



TOM HOLBROOK

Tom Holbrook is the director and co-founder of 5th Studio in London. He is also is Professor of Architecture and Industry Fellow at RMIT University, based in Melbourne & Barcelona. Tom directs Urban Studies at the London School of Architecture.

“ I haven't yet decided if I want to become an architect. I set up my practice pretty early on. We've always wanted big scale projects. But you don't get this as a young practice. So we had to invent. ”

In Tom's website, his biography says he came to architecture "tangentially". This is because Tom did not know he was going to enter the architecture and urban design world. When he left school, he originally worked doing scenery – first in the backstage of a theater, and then in films. But he needed a degree to work in the art department, to be an art director.

Holbrook studied Design at Kingston's University. That is when he met Fred Scott – an architect who taught at the AA. He gradually discovered that the projects of a broad scope – including architecture – were much more engaging. He started growing fond of architecture. After he graduated, there was the crash. There were few jobs during the recession. So he went to Cambridge seeking a master's diploma. It was a one year experience.

"It was a funny route. And I still feel I'm in the edge of a profession. I don't really feel like a proper architect. I think it's quite an interesting job. It's a good label for the job, the things I like to do. We don't have a conventional type of portfolio. We don't do conventional jobs. Rather strange jobs! [...] We practice being generalists in our approach. And we've always wanted as a practice, even before it was set up, big scale projects. But you don't get this as a young practice. So we had to invent. [...] We always had that balance in our work. Working across the scale, working at a very wide range of things. Quite a wide range of interests for planning to landscape to infrastructure. Thinking about the city. And of course building – although it's not particularly focused on buildings".

Tom acknowledges he is a generalist. "The discipline in south London is quite precise about what it does. Some people do a certain type of typology. Some people do schools. The way the market tends to push you is towards specialism". But he resists that. "People like to put on you a label. But we actually think our best projects are the ones when we've never done something like it before – and then we have to learn. But a client sees that as a risk. It is a difficult position in the market". Of course inside the practice people have particular interests, sorts of specialisms. "It is a very multi-disciplinary practice".

Holbrook talks a lot about infrastructure in a larger scale. From the urban perspective to the countryside issues, he doesn't particularly believe there is a big difference between making infrastructure for city and for the countryside. "There is no landscape that is untouched. . It is archeologically rich, it is ecologically important as a economic productive. We are interested in the idea of the pastoral condition as landscape idea as much as we are in urbanism".

Tom advocates for the power of infrastructure design as part of our lives and our cities image. For him, it is important that the infrastructure is seen as an issue – to adapt cities in order to become more resilient. "Infrastructure is part of our lives. But people resist them". He admires the trams of Milan as a beautiful example of a structure that is distinctively part of the image of the city.

"It's been around or about 70 years. So it's an extraordinary thing. We leave it to engineers now. We're not interested. [...] In England the new trains are

pretty boring. We lost our ability to make a infrastructure become emblematic of a place. Sort of represent our culture throughout infrastructure. [...] Now our infrastructure is being hedge fund somewhere else. We gave up responsibility as citizens. The infrastructure becomes more opaque. Less distinctive. I think that is something to be resistant".

Although Holbrook is focused on big strategies, it does not mean he depreciate the role of a smaller site in an urban context. For him, investigating Farini is a good sample of a big understanding. "I guess a good analogy would be if we were writers. I find amazing the ability to write about great themes, historical themes through the accuracy of a short story. Is amazing, isn't it? [...] It is possible to make tiny changes or to understand the particular moments of larger changes. I think Farini is a perfect example of how one might intervene in the big issues the European city is facing".

His approach towards Farini is "Thinking big but acting in a particular way". He is trying to address questions with his students in order to achieve a different program for the area. "How do you make a big move but try to do it in a way sensitive to real possibilities in Farini. Try to understand very quickly within a few days what sort of issues are in the place. What could we think about within the project? So we're thinking about infrastructure – there is a lot of infrastructure in Scalo Farini – and what else could work more closely with that kind of richness of infrastructure, rather than taking that out, leaving something else in its place. What could coexist. [...] We are not really adding more infrastructure. We are just trying to urbanize the infrastructure that is there. Or trying to make some tiny shifts in the relationships to it. In Farini there is a monocultural environment imagined by engineers. So trains. We can swap that for another monoculture, now imagined by accounts and financiers – so move the trains and put in the generic financial model of the moment. But what happens if you try to immediate what is there with something new? It can be multivalent – being more than one thing at once. It can have more than one meaning".

Tom has a lot to offer with his unusual different background. One could benefit a lot by just working at his office. But what you need to know is if you are a Jack of all Trades. We asked Tom how can a student get a job in his office.

"Bring a range of skills. When you start in an office you have to be useful in all sorts of different ways. That's the great thing you bring to a more experienced architect. So a jack of all trades. We need somebody who can turn their hand in to a little modelling in the morning, then jump onto doing some drawings in the afternoon. [...] It is important to be energetic! Also being able to communicate – to be able to sketch – both in model and in paper. [...] Somebody who has hand drawing skills or hand modelling skills can manifest quickly an idea, and somebody else can immediately understand it and change it. [...] It is a skill we endangered losing. We forget with just a piece of paper we can communicate ideas. Sketch everyday. Use your sketchbook, it's an oldfashioned device. If you don't use it you lose it".