

The Psychogeographer is Disappointed



A Transformative Architecture (2008)



cock and hen salmon - neil dalrymple

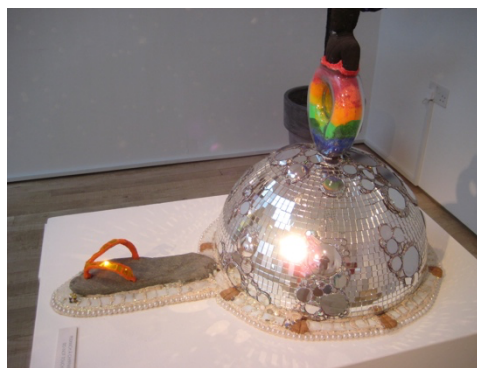
The Ruthin Craft Centre in North Wales, recently opened toward the end of 2008, is what we could describe – with all disclaimers intact yet not beyond negation - a vernacular architecture, more precisely perhaps an adaptive transformation (not re-use) of a 'removed-fatigued' craft centre in the market town of Ruthin, North Wales. The press release would probably coincide with the architects' statement: "With increasing constraints brought about by the existing facilities, it seemed timely to upgrade the buildings, spaces and landscape to increase creative possibilities for display, work and atmosphere."¹

The actual funding, grant application and political process for such a transformation of the existing building would be worth charting and analysing in detail. If each building is a prototype, then each funding application and process would surely allow us to note how much randomness and serendipity make up the decisions, validate the production and script the architectural and social claims and interpretations that follow from the new work. But that is not our remit here except to say that the funding process, the grant application, the award of funds, in some way implied and demanded - between the bodies involved - the transformation and retention of certain aspects of the existing rural craft centre (built 1982)².

It is clear how the transformative would need the vernacular in some way to guarantee a kind of continuity between the removed buildings and the building-to-come. The central notion of transformation as a design concept would be interpreted and by so doing offer an authentication for the architects: " (transformation) implies a working-with and a re-making of the fundamental characteristics of what exists already. The essential characteristics of the former building, its courtyard typology and the relationship it makes with its landscape (a building amongst trees) have been retained and enhanced."³

Hints at the careful use of the vernacular carry with it a traditionalism that can and does in the Ruthin Craft Centre work as an inevitable re-branding exercise. The small rather homey pitched-roof, local vernacular of the existing craft centre from 1982 clearly by the turn of the millennium not only needed upgrading but, probably more significantly, it provided a tired sign for what the notion of serious craft had become.

Was there still space in this vernacular transformation, a ‘working-with’ and a ‘remaking’ for the local ceramicist producing two salmon resting at tail of a salmon pool on their upstream journey and the occasional commissioned town plaque?⁴ The idea of local craftsmen and woman in open studios on display to the public was not outdated as much as it needed refreshing along with the need for, according to the Welsh Arts centre press release, upgraded exhibition spaces, a merchandising facility and catering.⁵ The salmon would sit alongside the camp bejewelled contemporary craftwork, or spectacular, minimal silverware, thereby helping the Centre to be “much more than a venue for the display and sale of contemporary art and craft A number of seminal touring exhibitions, the promotion of the very best of contemporary makers and their work and the exemplary quality of publications produced by the centre has given it an international reputation and far-reaching audience.”



andrew logan⁶

The language is suddenly of little use to us in its claims, so neatly is the scripted program, so normative do the assumptions become in the claims for the local community: “Its continually evolving education programme, craft workshops for local makers and businesses, restaurant and tourist information centre also make it an important venue and centre for the local community.”⁷



Ruthin Clwyd Street

A working-with and a re-making of the fundamental characteristics of what exists already: this and other transformative factors obviously necessitate a careful backwards-forward paradox, possibly resulting in a poetic licence taken by all involved, including the architects, towards some aspects of existing building. To destroy the existing building, something about it had to be saved. The architects perhaps chose the obvious workable aspects of the existing: the retention of the orientation not only suggested a similar clustered massing around an inner courtyard but began an almost-look-again process.

“The courtyard of the new building is intended to be dynamic and adaptable. It is the principal communal space for users and visitors to the building, creating a protected environment from traffic noise and an important transitional space between the interior spaces and the surrounding town.”⁸ Environmentally, some echoes to the previous building, existing trees and other aspects of the site and environment that could be saved would also provide some of the ‘inner-logic’ to the new building. “The restaurant, education room, craft workshops, studios and entrance hall open directly into this landscaped space with external seating and covered areas, following the general cluster of the old building.”

Too quickly however we slide away from the statements into the perception, the space itself; where all these functions appear to flow into what should appear like a cloistered space, even a usefully protective walkway (for the extremes of the winter snow and rain climate of North Wales) we get little hints at this. The overhangs of the undulating roofs are expressive but unexciting; the roof lines that stun the view in the aerial are not read in the same way at ground level. The undulation in plan and section, something that would have offered an intriguing way to deal with the internal movement in the courtyard is undirected. Planters, the characteristically designed picnic-set of external furniture, plus the long zig-zag benches, all potentially spatially interesting in defining space and place neither play off each other or reinforce the dynamics of the roof, interior space or courtyard.

The hard concrete surface, slightly nuanced to indicate covered areas and open areas, misses the opportunity of the wet and dry effect which often happens in such a climate. You see this on slate where it goes dark only to go light again when it dries. This happens on shale, which absorbs the water and reads off the climate and the vernacular in another way. Perhaps only the zinc roofs, the most successful part of the project which, as they shift in plan and section, are quietly reminiscent according to the architects, of the Clwydian range seen above the site, as the undulations register climate change, sunlight drama and the dark and light patterns that make up the landscape all around.

Anyone used to North Wales will know the way darkness can drop as clouds gather only to lighten even within the hour of the day. If the roofs succeed in registering such nuances, the layout and the echo from roof to ground floor dynamics does not achieve this. Though the architects' coded response in all its subtlety can consider the building sometimes revealing itself as a single storey building and at other places rising in scale to create a distinct and dramatic double height profile" the subtlety is so often lost on the user. The cleverest coded angle for the architects and photographers amongst us in the titling wall at the end of the project facing the traffic roundabout and the town of Ruthin, slightly tipped outwards the end it has the effect of a kind of tectonic peel. But oh so subtle, oh so careful caught only in the photograph of choice.

Photographs of choice



The transformative result achieved by the architects Sergison-Bates was, in the various press releases, seen as a 'cleverly resonating' vernacular statement of international and local nuance, a tectonic transformation. Real architecture to some, a human response to others, and certainly not Bilbao Guggenheim which seemed, even as far away as Ruthin North Wales to constitute some sort of success. The architects appear to have begun refining their new vision with what must have been a juggled a set of applied 'vernacular codes' and a more globalised (internationalised) reference. The major new exhibition space would signify the 'cutting edge' work of many craft-allied artists, working the edge of craft into art and astonishment.

Meanwhile the demands for smaller studio spaces would appear not only an attempt to pay the rent, to help the running costs of the centre but offer the 'other' in contemporary craft which would take most people back to their grandmother's crotchet sessions, father's wood whittling in the garden shed, and the amateur brilliance of salmon craftery or leather-workery. Only no one really looked at it like this.



