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Teaching in Architecture Studios: Poetic Simplicity

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Teaching in Architecture Studios: Poetic Simplicity

Letiţia BĂRBUICĂ[1]

Abstract

John Pawson and SANAA (Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nizhizawa) share the same interest in simplicity. For SANAA, the concern for simplicity forms part of their cultural background while for Pawson it was acquired through a trip to Japan in his youth. Investigating their work, and how they approach architectural design, enables us to understand how simplicity can create a form of poetry within real world architecture. Pawson works with a Japanese notion – shibui – meaning to know when to stop, and with "pure geometry...another quality that seems to make simplicity more likely."[1] SANAA, on the other hand, base their approach on Japanese culture and the concept of wabi – subdue austere beauty [2] - and on the beauty of imperfection which they find in the geometry of nature. The chaotic nature of the outside world needs to draw on abstract expressions such as these to achieve balance, an equilibrium both Pawson and SANAA are (re)searching for. What is the result of applying shibui and wabi-sabi to the architectural process? What can we learn by applying these concepts in this way? How can these concepts be used to teach architecture? Drawing on these two Japanese concepts a number of teaching suggestions will be proposed; these will be aimed at enabling students to investigate and explore differing approaches within the confines of the architectural studio.

Keywords: John Pawson; SANAA; simplicity; geometry; wabi-sabi; architecture studio workshop.

1. Introduction

This paper introduces new teaching strategies for use within the architecture studio, thereby falling under the Lumen Congress theme of

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Education. It highlights a range of topics which are especially relevant to teaching and research. It is the second [3] in a series of papers aimed at addressing the following question: is there a way to develop teaching strategies from best practice in architecture? The methodology developed to answer this question can be drawn on and used by qualified architects to develop a range of valid teaching strategies and thus become a tool for architectural studio tutors in all universities.

The research it presents will also provide a useful counterbalance to a world where images travel rapidly and are sometimes adopted by students without solid analysis or understanding. It focuses on two architectural practices and three architects: Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nizhizawa who founded SANAA, and John Pawson. SANAA is the Pritzker winner of 2010, and John Pawson is a highly notable and unique figure; an architect who did not finish his AA studies yet developed a way of thinking and doing architecture through his extensive essay, "Minimum" (1996). I propose to analyse them together because of their shared roots in Japanese culture and, furthermore, because they are categorized together under Modernisme Réflexive [4] in "L'architecture de 1990 à nos jours".

1.1. Subject relevance

The topic has international relevance for teaching in the architecture studio. The way architecture is taught has to be continuously renewed, and looking at the creative strategies employed by renowned architects is one way. Architecture studio teaching should be also anticipatory. The values to be integrated in studio teaching, proposed as part of this paper, are both very particular to the architects discussed, but also universal in terms of poetry and simplicity.

The social value of the paper is related to teaching and understanding architecture. Consequently, it is not only related to the students and teachers, but also to the people interested in the way architecture is produced and understood.

To this end, we launch a series of questions. Can we utilize poetry and simplicity to create architecture? Can we feel the poetry of a space? Do we appreciate the simplicity of an architectural object? Is it evocative for us?

1.2. Literature review

There are not substantial sources about teaching architecture in studios. In "Tools for Ideas", for instance, by Christian Gänshirt [20], all the means to create architecture, from the simple hand drawing to computer operated techniques, to the "two-edged sword" [20] of criticism, are

presented. But there is no reference related to the topic presented in this paper: looking at how well-established architects are doing, thinking, writing about architecture, and learning from their outcomes, designs, values and processes.

A driver to analyse the work of these architects, in search of similarities, is the impressive synoptic map realized by Adrian Meyer [4] in "L'architecture de 1990 à nos jours". The map is a graphic illustration. However, the 22 page book accompanying the map does not back up the methodology behind creating the map.

Some of the elements revealed by the map seem true and grounded, but for me it was important to prove that they are correct. Hence this paper aims to demonstrate that the area in which Pawson and SANAA are grouped on the synoptic map holds true, through the arguments presented below.

