

Concept & Construction: A Meditation on the State of Practice

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by Allen Pierce

This morning as I sat to write, news reached me that Danish architect Bjarke Ingels was to receive the Louis I. Kahn memorial award, which, per the award's website, "celebrates [Ingels'] achievements against the backdrop of the storied career of Philadelphia architect, Louis Kahn". For all of their respective merits, it is hard to imagine two men more estranged in values & methods or with greater differences of opinion on the vector of their field.

Kahn & his small office quietly developed one of the most respected but compact portfolios of architectural work in the western canon over four decades of meticulous labor, not truly finding traction or a definitive voice until Kahn was in his mid 50's. Outside of the architectural world, Kahn & his work remain all but unknown despite their lasting impact on the communities they serve. By contrast, 42-year-old Ingels' two large offices (one in Copenhagen, one in New York) have rapidly and with great fanfare produced a catalogue of dozens of projects around the world, many at incredibly large scales, and many more entirely unrealized despite their internet notoriety.

Unlike the shying, esoteric & at times difficult Kahn, Bjarke is an apparently affable if roguish media darling – portrayed as youthful and handsome, he actively courts attention for himself & his brand through punchy publications (*Yes is More!*), viral videos of flashy holographic diagrams & a die-hard insistence that his ideas are revolutionary.

One thing the two men can be said to share is a commitment to a kind of conceptual elementalism – work built up from simple geometric operations. Where Kahn's work diverges most obviously is in its execution. Noted for rigorous attention to detail & to the realities of the material world ("What do you want, Brick?"), the base facts of construction echo back up into Kahn's overall forms in a way that is both aesthetically pleasing and deeply practical ("Brick says, 'I like an arch'"). Not so of Ingels' work. Eight years after their construction I was able to visit the landmark projects on the Amager peninsula that launched his career; we found them badly detailed & in poor condition: at times appearing to have been designed without key knowledge of how construction happens. The grand ideas present in his youtube sermons often come to little in concrete & glass.

While Kahn was a deep student of history & eschews, in his work, a kind of timeless nobility, Ingels' buildings are harder to place. Unquestionably rejecting conventions of the past, they cannot really be considered "for" the future as most won't make it there in a recognizable form. What they may be is maquettes; studies for his vision; a trail for others to follow, to realize, to sort out the nitty-gritty of. As Patrik Schumacher notoriously insists of his own thought, Bjarke seems to believe that the future belongs to him already; that despite the sorry state of so much of his built work, his ideas have won. And in many ways, by virtue of his singular ability to infect our collective imagination, this is true. But if we are not, as architects ourselves, satisfied with the physical worlds that these ideas produce, where are we left?

If my personal cohort is anything like the thousand others that populate our architectural offices, we recognize that Bjarke Ingels makes an easy punching bag and Kahn, an easy god. At the end of a toilsome day, it gives us some sense of ourselves to sit around a table and denigrate the Dane; exalt the Estonian. But we must admit that there is some more complex truth to their simple dichotomy, one that, for my generation hits at the very heart of what we do and where we are going: are we builders of things, or shapers of ideas?

When Walter Gropius led his pupils to architecture in Dessau 90 years ago, they spent much of their time doing what architects had done since Vitruvius: building; in workshops, on job-sites, trying out new materials & processes. By the time I made it to school, I spent much of mine making diagrams. There is a pervasive notion in America's architecture schools today that a set of diagrams is as important to a final presentation as the plan, section & elevation that describe the actual thing to be built. What is being judged by a jury is not only what you did produce but what you meant to be produced (in case it failed to show up). This is exacerbated in the cases of studios that insist that their final product may, in fact, not even be buildable. Disconcertingly, we are being taught, not just by Ingels' videos but also by our professors, most of them sophisticated, intelligent & notable practitioners themselves, that our "product" as an industry is not the building but the rule-set, the diagram, the scaffold for future construction, the concept.

Listening to our discourse at the highest levels, one is left feeling that everything that follows a project's concept is somehow extraneous to its "true" end; that detailing & building constitute a set of additional services to be completed increasingly by consultants, by construction managers, by contractors, by spec writers, by interns & by a de facto underclass of "full-service" architecture firms who are in turn progressively barred from having a crack at "concepting" a prestigious project themselves by the limited strength of their brands in a superficial marketplace. The architectural down-stream is becoming mercenary.

When we look at a building like Japanese high-concept darling SANAA's recently opened Grace Farms, we fail to realize (and it is almost never mentioned in the press) how much of the weight of detailing & realizing that project fell outside of SANAA's office, onto consulting entities, most notably the "facade consultant" FRONT Inc. Indeed it is FRONT's expertise that makes Kazuyo Sejima's purity of concept realizable at all. It may be pointed out that "consulting" on the finer points of building has long been common practice in architecture. Kahn, himself, was constantly working with his engineers and builders to better understand the realities of his office's designs, but the key distinction is that Kahn went out in order to bring new knowledge back in; in order to increase his own dexterity with design. What we see today is not merely seeking help on the size of a beam or the scale of a duct system but the wholesale outsourcing of large swaths of the design, documentation and construction-administration process. Our industry's vanguard is beating a full-scale retreat into a small corner of what my mid-century grandfathers (let alone Vitruvius, Gropius) would recognize as the role of the *architektón*.

And as we do so, we are losing knowledge. FRONT, for example, goes out of its way to state that it is not an architectural practice and does not bestow on its employees the credit-hours necessary for them to become licensed

architects. This means that many of the men and women who are now learning the ins-and-outs of cutting edge building-practice are not on track to become a part of “architecture” as such, but a new thing, leaving those of us who remain estranged from institutional knowledge that has been, for thousands of years, our own. And maybe, as figures like Ingels begin to expand the boundaries of what architecture “is” away from the richly physical world of Kahn, those of us dedicated to the material side of things will jump ship for this yet-unnamed island that now stands where our old continent used to be. But I think there is a third way.

In the work of an extraordinary number of young Iberian, Latin American and South Asian practices (and, I think in the line left in this country by Rafael Moneo’s time at Harvard, most notably drawn forward by Nader Tehrani & his partners) we see an everyday fusion of the evolving concept & a rich understanding of physical construction. What underlies this work is not a form or an idea; is neither mere concept nor myopic commitment to building details but a mode of inquiry in common with Gropius & Kahn & Vitruvius, too. Here we find eager inquiry into concepts and constructions alike: a recognition that intellections & diagrams, no more or less than chopsaws & screwguns, bricks and birch ply, are a means to an end, to be understood and employed on the way to a greater whole. These practices ask more of us as individuals, requiring us to breathe deeply of philosophy and sociology while simultaneously immersed in slump tests and CNCs; to be capable of producing rigorously tested concepts & know how to make them into detailed, legible, abiding realities. And if saying yes to this dual challenge as individuals, as practices, as schools of design is what it means, today, to really do architecture, then perhaps Ingels is right in his own way: “Yes is more.”