

TRYING TO THINK IN A CONNECTED SORT OF WAY: PART II

ANDREW BALLANTYNE IN CONVERSATION WITH STEFAN KOLLER

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QUESTION: *There seems to be something important to you at the level of pure methodology, regardless of the philosophical content engaged. Is that something that you think is peculiar to philosophy or is philosophy one of the disciplines that might bring method to architecture? Why is method not already inherent to architecture as an academic discipline? Why is the methodological stringing together of content not already inherent to architecture as an academic discipline?*

ANSWER: It's not that thinking is especially isolated in philosophy, or in architecture, or in anywhere else. I don't think that thinking in architecture is necessarily less rigorous than in other places. I think thinking in architecture is very rigorous about certain sorts of things, but equally rather lax, or typically rather lax, in some other ways.

That's probably true of all disciplines, but we have different ways of making use of information, different ways of thinking about things, or coming close to thinking about things. I put things on a scale ranging from common sense at one end of the scale to perhaps something more like logic thought at the other. When you're dealing with common sense, it's not philosophical thinking, you're recognizing a pattern of events and assuming that that pattern of events will repeat itself the way it did when you encountered it the last time. Most of the time, that kind of recognition works.

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tomorrow, are fairly similar and we can go through them in a similar way. Not by thinking out the situation afresh but by remembering what we did yesterday and the day before, and in fact we stop thinking about it, we just go through our routine, habitual patterns, and everything is fine and everything continues the way it did. But if we want to change things or we're faced with a fresh problem, then we have to do a different sort of thinking, which may involve an element of recognizing patterns from what we did before. Also, you need to make some sort of analysis, maybe have some sort of creative response to what it is. Maybe it's a matter of logical deduction, but there's a different kind of thinking that goes on. That's the kind of thinking that it's important for me to engage with when I'm writing.

I don't have to do that every day in every way. I wouldn't get through the day if I did. A lot of things I just do as routine. When it's a matter of academic work, academic thinking, then you do have to think. Philosophy is good at prioritizing that sort of thinking discipline. Actually Michel Tournier described philosophers as the professionals of thought. He studied philosophy as a student alongside Deleuze, and it took him completely by surprise when he failed the exams that Deleuze passed. He went on to become a novelist and won the Prix Goncourt, but there's a wistful tone when he talks about philosophers. Thinking is their business and they show you how to do it. There's other ways of doing it, but philosophy is good, it's rigorous, and it really makes you think. The other person I really like on that subject is David Hume, who describes himself being sent into depression by the isolation that comes with rigorous philosophical thinking. He says that if he needs a remedy for that, it's easy to find. He just seeks out company – a game of backgammon – and all his philosophical problems disappear. He regains the will to live or whatever it is. He was a sociable person. We're all sociable people, and we feel good and comfortable with the world if we're engaged with conversation and so on. That doesn't get you thinking philosophically. In order to think rigorously and logically, you do have to withdraw and internalize. It's quite an isolated process. Maybe there are philosophers who can conduct Socratic dialogues with others, but for me that kind of conversation makes best sense if you think of it as articulating the different voices in your own head. Maybe I haven't met the right people. But I recognize what I do as feeling like what Hume describes. So you need to be able to do that and then to function as a human being, you need to come out of it.

Hume's punch line is his remedy for the depression that comes with philosophical work is carelessness and inattention. He says, "for this reason I rely entirely upon them." His method is a method of carelessness

and inattention, but that's a method for living, not a method for doing philosophy.

Q: How extraordinary to bring out the contribution of philosophy in that light when it's philosophy that kind of temporarily puts ordinary life and common sense on hold, as in Hume. Nothing ultimately, if you narrowly attend to it, even the collision of billiard balls, makes sense anymore and you have to relapse into custom to even be able to get by. It makes philosophy pull away from common, ordinary life.

In one of your most recent works, "Architecture, Life, and Habit" you use the work of some philosophers, or your own philosophical thought, to reorient thinking about architecture from this remote disengaged aesthetic touristic contemplation. Towards an understanding that, in dealing with building, we deal with the people that inhabit them, and the life that shapes around them. The work becomes a new pragmatist aesthetics of architecture which looked as if the philosophy pulled a customary architectural historian back into engaging with the life that surrounds these buildings – the common life.

A: Of habits that become so habitual that you've lost sight of them, which become the things that shape your world.

Q: It seems to run in the opposite direction of the Humean relation to philosophy, where philosophy is something that pulls you out of ordinary life. Then there's the Wittgensteinian way of pulling you back in and enabling you to engage with it. In a sense that is not everyday in the sense of being common or habitual, but in reconnecting you to something that maybe through habit or academic study or even a design attitude to the built object has removed it from its built, lived reality.

A: Yes. I'd hoped that one could find a way to aestheticize the everyday activity and find value in it. And enjoy doing everyday things by waking up to them. It may be going against that idea of thinking through withdrawal. It's withdrawn thinking but turned in on the activity of living and perhaps being more sociable.

