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Reflections on Leaving Architecture

By
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I began my architectural studies in the late 1970s after completing a degree in Chinese archaeology. I jokingly told my friends that I chose architecture because it was the next degree on the “A’s” list. My father was the biggest influence on my choice of architecture as a profession. He was a master stonemason and bricklayer and had studied architectural design in Italy, prior to World War II. He taught me construction geometry when I was in elementary school and regaled me with stories of the great artists and architects of the Italian Renaissance. Men like Giotto who could draw a perfect freehand circle; Cellini who even made a tight-fisted Pope pay up front for a commission; and Brunelleschi whose dome over *Santa Maria della Fiore* in Florence is still one of the greatest marvels of architecture today. The way these artists thought and worked has influenced how I chose to practice architecture. Their process of *disegno* leading to a preliminary concept or *parti*, design development via the *modello* (which is not only a model/representation but also a generative device which changes and evolves through the design process), and client education all became key elements in my approach to design.

Reflection #1: Design ≠ Disegno

In 2009, I decided to teach, so I retired from architecture and went to graduate school. There, I explored the original meaning of the word design and focused on how top designers thought and worked. My research did not so much as change my approach, as reinforce the ongoing dialogue on design I had been involved in since I was a student at the University of Cincinnati and Washington State.

The English word design, now a production-/product-oriented term, derives from the Italian Renaissance term *disegno*, which originally had two interrelated meanings.



Disegno of a set design for King Lear (2010)

1. Images or ideas formed in the mind
2. The capturing of these ideas in quick sketches or words*

(*Just as the Italians had *disegno* for artists, so too did they have an equivalent term for writers – *concetto*. *Concetto* connotes metaphor through which idea generation occurs. These ideas are recorded and developed into strands of thought that can take the creative process outside the realm of poetry or prose and into other realms, including art and architecture.)

The capturing and recording of these ideas became a fundamental process for enhancing creativity. In fact, artists placed such value on these *disegni* that they bound them into books and gave them to their apprentices. This bound collection of partial ideas provided newly minted artists with a reference text that provided inspiration to develop their own projects.

Probably the most famous examples of this practice are the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci. Through them, we can gain a glimpse into his thinking and carry his intellectual conversation through to the present time. Today, this tradition of capturing ideas for revisiting continues among top designers. Some even pass their sketchbooks along. My own modest architectural library contains not only volumes of my own sketchbooks and drawings but also the published sketchbooks of some of my favorite architectural thinkers including: Aldo Rossi, who favored pen and wax crayon; and Carlo Scarpa who loved the inaccuracy of the T-square. Another thinker in this tradition is the late, consummate draughtsman and artist, Lebbeus Woods. Although I was a fan of his drawings, it was only after several hours of drinking wine and chatting with him that I changed my mind about his architecture. I told him

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that his forms were elegant and intriguing but not really connected to habitable, “real” spaces. He responded by emphasizing that his forms were a means of making other architects think about their work. As he explained to me, his solution to a theoretical or built project is not the only one; the form or style is secondary to the serious thinking, process of development, and final expression of the design.

*Fragment of Lebbeus Woods sketch
from The New City Series
Redrawn by Dennis Rovere; Caran d'Ache Crayon on Vellum, 2017*

Out of my exploration of *disegno*, the lesson I hold dearest is that there is value in partial ideas. This is an especially important lesson for any artist at the beginning of their career. Most often, we only reward the finished product and pay little attention to the importance of, or abandon too early, better ideas that simply need more development.

So how can we use this understanding of *disegno* to develop our partial ideas or put them to best use? One way is to permanently record them and revisit them for future development, discussion, and consideration. Another way to overcome the fear of failure is by presenting work early, often, and incomplete. The feedback throughout the development process will assist in decreasing the learning curve and lead to greater long-term success.

Reflection #2: Design ≠ Art

On the wall outside my home office is a print by the Italian artist Piranesi. It is number six of the series of *Le Carceri*, or imaginary prisons. Piranesi is mostly unknown as an architect because, in the span of his lifetime, he produced no built works. Besides the works themselves, the idea of Piranesi, the artist/architect, provided me with great insight into two important concepts. The first is the point of intersection between art, design, and architecture.