The following paper is an additional piece of the complex puzzle that teaching architecture studio stands for, determining thus what contemporary architecture is.

2. Methodology

Both Seijima and Nishizawa teach architecture. However, they do not debate on the teaching process. Nishizawa appears to consider teaching to be too standardized and methodical. For him, "Learning is more fun than teaching" [5]. Pawson taught whilst in Japan, but never taught architecture. It is therefore interesting to investigate the way SANAA and Pawson perform architecture, and to derive from their strategies and approaches new ways of teaching architecture in the studio.

The research employs both historical and analytical methods; it is designed as a general research method and was also utilized in the previously mentioned paper "Architecture Studio Teaching. Transforming Reality". It explores 37 architectural works built by architects between 1990-2010. For each architectural work an interpretative analysis was conducted focusing on: space, structure, expressiveness, and how the buildings relate to the external site. Summaries of the research are presented in Tables 1 and 2, with each work described by key words in order to identify its main characteristics. Since there is information available regarding the *modus operandi* of architects in architecture, these are also presented. It is reasonable to assume there is a connection between the way architects perform architecture and the way they think architecture. From these processes, strategies can be distilled to teach architecture. I therefore propose to explore in depth the reasoning and

methods of investigation used by architects in order to develop lessons that can be taught in the architecture studio.

2.1. Analytical Research

Table 1. SANAA. List of buildings 1990-2010.

YEAR	SANAA	SPACE	STRUCTURE	EXPRESSIVENESS	SITE
1997	MULTIMEDIA WORKSHOP OOGAKI	"parabolic curving plaza" [6] exterior space (pedestrian circulation) as buffer for the interior. Walkable roof functional areas organized like strips	Reinforced concrete	BOX IN A BOX: the façade has a continuity that does not reveal the organization of the interior space. HORIZONTALITY: like a floating roof FLOATING character (inconspicuous base)	Is surrounded by green roof
1997	N MUSEUM, WAKAYAMA	exterior space (pedestrian circulation) as buffer for the interior.	Reinforced concrete structural glass façade	TRANSLUCENT BOX IN A BOX like a floating roof FLOATING character (inconspicuous base) THIN (detail for a thin roof)	Undulating roof, undulating landscape
1997	S HOUSE	"semi external space"[6] introverted spaces natural light adjustment flexibility of space through sliding panels double height spaces, like strips.	Wood structure	BOX IN A BOX translucent/opaque BLUR interior/exterior	Site neutral, directed inwards
1997	M HOUSE	Introverted spaces, interior gardens functional areas organized like strips alternate interior and exterior spaces double height spaces, like strips.	Metallic structure	FLOATING BOXES within the BOX BLUR between interior & exterior layers of transparency	"bringing the outdoor into inside...keeping the privacy."[6] created its own internal landscape for orientation

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1997	K BUILDING, HITACHI	Flexible space through sliding partitions double height spaces, like strips. Open plan space with no hierarchies	5.1mx5.1 m grid. Reinforced concrete	BOX, MONOLITH, TRANSPARENCY, TRANSLUCENT "panels of the same size, using transparent, translucent and aluminium…in random order."[6]	Site neutral
1998	PARK CAFE, KOGA	Open plan space with no hierarchies	Metal Thin roof on thin columns 60mm	FLOATING character (inconspicuous base) floating roof like THIN illusory sensation given by the reflection of the landscape HORIZONTALITY	Transparent towards the landscape. Into the landscape, reflecting the landscape
1999	O MUSEUM, NAGANO	Fluid open plan non-Cartesian plan slightly bended parallel-piped; distorted perspective	Metallic structure on pilotis	FLOATING character (inconspicuous base) TRANSPARENCY, TRANSLUCENT layers of transparency HORIZONTALITY	"make our project float as an element of the environment ", "the whole environment. ..can be experienced as an exhibition space."[6]
2000	DAY CARE CENTER FOR THE ELDERLY	Interconnected spaces flexible spaces local corridor- semi-external space graduation of the privacy	Metal structure	"different degrees of transparency"[6] HORIZONTALITY	
2003	DIOR STORE JAPAN	exterior space (pedestrian circulation) as buffer for the interior. Introverted space walkable flat roof	Metal structure	BOX IN A BOX TRANSLUCENT variable degrees of transparency. STACKED BOXES (levels with different heights expressed in the façade) INTERNAL DRAPE	Urban insert. Height limitation