It is clear why a delicate balance between the European slant of much serious arts and crafts would tie in with the local gesture needed and suit the crossover image of the Welsh Arts Council and the funding authorities. According to the press handouts that began the process of preparing the public for the building, the architects, a young practice were presented as a contemporary (European- vernacular!) practice skilled in the modest and appropriate indigenous architectural response. It does not take much critical spin to see the various codes and strategies employed in the building and site recalling an alleged 'authentic' vernacularism, even to dialectically challenge a frustrated mainstream architecture with a modest down-to-earth (though this term is hardly ever used today) sensitive and phenomenal work.

The contract between the conceptual and the phenomenal would be highlighted and championed in one complimentary essay which would instantly place this type of work and architecture, as we noted, as a timely 'rage' against the work of star-architects. Sadly Ruthin Craft Centre does not need critical framing of this sort that plays against and even hints at cancelling out some of the real critical and vernacular nuances the building has achieved.



Stunning as it is in its aerial shaping and form, Ruthin Craft Centre however may demonstrate a nuance and achievement unlikely to be truly appreciated. Is this part of the vernacular as it meets its inevitable critical over-reach? The building fits the script in a small market town like Ruthin just as it might be a perfect addition to a small German town nestling at it does in the shadow of rolling hills with forest not far off and the smack of a zinc history nearby. It is quite possible the admirable agenda in one code which laments the memory loss and links architecture back to yet another edited past, revitalises the escape backwards, presenting the future with a shape it cannot resist and holds back architecture to a subtle but docile, un-vibrant and precious past.

Subtle transformations, the adaptive re-think of locality within the careful industrialism of the wider region may only be recognisable to those needing this validity. The loss, this sentimental position, may be one we attribute only to the architects who see the narratives in their own history, and use locality to measure out difference between the spectacle and the invisible.

Here though we meet the critical conundrum. If we converge our codes on an acceptable symbolism (sing-index-icon) and then need to announce it, we have to question the untidy semiotic which holds the public guilty of not appreciating the finer arts and tectonic traces of the building. Not necessarily a malpractice within the architects in relation to the public but a shaky agreement between both seems to emerge. Is communal integrity interchangeable?



Ruthin as a town is not quite doing as well as the subtlety suggests. The craft centre might invite the travelling visitor, the international audience linking it to Wales, the arts and crafts of those creative persons who request their photographs to be creative, their scarves to be pashminas and their lives to follow suit.

This town fits uneasily into the snug pretence of creativity and practice. It represents a severe shift from docile impassive invisibility, from the quiet, comatozed market existence to the raucous bucolic invasions of the weekend and binge drinker hoards. True, it would seem a useful step to hide away from this, turn a building away and create or suggest the sense of a haven, an inner courtyard gated elegantly with a re-worked version of the expanded metal gates at railway station; albeit an inner haven the visitor arrives at by car or coach.

How many times over the last 100 years have architects tried to steer architecture away from one form if image-making to another, supposedly less fashionable or more credible? As the market distorts initial intentions, the knock at the door reminds us of the less worthy. Does this ignore once more that architects have – by default – always been involved in chasing and creating images which the public can supposedly get involved in?



In this case the architects choice of the undulating roof line, wrapped in locally sourced zinc might be the perfect sign for the obvious nickname that the public holds onto; that 'shed down the road'. The aerial quality, massing and undulating line is somehow lost when not viewed from afar. Instead the intimacy of the 'shed' eventually stands in for what the public see down the road; in reality those industrial sheds quickly erected where the town sprays its cars, refits pine kitchens, re-assembles computers, presents its wares like carpets, Swedish flooring, business systems and the latest plasma screens and double fronted ice-making fridges. Implied in this turn to validate a real architecture – if we accept this – are the architects setting up a catalogue of needs and architectural experience deemed worthy as they marry sensitive materiality, textured, ribbed and site-detailed stained concrete with an unadornment that runs a fine line between elegance and the 'arty' in one locality, and the unfinished and shabby in another; is this the vernacular act, the balance between allowed design excess, conceptual and phenomenal, with the alleged understated and quiet modesty?



There is a conundrum. In attempting to resist – by default - an architecture based on image and identity, yet requesting the public to resonate with memory, the industrial sheds nearby and the undulating roof a play of resemblances to the rolling hills all around, there is a game being played here. In this is another arbitrary turn toward an ideology which again attempts to redeem a crafted, in this case rather dry architecture, from the drivers of style and fashion? The quietly reminiscent expression is another form of image-making wrapped in vernacular intentions or the carefully tailored suit with invisible stitching and interior detailing unavailable to the naked eye. This time not a worthless or modest rational architecture but a neo-vernacular, the crafted building with a capital C, where fragments of previous projects of the architect, previous concepts and ideas for another locality are re-tooled for yet another locality.

Here the struggle for authenticity though remains internal, debated in London at the Tate Britain 'Real Architecture series or in the lines of select magazines.⁹ Any deviations of this prove impossible in the loaned social merit and responsibility of the gesture. This is the black linen, white shirt architecture, with a touch of the Teutonic line which – without being too unfair – surely suggests in one way another costume architecture.

Towards an Uncritical Regionalism



Intentional and narrative fallacies: should we not always be open to the building, to the 'work' of architecture that has tried to struggle and the architect that has also had to struggle to achieve the work. The term *vernacular* in relation to global imperative may gain any new sense it might wish to assert by a simple and constant reversal. Just as modern financial theory and predictions have become a kind of junk science open to randomness, serendipity and the fickle, so the peer-controlled and privileged variations in architectural theory (using normative assumptions, predictions holding implied visions, counter-intuitive histories, the formalist against the sentimentalist analysis and so on) has become a form of junk science too. In many ways crossed with journalism and undirected research, architectural scholarship is often reduced to a concentrated game in the fate and destiny of individual adventurers, self-portraits of the architect as fatigued analyst or new materialist, which have nothing to do with validity at all.

The fashionable nonsense in one field becomes understated ambiguity in another or then critical overreach. Over the last 40 years or so, this lies in the legacy toward appropriated French theory and architectural thinking as much as it does in erudite phenomenological texts and/or new texts on business organisation strategies, design and integrative practice and speed theology.

Would it be wise to attempt what Kenneth Frampton did in the early 1980s in his essay *Toward a Critical Regionalism*. The essay attempted with some success and panache, to redeem an authenticity within Modernism and thereby refine this authenticity through a series of issues which could be categorised as indigenous code. The paraphrase would never be enough; the issues Frampton raised were always more fluid: place-making and siting the work, crossed with the tactility of material carried out with some tectonic fiat spoke of a significant minor architecture, *an arkiteturra minore* - a modern vernacular, shifting back and forth from the universalist notions in the modern to the local, from the conceptual to the phenomenal, relieved and re-scripted architects like Siza, Scarpa, Aalto and Utzon from under the noses of those rodeo cowboys around in the early post-modernist years.

