

Essay

## Rue Des Martyrs *retreat*

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Slowly, from left to right, I inscribe a sharp but almost imperceptible pencil line across the surface of the paper, with the aid of a metal ruler. I always draw this horizontal line in exactly the same relation to the bottom of the page, so as to replicate the same procedure enacted upon all previous drawings. Unfortunately, I often find that each page has not been cut quite square, so the next line, a vertical one, is drawn with the aid of a set square, with which I apply two guiding pencil marks. I then take up the metal ruler again and draw a fine pencil line between these two points. Upon the page are now two lines crossing to form an off-centre axis, which inhabit the lower right-hand part of the page.

Apart from the first two or three drawings I inscribe, all subsequent drawings are drawn in direct relation to each other. It is in this sense, that each drawing is done almost simultaneously, with a constant flicking between pages, so as to ascertain what a line applied to an elevation will appear like, in plan or section.

Each drawing, although appearing as a discrete element upon each page, is nevertheless one of a series of inter-related mediations, existing within the covers of a printed or increasingly digital folio, which is the final work, and not the individual drawings themselves. This linear relationship of one drawing to another, forming a complex matrix of fragments which delineate the projected object, is one of the fundamental characteristics of architectural drawing, which are always seen to exist in parenthesis.

Architectural drawing has primarily two sites or fields of investigation.

The first is simply the picture plane, either paper or screen; its size, colour, materiality, the particularities of the language of architectural representation and whichever visual ideology you choose to employ. The second is the chosen geographical site, its cultural and physical location, orientation, climate and ground conditions. Both are seen to bear down upon the activity of drawing, to the extent that the discrete relationships of lines upon and within the picture plane, play a role in shaping the built object at least equal to the socioeconomic collective activity that finally allows drawings to be built.

This tension between the two primary sites of architectural speculation, the space of the picture plane and the collective moment is what marks out architectural drawing from other related disciplines and should not therefore be seen as an impediment to creativity, but as a fundamental constituent of what it means to practice as an architect.

It is in this sense, that by inscribing lines upon or within a surface, to suggest an equal relationship with the field of the grounding material, that I consciously attempt not to prioritise the drawn lines over and above the drawing's relational aspects. An off-centre emphasis pushes the notion of a projected object situated within a subordinate field to one side, thereby allowing the drawing as object to speak first.

Compositions which alternately place the projected object within the centre of the drawing, give the impression that the surface is mere lumpen ground for expression and not the primary element in the construction of meaning. Off-centre compositions somehow allow lines to float within the conceptual space of the picture plane, appearing quite lost, without discernible foundation, drifting free within a sea of relation.

To enter the world of the drawing is to give up a certain sense of grounding in what we understand to be day to day reality.

The authorial activity that is able to translate simple marks upon the picture plane into coded relational lines within the picture plane, is a process whereby the author moves slowly into the simultaneous reality of the space of the drawing, a space which paradoxically knows no hard and fast borders or a sense of its own mortality.

This is not a representation this is simply the true condition of architectural drawing.

To draw is to both dream through line; a purely involuntary negotiation, which involves a certain giving up of authorial intentionality, letting line follow its own internal exigencies and to use line as a simple mimetic code, which holds onto the physical world, managing to translate complex phenomenon into a relatively abstract language, which enables a universality, readable across space and time.

Yet these two ways of working with line appear as a contradiction, how is it possible to both let line dictate how the composition develops and also to consciously use line as if a tool? The answer lies in a certain intimacy with the codes, which allow one to employ line without having to constantly ask, how should I use this line to show this or that detail? This may suggest that by working with an abstract language over time, similar to written language, one develops an ease with its structures and internal expectations to the extent they become ingrained deep within one's consciousness.

The same process which allows me to write these words without having to check my grammar, spelling or if the words are working for me and expressing what I want to say, is the same process whereby I can draw lines which have a direct relation to the material world of objects, without having to check whether the lines run away with themselves, and are describing characteristics to objects which they are not capable of.

The greater the intimacy with the codes of architectural representation, the more one is able to let go of intentionality to the extent that one starts to feel the strength of line seducing you to explore its discrete world, distinct from its character as an instrumental tool.

The more one draws the more one's work is inevitably situated within a realm of desire and bliss.

For the sooner one leaves simple ideology behind and gives up the attempt to use line to express an external idea, the sooner one realises that to draw, is to enter into a tense negotiation between the infantile ordinances of line and the authors particular idiosyncrasies. The author may choose to use line as a simple tool, but I think that author will never discover the surprising play of line and will be forever limited in their conceptions.

It is my contention that by giving up a certain amount of intentionality, that one is able to start to investigate how line pushes and structures the architectural imagination. This not a contradiction, but a tension which allows one to fall into the world of line, yet always with one foot placed firmly within the simple mimetic tradition of architectural representation. To choose to explore one path to the exclusion of the other is to step into the field of other related disciplines, and so is to give up the hard-won title of an architect.

This quality to architectural practice is perhaps unique, in that it collapses two seeming opposites, the transcendent and the relational and I think therefore, we should build on this opportunity and try not to deny it by convincing ourselves that it is possible to practice either pure aestheticism or blind instrumentality. For just perhaps, this is one key to a future which can work outside of the easy oppositions which we are constantly plagued by.

Gordon Shrigley 2020.