2004	21st CENTURY MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART KANAZAWA	exterior space (pedestrian circulation) as buffer for the interior. INTERCONNECTED INDEPENDENT CELLS blurred relationship with the exterior interior courts organic forms, non-Cartesian space	Metal structure / columns	MONOLITH, TRANSPARENCY, TRANSLUCENT HORIZONTALITY	Transparent plane towards the park "ring shaped promenade"[6]
2005	NAOSHIMA FERRY TERMINAL	Closed cells floating in a rectangular covered space open plan	Thin roof on thin column	FLOATING character (inconspicuous base) like a floating roof THIN HORIZONTALITY	Total open space on all direction, urban foyer "the island main foyer."[7]
2006	NOVARTIS OFFICE BUILDING	Open plan spaces organized around interior courts exterior space (pedestrian circulation) as buffer for the interior. no visual separation between spaces	Metal structure	BOX, MONOLITH TRANSPARENT OVERLAPPED TRANSPARENCIES BLUR INTERIOR/EXTERIOR	Transparency to an urban site
2006	GLASS PAVILION, TOLEDO, OHIO	exterior space (pedestrian circulation) as buffer for the interior. INTERCONNECTED INDEPENDENT CELLS blurred connections with the exterior non-Cartesian space, organic forms	Metal structure	TRANSPARENT MONOLITH overlapped transparencies floating like roof HORIZONTALITY "acrobatic feats of transparency"[8]	Transparency towards the park. Double glazing with 80cm of air insulation between, ecological solution
2006	ZOLVEREIN SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT	Open plan walkable flat roof (Modernism) exterior space (pedestrian	Structural façade, rigid vertical circulatio	BOX random order of openings position and size, but harmonic composition	Landmark in an industrial site.

		circulation) as buffer for the interior. Each floor has a different path for circulation space double introverted from the exterior, oriented towards inner courts	n, 2 columns, a type of reinterpre ted tube in tube structure with asymmetr ical solutions, exposed concrete and metal	the façade "soften[s] the transition between interior and exterior."[7]	
2006	ALMERE CULTURAL CENTRE	"… spaces of various sizes can be connected into various ways."[7] internal courts introverted and extroverted spaces pedestrian circulations with no hierarchy	"architect ure without columns. "[7] structural thin walls	MONOLITH COMPOSITION WITH CUBES (BOXES) Box within a BOX	"…seek to link the city with the water…."[7]
2007	NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPO-RARY ART NY	Open plan grading of the type of natural light "not perfect square"[7]	Metal truss structure (walls and slabs) exposed structure at the interior	MONOLITH STACKED BOXES a type of blurring the massiveness using the mesh façade. CONTRADICTION between SOLID and TRANSPARENT DRAPE façade	Creativity within urban restriction given by the local rules (alignment with the left and right cornices line)
2009	SERPENTIN E GALLERY	Open plan with no hierarchy, organic contour, Non-Cartesian space	Metal Thin roof on thin columns 60mm	FLOATING character (inconspicuous base) floating roof like THIN illusory sensation given by the reflection of the landscape HORIZONTALITY	Into the landscape, reflecting the landscape
2010	ROLEX LEARNING CENTER	exterior space (pedestrian circulation) as buffer for the interior. INTERCONNECT	Metal structure and beamless flat	FLOATING MONOLITH HORIZONTALITY	Pre-existing pedestrian walks integrated into the

