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The Trolley and the Moveable Architectural Objects

The parts for my new home arrived on a trolley. The prospectus stressed all I needed was an area; as a house it can be placed anywhere. Architecture's connection to place has always been present in some form through time, whether as a temporary shelter or of a more permeant character. Within in this connection, site identity has until perhaps the last century directly influenced spatial integrity, and with each new time layer, there continued to exist a sense of the initial substance of the original "place". Whether a city, village, or a tent pitched for summer grazing, the physical result was an accumulation of decisions specific to one place, and this again was a position in a greater landscape. The precision of these decisions can ebb and flow over time, but the inhabitant's general comprehension of the limitations and the potential on offer were shared by all and set identity. The construction of a house relied upon local competencies and materials ones that built upon a communal knowledge base of generations, and in this was a communal understanding of place. Architecture was not so much a profession or expertise, rather an effort, a crystallization of human needs, dreams and desires specific for a community, a place.

There are a number of reasons why this description of architecture rooted to place is no longer relevant for many. In much architectural discourse today, we have an increasingly ambiguous and compartmentalized relationship to nature. Nature as site is simply "area", and it can be anywhere. The site's potential is narrowly measured by way of its ability to highlight and park the architectural object. To limit architecture to a built object particularly when efficiency and profit are the driving forces also changes how we perceive "site" as it too becomes an object and in a sense interchangeable. Without greater philosophical reflection and a general understanding of how this reflection works as a critical resistance force, all levels of a building process from the seed of its beginning to the long-term impact will be directed by short-term investment concerns. True, this has always been a factor, but just one among other far more serious determinates which were once understood by all and benefitted all. The visual focus of digital technology over the past decades has inadvertently exasperated the balance of these determinates since short-term investment is now tied to the shopping list of the global digital market. The profession and even the schools of architecture have come to accept this

weighted scale of determinates as their reality. This is not a critique of only architecture for why should this profession have greater insight or virtue than any other professions? Rather, as we gradually lose touch with some basic instincts and knowledge in relation to nature and the human in this nature, what role will architecture play? An arbitrator of a global object and its site?

The site as "area" may seem straightforward and innocent enough as an approach. However, in relation to the above, building as mass has no limitations other than the scale established by the periphery of the site as area. In this equation, the discussion around the nature of architecture can only focus upon the independent autonomous object where the potential of place is only relevant if there is a possibility of enhancing the object itself. Nature is conquered, the trees cut down, the hill blown away, and the rivers trapped in a concrete drains. Inside this object, we look out, and standing on a balcony is the only reminder or connection left in relation nature and place. We have come to accept this change with ease, away from nature, yet part of it. We have however retained some resistance and connection to nature through our bodies, but today this is often a highly passive connection, perhaps only clearly apparent in sickness or exertion.

We will never be able to separate ourselves from the built object, as no other spatial instrument gives the same protection of human life, but we are far away from understanding how and in what way the current technical tools influence both the questions and answers as to how we live. What is the built object when responding to a visual focus and seemingly unlimited mass and what is the built object when the limitations set by nature as part of nature are the criteria? We lack a base from which we can discuss architecture, one that carries an intensity and vigor comparable to the technological input and the global audience that are now clearly players in the sphere of architecture. Unfortunately, we are not even in search of this base, as the present content that propels realization is seldom challenged. We continue to discuss architecture out from motivations, platforms and discourse set nearly a hundred years ago with only slight adjustments. In light of this, it is understandable that the architectural object and its site as "area" are on the move, as their scale and accountability are now internal, self-propelled. The profession's reaction is one thing, but architectural schools should be tougher in questioning not just the content, but also the direction within architectural curriculums. Unfortunately, we are not able as

institutions to be open enough, as here short-term goals and visions cannot give the necessary corrective or constructive support, thus all focus is directed towards the autonomous built object or a singular, limited solution to a concrete problem without any real effort to connect and expand the singular endeavor into a plural, layered perspective. This tendency is not just a problem for architectural education, but for many professions. Digital, global information cannot on its own stand as a guarantee for the quality or depth of perspective.