To be critically positive and open to this work as lost and found opportunities, as architectures invisible and underachieved, the Ruthin Craft Centre, we may as we indicated need to re-examine the brief, the money available, the funding and decision-making process that exists alongside the architects' professional and conceptual motivations to drive the project. The previous building – a rural assemblage of vernacular and echoed roofs and stone - lasted only 25 years before it was removed.

One wonders how long this 'vernacular' response will survive in an age of globalisation which will demand changing codes every two decades or possibly less. Craft in the Ruthin Centre probably had a symbolic weight to both the architect and clients that it might no longer be able to maintain for the local townspeople. Would that matter? Would that alter the vernacular whilst it may serve the visitors who seek the unusual in an art jewellery, ceramic, textile and even junk? If we are to deal with the metaphorical tools and language which attempt to validate the building by echoing the Clywdian Hills and the public remonstrance at a 4.5 million-quid shed (\$9M) clearly we need to try and unravel some of the cultural and artisanal implications within the project and the critical engagement taken. What are the normative assumptions for example, that make up the moral reach inserted snugly within an aesthetic competence?

How do we even discuss today such a clash with moral reach! Ruthin Craft centre, barely 6 months old, has since been feted by some (selected) journals, spun by the crafts people, ignored or questioned by the public (user), re-spun by the award winning architects, re-spun by the Welsh Arts Council and currently already undergoing a renovation by the contractors for Denbighshire County Council after 6 months opening! What some know as glaring design errors occasioned by the trimming process between the architects' vision, the clients' requirements and the funding restrictions usually never emerge.

Should we attempt to retrieve the notion of vernacular from globalisation, use it as a withstanding force or seek within it a new contract along the lines Frampton achieved when he collapsed the critical regional thinking inspired by architects like Utzon and Aalto with the generated authenticity of a de-universalised Modern architecture in need of upgrade?

It's a difficult contract, for the vernacular itself plays off globalisation in so many ways that it can begin to reverse the actions we tend to attribute as differences. The technological transfer, the speed of money and the market aids the vernacular emphasis by switching codes; by re-scripting what appeared to be lost in an international idiom as a refined local idiom. The dialectical challenges smoother, different architectural establishments; it always does as distinction between greater and lesser languages of the 'people', produce different tribes of the '*vernaculari*'.

Escape Backwards?



The various texts available on the centre, answers to questions asked, the search for more information on what a building might have become rather than what it did become are all part of the illicit enquiry that generally meets resistance in a post-occupancy architecture. The texts offered from architect, client, press bureau etc. all waver from explanations, alleged facts given by the centre, architects' notes, press releases, and - upon the release of the building like the release of a film- the statements of the press which can then be used to support the earlier texts.

The critical situation subsides in a series of advertising moves, less-than-critical positions that must support the completed building. Any sense of instability, in the possible uninspiring use of funds, the narrow use of idea and agenda remains difficult. In place, the sense of modesty and quietness is reinforced until the public who may not feel the architects' or the client's reason are considered ungrateful or then even 'barbarians'.¹⁰

The constraints brought about by the existing facilities are never quite indexed but serve as a fiction for the seemingly upgraded project. Whether the buildings, spaces and landscape increase creative possibilities for display, work and atmosphere can become, by the very nature of the circular argument and reference back to the existing removed building, secondary to the closed discourse.

If we are to talk about where we exist in the century past, whilst realising we are in the century present, then we might accept that we must stop mediating, adjusting and over-interpreting architecture and concentrate on the critical responsibility our work invites. We might also coincide for a moment longer with Czeslaw Milosz's desire to assess our lives *after* the Existentialists taught us to value chance and freedom, and debunk unswerving spiritual guides. This might ask us to aim for something always slightly ahead of us. In Milosz's words, the poet is probably more accurate than the architect, if we so desire that escape forwards and not backwards.

Transformation appears the key move to engage an architectural solution within a funding structure. Though one might question wishing to transform a thoroughly replaceable insignificant building, the issue is not this. It is whether the constraint of this 'transformation' prevented a more interesting building emerge or was the creative footprint from which the current building emerged satisfactory under the circumstances. A design concept called 'transformation seems weak even though

It can be argued as a 'working-with and a re-making of the fundamental characteristics of what exists already.' The essential characteristics of the (rather poor, hardly vernacular and historic) former building, its (domestic scaled) courtyard typology and the (weak) relationship it makes with its landscape (a building amongst trees) have been retained and enhanced. The courtyard of the new building, it is no surprise, is intended to be dynamic and adaptable. It would surely be rather difficult to imagine a new construction and assemblage which was neither dynamic nor adaptable. The rest follows uninterestingly - the principal communal space for users and visitors to the building, creating a protected environment from traffic noise and an important transitional space between the interior spaces and the surrounding town. It is precisely the transitional space between these interior spaces and the surrounding town which the building hardly enhances and hardly invites.

But all that aside, all the texts written, the statements that are given by the architects, the directors, the funding bodies, even the critics given sneak previews or then used as extension of the press process, there is a serious question: is there any real way to assess what is now already in place? Does any serious critical attention the building might invite not get parried by the obvious, the sentimental and the professional codes that can talk up whatever strategies chosen? The routes through, across, around the building, in different lights, in winter and the harder periods appear dull and potentially far from dynamic. This might not be a requirement worth the investment of nuance and experience.

The (roof) section mentioned by the architects and its play in the undulation of the zinc roofs is hardly carried through elsewhere. A slow ramp, a suggestion in change of levels, a careful cloistered route could all invite more passing interest in the space. Even a sectional echo at ground level, an echo suggested by the spirited and clear angular rhythm of the roofing is absent. The sense of undulation if so required for more than a semiotic alibi and a nod the surrounding hills could have invited a deployment and rhythm within courtyard, inviting enriched spaces quite different from the enfilade and expected routes.

The circulation and experience is uninspiring but who can tell this: someone walking through the town, a tourist visiting in a car and entering from the car park or someone slipping across from the local supermarket Tesco into the café? We need refined ways of assessing buildings, pre and post-occupancy. Critical codes, at least those applied by the visitors, friends of the architects and others, serve only to re-confirm the codes chosen.

The modest architects are revealed by careful photography, enhancing industrial echo in chiaroscuro and human form. Textures can be created and re-created; wait for the right light to come round and the industrial can take on the fleeting feel of Antonioni's cinematography. Photographers up from London can seek the narrow angle, the gentle undulation of zinc roof and tilt. All this is competently designed and perhaps, to some codes, brilliantly modest; but it is still uninspiring.

And what of landscaped spaces before the final landscape solution arrives, matures, fills out? Are we to excuse the time for it affect on nature's slowness. The external seating resembles a motorway lay-by set of furniture as one visitor put it. Certainly, as the architects claim, 'the external form of the building is a complex composition of sloping roofs, which shift in plan and section and are quietly reminiscent of the Clwydian range seen above the site.'

The quiet reminiscence may be there but the public struggles hard to register this. It might be that the architects need to put a small plaque indicating the semiotic reading of the building for the edification of the barbarians! 'The building sometimes reveals itself as a single storey building and at other places rising in scale to create a distinct and dramatic double height profile.' A valid point but such a thin critical addition when considering the whole assemblage the dynamics of eye line, the tactile register offered and the experience.