		ED CELLS interior courts non-Cartesian space	concrete slab (60cm)		project. Perspective towards the lake.
2012	LOUVRE_ LENS MUSEUM	Mix of typologies of spaces characteristics for O MUSEUM NAGANO and GLASS MUSEUM TOLEDO mix of possible pathways within the museum	Concrete floors, metal columns apparent structure at the interior	DISTORTED BOXES TRANSPARENCY and REFLECTION (polished aluminium) Blur interior/exterior Blur built/nature Floating roof	Industrial scale of the museum, insert in an industrial area surrounded by dense residential layout.
2013	VITRA FACTORY	Open plan zenithal light	Prefabricated concrete elements + orthogonal metallic structure (truss) visible at the interior	CONTRADICTION between SOLID and TRANSPARENT DRAPE façade (acrylic glass) MONOLITH	Insert in an industrial space with signature buildings "this white glossy surface reflects the surrounding trees and buildings and makes this vast hall blend in with the surroundings." [7]

Table 2. Pawson. List of buildings 1990-2010. Analytical table

YEAR	PAWSON	SPACE	STRUCTURE	EXPRESSIVENESS	SITE
1993	CALVIN KLEIN COLLECTION STORE, NY	Space similar to that in an art gallery, white box vertical double space towards the exterior	Existing	"calm visual field...benches that appear variously to float or to extrude from the floor."[9]	Retains the specificity of the building (banking hall). Unity at the floor level – grey.[10]
1995	TILTY BARN	U shaped courtyards, open plan space	Wood, brick,	The structure is exposed as an	Vernacular typology:

	ESSEX	pedestrian circulation is transparent, opened to the landscape public spaces face the court yard; bedrooms face the landscape	existing structure	artefact MIX OLD+NEW "the original roof appears to float."[11]	connection with nature
1995	DE CAMARET HOUSE	Perimeter-walled courtyard sunken courtyard continuity between interior and exterior space at the ground floor level staircase as sculptural element	Existing structure and reinforced concrete extension	Refined MIX OLD+NEW	Urban insert with high conditionings
1996	JIGSAW STORE	Space similar to that in an art gallery, white box vertical double space towards the exterior staircase as sculptural element	Existing structure	Refined MIX OLD+NEW play with transparency/opacity	"site specific store" [11]
1999	PAWSON HOUSE	Continuity between interior and exterior space at the ground floor level staircase as sculptural element	Existing structure + extension	Refined MIX OLD+NEW seemingly floating ground floor towards the walled courtyard	Urban insert with high conditionings
2001	WALSH HOUSE TELURIDE	Fluid space on the first floor direct towards the landscape the space as an extruded cross-section staircase as sculptural element	Wood structure	STACKED BOXES NEW OBJECT WHICH SEEMS VERNACULAR roof expressivity	insert with high conditionings :" preservation of existing views, historically appropriate building forms, traditional roof structure, entrance oriented to the street, consistent

					ratio of window/wall area, restrained ornament, Natine planting." [11]
2003	HOUSE IN GERMANY	Interior space continues outside on the ground floor space delimited by glass walls staircase as sculptural element	Reinforced concrete	BOX FLOATING character (inconspicuous base) MONOLITH	"...gentler strategy, following the slope and making it a defining part of the character of the architecture." [11]
2004	NOVY DUR MONASTE RY	U shaped courtyard pedestrian circulation is transparent, opened to the landscape space organized around a patio	Existing structure+ reinforced concrete +wood	Refined MIX OLD+NEW HORIZONTALIT Y	Keeps the traces of previous buildings works with the land slope
2004	LANDSDO WNE APARTME NTS	Open plan living room opened to the urban landscape segregation between day/night spaces	Structural walls	BOX MONOLITH	Integrated through texture, scale, colour
2005	TETSUKA HOUSE	Continuity between interior and exterior space at the ground floor level staircase as sculptural element	Reinforced concrete. 2 shades: for day and night spaces	BOX MONOLITH self-citation (Pawson house)	Integrates Japanese elements: tatami room, organization around a courtyard
2005	BARON HOUSE SWEEDEN	Spaces organized around an internal patio public spaces face the court yard; bedrooms face the landscape continuity between interior and exterior	Brick, wood	MONOLITH blurred boundary between the built and the landscape HORIZONTALIT Y	"...draws on vernacular models...trans formed through the introduction of new materiality and

