Scogin Elam and Bray

Mark Scogin, a principal of the Atlanta-based architectural practice Scogin Elam and Bray, and Chairman of the Department of Architecture of the Harvard University Graduate School of Design, gave the thirteenth John Dennis Memorial Lecture at the AA in June 1992. John Dennis, who trained at the AA, was involved with the School over a period of twenty-six years, as student, lecturer, member of Council and President. After his death in 1971 a visiting lecturership was established to mark his interest in education.

In the essay which follows, Mark Linder introduces the work of Scogin Elam and Bray.

However ironic it may appear, to admit to being at a loss for words in perhaps the most direct way of introducing the architecture of Scogin Elam and Bray. In an era that will likely be remembered for an extraordinary proliferation of theoretical writing, and a coincident surplus of radical approaches to architectural design, these buildings and their architects are surprisingly conventional and happily reductive. But such quiescence should not be mistaken as inarticulate or careless. The buildings of Scogin Elam and Bray inhabit a largely overlooked territory of architectural thought which neither sanctifies silence nor insist upon communication. Their work seems to cause in a gap between prevalent theoretical modes. Yet irony is acutely in question here. Operating in a manner vaguely aligned with peculiarly American traditions of philosophy, Scogin Elam and Bray practise what C corp West has termed an 'evasion of theory, a distinctly American refusal' to adopt prevailing methodologies and modes of thinking. Instead, their strategies simultaneously exploit and avoid 'the problematic and vocabulary established in the systems of precursors and contemporaries.' Like the non-philosophical philosophers Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James, Scogin Elam and Bray display a robust intellectual scepticism, while neither disavowing theory nor formulating explicit, dissimulating vocabularies. Rather than aspiring to comprehensibility or following intentions, they draw our attention to absent or latent thoughts which perch at the limits of articulation.

But why should this strategy of evasion be characterized as 'distinctly American'? Numerous examples suggest otherwise. For instance, in the years immediately following the Second World War, two thinkers residing in Britain puffed over the writings of William James. In an occurrence that can only be described as uncanny, both Ludwig Wittgenstein and Aston Ewingtook an interest in a particular passage of James's by then obsolete Principles of Psychology, in which he discusses our intention to the 'transitive parts' of thought. The troublesome passage occurs in James's famous chapter 'The Stemm of Thought.' Suppose we try to recall a forgotten name. The state of our consciousness is peculiar. There is a gap therein; but no mere gap. It is a gap that is immensely active. A sort of wrath of the name is in it, becoining us in a given direction, making us a momentum tingle with the sense of cloisons, and then lifting us back without the longed-for term.?' Wittgenstein drew upon this part of James's Principles in his attempt to give an account of the experience of thinking, and remarks that our thoughts are 'vagueness are not experienced at all, if one understands experience as something translatable in explainable or describable events — writing, speaking, drawing, building. He wants to emphasize the difficulties involved in attempting to reconcile thought and experience, intention and action, or meaning and saying. He maintains that our confidence in the theoretical language rests on a mistake. We often think as if our thinking were founded on a thought scheme as if we were translating from a more primitive mode of thought into ours. In other words, our thoughts are remarkably unfounded; therefore, theory and philosophy do not achieve their authority from being based in thought. Wittgenstein seems to think that theory and philosophy are something entirely other than exceptionally articulate modes of thought, and his style in the Investigations exemplifies this claim. His most profound thoughts remain puzzlingly vague in spite of the precise form of their articulation.

Ehrenwein attacks from another direction. He turns to James to support his contention that thinkers are habitually blind — conceptually and visually — to 'evasive inarticulate form elements.' Following James, he insists that our tendency to perceive only articulate form leads us to a serious epistemological illusion' that precludes an absence of thought where no recognizable form is exhibited, or awareness of a too definite form into the blank gap. He further suggests that when we are disembodied (capable articulate a thought we are not entirely inarticulate. In fact, although 'articulate vision is ambiguous' it 'anticipates and comprehends all later attempts at articulation.' As distinct from Wittgenstein, Ehrenwein believes that theory is a form of thinking, but its initial form eludes us. The comprehensive insights of Ehrenwein and Wittgenstein begin to explain the incapacity of critics and theorists to engage the work of architects such as Charles Gwathmey, John Hejduk, Steven Holl, and Scogin Elam and Bray. Their work displays no explicit theory, no substantive argument or oppositional statements generate, justify or explain the design decisions. In the architecture of Scogin Elam and Bray the 'wraith of the name' is that which is named 'theory.' Is 'theory' then? Unable to answer that question definitively, can we reasonably call their thoughtlessness theory? Even as we formulate the first question, we tend to stifle awareness of the evasive thoughts we respect as theory; to resist in name-calling the afterlife of name-depriving, as proposed by the second question, implies a degradation of both 'theory' and 'Scogin Elam and Bray.' Just as James notes that 'a person whose visual imagination is strong finds it hard to understand how those who are without the faculty can think at all, those who insist on an articulated theory as a prerequisite of architectural thinking will invariably overlook liminal thoughts and dismiss many intriguing thoughts.

