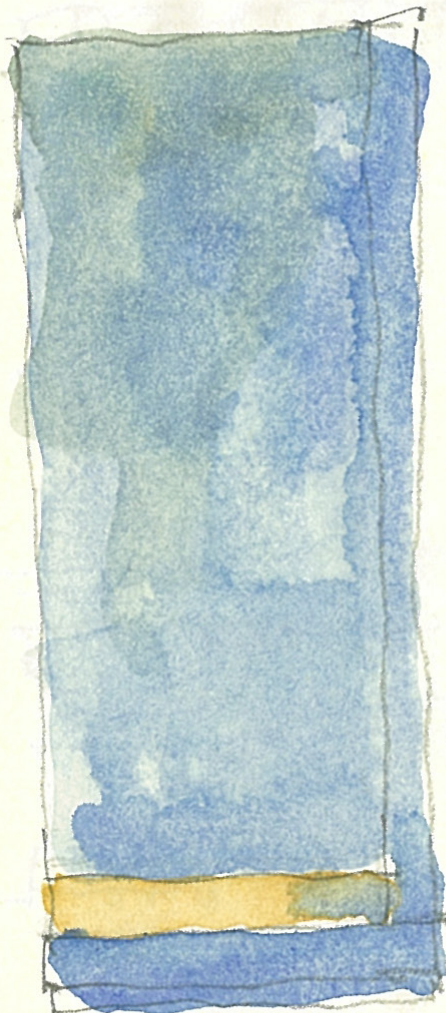


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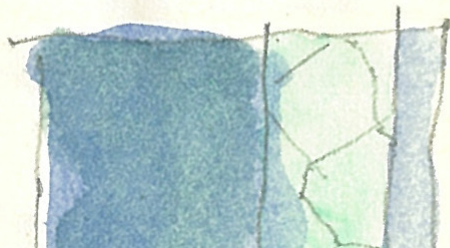
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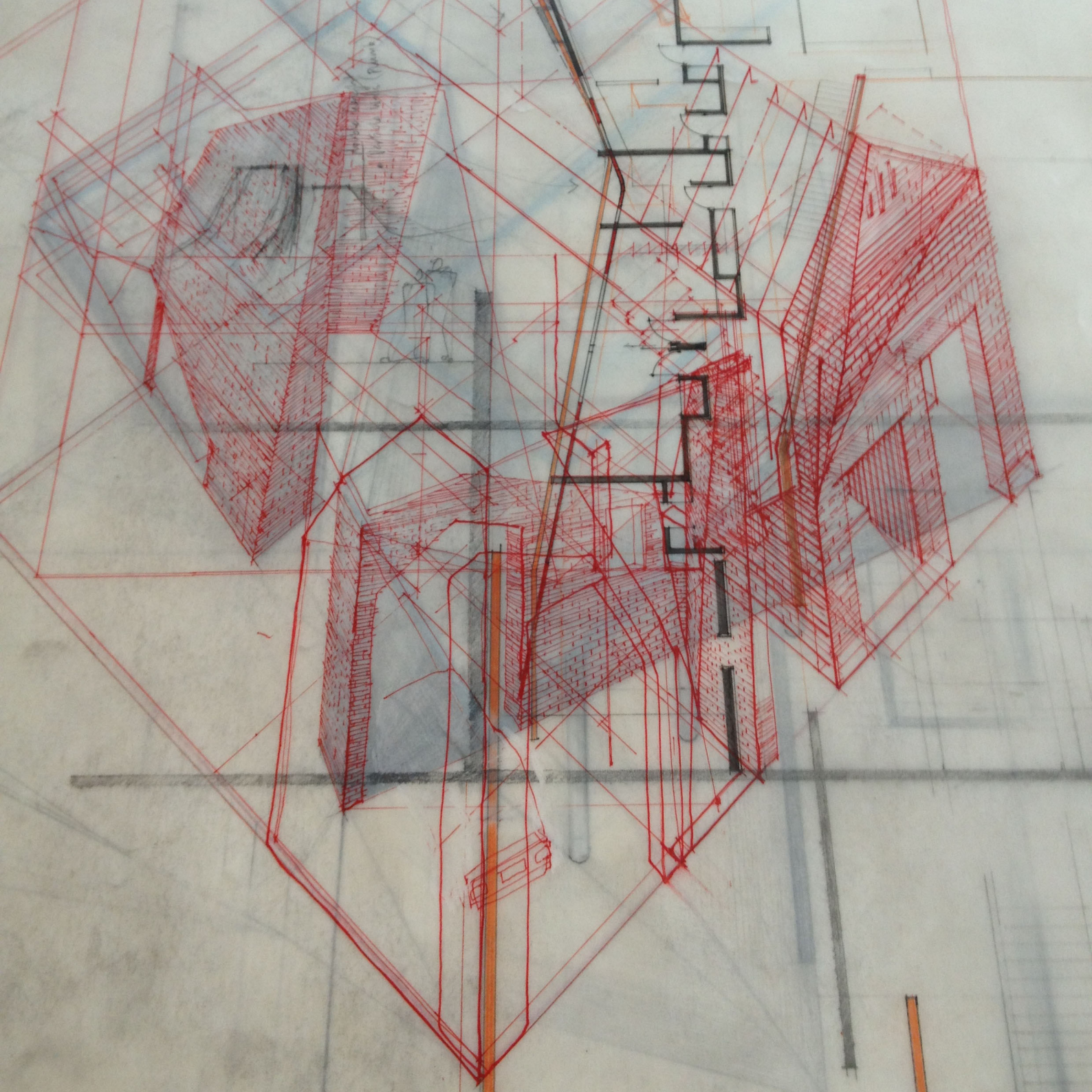


