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The Value of Architectural Sketches

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Abstract

In this article we analyse architectural sketches as an example of how communities attribute value to activities and outputs. Sketching is both an ideational activity, of conceiving of things through the act of drawing, and a recording activity leading to buildings that can be materialized. To the architectural practice community, architectural sketches are more than mere translations of what is already outlined in the architect's mind – sketching is also an activity that generates new knowledge.

We focus on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital, as a way of corroborating our claim about the structure of communities as groups of people who share certain values, and find certain actions meaningful and certain outputs significant and satisfying. These communities invest in certain actions towards mastering certain skills and producing certain kinds of output, all of which must result in some kind of gain or capital. We describe the act of sketching as citation in order to discuss the efforts and engagements of those who enter and remain in the architectural profession or field. In reflecting about what motivates someone to undertake the challenging training in order to master a skill such as sketching, we cite Balinisteanu's notion of fantasy.

Within our explanatory framework, one engages in developing the skill of sketching because, to some degree one identifies oneself with the professional habitus, sees oneself as belonging to that field, and proceeds to acquire that particular capital. The field can just as easily consist of professional architectural practice as of the academic research community. Architectural sketching need no longer be interpreted as merely a way to become 'passionately involved' with the object that is drawn. Architectural sketching can also be a means of becoming involved with a community who values architectural sketches – be that the architectural practice or the academic research community.



Introduction

The context of this article is the academicization of professionally oriented studies in subjects including architecture. One can now find doctoral studies being undertaken in architecture and also research council funded projects conducted by postdoctoral and professional researchers. These provide incentives to undertake research in architecture both in terms of education and career development, to access national and international funding and to meet performance measures used in research evaluations. Architecture, in common with non-traditional subjects in the academy, suffers from the disadvantage that its principal outcomes are in non-traditional forms including the production of culturally significant buildings, urban plans and drawings. In particular, we discuss the value of architectural sketches for the architectural research community. The architectural sketch is discussed as a specific kind of drawing, which is at once the product of actions that lead to specific outcomes and the refinement of a professional skill.

Drawings, and in particular sketches – which are the most Protean manifestation of an architectural idea – are highly valued in the professional architectural community and more widely as objects of cultural consumption. At the *First International Congress of Architecture Archives* in Alcalá de Henares, Spain (2003) one could read:

the importance of the heritage that has been built by architecture collections is related to the specific manner in which architecture is conceived and developed, and the fundamental role played by drawings and graphic documents in the conception process as well as on the building site [...they] represent not only the trace of the process of creating what is to be built, but they are also sometimes the only testimony to destroyed or never-built edifices (Lima et al. 2008, 9).

Indications of this valorisation include the publication of well organized, searchable on-line catalogues of images that attract the same levels of bibliographic attention as do their textual counterparts in institutional repositories and events. Nowadays, individual architectural sketches, as well as sketchbooks, are held by many institutions throughout the world. For example, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) have formed a partnership in order to promote the understanding and enjoyment of architecture. Together they hold about 650,000 items, ranging from the Renaissance to the present day. The V&A museum website boasts that Joseph Paxton's famous first sketch of the Great Exhibition building, known as the Crystal Palace, is on display in its British Galleries, as well as a page from one of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's sketchbooks. This shows the esteem in which certain sketches are held by this arbiter of the canon.

Other institutions maintain similar collections and on-line catalogues, including the Louvre Museum in Paris, which hosts the *Département des Arts & Graphiques* containing, amongst other material, architectural drawings in a collection



of more than 140,000 items. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, USA, also has a large collection of modern architect's sketches ranging from Otto Wagner (1896) to Steven Holl (2004).

However, it remains to be determined whether such sketches continue to have value within the newly academicized environment of architecture. This paper therefore considers what is valued in architectural sketches by professional architects and, consequently, what aspects of drawing and what research methods should form the focus of academic architectural research. For example, one could approach these sketches from a purely design-historical perspective, in which case such studies would clearly meet the criteria of the academy because they would employ traditional historical research methods. On the other hand, if one is to reflect the values of the professional architectural community in academic research there is perhaps a need to use non-traditional and more object-led research methods. Reconciling the initially opposed text-led methods and object-led methods would require a thorough-going analysis of the different interests of these two communities (Büchler et al. 2009).

The Roles of the Sketch in the Architectural Community

According to Jonson (2002), the term 'sketch' derives etymologically from the Greek *skhedios*, meaning unprepared; and from the Latin *schedius*, meaning hastily made. 'Sketch' therefore refers to something that is hastily done and is by nature incomplete, rough and unpolished. These are drawings that do not necessarily follow any kind of convention, such as scale and proportion, to which other kinds of drawn representations usually conform.