Works under the title "research by design" or "artistic research" can have an important role in giving clarity to the above problem. Here a physical work directly tied to a philosophical or intellectual concept may have a capacity to shift perspective and reveal another type or broader knowledge base. Possibly, it can reveal other architectural connections, new architectural vitality within the relationship of nature and humanness. To broaden our understanding of architectural content an effort must be made to prioritize these types of projects and the necessary time required despite the difficulties in measuring results with each semester review. It is a long-term academic process. To train the next generation of architects to build the same apartment block as today with only detail adjustments in relation to the new materials of the future and sales potential cannot be the challenge inside architectural education nor the path to creative approach. There is a tendency within education to shy away from creative openness and this influences the level of architectural discourse in general. Searching only for inspiration and information within or close to the realm of accepted criteria will hamper new insights. "Research by design" has the potential to signal another type of content. To identify a capacity for transformation is inherent to content development. The process encompasses far more than the narrow path set by the profession.

When I visited the new marine museum outside Copenhagen not long ago, an old hand trolley used to carry goods back and forth from the storage house caught my attention. Intuitively, I understood this trolley connected to the content I was seeking in relation to "Works+Words". The present architectural situation is more than ever about moveable objects, the built object as cargo capable of being placed anywhere and everywhere. Material is prefabricated parts, unlimited, produced worldwide, and all parts are eventually placed on some form of a trolley real or digital. What triggered my

interest was not the trolley as an object, its form or surface, but rather its capacity to link one place to another by way of its cargo. Architectural parts and other moveable objects arrive with larger and larger suitcases each with a nametag of origin.

To regard architecture, as an object of prefabricated parts looking for an "area" to land (the site) is not that different from the way new digital technology has transformed place identity into a more floating cerebral concept rather than a fixed physical reality. The intensity between these instruments and the mental concept they deliver is comprehensive and concentrated, so much so that the architectural spatial stimuli and its energy are merely secondary issues within these conditions. With our instruments in hand, to be on the street, in a car, in a park, or in a house, all seem all to offer sufficient place energy, and if this is correct, and we accept the image given by the trolley, what then is specific for architectural identity? After all, architecture has a more complex role in human life than what technology delivers.

