

IN CONVERSATION WITH PAUL

VAN HERK

"If you fail you can send it to Thames and Hudson"

I started thinking of Major Project as a place to put everything I had been thinking and reading about, particularly in regards to the city, the suburbs and migrant culture. I just started writing and doing graphics. I took advantage of the fact that Corrigan is quite hands off for the first half of the semester and I did what I wanted to do, which was to write. Gradually that writing became what I called 'fodder' for whatever Major Project was. I pitched the final product as an RMIT major project, particular with the colour choice at the

project has to have purpose. It has to be explicit and there were a few moments in Major Project where the things that helped me the most were the most earnest things that I wrote. One of which was just a diary entry and was just literally how I was feeling at the time. A lot of this was figured in whatever I was modelling in grey rhinoland, and it became a form, quite literally, or with a few layers of associations - quick and nasty expressions of those bigger ideas.

So there was a sort of

adding meaning to it, until you start discerning it from other things. I think that's a dialectic that's been going on since the beginning of architecture but especially going back to the rationalists. In Piranesi's eyes: "we gotta juice this up, gotta add vines and ruins and circus people to these images, to put the romance back into it". During the enlightenment as well, with the French and English landscapers: "it's not Wordsworth enough for us!".

What we think of now as the rationalists weren't

This was a big thing for me in Major too - plan analytics and strategies to 'activate' streets. Swanston street is an example of the City of Melbourne's 'great' urban design policies, with Jahn Ghel, but as far as I can see its just creating another big shopping strip and not everyone wants to be with crowds of people walking past H and M everyday. For me that's not what the city is about.

All that space syntax is used to design airports and new precincts like OMA's Euralille in north of France,

SOME DIY CIVIC JISMS



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end, pure graphic sluttery - whatever's going to stand out on the wall the most.

So you framed your textual and graphic explorations as a project right at the end?

Yeah and that wasn't unfitting for my thesis either which was the notion of cheating or lying as a cultural move, to open up new possibilities where there are stuck positions. I made this great effort to avoid the word subversion at all costs because it becomes this kind of Banksy shtick where it's like, "o it's so clever but it's so mainstream, so what is it? Does it still have its potency?"... I was trying to avoid that kind of ironic, nudge-nudge-wink-wink criticism. Just because you're being nudge-nudge-wink-wink critical of your own complicity, doesn't make you any less complicit. The

faith that whatever you were writing would translate into modelling space and that it would work, albeit esoterically or confusingly?

To me in hindsight, especially going for the practice award the other week, I pitched to them that it was about expression and that's the nature of expressing anything, there is always a leap between the ideas that you can write about and the ones that you can draw - imagery and form. I don't think there is ever an explicit expression of anything without a leap of some sort.

It's that old dialectic of language and form. Language is explicit and differentiates between things; form is something that is an offer, a gift, refers to nothing but itself, until you start

logicians as such, there wasn't any less feeling in what they were doing. There is so much emotion in it, whether it was suppressing or expressing emotion. You can see it in Le Corbusier's paintings which are pretty bad and have this kind of autistic quality to them. It's not something you can choose to side with. It is there and we can either celebrate it or suppress it. In the case of most things that are built, particular in Melbourne if you look around here, they don't choose to engage with that at all, their not choosing emotion in it, because it's not a choice between emotion and language, it's a choice between both of those things and money.

What about architecture as a pseudo-science? Pattern language and urbanism theories for example?

maybe there's just not enough being plugged into it in terms of the soft appeal of places, it's all very hard nose.

Despite that though, you're major wasn't a catalyst project, it was a pretty hardboiled proposition.

I felt like that was important in the same way that writing was important. In academic writing there is a lot of opinion, a lot of theorising, nothing to really take home with you. My desire is always to just put it straight out there, something very explicit, and start from there. Rather than circle around it. I was reading a lot about power relations and how architects are always working for those in power and blah blah but the question remains of that social theory is: ok, what do we do? Given that

loads of shitty apartments are being built anyway, how do we wedge in there and change the culture in opposition to coming up with a rarified example of how we can be way better, usually for those in power?

I have this feeling that human beings are fundamentally hubristic, always operating in the realm of hypocrisies.

Ideology is one part of the hypocrisy. If you only practice and don't preach then you can't really be hypocritical. You're just doing what you're doing. Corrigan attempted to pull the rug out from under me a couple of times, which is his job I guess, but one time when he was looking through my writing he says, "this looks like ideology." And he made it sound like a bad thing but it's not necessarily a bad thing. He said another time, "if you fail you can send it to Thames and Hudson" and had a giggle about it.

But Ideology is productive thing right? Or is it a bullshit narcissistic thing like Corrigan might have made you feel?