Architecture is considered, to a certain degree, the art of building, or the art of the built form. As a result, the line between art and design is often blurred or crossed. They are, however, different. For example, painting tries to portray an existing or imagined scene or situation. Design, on the other hand, attempts to respond to a situation. This is accomplished by first discovering something about what already exists. In architecture, we need something to push against: site, existing or theoretical data, *parti* or organizing concept, and so on. Here, we are not trying to work from a primitive state as an artist might, but rather from a pre-existing/known situation.

I am familiar with *carceri*, not just as depicted by Piranesi, but because I was a visitor. The most well-known is the one adjacent to the Doge's Palace, across the Bridge of Sighs in Venice. It is both daunting in design and completely sanitized for tourist consumption. Thus, it requires a discerning eye to envision what it was like to be trapped there as a prisoner and not viewing it as a tourist. Another less sanitized *carceri* is in the Castel de Zoppola, also in Northern Italy. Small, dark, and not open to the public. The Contessa de Panciera nonetheless allowed me to explore while she stood behind me in the doorway. Given that she did not accompany me and was in possession of the keys, my tour was both thorough and brief.



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In my understanding, Piranesi, the artist/architect, is the point of intersection between art and design. His works, which are truly architectural in nature, achieve a blending of the physical structure and the situation of the prison using multiple vanishing points, partially obscured views, the inference of smoke, endless and indeterminate depth, and hints at the unknown. As an architect I investigate his spaces in terms of scale, cohesiveness of design, materials of construction, layering, and so on. As a lover of art, I inhabit the space knowing full well that the *carceri* are completely imaginary. This understanding does not, however, preclude me from wondering what lies beyond the infinity of stairways? What transpires behind the iron grilles? What are the sources of light in such a dark, foreboding place? And who are the figures in the pictures – are they prisoners who are free to wander, keepers of secrets, or are they more like Dante exploring the underworld with Vergil?

Reflection #3: Layering and Metaphor

The second concept Piranesi's work generated was the relationship between layering and metaphor. For the sake of brevity, it is probably easier to explain layering in terms of what it is *not*. Imagine the façade of a warehouse or strip mall: flat, uninteresting, and (yes!) often designed by real architects. Layering in architecture is the antithesis of these images.

In my experience, layering can best be understood through a process of dissection or deconstruction. Having originally trained as an archaeologist, I often view buildings in terms of what types of ruins they would leave behind. I also tend to be more intrigued by the backs of buildings than with their fronts. The backs more readily reveal the history of the building and the differences between formal presentation and *genius loci* (i.e., spirit of the place). Consider a person's shoes – the fronts are polished to reflect the impression the wearer wants to project – clean, slick, elegant, and fastidious. However, if the backs of the shoes do not match the fronts in terms of care, there is an instant disconnect between perceived character and real character.

Paul Ricoeur famously stated that “metaphor is the trope of resemblance.” As an architect, I consider layering as one of these tropes. As is the case with *conchetto*, the use of layering connotes and generates metaphor – not only in the work of Piranesi, but also in such disparate situations as Chinese gardens (another love of mine). Here, layers of compressed space create foreshortening and forced perspective giving the impression of seemingly infinite vistas. Rock formations become high mountain ranges where hermits dwell. Small groupings of bamboo, separated from, and accessed only visually via oddly placed and oddly shaped openings, conjure images of the “seven sages” a famous group of *literati* who met in bamboo groves to compose poetry and drink.

Changing paths or returning along the same route creates a ‘rereading’ of the space as the wanderer revisits the narrative of the garden from a different perspective, both literally and figuratively. If the Chinese garden is a metaphor then layering is truly the trope through which resemblance is created. It, like great literature, exists on a level that transcends complete understanding. Properly executed both provide spaces to influence and expand thought.

To be continued ...?



Doorway to the Yu Yuan (Yu Garden), Shanghai. Photographed by Dennis Rovere, circa 1995; 35 mm slide