

Ros Diamond

## Tracing 9H



*'critical of present discourses but also exploring and suggesting means and ways of moving forward'*

How might one track critical thought in the output of an architectural practice? In my case I became involved with the journal *9H* at the same time as I started to practise. *9H* represented a critical discourse which could be used as a backdrop to pursue architecture in built projects; it also helped to frame our work between the theoretical and the critique of concept, as well as its pursuit of the practical in the imperfect conditions of physical, professional and societal contexts.

*9H* was founded by a group of MSc students in the Bartlett School at University College, London. The first issue appeared in 1980 (there would be nine more published over the next 15 years). It was launched at a time when the Bartlett was not in a strong or inventive state in terms of its design studios. In areas of research and theory, however, it was very strong: architectural studies and history had Reyner Banham and Bill Hillier; the planning school had Peter Hall; its building department – which included studies of theoretical developments in UK construction – was one of the best.

The founding of *9H* coincided with the start of British architecture's technological obsession, rooted in the ethos of educators such as Llewellyn Davis, who was head of the Bartlett in the 1960s, and architects such as Rogers, Foster and Hopkins. Rogers' house for his mother was built in 1967, and Foster's Sainsbury Centre at the University of East Anglia in 1978. *9H* resisted the generally prevailing view of British architecture which focused on 'High-Tech' as one of the key British contributions to late twentieth-

century architectural development in physical and conceptual terms. This could be seen as a point of schism in the country's architectural (or archi-cultural) position. *9H's* position was expressed ('if distantly') in its title:

*'the notion of "pencil hardness" ... hardness, terseness, critical of present discourses in the sphere of history and architectural criticism, but also exploring and suggesting means and ways of moving forward, not by leaps and bounds, but with measured steps taken with a grasp of history, a knowledge of the present, and the aim of more than worshipping or peering at the future ... But at the same time, encompassing the poetry of architecture, of light and walls ... ambiguities and contradictions that we accept for they exist despite ourselves (and hardness never existed without the reassuring presence of softness) for this is the only way ... However this does not mean that we shall omit polemics for even rhetoric is a necessary part (and perhaps a consequence) of this search'.*

*9H* also started and continued in a time of particular archi-cultural deprivation in Britain and a period of Post-Modernism in the West in which ideas which might have arisen philosophically and from thoughts of a post-modern era were translated all too swiftly into stylistic fabrications. This is a subject which concerned a number of our contributors and to which we kept returning. In issue number 8, 'On Rigour', one of those critics was the Austrian Hermann Czech: *'So, style and choice can be useful ingredients in the course of the design process. But they can never be a fundamental source of architectural quality. The source of architecture*

cannot be a preconceived decision of quasi-ideological character ... Every architectural form contains within it its constructive, economic and social conditions. Architecture already possesses the real character of an object; a richness that rises far above all results of plastic and sculptural form ... The methodical approach has to provide more than an abstract ideology; it has to be valid right down to concrete decisions about the design: the plan itself, the resolution of a corner ... Thus, architectural thought must succeed in tackling the grand issues as they arise in concrete situations'.

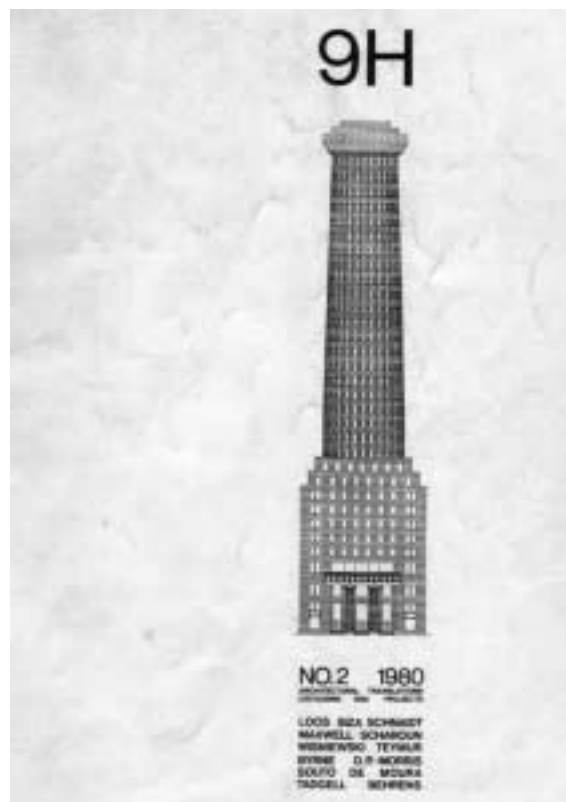
This is a context in which to place the work of a number of British (and other mainland European) architects with whom we are now familiar. They include Caruso St. John, Tim Ronalds, Florian Beigel and Eric Parry.

