The Hybrid Practitioner

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CHAPTER 2

The Discipline of Concept and the Judgement of the Eye: Pedigrees of Form in Architectural Practice

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Contemporary architects often emphasise a conceptual basis for work as a matter of artistic integrity. Since the Renaissance, concepts have been theorized as a driving force to guarantee the coherence of formal, spatial, and material decisions. And yet, the rational basis for form has consistently been challenged by the necessity for adjustment, practiced by Mannerists as ‘the judgment of the eye’. This countertendency remains visible in recent and contemporary architectural works. The appeal of the fully reasoned form is faced with the exercise of discernment as an integral, if often subliminal, part of the creative process.

1. A House of Stone and Paper

An emblematic early project of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, the Stone House in Tavole was conceived in resistance to the formal excess of 1980s architecture. With its rugged masonry walls aligned into a perfect prism, this neo-archaic house was a profane temple: a primitive hut elevated by geometric purity. It declared timelessness instead of nowness, wholeness instead of fragmentation. A remote building in a remote village in a remote Ligurian valley, the Stone House nevertheless addressed an international community of connoisseurs, and was disseminated mostly through architectural photography. The abrasive materiality of the rough tactile surfaces became best known as printed on glossy paper, its mediatisation an indicator of cultural currency. In this way, the ostentatiously simple, defeensively private Stone House claimed its place in the global professional discourse.

Thus, the architects’ focus was not on the building’s function as holiday retreat, nor on its material expression, nor on the legibility of reduced form. It was on its sophisticated conceptual pedigree: an intellectual edifice
elaborated analytically, with no hint of nostalgia. The original sketches claimed the authority of art to bear upon on this modest structure.

As a result, the project’s relation with its setting was deeply ambiguous. The architects memorably described the house as “an implosion of the landscape,” channelling its semi-wild location with such concentration that it became alien to it. The pictorial juxtaposition of dry masonry and in-situ concrete, contrasting raw materiality and precisely cut volume, was described by British critic Alan Colquhoun as an “endless text.” This comment – the mere fact of the international commentary – takes us to the other side of the coin. This private and inaccessible holiday home, concealed behind outgrown vegetation and property boundaries, was conceived to operate publicly through the autonomous channels of global cultural circulation.


The images of architecture often reveal their hidden logic through the serial contexts in which they occur: sets of orthogonal projections, photographs on a film, the still frames of a moving image. It is thus revealing that the architectural photography of the Stone House is almost exclusively external, its interiors barely and sparely documented, if at all. That this building is known almost
exclusively by means of its exteriors suggests it was conceived primarily as an image. The physical existence of a small and rather unprepossessing structure in a remote part of Liguria was dwarfed by the ambition of its mediatized presence in the architectural discourse, as a house of stone and paper.

The iconic Stone House circulated internationally as part of a small pantheon of mostly secular temples built in similarly remote, scenic locations. An inordinate proportion of these was associated with 1980s and 1990s German Swiss architecture. The formally severe, materially sensuous projects of Herzog & de Meuron and other international Swiss protagonists – Peter Zumthor, Valerio Olgiati, Christian Kerez among others – were routinely circulated through the medium of print. In his 1996 text “Minimal Moralia: Reflections on Recent Swiss German Production,” Kenneth Frampton placed this new phenomenon under the sign of architectural minimalism, establishing a binary contrast between Herzog & de Meuron’s “art-like” (and thus seemingly dubious) practice and Zumthor’s “craftsman-like” (and thus seemingly admirable) formation. As the title suggests, the critique inscribed itself in a tradition of ascribing moral values to architecture.

