

In Practice : exploring design processes through publication

accounting a singular design process through the working documents

“ (...) I specifically did not want to ‘write a book’. I didn’t want to deliver the results of a research but to write up the research itself, as it was actually being carried out, with its nascent discoveries, its misses, its red herrings, its hesitant elaboration of a method never to be achieved. Conscious of the fact that, ‘when everything’s said, everything remains to be said’ — in other words: it’s the saying that matters, not the said. What I’d written interested me a lot less than what I might write next.”ⁱ

Initially, In Practice were conferences at which architects were invited to unveil and tell the story of their working documents. These conferences are followed by a conversation with a panel of critics, architects and academics. The practice of architecture was opening up to the modalities of research.

Recently, a first book was published about the design process of a house designed by Philippe Van Der Maren and Richard Venletⁱⁱ, who had presented this work during an In Practice conference in Liège. The publication of this book ambitioned to place practicing architects in a research position whilst staying at the heart of their architectural practice.

The book accounts the genesis of a project through the reconstruction of a narrative flow based on the working documents. It shares the doubts of the design process, it extracts mechanisms that lead to choices and it uncovers the intuitions that make poetry. This account does not ambition to reach an ultimate and exhaustive objectivity, but rather to make use of the specific vantage point of the practicing and reflecting architect.

In essence, In Practice is not a critical review of the project, as it dives in the objectivity of the produced documents. It is not a holistic interpretation of underlying ambitions, as the focus is on the local changes in perception and understandings. It is not a contextualization of a practice situating it in a field, as the appearing references relate to design decisions rather than to the designed object itself.

Operating a ground cut in the design process

“The queen of methods in pedology since its origin is the ground cut. This consist of realizing trenches in the ground with vertical walls, at varying depths according to the type of ground (usually you go on until reaching the rock bed). Once the trench is realized, what do you do? Well, you observe.”ⁱⁱⁱ

First, the work documents, which usually remain in the darkness of closed drawers and boxes, are brought to light, observed and commented by the designers themselves. In the case of Philippe Van Der Maren and Richard Venlet, this first step was realized for a lecture held in 2018 followed by a conversation according to the usual framework.

Second, a chosen extern (Pierre Chabard) engages with the architect in the exploration of these documents. The documents are ordered according to type, chronology or underlying themes. They can include mail exchange, referential material (architecture, texts, visual material, there is no limitation, as long as these documents are originals). The collaboration with an extern works as a revealer. The externality of the collaboration forces to build up an intelligible and objective account. The external outlook and the inner knowledge complement each other.

Third, based on the text, a graphic designer (Ueberknäckig) develops the layout.

Last, a photographer (or illustrator) is engaged to document the realized work (Jeroen Verrecht).

These two additional (external) collaborations happen in the light of the text, and shed new light and clarity in return. These crossed contributions are orchestrated by the editors, and work as layers of the same reality, as revelators of the design process.

But no, this is no *ground cut*, even if the collection of documents emerge from a kind of archaeology. The layers are subjectively designed and choreographed themselves to tell a narrative of the process. As Bellanger states, “the difference between prose and poetry could be that poetry enounces natural laws *that occur only once*”^{iv}. In Practice is the unique narrative occurrence of an architectural poem.

In Practice allows the authors to define a subjective narrative of a singular architecture through the observation of the objective material extracted from the design process. It is the theory that describes what we can observe, as Einstein states. A particular process is inevitably grounded in a *theory*. Aldo Rossi’s Scientific Autobiography^v spends an entire book to grasp this cloud of ideas informing a practice as a whole : it would take as many other books to observe singular design processes. Koolhaas’ SMLXL^{vi} may propose an intermediate form, in which design processes and work documents are used in order to address *topics* (bigness, typical plan, whatever), each forming a *micro-theory*, which together form an implicit *macro-theory*, key to the practice as a whole. From 1992 until 2007, the Australian UME^{vii} magazine reviewed architecture projects critically giving a central place to the drawings : documents became the subject of the review, from an external point of view. In Practice is about one design process, not addressing *topics* beforehand, grounded in the design team, seeking local understandings, not directly the global *theory* informing a whole practice.

The cover of the book is a folded poster on which the as-built plans are reproduced on one side; the very essence of a neutral, professional, objective representation according to shared standards and procedures within the field. The other side represents a detail photograph of the realized building by photographer Jeroen Verrecht : maybe the most extreme form of a subjective, poetic, interpretative representation. Two faces of the same reality, which the book will attempt to unveil through close objective observation and subjective accounting of the process.

Text and images

“Two principles, I believe, rules Western painting from the fifteenth to the twentieth century. The first asserts the separation between plastic representation (which implies resemblance) and linguistic reference (which excludes it). By resemblance we demonstrate and speak across difference. The two systems can neither merge nor intersect. In one way or another, subordination is required. Either the text is ruled by the image (as in those paintings where a book, an inscription, a letter, or the name of a person are represented), either the image is ruled by the text (as in books where a drawing completes, as if it were merely taking a shortcut, the message that words are charged to represent).”^{viii}

The text is formed of visually independent paragraphs written in large letters, forming blocks which do not fill the pages, just like the images. Responding to Foucault’s statement and his exploration of this ambiguous relationship, this particular layout creates a spatial equivalence between textuality and visuality.

