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# CRAFT AND COMPOSITION: NOTES ON ARCHITECTURAL AUTHORSHIP

Michiel Riedijk

Architecture is about ideas represented in compositions. Ideas about the project, the social relevance of the design, spatiality and materiality, and the relationship between the designer and his own discipline are implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – reflected in the ultimate design.

## DICIPLINE: IDEA, MODEL & TEXT

The architect produces a design in reply to a question from a client, and believes the design is the most appropriate answer to the initial question or spatial need. The architectural design thus always represents the designer's conceptual position in relation to the project, and reveals his range of different ideas about it. The designer's ideas solidify into drawings, scale models and texts. The ultimate realisation of his ideas in buildings very much depends on others – clients, funders and contractors – and increasingly often it lies beyond the architect's control. In the first instance, and sometimes even in the last instance, the architect will only be able to realise his ideas on paper or in the glued pieces of cardboard and wood used for the model. The notation and documentation of ideas in drawings and models – the design – are thus the architect's true core task. Texts, drawings and models are the best instruments he can use to describe the form of the designed object as accurately as possible. This object depicts a future that has yet to be realised in brick, steel and timber.



Jan van Eyck (1390-1441): Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife (oil on wood, 1434), National Gallery, London.



The designer's idea, his position in relation to the project, is displayed in the composition of the design. The composition of the ground plan, the cross-section or the elevation can be read and is developed in the drawing and the model.

It is in the text that the architect can become detached from the act of designing. The text embodies reflection on the profession. Unlike drawings and models – products of the act of design – architectural texts are the starting points for disciplinary thinking. Drawings and models are tautological elements of design. They are the means whereby the idea is explored and takes shape. At the same time, they are the result of the design effort. They are thus part of a potentially infinite iterative process of alteration and completion. The essence of architectural design lies in the production and constant alteration of the drawing and the model.

The drawing and the model operate in different areas and can be expressed in very different ways. The model is a narrative instrument that can convey the exact proportions, dimensions, colours and textures of the design, whereas the drawing is merely a projection of reality through scale, coding and abstraction. The model is evocative, imaginative, and shows a reduced but inclusive reality; the drawing is selective and can only display a reduced part of reality. The drawing, and particularly the sketch, shows what the designer is trying to do. That medium forces the designer to draw only what is truly relevant to the design. It depicts what the designer wants to make – a potential future that will in some cases only be depicted on paper.

Depicting an as yet unbuilt reality as accurately as possible on paper or in clay, cardboard or polystyrene is largely the result of an act that may be termed «craftsmanship» – a skill honed by repetition and practice. Here craftsmanship means a knowledge system based on skills that are developed in the course of the act. The skill is enhanced by altering the initial idea and retracing the vague sketch over and over again, thus gradually improving it, in the act of design. This craftsmanship is the heart of design. Paradoxically, disciplinary conceptualisation about architecture begins with knowledge of the designer's craftsmanship. In architecture, midway between a craft and a discipline, there appears to be a polarity between craftsmanlike action and disciplinary thinking. What counts is not what the designer makes, but how it is done and what it is based on.

**CRAFT: POSITION, COMPOSITION, MATERIALIZATION**  
Richard Sennett's book *«The Craftsman»* investigates the relationship between the skill with which something is made and its quality. Among other things, Sennett states

that the quality of the end product is implicit in the act of making it, in its craftsmanship – and this applies whether we are talking about making violins or architectural design. The quality of the work is largely determined by the tried and tested relationship between eye and hand – in other words, between thinking and doing. Repeating a particular act over and over again creates meaning for the practitioner or the craftsman. The user of the craftsman's product has a better product thanks to the skill embedded in the maker's muscle memory. In this sense, «craftsmanship» does not mean a nostalgic or historicising attitude to a particular activity or act, but explicitly examines the relationship between the act of making (or, in this case, designing) and its result.

The craftsman is a generalist who has mastered all the facets of the production process and seems capable of resisting the continual erosion of skills and working conditions. *«The Craftsman»* can be read as a call for a design process in which the architect once again concerns him-self with all the facets of his craft, and so can achieve the best result both for his client and for himself.

The boundaries of the architect's craft can only be marked out by examining the architect's position, taking account of the nature of the architectural composition and ultimately also the way in which the design is materialised. Hence architecture consists of three different poles: the position, the composition and materialization of the design. The architectural design is the synthesis of these three poles. The drawing and the model represent this synthesis.

The position an architect or designer adopts with regard to society and to the given task, should be central to any consideration of architectural designing. The architect must adopt a position, since the architectural design forms the basis for the construction of a building or part of the built environment which will, at best, meet a social need for many years to come.

Craftsmanship is directly related to the organisation of working and production conditions in the designer's studio. The nature of architectural production is also largely determined by the specific role the architect chooses to play in the design and construction process and his position in relation to it. What is crucial here is his position in relation to sociocultural developments or societal phenomena, such as the current emphasis on sustainability. His traditional position in the design and production of buildings is changing as a result of ever-increasing division of labour. How should the architect design in today's working and production conditions? As his role is transformed by division of labour, is he still capable of producing a relevant design?

The nature of the position is of crucial importance and often very diverse. Every designer, or every form of professional practice, generates its own position or standpoint. Is it possible, in this thoroughly pragmatic age, with our professional group of small businessmen and women, to develop ethical criteria that would make it possible to reject certain preconditions? Should an architect accept every commission that comes his way? What is the nature of the task, what are the specific socio-cultural conditions or traditions under which the architect will have to work? How does the designer relate to past and future? Are the knowledge, expertise and strategies of architecture's rich past an integral part of his thinking? The position of the architect is self-evidently the result or reflection of the specific working and production relationships within which he or she is prepared to operate.