The timing of Frampton’s article is significant. By the mid-1990s, as the “recent Swiss German production” acquired an international following, its internal positions diverged considerably. The disintegration of this briefly monolithic construct undermined any credible claim to a nominal architectural-territorial identity. Not only did “regional culture” prove to be a slippery and heterogeneous construct, but the architects themselves claimed their work, not unreasonably, as a mark of artistic and ideological individuality. In this respect, as a Swiss artefact built in a remote Italian village for German clients, the Stone House illustrated the flimsiness of culturally or regionally determined claims. The rising international profile of its authors revealed the professional expertise and conceptual rigour involved as stateless commodities. Instead, the most stable ground available to architecture became the appeal to conceptual coherence, claiming an absolute, if ill-defined, sense of integrity. The physical territory in which the architecture operated only provided clues as to its appearance. What ultimately determined its formal and material expression was, nevertheless, immaterial. The basis for form was its capacity to be conceptually defined. In their architectural manifesto, “The Hidden Geometry of Nature” (1988), the architects wrote that the “project is, as its name denotes, a projection. A spiritual mental projection […] from the body to the architect to new projected forms of appearance.”

Their view of architecture as primarily conceptual, rather than material, was disconnected from any specific formal language. Its purpose was to relieve the author from any signature style, to justify the production by removing it from gestures that could be perceived as subjective or arbitrary. This withdrawal from formal statements could be subsumed under the sign of an authorial decision: it was not the form, but the concept underlying it
that could guarantee, as it were, the integrity of the architecture. These were the terms under which, in 2001, as recipients of the prestigious Pritzker Prize, Herzog & de Meuron presented their more recent, increasingly formally expressive, work:

The sculptural and even seemingly accidental elements, the figurative and the chaotic, which have recently appeared in our work, are as much a consequence of conceptual strategies as our previously developed formal idiom and not the result of a singular artist [sic] gesture. This conceptual approach is actually a device developed for each project, by means of which we remain invisible as authors.⁶

2. The Stable Ground of Concepts

Already by the early 1990s, the insistence on the primacy of concepts had had a visible impact on the work of younger architects. The Kirchner Museum in Davos (1989–1992), by Annette Gigon and Mike Guyer, is a didactic illustration of an architectural concept at work. All aspects of the building are rigorously determined by the overall hypothesis of a correspondence between programme, spatial sequence, and material expression.⁷ Every material and constructional aspect can be seen as a derivation of its plan. The plan itself – as orthogonal projection, an intellectual construct par excellence – has meanwhile acquired a distinct representational value, a sign autonomous from the building as such.

The dispersed galleries and interstitial circulations of the Kirchner Museum deliberately reversed the enfilade convention. In its questioning of established typologies, the plan closely referenced the “ideal museum” proposed by the conceptual artist Remy Zaugg in his 1986 lecture “The Art Museum of My Dreams,” which reimagined the institution as a collection of “scattered rooms.”⁸ In their translation of Zaugg’s abstract diagram to drawing, then to building, Gigon Guyer rendered an abstract ideal into concrete reality. This act of acknowledged conceptual appropriation achieved two aims. On the one hand, it materialised an idea. On the other, it allowed the architects to claim that the giving form had been removed from their own authorial volition, that no imposition of arbitrary aesthetic agendas had taken place: look, no hands.

A common condition in the Swiss architecture of the late twentieth century can be located in the collective rejection of arbitrary decisions – a culturally and intellectually justified rejection. An entire generation was enthralled to the primacy of concepts as a way of avoiding subjectivity, thus relying on the discipline of the idea as an objective ontological category. Christian Kerez named several of his projects after organising principles – House with One Wall, House with a Missing Column – indicating the concept as the main driving force.
Determined according to a predefined concept, the form of the architecture resulted from a matrix of self-imposed rules:

To define architecture by a set of rules is to understand a building in a purely conceptual way. Rules establish a relationship between different parts, different elements of a building beyond any concern for aesthetic qualities, such as the shape of a volume or the size and proportion of an interior space. Rules understand a building as an entity beyond any narrative or anecdotal explanation. They are an attempt to overcome any personal taste for aesthetic decisions or any metaphorical use of architecture. This definition of rules refers more to the revelation of principles in architecture than to their invention.\(^9\)

Kerez rightly pointed out that the principle of conceptual discipline was not new. The ordering of idea, programme, and site into the formal and material definition of the architectural artefact is inscribed in a rationalism that goes back to the classical tradition. In the later Renaissance, and already in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century art theory, the conceptual order as the rational basis for form was challenged by the necessity for adjustment, made most clear in the transition from idea to drawing, the *disegno*.
Sebastiano Serlio. *On architecture* Book I ‘Geometry’, 1584, page 10. Figure shows the geometric corrections necessary to maintain vertical proportions in relation to the distance from the eye. © Public domain.