Perhaps then it is the tactile register that can redeem the lack of sectional interest, the loss of play from roof to floor? Perhaps it is the careful cladding and materiality that redeems the building as a modest sign, that recalls the artisanal, the hints at a critical regionalism, a retrieval for a valid new human scale vernacularism. In fact, a real architecture! There is always in such work the hint of essentialism. Essential aspects of design take on the import of echo and resonance. The two principal materials chosen by the architect for the external cladding, zinc for the wrapped roof and vertical planes and a pinkish (clay-red) pigmented cast concrete for the walls. Varying panels do indeed offer rhythm, as do a combination of seam types but though the detail is often exquisitely implemented (like a quilt or silk-screen) it is thin fare; nuances unrecognizable in the overall scheme.

Perhaps, too, the language of a weave-like pattern comes naturally and preciously to those in the craft business and the tactile world of close crafts and niceties, but it is one in the public's understanding that palls. There is not enough critical unpredictability within the building that communicates this intelligence, thereby it resorts to didacticism, an indication that such phenomenological factors inspire and thus award meaning to the work, the building. Even the clay-red puckish hue to the concrete weave may in its insistence link to the local red sandstone used on buildings like the St Peter's Church in Ruthin or the Cathedral in St Asaph but again this is stretched, a retina game that goes no deeper. It is a palette, a swatch architecture: stretched alibis cannot stretch so far unless guaranteed by the accepted architectural codes.

But accepting there is an ingenuity claimed for this building, let us explore where this might be. Could it lie in its construction feat as the walls were cast on the ground and then tilted up into place? The surface textures whilst delighting the vernaculari within a chosen subset of the architectural profession, emphasise little more to the public eye than roughness and the hint of incompleteness. Should we ignore such reactions, immediate and rough as the material the architects offer? Is this sad, ridiculous or something the architects could have read if indeed they wished to rely so much on the associational and semiotic exercise for the legitimacy of the work and choice?

The Vernaculari



We might see Ruthin Craft centre as an example of a new architecture, an architecture of re-scripting within but extending existing codes. The centre re-harnesses the craft of privilege and the privilege of craft until its authenticity seeks critical acceptance via the very language it must use for support. Here semiotics can get confused not by vernacular clarity but by the ache of a globalisation that begins and ends in a closed European mind. It is seductive at the same time as being the emperor's new clothes. The bubble always about to burst in anything popular and widespread creates another bubble in the rear-guard action that emerges.

The young girls who come into Ruthin on Fridays for their weekend binges in the public houses off the market Square are known colloquially as the 'vernaculari'. They dress with a lightness, frailty and skimpiness that respond not to conditions of the local climate or character but to the codes of an American Idol or the X-Factor. They have learnt to scream at lot in affectation of something about to happen; a film star returning home, or the echo of lost hopes.

This is not *Dogtown* either. But the planters in the courtyard and on the perimeters near the car park are low, carefully designed with rounded edges. They frame the industrial sheeting of the building ready for the critic to see more there than actually is. But the screen writer imagines a completely different use of these geometric boxed containers. At a height of about a foot or so, they are attractive both as barrier and hurdle. Of course, the barrier to the architect frames the end space, creates the narrow impossible walkway, prevents the car from entering a space near the building and generally signals a soft landscaping all but cute in the attention given.

Robust this is not, expressive neither. Instead, these little planters act as hurdles in another game entirely whereby this edge becomes a vector, a series of shoots and arrows. This is naturally an entertaining course only for those who see the potential of this edge. If the architect were skateboarders, they might have seen this so; if they knew the aerosol engineering that currently disfigures buildings like this in more urban zones, they might re-think the cautious knitting of texture and colour and the refined palette that rewards the low vernacular in the transfer of pattern-to-pattern recognition.

Writing about architecture, experiencing it first-hand or from afar, is still as immature as it always was which is one of our adventures. The planting too is immature as yet because of this allows more illicit play and transparency. That is not to say the site is bare; trees are carefully retained or then planted. The future landscape will eventually protect the building and hide the potential of both the planters and perhaps even, the building behind. But these are places of course that are locked at night. Places that have no planters or edges with smooth concrete, only sheeted zinc, cleverly jointed, seamless trimmed, as careful in reality as in the drawn.

At present the wall is vernacular industrial; echoes of the industrial warehouses and sheds further down the road appear to be one of the (not unreasonable?) semiotic invitations and threads the architects chose for their game of echoes. The other, the rolling hills, the Clwydian range that provides the valley context for Ruthin and the gentle changing facades of the hills. The European architecture, a modest even indigenous Europeanism - is this what makes this distinct from a more spectacular architecture and its codes as is claimed in one of the write-ups about the building?

Interestingly this is not a rural tradition inspiring an anti-academic, anti-historicist architecture. This is used more topically, as an inspired modesty intended to signal unrest with the stars, unrest with the adventures in geometry and software which have seen buildings become sculpture and sculpture become skateparks. Around the planters the *vernaculari* skateboarders hang here as do the BMXers. These are the boys that have not yet left town; but will either leave and learn *parcours* in cities as exciting as Manchester and Liverpool nearby or then drift back into adulthood and the local vernacular games which usually end up in the Ruthin pubs called the Park Place, The Feathers or the Boar's Head.

But the lintel, the straight line, now there is the adventure of this building. The height from rise to ground allows for the drag of wheel, for the leading wheel to catch for the play of skateboard with straight surface and then the flip at the edge. Most of the users of this edge of the building facing the car park are of course illicit. This is an illegal activity in a legal architecture. This is another discourse on linguistics and culture which recognizes the empirical genius and vitality of the edge. The vocabulary the kids are more likely to respond to would be that of Tony Hawk rather than any vernacular echoes to the landscape of North Wales, the drab industrial park (hardly a park!) or the mediaeval market town Ruthin where this delicious piece of designed non-space protects both car and pedestrian from, well... from what?



From the youth? Regularly the security guards chase away these young dudes. It's their job to chase them away though one wonders if they do it out of respect for their job, out of respect for the new building, out of respect for the architecture, or merely out of duty. As if the barbarians are about to enter the building and take it for themselves. If it was one of their sons, would they do the same? No doubt an issue which has been raised in one of the recent committee meetings held by management as to the teething and troubleshooting at the centre after 4 or 5 months since opening this new building.

This is not *Dogtown* and these are not *Z boys*. But to them this is their playground, this is their vernacular activity, their global world squeezed into an activity, far from trivial and as demanding to them as surfing on Venice Beach in LA. At the moment, in their life this is all the town, the vernacular legacy and the building have to offer them. Craft for these dudes is the detailed knowledge of the skateboard parts or the BMX. This is not *Dogtown*, but it could be, and the building could have been a response to them too, an industrial vernacular product of the “anonymous” perhaps in a town that desperately needs the foils to a received globalism and its fascinating pull toward sterility.

The Public Misunderstanding of Architecture?

