





# The biggest social experiment in history?

#OnReflection #1  
13 May 2020, 5:30—6:30pm

#OnReflection is a series exploring the evolution of practice pre- and post-COVID through words, image and action

#ONREFLECTION #1

THE BIGGEST SOCIAL EXPERIMENT IN HISTORY?

1

This lecture, given for the Architecture Foundation's 100 Day Studio series<sup>1</sup> in May 2020<sup>2</sup>, offers a means to reflect on how we might alter our patterns of thinking and method of practice as we tackle a global pandemic. My primary aim is to look at how we collaborate during crisis, threading this together with a compilation of thoughts gathered through debate with family, friends, colleagues and contemporaries.

I want to voice the experience of practicing through the pandemic, setting it out as a precursor to further discussion. This experience is not something any individual will own: it is a collective experience on a global scale.

I do not want to talk about form making, or architectural techniques for resilience and density. Instead, I am here to talk about relationships. I am here to talk about the importance of autonomy, a greater awareness of the players in the company, about the dangers of micromanagement and the effects of isolation. I also look at the 'reboot': how, in the face of health and climate crises, we need to build on trust as a means to transform our businesses.

I have had to visit Morris+Company's office regularly since we went into the current social distancing regime. The whole building is deserted, along with all the neighbouring office buildings on

Underwood Street. I have timed my daily exercise routine over the past six or seven weeks to attend the building each day, and evolved a new pattern of working activities as a direct consequence of the lockdown. I am now security guard, trouble-shooter and IT support, office and maintenance manager, plant waterer and cleaner, alongside my pre-COVID architectural duties.

These visits to the office have created an utterly unique opportunity for reflection. It is an eerie place, quite still and silent, giving heightened sense of the exceptional nature of these circumstances. It takes me back to the first days after I founded the practice in 2004, when I had to do everything. Now, of course, it's quite different. We have 50 team members in London, 4 more in Copenhagen—a complex network of exceptionally gifted people, nurturing a raft of complex projects at a variety of stages.

The 100 Day Studio programme has been truly absorbing and remarkable: had we not been plunged into this crisis we might not have realised this opportunity for reflection in quite the same way. Three lectures in particular helped to inform my thinking for this one. Firstly Richard Sennett's piece<sup>3</sup> *Density In The Wake of Social Distancing*, then Carolyn Steel's exploration<sup>4</sup> of how food can save



#ONREFLECTION #1

THE BIGGEST SOCIAL EXPERIMENT IN HISTORY?

2



#ONREFLECTION #1

A LECTURE BY JOE MORRIS

3



the world in her new publication *Sitopia*, and finally the extraordinary presentation by Jeremy Till<sup>5</sup> on *Architecture after Architecture*.

Each of these lectures made direct associations between our prior selves—our pre-COVID selves—and the failing of our societal systems. What I want to do is reflect on the same theme from within practice. Morris+Company is one of many thousands of creative businesses whose methodologies have been broken to pieces (although I hope we will come to realise that this isn't necessarily all bad). As a consequence we are now in a decentralised, destabilised and iterative state, caught between our pre-COVID selves and a future horizon as yet unknown.

The practice—like most others, I'm sure—was awash with speculation in the months before the virus landed in Europe. Even then, our conditioning guided us to seek distance from the looming crisis, assuming it would not affect us and that things would continue as they were. But we were simply holding our nerve against the inevitable lockdown the closure of all offices, creative or not, for an undetermined period of time.

We planned our way through the crisis by speculating on what might happen through debate, research and imagination, the question always being how we would ever survive. But surviving we are. We have proven beyond doubt that when we act

#ONREFLECTION #1

THE BIGGEST SOCIAL EXPERIMENT IN HISTORY?

4

collectively we can survive crisis. Or we can survive the upward curve of crisis at least, through resilience, endurance, wit and adaptability. The timing of the lockdown was partly unexpected and of course almost immediate. Our entire team put incredible effort into setting up fifty mini-practices overnight. In something like a war effort, we rallied around, analysing our hardware capacity, network and broadband capabilities, and the spatial complexities in each house. There was a feverish deployment of taxis, bikes, couriers as people fled the office. And then, the next day, silence in the aisles where once there was chatter and energy.

We are now a fully distributed network. Each week brings a different process of settling in and feels more like a month, even a century, given the ground we make up. It seems an age since we last met our teammates face-to-face, but—in a defiant stand that we will keep going as we did before—we have a strong support network of social gatherings, yoga groups, seminars and cultural exchanges, all played through the digital format.

