

Beyond Control – Promoting Craft in the Practice of Architecture

In his essay "Intention, Craft and Rationality", Kenneth Frampton links the presence or absence of craftsmanship in architectural practice to the degrees of alienation experienced due to a division of labour that attends all forms of production. Although craft seems to have turned into a hackneyed notion overused beyond recognition, a structural inquiry into its history within a specific domain still proves useful insights. In the context of architecture, the notion of craft has connotations of a regressive utopia, and is often regarded as an opposing force against latest technologies. This paper will argue for a pragmatic and progressive understanding of craft instead of a romantic one, and will delineate an argument for sustaining materiality, embodied knowledge and context awareness within a design praxis that is undergoing a substantial change under the pressures of globalism and the Information Age.

The practice of designing and making in architecture is increasingly influenced by the utilisation of homogenising templates of design details, resulting in a proliferation of globally distributed building types without much response to local contingencies. In a landscape dominated by managerial culture, speed of construction rather than long term sustainability becomes the norm. This approach, favouring economies of scale over an economy of means, results in a decreasing interaction with the immediate environment and local materials. The practice of crafts however, requires active engagement with the environment and sustainable use of materials, as well as the knowledge of maintenance with respect to the finished artefact. By tracing the lineage of different types of expertise that inform the translation from the design to the built material artefact, it would be possible to define an alternative mode of practice and to propose a framework for defining future strategies for making in architecture. This argument is partly based on an ethno-archaeological study of 12 traditional stonemasons; coupled with a comparative qualitative study of 12 architects from small scale architectural practices. The major themes of the research arose from a historical investigation of the notion of craft in architecture that focused on the impact of socio-technical relations among the different experts in the building trade on the formation of architectural knowledge.

In the proposed paper, I will discuss various material strategies used by architects and craftsmen to delineate the impact of socio-technical relations on the nature of building practice. The discussion will involve a reconsideration of the construction site as the facilitating framework for the development of an indigenous practice informed by the larger context of locality, materiality and relations - a site of deviation from the globalising thrust of latest technologies. I will conclude by proposing an alternative environment that acknowledges different types of expertise by encouraging creative feedback among different actors, where the unilateral control of the architect is replaced by mutual trust between the designer and the builder.