		space at the ground floor level the space as an extruded cross-section			detailing." [12]
2007	GRAMERCY APPART.	Living space with double orientation	metallic	Refined OLD+NEW	Integrated thorough texture, scale, colour
2008	TED HUGHES POETRY CENTER, UK	Introverted for the centre/ extroverted for the cafe	Structural walls	MONOLITH NEW AND OLD	Extension of the existing building; contrast of colour and texture
2009	HOUSE IN L.A.	Separation between the fluid space for the day and the space for the night. The staircase as a sculptural element	Structural walls	STACKED BOXES FLOATING CHARACTER HORIZONTALITY	Remodelling of the site/ half level in the ground
2009	FINCA EN MONTEMAGGIO TOSCANA	The staircase as a sculptural element	Restoration of the walls	MONOLITH wall is predominant	"explores the relationship between architecture and landscape." [13]
2009	CRICKET PAVILION	Intermediate space covered and elevated a new typology.[13]	Structural walls	BOX Modernist appearance (Mies van der Rohe: SR Crown Hall, Neue National Library)	Slight remodelling of the site
2011	CASA DE LA BOTERE	Sunken interior courtyards, staircase as a sculptural element	Structural walls	HORIZONTALITY	Open to the landscape zero energy house

3. Findings

3.1. Simplicity and Modernist Influences

Pawson is very clear about the architecture that influenced him. Le Corbusier is, for him, a genius equivalent to Picasso yet he is more attracted

to the architecture produced by Mies van der Rohe whom he describes "a brilliant refiner." [1] Seijima and Nishizawa cite the same influences but would add to that list Oscar Niemeyer. [14] Also of note is Donald Judd, a minimalist artist, who bridges the gap between art and architecture through his three dimensional works and is praised by Pawson for arguing that: "proportion is 'reason made visible'." Proportion and materiality of the object in space are also important for SANAA. [14]

However, both Pawson and SANAA push the boundaries of Modernism as they venture beyond functionalism. Pawson concentrates on an elevated aesthetic that encapsulates simplicity. His proposal is radical, as radical as Modernism had previously been; remove all unnecessary detail, maximize simplicity to feel the space. As Pawson himself has said, "Emptiness allows us to see the space as it is, to see architecture as it is, preventing from being corrupted or hidden" [1]. This view is in accord with the minimalist art motto attributed to Frank Stella, "What you see is what you see." [15]

SANAA, in turn, are concerned with subtle elements that were deemed unimportant, such as how people would navigate the space they have created, stating "The most important thing for us is that people enjoy the space". SANAA work with the open plan philosophy that Modernism invented, and in doing so they also invent contemporary architecture: the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Glass Pavilion and The Ferry Terminal all begin with an open plan in which partitions can take any position. The Rolex Learning Center pushes to the limit the idea of a free plan by distorting it on the z axis. The aim is the same as that of the old Modernists: create flexible spaces for showing art and for learning. The walkable roof is another Modernist fetish and SANAA make use of this idea at the Dior Store and the Zolverein School of Management.

SANAA was invited to put forward a proposal for an installation[2] at the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion in Barcelona, in 2007. I see in their proposal a reverence towards Modernism, an indication that it is a source of creative inspiration for them, as they create a different kind of open space, a different type of expressive structure, particularly the thin metallic white column. Their installation comprises an acrylic overlapped ellipse inside the main room. For me, this shows how the spaces they create are derived from a Modernist typology.

2 Installation was on show until January 2008

3.2. The box

The box is a topic also related to Modernism. SANAA is investigating the concept of a box that does not reveal its content, essentially a mystery box, as can be seen in:

a) The box with a random façade order: K Building, Zolverein School of Management, Novartis
b) Box in a box: Multimedia Workshop Oogaki, N Museum Wakayama, S House
c) Stacked boxes: Dior Store, New Museum of Contemporary Art, NY
d) Organic boxes in a box: Kanazawa Museum and Toledo Glass Pavilion

Pawson is Cartesian in his approach and has developed a) the box that reveals its content in line with the Modernist concept of *honesty:* Cricket Pavilion, Tesuka House, Lansdowne Apartment, House in Germany b) stacked boxes: Casa in Los Angeles. Pawson does not experiment with the box per se, but rather with the mix between old and new.

