

Becoming, a personal professional appraisal.

RIBA part 3.@theAA

Martin West Sept 2013

"To become is never to imitate, nor to 'do like', nor to conform to a model, whether it's of justice or of truth. There is no terminus from which you set out, none which you arrive at or which you ought to arrive at. Nor are there two terms which are exchanged. The question 'What are you becoming?' is particularly stupid. For as someone becomes, what he is becoming changes as much as himself. Becomings are not phenomena of imitations or assimilations, but a double capture, of non-parallel evolution, of nuptials between two reigns."

Gilles Deleuze in Dialogues II

Electing to enter the part three programme now, to be examined by those in the profession that I seek to *become*, is simple to explain. It is about timings. There have been other times when a similar thought has crossed my mind but never with such focus. The first was around 2000. I went as far as to enrol at the Bartlett. Susan Ware was the PSA. I dropped out in the first week.

Evaluating my experiences with respect to the professional exam has always thrown up questions. Susan Ware waved the requirement for my production of PEDRs then. That may have been a mistake. Reflecting on what I was "becoming", rather than "doing" might have produced a mindset to see it through. I wasn't ready at 39 years of age with a 23 year career history. 2 years work in an architectural practice had "landed me on my feet" some said. I can recall the interview that found that assistants job. It was with Peter Shaw of RHWL Architects (Rentons). We remain close to this day. He wrote a reference for me last week that was part of my application for the IDBE at Cambridge. They have offered a place. I will start that part-time course immediately after the AA seminar sessions. Fifteen years have elapsed since that interview. It was my second of that week. The only two I have had since gaining my diploma in 1998. The other was with Aukett Architects. It did not go well.

I carried a very esoteric portfolio. My diploma had been with Paul Coates at UEL. A breath of fresh air compared to the degree at Westminster. In fairness, I had done the BA in two years, not three. Having a family and without a full grant brought financial pressure. The conceptual unwrapping undertaken as an undergraduate had taken its toll. My experience of mature students, and I am no exception, reveals they can come very tightly wrapped. Squeezing a young engineers thoughts and a model makers hands into an architects head is a slow process. Paul offered a path of reconciliation. He was a system theorist. His was a third way. Hovering between art and science. This suited me.

Paul headed up the Centre of Evolutionary Architecture. I tried to contact him only 6 week ago. I was to critique the final year Masters Course at the Dessau Institute of Architecture, Bauhaus. Krassimir Krastev runs the Material Performances Studio there. We met whilst critiquing a unit at the Bartlett in December last year. Damian Leved, one of the first interns on the programme I led for 10 years at Renton's put us

together. Paul would have been better at that crit than me. Sadly he had lost his battle with the brain disease cerebral amyloid angiopathy and could not hear my news. He did leave a great book, Programming Architecture. I encourage all students of design and those who are still wanting to learn to pick it up. Now you can shout about "his stuff". Then it was rather underground. John Frazer, a former business associate and well known teacher, gave one of several eulogies at Paul's cremation. He reminded us of one of Paul's many catch phrases. *"If something's worth doing its worth doing badly."* I borrow it often when I teach.

As a student it is very valuable advice. The professional often demands the opposite. Can you can't do "it" badly for your client. You might need to experiment if you are going to innovate. Paul new the trying required confidences and a reflection on the trying afforded learning. Paul allowed you to fail. He encouraged experimentation.

Leaving academia and joining the world of work was not new to me in '98. I had done it as a 21 year old, leaving a degree in mechanical engineering to work in the health service. The world of architecture wasn't exactly new either. My contact with "them" prior to office experience was as "their" model maker. Architectural model making was never my favourite. My speciality was precision special effects. Although I did build a full size version of Le Corbusier's car and Leonardo's flying machine. I had left school at 16 and practically worked my way through schooling. Training on the job since 1977. I still do it today. Paul had filled us to the brim with algorithmic solutions and systemic approaches to design. But Aukett's didn't fall for it. Not even my professional model making portfolio, which was very impressive, or my engineering background persuaded the interviewer of my suitability for a large London practice. His advice to me was to find a small regional set up for five years and learn my trade that way. That route, one might think luxury, was not affordable to me.