I began to take on this critique in no way to play down the achievement of the architects and the subtleties achieved in many parts of this small building. But the more I visited, observed, sat, chatted, penetrated and discussed the new building, the more I received from those I happened to meet with a growing series of disappointments. It was never easily voiced and there was often guilt; we wanted to like the building and so on. There were also that fair share of appreciative comments, not all of them amounting to: well, this is much lighter than the old one etc. Mostly though the grim observations hid an inability really to talk about the architecture, and the obvious turn to opinion or instant like and dislike.

There was little chance it seemed to take the long view for what was the long view of such a work? More trees, more maturity, more material patina? It was not that there were only negative comments, there weren't but so few of the public had a vocabulary to make their thoughts clear. The instant comment often comes out as if immediate and a little unthought-through, in fact though it might just have been that some of these thoughts also indicated just what the public were doing, trying to make their thoughts as clear as possible. Simply, many times, though the colour, nuance of concrete, even the zinc roof appealed at some level, the building did not appear to thrill them.

What would have thrilled them I thought? Would it have helped if they had more experience to vocalize their own experience of this building? Would it have helped if the architects could show the roof or the public could view the roof from a vantage point? Would it have helped if the subtlety of undulations and landscape echo of the Clywdian hills all around had actually been inserted into the architectural experience? Or what if view toward those hills could have been seen through cracks in the buildings, through a window inserted in an unusual place? What thinking would have needed that: an Alvar Aalto at Saynatsalo Civic centre where the richness is so well controlled and so layered as to defy the small scale of the building? Would a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the six points towards critical regionalism that Frampton outlined in 1982 have achieved quite another public richness in this architecture?

Is it fair to ask for more from a building when it does not conform to the architect's or client's ambitions? Or was this questioning fair because architecture once more had put itself beyond the public and then called upon its own privilege and professional discourse to validate it? Such dislocations we became used to in the 1970s with heavy construction, often textured and brutal concrete which was 'erased' by the post-modern decade (the 1980s) which in itself had the effect of legitimating a kind of retreat to coded traditionalism and a somewhat diagrammatic if symbolic, figurative architecture. The result was that architecture was coded by its look, its form. It trivialized architecture into a diagram of what it was supposed to communicate to the public - poetic or tectonic - whilst another set of architectural thinkers then took on the diagram seriously and re-introduced it into the architectural program at urban and building level.

Of course, the public were encouraged to read the codes, see the symbols (the boats, the birds, the hats or the rabbits) from that post-modern period. And of course, the public were also invited to read the period of serious technological advance and refinement in structures especially the advances in structural glass which produced a spate of predominantly glass buildings. And then came the Bilbao Guggenheim, a coded building in architectural history in that it became symbolic of a building which could rescue a city's history or a city's decline. An analogic smear could be carried out with digital crutches; and the battle was on. It wasn't architecture's answer to the celebrity culture, it was the public's answer to the requirement for a celebrity culture in architecture. Slowly, the years would go by and a counter-memory would have to take its place - a reality architecture would have to be re-introduced, the type of real architecture according to some that would outlast trade fair architecture. But for how long?

So when the editor of Craft magazine puts forward the argument that the modest solution to the Ruthin craft centre is a worthy antidote to the Bilbao effect, we are being invited to short cut the whole inventive program of architecture over the last 20 years. This is also a short-cut world as dangerous as the icons so attacked for being instant, glamorous and celebrated. This is also tantamount to asking us to accept a competent, probably coded brilliance in a tacit world, but ultimately traditional move, a retreat to a time when architecture was done better, or, in the case of the Tate Modern's conversations on architecture, Real Architecture.

Could this anecdotal claim be somewhat misguided? It is quite possible despite these arranged plaudits, the program for the craft centre has been trimmed, the potential of 'real' architecture somewhat restricted and the coded building - international or not - of little use to the town. As we might re-word the Sunday Telegraph's weekend supplement text which merely acts as another press release: a centre of excellence perhaps but a *shadowlands* at night!

Shadowlands



If you wish to play the game of representation (the building could represent the town, as the architects put it) then one must also open the work to a semiotic reading from all directions. So, the use of zinc and an undulating folded roof form can be seen to echo the surrounding Clwydian hills. Or is this an allusion; the journey of the eye from the soft smooth contours of an impressive range of hills to the optical illusion that the retina retains this form and sees it echoed in the roof of the building. That is entirely possible, and in many cases, that becomes enough for the architect to maintain connection of not signal a figurative element to the building. However the reading games cannot stop there. The architect cannot control the signifying system they so wish to use to validate some parts of their schemes against others. This is a game architects play as much as planners as much as the public as they redeem the insignificant for significance.

Signifying motifs appear all through any building and it depends on the desire and interest of the building's users or visitors to read these signs - the register is from indifference to insight, from ennui to thrill. It is a little decoding game and one that flows naturally from the public, less naturally from the architects, and probably somewhere in between in the clients.

The folded zinc may recall the hills though, as one local wag put it, you hardly ever see the Clywdian Hills with a point, or a ridge, they are much softer and much gentler. The tire mechanic was correct, as he wiped his hands of the grease. Looking up to the range of hills he was talking about, the contour was truly undulating, soft and even malleable. None of which is really suggested by zinc except as a kind of diagrammatic folded model of such a range of hills. Had the wag been interested in ecology and sustainability, he might have thrown out the suggestion (not entirely ridiculous) of a grassed roof.

More obvious to the tire mechanic, though he didn't quite use these words: the move to extend the zinc roofing and wrap down into the vertical plane of the building does however recall to most 'readers' the side of industrial warehouses, supermarket storage centres or car autobody repair shops all around the new craft centre. Given that one of the reasons for the use of zinc was also to echo the industrial side or location of the craft centre, this is one echo surely that has to be seen as successful.

However, what proves more dubious in this reading game is the authority or even the possibility that this is not only inappropriate to most people, but likely to take on an overwhelming signification and almost cancel out the more subtle semiotic games of association required from the nearby hills. By opting for such echo and allusion, the architects immediately open up the work to a figurative exercise, to one that invites instant opinion, likes and dislikes. No problem there then, unless the public (and not only the towns people) choose to find the industrial echo outweighing and more overwhelming than the subtle outlying hills echo.

Could this have been avoided, played down, or even used to tweak the design differently? Is it even worth asking such a question at this stage when, all decisions made, all funding back in the locker room, and any opportunities for the building to be more than it is has gone. Are we to ask for such a contrarian position, for the architects to take the oppositional role to the spectacle in Dubai or Bilbao, and is that not such a waste for a re-scripted architecture and the potential for vernaculars in contemporary practice?

The outside may not have been used to its full effect in this building; the vernacular act might just serve to satisfy the conditions for a crafted response to the existing building and the spectacle of contemporary 'starchitecture' but it may ironically serve to delocalize the locals, and in a way, the pull for an international trend in craft excellence continues to delocalize the very traditions and crafts championed. The methods and processes confuse the aspirations of the non-professional whilst serving a belated vernacular design and discourse. The result might be more formulaic productions hidden beneath the de-vitalised local condition; nearly hidden, exquisitely hidden, stylistically hidden, aesthetically hidden, architecturally hidden.