The unusual scale of the typography of the book “Never Modern”^{ix} about 6a architects also modifies the relationships of text and illustration in the book which is not the receptacle of a content, but an object in itself : re-laying would essentially alter its content. In the case of In Practice, this shift in scale fulfills a multiple agenda : the book as an object, sequences engaging specific relationships and reflections, the meta-level of the In Practice ambitions.

The verbal account and the visual documents merge into a new and irreducible medium, which “is the message”, in McLuhan’s words^x. The result combines text, illustrations, photographs and layout into an objective and observable whole, proposing a possible understanding the ins and outs of a particular design process from within the practice.

Moreover, the layout produces a flowing text which can be read in one movement without effort, while each double page also acts as a network of mutual comments and statements, producing “sparks of sense”^{xi} in the greater whole. Text on images, images on text, images on images, text on text. Sometimes, series of similar double pages extend this principle over a longer stretch. Not completely strange to Aby Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas^{xii}, Ad Reinhardt’s slides^{xiii} or even Gerard Richter’s Atlas^{xiv}.

A sequence

“The sequence of plans is placed very smartly, the photographs at the end too, the size of the font is perfect. We have some doubts about a few weaker documents, and perhaps some references evoked at the end of the lecture could be integrated. (...) Maybe the titles could be written in the same font and be integrated in the flow of the text (and no appear anymore as real titles)”^{xv}.

Page 71-72, an annotated plan of the garden by landscape architect Erik Dhondt faces a paragraph relating the discussions between the client and the architect about how the terraces could disconnect the house from the surroundings. The very humble annotations on the plans and the short text complement each other. The text is not a legend to the image. The image is not reduced the status of illustration. Together, they are a key to a moment of in the process.

This spread evokes the application of previously established design principles into another aspect of the project. A sequence of plans running until page 84, accounts its interpretation and application to multiple elements in the project like the terraces, the articulation of rooms, the materiality of the floor coverings and the staircases.

Page 75, a table is photographed after a dinner. A large scale model is dominating the dinner scene. This seemingly anecdotic interruption remembers explicitly that the plans are part of a vaster reflection (the terrace in the scale model corresponds the plan), that the plans are the subject of an intensive process until late in the evening, probably including the clients (a blurred delimitation of work and life), that the collaboration between Philippe and Richard is a collaboration between two befriended creative personalities (the importance of the medium of the nature of the exchanges), and that there is pleasure to be found in the dryness of the plans (the bottle of wine and the empty glasses testify). This is echoed in the book’s final sentences: “What is the purpose of this interminability in architectural work? (...) There is nothing profitable, nothing efficient, nothing dogmatic... It’s just seven years of reflection”^{xvi}. The photograph of the dinner table is an explicit comment on the plans.

Page 85, a short text defines states a design principle : a line will separate two surfacic materials. This diagonal line seems arbitrary, which positions it as the assertion of a principle. The series of plans, which aimed at the application of established principles to the entire house, produces here a new principle, which is given back to the project. The existing house and the extension will be identified by a very thin line, a delimitation between two similar materials, regardless of the window openings, like an arbitrary line, reinforced by partial window shutters deconstructing views. The linearity of the process has been broken through this feedback, the sequence of the plans can be ended now.

The sequence thus ends with a photograph of the exterior spiral staircase in regard of the “final” plan in which this staircase appears, pp 86-87. The circular shape is a way of not responding to the geometry of the lines. Photographer Jeroen Verrecht artfully divides the image in two halves; the axis of the staircase dividing two spaces, two depths. The story lands in reality and materiality again, which opens the next chapter, “delineate and materialize”.

References

The e-mail shows the struggle of the team with the integration of references, which contextualize the project and its process in the field. During the lecture in Liège, Philippe and Richard introduced references at the end of the talk. These references were not used “a priori” in order to anchor the project in a context. In fact, they appeared rather as a kind of confirmation of the main design principles. A picture from a Palladian villa taken after the completion of the works by Richard during a travel in Italy was significant.

During the making of the book, Philippe and Richard proposed to integrate additional references, like Hoffmann’s Palais Stoclet. But the integration of these illustrations shifted the focus from the design process towards critical interpretation. When layouted, these references received a confusing external status, reduced in scale and integrated in the text blocks, just like illustrations. Eventually, it was decided to evoke references only textually, assuming the reader can inform on these projects in the literature. Just like a reference.

The absence of an explicit referential framework, excepting the materially present anglo-norman architecture of the house or the pictures from the works realized by the client prior to the project are perhaps specific to this particular process. This may thus be different in future books, depending on the nature of the observed work.