In projects like the Cinemat House and the Morrow Library, the apparently expressive form-making, or the idiosyncrasies of idiom and detail, might be interpreted in a positive light, as a displacement of more recognizable, and apparently simpler, strategies. To fixate on the perspicuous elements is to neglect the more subtle manners of the buildings. They are not outwardly articulate, but rather adhere intimately to the conditions of the site. Both projects avoid bald assertion. Instead of seeking coherence, comprehensibility or stability, they do something funny, even uncanny. The carilliers at Cinemat or the angularly scappers at Morrow, the chauffeur's door of the house or the children's handprints in the slurry of the stucco, are strangely oryinary evasions. To apprehend them as thoughts is something like teasing out the idea of a 'distinct pleasure,' a task which is more and less deliriously philosophical (or tracing the metaphysics of 'presence,' or dwelling upon the gaps. Scogin Elam and Bray's architecture involves frustrating, hybrid terms that are once apprehensive and apprehensible. To convey these architects' version of theoretical practice requires something akin to grasping, and embracing, the chalc of serious fun.

Mark Linder

Notes
5. Ehrenwein, p. 2.
HOUSE CHMAR

The site — two-and-a-half acres of woods — is adjacent to a forest three miles from the heart of Atlanta, Georgia. When a tree had fallen, an opening occurred. The house occupies the position of this tree. It also occupies the attitude of the people who inhabit it.

The interior spaces enclose and protect, but at the same time they imply extensions into the woods. Particular interior zones are at one with particular interior zones.

The house is narrow but not limited. It is isolated in the woods, yet at its very heart is the goddessen room, where light and companionship are shared.

A simple wooden structure, the house is clad in stucco and glass, with metal roofing. Very few trees were felled during the construction process, which was completed in 1989.

Architect: Soug in Slam and Bery Architects
Mack Soug in with Merrill Eilen and Lloyd Bay (principal-in-charge) and Susan Denko
Structural Engineer: Pratit Cernly
General Contractor: Walsh Torkington
Photography: Timothy Hesley / The Arkansas Office
Model Photography: Lloyd Bay
Computer Photography: Susan Denko
CAROL COBB TURNER
BRANCH LIBRARY

The Morrow Branch Library, located in Morrow, Georgia, is an institutional facility in a mixed-use area surrounded by a strip shopping centre, a busy county road, and subdivisions. Its design reflects its context, facing the street to acknowledge the road’s presence.

The site is a one-acre site with yellow-topped birch trees, a new building, and a rose garden. The programme of the building and parking consume the entire area. The site view is upward, and the scheme reflects this. Other influences are more abstract or distant, such as the headquarters library, the county courthouse, the nearby neighborhoods, and the cardinal points of the compass. Along with the property lines, the lines of connection with these entities give form to the building.

The building plan is, in effect, a skewed, asymmetrical dog trot. Off both sides of a dividing breezeway/connector there are rooms — to the north the public meeting room, lavatories, and administrative services, and to the south the children’s collection and the general collection. Introducing into the corridor is the circulation desk. Along the south property line, just outside the children’s and general collections, there is a small garden with a viewing area that will hold water and act as a reflecting lake.

A steel and glass tower marks the corner of the site and the building, and signifies the centre of a new reality for the library. Resting on a simple post-and-beam structure, it is a negative centripetal support from which the mushroom-like roof forms emerge and rise towards the perimeter.

The exterior walls are of glass and Georgia red clay-colored synthetic stucco. The roof is of tire-tread rubber.

Construction was completed in summer of 1981.

Architects: Soggin Hart and Bray Architects
Merrill Evans with Richard Sohls and Lloyd Bray
and with Carlos Tarillo, Richard Ashworth, Julie Saffield, Jeff Ashworth, Susan Drezik, Colin Miles
Structural Engineers: Pratt Bailey

Photography: Tim Bayliss / The Architects Office
Model Photography: Lloyd Bray