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**Continuity & Invention**

## Continuity and Invention

The idea of serial production might seem, at first, at odds with much of today's architecture, which makes virtue of inventiveness and originality over continuity and perfection of 'type'. Mies, *the* foremost serialist, notably refused to '...invent a new architecture every Monday morning.'<sup>1</sup> Such comparable contemporary reductivists reinforce this, such as Olgiatti, who suggests continuity and inventiveness are not dialectically opposed:

*'He [Olgiatti] believes it should be possible to invent architecture and that there is architecture that is made out of itself. He refers to examples of a barn, a church, a temple – buildings derived from a certain typology, that follow their own rules, buildings that are non-contextual. That kind of architecture has invention at its core.'*<sup>2</sup>

The desire to be continually original does, in itself, represent a kind of serial action, or at least a serial measure of creative success or failure. It is as interesting to speculate what governs the current preference for the singular and unique, as it is to understand what motivates the more obviously 'serial' work. Serial works can be considered in two ways: one, where the work is a series of individually recognized pieces; and a second, where a series of singular works constitute a recognizable whole.

What constitutes 'seriality' in architectural practice is complex as it embraces both design actions *and* their outcomes as designs and buildings. It is also not a singular pursuit: clients are part of the process and must be mediated in line with a desired creative direction and coherent narrative. Serial architectural practice, by its very nature, infers a temporal dimension, inviting a course of flux and mutability to shape and reshape conceptions.

It is by recognizing this meta-pattern of action-reflection-reaction that individual designs give way to more deeply set and continuous themes in my practice. A more considered understanding of time and repetition are beginning to enforce liberation from the simple stylistic coherence which gave an even patina of continuity between my earlier projects.

Three recent designs from my practice embrace a more consistent and coherent set of governing and 'serial' principals. Their comparative hidden order is subtler and more considered as part of a conscious idea of serial progression. Their primary guiding narrative framework involves serial interplay between considerations of Place, Programme and Presence. However, within this narrative interplay five sub-themes recur: *Dialectic, Analogy, Landform, Erosion and Material Association*.

*The Dialectic* governs all types of interplay and in itself embeds serial continuity from one design to the next. The to-and-fro in the discourse of all arrangements drives towards what Venturi termed the 'difficult whole.'<sup>3</sup> The process of dialectics deliberately introduces seemingly irreconcilable dualities within the designs. Tradition and modernity in the *Drummond House* (fig. 1) for example are in constant tension.

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<sup>1</sup> Werner Blaser, *Mies van der Rohe. Less is More*, (Berlin: Birkhauser, 1986) p.128.

<sup>2</sup> Renata Arpagaus *On the work of Valerio Olgiati* (Blueprint magazine, 26/11/09) <http://www.blueprintmagazine.co.uk/index.php/architecture/valerio-olgiati-le-corbusier-lecture-series/>

<sup>3</sup> Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, (bibliography AP, 1977) p.88.

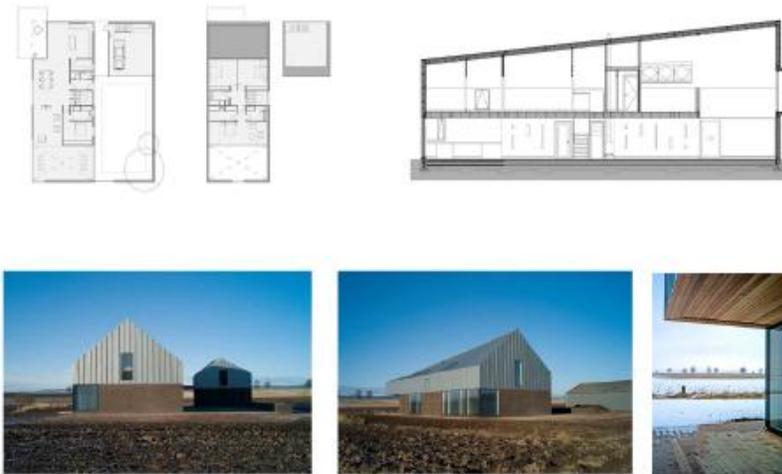


fig. 1

The *Coulson BlackHouse* (fig. 2) presents as an erratic boulder, a geological aberration that is both grounded in material and yet alien in form. *Pittormie White House* (fig. 3) accepts the linear limits of a given sloping field pattern yet introduces a material juxtaposition of white brick that is both urban and abstract – formally contextual, yet materially not. These deliberate dialectical tensions heighten the ‘presence’ of the building as a clearly imposed form that is disengaged from notions of sentimental vernacular or domestic aesthetic.



fig. 2

*Analogy* makes reference to forms that recur through time, for example, as elaborated by Aldo Rossi, but also to “analogical thought” processes (in design) as described by Jung via Rossi:

*“ ‘Analogical’ thought is sensed yet unreal, imagined yet silent; it is not a discourse but rather a meditation on themes of the past, an interior monologue.”<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>4</sup> *Carl Jung, ref. An Analogical Architecture Aldo Rossi, (A+U Publishing Co. Ltd. Architecture and Urbanism, May 1976) p.75.*



fig. 3

One imagines this as a process of design engaging with what Rossi defines as a mental repository of types, “something between memory and an inventory,”<sup>5</sup> which encourages reference to familiar types and their associated form. In the cases of the three projects described, this recall is tempered by an attitude to the past which finds resonance with T S Eliot’s sentiment:

*“Existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. The past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.”<sup>6</sup>*

It is also interesting to note the inherent dialectics within Jung’s ideas: for example, sensed/unreal; imagined/silent; discourse/meditation; and, of course, conscious/unconscious. When these dialectics engage with building, place and an attitude to tradition outlined by Eliot, then, the invocation of types and analogical form is the inevitable result of an automatic process of deep reflection and recollection: the Black House square plan and cubic form make indirect reference to classic villa typologies; the Drummond House and Whitehouse invoke barns and other simple utilitarian structures. Each project is resonant of the others. They are each formed according to their own specific tensions between programme and place; they each have their own version of the same programme; they each speak of the others’ presence as part of the same authorial series; but more than this, they each speak of the potential presence and, therefore, absence of all other versions of the same programme in similar circumstances through time.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.75.

<sup>6</sup> T S Eliot "Tradition and the Individual Talent" 1919

What is critical here is not a sentimental attitude toward replication of traditional types but a desire to present a new formal agenda which then establishes a dialogue with a particular context. Each project is a suspended dialogue and as such retains the tension of exchange between its building form and *landform*.

*Landform* describes an action in the three designs whereby the landscape context inflects the built form. In the cases of Drummond and the Coulson Blackhouse, the roof forms are distorted and manipulated in communion with the topography (distant, intermediate or intimate). Pittormie Whitehouse utilizes both ground plane manipulation and longitudinal asymmetry of the roof to engage the building with its place. In all instances the spatial programmes of the buildings are influenced by the specific characters of the landscape.

These playful 'distortions' (fig.4) at once remove the solutions from orthodoxy and introduce qualities of the 'strangely familiar' questioning the expected relationship between form and function.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, in determining *landform* as a formation principle, it is important to understand that the architecture does not seek to mediate and reconcile differences between the building form and *landform*. All three buildings sit hard to the ground plane with no attempt to gentrify or alter the inherited landscape.

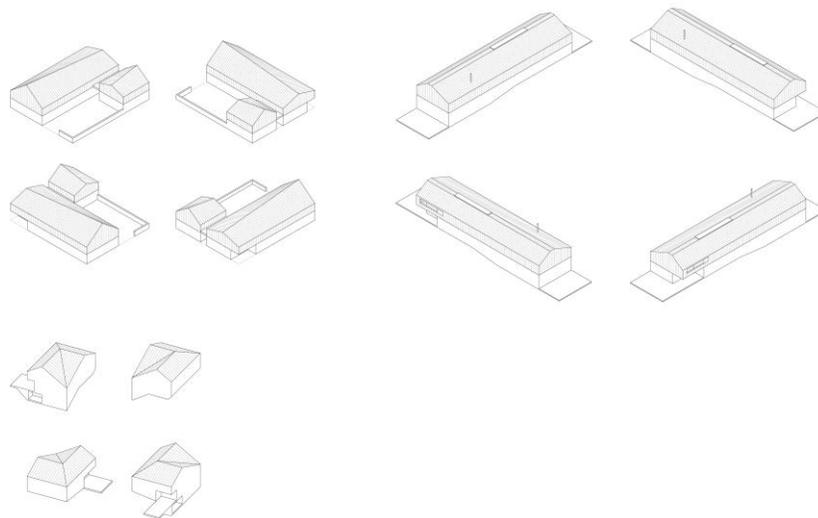


fig. 4

An aspect of *landform* is *Erosion*. Pieces have been removed from all three strong and recognized forms; it is as if the landscape has pulled away and claimed part of the spatial programme of the houses. This extends both the building's and occupant's relationship with the raw land without disrupting the clear form of the building. The absent parts of the forms create places where the occupant might sit undercover.

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<sup>7</sup> Shigeru Ban, Rachel Whiteread et al, *Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life*, Walker Art Center, 2003, <http://www.walkerart.org/archive/D/AD73B5FEB80AC7536166.htm>.

Paradoxically, the act of *erosion* only serves to strengthen the formal idea of the building – like a bite from an apple revealing its whole quality somehow. This desire for formal clarity (un-aggregated form) is again part of the dialectic between nature and the highly controlled man-made. One might think similarly about the ‘Specific Objects’ of Judd and the three-dimensional gridworks and serial ‘Progression’ works of Sol Le Witt, amongst other dialectical tensions it is the difference but clear relationship to a context which bestows some meaning to the work, and the clear absence of something makes what is present evermore palpable.

Palpable presence is further enhanced by way of *Material Association*. The Drummond House’s earthen brick perfectly matches the soil of the ploughed fields; the Basalt walls of the Coulson BlackHouse references the geological substrata and summit of Nevis to the south; and the *Pittormie White House* is appositely placed as neutral but precisely delineated backdrop and foreground against which the natural sloping landscape can be measured.

It is the serial interplay and development of these theoretical, formal and material concerns which determine a continuous hidden order to otherwise individual designs.