Architects' Sketches

Dialogue and Design

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND
THE SKETCH

Figure 1.1 depicts an architect sketching what he observes, which represents one way that architects think with media and use sketches for dialogue. This architect, placed in front of a dynamic and historic construction, may be recording the building's proportions, details, or its placement in context. He may be drawing to try to understand its scale, materiality, or how it compares with

FIGURE 1.1   Triumphal Arch, Tripoli; Plate 4 (engraved by George Harley (1791–1871) 1821 (litho) from *A Narrative of Travels in Northern Africa* by Lyon, Captain George Francis (1795–1832) (after).

other buildings throughout history. He may be trying to replicate how it looks as a way to bring a souvenir home or to preserve its complexities, which may be hard to imprint on his memory without visual stimulus. The architect, possibly on a *Grand Tour*, comprehends more through the action of sketching than mere observation. Forced to study as he imitates, this architect may understand more about the building's construction or intention. Drawing from observation is one dimension of how architects may use sketches as dialogue.

Architects depend upon sketches throughout the process of design as a medium for dialogue. They are the physical manifestation of their thinking and are used in various ways from the inception of the project to final detailing and evaluation. As instruments of a process, they reveal an intimate conversation that is coupled with desire for the future building (Piotrowski and Robinson, 2001). Intention and meaning evident in the use of architectural sketches may be explored by comparing them to theories of play, memory, imagination, and fantasy. A further method of examining the propositions inherent in sketches is to compare them to characteristics of caricature and the grotesque to find less obvious qualities of conscious, or subconscious, intention. Where architects depend upon sketches as the medium for the creative process used to conceive architecture, they also use sketches in all aspects of the design process with individual expression. This examination suggests an interpretation of architects' relationships with the transitory and immediate images they utilize for design.

Because architectural sketches are part of a thinking process and seldom an end product, they play an important role in the process of architectural design. Even though architectural sketches are uniquely personal, there are several general functions which are common to them. Sketches may facilitate discovery and the first inspirations for conceptual beginnings, they can be part of the communication between parties involved in the process, or they are often a means to record mental impressions. Sketches can be employed to evaluate decisions and suggest refinement; they are used as diagrams to analyze a difficult thought, and they help architects to visualize and thus understand complex configurations. As evidenced by cave paintings and images continuously created through history, humans also have an innate desire to represent what they see and what they imagine (Gombrich, 1985).

ARCHITECTURAL SKETCHES AND A COMPARISON TO DIALOGUE

Architects require a visual forum to construe the information necessary for the conception and building of complex structures. This process necessitates a dialogue – a free exchange of thoughts and opinions – between architects and themselves, their clients, the contractors and their colleagues. The discourse implies a two-way interaction, which creates a learning environment, one where the interaction and reasoning facilitates the entire process of design. This dialogue, as a theme throughout this book, implies the fluid and evolving 'give and take' of discussion. It reinforces the thesis, antithesis and synthesis of a design spiral, along with the 'action and reaction' promoting intelligibility (Broadbent, 1973).

With the varied uses of sketches for inspiration and design thinking, communication, recording, evaluation and testing, analysis, visualization and understanding, together with a passion to create images, architects depend upon a representational medium to facilitate the dialogue of these functions. Primarily visual rather than verbal or written, design requires a projection for this conversation. These visual tools help architects communicate with colleagues or engage a personal discussion with their images.

Fraser and Henmi, in their book *Envisioning Architecture*, recognize that drawings, like sketches, have the potential to multiply thought and create a chain of associations that lead to new ways

of seeing and understanding. Here it is evident that the acts of visual dialogue enrich the entire process:

> *Just as an author inserts his or her conceptual presence into a drawing through a mode of seeing, interpreting, and changing a scene, drawing tools impose a material influence. Drawing thus intervenes between an author and their ideas being considered, becoming in effect a third presence. In this sense, drawing is not a transparent translation of thought into form, but rather a medium which influences thought just as thought influences drawing. (Fraser & Henmi, 1994: viii)*

Dialogue, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, stems from the Greek to 'speak alternately,' and is a verbal interchange or thought between two or more persons. It describes an interaction and implies question and answer. Similar to discourse, it may be accompanied by an act of understanding by which it passes from premises to consequences and includes the faculty of reasoning. This free exchange of thoughts and opinions creates the close acquaintance, or intimacy, of sentiments or observations, opinions and ideas. An intelligibility results from the give and take, and trial and error, profoundly evidenced in the acquisition of knowledge. For architects, when designing, this communication requires a visual component – images that through their power to convince, seduce, compel, argue, and provide insight, fertilize and solidify the infinite number of decisions necessary for a building to be built as it was conceived.