In academic research in architecture, sketches are often interpreted as being either recordings or ideation (Büchler and Lima 2008). On the one hand, when acting as a recording, the sketch takes on the role of merely registering and manifesting what is already outlined in the mind (Farthing 2008). On the other hand, when enabling ideation (Rosenberg 2008), the sketch as a 'study drawing' generates original information within the design task by means of graphical processes (Herbert 1992). In architectural practice, one of the reasons for making architectural sketches is to develop and deepen the inner world of the architect which, in turn, contributes to the conception of the built world. Understood in this way, the act of sketching may have an important role in developing both the architect's skill in architectural visualization, and ability to conceive and initiate more complex architectural ideas.

Architectural sketches are generally described by the community as a type of drawing that architects use in the design process, which enables the consideration of alternative solutions to the design problem. Regarded as the mythological start of architecture (Krasny 2008), these handmade artefacts are still considered to be an important tool in the architect's thinking process, even in a time when digital resources are widely available (Edwards 2005). Sketches possess a material dimension and are therefore able to exert a physical presence and influence (Fraser and



Hemni 1994). There are those who suggest that architectural sketches are seductive because of their ability to imply without, however, defining anything concrete; because they are open to many interpretations and point to many possibilities. In this sense, sketches have the ability to encompass, for example, both concrete reality such as the structural behaviour of a constructive element, and poetic and metaphorical elements such as wings or sails.

Drawings by Jørn Utzon and by Oscar Niemeyer exemplify the power of imagery despite the often problematic merger of these with the business of construction. Utzon's drawings for the *Sydney Opera House* (1957), which for some resembled immense seashells overlooking the Sydney Harbour, won the architectural competition. However, the structure was unbuildable as it was represented in Utzon's drawings, at least without some degree of reinterpretation. The engineering office Ove Arup took six years to solve the constructive problem presented by the drawings and the execution of the building went beyond the original budget (Montaner 1997). Nevertheless, the result was an iconic building, acting as a visual signature of Sydney that is recognized worldwide as representing all things Australian. Similarly, the drawings produced by Niemeyer for *Brasília Cathedral* (1959) caused practical problems. His sketches suggested that the shape of the whole building would emerge from the use of a single structural piece – a curved concrete pillar that, when repeated 16 times in rotation, would constitute the entire spatiality of the cathedral. It took the civil engineer Joaquim Cardozo over a decade to render Niemeyer's drawings as buildable. What was ultimately produced went beyond the material manifestation of the drawing and became one of the icons of Brazilian modernist architecture and a signature of the federal capital.

What might be inferred from the examples above is that the strength of visual imagery present in the architect's sketch is still visible in the final construction. This would suggest that, in line with the architectural community's claim, architectural sketches could occupy a differentiated category of object. Their claim is that because of its ability to manifest the ideational, the architectural sketch could be elevated to a higher category of object, even transcending its connection with the objects it represents, thereby reinforcing its association with the complex and deep mental process of the architect. However, this view of the value of architectural sketches is inherited from the canons of modern architecture. Indeed, the sketchbooks of the seminal modernist architect Le Corbusier were perhaps the most influential set of drawings within the architectural community during the second half of the twentieth century. Despite being a skilful draughtsman, in his drawings Le Corbusier often violated the conventions of perspective and also distorted proportions. Allegedly, this was because he was less concerned with faithfully representing reality or envisaging architecture with mathematical precision than with achieving, through the act of drawing, a certain state of 'deep emotion' and the possibility to connect to some 'inner force' (Fraser and Hemmi 1994).

Other than the metaphysical dimension of this 'inner force', the architectural community also values the sketch owing to its ability to demonstrate craftsmanship. The act of sketching implies certain qualities that go beyond the



value of the sketch itself. These qualities are linked to the process of making sketches that is often referred to as craftsmanship. Sennett has reflected on the role of craft in the process of making concrete things and what it reveals about oneself (2008). A craftsman is an individual who is skilled in a particular activity or craft. The idea of skill is of something that has to be constructed through time. Sennett suggested that ten thousand hours is a reasonable touchstone for mastering a craft. This apparently disproportionately long time is an estimate of how long it takes for complex skills, such as architectural sketching, to become so deeply ingrained that they are readily available and comprise a professional's tacit knowledge. He argued that this number is not so unrealistic if one considers that when training to be a goldsmith, the medieval apprentice was expected to undertake five hours of bench work a day over the course of seven years (Sennett 2008). This long immersion in the craft and the context of its production inevitably transforms both the hand and the mind with the effect of not only training the individual for exercising the skills but also instilling in them the values of the profession.

