

WALES WORKSHOP,  
MACHYNLLETH,  
12-14 MARCH 2010

LOGBOOK  
AND  
REFLECTIONS

GIORGIO  
TALOCCI



## INDEX

Introduction, p.3  
Friday's logbook, p.4  
Saturday's logbook, p.12  
Sunday's logbook, p.16  
Final reflections, p.19

## INTRODUCTION

Moving to Wales to participate to the workshop at the Centre for Alternative Technologies, I was both enthusiastic and skeptical towards what we were going to do. The main question was “Why do we have to build for real to understand the philosophy of Maurice Mitchell?”

I think in the next pages there are many answers, showing actually the importance of the way in which we learnt.

For each day I decided to show the notes taken on the field, along with the description of what happened. At the end of each day there are some reflections on that particular day of work.

The last section is a reflection on all the process.

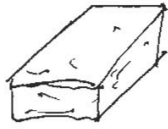
## FRIDAY'S LOGBOOK





FRIDAY


## CHOOSING THE MATERIALS



soil blocks

what does it want to be?  
I don't know. Moreover  
it'll take one day only  
to produce them.

Clay: without oven → no way.

→ SLATE, it would  
be easy to build  
an arch 

Clay bricks must be  
square → they could  
dry uniformly.

→ clay + sand → if  
clay is too much  
they will be fragile

## TASKS

group 1, working  
with willows.

Maybe a hyperbolic  
parabola



We started choosing only *one* material and deciding what to do with it, without forcing its nature.

Many of us were interested in working with willow branches. I decided together with others to work with something that appeared more 'tectonic' to me.

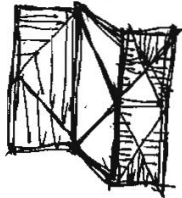
After some doubts about soil blocks and clay bricks, because of the long process of production, we decided to work with slate.

What does the slate want to be? Maybe an arch. Definitely an arch, really challenging. And pretty funny, since I come from Rome.

group 2

again willows

→ stream



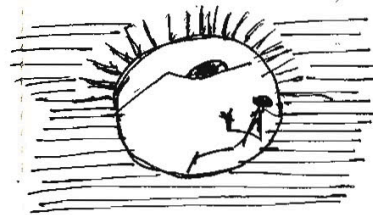
group 3

willows → oculi



PANTHEON

group 4 (US)



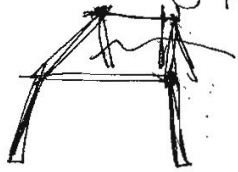
WINDOW ON THE  
LANDSCAPE TO WATCH  
THE SUN GOING DOWN

- how big?
- do we want to sit below the arch? or are we more interested in doing a circle?

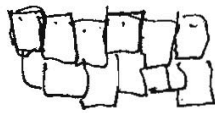
The tasks we chose moved around the general aim to work on the construction site to build (linking our structures with the ones already in place) a space to live: according to Maurice Mitchell, a space with a place to eat, a place to sleep and a place to watch the sun goes down. The arch was exactly conceived as a window toward the landscape. And toward west, actually: a place where to sit down and relax looking at the sunset.

A space that starts to be built from the will to look toward somewhere. As an architect, I was amazed from this kind of spatial source.

group 5  
timber, big poles



group 6  
slate + ---



ROOF?  
DECORATION?

"I'M NOT AGAINST  
MAKE-UP"

(Maurice, 2010)

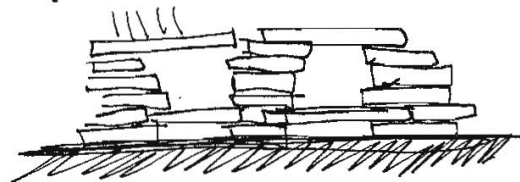


Do not coordinate!

It's not game  
work!

group 2 → Sweeth

slate bookshelves



"I'm not against make-up" said Maurice. At the beginning we have the aesthetic will to go beyond the structural shape of the arch, doubling it to make a perfect circle. The lower part of course would not have been structural. We realised then that we were more interested to build the arch itself, understanding how it could have worked properly, but anyway I was glad to hear those words: the collective construction of the built environment involves many aspects, and the aesthetic one is certainly one of those.

NOT COORDINATING  
MEANS THAT ONE  
DOES NOT DEPEND  
ON THE OTHERS

COORDINATION IS  
HOW THE MAINSTREAM  
BUILDING CONSTRU  
CTION INDUSTRY  
WORKS

→ DON'T FORCE THE  
MATERIAL TO WORK  
IN AN UNPROPER WAY

→ it's not possible  
in a development  
context.

ARCH

→ wooden frame



this will  
take 3  
days

→ "LOOK AT THE  
PRESIDENT"  
(Mitchell, 2010)

The importance of not coordinating between the different groups was stated at the beginning.

