

# THE DYNAMICS OF SIMULTANEITY: A SEARCH FOR BALANCE BETWEEN THE UTTERING OF NEW ARCHITECTURAL, SPACIAL, FUNCTIONAL UTOPIAS AND COMMON SENSE

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## INTRODUCTION

The traditional emphasis in design studios on project-focused assignments, regardless of variations from abstract or theoretical explorations, to specific functional, programmatic briefs, usually departs from a more or less firm grounding in reality.

Luckily so, as one would otherwise submerge in seemingly fictional universes, mirroring utopic conditions, unanswerable but to their own realms' preset or created guidelines.

On the other hand, the outlook on what generally is regarded as reality, is mostly subtly cramped with ample preconceptions and presuppositions on the nature of what one considers reality to be. These preset points of departure for possible alternative reflections are much more ingrained than commonly expected, and certainly impair valuable creative parallel approaches. The ability to attain a certain amount of clarity in any given design studio project, be it of programmatic, functional, technical or architectural state, is commonly fairly stained by what could be described as latent hangovers from unreflected consumption of normality.

This lack of clarity or focused vision, is usually further blurred by the seemingly intensive urge to be "creative," to assert one's talents as designer striving to achieve personal, individual artistic statements. Even in this territory, normality in its banal state flourishes, as merely retinal distortions of undigested fragments of icons from the latest glossy magazines tend to sneak obtrusively in through the backstairs, into the work process.

These basic conditions are some of the inherent states in any design studio. And should be, as one cannot possibly expect architecture students to be able to dissect and behave like mature, artistic or technical innovators, when reality and professional practice at large, basically sustains and perpetuates conditions of normality, based similarly on subliminal or conscious presuppositions of how reality is perceived and dealt with.

Nevertheless, attempts can and should be made, to establish conditions in design studios, where creative, reflective, and thought-provoking work can be produced, leading to possible degrees of awareness concerning a wide array of topics one had preconceptions about.

This is a difficult task. Somewhat like ordering spontaneity or laughter in calculable doses, at specific moments, just to clear the air, since boredom and indifference are so dispassionate.

Enlightenment does not come easy, and quite rarely instantly. Awareness though, and sharpened reflection, can be trained. But just as forced laughter feels unnatural, a "de-briefing" of preconceptions has to be administered obliquely, to be able to

be grasped fully. To become aware, manuals and instructions are of no immediate strategical value. On the contrary.

A certain set of tactics, combined with consistent lateral coaching, can produce very reasonable yet tantalizing and at times utmost surprising results, forming the bases of an *acupuncture* like path, re-establishing sharpened focus on seemingly unimportant topics, developing into "AHA" architectural experiences on various levels.

The following is an attempt to recapitulate and describe the work process occurred in a design studio from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture, Institute for Building Design, Department 3G, held during spring 1993. Extensive illustration material will be shown at the presentation.

## MODERN ORNAMENTAL HERMITS: A CASE OF DWELL AND DWELLING

*"First we shape our buildings, then they shape us."*

Basically so simple, as stated by Winston Churchill. Yet, so intensively multi-faceted, should one start to reflect on the wide array of implications inherent in the statement.