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Manual inscriptions of the everyday

SASA GALLERY

17 September - 18 October 2013

Manual: inscriptions of the everyday

Ceridwen Owen

01 beginnings

The good craftsman understands the importance of the sketch – that is, not knowing quite what you are about when you begin.¹

Where, then, to begin? With the hand, answers Pallasmaa, the thinking hand that leads us in probing the vast open space of beginnings.² An array of tools lies at our disposal as ‘bridges’ between imagination and visualisation. Through these tools, and the almost unconscious dialogue between hand and mind, the idea materialises in the sketch and we realise that we have already begun.

02 handcraft

This dialogue is the craftsman’s art. Sennett describes it as “sustaining habits [that] establish a rhythm between problem solving and problem finding”.³ The rhythm emerges through repetition, an intimacy of knowing and doing. Traces of this rhythm are recorded in material form in the marks of the maker’s hands and tools – a tangible register of the intimate dialogue between mind and hand.

Herein lies the power of the handmade object, writ large in Poulet’s *Manual (Aspiring to be Human)*. In the handmade we delight in seeing the dynamics of practice within the stasis of the artefact, whether recognising the ordinary within the extraordinary (the repetitive action of the artist’s hand) or the extraordinary within the ordinary (the everyday objects crafted by unknown hands). Each unique formation emerges through a distinctive relationship between minds, hands, materials and tools.

What dimensions characterise this relationship? From a normative conceptualisation of handcraft, mind, body and material are tightly bound and locally situated. Materials, hands and tools are woven together, each one shaping the other, and the ‘craft’ is embodied in individual objects and makers.

What, then, of architecture, which must negotiate a more complex terrain? In this field, the space between designing and making continues to expand, mediated by multiple hands, minds, materials and tools. Architecture is literally ‘mass produced’, materially and socially.

As material practices shift in response to changing technologies, societal expectations and an increasingly regulated environment, hand and material are no longer so intimately connected. While the hand sculpted moulding of earthen cob construction may be a relic of a bygone era, is the calculated precision of digital design and fabrication a bridge too far, severing the embodied connection between hand and material and undermining the productive imprecision of the sketch? Perhaps it is just a question of who (or what) is in control – craft is sustained through the capacity for manual manipulation and material resistance. Rael San Fratello’s subversive manoeuvres with 3D printers to create digital earth structures are exemplary here – blurring the polarities of material practice as a form of digitally fabricated cob.⁴

Yet, this issue of control is also critical in relation to the social production of architecture. Given the contingencies and complexities of practice, in what ways can the distinction of ‘craftsmanship’ accrue in individuals and artefacts? Arguably the craft of architecture lies in the participatory frameworks of its production – from conceptualisation to inhabitation. These frameworks can be neither tightly conceived nor permissively abstract but must engage the characteristics of the sketch – an incomplete yet nascent picture of the whole.

03 handbook

If the good craftsman understands the importance of the sketch, then the good teacher must offer similarly loose frameworks for instruction. What, then, of the manual? As textbook the manual presupposes ordering, specifying, clarifying and objective precision. As handbook, however, the manual invites a different interpretation – handy, palm sized, traces of the hand inscribed on the pages through worn corners and scribbles in the margins. These are not faithful texts to be emulated, but catalysts for exploration.

