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Leadership with a Soft Center

In an era when hard men, authoritarianism and central command structures are becoming a trend across the globe, it is essential to remember—because memories fade fast—that there are other ways of wielding power.

Even the words *wielding power* have embodied in them the idea of authority exerting its dominance through reference to subjugation, weaponry, and display. Historically, those who have risen to command have done so through combat, terror or the infliction of other forms of control such as starvation. Signifiers of this form of power can be seen clearly in the ceremonial items held by the monarch during the coronation: the mace—literally a ceremonial weapon, the sceptre—a symbol of law-making deriving from the shepherd's crook and the orb—a symbol of the earth but also referencing a (Christianised) version of the bolas, a type of globular weapon.

What does this tell us, then, about our expectations of power and authority in architecture? How is power in architecture wielded and how do we submit to it? Is it possible to find different models that use power in a more thoughtful, creative way—a soft power—that enables and unifies towards a common purpose while leaving behind the structures of submission and control? This is what this essay attempts to examine.

In architecture, power attaches to myths around success, and success reflects the broader concepts of mastery embedded in our culture. Here, the pen really is mightier than the sword. One prevailing myth is that of the individual creative genius, whose prowess (and domination over others) is demonstrated through the diagrams he—for it is invariably he—scribbles effortlessly, even on the back of a napkin. Those realising these creations are subservient to the will of the author, whose vision is unique and precious, and who is treated with the reverence of a god. Even if their designs are unbuildable, a genius's work is worth having at any cost, and worth sacrificing something to achieve. This is famously illustrated in *The Fountainhead*, where Howard Roarke, the disillusioned, misunderstood architect genius, descends to the level of a quarryman rather than have his creations tainted by commerce.

In the context of the recent revelations at one British school of architecture, we can see where this form of hero-worship, subservience to genius, and hierarchy can lead when acolytes regard this sort of leader as untouchable.

Capitalism creates the rules of business success. Capital's aim is growth, so the larger the firm, the more income it earns, the more heft, and the more visibility and influence in the marketplace. Large, prestigious projects can follow and people are attracted to the rewards on offer. Yet size brings added complexities and organisational structures that tend towards the top-down, rigid and hierarchical: such firms often resemble factories, with efficiency driving the bottom line and people divided into specialisms they rarely stray from. Such organizations almost invariably involve pyramidal structures of leadership wherein more junior staff have little influence on decision-making.

Large practices, with their huge impact on communities and the environment, their vast through-put of projects and their capacity for promotion, also dominate the professional club. They influence decision-making, make the rules and protect their commercial share in the marketplace. This scale of practice results in the preservation of the status quo, meaning it lacks a critical edge where change is so needed.

It is noteworthy that while the elders across all firms have wisdom and experience, their knowledge was founded 30 years ago. The younger among us know different things and have different experiences which are also beneficial and relevant. While they stand on the shoulders of earlier pioneers, young people must both inherit the previous generation's labor and, as the next leaders, take us forward into an unknown future.

Thinking about leadership and power in this way raises many questions about current ways of thinking and doing, asking us to consider whether they are fit for purpose. Such consideration posits: What space is opened up when thinking of other models of leadership, ones that do not rely on domination and displays of status, genius and authority? Is it possible to provide authority while at the same time finding more collaborative ways of working *and* moving in the same direction? How can one help inspire rather than subjugate, build up rather than suppress, and lead through example rather than through command and control?

Practice is a challenging environment, as external drivers all conspire to reproduce conventional models of operation. These include professional codes and behavioural expectations, male-centric networks, men's historic sense of entitlement to paid work taking priority over other forms of labor, the commonplace flouting of equality legislation, technical-rational concepts of

the discipline and a dominant focus on systems as opposed to social determinants. As a young female architect in an industry that is based on the default male, I saw role models that I did not recognize as mirroring my own experience and structures of practice in which I felt it would be necessary to suppress my identity in order to succeed within those value systems. Accordingly, I set out on my own, aiming to try to define an identity for my architectural being that I was unable to locate in mainstream practice.

I was keen to create an overtly female-led practice. It took time to formulate what this meant, and to help to do this I turned to French feminists to guide my philosophical and ethical thinking. At the same time, it was—and is—important to understand the context of conventional practice: how architecture is produced, how people organize themselves within it, and what myths and narratives create the conditions expected by people in the industry. For instance, despite the myth of the sole genius, in reality buildings are produced collectively. Leadership, in my view, depends on who is the guardian of the narrative around which those working on the project can focus. The narrative can change, and spin out through the various disciplines, and this needs to be worked through jointly and communicated clearly. Yet every member of the design team has a contribution to make at all levels, and every contribution matters.

For me, therefore, rethinking leadership within my own office meant considering a model which works dynamically with others rather than dictating from above. It also demands that we remain a small team (currently we are ten) so that the hierarchy is flat, everyone knows each other and we share exactly the same physical spaces. Recognizing that we all have different knowledge and experience, the opinion of younger and diverse staff is as welcome as that made by those that have spent longer in the industry. We place great value on respect and inclusion, spreading agency and opportunity among our staff while supporting them when they need a guiding hand. I think of this as soft power, leading from the rear, the shepherd rather than the warrior.

We aim at collaboration, consensual decision-making and co-design with our clients, users and other stakeholders, attempting to break down the notion of the individual author. We listen to their experiences, guide conversations and explain our thinking. In this manner hierarchies of knowledge are challenged and people take ownership of the environments they help us to create. It does not mean dumbing down our design skills or relinquishing our role as shapers

of space; rather it provides insights that help unlock key narratives. It also requires us to rethink the jargon professionals use among themselves, making us develop ways to explain and share our thinking so that those who will use our buildings clearly understand what they are going to inhabit and inherit.

The notion of mastery and domination also pertains most urgently to our relationship to the world's resources. Modernism was founded on the exploitation of labor, nature, and capital, and has led to the greatest disasters of the Anthropocene—the climate crisis, environmental destruction, and mass extinction. Women are far more likely to suffer from the effects of the climate crisis because they have less power and fewer resources. As designers and specifiers of materials and products, architects owe a major responsibility to avoid environmental degradation, extraction, and waste, and we must advocate for changes in manufacturing, detailing, and aesthetics that will revolutionize the way our environment looks and operates. In this complex area, an appreciation of the connected nature of every aspect of these systems means we absolutely have to collaborate in rowing back from the brink. In particular it means we must work with those in marginalize communities, women and nations suffering the effects of former colonisation to reinvent environmental justice, and equilibrium. From top to bottom, we are all the agents of change and must play our part in finding alternative ways of living.

Ecological design is a critical tool to re-evaluate our relationship with resources and work to change the economic system that rewards exploitation of all kinds. In this respect, even a small practice like ours can demonstrate other ways of thinking and doing that have an impact on current practice. Although our PR budgets are small and our output is limited, our voices can echo through speaking platforms and social media and our actions can demonstrate our approach by finding the clients that think the way we do.

To operate soft power means leaving ego behind and forming bonds that create different forms of leadership. Soft power can work by stealth, by cunning and by advocacy. It can be inspiring and it can be quiet. It demands all of us, no matter who we are, to step forward and be a part in this change: leadership with a soft center, and one from which we can all benefit.

Figure 1. Sarah Wigglesworth Architects, *Stock Orchard Street*, 2001. Photo by Paul Smoothy.