IN PRAISE OF DRAWING
BY ELIZABETH B HATZ

Some years ago, entering José Linares’s library in a Madrid church, our students from SAUL Limerick, in the silence of the room, immediately picked up their little black notebooks and started sketching peacefully for the couple of hours we were guided by the architects who turned to us, mouth wide open; “I don’t believe this – no architecture students at ETSAM hand draw anymore… I am so envious! How do you do it?”

Then, is not hand drawing desperately obsolete today? No – and it never will be, despite the current lack of practice. As the world gets more complex, why not embrace a rich co-existence of different media? We have the opportunity to understand and make use of the unique insights and significant and global disappearance of hand drawing means.

It allows for reflection and recalls something more finished. The drawing is closer to the picture, the sketch. The sketch is more of a notation, imperfect but often accurate in its speculative abstraction – its ability to catch the essence. Alison and Peter Smithson used what they called “ideograms” – something in between ideas and diagrams.

It is a gentle flow, careful and sensitive. It is a useful tool that provides an immediate communication device in the moment. In a world that is always on the move, it is essential to be able to see a particular moment and conjure up an interpretation. The tool of an architect is to be able to see” says Alvaro Siza.

Sketching is a heterogeneous, open activity. A sketch may mean totally different things to the author and the spectator: yet they seem to meet – somewhere in the imperfect, elusive, and pertinent zone between image and thought. You are between attentive focus and leisurely gaze. Still, it is amazing how differently we as architects can use the means.

Two different words in Portuguese that mean “to look” and “to see and understand” (olhar and ver). The tool of an architect is to be able to see” says Alvaro Siza.

Opening the film, Nigel Murray talks about the unpretentious format of the sketchbook. This is key. A cheap, light and sustainable companion for anyone aged 5 to 95, to play, observe, think or muse. Michael Doherty draws people using the city, thus observing how places are appropriated. He has 3 minutes to draw, before people move. If you are slow, maybe just the stillness of the stone slab they sat on remains on the paper – like a surface remembering the touch, and waiting for the next. Different paces have different advantages for observation.

On the other hand, the drawing is as it is and appears to determine the intelligence of the re-encounter. Discovering through the hatched graphite darkness that even mass can be perforated, like Luciethis rock, perforated by water. We see the hand of Tuomey and a sketch by O’Donnell. Seldom has poetry come so near strategy, through the hand. You realise the intimate inter-relationship between all the different drawings, including the computer drawing.

Drawing can act as code or character. The fluent sketcher can develop this as idiom. Nigel Peake (“I draw what I cannot say”) creates a world of figures like a mirroring filter, a patterned veil of humour and appetite of all things… playful and disarmingly laid-back. Here the sketch takes on a kind of autonomy. Also the skill in Doherty’s drawing has this aura of a picture, something more finished. The drawing is closer to the picture, the sketch. The sketch is more of a notation, imperfect but often accurate in its speculative abstraction – its ability to catch the essence. Alison and Peter Smithson used what they called “ideograms” – something in between ideas and diagrams.

Niall McCullough and Valerie Mulvin eloquently introduce us to the drawing as testing, thinking, projecting, and link it to how photographs may change our view of places. They add the significant dimension of time, entropy versus timelessness. Re-encounter or dismantling of a building, un-building, is intuitively suggested in their reflections, acutely drawing on a contemporary condition that most of the world would love to ignore, but the depth of which is intimately fused with the pendulum between transience and permanence.

Somehow, this highlights the choreography of de-bobbling – captured in Valerie Mulvin’s de-folding of a wall - the contemporary dilemma of an over-designed and over-built world. Drawing on Life is a film about the unpretentious format of the sketchbook. This is key. A cheap, light and sustainable companion for anyone aged 5 to 95, to play, observe, think or muse. Michael Doherty draws people using the city, thus observing how places are appropriated. He has 3 minutes to draw, before people move. If you are slow, maybe just the stillness of the stone slab they sat on remains on the paper – like a surface remembering the touch, and waiting for the next. Different paces have different advantages for observation.

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It is like a disciplined taming of the chaotic immersing in the world, an ordering of the scary disorderly creative flow – and it is in itself a kind of architecture.

This is a rich film with many layers. Shane O’Toole’s wisdom and liberating frankness at the end is brilliant. “I hate design” is a quote I will bear at heart.

So, see this film, show this film and spread this film. It is unique and important. Make it a short version of 30 minutes for television, now, as it is accessible to an audience beyond architects.

Have I no objections or frustrations? It would be wrong. One would need to see more of the actual drawing, act and item. Remember, the documentary where Picasso is filmed drawing; you see the paper from behind and the ink coming through. But in this film, so the drawing is as it is and appears to determine the intelligence of the re-encounter. Discovering through the hatched graphite darkness that even mass can be perforated, like Luciethis rock, perforated by water. We see the hand of Tuomey and a sketch by O’Donnell. Seldom has poetry come so near strategy, through the hand. You realise the intimate inter-relationship between all the different drawings, including the computer drawing.

Drawing on Life was first screened by the Irish Architecture Foundation at IMMA as part of The Everyday Experience. It was shown recently as part of The Belfast International Film Festival's Documentary Panorama. Screenings have taken place in Portugal and Canada with forthcoming ones in Seattle Public Library, Berlin and Sweden. Other International Film Festivals will be confirmed in August: Drawingonlife.com

This film gives significant and unique insights into why how and when hand drawing acts in the process of perceiving and making architecture.