Mastering a skill is therefore a transformational process, one that requires effort and attention. It represents an investment, at the end of which the trainee can expect to gain something. This is true of any kind of training, i.e. there is a relationship between training towards transformation and gain. In the field of professional sport, this relationship is perhaps more obvious: an athlete who has spent a significant amount of time training and adjusting sleeping routines, nutritional habits, etc., is not the same person that started the training months or even years before. This training is a lifestyle that transforms the body, mind and emotions as the years go by, a process in which athletes become their own *œuvre*. Given positive results in performance, this transformation is perceived as a gain that can be measured and sponsorship can be awarded in line with these measured results.

Similarly, sketching is a physical activity that shapes the architect as well as a skill that demands an investment until it is mastered. The architectural community can see in the sketch evidence of this process and the acquisition of skill can be measured much like one can measure the performance of an athlete. The sketch is not the final outcome as one might judge the award of a gold medal to be, however the act of sketching indicates to the members of the architectural community that this transformational process is taking place within the individual who sketches. In this sense, sketching may indicate potential for future achievements. In both cases, of the athlete and of the architect, undertaking training in order to master a skill represents a desire to align oneself with the values and thereby associate oneself to that community.

Communities, Values and Skills

Within the architectural community, the act of sketching is regarded as meaningful because the sketches themselves have a role, and vice versa, i.e. by having a role, the sketches hold some value and the act of sketching is therefore



regarded as meaningful (Biggs and Büchler 2010b). This is an iterative relationship between value of outcome and value of action for a community. In the architectural community, if we start from the notion that architectural sketches have value, we can see why sketching is regarded as a valued skill. Therefore the value of sketches and of sketching serves to define the architectural community because skilfully producing sketches is something that may function as a distinguishing feature. One gains membership of the architectural community by demonstrating this skill, as well as through the ability to identify sketches as meaningful and appreciating them.

In establishing oneself as a member of a community, one is also contributing to the definition and positioning of that community within a broader context and in relation to other communities. Certain actions, such as sketching, are elected, conventionalized and then performed as a means of expressing the community values. This relationship between community values and meaningful actions is unproblematic when it is coherent and when it is located within that community. Take the architectural sketch out of the architectural practice community and it loses its meaning and consequently its value. To the second community the sketch might also be valuable but in line with their values and therefore different to the value that it has for the architectural community.

There are two consequences of this re-contextualization of the architectural sketch. Initially, new value will have to be attributed to the sketch according to the new community's value system. This leads to the second consequence, which describes this re-attribution of value as a process of justification and negotiation on the part of the original architectural community. What this means in the context of the academicization of the architectural sketch is that the architectural community will offer the sketch in its most measurable aspect, i.e. as recording, so that its value can be accounted for and made explicit. The ideational value of the sketch is, in this process, overlooked because of its direct relationship with the architectural practice community values. The problem with this process, we claim, is that by re-framing the sketch so that it fits academic conventions, such as being measurable, the architectural community has had to compromise the ideational content of the sketch and therefore runs the risk of being left dissatisfied with the value that the academic community has attributed to it (Biggs and Büchler 2010a).

As explained above, the canons of modernism helped to establish sketching as a potentially significant and valued activity for the architectural community. Balinisteanu (2008) suggests that the sketch as citation can further explain its value in the community. He argues that identities are 'fantasised' in the recesses of the mind and that in order to express these fantasies and flesh out our social identity, we cite from the narratives of others. These acts of citation shape our perceptions of ourselves and of others as we construct, through these narratives, subjective identities and acceptable scenarios for socialisation. The architectural community often uses the sketch as an act of citation as, for example, in the dialogue between the sketch made by Luciano Margotto for the *Lapa Bus Terminal* and Álvaro Siza's *Aveiro Library* (Perrone 2006). Mutual citation reinforces membership of a community through inter-textual referencing, i.e. painters refer to other painters; scholars refer to other scholars, etc.



These constructions can only take place in social interaction when one becomes acquainted with voices that can be cited (Balinisteanu 2008). It is conceivable that fantasy is one of the mechanisms through which the architect develops the skill of thinking through drawing. This is in line with Balinisteanu's view that our modes of socialisation are steered by fantasies that originate in narratives. Architectural sketches could be seen as a narrative rather than merely a deliberate strategy for positioning oneself within a community or creating an identity. This would mean that narratives such as sketches or texts would first be internalized as emulated practices that are steered by the unconscious.