'What are we waiting for, gathered in the market-place?' the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy wrote, 'The barbarians are due here today'. Buildings like this, the New Ruthin Crafts Centre, invariably get embroiled rather quickly and distastefully in a battle, an us-versus-themism. Debate passes over to rant or romance and the building becomes an arena for the practice of taste, cliché and hubris. Usually one side is considered cultivated, civilised, elitist guardians of the environment. And sophisticated! The other side, often the detractors - in this case predominantly locals, the locals unused to architecture of this quality - unfairly become the philistines, the barbarians. Linguine (anglicised linguini) is delicately served in the bistro and deliciously put against the black pudding!

However, today the picture is unclear. In a period of confused, often short-sighted and ambiguous management at local and central political levels (planning, funding and development) we are not so sure which side is which, or as Cavafy continues, what laws the senators can make now? To seek money, to spend money, to apply art and see it alienate the public might not be such the civilised, inclusive and sustainable act as we think. We are accountable to whom, who has the legislative and remedial votes and where does the responsibility lie for decisions taken?

Any admirable vernacular qualities in the building and development (whether communicated by the clients, architects, arts council, funding bodies, local council leaders or bureaucrats) are usually marginalised by instant prejudice; these are the likes and dislikes that we all carry with us whether we go shopping at Tesco Supermarket or see Gustav Klimt in Tate Liverpool, whether we question *superlambanana* art installations on Moel Famau or see the painted cows repeated in some welcome frivolity in Dallas or Ottawa. Not all our prejudices of course are irrelevant or wildly inaccurate; a prejudice is also a mental map, an image that ties us to locations and ties experience to our lives. A prejudice, strongly or weakly held, does not mean it is wrong.

Despite the claims - which can of course be debated - of this Craft Centre toward architectural excellence, material sensitivity, an avowed, mostly untenable resonance to the surrounding Clwydian Range ('range' sounds much better than hills?) and its 'local' siting, there are two obvious consequences from this battle which will be around for some time. It is a confused debate which will colour the success or failure of this project however much the building grows, ages and matures in its post-occupancy. It is a constant running sore in and amongst the public understanding and communication of architecture.

Firstly, the gentle transformation and re-scripting of the Craft Centre to extend its programme as a Centre of the Applied Arts (something which had been going on for some years) implies a wider agenda. This, politically and culturally, links it to the circles, preferences and prejudices of the Welsh Arts Council, the Welsh Development Agency, and the current leadership of the Craft Centre. Most decisions at this level are likely to occur without any real resonance to the town of Ruthin. Secondly, the apparent 'turning way', inward-facing to the courtyard, whether this is interpreted as 'alienation' toward the town or a protective move, is aggravated by its closed, rather unimaginative architectural siting and movement patterns within and across the site. This is not merely a parochial sneer.

The sheer 'industrial' wall of zinc - however well craft, slightly bowed and skilled, however enticing as a closed face - does symbolically turn its back on the town. It may also invite the visitor into a secure, safe space, acting as a haven against the local hordes of philistines who wish for neither linguine nor black pudding in a bistro. There are perhaps valid planning reasons for this choice, even seen in more fortress-like symbolism in architecture creeping in, in response to the current uncertainty, increasing lawlessness, petty crime and of course the wider issue of terror. That said, there are equally valid reasons for the instant reactions from the public and their feelings of alienation.

The public understanding and professional misunderstanding of architecture, or vice versa, works like this; the leadership - senators, mayors, architects, bureaucrats, directors - talk down to those who do not quite accept the talked-up building. The barbarians rightly suspect the symbolic claims (what the building should resonate or echo with) tend to be more visceral and direct. By so doing the public consider the building for what - to them - it looks like. And the architects have surely invited that exercise by locally stressing place, material and geography. For the most part, it might just echo the hills around, but more likely it appears to them more like a side-loading bay for a supermarket or an industrial concern; many of which are just down the road.

This has the unfortunate habit of triggering the unhappy conditions and reminding the barbarians of the low wages which support the high wages but can never buy the applied art in the gallery of the centre. Sometimes it is the paradoxes that go too far, not the architecture.

If Ruthin Arts Centre turns out to be an arena of excellence¹¹ or the white elephant that some locals suspect, it is however unfair to condemn it so prematurely without understanding the decisions made and by whom, the reasons why this and not that architect was chosen, the way the brief was formulated, why a transformation of an existing 'rustic' building past its sell-by date is deemed suitable for a re-build almost on the same footprint (as if this ensures continuity) and so on.¹²

We should stop claiming the impossible, that a building can 'acknowledge diversity and differences.' How if such a building makes 'formal' reference to the local culture in terms of local materials, known forms and surrounding landscape can it possible according to the architects 'also fulfil the ambition of the centre to engage an international audience through its powerful volumetric form and physical presence and the publicity in the art and architectural press that it is likely to receive.' What right does out competence in one area, in the subtle transformation, in the vernacular retrieval of an architecture in relation to the globalisation, give us to claim that? Since when has architecture carried out these programmes and achieved its significance; is this not falling back on the iconic register that is all but denied in the prominence of morphed form and the enigmatic building.

A wire drawing of the undulation of the Ruthin Craft Centre indicates within it quite another building of a potential not achieved in this craft centre; the expenditure and poetic energy seen on the seams, joints, fabrication and zinc roofing does not extend to the project on the ground, in the enfilade of gallery spaces, in the local theatre, in the town, by the town, set off from the town.

Isn't that true of all works; in their immediacy we cannot read other potentials but generally must wait before time takes its years, and the building matures into what it could be, or decays into a fatigued response and meets the fate of the original craft centre whose life span was little more than 25 years. ¹³

Today, how we use our ignorance is becoming more important than the knowledge we don't have. How can we give more considered thought to such a project (in a holistic sense?) before condemning it for what it might be - a centre for excellence and missed opportunities, or an internalised but elite centre for the applied arts. What does our new writing in architecture need to be, and where can it turn to avoid the formulaic and closed responses of press releases and normative assumptions.

That said, where should we take our discussion if not to see it add the further glossing and go against the new series and seriousness that writing matters. Writing on architecture only matters when it matters least! The rest is more or less various stages of the hoodwink; vernacularism is not privileged nor is it left outside such hoodwink. Globalisation unravels the pretence of the big picture, whilst vernacularism can narrow down the small picture until the fragments are lost in narrative games and fallacies. And let us take a step back before any of us can truly say without arrogance, just who amongst us are 'the' barbarians. Remember the graffiti in Paris all those years back: 'those who lack imagination cannot imagine what is lacking.' Of course, it should not be linguine or black pudding but both! But not necessarily in that order, and not necessarily on the same plate.

Psychogeographer

It may be good that I live near this building or then it might not be that good. If the building, like many buildings are based on a kind of public lie, in other words they work better if one never actually sees them or experience them, then living so close to this building could be a mistake. It might never perform to what it pretends to be. But Ruthin Craft Centre is not a building you walk through or really stumble across as if in an urban context whereupon through a maze of other activities one finds peace and sanctuary. Even if you did there is probably little of thrill to retain that wandering aimless spirit. Perhaps that is a feature of more psychogeographic environments and desires and unfair to ask this of such a building. At one moment, full summer, trees out, the long, hidden zinc wall barely registers. Few would realize behind this piece of industrial siding lurked a centre of excellence. But might we just once treat it as a building one could chance upon?