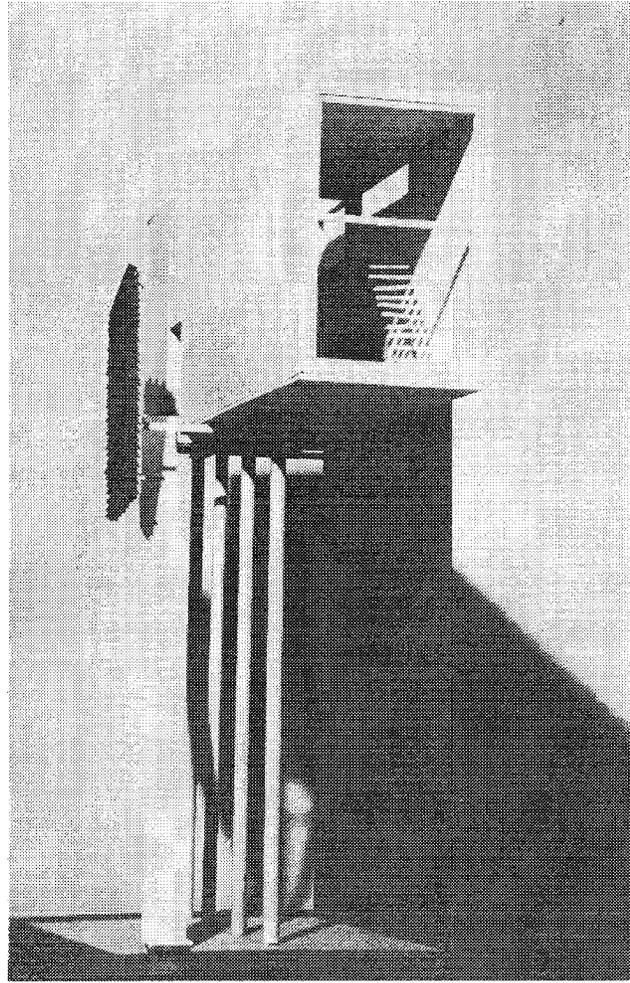
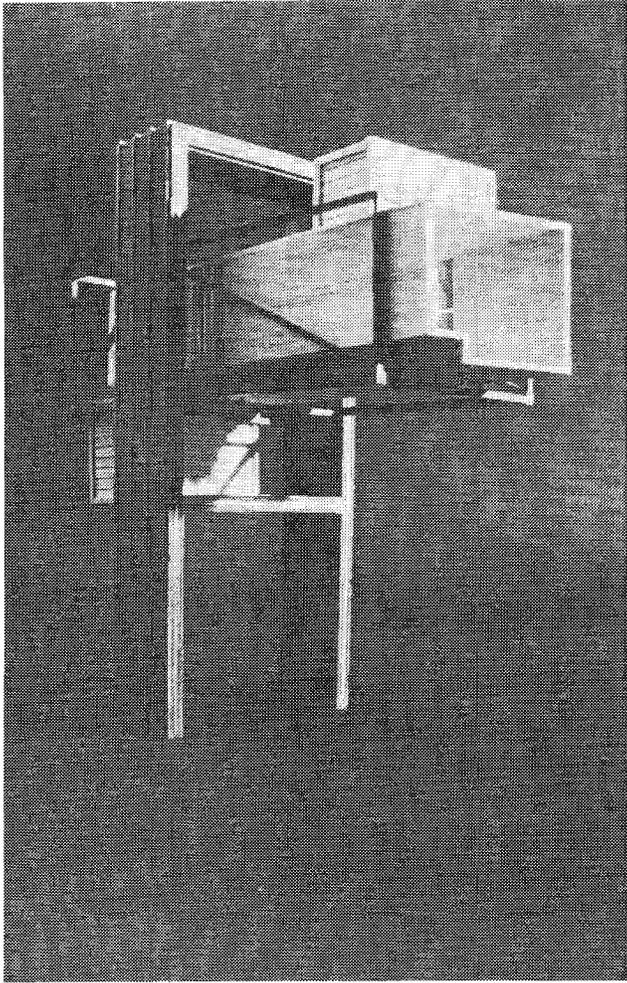
By and large, most people, including architects, are unfortunately blissfully *un-aware* or just plainly forgetful of the implications of this statement. Many of the most prevailing preconceptions in architecture stick to dwelling conditions. In our industrialized, standardized state of globality, we imply, as basic point of departure, a certain amount of preconceptions when dealing with different dwelling situations. We rapidly deploy various existing typologies, as stepping stones for further enhancements. Regardless of what might have caused this state, one could wonder if we already are so shaped by the typologies that "we" gave shape, that we are generally unable to *re-consider*, *re-structure* or *re-think* possible different alternative solutions or positions to start with.