For Leon Battista Alberti, beauty in art was attainable “by a rational faculty which is common to all, and leads to a general agreement about which works of art are beautiful.” Unlike us, however, by “beautiful” he meant “the most usual, the most general, or the most typical” standards. Alberti conceived of architecture as the imitation of nature, replicating “certain general laws and orderly method […] found in nature.” Ancient architects, he claimed, had rightly maintained that nature, the greatest of all artists in the invention of form, was always their model. Therefore, they collected the laws, according to which she works in her production as far as humanly possible, and introduced them in their method of building.

Architecture was justifiable as the replication of natural principles, which alone could guarantee, at the very least, appropriateness.

Alberti’s fundamental contribution to architecture was to bring method into the construction of pictorial space. Based on mathematical foundations, perspective created an illusion of spatial depth through fully rational means. One-point perspective provided the tools for the representation of the ideal city as static and stable, composed according to Alberti’s urban planning principles of decorum and civitas. Adjustments of reality to create ideals occurred, even more readily, in built architecture. According to Robert Tavernor, Alberti’s design for the facade of Palazzo Rucellai was composed pictorially, bending the rules of classical composition, on account of the narrow street, so as to appear grander from constrained viewpoints.

Late Renaissance theory increasingly emphasised the artist’s capacity to correct nature. In Book I of his treatise Tutte l’opere d’architettura et prospetiva (1584), Sebastiano Serlio stipulated how the height of vertical elements, such as columns, should be taken into consideration when adjusting the proportions of facades: “If you want distant elements to appear the same size, you will have to make use of artifice.” During late Cinquecento, painters and architects increasingly bent the rules of perspective according to the giudizio dell’occhio, the judgement of the eye, defined as an “intuitive sense of proper proportions, the ability to create a harmonious and balanced composition out of disparate elements.” The objectivity of perspective was devalued by the imperative to demonstrate skill, inviting artists to represent more complex sets of conditions than the simple dichotomy of viewer’s (actual) and represented space. As Massimo Scolari has noted,

at the height of Renaissance perspective inquiry, many more examples of works bend the rules of linear perspective than adhere rigidly to them. And often they are more pictorially interesting, precisely because of the tendency
of perspectival representation to compromise the overall balance of the composition, plunging it into a cone-shaped catastrophe.\textsuperscript{15}

The geometric rigidity of perspective was questioned by the greatest personalities of mature and late Renaissance. For Leonardo, who devoted tracts to the anatomy of the brain and vision processes, the judgement of the eye was necessary to mediate between perceived and rational reality, for “knowing to judge the truth concerning the breadth and length of things.”\textsuperscript{16} Later, Michelangelo was quoted as saying that “all the reasonings of geometry and arithmetic, and all the proofs of perspective, are of no use without the eye.” He deemed more “necessary to have the compasses in the eye and not in the hand, because the hands work, and the eyes judge.”\textsuperscript{17}

By the end of the fifteenth century, Albertian reason was all but displaced by mystical faith. In the treatise \textit{L’Idea de’ Pittori, Scultori, et Architetti} (1607), Mannerist Federico Zuccaro decreed the \textit{disegno interno} as the foundation of all intellectual activity, entangling illusion and reality, artifice and nature, the sacred and the secular.\textsuperscript{18} As the manifestation of the divine into the human mind, Zuccari’s \textit{disegno interno} provided a licence for deforming proportions and blurring the boundaries between depicted and actual space, between manufactured artifice and natural formation. This tendency towards the formal convolution of established canons is identifiable throughout art history. Unsurprisingly, it recurs in recent architecture, which reflects the Mannerists’ ambivalence towards rational form.\textsuperscript{19}