We worked separately, but without being selfish, exchanging information and collaborating when needed.

At the end, we would have realised how actually Maurice's theory worked. Although not coordinated, several structures would have fit together.



+ PLYWOOD  
ON THE  
TOP

1.80 to fit 1 gen.

→ Too large.

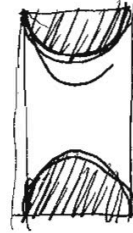


it should be  
"gothic"

→ 1.20

so we don't waste  
material

(the wooden piece  
is 1.20 wide)



\* 1.20 \*

plus 15 cm stands



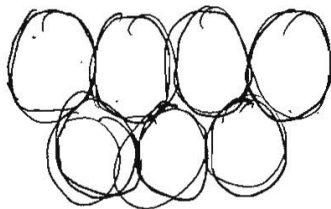
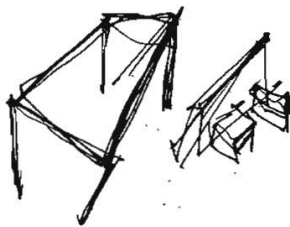
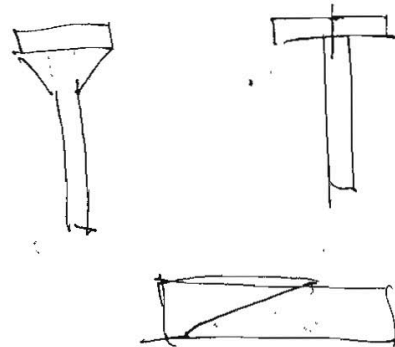
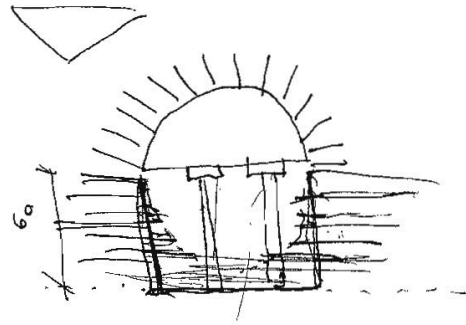
It took us all the first day to make the wooden structure to build the arch on.

It was important to understand how important is not to waste material. Giving up the initial hypothesis to build a 1.80m tall arch because of structural issues, we decided for a smaller one. The dimension of 1.20 was the best because the piece of wood we used was exactly of that dimension.



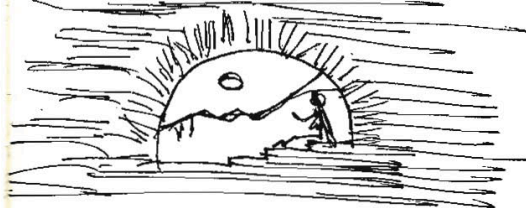
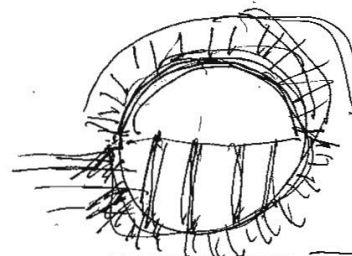
4.20 meters  
is the right  
size