The design studios main brief thus tried to deal with inoculating a certain amount of general awareness on dwelling conditions to the participants.

And also the freedom to dwell, in the process.

To achieve conditions of reflections on the topic, the brief was compressed into a certain number of constraints and simplifications. To be able to reflect freely on conditions of reality, a certain territory of fictional, hypothetical utopia had to be created.

As travel to exotic places often sharpens and sometimes mirrors or enables comparisons with our home conditions, the established new set of conditions for the brief where created to generate fields of potential comparisons with reality. At the same time, the projects should be able to re-ground fantasies into



realistic examples.

To this purpose, the brief reformulated a modern version of the Victorian "Ornamental Hermit," a prominent figure of the 18th century in England, inserted into the many vast country estates owned by the British aristocracy. These hermits, usually philosophers, thinkers, artists of various kinds, or even pure exotics and lunatics, were boarded and lodged in romantic small *ermitages* with the sole purpose of being decorative (some had flamboyant clothing, a certain amount of exotic paraphernalia and strange whims). Invited guests to the estate were usually introduced to the owners' hermit, for conversation or inspiration. No other strings attached for the hermits, and they were generally permitted to leave without notice, should they wish so.

In our modern metropolises, the present-day hermits are free. And they exist, as can anyone living in a larger global urban agglomeration testify. We might, in some way, at certain stages of life, all be single urban hermits being decorative for each other, pursuing whatever makes us happy. Think of all the large binoculars present in flats in New York City, to mention just one example. Ornithologists?

The brief thus set forth for the creation of a certain amount of dwellings for modern ornamental hermits, inserted into the urban tissue of a Copenhagen neighbourhood. A hypothetical hermit figure (male or female optional) was to be invented. It was up to the participant to choose whether the

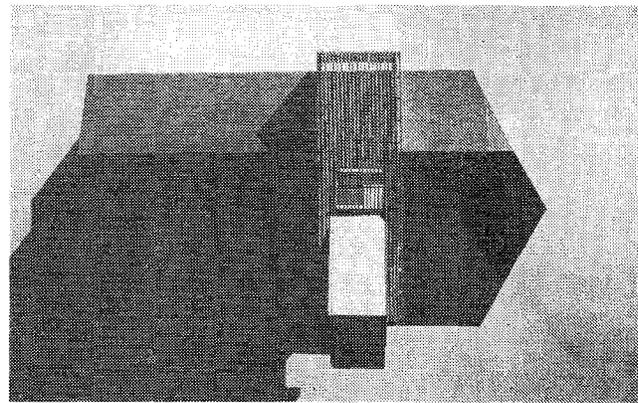
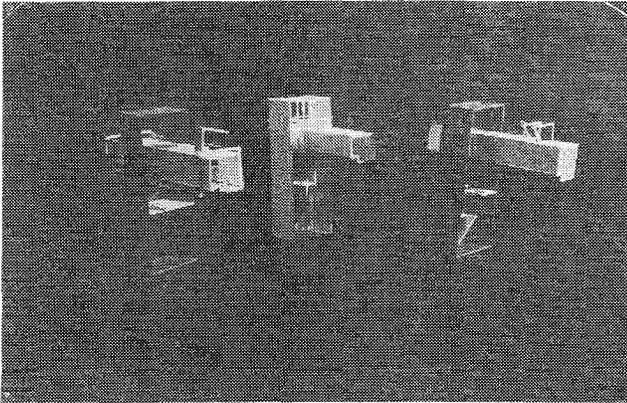
dwelling's architecture would establish the identity or characteristics of the hermit, or if the hermit's special requirements, living habits or peculiar interests would eventually be the programmatic and functional requirements to be fulfilled architecturally.

An apparently easy task that turned out to be quite tricky. For it was agreed that the results should be fairly plausible, and be considered realistic and possibly buildable. Reality never should completely leave the stage, although one was entering quite fictional grounds.