Luckily Peter Shaw was in a hurry at the next interview. Nick Dunn, his CAD manager, had been given my name. Peter didn't need to see my portfolio. He new I had been a model maker for 12 years. My apprenticeship in mechanical engineering would come in handy. There was "miles" of balustrade to draw. As long as I didn't mind starting on the same salary as other part two architectural assistants I could start on Monday next.

My first day in an architects office was on site on the Glaxo SmithKline Beecham European Headquarters with MACE as the Construction Managers. The design was still in its infancy. Rentons were coming in on the back of BA Waterside. They had entered into a joint venture with The Hillier Group an American practice.

The multi disciplinary consultant team had the top floor of a three storey temporary office. Below the subcontractors where already moving in. The ground floor was welfare facilities. On that first day 250 staff were on site. At its height 1800 people would be focused on one task. To complete on time and on budget.

I nervously took my seat. Carl Quinn, Renton's Director in charge, asked me to draw up an elevation from the designers sketch. I did the only thing I new how. Luckily a partial bay study was on the system. I copied it. Then broke it into cells and scripted a "macro" in Microstation. Then I pushed the array button. A 250m long, five storey

high scheme shot across the screen. I contrived a sixteen storey tower in the centre. The first section of my becoming an architect went to "print". Out of the plotter emerged an extended AO 1:50 drawing that didn't seem to want to end.

Mark Chen bellowed out across the office enquiring "who's drawing was this"? I timidly owned up. He rolled up the drawing and asked me to pin it up in the meetings room. The client presentation was in 10 minutes. We would show them the first concept section of the new HQ.

That afternoon I was allocated as Michael Darvil's architectural assistant for the cladding package. The value was £26m. Michael drew everything by hand. My job was to produce the package for tender. I realised then that I had to start an apprenticeship over again. Accept the master pupil becoming. Take in everything that is going on around me and learn to learn once more.

That came in droves. How offices are structured. The rules to the form of an BCO grade A BREEAM excellent office. What information is necessary to buy, coordinate and build. How to manage teams. Soft skills and office politics. Alan Smith, a senior surveyor, taught me the importance of the contract, the promise. Agree and sign up to ones expectations and then never get it out of the draw he thumped out on his desk. The best thing was the MACE way. CM was about no blame. 10 % is always wrong. Even 10 % of your corrections are wrong, so get it out and let us all correct our mistakes. Even whilst we are finishing it in-situ there is always time to correct. This paralleled Paul's systemic approach. It is Zenos paradox *That which is in locomotion must arrive at the half-way stage before it arrives at the goal.* Iterate and iterate again.

Two years into the Glaxo project I went to see Susan Ware at the Bartlet. Despite long days in the office and three hours travelling per day, I thought that I had time to do the part 3. As said, I didn't. I still have the copious course notes handed out at the first lecture. The information contained, has been used often. Now a little out of date. But it has held me in good stead. Occasionally I have lent them to an intern who has continued under my mentorship through to diploma. Some have returned to projects I have been running to gain their part 3. One of them eventually, hopefully, will fill out the role I left at Renton's last summer. I have drafted dozens of PEDR sheets and had to have them signed by a qualified architect because of my lack of becoming. It never bothered me - I was too busy doing architecture to become one.

At the end of Glaxo in October of 2001 the world and I had changed dramatically. We had all stopped and watched our monitors as two jets slammed into the World Trade Centre. Our American colleagues desperately phoning home. A month later we handed over the building to the client. This was the first time I experienced a sensation that I have never gotten over. There is an odd grieving in those first few days after completion. The facilities team move in and don't necessarily know who you are. With Glaxo it was felt hardest because it was the shock of the new. That first time. It has never subsided, even though I attempt to anticipate its happening. Different grievings but always because of handing over. My next two buildings in Manchester for the RBS being handing over with "my" envelope design to a novated architect. Grieving that Renton's were appointed clients advisor and not delivery architects. A social housing block at Regents Quarter being handed over to a D&B contractor that didn't want to really engage. And handing a design for the Centre of

Executive Development over to Sir Fred Goodwin who would have said black was white if it reinforced his position.

