

The Architects' Studio as 'Switchboard' between the Inner and Outer World

Derek Pigrum and Marcus Koerner 2011

This essay has its origins in conversations between creativity researcher, author and practicing artist Derek Pigrum and the interior architect and designer Marcus Koerner, in the ambiance of a traditional Viennese café- a place that in itself has played a role in the creativity of artists, writers and architects past and present. The quotations from Koerner are from his written account that Pigrum has translated from German. In addition to this are excerpts from recent interview notes with Koerner.

The reason why so little attention has been paid to the role of the studio as the site of architectural practices is that, like all such places, it has the quality of a second nature, of ingrained habits and an intimate familiarity. We tend to overlook the role it plays in the extraordinary creative activity that produces much of our built environment. The role of the studio space in the creativity of architects reveals a dependency on the nature of the place of the studio as an intermediate area, as what Koerner describes as a 'switchboard' between the inner and the outer that promotes the generation, modification and development of ideas (see Pigrum 2001 and 2009).

The way the architect orders the studio determines the world of things encountered every day, things 'readily available' and 'ready-to-hand'. This essay attempts to show that the studio is a third place between the subjective inner world and objective external reality. The things in the studio, the instruments, paper, equipment, tools, materials, drawings and resources, are at some level of consciousness continually taken into account. The 'round-about-us' of the studio involves a continual acquaintance and a preference for certain schemas that enhance creative possibilities and solutions.

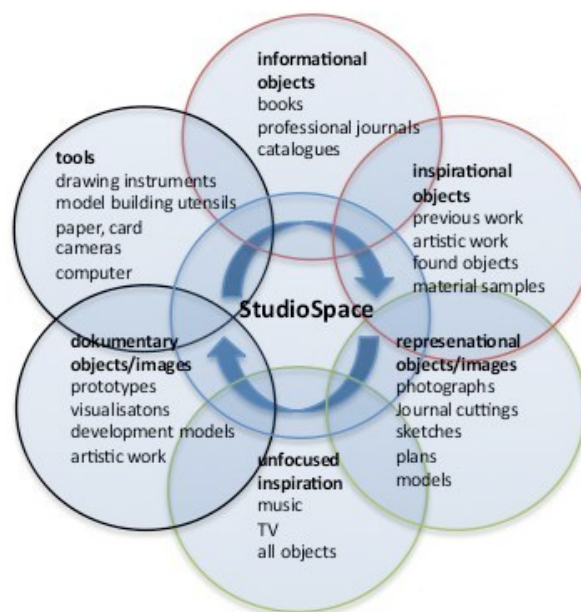
The architect Steven Holl states, 'My office is as messy as an artist's studio but in the mess I see something that will become a part of my creative process' (Krasny, 2009, p.70). The architect Yona Friedman has an ever expanding collection of

bricole that stretches across the walls and ceiling of his work space (see Krasny, 2008, pp. 52-57). Bricolage activity in the studio often takes the form of a kind of aside or displacement activity, a polar relation between intense activity and the repose necessary to the architect's idea generation and development. Thus, in a sense, *bricolage* leads the architect away and then back to his immediate concern. Pigrum has written about this phenomena and the relation of gathering and thinking in the studios and workspaces of writers, composers and artists (See Pigrum, 2011).

Koerner's prefers to call his studio his 'workshop,' and classifies the objects and images it contains as follows:

- 'objects of an informational character
- objects that aid inspiration
- objects that involve representations of different kinds from photos to sketches
- objects that aid unfocused inspiration
- objects of a documentary character
- objects that serve as tools.

Koerner goes on to state that 'the overlap between these various objects determines the studio space'. Koerner drew the diagram below to show the relation of these objects within the studio.



Koerner states that:

‘at the beginning of a project I gather information on the one hand in books, journals, catalogues and so on, and on the other hand, material directly related to the project such as plans, photos etc. In this phase of seeking inspiration the focus is widened to include previous projects, material samples and found objects as well as autonomous artistic works’.

These artistic works are most often related to the theme of time and with a clear compositional character, and according to Koerner, ‘act as a kind of bridge or coupling device to his idea generation and development’. On one occasion quite recently, he brought a small stone to our meeting stating ‘that it usually lies within view on his shelf, and acts as a source of inspiration, and, on the rare occasions when I pick it up, it acts as a kind of coupling in that part of the process that concerns formal and material questions’. Whatever way the stone is turned it has a schematic resemblance to something; now a crocodile, now a bird.

Koerner states

‘in some ways this stone works like Freud’s collection of ancient figurines that he kept in view on his desk. It leads to a solution without providing one itself but simply as a means to conduct a first search and to ascertain their relevance to my present concerns’.

Koerner went on to state that, ‘the process of representation leads to a change in the physical appearance of the studio itself, because now the relevant photos, newspaper cuttings, sketches, plans and models are placed in a collage- like arrangement on panels’. The architect Jon Jerda adopts much the same procedure when he states, ‘the colored print-outs that show local characteristics hang beside each other, indeed sometimes over each other, so as to develop solutions to problems by means of visual clusters of themes’ (Krasny, 2009, p.75).

Lefebvre(1991) developed ideas on space eminently applicable to the architects studio. The architect develops the ability to locate the body in its immediate surroundings producing over time a ‘practico-sensory realm’; a dense network of ever-changing relations between the inner and outer that exceeds the Cartesian model of space, divorced from experience, where things are isolated, static and

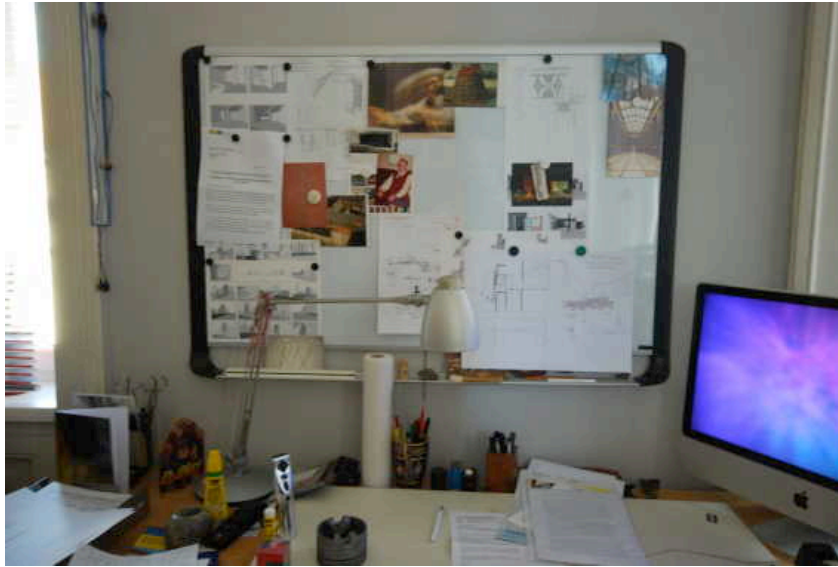
arranged on lifeless co-ordinates, but rather as a 'lived space' that houses objects imbued with meaning, that makes possible the perception of links and interactions between things, of the wresting of ideas.

In Koerner's studio almost all the furniture and containers are mobile and easily moved from one place to another such that, according to his needs, things can be arranged in ways that facilitate the study and development of the project. In the sketch he made below only the table on the left is a permanent fixture.



Koerner states:

'the surface of my vintage "drawing machine" can be tilted horizontally; an aeroplane trolley is used for storage purposes; a serving trolley where project information and models are placed; the prototype of a table I designed that is easily assembled serves to put things on that are not in immediate use. From my desk in my direct line of vision I have a panel with magnets to which I can attach pictures, clippings and other material' as shown in the photo below.



The philosopher Martin Heidegger (1962) suggests that every entity that is to-hand has different conditions of closeness: the presence-at-hand where things are not proximally given, the 'proximally ready-to-hand' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 135) and readiness-to-hand where the thing and our immediate concerns converge, (see Pigrum, 2011). Very often the readiness-to-hand of note-paper, newsprint, envelopes or the reverse side of printed matter, is not only reliably available in the work environment but is something that can be left around, re-found, recovered or destroyed (see Pigrum, 2009, 2011). These are ways of working based on an immediate sensory and imaginative encounter with the concrete given of the scrap of paper, or the object.

Lefebvre states:

'Space is continually produced and reproduced, and as such is to be understood as active: the analysis of the production of space does not concern the ordering of material objects and artifacts, but rather the practical, mental and symbolic in their relation to these objects' (in Schmid, 2010, p.321).

As Koerner states 'the architect's studio is not a "frozen" space" but rather one where every change within it produces a new configuration of possibilities and potentialities that presents us with a range of metaphorical meanings', a space permeated by ambiguity, that in its indeterminacy constitutes a space of possibilities and potentiality and the move from potentiality to actualization.

Koerner states that, 'after the transformation of the studio there usually follows a phase of unfocused seeking for inspiration during which he listened to music, looks through books and journals, thumbs through magazines, and sometimes watches TV.' He is particularly interested in the way the architect Gary Chang conceives of film because 'it let's you connect all the key issues you are thinking of, you find the references much more quickly', (Krasny, 2009, p.50). Koerner states:

'I do not consider this to be work but am aware that all the time I keep the first phases of idea development in view. This was also the time in which I think of the project as 'transportable', because it is uppermost in my mind and can be carried around as a tangible representation. In this phase I also talk to other people, not architect's, about the project.

Conversations that involve the 'sketch on a serviette' where, as I talk and draw, new ideas come to mind'.

A colleague of Alvaro Aalto reported that he, 'considered these "napkin sketches", as having, 'just as important a role as the ones made on the plain backs of the packages of his favorite cigarettes' (ibid, 2009, p.17).

During this phase Koerner states, 'that other objects related to my personal history take on a renewed significance because these objects produce links to the experimental stage of the project, of formal and material relations where I begin to see something in these objects as something else'. The studio as a 'switchboard' between what is put there and what we need for our creative concerns, between the inner and outer world is based on an understanding of the studio as a variation on what Donald Winnicott (1971) termed 'potential space'. The term 'potential space' was coined in the post Freudian psychoanalytic theory of Winnicott (1971) on early child development as having the explanatory power to identify the roots of human creativity. Winnicott's theory has gained adherents from a broad spectrum of people involved in creative activity (see Pigrum 2009, Nussbaum, 2001, Giddens, 1991, Rudnysky 1993, Agamben, 1993). While it is beyond the scope of this essay to address this theme in any detail, it is of great interest that Winnicott's 'potential space' is closely linked to the 'readily available', 'transitional object', and dependent on a physical and

emotional environment conducive to the mediation between the inner and outer world that is characteristic of the architect's studio. The architect's studio is a 'potential space' for things that are the intermediate products of creative activity: sketches, concepts, models, reproductions, montages and other inspirational objects and tools that serve as discursive media that enrich the information at the disposal of the drafting process.

Koerner states:

'I use prototypes and developmental models, visualizations, project information from past commissions and pieces of art to document my work. These can serve as information and inspiration for future projects or as the basis for the further development of ideas that were never realized, or only partially completed, but are also a mode of introspective exploration'.

Denis Scott Brown talks about 'the long history of the office in the form of sketches, plans, models, slides, collected objects and publications' (Krasny, 2009, p.127) or 'the interaction of the existing and its potential' (ibid). In Koerner's view 'this gives rise to a kind of museum of ones own production in the real sense of communication. The knowledge gained from this documentary research activity flows into new tasks providing a foothold for further work'

Koerner states that, in his studio:

'there are diverse anachronistic objects that have once belonged to the architects profession but are now obsolete. The drawing machine mentioned earlier is an example of an apparatus that was used for manually drawing plans to the size of AO, that today in his studio serves as a surface to collect things on. Along with a collection of historical drawing instruments and stencil forms, he also keeps the original plan, from 1902, of the house in which his studio is situated'.

This highlights the strong link that seems to exist between the architect's studio and his creative processes. It is in the studio that the architect gathers things

from external reality and uses these in ways that correspond to inner reality. In this sense the studio becomes a setting for the serious play of creativity. This play is dependent on the experience of the reliability of the setting of a studio to facilitate the encounter with a succession of objects and images, from the present and the past history of the architects work, of impulses and sensations, some of them linked and some whose relevance to the architects concerns remain to be detected.

Finally, the dimension of purposeful activity in the studio has an overlooked polar relation to formless relaxed and unfocused experience or 'letting go', 'a relation that allows random points of entry, intersecting trails and multiple pathways' (Pigrum, 2007). The creativity of the architect is a balancing act between the objective requirements of external reality that at the same time keeps in touch with the subjective world. The success of this balancing act depends on the nature of the creative environment of the studio where ideas for architecture are not purely subjective or objective, but in a third area positioned somewhere between the two. The architect's studio as a setting for the serious play of creativity.

In many ways this essay addresses Winnicott's idea that the most useful thing to study in the context of creativity is the link between 'creative living and living itself' (Winnicott, 1971, p.69). The architect lives and works for much of his life in the studio. This does not reach to the root of the 'creative impulse', that we shall probably never understand, because creativity cannot be explained in terms of the studio space alone, but it does help us to appreciate how a particular place, like the studio, can help the architect to live and work creatively.

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