

AN IDEA FITS IN THE PALM OF A HAND

On small-scale models as a synthesis of the projected space

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Jewish laws prescribed that when a first-born son was presented in the temple shortly after birth, the offering consisted of two turtle doves or pigeons. And if the family were very poor, a handful of wheat would suffice: the wheat that would fit in the palm of one's hand.

That wonderful Jewish custom, which I learnt about when writing this text, moved me deeply on account of what it shares with this proposal of making models capable of fitting into the palm of one's hand.

At the Master Classes for Advanced Projects in Architecture, or MPAA, which I taught at the Madrid School of Architecture, ETSAM, during the academic year 2011-2012, I gave my students for the first time a rather curious exercise: that of constructing a model so small that it fits into the palm of one's hand. Because I thought at the time, as I think now, the idea of a project should be able to be materialized, synthesized in such a small model that it fits in the palm of one's hand. Because an idea has no size; it fits in the palm of one's hand.

In order to achieve this, the model had to be done in a size and scale that demanded the elimination of everything superfluous, synthesizing to the maximum the idea generated by the chosen project; rather like materializing the architectural idea in its purest state.

I have repeated a thousand times to my students William Blake's poem in which, in order to express what we should dream, he tells us: "to see a world in a grain of sand", to which he immediately adds: "hold infinity in the palm of your hand". In the same vein, the idea of holding something —in this case, architectural form— in the palm of one's hand, was my intention with this exercise.

I will never tire of repeating that in Architecture, as in any creative work, it is indispensable to have a clear idea of what one wants to do: "Architectura sine idea vana architectura est".

The more than positive experience of my strategy on that Masters Course prompted me to again request these little models from my regular students for the current academic year 2012-2013, right at the outset, as they embarked on their own projects, while they were still germinating ideas. And once again the strategy proved to be extraordinarily worthwhile. I must confess here that it is something I have been doing with my own projects for some time, and what I have also continued to do with all my latest projects.

But, what is the purpose of such a reduced model? Indeed what is the purpose of making a model at all at a time when computers can generate 3D virtual models that can move in all directions? Well, although this is true, what is also true is that one can never achieve on the flat screen what only can be produced with a real model: the simultaneity of understanding three-dimensional space and its relationship with humans and light. The understanding of its relationship with sunlight, when the model is placed under the real sun, is something ineffable and infallible. I have never seen anyone placing their computer screen in the sunlight to see what happens. Because nothing would happen. And furthermore, if this scale-model is small, very small, devoid of any unnecessary additions, it must be capable of representing the idea which one wants to develop in the project with maximum precision. That is the ultimate goal of all these operations.

So the approach with these little scale-models is not the same as someone making a miniature. Far from it, what I am looking for here is the precision of the idea through form.

That little scale model, that idea that fits in the palm of a hand, prompts serious reflection on the project itself, the kind of reflection that is characterized by research and at times can prove difficult for non-architects to understand. This was what a good friend of mine, a marvelous industrial engineer, said to me. He couldn't understand why I make these models when I could use the very advanced computer programs available today. I still think that this little model is an instrument that is not only efficient but indispensable for project research.

There is nothing more satisfying for an educator than to verify the validity of new teaching strategies applied over time with the hand of experience. And in this particular instance it is that same hand that makes it possible to capture ideas, ideas materialized in small models. Because for a true architect, an idea fits nicely in the palm of one's hand.