Opposability

“Design is highly discontinuous : its rule is the rupture, its threat is stability. (...). The master being overcome or betrayed by his disciple is not a model originating in science but in performative disciplines, in learning processes (...). Once something has been done and recognized, it must be disavowed, new ways have to be sought, repetition has to be avoided. (...) Isn’t all creative practice fed by the quite innocent hope of relevance and sense ?”^{xvii}

In Practice does not ambition to achieve a definitive truth about a project. It focuses on the process from the inside. It is an object to which can be referred in a more comprehensive research in the concerned practice, in other researches, in projects, in architecture studios as a pedagogic tool. As an object, in a word, it is *opposable*^{xviii}.

Alain Findeli said that “in research by design practice, the world does not interest us as an object to be understood and observed, it interests us as a project. In the world, we are not interested so much in the permanence and stability of theories as we are in the future engines of change and navigation in contingency (...)”^{xix}.

This In Practice book starts with a quote from Michel Vernes, proposed by Pierre Chabard. « The inaugural idea alters itself by becoming clear ; it sacrifices its infinitude for a ‘natural’ finality. By filling in its gaps, the project becomes inexpressive, almost enigmatic”^{xx}. This preliminary sentence is enigmatic itself. Is it a revealer of the text, of the process, of the project itself or of the architect’s practice in general? Being extracted from a text about neoclassic drawings, is it about the documents themselves or about some affinity with neoclassicism? This sentence is maybe the only one in the

entire book evoking a possible external meta-interpretation : of the book (sticking to the process of alteration and clarification), of the project (the natural finality), of the oeuvre.

In the case of this house by Philippe Van Der Maren and Richard Venlet, the “hidden finality” of the ongoing transformations of the house could be the very essence of the work. The borders between the site and the house, between the new and the old, between what is intentional architecture and the contingency of the pre-existing have blurred. This intentional blurring complements the creation of a few discrete hints, some indications, material traces of architects at work.

Perspectives

This book is a precedent that can be engaged in different perspectives.

We are now planning to continue the series with four similar books. The future will tell to which extent the books will diverge or follow a similar track. Very different contexts and interests will probably result in a variation of approaches.

We would like to propose a similar exercise to researchers who engage their professional practice at the heart of their doctoral research. This exercise is probably slightly different because it would frame in ongoing researches which have their own agenda.

This precedent will also be engaged as a pedagogic tool in a master dissertation studio at the KU Leuven, in which the students will be invited to compile work documents following similar (probably adapted) procedures.

This growing body of work will open up to further speculation and observation, on an epistemological level, on the level of individual practices and on the level of pedagogics.

ⁱ Gorz, André, “Letter to D. A Love Story”, p. 54

ⁱⁱ Philippe Van Der Maren, Richard Venlet, Pierre Charbard, Harold Fallon, Benoît Vandenbulcke, « Philippe Van Der Maren & Richard Venlet In Practice », 2019, Ara Mer

ⁱⁱⁱ Houellebecq, Michel in a text about Robbe-Grillet, quoted in Bellanger, Aurélien, « Houellebecq, écrivain romantique », 2010, Editions Léo Scheers, p 66

^{iv} Bellanger, Aurélien, « Houellebecq, écrivain romantique », 2010, Editions Léo Scheers, p 136

^v Rossi, Aldo, « A Scientific Autobiography », 1981, Oppositions Books

^{vi} Koolhaas, Rem, Mau, Bruce, « SMLXL », 1995, The Monacelli Press

^{vii} <http://www.umemagazine.com> (accessed 07/07/2019)

^{viii} Foucault, Michel, « Ceci n’est pas une pipe », 1973, Fata Morgana, p26 (« This is not a Pipe », translated and edited by James Harkness, University of California Press, 1983)

^{ix} Irénée Scalbert and 6a architects, « Never Modern », 2013, Park Books

^x McLuhan, Marshall, « Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man », 1964, W. Terrence Gordon

^{xi} Fallon, Harold, « Sparks of Sense », in Reflections #8, Hogeschool voor Wetenschap en Kunst Sint Lucas, 2008

^{xii} Warbur, Aby, “L’Atlas Mnemosyne”, L’écarruillé, 2012

^{xiii} Lippard, Lucy R., « Ad Reinhardt », Harry N Abrams Inc, 1982

^{xiv} Rihter, Gerhard, “Gerhard Rochter: Atlas is four Volumes”, Walther König, 2015

^{xv} Excerpt from an e-mail from Harold Fallon and Benoît Vandenbulcke, eds, to the team, 18 January 2019 (translated)

^{xvi} Philippe Van Der Maren, Richard Venlet, Pierre Chabard, “Philippe Van Der Maren & Richard Venlet In Practice”, 2019, Ara Mer, p107

^{xvii} Fallon, Harold, « Sparks of Sense », in Reflections #8, Hogeschool voor Wetenschap en Kunst Sint Lucas, 2008

^{xviii} Ooms, Tomas, “Architecture is a Cognitive Craft”, in “LucAs - Architecturebook #1 The Eugeen-Tanja Selection”, Rajesh Heyninx editor, 2018

^{xix} Findeli, Alain, “Le coeur théorique du design est-il vide ?”, CRAL, 2016

^{xx} Vernes, Michel, "Les ombres de la beauté. Sur le dessin d'architecture néoclassique », in Jean Dethier eds., Images et imaginaires d'architecture, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1984, p.28