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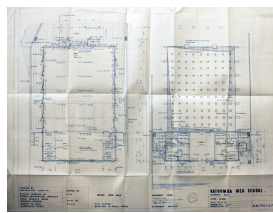
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2021 WORKSHOP

Drawings of Tea-Leaves and Split Entrails: The Uncertain Social Function of Architectural Plans

LUKE TIPENE

DECEMBER 2021



Plan of Katoomba High School assembly hall by Ken Woolley, 1960, New South Wales Government Architects Office. [Luke Tipene]

I stumbled on the architectural plans for my high-school assembly hall in the New South Wales government archives. Like an old photo, the drawings brought back vivid memories: the hall obscured by fog on daybreak winter mornings, the dusty smell hiding in the backstage curtains, the scrape of metal chair legs on sunlit floorboards.

The plans, of course, reflected none of these qualities. They had been prepared by the office of the Australian modernist architect Arthur Baldwinson in 1960. The hall's modular, straightforward design embodied the principles of functional planning for which Baldwinson is now well-known. Simply drawn, they were visually unremarkable. The richness of the space in my memories was not conveyed, yet the disjuncture was surprising all the same.

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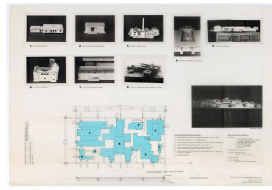
The high-school hall obscured by fog on winter mornings, the scrape of chair legs on sunlit floorboards: The plans, of course, reflected none of these qualities.

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In architectural planning, the unreconcilable difference between a building's graphic representation and its inhabitants' lived experience is under-considered and often ignored. The theorist Robin Evans once described architectural drawings as “like the tea-leaves in the cup, [or] the split entrails of the eviscerated dove.”¹ His point was that, far from simply translating definitive qualities and pre-programmed facts, architectural drawings comprise uncertainty — though this is rarely acknowledged in the profession.

Beginning with sacred geometries undergirding Renaissance plans, architects for centuries have trusted such documents to accurately convey vital facts about the physical, structural, municipal, and contractual obligations brought to bear on a given design. When it comes to the experiential and relational reality of a built structure, architectural drawings — including plans — have similarly been used to convey expectations for how people should live. The modern house plan, for example, codifies anticipated behaviors and categorizes foreseen social actions. Privacy is a key consideration for arranging spaces in domestic planning, and labels like “dining,” “living,” “bedroom,” and “t.v. room,” are written over plans so as to guide our interpretations and animate our perceptions of the life we might lead inside the home. Along with hyper-realistic renders, plans are used in real-estate advertisements to convince us of the happiness and idealized stability that a proposed development will foster.

The idea that drawings can — and should — somehow predict our behaviors is unique to the architectural profession, and calls for careful consideration. Drawings have limits. Why would we expect a plan to represent the texture of lived experience? All images affect us, but we don't expect a portrait, for instance, to represent the emotional totality of its subject as he or she exists in time. Interpretive judgement is intrinsic to image appreciation in artistic practices. In reality, interpretation is intrinsic to how we use buildings too. The room labelled on a plan as a bedroom may, in fact, be used as a study, or a nursery; it may become a recording studio at one stage; maybe a hospital ward after that. Yet architectural drawings rarely imply such adaptations. They remain instruments not only of description but of instruction, functioning implicitly to sort behaviors according to presumed levels of appropriateness. As such, social biases and stereotypes manifest in the arrangement of spaces in plans. By manipulating our expectations of the unbuilt, plans warrant some of the same criticisms levied against the use of cultural stereotypes in hyper-realistic renders.²



Mike Kelley, *Educational Complex* (working drawing prepared by Kimberley Colin), 1996. [Courtesy Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, © Mike Kelley/ARS Copyright Agency]

The problem is not that the plan does not ever reflect or predict the experiential aspects of a structure, but that there is little acknowledgement of the extent to which this relationship is and must remain uncertain. If the architectural drawing is not predictive, then the process of planning is inherently unstable. And if that is the case — if assurance is lost in the relationship between representation and social function in spatial design — can architecture serve to support and affect social change?

