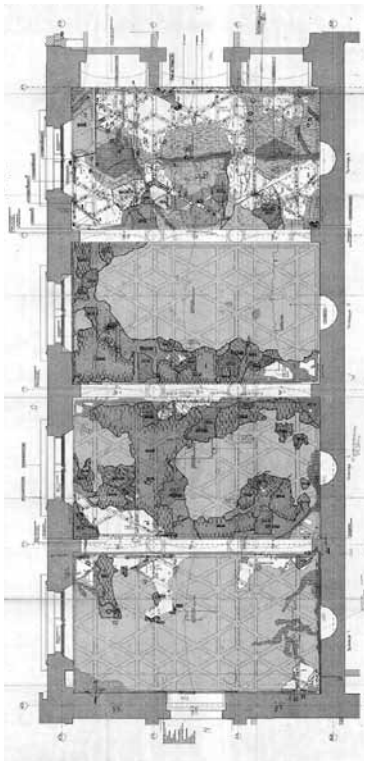
Form, matter and David Chipperfield

Ivor Richards



'Architecture must speak for itself'

In his introduction to *Form Matters*, the catalogue accompanying his Design Museum exhibition, which began in London in October 2009 and culminated its tour in Italy earlier this year, David Chipperfield is at once very clear to state that 'the work of an architect is measured by built work'; but he also emphasises that the body of work shown is 'the consequence not of individual genius, but of the collaborative efforts of our office and our partners, unified in the belief that architecture can pursue ideas, concern itself with its physical potential and maintain the economic criteria that make these projects possible'. It is a tribute that also implies the organisational structure required to run offices in London, Berlin, Milan and Shanghai and to design and build projects in Europe, North America, Asia and Africa.

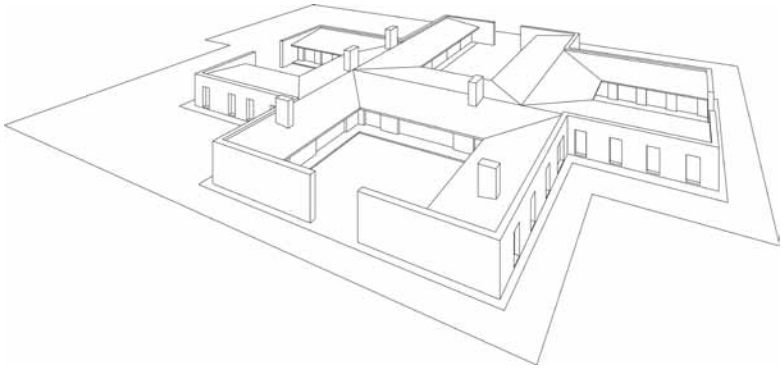
The pursuit of ideas remains a common factor from the earliest days of his first London office, in a building shared with *Blueprint* magazine. There he set out to bring the work of a new generation of European architects to the contemporary London scene through the auspices of the 9H Gallery, which he founded in the basement in 1985. The work shown there, such as that of Herzog and de Meuron (in 1989), in turn gave an intellectual context for his own emergent form of solemn, understated Modernism. Then, alongside the exhibition and promotion of a Modernist renaissance, Chipperfield published a significant book entitled *Theoretical Practice* (MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1994), memorable in its bright yellow jacket. In it he not only seized the opportunity to show his work, much of it unbuilt, but also laid down his own principles of architectural design in practice – a form of highly articulate and useful expression of belief and compositional control that is rare among architects, who more usually live by Alvar Aalto's creed of 'I build'.

Nevertheless, and though an exposition of his principles is very handsomely summarised and extended in a series of essays published in *Form Matters,* Chipperfield is definitive in saying that, at the end of the day, 'Architecture must speak for itself, there is no manifesto. It is its own manifesto.' And he continues with a telling parallel:

> *Louis Kahn, the architect who revitalized the modern movement through his nearly archaic interpretation of modern architecture, asked that the building should find 'what it wants to be'. In other words, the architect must realise through the appropriate architectural means an interpretation of programme and context that gives particular identity to the building that is both unique and familiar. [...] It is an overriding ambition within our work that we find a dialogue between the form of the building and the spaces that it holds within it, between the spaces and the forms that contain them.*

