather, they are something we must work with carefully, something to climb, from whose vantage point, if we lean and squint, we can see across the spaces between us.

What becomes clear in an overview is that architecture as a discipline is struggling for a new language - a language which protects us from the grandiosity and hubris of the past, but which retains the capacity to be ambitious, specific and hopeful. We need ways of talking about power, collectivity and agency which are capable of making them more accurate descriptions of the present, of actually existing people, of diagnosing what prevents the change we seek, of sharing more nuanced proposals for action. Can we start to develop that language here? Words don't need to be perfect, they just need to be good enough.

Ghost Architecture

Perhaps the most revealing and most consistent characteristic shared by all these proposals was the extent to which ideas, observations and actions were all described in the passive voice. And this is all the more extraordinary because the content is so specific, and so often describes very particular thoughts, actions and experiments undertaken by an equally particular and specific group of people. There is no mystery about who is doing the thinking and the doing. And yet almost to a person, the authors of the proposals all wrote themselves out of the proposals, and replaced themselves with the ghostly vacancy of the passive voice.

One phrase which perhaps captures this tendency and its problems more than any other, it's the STAKEHOLDERS WILL BE ENGAGED. When you think about it in isolation, it's really an absolutely bizarre, almost surreal statement. It's a relational process usually described by the actual person who has actually done or actually plans to do that relating, with the subject crossed out and the object anonymized. There is no one there to do the relating.

The agency of the architect, the future architect, dissolves in front your eyes into a kind of cloud of well-meaning doing. It will start to rain. The stakeholders will be engaged. A conversation will be enabled. A process will be initiated. Who is there, behind this wall of disembodied words? Can we give each other the confidence and certainty to start with who we are? If we are to get out from behind the protection of our desks, we also have to leave behind the strange cloak of anonymity and impersonality they were, in some ways, designed to create.

If we can't even put ourselves into a process, how can we even think of inviting anyone else? We have to find a way to understand ourselves as actors deeply in the mix of things, not agents standing outside it. We have to get into the thick of it. We have to understand ourselves as partial, compromised, contingent, social, particular people, with our own ideas, confusions, abilities and ways of seeing. We have to own those things, understand that whatever we do, they come with us. In short, we have to find a way of being inside the processes we take part in, not outside of them. We have to belong to the world. There are many steps to this process, many years of calcified habit to work through, many deeply political and personal discussions we need to have without ourselves and with each other. But can we start where we are, and we challenge each other to talk in the first person? To use an active voice?

Leviathan Thinking

One consequence, I think, of challenging ourselves to move into the active voice, and get inside the situations we are engaging with, is that we also open up the opportunity to think in a more genuinely pluralistic and horizontal way. A great number of these proposals talked very intently about a plan or desire to work with the community but very few demonstrated any interest in the character and complexity of the communities mentioned. Communities are not homogenous, whether they are 'local', 'residential', 'neighbouring', 'active', 'underserved', 'ageing', or in fact, anything else. When we write 'community' - we have to ask ourselves, who are we attempting to contain within that plural?

Architecture has always had a strain of heroic individualism. After all, the very idea of an architect developed in distinction to and in order to direct the action of a group of builders and crafts people. In his wonderfully approachable monograph, *Common Ground* (2018), activist and theorist Jeremy Gilbert argues it's not enough to replace individualism - in any field - with an idea of community or collectivity unless you are also prepared to critically engage with or imaginatively dismantle what we mean by community, in order to develop a complex, dynamic and evolving sense of what a group of people is and can be. He argues that the recent turn of many professions in the social and cultural sphere away from individualism and towards community is still based on the idea of community that a culture of individualism was nurtured to counter-act: a monolithic, non-interactive, horizontally organized mass. In this conception, whatever informal horizontal relationships exist, each and every individual primarily relates to one another via a hierarchical intermediary - that is, primary social relations which structure and define are vertical, and never horizontal. Understood as such, communities are limited to the median of all the contained individuals, what Gilbert calls a “super-individual” that acts like a single giant individual with all meaningful differences evened out.

In opposition to this approach, I’m interested in whether we can work together to find a way to talk about the people that we work with and among, people our actions affect in both the present and in the future both with more precision when its actually needed and in looser and more generative sense the rest of the time. That would be find away of talking about people that we don’t know, or barely know in a why which is both more able to acknowledge and accommodate difference, and more able to accommodate a range of known and unknown ways of living.