4. The process-driven adjustment of concept

Contemporary architecture is beholden to concepts, which are perceived as guarantors of intelligibility, integrity, and cultural merit. In recent decades, a most widespread design method has generated form through the scanning of sites for formal and material clues, which are then, through logical steps, tied into satisfactory unity. Arbitrary gestures and formal preferences are avoided, formal expressions held in check by conceptual frameworks. At the same time, a generational shift is perceptible in newer works, which delight in the ambivalence of postmodernist conceptions of form and space. Unleashed upon the rational edifice, the true creative act consists of destabilising the conceptual equilibrium. Instead of a unifying, reductive severity, a new, ironic playfulness emerges.

Exemplifying this approach are the material and topographical explorations of Dutch architect Anne Holtrop. Fluid forms, merging with the landscape, are generated by art-inspired actions, such as pouring melted metal into sand, or flowing ink on paper, materialised through collaborations with skilled craftsmen. Holtrop’s position deliberately resists a priori forms, relying on process for their definition:
In my work I start with forms or material gestures that often come from outside the realm of architecture, in the conviction that things can always be re-examined and reinterpreted, and could in turn also be seen as architecture. [...] I try to look freely at material gestures and forms and let them perform as architecture.^[20] The method can be seen as a rebuttal of a priori or composed structures, by which form becomes the result of action. And yet, the rejection of preconceived ideas is itself preconceived. Starting the design process from a set of ground rules, without the exercise of conventional design actions such as sketching or measuring, refers to performance practices. Forms are “found” through open-ended processes, rather than through compositional or mimetic principles.

Studio Holtrop’s earth-embedded Fort Vechten Museum is a case in point. Its volumes are determined by its siting among the sand dunes of the Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie (New Dutch Waterline), a nineteenth-century military defence system and national heritage site. Dug into the ground, the building’s contours coincide with those of the topography. Yet the form-finding process is not simply the result of a logical sequence of steps, but also of moments of selection and readjustment.^[21] While drawing the museum into the dunes

Anne Holtrop. Museum Fort Vechten, Utrecht, 2011, completed 2015. The plan shows how the underground part of the museum fits within the existing topography, which was nevertheless slightly adjusted. © Courtesy of Anne Holtrop.
around the existing fort, a certain mound ruined the overall composition, so Holtrop designed the plan as if this dune did not exist. We witness here a reversal of sorts; the concept was itself subjected to an unquestionably rational adjustment simply to make it work. This example highlights the exercise of judgement as intrinsic part of the creative process. If personal judgement intervened during the translation of concept into form, this translation was mediated through the act of drawing – a simultaneity long ago encapsulated in the Mannerist disegno.

5. Of Form and Life

By making intuitive adjustments to concept-driven forms, architects from different times and cultures have held in balance mind and eye, reason and senses, knowledge and instinct, rigor and freedom. The pairing of rational concept and intuitive judgement, each with its own implicit limitations and risks, shows the necessity of processes of rationalisation and correction. Yet this oscillation between discipline and adjustment, between the exercise of pure reason and of subjective experience, is primarily attached to an understanding of architecture as a primarily autonomous practice. All the projects mentioned above, while existing in concrete settings and often taking these settings as the departing premise of design, unfold their sequencing of conceptual logic and adjustment in the bubble of architectural autonomy.

