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David Chipperfield: Questions of Meaning

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David Chipperfield

– Questions of Meaning

By Noel J Brady

In town last month to give a lecture for the Dublin Docklands Development Authority (DDDA) lecture, I had the opportunity to ask David Chipperfield a number of key questions about architecture, practice and success. These included the role of Norman Foster and Partners as an apprenticeship, the use of physical models, architecture as a frame for activity and the presence of a distinctly Utsonian tectonic in work such as BBC Glasgow. It was my last question that David chose to answer first, the move of the work towards a proto-modernism.

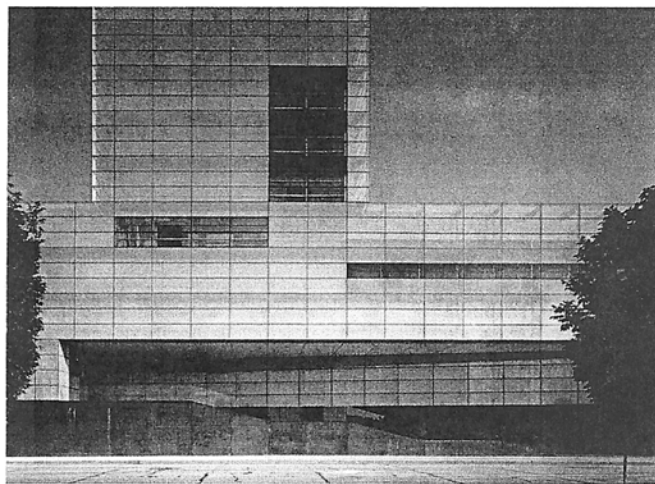
DC: "On the last point, I think that the radical programme of Modernism was about creating a schism, a disconnect with the 19th century, like all movements it ran out of steam, becoming self referential. One thing to look at is to reenergise Modernism by being slightly more open about continuity, about what things were at that boundary between the 19th and 20th century when architecture began to express freedoms."

The continuity prevalent in Scandinavian Modernism that sought to bridge the classical with the modern was offered as an alternative.

DC: "Yes and I think it is about memory. There is something fantastically fresh about breaking and turning something over and disconnecting memory and that happened in all the fields, but you have to go back at some stage to the forms that we know. The novel got reinvigorated by being challenged but in the end the format of the novel resisted. We need to look at where energy was coming from in a pure architectural sense without the manifestoes of the Modern Movement. The Victorians had their manifestoes too, about truth, such as Ruskin's principles about morality but imbedded in that was a notion of memory, history and continuity."

I ventured that his work did not belong to the English tradition of the picturesque, finding influence in Japanese aesthetics and idioms.

DC: "I think you are right. I am nervous about making decisions based on the picturesque. We all have tendency towards it, though it is not such a bad tradition or artistic form. My formative college years were at the point when Post Modernism was rearing its ugly head. I think that, while I was completely against the conclusions, I was not completely against the observations. We saw a generation of architects who tried to re-imbue modernism with more meaning – the generation of Herzog & De Meuron,



Figge Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa Photo: Christian Richters

Siza, Moneo, De Sota Moura. I would say that my aversion to the picturesque is not as a sensibility but as a motivation. Therefore, I am much more interested in the archaic, in somehow classical, neutral architecture as a conceptual beginning."

An Egyptian Archaic with a strong iteration of repeating modules, I suggested.

DC: "Repetition is something, which we have to deal with. As an architect you go through all these different stages of crisis, one of which is changing scale, and you learn very early on that you can't do things that you played around in shops and small houses and scale them up. You have got to order your ideas in a different way; you have to engage certain notions of resistance."

David spent a number of formative years with Norman Foster and Partners before launching into practice with Chipperfield Armstrong Associates, and his work appears opposite to the commodification of architecture and its details that defines Fosters.

DC: "I think Fosters serves an ideology which is very well matched up with an idea of the modern world, last seen in SOM, who invented a uniform for corporate America, an optimistic Modernism. Norman is not interested in chiselling away at the edges. When architects in the 1980s were drawing on yellow paper, designing little museums, Norman wanted to do airports and banks. Scarpa, Moneo, Siza were our heroes and naturally they were looking at the edges. They were criticising the society they were living in, whereas Norman is the 100% signed up optimist at the centre of the culture. It is not a critique; it is a leadership [issue], which in some ways is highly admirable."

David Chipperfield is currently working on seven museums and various housing and cultural buildings around the world, with offices in Shanghai, Milan and Berlin (larger than London). Like many of his heroes, he is part of a growing stable of international architects (an establishment of sorts) and this poses certain questions. I asked him particularly about his experiences in the US with the Des Moines library and the Figge Museum.

DC: "I think these have been the most difficult projects we have done. We had much more creative freedom in Iowa with what we could achieve but it was absolutely buttoned down in terms of how one might do it, what one might build out of. It is no accident that those two buildings are our first glass buildings in a way."

Much more about surface than the other projects these are both container and contained.

DC: "I just decided that it was not going to be possible to try and play with any sort of interpretive surface. It had to come in a package, so we tried to skill up the product or in the case of Des Moines materialise the product. If it was going to be a glass building, could we add materiality? From outside, it



Des Moines Library Photo: Christian Richters

seems solid all the time and inside it seems totally transparent, nearly disappointingly transparent, I would have liked it to be a little more veiled."

The Davenport project has the sensation of being like a NASA assembly building, in terms of its scale and white starkness opposition to the city.

DC: "On purpose again, in that case there did not seem to be any great material clues, apart from the river. The two materials that interest me at the moment are concrete and glass, particularly concrete for its archaic, timeless quality."