Horizontal or mixed collectivity has a generative, propositional, unknowable quality, and this is perhaps its primary quality. In this conception of community, we can create space for interactions which create a direct excess of meaning and possibility, beyond what any one individual can imagine. People are not numbers and although statistical models are very useful in understanding city populations and other high-level demands, they have very little meaning at the level at which architecture itself makes meaning. Certainly at the level at which the architecture we are talking about here makes meaning. This the real nature of collaboration, to make something neither person knew was possible before. When you work with a community, really, you are working with a succession or groups of co-incidentally connecting people, and if you get it right, or right enough, you are creating a space for collaboration: a space in which something new can emerge.

Freedom is an Endless Meeting

For all of this, it's worth pointing out that these kinds of relationships are not trivial, and in fact can be a good deal harder to sustain than typical transactional modes of relating to strangers. I was interested in the range of ways "talking" arrived in these proposals. People want to talk. Many proposals wanted to open space for dialogue, to prompt conversations, to provoke interaction, to create opportunities for collective reflection.It seems to be that there is a barely articulated but nevertheless very present and persistent hope that these conversations might be transformative - that they might have a democratic function, and it's worth looking at this ambition a little more carefully.

In her extraordinary 2002 book, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*, Francesca Polletta proposes that in order to think clearly about actually existing participatory democracies we need first to make a distinction between the prefigurative and the strategic. In the prefigurative mode, a group of people play out or model a way relating to one another within the given limits of their agency, context and time, but in a way which offers both to themselves and to those outside their group something close to a real-world example, a real-time collective figuring of what a more participatory future might look like. It is not a prototype, or a test, but a thing-in-itself, in much the way a child is not a prototype or a test for a future adult, but also a being in itself with a value which is absolute, and not dependent on future manifestation or efficacy. In a sense, the prefigurative is a do-as-we-do model, the model in which the means are identical with the ends.

In the strategic mode, the means produce but are not identical with the ends. A group creates a goal by consensus, and then works to create the means to achieve that goal. That goal might be further participatory democracies - to give a very contemporary if not quite perfect example - Extinction Rebellion's campaign goal is to have governing bodies establish Citizen's Assemblies. Sometimes, there might be a very strong element of do-as-we-do, but the dominant mode of the strategic is do-as-we-say.

Of the many careful, considerate, articulate proposals which have conversation and communication as a core goal, whether by creating installations, spaces, seating or social systems, very few are clear about what they want or seek to achieve. The easy answer to this is that the conversations themselves should be open-ended. But this is, I want to propose, a little disingenuous. Open-ended, autogenic transformation is a goal in and of itself. But of what? Of what group? Of what resource? In what context? If you can't recognize

and accommodate the reality of your own situation in terms of power, politics, ambitions and limits, it almost impossible to make meaningful accommodation of anyone elses. We have to start from where we are. There is no such things as a disinterested actor. All action has politics. When we talk about talking, we have to ask too whether we bring an agenda to that conversation, and what kind of agenda. One we are happy to own, or one we'd rather keep quiet? This is not a call to be perfect, or to aspire towards disinterestedness. As I will have mentioned above and will return to later on, it's a call to get down into the mix of things, to realise that we part of the systems and networks we try to affect. What kind of conversation, over what time frame, and with what power to enact? As Polletta points out, the means *do* determine the ends. The process makes the project.

Start with Bad New Ones

As well as the question of intentionality, whether our projects are predominantly in the prefigurative or the strategic mode raised by Polletta, and the question of how we think about collectivity raised by Gilbert, there is also the question of how we relate to or situate ourselves and our projects in time. How do we think about the future? Does it already exist in the present? Or is it yet to be determined? How much is chaos, and how much is purpose? The heart of architecture has always been instruction: to create something (a drawing, a model) that tells someone else how to do something. A line becomes a wall. You act as the central point in the network of forces acting on the non-building, the building-to-be, the becoming-building.

Behind many of these proposals, there was a consistent and very welcome precision about some aspects, whether it was the location, the tool of intervention, the constituency. But in many, if not perhaps most, there was a strange vagueness around temporality, and I don't mean in terms of temporariness or permanence.

Hal Foster's caustic, fantastic book about the state of contemporary art, *Bad New Days* draws its title from Bertolt Brecht's dictum on how to imagine a better future: Don't start the good old days, start with the bad new ones. To this I'm going to add, don't start with the fictional future, start with the existing present.

Can we apply this to our own thinking, the way we conceive and develop proposals? Right across these proposals there is a consistent feeling of dissatisfaction, concern, worry about the general state of things. But almost as pervasive is a lack of specificity about both the causes of that worry and how we might measure and focus our own capacity to act. This

confusion is, I think, generated by a focus on the future which has failed to locate itself and its field of action in the present. We are shy, it seems, of making assertions about the present and the immanent. Instead, we struggle to throw our focus towards the future. More often than not, we expend so much energy trying to bring the horizon into focus, we trample and stumble on the inconvenient, stubbornly, actually existing present. But the present is not only where we are now, but where we will always be, where our actions take place. In order to affect the future, we have to find away to act bravely and clearly in the present.