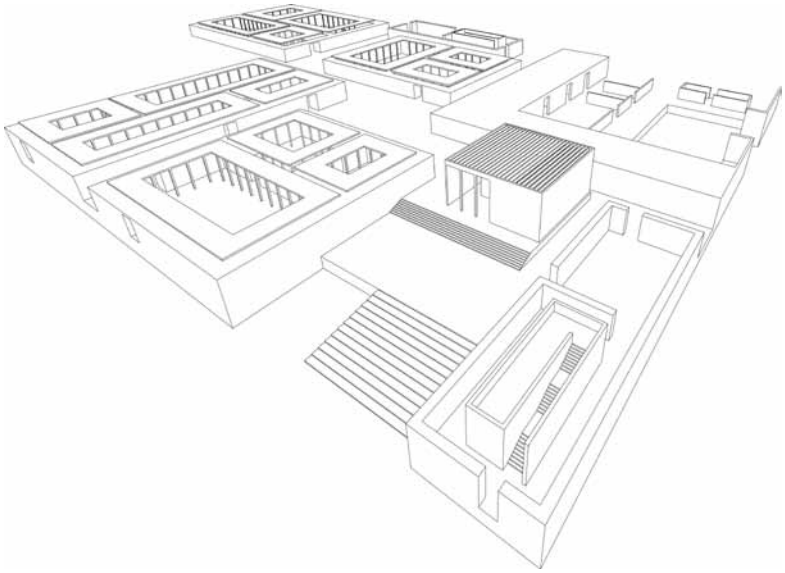
Certainly Chipperfield's work as a whole can be seen on many occasions to follow the rigorous and exhaustively iterative process of formal evolution that Kahn so beautifully exemplified; indeed it is this quality, coupled with his sense of appropriate materiality and precision craftsmanship, that distinguishes him as a truly

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135512000206 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Courtyards, like outdoor rooms, mediating between building and the agricultural landscape: private house, Oxfordshire, UK, 2006–11

'the pursuit of ideas remains a common factor from the earliest days of his first office'



Courtyard buildings in a clustered arrangement: San Michele Cemetery, Venice, Italy, 1998–2013

worthy recipient of the 2011 Royal Gold Medal for Architecture. But though the forms of architecture may indeed speak for themselves, Chipperfield gives an insight into their governance in an essay in *Form Matters* entitled 'Composition': 'When everything is possible, when there are no formal or technical restrictions to our imagination then we must impose these limits on ourselves. Without these limits, without the concept of intellectual as well as physical restraint, we cannot hope to find architecture that has meaning.'

The exhibition provided evidence of the results but also showed the method. Most predictable, perhaps, was the office's use of architectural models, particularly as works in progress rather than as points in the process of presentation. Then, less expectedly, working drawings for the Neues Museum, Berlin (1997–2009), these displayed as a huge bound document for visitors to study. An example from this set (see image on p. 380) was a

> *... layered drawing mapping out restoration for the Römischer Saal ceiling [where] missing sections destroyed during the Second World War have been rebuilt, the enfilade of rooms restored and the stair and courtyard spaces designed to maintain elements of the building's own decay. As a restoration project, it is carefully placed between de-historicised reconstruction and monumental preservation.*

The third method on show was a remarkable series of large 3D line drawings mounted at eye-level – concentrated drawings, formed with minimum lines in high definition, focusing the viewer on the building as an abstracted reality, free of context.

For example, for a private house in Oxfordshire (2006–11) that develops the tradition of the courtyard house into an expanded modern form and yet recalls the Roman atrium house of Antiquity, the aerial perspective emphasises the expansive volumetric composition and the idea of a multi-courtyard plan. This inventive design establishes a new tier within the evolution of the courtyard house as a type. Then, at San Michele Cemetery, Venice (1996–2013), another aerial perspective clearly portrays the overall composition, the 'clustered arrangement of landscaped courtyard buildings, housing tombs' as Chipperfield has described it, and in this case replaces the role of a model in clarifying the central ideas of the design. For the America's Cup Building at Valencia (2005–06), a low-level perspective emphasises the simplicity of the essential idea of the cantilever floor-plane, the apparent lightness of heavy concrete construction and the dynamic perspective of the building's presence and public occupation as an event structure all at the same time.

Back in the UK, both of Chipperfield's recently realised buildings are galleries for contemporary art, one without a permanent collection, and one with a distinguished collection of Barbara Hepworth's sculptural legacy. Both are based on a sectional arrangement with galleries at first floor level that are naturally toplit. At the opening of the Turner Contemporary at Margate, Chipperfield was quoted as saying that 'it is a type of shed'. In a certain sense, this is entirely appropriate as a description for a working community facility for the arts. As a type, the building relates to the architect's earlier Gormley Studio in London (2003). That robust, white-clad structure was a simple functional response to the artist's needs, and the section and daylighting create the form. Chipperfield has said that

> *... it references and abstracts the large scale, industrial vernacular of the surrounding buildings, and also the smaller and more domestic model*