do 1st work  
materials



willows coverage  
→ mass of reeds  
up

WATCHING THE  
SUN GOES DOWN



WATCHING THE  
SUN GOES DOWN





## FRIDAY'S REFLECTIONS

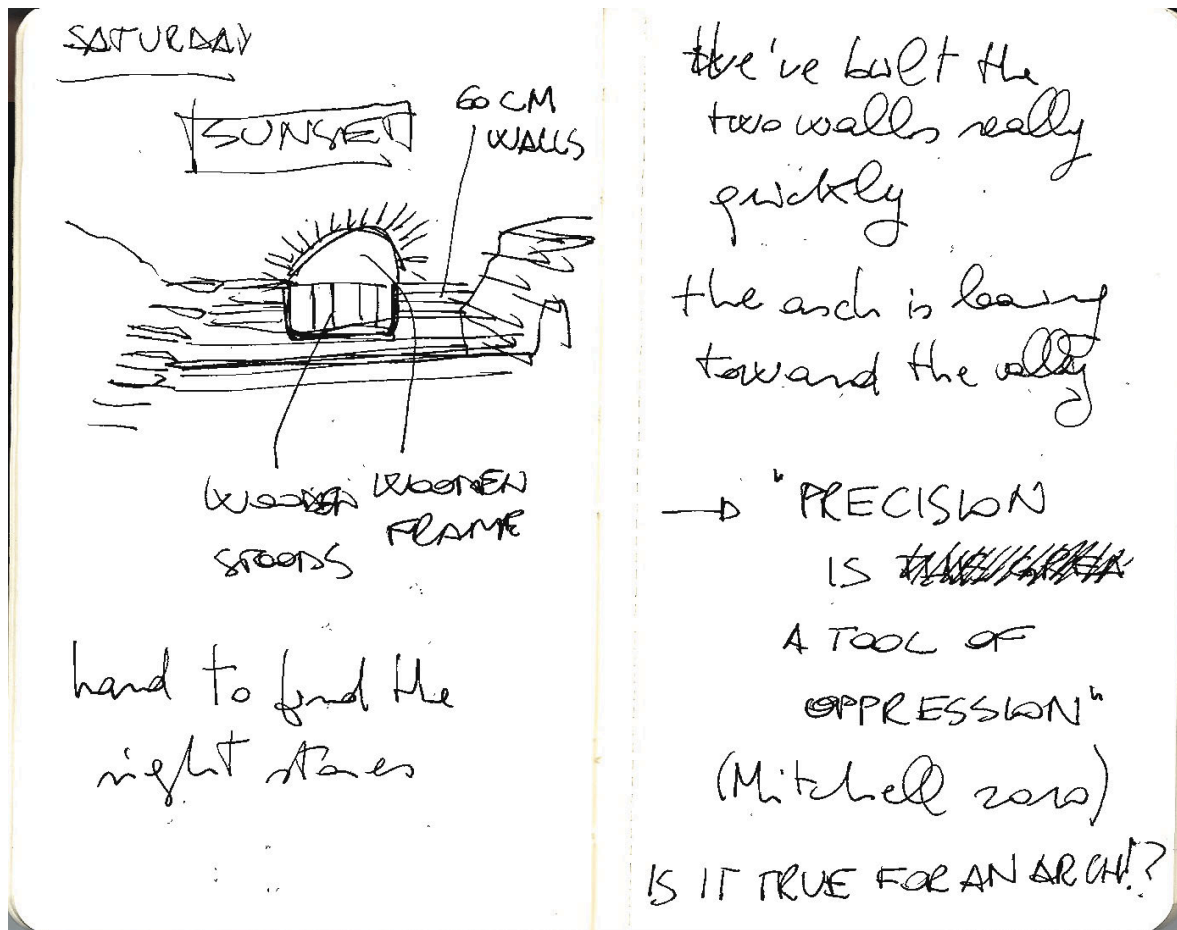
After the first day of working, what was stuck into my mind was especially the initial statement of Maurice: "If you coordinate it's not gonna work".

At the end of the day we started to talk about scaling-up the operations. A kind of interaction among the groups was forecasted but not programmed. Besides the extreme freedom implied in such approach, it was fascinating for me thinking of a collective will as the sum of many individual ones. Only in this way, all the nuances of the several individuals could survive till the 'end' of the process.

## SATURDAY'S LOGBOOK







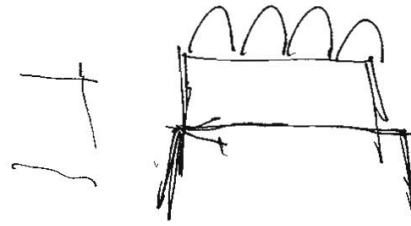
Starting to build an arch was a great effort in term of both physical and mental energies. The issue of let the material be what it wants to be was the guideline of the entire day. The work had to be really precise, trying to maintain a 90 degrees angle between each stone and the wooden frame, in a precarious equilibrium of forces running in the stones. Learning by doing, we realised too late that the first part of the arch was not done properly, compromising all the structure. The statement "precision is a tool of oppression", that Maurice gave us during the night meeting, sounded ironically sad for us.

MIDDLE  $\frac{1}{3}$  CASE



less the  $\frac{1}{3}$   
 /  $\rightarrow$  it was  $\frac{3}{4}$  it  
 fell  
 but it was more

understanding in  
 a short time how  
 the natural works  
 observation, as a reaction,



OTHERS' STRUCTURE  
 IS GROWING AND  
 OUR ARCH CRUMBLING

$\rightarrow$  LEARNING BY  
 DOING?  
 WE'LL SEE  
 TOMORROW

The rule of the middle third was learnt too late maybe, but it would have been useful the day after. The arch was leaning toward the valley, and there was no doubt it would have fallen down.

Maurice let us doing, without intervening. It was frustrating, but actually the day after I realised it was a good way to let us learn.





## SATURDAY'S REFLECTIONS

The statement "Precision is a tool of oppression" impressed me a lot (and maybe comforted me, being substantially an unprecise person).

It was really powerful: firstly, to make us understand how not to be worried about what we were doing, we just had to keep going on, refining our precision attempt by attempt; secondly, definitely emancipating us from the way of thinking of the mainstream building constructions industry.

