

Drawing Contexts, not Conclusions: The Architecture of Diploma 15

Architecture's understanding of a concept like context is only ever achieved in the most delicate yet discrete and abstract of ways, and typically reveals itself to us through drawings, models and other forms of representation. In that these are exactly the means by which architectural knowledge itself is communicated, we can see why a concept like 'context' is so foundational to architecture. For architects, contexts are only ever that which they say, declare or assume them to be. They are the first thing an architect observes, draws or 'builds' into any given work. Without context, every architectural project is unimaginable. Simply put, context is architecture.

The drawings included in *Drawings that Count* have themselves, of course, already been taken out of their most literal context: the design portfolios of their student authors in the AA's Diploma Unit 15. As conceived and led by Francesca Hughes and her teaching partners, for six years starting in 2004, Diploma 15 was itself only a part of its larger context: the two-year diploma and in turn five-year undergraduate school of the AA, providing a meta-context for the brilliant work that follows.

This, therefore, is an allusion to multiple contexts, which I make here at the outset for the purposes of reminding us of the myriad of intersecting realities at play in any setting, architectural, educational or otherwise. There is no context, only ever contexts, a reality the unit's incredible drawings find ways of asserting in new, unexpected and beautiful ways. These images with their highly abstract, at times nearly incomprehensible qualities, are the actual contexts in which we can locate the one thing that all architects and their schools continue to value above anything else – the forming of architectural minds. When approached intelligently, therefore, to produce a drawing is in effect a demonstration of disciplinary self-worth, of the making of architectural knowledge.

In order to begin any work on a project, architects always initially locate their undertaking – literally, they give it context. How they do this has an impact on how they define not only their subsequent ‘project’ but also – more importantly – their own identity. As William James once said, ‘to know an object is to lead it through a context’; how architects gain knowledge of what they then take to be the (many, larger) contexts of their work offers one of the clearest means by which they may know themselves.

So a key achievement of *Drawings that Count* is its important reminder – that when taking on context, proceed with caution (and challenge the expected ways in which you think it should be described). ‘The mask you put on when entering a profession’, Oscar Wilde once quipped, ‘becomes your true face’. Following the lessons of this book, we might append this cautionary professional tale to say something like this: the context any given architect chooses to imagine, represent or accept (for any given project) is the best way possible for us to see who they really are.

On behalf of the entire Architectural Association my thanks go out to everyone involved in this book, the latest in our AA Agendas series, documenting the work (and worlds) of the school. Special thanks to Francesca Hughes for six years of sustained invention and critical enquiry – creating in the unit a context of the rarest kind, and one she extended well beyond the boundaries of Diploma 15. To Rita Lambert, Noam Andrews and everyone else who joined in the teaching, thank you for your energy and commitment, and especially to Noam for his inspiring contribution to this book. Thanks also to Mary Beard for providing scholarly context of the most brilliant and generous kind – not only historical but cultural, expanding the walls of architectural learning. And above all thanks to the students of Diploma 15, whose drawings, portfolios and projects helped enrich the context that matters more than any other – the kind of space of learning and wonder from which the following beautiful drawings and book emerged.