

Invisible Studio

Words by Hannah Wood | 26.01.16



As 2011 drew to a close, Piers Taylor, then partner of the London-based Mitchell Taylor Workshop, penned an open letter to the architecture profession: he'd had enough. Armed with a manifesto in which he damned contemporary practice as "flatscreen monitors, associates, directors and buzzy rhetoric about itself" he stated he was leaving to collaborate with "bicycle framers and magicians." In his most recent interview with LOBBY, Piers explains what has happened since.

"We turn down more projects than we accept. We are not interested in private clients, developers or those with a clear idea of an architectural output." Piers tells me. He held to his word, I thought, recalling a former interview printed in the *Architects' Journal* following the split in which he turned down a £2 million townhouse scheme he felt was too ostentatious. "Such an approach suffocates design," he adds, "instead, we work with process."



Pier's answer to an ongoing frustration with the day-to-day reality of much of today's corporate practice was *Invisible Studio*, based in the woodland outside Bath. I was curious to what extent his defiant act had endured and whether his alternate *modus operandi* had translated into a design process:

"My concept was to raise the pre-established structure to the ground, and in its place build up a new way of working, this time with the focus shifted," he explains. "It leads us to explore novel modes of working, allowing the nature to shift and evolve, so we can investigate the fluid space of design."

His idea was that the formalised architecture studio would therefore assume a background role. For Piers, this is the development of an *anti-practice*, banishing the formalised work structure he sees as creatively limiting.



Despite its establishment occurring in the UK's worst recession in a generation (where a fifth of architects lost steady work), Invisible Studio appears to have been busy. 'Caretaker's House', 'Stillpoint' and 'Moonshine' projects have generated critical acclaim for their ecological sensitivity, lightweight timber construction and craftsmanship. Piers now also runs a unit at a London architecture school with timber-framer Charley Brentnall and finds the time to co-present a BBC2 show alongside Kieran Long.

The success of Invisible Studio reflects a new wave of architects reviving a hands-on, self-build approach spearheaded by UK design-and-make collectives such as Assemble, winners of the 2015 Turner Prize. These practitioners reject the drawing board in favour of on-site sketching, enabling a flexibility for the project to evolve through construction. By architect-makers encouraging public participation, architecture is being brought out into the field. The design process can therefore embody an element of *contingency* to absorb scavenged, second-hand objects, allowing the consequences of design to emerge.

Piers points to his time in the Architectural Association's Design and Make programme as having consolidated the central philosophy of Invisible Studio: construction should start at the beginning, not the end, of the design process. He tells me the aim is an architecture underpinned by making, which rejects the "moralising perfectionism of the Arts and Crafts movement", which he sees as having discouraged architects from getting stuck in for too long. He points to his un-self conscious 'bodged joints' and ad-hoc nature of this formative period at Hooke Park as laying the foundations for larger-scale projects, such as Westonbirt Arboretum.

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"Even in the act of setting up you already suggest a structure and mode of working", he elaborates. "Architects themselves are complicit in this. By intellectually confining yourself to a vehicle, you narrow your thinking." We discuss how the mainstream view regarding this has shifted since he graduated back in the 1980s:

"I have much optimism for the upcoming generation," he tells me, "young architects are rebelling against the box-ticking conservatism and legacy of the Thatcher city thing that has haunted the profession, unquestioned, for far too long."

We never spoke of magicians, but Invisible Studio has so far benefited hugely from a series of collaborations with trapeze artists, carpenters, metal workers, students and the clients themselves. "That's what Invisible Studio is", Piers assures me, "just a group of people who work together with no labels or titles, no commitment or expectations."

Despite my doubts in the sincerity of this statement in the face of tight construction deadlines, budgets and salaries, it certainly does embody the motto of the 'joined-up thinking' he is keen to convey.



It has been almost four years since Piers set out to create a practice “based everywhere and nowhere, a provocative and polemical vehicle for collaboration, experimentation, research and education which doesn’t try to squeeze itself into the confines of a pre-qualification questionnaire.” It was, by any means, no simple task.

Did he come close to achieving what he set out to when he penned the letter? “I didn’t achieve anything”, he jokes, “it’s all an ongoing process of figuring out what’s next.” Of course, that is the point of the vehicle, I thought, to keep on building.

-All images courtesy of Invisible Studio

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