

Resistance

The wall

A wall surrounds the kitchen garden of a Georgian country house in Welsh border country. It covers the area of a modest-sized football pitch and although it stands at just under three-and-a-half metres tall it feels massive in the delicate landscape. The wall has been raised to follow the gently sloping and undulating site, to minimise shadows cast within, settling into an uneven and tilted form as if surrendered to the land. The uniform height relative to the changing ground level gives a vertical dimension to the existing topography which makes the slope of the ground more visible. But whilst this large object seems to be dominated by the landscape (in the way the wall has become a reflection of the ground), the consequent form of the wall, however, is intensified by its adjusted shape. Against convention, the brick wall eases from its inherent horizontality, sagging and sloping, as if in a state of repose. The hidden nature of brick—tolerant and clay-soft—emerges from this situation giving a special presence that renews our expectation of something so familiar.

The brick is orange-red, intermixed with a darker over-fired brick of black and grey. The mortar has the chalky colour of lime and the English-bond pattern, with layers of closely butted header bricks alternated with layers of soldier-course bricks, gives an emphasis to the horizontal joint over the vertical. A combination of lichen growth, previous repair-work and rising damp has discoloured the surface with shapes and patterns which blur the order of horizontal coursing. A disordered arrangement of nails, pins and stretched wires across the surface add to the heterogeneous density of the whole. With effortless continuity between horizontal and sloping courses, the corners of the wall curve in a gently battered lean, demonstrating a masterly control of interlocking masonry and making the structure of the wall evident. In these ways the landscape has had a decisive impact on the ultimate character of the wall, with the wall making the landscape more visible

on the one hand and the material of the wall becoming more potent on the other. It is as if the landscape has set free the true nature of the wall being both flawed and monumental at the same time.

The felt suit

The sculptural environments and closed vitrines of the German artist Joseph Beuys are full of metaphor and private symbolism. At one level they require explanation to understand and yet the use of particular materials seems to communicate at a visceral level, requiring no narrative. This may be because they engage us all with man's ancient and elemental knowledge of the material, which exists even beyond cultural meaning. This work clearly does not rely for its affect on the shock of the new but in the recognition of the deeply known.

Beuys's use of folded felt and dripping fat reveals the inherent imprecision of materials and their ultimate authenticity. Despite the attempts made to work the material into shapes, its organic nature ensures that it somehow loosens itself from the ultimate control of the artist. A cut intended as a precise edge to a stack of felt mats is never so; a fold in a felt suit is never quite controlled by the crease made to turn its surface; dripping fat moulded into blocks and cut into long slab-like sections are never each the same.

The grey-brown engineering felt used has a coarse and unstable character. By nature it is imperfect and non-uniform, made up as it is of multiple woollen filaments of different types, rolled, pressed and shrunk into flat mats. The faintly comic yet mysterious felt suits, presented either in a stacked pile or hung singularly in space, surprisingly reveal the very essence of the material from which they are made. There seems to be a deliberate conflict, made apparent by the artist, between the precision required to achieve the tailored form and the ultimate inclination of the material to fold



in loose rolls and thick edges. The effect is an approximation of the regular form of the ubiquitous suit but in an exaggerated state and with an abrasive materiality that suggests a denial of comfort but with an assurance of warmth.

It is as if the material is only momentarily conforming to the constraints of a controlling form and will, at any moment, unroll and unwrap to its own mat-like state. The expectation of a fineness and thinness of material that one associates with the suit form is substituted with an increased awareness of the natural and flawed state of felt itself.

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The essential character and quality found in these objects and their potential in guiding architectural production remain highly relevant to us and inspire a state of resistance from certain current forces we observe in contemporary practice. We resist the threat to a sense of material weight and physical permanence in architecture. The dominance of the rainscreen facade, encouraged by the demands of generic thermal comfort, economic pressures to reduce material cost and industry limitations with the loss of skills, has made conventional the multi-layered wall and an increased

permeability of the facade. As the outer layer has become more like a skin which is often dominated by the process of fixing and assembly, the potential for material to express the external character of a building has become limited or is substituted with an alternative surface which acts as a replica or representation of a material. However, we believe that where there is an appropriate imperative, it is necessary to adapt this multi-layered construction to express the structural character and ornamentation of material giving a single unity to a conglomerate whole. Through the stacking assembly of a tectonic structure or the consistency of a single "overall" covering envelope, a greater intensity of material and expression of gravity may be made manifest. In this we acknowledge the parallels that may be made with the character of more ancient structures.

We resist the abstract ideology that reduces architecture to a product, imposing itself autonomously from its site and often even of its use. This method of production gives a generalising effect to the character of place and seeks credibility in being formally inventive and "new". The city can be seen to resist a priori ideologies or, in the case of the grid, square and boulevard of the 19th-and 20th-century city, to absorb them and make them specific to the culture and place in which they lie. Inevitably, therefore, these products are prone to failure. Instead it is possible to seek engagement with the fine line of a reality in which buildings are inextricably linked to place and are adaptable enough in their nature to mediate with the changing environment around them.

We resist the seemingly non-judgemental way in which current architecture explores the new boundaries offered by digital technology, as it works in a way that is devoid of understandable cultural imperatives. Instead it is possible to understand the potential in buildings that engage with the culture of architecture, contributing to a continuum and not as an end in itself. Digital technology has inspired the pursuit of form which proposes fluid and virtual images of unnecessary complexity. We resist the efforts made to undermine the given limits of what a space can be. Instances may be observed where a proposed architecture of abstract strips fold over themselves in an attempt to describe both an external and internal dimension and in so doing negate any possible sense of intimacy of the interior space or clarity of territory. Instead we feel it necessary to intensify the definition between the inside and outside by working with rooms. Our concern is of the character of the room and the nature of the frame which demarcates exposure and intimacy.

Architecture is often both object and subject but it may also embody continuity and a re-affirmation of place. It may express in concrete terms the immaterial aspects of our existence—emotion, memory, presence—and it may also recognise the imperfection in daily phenomena. This architecture contributes to an increased atmospheric density of a place and in this there lies an ultimate resistance to the artificial and the virtual.

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