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It might be useful to turn to Mike Kelley's 1995 sculpture *Educational Complex*. This architectural model is almost five meters long, and reconstructs while hybridizing every school and home that Kelley attended or lived in during his childhood. Assembled exclusively from memory, the model excludes spaces that Kelley could not recall. Its constellation of memory-sites appears as a coherent masterplan, which the artist described as a "kind of modernist architecture." The model is useless as an accurate representation of any architecture actually extant in Kelley's past. Yet it speaks poignantly to the incomplete quality of our memories, the potent role played by built spaces in those memories, and the ways in which our experiences differ from reality. The buildings "were cut apart and reconfigured," Kelley tells us, "formalized" in a way that makes *Educational Complex* look coherent in a way that it is not.³

Despite being a physical representation of architecture, Kelley's work unravels the confidence and completeness we tend to ascribe to the architectural plan. Plans are useful scripts for building, but Kelley suggests they are opaque and incomplete in other respects. This is not because a plan is imprecise, but because the reality we make with architecture eludes precision. Looking at Baldwinson's plans for my high-school hall, any architectural historian would be able to recognize certain social norms embedded in them — like the kitchen labelled "P & C," for the Parents and Citizens Federation, or the gender-binary changing rooms. Yet only lived experiences speak to the actual complexity of use.

When we understand the affective limits of the architectural plan, its imprecise relationships with lived experience, the plan may begin to look more like an artist's portrait than it would first appear — a static reflection of the moment in which it is drawn, which only vaguely hints at hypothetical futures or pasts; a well-intentioned illustration that remains perpetually unfinished, because people are unfinished. It's worth our while to bear this in mind. For, as Evans notes, architectural drawings are "distributions made in such a way that they cannot be fully understood even by their author."

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NOTES

1. Robin Evans, "In front of the lines that leave nothing behind," *AA Flies*, 6 (1984): 90.
2. See Daniel Innes, "Drawing People," *Drawing Matter* (September 23, 2020).
3. Mike Kelley, *Human Interest*, excerpt of recorded interview about *Educational Complex*, 1995, Whitney Museum of American Art.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



LUKE TIPENE

Luke Tipene is a lecturer and course director of the Bachelor of Design in Interior Architecture at University of Technology Sydney. His research centers on the history, theory, and practice of architectural drawing and how questions of accuracy and uncertainty produce new disciplinary

knowledge. Tipene has worked as a writer, editor, and peer reviewer; his essays have appeared in publications such as *The Journal of Architecture*, and he serves on the editorial board of *idea journal*, for which he was also co-guest editor of the 2021 issue. Tipene is currently a Ph.D. candidate at UTS, where his dissertation focuses on late-20th-century experimental drawing.

MORE FROM THE 2021 WORKSHOP



Double Vision: Industry and the U.S. Building Code

TYLER GAETH

On a cold Boston day in March 1895, six men gathered in the offices of the Underwriters Bureau of New England to discuss what would soon become the National Fire Protection Association or NFPA. While small building fires remain common today, fires at the turn of the 19th century were significantly larger and more deadly; [...]

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It is almost a tautology to say that a building contract awarded is the definition of success for a building contractor. Yet when the first national convention of American builders met in Chicago in 1887, “the absolute absurdity of the system of contracts now prevailing” was foremost on their minds.¹Peter B. Wight, “Building Contracts,” in [...]



The Space for Space-Making

YAN WAN

Shenzhen, the special economic zone established in 1980, was the first Chinese city to introduce housing as a commodity, in contrast to the established communist planning economy. Housing in the special zone could be owned or bought and sold on the market, instead of only being distributed by the state to privileged residents. Shenzhen's development [...]



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CARLOS BALZA GIRARDINO

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