Again: no coordination, no precision, but the built environment around us was growing, changing, improving.

## SUNDAY'S LOGBOOK







SUNDAY

producing the  
right pieces,  
dividing  
the labour

I LOVE  
MY MAUJET

it's amazing to see  
how the structure  
of the others are  
actually fitting  
without the initial  
coordination

→ 14.30 THE ARCH STANDS!

## SUNDAY'S REFLECTIONS

A day without time, spent running to find the right stones to pass to the others that were fixing the details. An automatic division of labour, not imposed: we were working together to reach the final objective. The arch had become something more, the projection of our aspirations, the incarnation of our collective – and good – work. Almost on the background of our construction site, became a source of hope for all the 'community': looking at it standing, we actually felt that we had been able to build our collective space together. On the other side, the structure made by the other group, was grown up, *abri souverain* (thinking of Auguste Perret) for the 'secondary' structures made by others (lateral screens, roof covers). Everything was fitting, in a general unplanned harmony (i.e. Maurice was right).

## FINAL REFLECTIONS



During the workshops and then at home I often wondered of what we actually did on the construction site.

When we arrived there, the site was not a tabula rasa: several 'ruins', the constructions made in the previous workshops, were the expression of the will of those who came before us. Their concept rotated around the definition of Maurice Mitchell of a space to live, i.e. a space to sleep, to eat and to watch the sun goes down, highly poetical in its archetypal formulation. And archetypal were those ruins: basically some walls to define the limits of a house limits (I would say a fence) and a roof to cover it.

Our community so was starting to imagine its own space growing up on those remainders: I had the impression of a collective space that was growing together with the several 'generations', maybe a contraction in space and time of what could happen for real in an informal settlement.

These thoughts reminded me of what we forecasted at the end of the first term for Chamra Bazaar, in Dharavi, Mumbai. While we concentrated the highest densities on the borders and around the main open spaces (to create the critical mass necessary to mainstream the area, to unlock and improve its potentialities), we suggested a 'spontaneous' growth in the inner parts, driven by catalyst interventions, able to generate a ripple effect in the built environment and in the communities themselves. What were exactly those catalysts and how could those have affected the built environment? The answers to those questions were not clear yet. We concluded the presentation showing an image of a square surrounded by buildings obtained by layering operations, able to host the various activities of the community. Like in Wales, the process of growth overlapped many wills and imaginations: and my point indeed is not the built environment itself, but rather what the community projects in it. The arch for example: our 18 people community was idealising the moment when we could have looked through it. While we were taking off the wooden structure everybody was waiting to see it standing and explode in a collective clap. The same happened while watching the other structures being joined together.

We experienced then a collective construction of the space, although starting with different 'small' aspirations (a window to stare at the sun, a new structure to double the 'house' already present on the site etc.). That space, was in those days the background of our life there. I was used to speak of "fixed scene" behind the life events, referring to monuments (Aldo Rossi, 1981, A scientific autobiography, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachussets). Those monuments were the space where the collective imagination was projected, the buildings able to charge themselves of different meanings during the course of time, maintaining though the same form, destined to be permanent.

In the last six months, and definitely after this workshop, I have learnt how even the 'informal' spaces, apparently without any will of permanence, could become the background of a collective narrative, the repository of the collective imaginations and memories. The space we showed in Dharavi, but probably any space present in any informal settlement, is now the background of the life events I mentioned before: maybe not a 'fixed' scene, but of course something more able to interact with the events themselves, and flexible enough to be shaped by them.

A last thought about the role of the practitioner in this process. I think Maurice Mitchell in Wales played that role. Although asking us not to coordinate, he was the one who knew what to do to enhance our potentialities, to guide us toward the achievement of our initial aspirations. Besides giving us some technical skills to work, he managed the several groups to make us collaborate when needed, to let the information be conveyed, to let us understand how important was every singular step of the learning process.

Going back to Dharavi, where was the practitioner there? Asked for an individual design response, I tried to develop one of the catalysts I mentioned above: a process of waste recycling, carried on by cooperative of ragpickers, able to empower them and the community as a whole. In the representation I made, the practitioner appeared to start the process, interpreting what was already in place (the relationships among the actors of the current system of recycling) and the possible aspirations of the ragpickers. But I think it is clear that our role is not only to enhance the process: understanding the aspirations of the different actors, recognising the heterogeneity between the several communities, acting as a facilitator in make them collaborate and speak, surveying what is going on, in terms of physical growth and social interactions, the range of the activities linked with an intervention in an informal settlement are many. Prioritising one or some of the above mentioned 'tasks', trying to tailor our skills to what the context actually needs, is fundamental. Like, maybe, disappearing, while the transformation we have enhanced is going on and on.