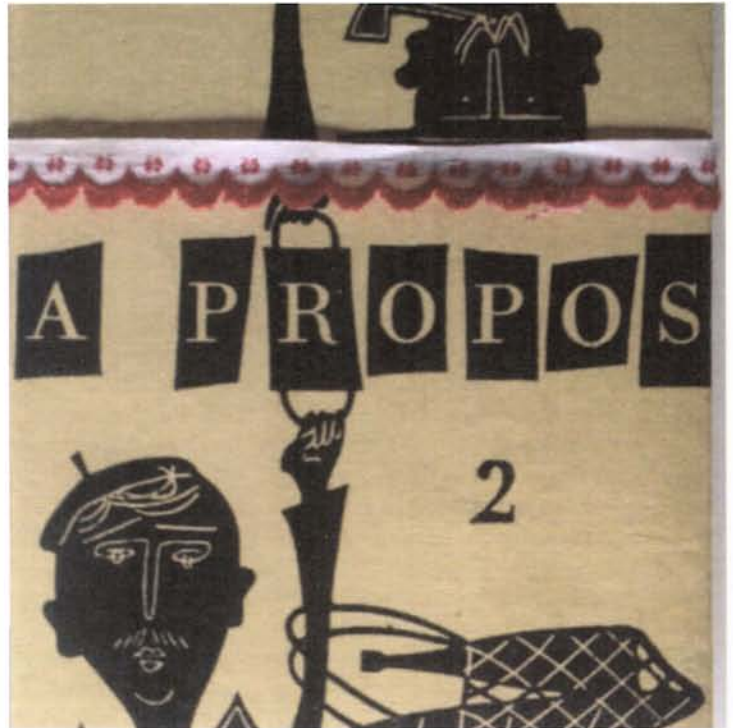


Make the best you can.

Calum Duncan

I was once given a second hand French book, carefully wrapped with only a ribbon. The hardback (*A Propos 2*) from the 1960's has a beautifully patterned cover of mute tones. It has a wonderful presence. I have probably ignored similar books hundreds of times. Now it has been framed by a ribbon and presented with great care, I am sold by its poetic presence. This book has not been recycled or upcycled. It is the same, but loved. Suddenly, this book is valuable. How we deal with the large scale things (the built environment) informs how we deal with the small scale, and experience of how we deal with our existing things has informed how we approach the new: Unfortunately we can't simply tie a ribbon around the limestones of buildings to make it valuable, but if we tune our senses to understand the value of the stuff of our built environment, then we will understand better the assets and opportunities that exist. We should be materialistic in the sense that we see the value in stuff. At the recently completed Edinburgh Centre for Carbon Innovation, I greatly enjoyed the consideration of stone repairs. How little can be done to make good the existing stone facades? After scanning every piece of stone by scaffold (after much cement render was removed), the stone takes on a new appreciation for the hard work it is doing. Similarly, I admire the example that I once found, somewhere within the SPAB website, for an approach to repairing a front door. There is no apology for removing a chunk of rotten timber from this historic door, and inserting a new piece, new to the door, but not new to the world. The door is well repaired and loved all the more for the existing patina that door handle retains. It is well loved and well used (I would present it with a ribbon).

The process of negotiating and agreeing how a building is to be made or altered could be described as managing the grey. Through this process I make a conscious effort to be guided by the philosophy of 'it depends'. The exercise of adapting and altering can as a process provide a motive for the material choices within



the new. In fact there is really no such thing as new, but always an alteration of something. My imagined philosophy of 'it depends' is as follows: Make the best you can with the material possibilities. Treat material with value, consider its weight, thickness, presence, texture and colour and use it how you feel it would wish. As far as embodied energy and locally sourcing; it depends how long it may be useful. As far as recycling; I think we should abandon the term and remember that every material has been somewhere previously, usually in an altered shape or form. While innovation and experimentation can be enlightening, the idea of sameness and backgroundness can be poetic and sublime. As far as quality and lifespan is concerned; I struggle. If we are certain a building will be usable and suitably adaptable, then lifespan is everything, but I equally admire the approach found in Danish housing (eg. Tinggarden, Denmark by Vandkunsten 1977-79) where the culture is not to be overly concerned with the detail, and construction is simple. There are greater, more important issues of social interaction and a sense of community with a lack of preciousness, allowing homes to be altered by quite simple means. Maybe by themselves, whether owner or tenant. These homes expend less energy in building capital terms as well as by the users, without the need for building more complicated stuff in order to use less energy. Equally important, this place will be loved and so maintained (efficiently).

All of the above is quite pragmatic, but amongst material choices we can thread poetry. Let's call it practicing the use of instinct and sensitivity. If we acknowledge our senses, we will find inspiration we did not know existed. A poetic language of materials is not reserved for an architectural elite. Most of all, see the value in little things and make the best you can.

Calum Duncan is a senior architect at Malcolm Fraser Architects and project architect for the Edinburgh Carbon Innovation Centre