To be sure, conceptual approaches encompass a balance between autonomous architecture as artistic gesture and heteronomous architecture as socially engaged practice. On the autonomous side of the spectrum, projects are primarily focused on forms and the cultural messages encoded within. At the other end, the appeal of concepts resides precisely in their ability to incorporate external considerations and speculate about the resulting buildings in terms of their everyday use, contribution to the environment, and challenge to the construction industry. They hint at the holy grail of modernism – the ability of architecture to be political, reflect societal needs, and claim societal impact. This offers a seemingly secondary, yet in fact fundamental, reading of the Caritas Psychiatric Clinic in Melle, whose refurbishment by architects De Vylder Vinck Taillieu can be seen as a typically conceptual project. The focus is the original 1905 psychiatric centre, a pavilion whose planned demolition was stalled by the simultaneous change in the clinic’s direction and the discovery of asbestos on the site. In dialogue with the clients, the architects developed an alternative approach. They preserved the building as a lived-in ruin, a roofless, open-air shell, inhabited by spaces for encounter and therapy shaped as small, environmentally controlled glasshouses. A substantial landscaping, fit-out, and gardening scheme complement the materially distinct refurbishment of the existing architectural fabric.
The architectural interventions, as circumscribed by the architectural concept, established a deliberate contrast between the existing ruins, in a state of preserved decay, and the fragile, transparent enclosures. At the same time, independently of the architects’ intentions, the visible repairs became incorporated in the way the building’s users read it and, to an extent, identified with it. In that respect, as observed by Bart Decroos, “Caritas appears as a blind spot in the strictly regulated and overly defined psychiatric campus, opening up a space of ambiguity beyond any conventional visions on what care should be.” The patients were encouraged to equate the reuse of architectural fabric of the building with its therapeutic programme. The refusal to destroy the old pavilion and the care and energy placed into small acts of patching up and restoring were seen to advocate for the integration of mental health patients into society. Valuing and pictorialising material repair, the building became a metaphor for the patients’ condition, and thus a validation of their social status. This development indicates both the potentialities and limits of the architectural concept: when the project transitions from the control of the architect into whatever might be seen as “real life.” Jan de Vylder and Inge Vinck acknowledge that “this project is not only about the project itself. But it is about a wider debate on the meaning of architecture and psychiatry. On space and life.”

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de Vylder Vinck Taillieu, Caritas Psychiatric Centre, Melle, completed 2016. Interior sketch showing the inhabitation of the original shell, open to elements, and the insulated interventions introduced during refurbishment. © Courtesy of architecten de Vylder Vinck Taillieu.
What, then, of the architectural concept and of drawing as its own space of appearance? Drawing – the contemporary embodiment of the *disegno* – is central to the practice and teaching of Jan de Vylder and Inge Vinck:

Usually a drawing prepares the way for a project. Or it represents a never (to be) realised project. Or simply an idea. Once ideas and projects are realised, drawings become redundant. Maybe that’s what the architectural drawing is, in essence: a preparation for an approaching reality.²⁶

Even if accepted in a dialectical fashion, the discipline of concepts seems by itself ill equipped for the encounter between architecture and the “approaching reality.” The adjustment, and sometimes interchangeability, of irrational and rational moments represents an acknowledgement of a more profound inadequacy of architecture. Many contemporary architects who rely upon concepts to justify their work are absorbed by their inner coherence, and tend to disregard the wider reverberations of the built material form. They formulate rules from within architecture, and outside of the everyday practices of the city and citizenship, to find reasons for form. Whereas in socially engaged commissions, the creative process is more of a synthesis, largely moulded by factors outside the creative process, and impervious to conceptual justifications. The necessity for concepts and adjustments, pertaining to an intra-architectural discourse, transcends the dialectic of rational and irrational when they open towards the world at large. The potential of architecture to be appropriated, used, and transformed goes beyond the reach of the architect. By escaping the full control of concepts, the architectural form attaches itself to reality, and becomes part of life itself.
Notes

22. I am grateful to Hilde Heynen for her call to historians and architects, in the framework of the initial conference (9 October 2020), to reconsider and render explicit the acts and principles of architectural design as subservient to societal agendas. This encouragement opened the theoretical, strangely claustrophobic challenge of understanding architectural concept to a much wider and generous type of inquiry.

Bibliography