3.3. Interpretation of tradition

When asked about their inspiration from Japanese tradition, SANAA countered: "We do not transform Japanese elements into our architectural language. We might be inspired by history or tradition, but this could come from any country or culture." [16] Nevertheless, looking to the traditional *en-gawa,* I see creative interpretation in SANAA's works as well as Pawson's. As explained by Gunter Nitschke [17], *en-gawa* is a space that makes the transition between the exterior and the interior, a multifunctional space which rises a few steps above the ground, wraps around the house and modulates the quantity of light, protecting it from the rain or sun. It can be seen as an addition to the traditional *genkan,* which is similar to the Romanian *prispa,* a vernacular architecture.

This type of transitional space is to be found, reinterpreted in a contemporary fashion, in many of SANNA's works: Multimedia Workshop Oogaki, N Museum, Wakayama, S House, Diore Store, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa (see fig.1), Glass Pavilion, Toledo-Ohio, Zolverein School of Management and some of the Louvre-Lens Pavilions. On a more residential scale, intermediary spaces can be found in many of John Pawson's works: Tilty Barn, Novy Dur Monastery, and Barron House where the idea intersects with that of another local typology, the barn. At Calvin Klein and the Jigsaw Store I found a translation of *genkan* on two levels, as we can talk about en-gawa only where there is a building surrounded by the landscape. While both shops have one

façade, *en-gawa* was restricted to *genkan*. The Cricket Pavilion also utilizes a *genkan* typology.

This transitional space is multifunctional, forming a buffer between the exterior and the more private parts of the building. It is similar to a *respiro*, a *memento* that prepares for the main part, and is a different way to interconnect spaces between these aspects of the building and spaces within the landscape or immediate urban surroundings.



Fig.1: SANAA, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, © arc space, photo source: http://www.arcspace.com

4. Conclusions

Common characteristics of the architecture practised by SANAA and Pawson can be grouped around the idea of simplicity:

1) Minimum – SANAA call themselves minimalists (use of minimum details)

2) Tradition translated into contemporaneity

3) The box.

SANAA enjoys the experimental aspects whilst Pawson prefers the vernacular. Simplicity should therefore be an important topic when teaching in architecture studios, "Leaving aside present-day misuse and inflation of the term, Minimalist architecture represents one of the most significant contribution to a review of a discipline and an attempt to endow it with new

foundations and a way of life." [18] There are numerous ways to address simplicity in architecture and dedicated workshops could investigate these different approaches. This would be a useful, and practical, application of this research.

For example:

a) The concepts Donald Judd developed in sculpture could be translated into architecture. Students are to investigate the following attributes in architecture: "elementary geometry, seriality and progression."[19] Tutors are to design a workshop to explore contemporary art and to identify ways in which they deal with these key elements. The workshop will investigate materials, their aesthetic character and practical potential. Simplify. Work by removing elements. Simplify. Work with, for example, only one material. Target audience: first and second year undergraduates.

b) Starting from traditional architectural elements and translating them into contemporary forms, students are to find existing precedents and experiment with:
   - *en-gawa*
   - *prispa*

   Tutors are to design a workshop to investigate ways of creating newness starting from existing, vernacular types of building. Target audience: second and third year undergraduates.

c) Starting from the Modernist concept of the box, students are to investigate and analyse contemporary examples of this architecture. They should then attempt to design a space that starts from a box but is far removed from its Modernist ideal. Tutors are to design a workshop to facilitate this exercise and to investigate the possibilities presented in chapter 3.2 point a)-d) as well as to encourage other forms of discovery. Target audience: second, third and fourth year undergraduates.

d) Beginning with the Modernist concepts of open plan, structure and transparency students are invited to refine an idea on the programme they currently study (residential, museum, school, etc.). Tutors are to encourage this research and integrate it into the wider design curriculum. Target audience: third and fourth year undergraduates.

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