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Report on PhD Thesis of Ms. Joanna Pełkowska
„Freehand Drawing in the Architectural and Urban Design Process“

Ms. Pełkowska's PhD thesis „Freehand Drawing in the Architectural and Urban Design Process“ is exploring the role of freehand drawing in contemporary design processes, focusing explicitly on the communicative aspects of drawing as they pertain to modes of collaborative and deliberate planning of public urban development projects. As case study the author has chosen an urban design charrette in Chicago in which she participated in. The charrette was focusing on public and publicly accessible spaces of two Chicago West Town hospitals, with the aim of supporting the urban and architecture design process with feedback and input by stakeholders and laypeople representing the broad social spectrum of the community. This main empirical work is framed by a comprehensive literature review and methodological discussion (chapter I), especially on participatory observation, and a thorough account on the history and theory of drawing as a design tool (chapter II), cognitive processes (chapter III), and design thinking (as in thinking related to design) at large (chapter IV), and freehand drawing in particular, focusing on its role in the three main phases of design and design communication (chapter V). This is followed by the case study (chapter VI) and the conclusions and outlook (chapter VII).

Firstly, Ms. Pełkowska's work is timely, as the profession of urban design is increasingly taking part in or managing participatory workshops and collaborative design processes, for which a good understanding and reflection of the professional tools is a prerequisite. Secondly, the increasing proliferation of digital

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design and communication tools leads to the question in how far more traditional, analogue tools shall still complement the professional tool-box.

Ms. Pełkowska poses the main research question: „what ist the role of freehand drawing at present in the architectural and urban design process?“ She supports this by the hypotheses, that freehand drawing has attributes that „render it useful in the design process“, explicitly in recording and understanding spaces, in translating thoughts into form, and in communicating within and outside of a team. The research question I consider too broad and would have wished for it to be narrowed down to specific pre-identified challenges in participatory and collaborative design processes, in which specific contestations and chances of freehand drawing can be identified more prominently, which I consider a valid assumption. As a charrette is the case study, one would have avoided the quite lengthy history and theory chapters (II, III, IV, V) or would have been able to coin those chapters more towards the critical issues at hand and thus been able to taken more time to discuss the participatory observation of the charrette of the case study. Yet, theses comprehensive chapters on tools, cognitive processes, and design thinking (as in thinking processes in and via design) are highly stimulating to current academic discourses in architecture and urban design, as the methodological discussion on the disciplines' tools is still underdeveloped. Thus, in this specific case, even though the very broad research question and hypotheses seem conceptionally justified, both – cases study and literature review on the history and theory of drawing – could have been more focused.

The thesis is very clearly structured in six chapter plus a concluding chapter. The clarity of the layout is beneficial especially given the wide range of detailed discussions on the tools. The written argumentation is clear. Where necessary, reproduction of drawings, plan material and documentary photographs of the charrette sessions complement the work. Basic concepts from cognitive science, design, and drawing theories are well-illustrated with diagrams and charts.

Developing her arguments along this clear structure, Ms. Pełkowska is able to present a series of findings. Some are known, but in this case well-argued and related to empirical findings, others are more original stemming from the participatory observation. For the first design phase (design related research) and the second (conceptual), she identifies two qualities of freehand drawings that are very beneficial to the expert him/herself and the communication with other experts and laypeople: ambiguity and non-literality, both factors that enable the enrollment of a large and diverse group of stakeholders into the participatory and communicative process. Freehand drawings do not seem fixed, they are open to interpretation and inducing discussion.

In her conclusion, Ms. Pełkowska suggests (p.233) that while the expert collaboration in building will increasingly be efficiently handled by digital and partly autmated communication (Building Information Management BIM), hand-drawing will definitely stay important in workshop formats, especially in the communication with the general public and laypeople. In relation to these closing remarks, I want to congratulate Ms. Pełkowska on observations and findings that are rather sidelining the overall-work, but important for the general discussion of freehand drawing and the politics of a project. For example, in section V.5 on the role of the architect / urban planner (p. 153) Ms. Pełkowska criticizes the efficiency (ideal) BIM-guided architecture projects that for the sake of cost- and time-savings are organized to avoid or bypass conflicts between collaborators (owner-investor-architect). Yet these political and aesthetic contestations might be important components of the project. Here she advocates the use of freehand drawing as a chance to integrate these conflicts.

In the current debate on digitalization and its chances and contestation, the discussion on freehand drawing puts an emphasis back to reflection-in-action, self-reflectivity and empowerment of the designer, and the communication with and „seeing as“ laypeople, which should be cultivated within and parallel to communication technology development.

On the basis of this evaluation, I state that Ms. Pełkowska's doctoral thesis meets the requirements laid down in Art. 13 section 1 of the Act on Academic Degrees and Academic Titles and on Degrees and Titles in the Arts (March 14th, 2003) and I strongly recommend the work to be allowed to be defended.

For the excellent overview over the history and theory of drawing as a tool, for the ambitious methodological approach of participatory observation of a charrette process, and for the overall high quality of the written work, I evaluate the PhD work of Ms. Pełkowska as „very good“.

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