This is a convoluted question, since transformation is not foreign to architecture. Human behavior, both on an individual and collective level, have through these technological advancements been given a new perception of place identity, time and resistance. It is so strong and persuasive that this shift must be considered an inspiration towards architectural transformation, but we do not seem able to embrace the possible spatial content embedded in this new relationship between physical and abstract space, between the new context and traditional content. Life along with the built objects waits on the trolley, and for the time, uncertain as to their address and destiny.
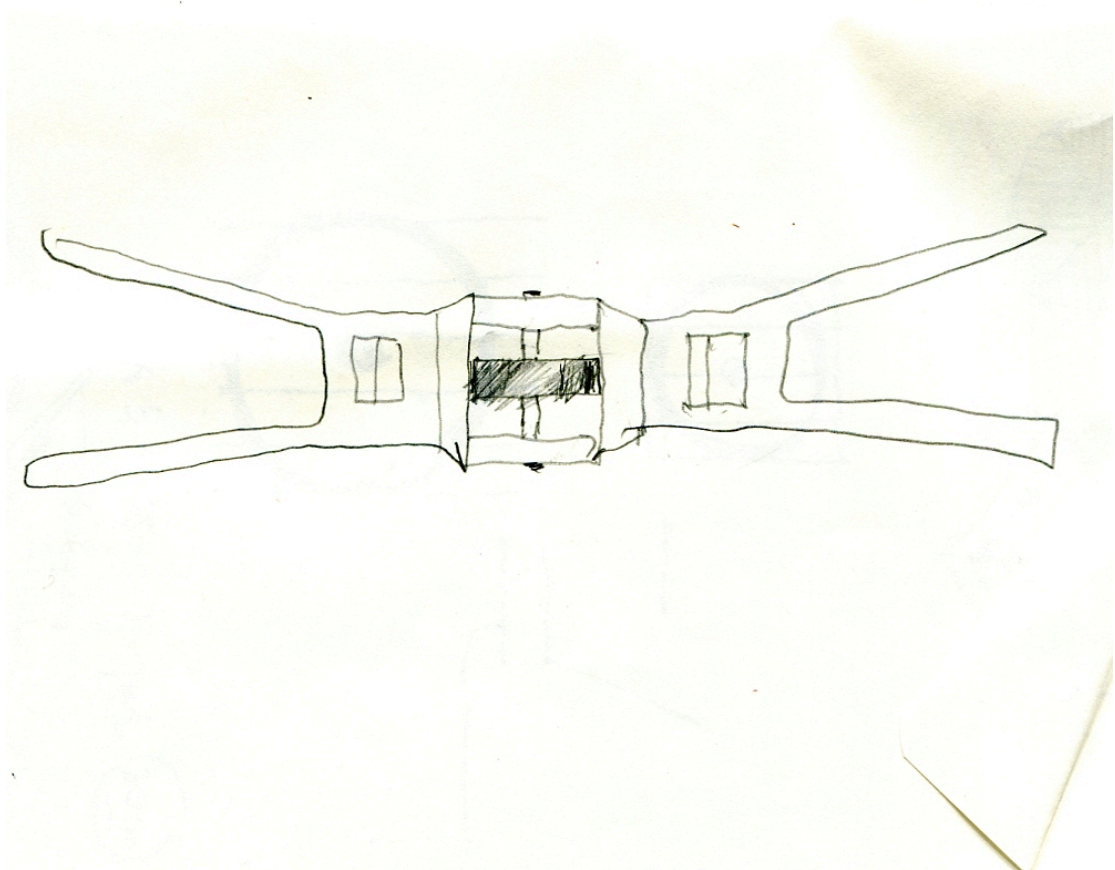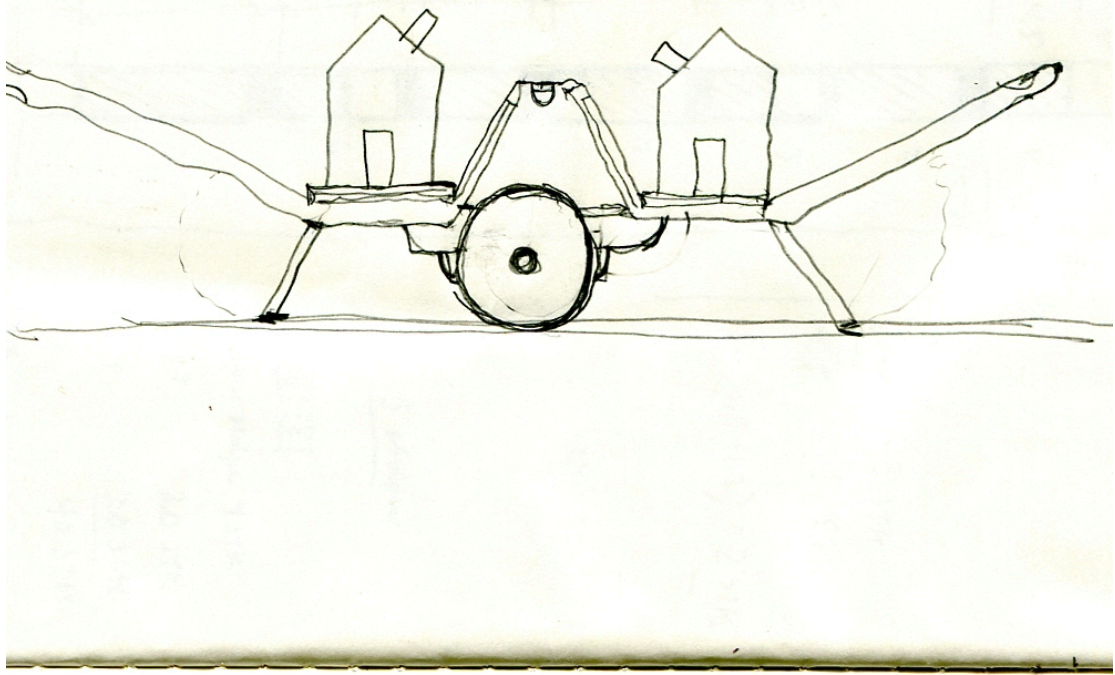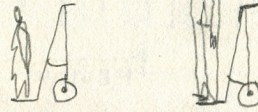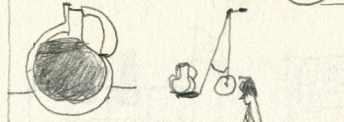
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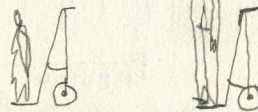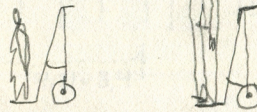
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