In Balinisteanu's theory, the fantasy of the self is constitutive of the subject. It expresses identity of the self in a series of images as narrative sequences, rather than as unarticulated events of the imagination. These narrative sequences inform the construction of subjectivities where every subject is constituted through citing legitimate subjects in narrative presentations of the self. Therefore, through the use of narratives, the way in which one fantasises (about a given scenario and subjective constitution) is repeated. This means that, in time, one becomes aware of the ways of feeling and experiencing that these narratives afford. One will then perform choreographies of gestures, bodily postures and rhetorical devices that one has grown accustomed to fantasising as one's own (Balinisteanu 2008). Furthermore, we suggest that the way one will attribute value and make value judgements is linked to the way in which one has embodied determined narrative sequences. This would mean that making a judgement is a way of citing previously internalized values that have come from social narratives.

In this article we are dealing with the sketch as object of consumption rather than discussing the nature of these objects. We are more interested in the social dynamics – steered by narratives and fantasies – that regulate the attribution of value to these objects. Balinisteanu's theory of fantasy has been helpful towards understanding why certain activity such as sketching is at the core of the development of the architectural community. However, Bourdieu and his three main 'thinking tools' – 'habitus', 'field' and 'capital' – can be used to enrich this explanation.

On habitus, Maton (2008) explains that although one usually feels as though one is a free agent, one bases one's daily decisions and assumptions on the predictable character, behaviour and attitudes of others. Bourdieu stated that 'all of my thinking started from this point: how can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?' (Maton 2008: 50). This is in line with Maton's own approach according to which habitus conceptualizes the relation between the objective and subjective – or the 'outer' and 'inner' – by describing how these social states become internalized. This describes how the personal comes to play a role in the social, how its dispositions underlie our actions that in turn contribute to social structures.

According to Moore (2008) those with the well-formed habitus are higher in cultural capital. However, not all habitus and their instances of cultural capital are attributed equal value in society, for example the value of the artist



versus that of the craftsman. This notion of habitus having a status may explain why, as suggested above, the architectural community often attributes higher value to architectural sketches. If architectural sketches belong to a higher status habitus then they would deal with the loftier creative speculations rather than with the mundane technical problems that are more associated with a lower status habitus.

According to Bourdieu, field is concerned with the social space in which interactions, transactions and events occur. In his view, an analysis of social space involves not only locating the object of investigation in its specific historical, local/national/international and relational context, but also questioning the ways in which previous knowledge about the object had been generated, by whom and whose interests were served by those knowledge-generating practices. In order to unpack Bourdieu's notion of field, Thomson (2008) draws on three types of analogy: the football field, the science fiction force-field and the physics force-field.

First, a football field is defined as a bounded site where a game is played. In order to play the game, players have set positions; there are specific rules that novice players must learn and basic skills that they must master. What players can do, and where they can go during the game depends on their field position. The physical state of the field – whether it is wet, dry, well maintained or uneven – also has an effect on what players can do and thus how the game can be played. In other sports, playing fields are shaped differently according to the game that is played on them and each game has their own set of rules, histories, star players, legends and lore. Above, we stated that a skill is learned through time and that there is a tacit understanding about membership in that community that developed during the practice of that skill. In the case of Thomson's football field analogy, we can infer that besides the official rules in the book, every game has codes and behaviours that are not explicit or formalized, but that are assimilated through time playing the game, during which each player learns how to behave in order to continue playing the game, i.e. gain and retain membership of that community.

In the second analogy, Thomson refers to social agents who, when playing in particular positions, understand how to behave in the field, and this understanding not only feels 'natural' but can also be explained using the truths – Bourdieu's 'doxa', that are common parlance within the field. This notion enables Thomson to use the analogy of a science fiction space ship as a microcosm inside which activities follow regular and ordered patterns and have some predictability. This is a field that is hierarchically structured, in which there are some people who are dominant and who have decision-making power over the ways in which this little social world functions. The space ship in this analogy is a force field that is designed to protect insiders from the outside environment. There are multiple social fields within this force field and each individual occupies more than one at a time, such as the economic field, the education field, the field of the arts, bureaucratic and political fields, and so on.