In the Madrid social housing project concrete panels are used like very large chunks of stone.

DC: "Yes, that's GRC. At the moment in Barcelona, we are working with a slightly different product. We are playing with glass and concrete projects in both cases we are looking at the issues of scale and repetition and in a way a sort of forced polychromy."

Steven Holl uses colour in Simmons Hall, MIT to denote the location of various stresses in the concrete facade.

DC: "Something like that, although I think that in this case it is much more 'picturesque'," Chipperfield adds with irony before continuing:

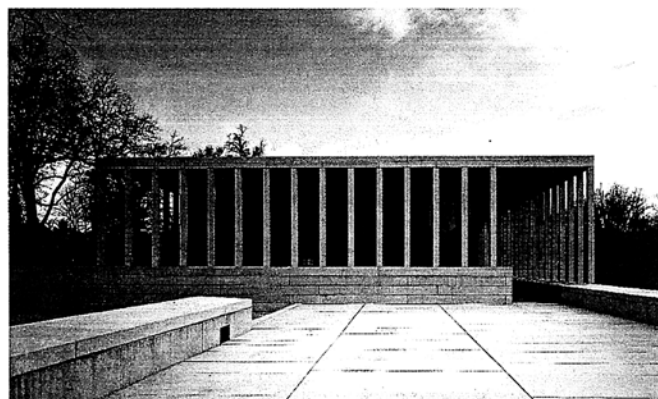
"The formulae of the office seems to be, if I can undermine myself, that I look for an idea which seems to be quite solid intellectually as a parti and it can be explained and it is not dependant on any particular architectural device. In the Des Moines project it was a case of 'if you want to do a library in a park, and you are designing the park at the same time as the library, you can design the gardens along with it.' The shape of Des Moines has more to do with the spaces it creates than the building. You see it as a series of surfaces from the outside and a series of spaces when inside. American libraries work best on two levels. We looked at the idea of a taller building that would be more urban. There was great resistance to this; therefore the challenge was how to do a low building in a downtown area, in a park. At that point I became very interested. There was a sketch at the beginning, which is not completely different to the completed work, a bit more organic, and then you are left with 500 aesthetic decisions as to how to realise that. In the realisation you try to follow things which have a certain discipline, you try not to wander off into little side obsessions. I am happier with those projects that have one clear parti for one reason or another. They tend to fall out of the mould better."

A Theoretical Practice was written in 1994, wherein David described the nature of the early years of practice. I asked him if it was useful in configuring or reconfiguring the work.

DC: "I think it was fundamental to the early work to show what we were interested in. It confirmed my concerns as an architect in London – at the time when the only work you could get was shops and bathrooms – to show that it was possible to show a parallel set of concerns. It was a way for me to give some sort of credibility to those sorts of exercises without trying to pretend that they were mini architectural projects."

Though small, the early "frock shops", as David calls them, stand out from the general fashion shops.

DC: "They did for while until everyone learned how to copy it. As soon as you have used a bit of stone, a few chunks of marble, the gig is over. Issey Miyake was a beautiful project. One of the problems for architects is that you get so little feedback. The main feedback you get is from your drawings, as opposed to a material feedback and therefore I think that what



New Literature Museum in Marbach Photo: Christian Richters

was very reassuring about those projects. You realise that if you put a stone floor down and a white wall and a window and if you did that right – actually did you need more than that?"

I ventured that this was an inherent critique of the 'Starchitecture' approach of the image over reality.

DC: "I think it is a double-edged sword at the moment. It is a very exciting time because there is more openness culturally to do things that are different, and therefore there are much more opportunities to do things. There is nearly an inverse lack of judgement. I think Zaha's [Hadid] Phaeno Centre is amazing, but I don't know why, apart from the fact she has achieved an extraordinary cavernous type of structure. Pretty amazing – but *amazing good or amazing bad?* I don't know what it means to me. To achieve novelty, something which has not been done before, becomes the determining criteria. Architecture has become a branding tool. To be honest we [general culture] are making shapes rather than experimenting. I would say that the Pompidou was a much bigger breakthrough than the Guggenheim [Bilbao]. One of the dangers is now that invention and surprise is a new lamp of architecture. I am not sure quite how that helps us because it takes us further and further away from meaning."

Similar to the international practices of Fosters, Zaha Hadid and Foreign Office Architects, Chipperfield has built few works in England, gaining instead popularity abroad.

DC: "We win most of our commissions through competition so we need a competition system to procure public buildings and we don't have one in England. I think it will come that we will get more commercial work because at a certain point, they cannot say that you don't have enough experience, when they have to admit you have actually built a few things."

The office is also dominated by the strong presence of physical models in parallel to the Haptic Qualities being generated in the work.

DC: "I think that the physical models are a surrogate hands on feeling, in a way to try to keep the process mentally and physically real. It helps us make better spatial decisions. It also means that there is a certain discipline. One of the problems I find with the virtual processes is the way everything is so ephemeral, it can change its course, and I don't like that. I like it when it [the project] starts with an idea and you keep moulding it. Somehow it has a certain resistance and life of its own. The slow cooking process concentrates the mind in a different way. On the one hand, I can be very negative about form making and the contemporary condition of architecture but at the same time we have benefited. I still believe in solving problems *but* we are not immune to the atmosphere of form making. I think that the experimentation of material and forms is something, which we should not begrudge. We should bless, the likes of Zaha and Rem for somehow chopping through the forest for the rest of us, so that we can ramble through it. Each building has its own physical proposition, a bridge between our programmatic idea, contextual situation and other things that are in the air."