But if you say it is business as usual, you'd be lying. We're already asking questions about how we'll survive the downward curve of the crisis and, as a result, have begun exploring the idea of a 'no-office

normal'. The shift is seismic and daunting, and more so because there is little government-to-government consistency, and an abundance of misinformation and vagueness around how things will return to normal—whatever normal is. During the upward curve of crisis, what many of us have done is to bring some of the bad habits from our pre-COVID working methods into the digital sphere, and these habits are somehow heightened by the fact we are working from home. Habits like the idea of 'being present' to evidence our input, the expectation of instant responses, the inefficiency of drawing tens of people into unnecessary meetings.

What we need to hope for is that this is just one iteration in the evolution of our businesses towards a more asynchronous form of communication, one where we don't all have to be in the same room online at the same time, where we work when we are at our most effective to enable our own flow of productivity. We are all unexpectedly engaged in the biggest social experiment in human history, in real time, with the actual effects experienced daily.

There are few companies which do the distributed, asynchronous working methodology better than Automattic, the company behind Wordpress. Automattic currently has 1,170 employees scattered across more than 75 countries, but it does not have an office; its

employees collaborate almost exclusively online. Founder Matt Mullenweg's view is that there is a 5-level shift to a fully distributed working method, where Level 1 is the pre-COVID state. Level 2 is where we are all likely situated now, recreating the office online. Automattic is at Level 4, while Level 5 ('Nirvana') is where the distributed team works better than any in-person team ever could. We are all a very long way from this.

While we stumble onwards at Level 2, though, there are many positives of this experience that we might want to acknowledge. Our spaces have been democratised. Our clients and collaborators of whatever age and rank all sit in the same, pixelated frame, the domestic realm in full view. The opt-in and opt-out-ability of Teams and Zoom enables every team member to control their interface with the meeting.

But there are also obvious negative issues. Our poorly-designed, ill-equipped homes are pushed to breaking point when in multiple occupancy, as co-workers jostle for the same physical, visual, and audio space. This places untold stresses on personal relationships, and that's all before you throw home-schooling children into the mix. So while there have been many positives such as more time with the family, more control over our working environments,

less travel and so on, there are simultaneously problems of compatibility, network strength, poor spatial layouts in non-adaptive building stock. And, always, the pervasive nature of the office creeping into your home.

Might this mean that we take a new, refreshed look at the office? The big question is whether having an office is important—and why? From my perspective, the office is the physical embodiment of the culture of our practice. It is a space which fosters interaction, friendships, support. It is immersive, full of energy, a manifestation of our shared endeavour. So when we think about the value of the office, are we talking about the hardware (the building and infrastructure), or the software (the people and culture)? Alongside the positives, the modern-day office is a natural evolution of the industrial factory model, designed to maximise productivity and output. It imposes a fixed timetable, it necessitates physical presence to evidence your contribution. Its design and layout are usually governed by an uninspiring straightjacket of rules and conventions. Within this constraining environment, and with a balance sheet to meet each month, we are driven onwards from task to task as we feed the machine. And we simply do not have sufficient capacity to make time for anything else.

#ONREFLECTION #1

A LECTURE BY JOE MORRIS

5

Time is an incredibly valuable commodity which the bad habits of our pre-COVID selves conspire to take from us even in a dispersed workflow. But we should recognise that we stand, right now, at a once-in-a-generation moment when we have the opportunity to redress these issues of time and space.

Now is our chance to row upstream and consider radical—but achievable—changes to the way we function. The first, most obvious, thing to do is to carve out time for reflection. Continuous, productive time, elevating the value of reflection to the same as that for production and allowing wellness, positive thinking and creativity to flourish.

By doing that during this crisis, I have reflected on my personal objectives in practice and what I might seek for those who I collaborate with. This reflection has not always been about answers; it has often come down to seeking the right questions. A constant theme that emerges is a desire to give people the agency and space to challenge practice norms. The immersive office might be one such environment, and, as you can see from this city of models around me, the physical incarnation of an idea holds magnificent and potent value.

I see the architectural model as a lens for reflecting on practice, and the dilemma we are now

presented with: the struggle between the analogue and the digital, the virtual and the physical.

To me, models are sounds, smells, shapes, shadows. They are more than just themselves: they are experiment, innovation, representation, abstraction, question, answer, success and failure. This is their physical value.

The architectural model also represents intelligence, endeavour and skill. It is the product of the many hands and minds who have invested time in it and carries the physical evidence of scalpel cuts, blood lost, sweat and tears. When collected into a city of models, they become a body of thought with an immersive quality, embodying the cultural essence of our practice.

It took a week for me to carry each of the models up into position for this talk, and the process of their assemblage became both thought-provoking and emotional, leading me to reflect on why the physical embodiment of our work is important, and what this means when we are isolated in lockdown.