Intention gleaned from images has been demonstrated by the extensive research of iconology and aesthetics. If dialogue, as an analogy for the design process, evokes the relationship between designers themselves and their repertoire of constituents, then sketches become a participant in this acquisition of understanding. Designers engage in conversation on many levels; some of this dialogue is initiated with the intricate questioning and interpretation of a client's needs and desires. In an abstract relationship, designers need to converse with the boundaries of their design, such as codes, site, and functions of the intended outcome. Additional boundaries of dialogue may include the people who support the process such as contractors, consultants, community groups and zoning boards. This conversation includes the issues of design that affect the designers' decisions, such as the history of architecture, current trends or styles, the conceptual strategies imposed on the project, and the designers' whole being (made up of education, sensibilities, experiences, memories, and propensity for imagination).

Architectural drawing, as Edward Robbins writes, has a social dimension. It unites its physical manifestation to the architect, who makes cultural artifacts and acts as a social practitioner (Robbins, 1994). Sketches, by comparison, are in most cases personal notes, references, and analysis. Although used for communication with clients and other people in the building process, much of architects' personal communication in the form of sketches is inherently too vague and unformed to be effective communication to others. When it does occur, this communication may be an ephemeral search for ideas amongst a design team. Beyond the public domain of the drawings being used for communication of construction directives and presentation, sketches represent architects' dialogue, employing a physical manipulation of media in a manifestation of immediate impressions. Directly from the hand, without intermediaries, sketches can be a personal dialogue or a physical remnant of a conversation that depends upon imagery. Thus, the production of a sketch constitutes an action and reaction that provides architects with the interaction necessary to think through the complex process of anticipating a building and nurturing it to final completion.

Dialogue implies the presentation of images, written words or sound used to influence others. How we interpret this stimulus depends on many factors, as visual communication involves perception and interpretation, and is laced with cultural and psychological dimensions. Since any projection of communication in culture depends upon signs, part of this discussion concerns the signifier and that which is signified (Culler, 1986; Buchler, 1955; Eco, 1976; Walker and Chaplin, 1977). Writing on semiotics speculates a relationship between what made the image and the image itself. In contemporary society, the mass communication of media is simultaneously received through

different means; we can no longer differentiate and control the media, and thus it becomes omni-present and loses a hierarchy of importance (Kearney, 1988). Society cannot ignore the media's influence, and everything seen and heard is somehow translated, as W.J.T. Mitchell writes, 'this interaction is unavoidable,' and when speaking about 'the innocent eye' he states:

> When this metaphor becomes literalized, when we try to postulate a foundational experience of 'pure' vision, a merely mechanical process uncontaminated by imagination, purpose, or desire, we invariably discover one of the few maxims on which Gombrich and Nelson agree: 'the innocent eye is blind.' The capacity for a purely physical vision that is supposed to be forever inaccessible to the blind turns out to be itself a kind of blindness. (Mitchell, 1986: 118)

Comparatively, theorists seek to interpret sketches and, not surprisingly, these sketches confound even the architects who make them. As a way to begin this method of translation, it is important to turn to several philosophers who write about some basic theories of visual communication, intention and interpretation. Once established that all images demand interpretation, it is possible to accept hermeneutics as a method to extrapolate meaning from images. But this meaning may be indeterminate and it is important to recognize, as Saussure states, that '...signs do not refer to objects in any fixed way' (Kearney, 1988: 269; Saussure, 1986). If, as Barthes writes, the authority of the author is diminished, then readers may interpret in any way they please. This opportunity opens interpretation to fragmentation (Barthes, 1988; Kearney, 1988). But by presenting the notion of 'The Third Meaning', the reader, as observer of the image, can find an interpretation beyond simple signs and find an 'obtuse' signifier in the '...power of certain [images] to carry a third level of impact (*significance*) beyond the conventional levels of informational *message* or symbolic *reference*' (Kearney, 1988: 278). Postmodern philosophers write about elusive interpretation and find that in a parodic circle '[t]here is no possibility of a single founding reference' (Kearney, 1988: 252).

With this constant 'mirroring' of reflexivity comes the problem of definitive meaning. The instability opens opportunities for the architect to act as an interpreter and operate between the parts and the whole (Gadamer, 1989). Humans can no longer regulate mass media at the source but, as Eco suggests, concentrate on 'the point of reception' (Kearney, 1988; Eco 1976). 'By affirm-ing the right of each media recipient to give his own meaning to the images and sounds which surround him, are we not in fact leaving the basic system of media consumerism intact?' (Kearney, 1988: 382). This communication might be one-way, but through interpretation or acceptance into our psyche, we are partners in this conversation. This relationship may not be concerned with the definitive interpretation, but instead with utilizing possibilities found through understanding. It is important to recognize the various perspectives viewed in the cultural artifact (Gadamer, 1989). With this inspection the meaning of the 'text' can be extrapolated from its context.