In *Bad New Days* Hal Foster argues that the meaningful site of the avant-garde is no longer the future, but the present. Pure criticality, like subversion, sarcasm and surrealism has run its course. It's no longer useful to stand outside. What is needed now, he says, is attention and precision. Look at what is here, and try and understand it, work into it, worry at it. If we seek to transform a given order, than what we are looking for, he argues, are:

> The fractures that already exist within the given order, to pressure them further, perhaps even activate them somehow.

A Net With Holes

Not only the current practice but also the recent history of architectural discourse and practice gives us good reason to be cautious about cause and effect. And across these proposals there is an attitude of caution, care and openness which perhaps is an early sign of a great generational shift which many believe is underway. But we mustn't go so far that we distance ourselves from any possibility of agency, or lose any capacity to critically reflect on our own actions. That we are at risk of this is evidenced in language which stretches out the relationship between what we do and what happens. I've characterized this as algebraic thinking: where X is a tool for Y, Y is a way of thinking about N, N is an approach to Z, Z is a way of starting a conversation about X?

Can we help each other to find a position which is based on neither on the one hand, so bombastic and deterministic that we are doing little more than constructing fictions, and the other hand, undermine by such a profound timidity that, at best, the most the architect can hope to do is cause someone else to share their preoccupation. Can we find the language to talk about intentions, and intentionality, here?

What I gradually start to see played out is a kind of drama between responsibility and power - an attempt to understand how you can take responsibility without taking or assuming

power, a drama between a vision of a world which is loose, plastic, intermingled with little certainty about cause and effect, and another vision of the world in which concerted action can have distinct and ambitious consequences. Can we bring ourselves into the conversation in a meaningful way, without reassuming the paternalism and determinism which wrought so much damage, both the world and our sense of ourselves?

What You Don't Know Won't Hurt You

One of the things that really stood out for me is a powerful belief in the innate goodness of people, if only they could be made to see and understand what is *really* happening, or if they can see it, connect to it emotionally, or if they are connected to it emotionally, understand how they can act on their feelings practically. So many of these proposals turn on the idea of revelation. That it is what we don't see that is going to hurt us. That is, if only we see, we will act. I am greatly restored by the profound optimism in this trend, by the belief in the transformative potential of knowledge. But there is a catch. It's now pretty well established by research in both sociology, psychology and behavioural economics that opinion change does not create behaviour change. Each of these disciplines has its own language and terminology for the phenomena, but overarchlingy, they agree, it is relationships and social contexts that create behaviour change. Again, we are circling around the idea of responsibility, our role, and what a relational practice of architecture might actually mean. We can't hide in the passive voice, or in hoping someone else will take the action if we move them emotionally. We have to be there, too.

The Snake in My Orchard

At the end of all this is a pretty straightforward call - to trust your own observations, and to think about how to act on them. What have you seen, what have you thought, what have you felt? What would it be like to connect near and far sight? To cultivate a bifocal attention, with which we can see what is before us, but also shift and keep the wider context in focus? How can we cultivate this simultaneous possibility, which refuses the gap between practice and theory, but sees thinking animating doing, and doing transforming thinking?

One way, I think, is to talk about what we want to do, and how we think we might be able to do it, in as simple, direct, and clear a way as we can. To spend time thinking about how to communicate, to become skilled at it. To slough off the old, constricting skins of exclusionary, obfuscating discourses, and land in the active, and in the present. How can we hope to get

down, into the thick of things, if we can't even talk or write as if that was a real, ordinary possibility?

It's too easy to allow the language of contract to seep into the spaces that should be nurturing hope and risk, the language of evasion and defence into the places where we need to be precise and vulnerable. The language of bureaucracy has filled up many of the spaces we would wish to hold open to critical dialogue. It seems it is time to remind ourselves again that there are worse things than failure.

When we stay away from the mess of actuality, it's a lot easier for things to seem and sound neat, coherent, explicable. The wonderful poet Frank O'Hara, champion of the actual, said that the critic was the snake in his orchard, the one who brings more than we want to know, who punctures illusions. But the snake is also the one who brings us to ourselves, to the rest of the world, who connects, considers, and grows. Bruno Latour described it like this:

> The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather (…) the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in need of great care and caution.[18]

The role of the architect, in the way it manifests here, in these proposals, is perhaps closer to the role of the critic than many of us might have imagined.


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