Taking the main street - what passes for a main street in such a small town - from my cottage I have to climb up Clwyd Street passed a predominance of cafes and hairs salons. The international city of Ruthin seems far away as, for years now, shop after shop appears closed, seeks new tenants or is merely run-down. After negotiating the Town Square with the distinctive mediaeval and post-mediaeval pastiche buildings, the genuinely old 15th century Courthouse rises and holds some presence. We take Well Street down the other side of town, passed the pharmacy and turn left onto what is called Station Walk. This was the cutting, where the trains used to pass through the town.

Left lower where the train ran across, this walk takes us directly to the road across from which we see the latest supermarket (Tesco). Here all roads lead into the supermarket, the town planners making no attempt to set up a walking path which could pass by. After buying the necessary print paper A4 ream I consider, as I always do, taking the route through the centre of excellence. This isn't easy. Either the centre of excellence wishes not for those chance walkers to enter or then it considers if 93% of traffic visiting the centre come from cars then the only real entrance is by cars. Thus, the walker is faced with the unlikely decision.

To cross the road where there is no crossing or find another route through to the centre. This brings the walker across a planted area where a trampled path has already started and then on into the centre obliquely, from the car entrance, from the planters where the skateboarders and BMXers now hang. Where the floor way and pathway are made no more inviting and no easier on the eye. Once in, entering the courtyard across an elaborate set of robust folding gates (semiotics: prison, station, hospital?) it is easy to be drawn to the one point like a pinball, up out and right.

The undulation of the roof from the low eye line does not register as exciting as it should. Unless water is pouring off the overhang, there is little drama; the cross between a home for the elderly and a monastery is somewhat unsuccessful. Exiting the centre through a small path one meets the crossing and exists into another uneasy walking space in the town. For a town that could so easily survive on a wonderful thread of walkways and offer healthy routes for its townspeople, the planning is woefully inadequate.

The *psychogeographer* is disappointed, stumbles on almost nothing and the word 'international' can hardly be used about what appears to be little more than suburban backwater stuck inside a market town. Let's try elsewhere! (Roger Connah 2009)

¹ From the Notes of the Architects Sergison Bates, provided by the Ruthin Craft Centre, January 2009. see also <http://www.sergisonbates.co.uk>

² The decision-making bodies involved were: The Welsh Arts Council, The European Regional Development Fund, Welsh Development Agency, The Lottery Fund, Denbighshire County Council, the existing Ruthin Craft Centre management team and, eventually, the architects Sergison Bates.

Arts Centre to get pounds 3.1m ACW grant. (News) Liverpool Daily Post (Liverpool, England Dec. 9, 2005) A STATE-of-the-art craft centre in Ruthin is to receive a pounds 3.1m grant from the Arts Council of Wales. The lottery grant, the largest made by the ACW in North Wales, will give Wales an international lead in applied arts. The new complex, on the site of the existing craft centre, will cost pounds 4.3m. Denbighshire County Council has earmarked pounds 480,000... Clearly the Contracting team would then become part of this process and in fact be a strong determining factor in many of the architectural nuances that would or would not be carried through in the building as the architects saw it develop.

There is a continuous phrase heard from locals and even visitors, that any new building is better than the pokey old one, thereby kind of lowering the bar and making expectations somewhat unambitious. This is probably not something the architects can take on unless that is the whole notion of public 'unambition' is understood 'architecturally' and becomes a major determining factor the dynamic experience.

³ Sergison and Bates, *ibid*.

⁴ At the moment of writing the plaque to commemorate the local racing driver Tom Pryce is being completed by Neil Dalrymple. Born in Ruthin on June 11 1949 Pryce died at the Kyalami circuit, South Africa on March 5 1977. <http://www.neildalrymple.com/tom-pryce-memorial-commission.html>

⁵ July 28th 2008 will see the opening of the new Ruthin Craft Centre in a stunning new, contemporary building set against the backdrop of the **Clwydian Hills**. The new Centre, which is all on the ground level, is set around a courtyard and gives Ruthin Craft Centre three new galleries, a substantial retail gallery, a café, six artist studios and educational and residency facilities. The budget for the purpose-built new building was £4.4 million, including £3.15 million from the Arts Council of Wales' Capital Lottery Funding - the largest grant of its kind made to North Wales...The centre will consist of three galleries - two for displaying the best contemporary craft from Wales and around the world, the other a collections gallery and a retail gallery space. There are also studios for artists, educational and residency facilities, a café and a tourist information cultural gateway. The whole complex is set round a courtyard that acts as a focal point and outdoor social space... But the project also had to blend into its beautiful surroundings and convey a sense of the spirit of Denbighshire. The design for the new Ruthin Craft Centre has succeeded splendidly in this. It is built of cast stone whose reddish-pink tones shift across the **building**. **The roof is of zinc and captures shapes and colours from the surrounding hills of the Vale of Clwyd.** Contemporary yet in touch with tradition, elegant yet with suggestions of being hand-turned, this remarkable new Centre is a fitting home for one of Europe's leading contemporary craft institutions. Extract from Arts Centre Wales Press bulletin (10 July 2008)

⁶ Andre Logan, works, Ruthin Craft Centre 28.7.08

⁷ Extract from Arts Centre Wales Press bulletin (10 July 2008)

⁸ The architects' notes are well-written and when stacked up against the initial premises begin to account for the strategies chosen, the choices made and the solutions achieved. There is a hint of over-interpretation as if in this building is contained the ideas and codes of quite another building, which at a larger scale might answer to the claims of the architect. Much of what is written is dry and coded; ultimately leaving ideas that are technically achieved brilliantly argued in a poetic vacuum, just as much of the art displayed can be, or the cross-over art.

This is not to much a failure of either client, director or architect, but merely a somewhat tamed brilliance that speaks of a resistant architecture rather than a vibrant dynamic work that would become the 'vernacular' of the very place it offers as a kind of protective, tranquil interior. More cloister and sanctuary, the preciousness of coded architectural detailing often invites the precious interior. Too little disposable, too little throwaway, perhaps it inevitably has to leave most of the 'vernacular' outside its project - for who would want skateboarders invading such a sanctuary, or pensioners throwing heavy meal balls! There is a chapel mentality about the very cunning that produces according to the critic, such a gem.

Zinc for the roof and some areas of wall and pigmented cast concrete for the walls. Zinc panels of varying width are detailed as a wrapping over roof and wall. A combination of seam types are used and their alternating arrangement across the roof slopes give it a weave-like pattern. The cast concrete walls have a pigment added to the mix, which gives a clay-red hue thereby establishing a visual link with the local red sandstone used as a building material on nearby buildings such as St Peter's Church in Ruthin or the cathedral in St Asaph, for example. The walls will be cast on the ground and then tilted up into place. A combination of surface textures give emphasis and pattern to the walls in different parts of the building.