The same may be true of architects' images. They carry potential meaning that can be accepted, rejected, countered, expanded or mutated depending, of course, on the reaction evoked in the human. Sketches and drawings are modes of architectural representation, as they may represent a mental impression of a visual perception of a setting as it is observed. The representation often gives the ability to see beyond appearances to a deeper meaning. The act of drawing facilitates interpreta-tion; this understanding is expressed by Richard Wollheim when he writes 'to see a drawing as a representation of something is no longer to take it, or to be disposed to take it, for that thing: it is rather to understand that thing by it' (Wollheim, 1974: 24). Architects draw to see and subsequently understand, whether it is an observation of perceptual stimulus or from a mental impression con-jured up by imagination. Carlo Scarpa expresses this concept well: 'I want to see things, that's all I really trust. I want to see, and that's why I draw. I can see an image only if I draw it' (Dal Co and Mazzariol, 1984: 242).

Donald Schön writes that much of what defines the 'reflective practitioner' is a designer hav-ing a conversation with the situation. He reinforces the relationship of designers to the way they

visualize when he writes '…the graphic world of the sketchpad is the medium of reflection-in-action. …Because the drawing reveals qualities and relations unimagined beforehand, moves can function as experiments' (Schön, 1983: 157). Schön recognizes how the action of sketching is part of eliciting a certain problem solving activity, and that the translation and application of those images are vital steps in bringing forth a design. 'The act of drawing can be rapid and spontaneous, but the residual traces are stable. The designer can examine them at leisure' (Schön, 1983: 157). As in any conversation, the dialogue with an image is not something that can be predetermined – it is a reaction to each image as it emerges on the page.

Fraser and Henmi suggest that a drawing has two lives: a dialogue with the architect at the time of the actual action of drawing and an afterlife, during which others view and interact with it. 'The influence of drawing then exists independently, acquiring its own voice and its own history through many acts of viewing and interpreting' (Fraser and Henmi, 1994: viii). Architects may be looking for something different each time they sit down to draw, and may discover something other than expected at each sitting. The methods and techniques, although unique to each architect, may also vary depending on the intended outcome and, in a situation of this variety, interpretation may even differ depending upon the time of day or mood of the designer.

A sketch may have many functions and how they communicate to their creator may be vague and allusive. Donald Schön writes about how architects revel in the ambiguous. When drawing, an architect finds himself immersed in '…judgments of quality for which he cannot state adequate criteria, and he displays skills for which he cannot state the rules and procedures. …It is this entire process of reflection-in-action which is central to the 'art' by which practitioners sometimes deal well with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict' (Schön, 1983: 50).

All images convey something, whether they are ideas, impressions, or emotions, and these communications range from the concrete to the abstract. Bernard Tschumi writes that all architecture represents something – the king, or ideas of God (Tschumi, 1994). These each imply the notion of the signified and the signifier, and of course the interpreters who utilize the information. Conversations are always subject to misinterpretation, inadequacy, implied terms, private jokes, intonation or allusion. They are often too brief, too elaborate, too cryptic, too flowery, too dense, too obtuse, or too pointed in their language, but each event of communication evokes some emotional response, either subtle or overt. Dialogue is woven with the constant interpretation between what has been said and an appropriate response.

Juan Pablo Bonta expresses the indirect learning and added dimension of communication that emerges from an image viewed as an indicator. 'An *indicator* is a directly perceivable event by means of which it is possible to learn something about other events which are not perceivable directly.' The '…queue, ambulance and notice are *indicators* and the occurrence of the accident in their *meaning*' (Bonta, 1979: 26). Each interaction requires a rethinking and a repositioning since dialogue must be a continual interpretation by the human to understand and react, whether actively or passively:

> *The picture and the actor's fantasy-imaginary are not devices to be borrowed from the real world in order to signify prosaic things which are absent. For the imaginary is much nearer to, and much farther away from, the actual – nearer because it is in my body as a diagram of the life of the actual…farther away from the actual because the painting is an analogue or likeness only according to the body; because it does not present the mind with an occasion to rethink the constitutive relations of things; because, rather…it offers to vision its inward tapestries, the imaginary texture of the real. (Kearney, 1988: 116)*

Much dialogue vacillates between the past, present and future: the past that an architect has experienced and the future anticipation of a structure. This adds to the ambiguous nature of the medium and also multiples the effort in the translation.