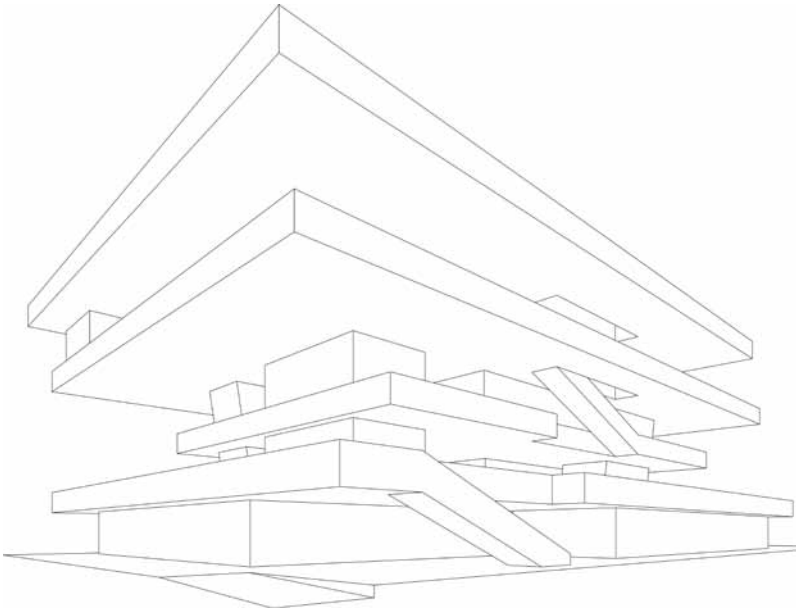
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of the artist's studio as illustrated, amongst others, by Le Corbusier [...] Like Ozenfant's studio, the Gormley building is distinguished by the silhouette of its pitched roofs and its bright but even interior light.

His competition entry for the White Cube Gallery, London, in 1998 is an earlier example of the use of a daylit clerestory. It is no coincidence that this project and the Turner building are seen together on pages 112 and 113 of *Form Matters*, the Turner Contemporary's form seeming to arise similarly from its monopitch, top daylit gallery section, repeating over each gallery module, the whole clad in white etched glass.

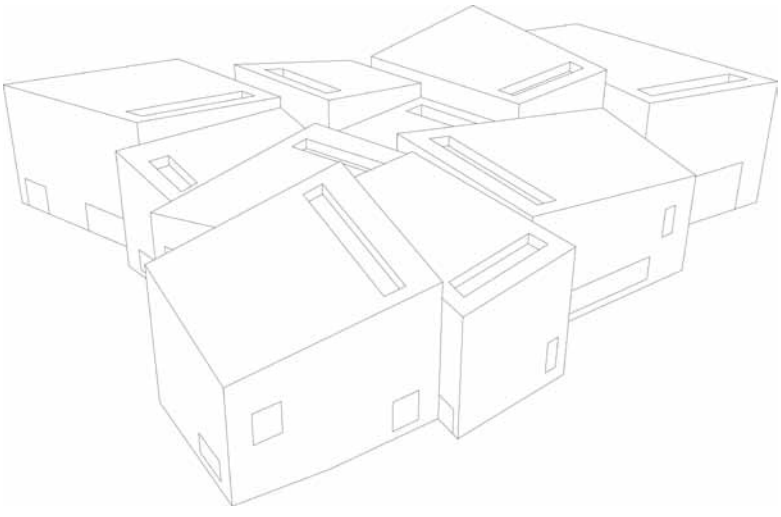
If the first conception of this building was indeed as a defensive, safe form, it was already loaded with interpretative possibilities. To imagine the scene as Turner himself might have painted it, with a stormy sea lashing its brilliant, white, shining, vaporised form, assimilating huge pebbles, rocks or even icebergs, confronting the force of the ocean and resisting it successfully, is to conjure up a breathtaking spectacle and, in that sublime sense, is worthy as a home for J. M. W. Turner and the spectacle of weather and human life that his paintings depict.

The Hepworth project might grow out of this same formal seed but is modified and refined to create a sculptural, organic form. According to Chipperfield, this 'almost geological composition is a conglomerate of diverse irregular forms tightly fitting one another . . . Each single volume represents and coincides with a single space, each unique in size and shape'. Quite what generates a composition of such complexity is hard to define – where does it begin? In Chipperfield's creative memory it is clear he is very aware of Kahn, whom he frequently cites; then, while there is no evidence of Aalto in Chipperfield's writing, here – momentarily – the fan-plan in Aalto's work is possibly evoked; equally, the projects of Hans Scharoun may come to mind. But then Chipperfield's project is unique and the stream of consciousness in the fertile mind of a great designer impossible to pin down. Here it is more interesting simply to observe that connected principles, both intellectual and formal, stabilise David Chipperfield's work and have provided a progressive continuity for his architectural language and exploration. It is something that he consistently seeks.



A paradoxical lightness in extreme cantilevers: America's Cup Building, Valencia, Spain, 2005–06

'concentrated drawings focus on an abstracted reality, free of context'



A worthy and appropriate vessel for the sculptor's gift: Hepworth Wakefield, UK, 2003–11

Ivor Richards is a former associate of Leslie Martin, with whom he designed a number of buildings, including the Centro de Arte Moderna in Lisbon (1983). His courtyard houses in Cambridge won RIBA Awards in 1986 and 1993. The author wishes to thank Rik Nys of David Chipperfield Architects and Ashley Woodfield of the Design Museum, London. All drawings courtesy of David Chipperfield Architects

The exhibition, David Chipperfield: Form Matters *was at the Design Museum, London, 2009/10, and at La Coruña, Spain and Pisa, Italy, during 2010/11.*

The catalogue, by David Chipperfield Architects, is published by Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne, 2009 (ISBN 978-3-86560-688-4)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135512000206 Published online by Cambridge University Press