#### **CONSTRAINTS: PINNING DOWN THE RULES OF THE GAME, PIERCING CONDITIONS**

The chosen area in Copenhagen into which the *ermitages* were to be inserted was Amagerbro. Located on the island of Amager, approx. 3 miles south of the city center. The area is characterized by a certain disparity of buildings, ranging from one to five floors, combining housing, smaller manufactories, car repair shops etc. Amagerbrogade is the main thoroughfare through the area. The locations for the hermit dwellings were all chosen within a radius of 1 mile around Amagerbrogade.

The design studio had 20 participating students, and lasted for one semester. Each student was by lottery allocated her/his site and the following constraints: a) that the main building materials/appearance of the hermit dwelling should be of either concrete, bricks, wood, metal or glass, *a condition also*



allocated by lottery, b) that the accessibility of the dwelling should be from at least second floor above ground, c) all locations where vacant gable situations, onto which the dwelling would be *poded*, and d) a short brief of a minimal one-person dwelling with kitchen and bathroom facilities.

What started to be a seemingly benign assignment, usually of a charette scope, thus developed into quite a complex assignment where many prerequisites acted *simultaneously*. The dynamics of a mindboggling game, where the struggle with apparently simple denominators turns into quicksand programmatic, technical and architectural *equations* where very little can be presupposed.

Add to that a very tight schedule of crits, stage for stage increasing the content and precision of requirements (scale models 1:200, 1:100, 1:50, 1:20, drawings: ink on vellum, size A3-A2).

#### **PITFALLS, LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS, AND STAGES OF RISING AWARENESS**

One of the main difficulties for most participants, turned out to be the invention of the hermit character. The schizophrenic situation of not being able to decide whether the architecture would give rise to a suitable hermit, or if the hermits peculiarities would help shape the dwelling. Many, very fruitful interactive discussions formed the extremely dynamic exchanges during that stage, to increase with more mature and creative enthusiastic in-depth analysis during later stages. Because nothing could be implied, most state of things were for the first time questioned. What does it mean to dwell? What is a hobby? What is eccentric, what is normal? What is an occupation, what is an obsession? Is there a difference to live in a dwelling consisting mostly of concrete as, say wood or metal? What is a kitchen, come to think of it? What is the conception of a bathroom? How does one access a home where the entrance is located 12 feet above ground? What is an entrance? How narrow is small? What is a room with a view? Who is the voyeur, who is the exhibitionist? What is the essence of brick? How do you produce glass, anyway? Where do you dispose of the waste? What are the delimitations of "Neighbourhood?" Can one just create spaces without knowing some purpose or function? What can be considered as "function?" Can this structure hold?

Slowly, each participant started to extract both a hermit character and the spaces, shapes of the dwelling. Distilling some sort of essence.

Basically three types of approaches emerged: 1) hermit

characteristics somewhat still grounded in functional, known types, i.e. a photographer, a musician, a poet, a film director etc., 2) characters which, in some ways were hidden appearances of some of the participants' own hobbies, dreams, yearning or sometimes phobias: extreme climbers, claustrophobics, radioamateurs, adventurers, meditation practitioners, butterfly collector, etc. 3) more abstracted, personal characters, or architectures based on quite refined thinking where the hermit and the architecture appeared/stimulated each other simultaneously.

A mathematician living in a dwelling generated by a mathematical equation, an exhibitionistic actor turning his dwelling into a transparent stage, a modern Diogenes living a snail-like existence where the dwelling becomes an unseparable part the character, a time maniac living in a dwelling that constantly repositioned itself hour after hour.

After the initial, somewhat for all participants, equally strong urge to strive for original, fabulous and just wacky creations and quick solutions, the personal themes surfaced, and, the at-times loud giggling at the first presentations, gave way for more thoughtful exchanges on a broad range of topics.

Mostly about life. Living conditions, the realization that much of daily life is a matter of either convenience, indifference or soaked habits. But also the growing awareness that "Function" might mean more than stereotype, and that even the weirdest activity has its particularities that have to be examined, defined and mapped so as to grasp it and shelter it.

