

Books

Knowing Look

Piers Taylor enjoys an insightful ethnographic examination of architectural thought and practice

'Architects: Portraits of a Practice'
Thomas Yarrow
Cornell University Press, 284pp, £16



Most of the literatures within material cultures — particularly architectural ones — focus on the artefacts that are made, and ignore the contexts and circumstances that give rise to them. That is why so many are so boring. Is there anything worse than an architectural monograph that focuses on mere objects when, as Paul Klee said “Form is the end — death. Form making is life”?

Instead, it is much more interesting to shed light on the processes that allow forms to come into being, rather than — as the anthropologist Tim Ingold describes — a backwards reading that begins with a material artefact and tries to make sense of the cultures that gave rise to it.

This is precisely what Thomas Yarrow does in *'Architects: Portraits of a Practice'*. Yarrow, also an anthropologist, contextualises his study by reminding us that there is little sociological work conducted specifically on architectural practice. Dana Cuff's *'The Story of Practice'* is perhaps the best-known text that examines the culture of architectural production, and many consider it a classic. However, it has always seemed to me a super-straight reading of the worst codes of autonomous architectural endeavour.

Yarrow's study is more nuanced and subtler. It gets to grips with a particular 'way of knowing' about the world — an architectural one — which as he argues, is uniquely placed to reconcile specific incompatibilities between things that seem in opposition.

The book uses a study of a small, rural office (Gloucestershire-based Miller Howard Workshop) in order to expand on themes that are universal within architectural practice. Yarrow uses a number of distinct themes (office/lives/ideas/pragmatics) to structure his narrative and explore the way architects work. He describes a quintessentially muddy, woolly, architectural way of knowing, and the ways we navigate between diverse aspects of practice in order to design buildings.

This ethnographic frame reminds us of how little we know ourselves. With the messiness of practice life always in the background, Yarrow demonstrates that we use design as a way of knowing in the manner described in the Royal College of Art study *'Design in General Education'* (1982), which said there that “there are things to know, ways of knowing them and ways of finding out about them” specific to the design area, and with this, there are “designerly ways of knowing” as distinct from other fields such as science, art and the humanities.

Yarrow's descriptions of the teamwork, discussion and teasing out of design proposals within a supportive environment of shared endeavour is familiar to many of us. The messy way in which ideas are generated within a loosely collaborative environment is also particular to architecture. It shows that despite our over-use of terms like 'rigour' and 'logic', unlike scientists who focus attention on discovering the 'rule', we architects obsess over result — with (as Nigel Cross has said) 'solution focused' strategies. In his quiet observations of architects at work, Yarrow describes the manner in which we design 'solutions' and then evaluate them, and learn about the nature of the problem by trying out solutions rather than (as scientists might) specifically studying the problem.

We recognise this in architectural practice where solutions appear at an early stage in the process of design — quite often before the brief is fully formed. If scientists solve by analysis, designers solve by synthesis. As we see in Yarrow's descriptions of the numerous models and drawings we make, design relies on quickly generating a number of solutions which we then evaluate and discuss, rather than any prolonged analysis of any problem. It is a process of 'satisficing' (Cross' term) rather than optimising; producing what might well be a large range of satisfactory solutions rather than attempting to generate the one hypothetically optimum solution.

These semi-satisfactory solutions are then used to interrogate the problem in a reciprocal manner — each becoming redefined, reiterated and restated through this process.

Yarrow also describes the breadth of architectural endeavour that, as a discipline, is unusually wide, spanning from contract to ideology and cost control to theory, with — as fits with a collaborative discipline — people always centre stage. Primarily, this is an unusually human book — so much more so than Cuff's study which made architects appear smug, self-satisfied and elitist in claiming a view of the world born from a superior and exceptionalist sense of entitlement coming from little more than a rarefied aesthetic viewpoint which masquerades as ethics.

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In contrast, there is a good deal that we can recognise about ourselves — and take comfort from — in Yarrow's portrait. Much of this is the charmingly ramshackle, romantic way we conduct ourselves, often in the manner of perpetual and un-commercial, slightly scruffy students, which is partly why I am so drawn to architecture rather than almost all other design disciplines, which seem so much less idealistic. As well as describing how we do things, Yarrow reminds us why we persist with this badly paid, insecure struggle of practice: less for the buildings and more for the particular way that we can use architecture as a way of being in the world and to help us understand our place in it. *AT*