

Beyond specification: A study of architect and client interaction



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This paper examines a successful architectural design process, taking place over a period of seven years, which resulted in the delivery of a complex building meeting the aspirations of the client. Our analysis focuses on the mechanisms by which expectations about how a building will be experienced are created, shared, and resolved during the process of design. We find differences in the ways designer and client talk to each other about experience and differences in the talk before the construction of the building and after it has been built and occupied. We discuss these differences and why the 'design concept' manifests in distinctive ways. We suggest that the phenomena we have noticed are linked intrinsically to expert design performance.

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Peter Zumthor, in *Thinking Architecture* (2010), writes '[t]he design process is based on a constant interplay of feeling and reason' (p. 21). Expressing the same sentiment more prosaically, the architects Proctor and Matthews write that it is 'not sufficient to create buildings which provide solutions to a series of technical performance specifications, spatial audits and detailed room schedules ... [there is also] a responsibility to offer more than this: to have one foot in the pragmatic world through a strong dialogue with clients and stakeholders, but to simultaneously look beyond – to defy gravity and ultimately to exceed expectations' (Proctor & Matthews, 2009: p. 9). The design task in their view seeks, '[a]n equilibrium of the analytical and the intuitive [to] deliver buildings which lift the spirit and exceed the pragmatic expectations of any building brief' (p. 25).

These descriptions express a subtle, nuanced view of the design process, and point to an aspect of designers' expertise often ignored in the academic study of design. Downing (1992) writes:

'The bridge from past to future suggests that the designer utilizes idiosyncratic knowledge of the world as a template for future experience. Within idiosyncratic knowledge, however, some kernels of shared experience must be present if individuals expect to communicate with others. It is this

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shared experience that architects use in many design situations to explore meaning captured with a place-image, transferring meaning to the present and future through the physical world' (p. 316).

She describes how 'place-images', composites of form, space, movement, sound, smell, or taste, function as bridging points in the design process and allow both internal and external dialogues to take place in meeting a brief.

In the study presented below we look at how an architectural design project succeeds in delivering a building that serves the functional, experiential and symbolic aspirations of the client. We draw attention to the different ways in which client and architect speak to each other about the building while it is virtual: while it is a set of ideas, some of which are represented in drawings and written specifications. We examine how they speak about the building once it has been constructed and put into daily use. In the discussion of our observations we suggest that the architect's tacit knowledge about what can serve as justifications for design decisions reveals his implicit understanding of the limitations of the material traces (Medway, 2003: p. 260) of the design as a representation of the complex of ideas (Medway, 2003: p. 256) that comprise the design as a whole. We focus particularly on those things that go beyond the pragmatic expectations of clients – their functional requirements – to those that may not only be inexpressible but also unimagined. This paper is not about the difficulties of non-designers understanding technical representations such as plans and drawings of elevations. It is about how the client and, in particular, the designer handle the fact that 'the design is not the drawings but is the idea that the drawings (always partially) represent' (Medway, 2003: p. 258) and how they cope with the phenomenon captured by Medway anecdotally when he says:

'When the architect goes across the office, opens the drawer and pulls out what looks like a blueprint, which is just a set of lines and some figures (to someone like me) what the architect sees is 'boldness' or 'fragility'.'
(Medway, 2003: p. 258)

The architectural project we analyse below was successful in realising the aspirations of both the clients and the architect. However, our intention is not to draw lessons from it, or make claims about how to guarantee or even improve the chances that the architect's ambitions for how the building will be experienced somehow coincide with the unspecified yearnings of the client. Our objective is rather to show that where there are not prior experiences of place(s) shared between architect and client success hinges not only on the architect's technical expertise but also on his judgement about how to present and justify key elements of the design. We believe understanding this better is of value to current wider debates about the roles of the designer and design expertise.

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