

## IN PRAISE OF DRAWING BY ELIZABETH B HATZ

Some years ago, entering José Linasoro's library in a Madrid church ruin, our students from SAUL Limerick, in the silence of the room, immediately picked up their little black notebooks and started sketching peacefully for the couple of hours we were guided by the architect. Linasoro turned to us, mouth wide open; "I don't believe this – no architecture students at ETSAM hand draw anymore... - I am so envious! How do you do it?"

Then, is not hand drawing desperately obsolete today? No – and it never will be, despite the current lack of practice. As the world gets more complex, why not embrace a rich co-existence of different media? We have the opportunity to choose openness over orthodoxy.

Global disappearance of hand drawing and worldwide success of Irish architecture, make the film *Drawing on Life* by Paul Clarke and Conor McCafferty a well-timed cultural undertaking. Clarke takes us on a deep, direct and unpretentious encounter with hand drawing in architectural practice through conversations with well-known architects, alternately from the Republic and the North. McCafferty's camera is circuitous and informal; superimposed shots of what

we actually see every day – IF we look ... It is a gentle flow, careful and sensitive. It allows for reflection and recalls sketching, in a subtle way.

When you draw your pace is automatically slower than when you take snap shots with your smart phone; you have to think, both hand and eye have to think. You CAN do this also with your phone; pause, observe, linger, register, choose.... But normally you just won't.

*There are two different words in Portuguese that mean "to look" and "to see and understand" (olhar and ver). The tool of an architect is to be able to see" says Álvaro Siza.*

Sketching is a heterogeneous, open activity. A sketch may mean totally different things to the author and the spectator: yet they seem to meet – somewhere in the imperfect, elusive and receptive zone between image and thought. You are between attentive focus and leisurely gaze. Still, it is amazing how differently we as architects can use the means.

Opening the film, Nigel Murray talks about the unpretentious format of the sketchbook. This is key. A cheap, light

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and sustainable companion for anyone aged 5 to 95, to play, observe, think or muse. Michael Doherty draws people using the city, thus observing how places are appropriated. He has 3 minutes to draw, before people move. If you are slow, maybe just the stillness of the stone slab they sat on remains on the paper – like a surface remembering the touch, and waiting for the next. Different paces have different advantages for observation.

O'Donnell + Tuomey draw to record, to confirm and to test. It is all the time dependent on the intelligence of the re-encounter. Discovering through the hatched graphite darkness that even mass may be perforated, like Lucretius rock, perforated by water. We see the hand of Tuomey and a sketch by O'Donnell. Seldom has poetry come so near strategy, through the hand. You realise the intimate inter-relationship between all the different drawings, including the computer drawing.

Drawing can act as code or character. The fluent sketcher can develop this as idiom. Nigel Peake ("I draw what I cannot say") creates a world of figures like a mirroring filter, a patterned veil of humour and appetite of all things...playful and disarmingly laid-back. Here the sketch

takes on a kind of autonomy. Also the skill in Doherty's drawing has this aura of a picture, something more finished. The drawing is closer to the picture, than the sketch. The sketch is more of a notation, imperfect but often accurate in its speculative abstraction – its ability to catch the essence. Alison and Peter Smithson used what they called "ideograms" – something in between ideas and diagrams.

Niall McCullough and Valerie Mulvin eloquently introduce us to the drawing as testing, thinking, projecting, and link it to how photographs may change our view of places. They add the significant dimension of time, entropy versus timelessness. Re-encounter or dismantling of a building, un-building, is intuitively suggested in their reflections, acutely drawing on a contemporary condition that most of the world would love to ignore, but the depth of which is intimately fused with the pendulum between transience and permanence.

Somehow, this highlights the choreography of *destabilising* – captured in Valerie Mulvin's de-folding of a wall - the contemporary dilemma of an over-designed and over-built world.

When Grafton Architects work on a project, the sketch is not only a sophisticated thinking tool, but also a powerful and immediate communication device in the office. And like the voice, the sketch seems to have a timbre – maybe even reflective of the depth or pitch of voice. Clarke and McCafferty have truly used the beauty of

the media: the film gives you voice and drawing together. The soft but powerful depth of Shelley McNamara's voice talking about rough wedges, geology, speed, city life...reflect the thick, dynamic darkness and roughness of structure in her sketches. Yvonne Farrell's extraordinarily delicate and rich drawings, like intricate stories are echoing her wide-ranged tone, but also the sharply poetic language. On tracing the drawings can overlap, like palimpsests reveal traces of the previous searches and trials. Apart from the sensuous dimensions, this is entirely different from clip and paste in the computer, where you also have only a limited part of the drawing in the window and cannot use your peripheral vision.

Drawing requires effort of some kind. Half discipline, half habit, it becomes part of your seeing and thinking. More important – drawing not only takes – but creates *qualified* time. It keeps the process open longer to expand and interrogate program, site, structure – to evolve architectural affinities and depths.

The element of part control, part attentive improvisation comes through in Tom de Paor's sketchbooks. Notations, sketches and cut out texts or images form mysterious collages, like messages with secret codes. It suggests an act of editing that is different to other sketches and drawings we see. Here they are elements of a more elaborate construction. The neat series of identical sketchbooks, like a careful system to catalogue precious fragments of insights, information and improvisations, within a

manageable personal library, seems part of a larger scientific project, a personal taxonomy. It is like a disciplined taming of the chaotic immersing in the world, an ordering of the scary disorderly creative flow – and it is in itself a kind of architecture.

This is a rich film with many layers. Shane O'Toole's wisdom and liberating frankness at the end is brilliant. "I hate design" is a quote I will bear at my heart.

So, see this film, show this film and spread this film. It is unique and important. Make a short version of 30 minutes for television, now, as it is accessible to an audience beyond architects.

Have I no objections or frustrations? It would be: *more*. One would love to see more of the actual drawing, act and item. Remember the documentary where Picasso is filmed drawing; you see the paper from behind and the ink coming through. But it is reversed so the drawing is as it is and appears to make itself. Without going to this rather overwhelming excess, architectural drawing and sketching on film is a full score.

*Drawing on Life* was first screened by the Irish Architecture Foundation at IMMA as part of *The Everyday Experience*. It was shown recently as part of The Belfast International Film Festival's Documentary Panorama. Screenings have taken place in Portugal and Canada with forthcoming ones in Seattle Public Library, Berlin and Sweden. Other International Film Festivals will be confirmed in August. [Drawingonlife.com](http://Drawingonlife.com)

"THIS FILM GIVES SIGNIFICANT AND UNIQUE INSIGHTS INTO WHY HOW AND WHEN HAND DRAWING ACTS IN THE PROCESS OF PERCEIVING AND MAKING ARCHITECTURE."