Improvisation remains key – the handbook is personalised, adapted, ‘rules’ are transformed or transgressed in testing the limits of possibilities. This must be enacted through the body, but the handbook is instrumental in creating a shared context for practice. The potential lies in the necessary slippage between the abstract world of the handbook and the concrete world of handcraft. Nowhere is this more critical than in the context of urban design where, as Hamdi argues, in the ‘swamp of the everyday’, design can only proceed through an interplay between abstract theory (rules, logic, facts) and embodied practice (trial-by-error, emotions, intuition).⁵

This relationship between resistance and ambiguity, bodily practice and improvisation is vital in developing technique. Thus, there is a potentially productive misalignment of manual (text) and manual (craft) where the 'tool' is not quite fit-for-purpose.⁶ Nevertheless, the handbook is neither immutable nor mute and, as Gini Lee reveals, there are new discursive territories that the manual can inhabit in making and unmaking our world.

04 flatland and swampland

What of the craft of writing itself? For those who do not write, this is a hidden craft. The logic or apparent flow of the final narrative obscures the messy, bodily practices that brought it into being – wrestling words, sentences and phrases into place. Where to begin? For me, almost never at the terrifying precipice of the first sentence. Employing the tactic of the thinking hand, a 'sketch' emerges – a loose and often distorted view of the whole. Oscillating between hand and head, structure and random notations, computer and pencil, the narrative slowly consolidates.

The craft of writing is analogous to the process of design, requiring similar tactics of interplay between abstraction (structure and logic) and embodied practice (intuition and flights of fancy). Yet on the 'flatland' of the page the richness and emotional turmoil – frustration, delight, surprise – are invisible.⁷ Inspired by Tufte's remarkable collection of visual representations of complex information and Wigglesworth and Till's *Increasing Disorder in a Dining Table*, which traces (in reverse) the movements of cutlery and crockery over the course of a meal, it is tempting to map these invisible practices.⁸ In unpicking the 'order' of the final narrative the intangible beginnings, the dances of words around (and off) the page, and the complex, messy practices that brought it into being are revealed. The swampland of the everyday emerges from the privileged abstracted perfection of beginnings (food) or ends (texts).

05 navigating

In the handbook, both beginning and end are marked by ordering devices orchestrating practices of movement in navigating the territory of the text. In the space of beginnings, the table of contents acts as a thematic ordering device, offering both a 'sense' of the whole and a map to assist in navigating to points of interest or relevance. In the space of endings, the index provides more targeted references to potential points of interest. However, navigating the fluidity between words and meanings commonly results in a flow of movement back and forth before the search hits the mark. Less crafted movements are enabled by flicking

through the pages, pausing at particular points as words or images capture our attention. In this way the manual is not a flatland but a spatial territory in which personal journeys of discovery are enabled and enacted.

06 manual: inscriptions of the everyday

In navigating the complex conceptual territory of the manual, Rachel Hurst and Jane Lawrence similarly invite different journeys of discovery. *The Table of Content*, which foregrounds this exhibition, is both a spatial and thematic ordering device. The spatial relocation from 'beginning' to 'centre' amplifies its role as the primary site of navigation. Here, beginnings and endings coincide, as the *Table of Content* is simultaneously the container for the dispersed and portable index, manifest as elements of 'hand luggage'. Liberated from the flatland, the *Table of Content* and index are also sites of performance and exchange prompting play, touch and conversation and informally recording the traces of movements through the relocation or removal of the hand luggage over time.

As physical artefact, site of navigation and site of exchange, the *Table of Content* prefigures the three themes of the exhibition through the notion of the manual as making, instruction and contact. It is a sketch of the whole – a participatory framework for the architecture of curation.

And as for where to begin? Well as Davis foreshadows, there are 100 useful beginnings.

1. Sennett, R. 2008. *The Craftsman*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
2. Pallasmaa, J. 2009. *The Thinking Hand: Existential and embodied wisdom in architecture*, Chichester, UK: Wiley, p.17.
3. Sennett, *The Craftsman*, p. 9.
4. See www.rael-sanfratello.com p.804.
5. Hamdi, N. 2004. *Small Change*, London: Earthscan, p. xxii.
6. Sennett, *The Craftsman*, p. 194.
7. The notion of 'flatland' is taken from Tufte, E. 1990. *Envisioning Information*, Cheshire, Connecticut: Graphics Press.
8. Images of Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till's *Increasing Disorder in a Dining Table* can be viewed at <http://www.ediblegeography.com/dining-disorder>.

Acknowledgements

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Images:

Front: Michael Geissler, *Pencil Landscape 81*, 2009

Centre: Damien Chwalisz, *Manual: reverse engineered*, 2013

Back: Peter Malatt, *I'm trying Ringo (Jules, Vincent and Honey Bunny)*, 2013