In reality architects do not build buildings. Architects communicate ideas, narrate futures, dwell on pasts and imagine future places. Our work is conducted as a collective and it leads to the realisation of a built form. Even if the building gets built, many of the ideas in the models never surface beyond the

moment they are born. The model is the end result of the testing of an idea, and its relationship to the next iteration is its important value. Buildings are never for ever, and models are perhaps even more fleeting, but in both there is an embedded sense of achievement and learning, captured in imperfections, errors and epiphanies.

Seven weeks ago this collection of models, mapping sixteen years of work, lost much of its value overnight, due to the imposed isolation and distribution of our team. For the first time in our history we became distanced, remote and abstracted from the source of our work. And this is why we need, in this moment, to think outside of the box, to imagine new scenarios.

We must speculate on what might be better around the corner, how what is happening now can lead to transformational shifts. It would be impossible to draw final conclusions at this juncture, but we need to find the metrics and remain accountable to them afterwards. We might even suggest that practice needed this crisis.

Returning to collaboration mid-COVID, there are obviously a great many digital platforms which emulate a shared working environment and, by and large, they are very good. But I still sense a stagnant dynamic, a passive form of exchange compared



#ONREFLECTION #1

THE BIGGEST SOCIAL EXPERIMENT IN HISTORY?



#ONREFLECTION #1

A LECTURE BY JOE MORRIS



to the more dynamic back-and-forth in physical, real-time space.

More versatile are those platforms in which team members can collaborate in one space in real time, but to my mind, while these enable the design process by liberating the time/space continuum, the methodology just feels pre-COVID dressed in new clothes. When done badly, all they enable is a kind of dysfunctional business as usual, one in which we think of the answer through the hardware, rather than focusing on the software—or, in other words, the people and the culture.

Collaboration isn't a one-size-fits-all jacket. It's malleable, flexible, and can accommodate all shapes and sizes. We should be more honest about how people work, and we need to play more to the strengths of those collaborating. Those strengths are more than just how profitable we can become through the collaboration, but how much value it adds to those involved and, consequently, to the work we do collectively and individually. At this moment in time we are weakened in some parts and strengthened in others. Our work is clearly compromised if we attempt to apply the same rules of engagement to the COVID scenario as we did before. There isn't a continuous effervescence of shared learning any more. Our collective brain isn't functioning in the

#ONREFLECTION #1

THE BIGGEST SOCIAL EXPERIMENT IN HISTORY?

8

same way, and our methods are weakened if we merely try to do 'business as usual'.

This business as usual isn't just about how we work from our bedrooms; it is also about how we view the value of our work, and those involved in or affected by it.

B Corps (Certified B Corporations) are a new kind of business that balances purpose and profit. They are legally required to consider the impact of their decisions on their workers, customers, suppliers, community and the environment, and have legal accountability to balance profit and purpose. They are accelerating a global culture shift which has redefined success in business, building a more inclusive and sustainable economy.

Last week James Perry, the co-founder of B Lab UK, posted an article on medium.com with the title *What will be the new normal? The choice is ours.*<sup>6</sup> In it, he talks eloquently about the character traits which represent two fundamental philosophical positions: the individualist and the interdependent. The individualist focuses on self and the materialistic, prioritising economic output, seeking advantage by sniffing out freebies, and ensuring it wins by whatever means. The interdependent is only as strong as the weakest communal link, its fate bound by that of

others. It is bonded for good, taking the ethos that 'what works for you, works for me'. In short, individualism is about maximising oneself, while interdependence is about maximising the whole.

Perry illustrates that in crisis it is blindingly obvious that we are interdependent, and that the virus itself is a manifestation of our interdependence. It is a social virus. So what happens in Wuhan affects all of us.

When we reboot, will we be individualists, adopting a position of hoarding, seeking to steal a march on our competitors and taking advantage irrespective of who is denied while chewing up the planet? Or can we work collectively, through reflection, by carving time to imagine a new system where winners don't take everything and we are all very much in this together?

In the reboot, we must not return to our pre-COVID selves. This crisis has enabled us to witness the true value of life. Business must protect the social and planetary system within which it is embedded, and we need to recognise that not all businesses are equally virtuous. This means we have to resist, where possible, simply turning all the engines back on and throwing open all the switches to make up for the losses incurred. And in the time we have, while we resist, we must reflect on the fact that we are part of a complex system, and that system—and our

practice—should use all of its talent to support the interests of all. Remember 2008? That was the last time we missed such an opportunity.

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[www.architecturefoundation.org.uk/news/100-day-studio](http://www.architecturefoundation.org.uk/news/100-day-studio)

2  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Is3K6KwZqqA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Is3K6KwZqqA)

3  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxMd0fwGMTk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxMd0fwGMTk)

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