And a lot of discussions about the essence of architecture and space. About superficialities versus genuine expressions, about the transformations of programme into space, the hard to get "something," the extra dimensions of architecture that incorporates programme and function, but transcends into poetic, metaphysical realms.

All that while the main concern seemed to be a small hermit dwelling. The excursion into seemingly fiction as tongue loosener and mindgame. A small breach in daily awareness, making it possible to reassess, compare, view focused, various conditions of reality.

#### **CREATING SPACE FOR REFLECTION, ESTABLISHING GROUND FOR ACTION**

The apparent weirdness of the proposals is only superficial: the importance lies in the *dynamics of simultaneities* where seemingly unimportant issues are *re-evaluated, re-considered*, as if for the first time ever. Most of the time, it turns out to be precisely the case. Basic, vital questions are formulated.

This happens mostly when one is busy trying to solve other things, or when one does not even realize that one is in the process of discovering something, or finding some clues. There is the free space making its appearance, just because of the imposed burden of constraints. At the same time, the apparent surreal brief gives one the possibility of being bold. It does not seem so serious, somehow.

Thus even structural and technical solutions could be explored, since it seemed to be a game. Many of the participants where at one stage or the other very satisfied, after some initial grudging "I do not like concrete, can I choose wood instead?" "How can one build a dwelling of glass?" to submerge themselves in the essence of materiality, and ultimately also the structural implications of the imposed main building material. Intensive personal studies and research were conducted without that it was specifically asked for.

By the positioning of the dwelling's locations on gables, one was constantly aware that the dwelling would appear quite differently, somewhat exhibitionistic, to the neighbourhood context. What might give rise to architectural bloating, gave in the process way for some sort of striving for balance between exuberant extroversion and shy introversion. Valuable group discussions maintained, also on that topic a high intellectual awareness, reassessing the potentialities and drawbacks of setting and context.

#### **BREAKING POINT: DEGREES OF MATURITY**

The 22 participating students in the design studio where on average in their 7th semester. Most had already fine-tuned abilities in drafting, and had just come through two design studios with more traditional briefs in the fall semester. Most wanted the possibility to go in depth with a smaller scale assignment where one could resolve structural and constructive matters. All where very enthusiastic about the brief, although most did not really assess the assignment to be difficult. "A piece of cake..." "charette stuff..."

As the first week had passed, some frustration set in. The brief became like a piece of soap in a bath tub: to be seen, but hard to grasp. The hermit character like a shapeless red

Pimpernell. The imposed constraints straight-jacket tight. And, as time started to pass, a certain amount of panic, as the assignment suddenly seemed to be meshed in insurmountable difficulties.

This was the first barrage of a multitude of preconceptions taking its toll. Apparent rationale, creative architectural fantasy and until then acquired and praised modelling and drafting skills, strangely seemed affected by a bad case of cryptonite exposure.

Time then for simple, basic questions... By the end all emerged in each their fantastic universe, utopias that did nevertheless not seem to be all that fictional. For some even just a question of budget and trying to find out, how some of the building codes regulations might be applicable for dispensations, if...

All got far more out of the assignment than they had expected. Including the two tutors. All participating students assess the assignment as having been a breaking point in the course of their studies, as all have by now graduated, and most having started to work in various offices. General comments are for the most the awareness that one produced very personal work, despite the drafting constraints, and that the projects somehow remain quite vivid in memory.

A recent comment by one student concerning the assignment, made me quite happy, as it resumed what I only could, at the assignments start, faintly hope for, although I somehow was confident: "...Without the trip into our seemingly fantasy world with the hermits, I sometimes would not dare to be bold in acquisition work for the office. And anyway, reality is far more absurd and sometimes surrealistic than one supposes..I guess you conveyed us the value of common sense by letting us ask questions..."

Simultaneity is not necessarily complexity. Reality, more than once, a swamp of bad habits.

All in all a matter of surfing the complexities through the tunnels of preconceptions, to reach some kind of creative common sense.

And start all over again questioning, for each assignment, to remain creatively anchored in reality. The time is always now.