What lies at the heart of that article, is that

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architectural discussion ought to begin with ordinary things and daily life and branch out from there. I think too much of the time we're faced with architectural discussion that begins with an admiration of form or something. These things can be quite demanding or difficult or even get in the way of ordinary life. They stand apart from it. They're special in some way and it's nice that they're special, they're challenging in that sort of way. But for sanity's sake, there just has to be a way of valorizing things that you have to do anyway. Why not make that the substance of what you do rather than something that has to be awkwardly fitted in afterwards?

Q: *Does that also entail that you would not follow the distinction that many other writers have tried to make between architecture with a capital "A" on the one hand and mere building (in German, bauen as opposed to Baukunst) on the other hand?*

The second is the vernacular, or the ordinary utilitarian domestic-level but culturally significant building. On the other hand, you've got some things that are much closer to the fine arts or architecture at least tries to align itself with the lofty ambitions of the artistic. Would you not want to draw a distinction precisely to avoid us having this split attitude?

A: I really don't want there to be that separation. I want it to be a sliding scale – if anything – where you begin with the ordinary things that you have to do and then find special intensifications of those things that makes them out of the ordinary, that makes them more pleasurable, or dramatic, or whatever it is. They're rooted in something meaningful. They're not separated. Otherwise, you get this split and it starts feeling like there's a separation between everyday activity and aesthetic sensibility. I really want them to be connected. I want my life to be full of wonderful aesthetic experiences.

Q: *Everything you say is the complete opposite of Schopenhauer. The reason for that is that you strike me as someone who is very optimistic and cheerful and that means also for you that these aesthetic experiences, especially when they are of buildings, ought to be life-affirming in a broader sense than just having an uplifting experience of contemplation.*

For Schopenhauer the idea is that life is full of woe and suffering and then aesthetic experience of architecture is one of the very few things that enable us to pull out of this life of suffering. So I'm also wondering to what extent these very fundamental decisions and your attitude towards how to approach architecture and ordinary building relates to a larger understanding of human life? Because in your work that emerges clearly at several junctures, but where exactly does that come from for you? What's the entry point of that? Is it already the reality of how you encounter the buildings, or is there an independent philosophical view that brought you to this?

A: I wonder. It's a conviction. Where do convictions come from? I

do think that a lot of aesthetic experience is unconscious. A lot of what we do all the time is unconscious and of course philosophical reflection is conscious. If you're trying to think about everyday experiences and why you feel good about having done something one way or another, what is it you're dealing with?

A lot of the time you're dealing with something that's unconscious, at the moment of your decision-making. You're deciding to sit at this table rather than on that sofa, but why are you deciding that? What are the issues that you're rehearsing? You're not entirely conscious of what they are but somehow one is more comfortable, the other feels better adapted to the task at hand.

There's a big element of unconscious stuff going on and what is that? There's all kinds of things we've got to get right before we can start worrying about aesthetic issues in a conscious sort of way. For example, things like heating and lighting, they just have to be dealt with in some way. If you're in a house that's too cold to be comfortable then there's no way you're going to be dwelling on the elegance of its proportions for too long, you'll be moving on or wrapping yourself up.

Q: So, it would be like addressing, or talking about concrete building considerations as heating, lighting, and construction more broadly. To what extent do you think philosophy could contribute to our understanding of such things?

A: Nothing at all. I think that they're more or less preconditions. If we can't get enough food to survive, we don't worry about the meaning of life. The meaning of life becomes very clear: it's to get food. I don't think that philosophy would help us to find food in that sort of emergency, but with more leisure and forethought – well, if your job is to teach philosophy then it would be philosophy that was putting food on your table. And then in the most ambitious restaurants there's certainly room for a philosophy of food, which has quite a lot of

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aesthetic content and very little discussion about nutrition.

Q: *What do you think authors, especially young authors, going into architecture philosophy right now should be aware of? What can they learn from what is currently less than perfect, or just plain bad?*

A: On the one hand you have philosophers, even aesthetic philosophers whose very business it is to write about art, where it is astounding just how uninformed they are about the actual details, say, of a painting, a piece of music, or a building. On the other hand, you have architecture historians who are greatly accomplished in mopping up every last detail about a work of art, but fall flat when they raise more general issues. Admittedly, I have painted the extreme end points on a wide spectrum – but there is a lot of room in between these that is still left unexplored. And that is where I think a great deal of interesting work remains to be done.

ANDREW BALLANTYNE'S BOOKS INCLUDE

Key Buildings From Prehistory to the Present: Plans, Sections and Elevations, 2012

Architecture in the Space of Flows, 2012 (co-edited by C. Smith)

Deleuze and Guattari for Architects, 2007

Architecture Theory: A Reader in Philosophy and Culture, 2005

Architecture and Experience: Radical Change in Spatial Practice, 2004

Architectures: Modernism and After, 2004

Architecture: A Very Short Introduction, 2002

What is Architecture?, 2002

Architecture, Landscape and Liberty: Richard Payne Knight and the Picturesque, 1997



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