Third, in the physics domain, Thomson presents a force field as it is commonly represented, i.e. as a set of vectors that illustrate the forces exerted by one object on another. Bourdieu expressed this state of dispute by proposing that cultural and economic capital operated as two hierarchical poles in a social field. Lipstadt (2005) also identifies a state of dispute in a field and defines it as a system for analyzing the overlapping and competing elements that constitute society, or social space. Furthermore, she explains, a field is a universe of social relations constituted by the members of the field in accordance with their own habitus, logic, stakes, capitals and interests.

In order to understand field in this way it is important to understand Bourdieu's notion of capital. In this rather long quote this notion is well explained:

It is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory. Economic theory has allowed to be foisted upon it a definition of the economy of practices which is the historical invention of capitalism; and by reducing the universe of exchanges to mercantile exchange, which is objectively and subjectively oriented toward the maximization of profit, i.e., (economically) self-interested, it has implicitly defined the other forms of exchange as non-economic, and therefore disinterested. In particular, it defines as disinterested those forms of exchange which ensure the transubstantiation whereby the most material types of capital – those which are economic in the restricted sense – can present themselves in the immaterial form of cultural capital or social capital and vice-versa. (Bourdieu 1986, 241-242)

Moore (2008) highlights the fact that an important aspect of this notion of capital is the contrast between the explicit nature of economic capital and the veiled nature of cultural capital. The former is openly a self-interested instrument of exchange and does not have intrinsic value, but is always a means to an end, i.e. profit, interest, wages, etc. Bourdieu contends that this is also true for other forms of symbolic capital, but that they, in their distinctive ways, deny and suppress their instrumentality by proclaiming themselves to be disinterested and of intrinsic worth. Moore considers this dynamic in relation to the arts field where cultural capital is presented as reflecting the intrinsic value of art works and the capacity of certain skilled individuals to recognize and appreciate those essential qualities.

Summary and Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed architectural sketches as an example of how communities attribute value to activities and outputs. In the architectural practice community, architectural sketches are commonly regarded as tools that are used in the design process. However, when architects sketch, they are not only training a skill but are



also learning how to develop and refine concepts through the act of drawing on paper. These hastily-made drawings are valued in a context of long periods of training and effort. The architectural community claim that one is able to sketch quickly and regularly as a result of a maturation of the skill of developing concepts through drawings. Le Corbusier's statement that drawing is a means to become 'passionately involved' and enter into a kind of intuitive communion with the object that is being drawn, also echoes the ideational value of the sketch to the architectural community.

As suggested by Sennett, the ability to become involved is a by-product of the ability to concentrate for long periods of time – an investment that is required in order to develop a skill such as sketching – and comes before the comprehension of a subject. In effect, when sketching the architect is representing something that is neither defined, nor understood. This would in turn reinforce the notion of sketching as an ideational skill of conceiving of things through the act of drawing. Therefore, to the architectural practice community, architectural sketches are more than mere translations of what is already outlined in the architect's mind – sketching is also an activity that generates new knowledge. Although these objects are by definition unfinished and hastily made, they have the potential to impact on the material world, as illustrated by the examples of the *Sydney Opera House* and *Brasília Cathedral*.

We have focused on Bourdieu's thinking tools as a way of corroborating our claim about the structure of communities as groups of people who share certain values, find certain actions meaningful, certain outputs significant and satisfying. These communities invest in certain actions towards mastering certain skills and producing certain kind of output, all of which must result in some kind of gain or capital. We have also described the act of sketching as citation in order to discuss the efforts and engagements of those who enter and remain in the architectural profession or field. In reflecting about what motivates someone to undertake the challenging training in order to master a skill such as sketching, it seemed that Balinisteanu's notion of fantasy might be present. This element of fantasy would not be completely detached from external social elements but, on the contrary, would be generated in the social space from the available narratives and then internalized or comprising the habitus.

Within this framework, one engages in developing the skill of sketching in architecture because, to some degree one identifies oneself with the professional habitus, sees oneself as belonging to that field, and proceeds to acquire that particular capital. The field in question can just as easily consist of the academic research community as of professional architectural practice. This identification of oneself as belonging to a community may be perceived as something that is already happening, about to happen or as something that is never completely achievable. It could therefore serve as a motivator towards the acquisition of behaviours and capitals that insert the individual more comfortably and securely in the field. Architectural sketching serves as a vehicle for the identification of professional practitioners and as a conceptual and technical skill required of and by members. When translated to



academic research in architecture, such behaviours and capital are still present, but construed within the interests of the new field. Therefore we claim that architectural sketching as an activity, and particularly architectural sketches as outputs with ideational content, have different but potentially equal value for the respective communities once their significance for each community has been determined.

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