St Paul's Square in Liverpool was a real wrench. 10 years, five buildings, another becoming. I really became emotionally involved handing over to the city. Picking up awards, BCO, RICS, AIS, Construction News all tinged with a letting go. If asked to go back to the site even now I prefer to go alone. On turning the corner a lump rises in my throat. Delivering buildings is an emotional process.

The maelstrom of designing and the ever larger ambitions leaves little time for reflection. I would long for a sabbatical at the end of each project. But that never came. One project rolled into the other. I don't hold with the saying "you are only as good as your last project". This is confusing and compounded by the cyclical nature of the construction industry. Whilst Liverpool became easier to manage and my skills at delegation and organisation became more efficient, the recession started to bite. There was a waxing and waning happening simultaneously. In the depths of the recession we produced our best work. As the design was iterated more and more to achieve greater and greater saving and we worked harder to hold on to our business and became exploitable. Not only the designers but the whole Architecture Engineering and Construction ensemble. We had a canny client and he made the best of our hunger. But we all did this with a knowingly acceptable respect.

Still, that client is enmeshed with Renton's and the architects client relationship continues. Whether it is complimentary or symmetrical, only time will tell. But it was time for my new becoming. In June 2012 I had started to think about leaving Renton's. Time to move on. But not without finishing off my responsibilities. Forging relationships with the projects and setting myself up for some grieving.

Several master plans had emerged on the back of St Paul's Square. Three had gained full traction. Namely Salford, Stoke and Chester. Salford will be English Cities funds next northern foray. Despite its spurious award for "best masterplan", it lacks coherence and conviction.

Stoke on the other hand is very robust. Made all the better by having Jan Gehl involved at the beginning of the design process. Alas the developer client could not find away of retaining their services. One of the last tasks I completed before leaving Renton's was to get the sign off by the client of the design concept of the first building, the new Civic Quarter for the new CBQ in Stoke-on-Trent.. Jon Van der Larchot, the City Council's Chief Executive had asked me one day what it would look like. I told him a tale about ceramics and critical regionalism. On the train journey back I sketched the building. By the time I reached the office I had the facade wall types completed including a specification for its solar performance. The day after, Mickey our technician had a draft stage C pack and I had Lindner provide a budget rate for the system. It was coming in just over budget but we could sort that through tender and design development. The structural grid would need to be 4.5m by 9m, a little unusual, but with the team, Arups and Atelier Ten, we would make it work. I presented it the week after to muted applause and the grieving for Stoke began.

At the same time our team completed the hybrid planning application for Chester's Central Business Quarter. This had been 3 years in its becoming. My role had been

lead design director, urban and spatial design adviser, architectural designer and project coordinator. My partner Carolin and I had conceptualised the contemporary linear park that "cracked" that master plan. We also developed a very convincing argument for the remodelling of the grade two star listed Railway Station. My second to last task before clearing my desk was to design, draw by hand just like Mike Darvil, the first office building in the new CBD for Chester. I did an all-nighter. Drew it on my kitchen table. The hybrid application was unanimously passed through committee. A contractor called me yesterday to pick my brains on the first building. He wants to be pre-qualified for the long list of ten.

I resigned from Renton's on the 17 of November 2012. I took my sabbatical. We opened Syndicate West with my partner Carolin on the 7th of January 2013. We have had 32 enquiries in 7 months. There are a dozen small projects either completed or on the go. We have just invested 10K in BIM and are ready to build the studio out in the back of our garden. Every project starts with the RIBA Plan of Works 2013 at stage 0. We tell the clients that does not mean the first stage is for nothing.

Still, the small practice means I am starting another apprenticeship, another becoming. What I need to demonstrate now, to prove I can be trusted, is judgement and a level of professional competence. The paradox is reconciling Deleuze and Zeno remains. Is asking "what are you becoming" stupid because what you are becoming is changing at the same pace. When are we there. There is always a mid point. Its knowing how to see the lines, finding the centre becomes the goal. Not becoming an architect but an architectural becoming.