

Architecture of Insistence: Crafting Place, Building Material Legacies

Situated in the decades of globalization following the 1980s, Brigitte Shim and Howard Sutcliffe's architectural oeuvre is best understood as a single body of work, which they have insistently and purposefully created over time. Each one of their buildings adds significance, depth, nuance, and meaning to this body of work. And in its entirety, the body of work adds significance, depth, nuance, and meaning to this generation's contribution to architectural history.

Shim and Sutcliffe are keenly aware that architecture is situated in specific geographies. Throughout, they have actively avoided the misfortunes of iconicity, placelessness, conspicuous construction, and hedonistic consumption that has befallen much of contemporary architecture in the decades of rampant globalization and neoliberal capitalism that followed the 1980s. As contemporary architecture was swept up in the image-centric culture of globalization, a new mentality of placelessness became firmly entrenched in architecture. Spectacular iconic buildings around the globe are evidence of this architectural trend connected to globalized capital.

Crafting place, which is at the core of Shim-Sutcliffe's body of work, counteracts this image-over-place mentality. Crafting place starts with considering given sites in geographical and climatic terms, but also in cultural terms. Crafting place results from the most intimate interweaving of site and building, which is in stark opposition to the anywhere-is-everywhere mindset of globalized architectural production.

The body of work created by Shim-Sutcliffe can be understood as an architecture of insistence as they pursue their site-specific approach to crafting place, refusing to compromise architecture to image, nor to compromise site to sight. In 1983, Kenneth Frampton's essay *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance* was a reminder that architecture can, and should, resist the homogeneity of modern society. Resistance, in my mind, speaks to a political philosophy, connected in particular to anti-fascist as well as anti-capitalist struggles and social movements. Insistence, on the other hand, speaks to dedication, and the ethics of carving out conditions for making buildings that are uncompromisingly committed to the core values of architecture. Insistence means never giving in to spectacle and speculation, even while working with the economic realities of capital.

The degree of architectural perfection which has come to define Shim-Sutcliffe's body of work, and is impeccably achieved in each one of their buildings is, of course, highly labor-, resource-, and cost-intensive. Shim-Sutcliffe's architecture of insistence takes an ethical stance in putting to best use the resources they, as architects, are entrusted with by their clients, in order to create lasting material legacies.

Buildings by Shim-Sutcliffe start from an ethics of responsiveness that acknowledges that buildings cannot be severed from their site, and that they have social, environmental, and cultural impacts and meanings beyond the immediate scale of their footprint on the ground. Site-specific ecologies—from climate and light, to local approaches to construction—matter in Shim-Sutcliffe's work. Their attentive responsiveness to these factors leads them to create unique responses to each of their buildings' sites, be they high-density urban neighbourhoods or sparsely populated rural locations. Their architecture is always inseparable from its site, and gives expression to environmental, social, cultural, and emotional belonging through its material composition.

Craft is commonly understood as knowledge that is passed along, gradually changing and adapting over time. Shim-Sutcliffe's profound interest in the material legacies created by architecture has led them to closely study such knowledge-cultivation in architecture. They carefully examine the solutions provided by the historical modernist project and by vernacular architecture, resulting in nuanced architectural solutions that are informed by the material

legacies of architecture. Their work makes room—and time—for the experiences of material intimacy, the sense of touch and visceral feelings of tactility, attentive listening to material and spatial compositions, and the contemplation of the (im)materiality of light. Shim-Sutcliffe's buildings provide for experiential richness, enabling those who live in them to grow their sensorial attentiveness. Crafting place then becomes the embodied, affective and even spiritual experience of everyday living as a *sympoietic*—that is to say, collectively produced—process between humans, buildings and sites.

Drawing architecture into existence—as Shim and Sutcliffe do with dedication, insistence, and continuity—is a process that requires time. Time for drawing with paper and pencil, for testing models at all sizes up to full-scale mock-ups. Their craft harnesses the flawless precision of digital fabrication, but also allows for the small imperfections that are part of how materials are experienced and that bring out their aliveness.

The work embraces all scales—from the design of doorknobs, built-in fittings, lamps and chairs, to small private homes and cottages, to larger-scale religious and residential buildings. Throughout, qualities like spatial generosity, calm serenity, choreography of nuanced experience, and intimate tactility are achieved by not separating vernacular traditions from modernist traditions, craft from art. Their architecture intricately weaves together the interior and the exterior, function and beauty, material and meaning to appeal to the human senses. Building material legacies makes these ethical and aesthetical expressions of their time and their place.

Shim-Sutcliffe's architecture of insistence is firmly rooted in a triple commitment: to be responsive to both nature and culture as it comes to specifically define each of their sites and their material choices, to be responsive to the needs and wishes of their clients, and to be responsive to the legacies of the modernist architectural project and vernacular building traditions. As Brigitte Shim and Howard Sutcliffe continue to cultivate and to grow their body of work, they remain carefully aware that crafting place not only requires time, and, of course, labor and resources—but above all an unwavering ethics of insistence. Building is understood both as a noun and a verb: their work unfolds potentials over time, in *sympoiesis* not only with their sites, but with all those who are touched by them and find their senses of belonging in them.

Essay by Elke Krasny prepared for the RAIC Gold Medal nomination of Brigitte Shim and A. Howard Sutcliffe. Elke Krasny is a cultural theorist, curator, urbanist, and author based in Vienna, Austria. She is a Professor at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts.