



To sketch is to think

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When an artist draws from life, he draws what he sees and interprets it in his own way – the observer perceives the subject through the artist’s eyes. However, when an architect is designing, he draws what he is thinking and the drawings are part of the creative process. The artist’s work is an end in itself, while the architect’s sketch is perhaps just the start of a great building.

The creative process in architecture is complex and hard to define, but when ideas are generated, the simplest way of communicating them is by drawing. As Le Corbusier is reputed to have said, ‘I prefer drawing to talking. Drawing is faster and leaves less room for lies.’

For me, the design process starts with getting to know the brief and analysing the site context. This is followed by sketches in which I explore ideas as they come. These early drawings may lead somewhere, or just trigger a thought process for discussion with other members of the design team.

Of course, they only form part of the process, which includes parametric modelling and form finding. However, many architects are missing out on the drawing stage and moving straight from first thoughts to believable, seductive imagery in a very short time. There are dangers in this approach, where the scheme looks finished before it has been properly resolved. The client may believe that everything works properly, when it doesn’t. A freehand sketch can convey the concept and intent, while leaving scope for design development.

The act of drawing helps to stimulate ideas. Although a blank piece of paper can be intimidating, it helps to start by drawing what you know and allowing ideas to flow. Whether for a commission or competition, architects are increasingly under pressure to produce quick design solutions and it is important to have a process that you can rely on. Working through options is common practice but surely it is more efficient to work through ideas at sketch stage before deciding how to proceed.

I am concerned that fewer architects are using freehand drawing as part of the design process and are relying more and more on computers. For me and for generations of architects before me, drawing has been an essential part of life. There is something about the eye-brain-hand coordination that seems to stimulate ideas, just as it serves to communicate them. It can also be said that although rendering conveys a design in a superbly accurate way, a freehand sketch can often express the emotions and thinking behind the concept, which can be more successful.

I hope drawing will always remain part of the architectural process.