The second pole in architectural thought is composition. The architect begins by making a drawing. The drawing is a composition of architectural elements. The composition is part of the expression of the architectural idea and is relatively independent of the chosen position or the materialization of the design. Architecture is a language with its own grammar, rules and compositional principles. These can be learned and communicated by drawing buildings and studying designs. The drawing of each new building, however eccentric or contemporary the design, can always be understood with reference to drawings and knowledge of other buildings. The language of architectural composition is a knowledge system based on axes, grids, proportions and typologies. The composition of the design and the arrangement of architectural elements can be understood with reference to concepts like symmetry, mirror image, repetition, rhythm, stacking, pattern, texture, spatial form, cavity, concave and convex spaces or the relation between planes and openings, between full and empty. More dynamic concepts like spatial development, parti and poché, routing or something as intangible as the changing incidence of light, are also part of the architectural composition. All these concepts apply to the plan, section and elevation of a design and are evident in the drawing.

The question of meaningful composition is also directly related to the notion that design is essentially an act of craftsmanship. Does each design require a unique compositional system to be defined afresh, or is the act of design subject to universally applicable rules and reasons? In a craft, constant repetition of design motifs and themes continually improves each successive design and takes it further. Does the architect always essentially work on one and the same task, despite all his different projects, or does he work each time on something new that has to be developed completely from scratch?

The third pole in architectural thinking is materialization. Architectural projects become reality in the material or, to put it another way, you build with your shoes in the mud. The excitement that takes hold of you when you feel the pressure of freshly poured concrete against the toe and sides of your boots, links materialization and construction quite literally to sensory experience. Matter is difficult to control, is intractable and coarse. In our profession, thinking about materiality is often determined by technical issues that directly affect the nature and quality of the design. The skills the architect needs in order to organize the material in a drawing have to do with things like gravity, the thickness and weight of the material, the dimensions of the grid, patterns, texture, the length of the span or the chosen construction method. The organization of the materiality of the design calls for a systematization of designing and the design process. In architectural thinking there has always been a lot of emphasis on organizing the material form of the design. From the proportions of the base of a Doric column it was possible to deduce the organization of the design as a whole. The form of the detail reflected the organization of the entire design.

#### AUTHORSHIP

The question of what the architect is actually doing also raises questions about his authorship. Is the architect a creative author with the will to produce a specific work, or do the conditions imposed on him inevitably result in something interchangeable, something that could as easily have been produced by someone else? The discourse about authorship can be examined in the light of the development and alteration of themes from the architect's own work. How does the architect act in his studio? How are designs produced, and what instruments are used for this? What are the respective roles of the model and the drawing? Now that the computer enables the architect to manage all the design data within a single integrated information system, do models and drawings still serve any purpose?

The role of the computer is another key factor in understanding the position of the architect within the process of division of labour. The first use of the computer in art and architecture was supposed to erase the artist's, composer's or architect's personal signature. The calculations and changes made by the computer were purely arithmetical and seemingly objective: the drawn result was the outcome of algorithms devoid of arbitrary personal taste.

But now the computer has become the opposite: since it enables us to document the designed object precisely and describe it with infinite accuracy, it would seem to provide endless scope for individual expression. Yet in

practice it has led to great uniformity and lack of variety. Work by different designers is now indistinguishable, because they use the same computer techniques. The computer seems to disguise any precise expression of the designer's chosen position. Its seemingly perfect representation of reality obscures his position and his intentions. Computer-generated drawings lack the selection mechanism inherent in manual sketches and drawings. Is the computer drawing then meaningless as a notation of architectural ideas, since there is seemingly no longer any need to distinguish between main and side issues?

In the painting 'Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife' by the Flemish artist Jan van Eyck (1390-1441) we see a man and woman standing hand in hand. The man is shown on the left-hand of the painting, the woman on the right. The man's right hand is raised; the woman, who is almost certainly pregnant, has lovingly placed her left hand on her swollen belly. The man is looking at the viewer; the woman is looking down. A small dog stands guard at the couple's feet. Behind the man we see a window with a view of the outside world; behind the woman we see a red divan bed surrounded by draperies. In every respect the husband and wife are in mirror-like symmetry: indoors/outdoors, colourful/restrained, left/right, black/white, narrative/form, structure/phenomenon. At the heart of the composition, exactly two thirds of the way up, we see a mirror on the rear wall of the room. All the lines in the composition appear to converge in the mirror. On closer inspection we can see the painter himself reflected in it, standing behind his easel.

This painting is one of his most important works. The artist's inconspicuous presence at the centre of the scene makes us aware that what we see is first and foremost a representation of his idea. Could he really see himself in the mirror, or did he put that in later? Was the woman still pregnant when the painting was completed? Did the man and the woman really look like this? At the heart of the composition, the artist himself finally speaks. The heart of every design is formed by the designer's position in relation to it. The way in which he turns the subject matter into a material composition is his work. As in Van Eyck's painting, it is ultimately the architect's interpretation of the project, his central idea or position, we perceive as architecture. His intentions, obsessions and wishes are ultimately the focus of architectural thinking. At the heart of every composition is its author.

**Michiel Riedijk, born 1964**  
studied architecture at the Technical University Delft. He is cofounder of Neutelings Riedijk Architects in Rotterdam. Since 2007 he is professor in Architecture «Public Building» at the Technical University in Delft. He was a guest professor at the RWTH Aachen in 2002. He gives lectures and workshops at universities, architecture institutes and museums worldwide among which Beijing, Moscow, Princeton, Los Angeles, London, Quito and Seattle. In 2010 Neutelings Riedijk was awarded the 'BNA Kubus', the prestigious award of the Dutch league of Architects for their whole oeuvre.