That's one thing I like about MCR, my employers,

decided to embrace it. And so jisms, the dualisms, like sperm are necessary to create and in the shear multiplicity of dualisms they cease to be oppressive and become potentially life giving things. So one half of the project is these life-giving dualisms, the jisms, and the other half is the gift, the tenuous expression of the entire multiple. These forms, the gift, were quick and nasty. Not much refinement and in the end it was a sort of omelette fold in a frying pan. To strengthen the idea that it's a feedback, it's a practice, it isn't "this is what I want for the world... there you go... a solution" but a practice between language and creation (creation ala rhino).

How does MP carry with you at the moment then?

That's tough. I don't really set my own tasks. Its carried through teaching at RMIT I guess. I don't think the ideas in MP are necessarily architectural ones, there's some urban ones and some ideas about character and making intentional cultures. So far the avenue I have had to explore that is through the elective I've been running. And that's not

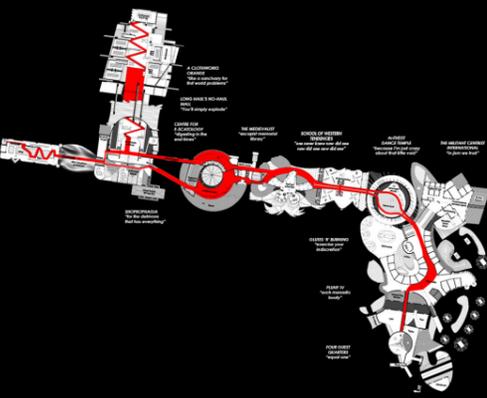


Apollonian, masculine and feminine energies, which don't necessarily correlate with the gender of people. There are a lot of masculine energies. The academy is all about differentiating people from one another. But getting behind feelings has always been just as important as ideas. I feel like the institution is missing this in a big way and teaching an elective nobody at the school gives a shit about has the opportunity to explore it. A lot of architects and designers talk about pro-social spaces but in their very practice, their office environment, they are not pro-social. They are competitive. And so you can't put out there in the world what you haven't created in

standards. Definitely not about admin either. Just the fact that I am allowed to run my elective and everyone is cool with it is a great sign that there's heaps of room for going for it and trying out different ways of teaching. Most universities wouldn't be open for it because they have all this content they've gotta push in the course. That's the crux of it. Content is important and character is not.

That's what's most productive for me at the university, the conversation, the cooperation, and it seems imperative to architectural practice...

Most of the time during major project I just wanted people



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they don't preach anything ethically, they just do stuff and they've done some great stuff. But my thesis was full of ideology and I don't shy away from that. I'd have a hernia if I did because I'm really drawn to it. There are a lot of 'should be's' in there which isn't necessarily a bad thing. But I think you have to be careful with them – to deliver many 'should be's' at the same time. That's where the title of my thesis came from, the word 'jism' means explicitly about four things and that pluralism is important to me. As opposed to saying it could mean anything in that pomo hand-washing way, "o no no, it can mean anything you make of it". One of the big idea's is that jism is an abbreviation of dualism, that western culture structures things as dualistic oppositions, and I certainly do that, and I

through writing but through facilitating people which is completely new ground for me. It doesn't have an explicit outcome either. It's not a repetition of practice. Starchitects everywhere, they repeat themselves so much because their ego is so invested in replicating itself and I see it in the academy as well where these teachers get really stuck and they're always looking for the same thing because they're flattered by seeing students take their word as gospel and go and make it happen.

What you're describing there sounds like that gross 19th century Darwinian notion of the male wanting to replicate his own genes...

..Old tribal culture embedded in this supposedly radical institution... I was writing about the Dionysian and

your own world.

Where are the examples of a non-competitive non-masculine office environment?

Maybe it's not something an office needs to have, an inbred tribal culture of people caring for each other but it has more to do with very subtle things. People being able to communicate their weaknesses and people being able to ask for help and offer help. They are all very personality based things that might not even be a systematic problem, except for the lack of exposure to pro-social cooperative behaviour at university. The university has very much distanced itself from that. RMIT has the best potential of anywhere for it because theyaren't a highly ranked university, they are more about character and not about strict, across-the-board

to fuck off, I wanted my own space, basically. Hypocrisy and ideology. And so I guess I speak about these things from a point of view of seeing how these things could be really damaging. Coming from a position of not really practicing it very well. In a lot of cases that's not such a bad thing because most of the time the teachers that can teach the best are the ones that have really had to go through it, rather than teachers for which it came naturally. The function of ideology is not to say, "you should all be like this", its an aspirational thing; "lets try and be like that", me included, or me especially. It's hard to turn up to class and say, "lets learn some stuff, coz I don't know anything either"... that's truly speculative.