The central idea of the journal concerned the relationship of theory and practice. *9H* published four main types of work. The first was translations of important texts within what was historical and current architectural discourse, together with their analysis by specific critics. These included texts by Tessenow (number 2), and Josef Frank (number 3). The second area was critical texts exploring factors affecting, and often determining, design and building. These could be as wide ranging as philosophical and sociological – hence, for example, a key text by Jürgen Habermas on the relationship between Modernism and Post-Modernism. A further interest was theoretical discussions, evaluations of the role of architects and planners in the past and the present and a questioning of methodologies for examining the nature of architecture. Here there were new texts by Frampton, Evans, Hillier and some then little-known (but to become well-known and respected) critics, for example Czech, Steinmann, and Rüegg. Finally, *9H* gave a platform to projects hitherto unpublished in England. These included introductions to Britain (and at times the English speaking world) of unknown or almost unknown architects, both deceased and living, including Caccia Dominioni, Cleon Crantonellis, Hans Dollgast, Lily Reich and Eileen Gray, and Alvaro Siza, Francesco Venezia, Eduardo Souto de Moura, Eduardo Bru, and Herzog and de Meuron.



The first covers: *9H* number 1...

*'started in a time of particular archi-cultural deprivation in the UK'*



... and number 2, both from 1980

Associated with the journal, the 9H Gallery was opened in London in 1985 and ran until 1991. It occupied the ground floor front and basement, David Chipperfield occupied the back room and the magazine *Blueprint* was above. The Gallery was a forerunner of the Architecture Foundation, and with its regular exhibitions programme (four to six per year) it acted as a forum, a place where architects could meet to debate architecture and its conditions.

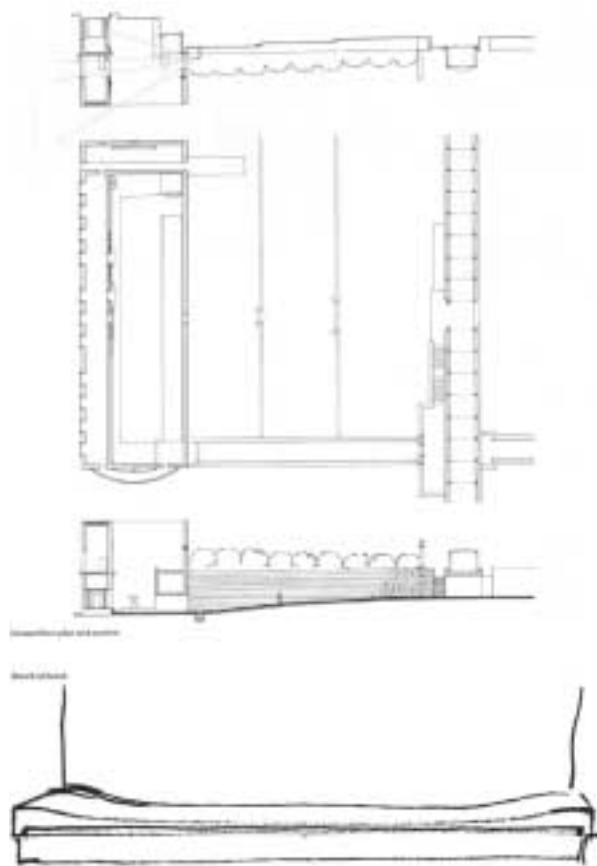
9H carried the idea of work which is not preoccupied with authenticity for its own sake and yet not derivative in the guise of knowledge of precedent and its reference. Its support was for work which has a consistency and rigour to its approach. One of the characteristics of such work, even if from a varied background with apparently little or nothing in common, is its acknowledgement of context – not just in terms of what literally lies around it, but what conditions it from a social, emotional or technological standpoint. The journal, and subsequently the gallery, emerged from a demand to seek alternative architectural paths resulting from the criticisms of international Modernism and its global products both in urban and architectural outcomes.

Nine issues of 9H were published between 1980 and 1995. (Many architectural libraries tend to have only the last issue, number 9, which, being a hardback probably saved it physically.) I will not say that it has ended – it may not have – but it was a voluntary and part-time pursuit by its editors and assistants and they have progressed to other related things in practice, teaching and publications. It was published at a time when there was a dearth of public building in the UK (apart from a small amount of housing, for thirty years there was almost nothing apart from the British Library) and when those whose architectural principles seemed from the past, such as Lasdun and the so-called Brutalists, were constantly lambasted.

Now I look at the editorials and the essays associated with 9H and the other venture – the 9H Gallery – and while I may feel almost relieved that there have been improvements (and that includes work for some of the architects we featured, including Tony Fretton, Eric Parry and Rick Mather), I also realise that there is still a void in the debate and the subsequent relationship in this

country between project idea and practice, and how it might affect our general culture. Although now world-renowned and successful in exactly that metier, David Chipperfield has still built little in the UK and there is still no structured system to invite architects of his calibre to compete

or design public projects, including schools and universities, which should be conceived of as national possessions as much as works of art or the systems they sustain such as education itself. Plus ça change. The irony of course about pencil hardness is that on the wrong surface nothing is visible.



First showings in the UK: Francesco Venezia, museum in Gibellina, Sicily, 1984, plan, sections and a sketch for a bench ...

*'a platform to projects hitherto unpublished in the UK'*



... and Alvaro Siza, house at Ovar, Portugal, both from issue 7, 1985