⁹ for a detailed account of the building by the architects see Tate Modern, Real Architecture debates.

¹⁰ Words like the following flatten the building: “Ruthin Craft Centre is much more than a venue for the display and sale of contemporary art and craft. Its continually evolving education programme, craft workshops for local makers and businesses, restaurant and tourist information centre also make it an important venue and centre for the local community. A number of seminal touring exhibitions, the promotion of the very best of contemporary makers and their work and the exemplary quality of publications produced by the centre has given it an international reputation and far-reaching audience. With increasing constraints brought about by the existing facilities, it seemed timely to upgrade the buildings, spaces and landscape to increase creative possibilities for display, work and atmosphere.”

There are a few conflicting signs at the moment when you approach the Ruthin crafts centre in the small North Wales market town. Ruthin has had a craft centre, one of many existing in Wales, for over two decades, the first built and completed in 1982. Signs are useful; they can alternate between The Ruthin Craft Centre and the Centre for Applied Arts. It is what advertising and marketing strategists suggest doing when wishing to re-brand. Both names exist for some time until the more recent one is allowed to take over and dominates the signage. At present we are invited to enter both worlds.

¹¹ see *Centre of Excellence*, Telegraph Magazine 9.8.08 or *Material Culture*, Craft August 08)

¹² It is with this in mind that the following questions might help before there is the usual chasm between the alleged elitist cultured bodies and the ‘misreading’ barbarians; a chasm that does nothing for intelligent exchange, and nothing for the town. Sadly the answers furnished remained well within the brief of the known and accepted alibis for the building’s materiality and essence, possibly proving that once a building is finished, once the grants and funding streams have been exhausted, there is little interest in learning from these buildings and more interest in glossing them.

¹³ The writer, the analyst, the researcher is also sidestepped served with trivial replies that again serve to trivialize the idea of building itself, the role of the building as an imaginative presence, memory and insertion into the environment. We will attempt to trace a little of this process as it uses what can be termed a 'vernacular' expression to answer the type of building that could have been replaced.

The following were a series of questions aimed to explore some of the issues the craft centre raised. The official answers provided by the Ruthin Craft Centre follow each question; no question was opened for further debate or idea rather the official language sought to close and confirm issues already accepted and identified.

1 Why did the 'brief' decide to stay within the existing building shape, plan and orientation? (see sketch: industry-craft-sculpture-jewellery)

1. On one side of the site (Park Road) runs the main town sewer, it would not have been possible to build over this. The other side (Lon Parcwr) is has problems with an underground waterway and would not have been stable to build on. The car park has remained in the same place, it uses the existing drainage into the main sewer new drainage would have required excavation and underground tanks and not been a good use of money or resources (a saving if IRO £400,000 GBP).

2 Does the closed façade facing the town entice people in or alienate? It may not effect those arriving by car but do the 'open' courtyard, craft details, furniture and architectonic qualities compensate for the mute façade? What relationship should the building try to have or help create with the town?

2. Architect notes attached: note from survey 93% of visitors arrive by car.

3 Where are the sustainability issues within the project? (eg: the use of locally sourced materials, rainwater, sun, planting: the building as an ecological system). Was slate out of the question - a cliché or was zinc a favoured choice?

Historically, North-East Wales has been one of the main zinc-producing areas of Europe and so it is a natural material with strong local associations. see ZINC notes attached below and Architect notes.

The new Ruthin Craft Centre addresses the issues of sustainability and use of resources in a number of ways. It does not rely on “active” approaches such as the use of photovoltaic panels, solar panels or wind turbine equipment. Instead, the design is based on using the “passive” elements of the building envelope itself (walls, floors, openings, etc) to create comfortable internal environments throughout the year with the minimum amount of equipment, such as mechanical ventilation or air conditioning. In this way the base energy needs of the building can be reduced. The possibility of adding active systems is always available to further enhance energy performance. Natural ventilation: the building has been planned to allow as many spaces as possible to be provided with fresh air ventilation using opening windows and roof lights following the guidance in the CIBSE publication “Natural Ventilation in non-domestic buildings”. Openings on opposing sides of spaces allow cross flow ventilation even in the larger, deep plan rooms. The large gallery space is also ventilated in this way, avoiding the need for energy using mechanical fans, made possible by the approach to the display of precious objects (requiring specific temperature and humidity control) which is based on the use of controlled display cases rather than air conditioning the entire gallery volume.

4 How inclusive is the project: for the elderly, the invalid, migrants, children etc. Is the disability agenda important?

4. The Centre is designed to be fully inclusive and freely accessible to all -- RCC does not charge for parking, entrance or exhibitions.

Recently I heard this from a colleague. Whilst reading the autobiography of one of the reputed contemporary architects he had some across a passage of behavior that forced him to end his journey with the book. The incident, his behavior, he said, was just too obnoxious even for this heroic figure. This is not a universal reaction for some. For others, eyes are blinded. Is it the flawed genius that we approach in the autobiographies of self-less souls that can make us rear up in horror, distrust history and memory. Or is this the necessary fictional step that the critical will indulge in to award its eminence to architecture playing fiction with itself? (In the celibotocracy is this mediocristan, extremistan or vernacularistan?) Isn't it nice to take our words beyond negation into the nether lands of disclaimers. I put down the book, he said, it was just so obnoxious. He spoke as though such action could still be a surprise. Those suspecting the hoodwink, the non-sense theorized into hoodwinking critical resistance, would have already suspected that.

5 Consider the building as a promenade; what encourages its use? What opportunities to meander, linger, stroll, pass through the building - is the target merchandise and/or café?

6 How does the courtyard work: as a park, a walkway, a Saturday market, a boule park (not as ridiculous as it may sound if compacted shale is used)?

7 What is the relationship between the 'internationalism' in the craft/applied arts agenda and the existing local craftspeople? (Who decides on 'craft overkill'?)

8 What might be the consequences of making the café exclusive; a Panini and espresso bias for travelling bistro fanciers or a picnic flask in the car park?

8. The Cafe does serve Linguine and Black Pudding, it is also a local business using mostly local produce, it is run by three siblings from the area all in their late twenties.

9 The building as an information-interactive system - wireless opportunities, touch screen learning environment; hands-on workshop courses? (What is the effect of the Zinc roof on wireless networks?)

9. We have just been successful in gaining funding for an Education Officer (hopefully in post by January) -- it is also useful to note that the Centre's programme of exhibitions and educational activity are entirely externally funded by ACW, Esmee Fairbairn, and other bodies such as SAFLE for the Artist Residency project.

10 Where would an enterprising kid or skilled artisan from Ruthin or the surrounding areas hold his or her exhibition on skateboards, self-built micro-lights, radical costume jewellery, crafted memorial stones, hip-hop do-it-yourself fashion or 'wrecked' journals?

10. RCC shows a considerable amount of work from North Wales and has given shows to several local makers, however our brief is UK wide and international -- an example the 2003's exhibition 'The Ring' an international exhibition originated in Cambridge Massachusetts USA, RCC was the only European showing and visitors came from several European countries.