



Florian Beigel photographed at the CASS school of architecture.
photo: Ivan Jones

Imagination and precision

Tom Emerson of 6a Architects applauds the decision of the RIBA to give Florian Beigel of London Metropolitan University the Annie Spink Award for outstanding teaching

Short pencil dashes gently formed a grid across the page as precisely as a human hand will allow. The graphite dragged by the drawing hand became a glowing background surface for short meticulous strokes. This is how space begins, said Florian Beigel.

Beigel opened an evening lecture in Cambridge with a long meditation on a drawing by Agnes Martin. Martin's graphite landscapes were followed by deeply personal photographs of nature, in which micro ecologies growing in the cracks of asphalt became spaces for inhabitation and examination.

We sat transfixed as Beigel's abstractions merged with a fragile reality. Combining building completed by his research practice ARU with student projects from his design unit at London Metropolitan (then University of North London) Beigel showed how architecture is led from the imagination to the world in drawing. Surfaces, lines and even mise-en-page held their own latent architecture, spaces of ideas and experience.

I was not taught by Florian Beigel but that lecture in 1996 was one of the most memorable events of my education. Since then, like many others, I have been a vicarious pupil through lectures, publications, drawings and working alongside former colleagues and students. Since the 1970s Beigel has tirelessly researched and shared with his students a radical architectural position in which theory does not legitimise action, but makes human experience and practice the foundations of a humane and progressive architecture. As fantastically speedy and widespread media triumph and flatten architecture into a single, homogenous surface, Beigel gives depth to surface, specificity to the apparently generic.

For Beigel, there is only one environment. There are no hierarchies between large and small or between history and the avant-garde; for Beigel an entire landscape can be conceived as a room while a room or an object can be invested with the potential of landscape. Spatial metaphors and analogies are deployed with critical precision to bring new images of the world into architecture. Architecture, landscape, drawing, painting, abstraction and quotation form one nature, one human culture. Perhaps with an echo of Aldo Rossi, for Beigel architecture stands only for architecture but in his hands that has few limits. He has returned the subject to itself. Beigel's teaching and practice are a guiding light for several generations of architects, who have sought an alternative to the rhetoric of modernism or the excesses of post modernism. His is a holistic and poetic vision of architecture, within nature rather than separate from it. He has often

expressed a paradoxical radical modesty. Not because future architecture should be background but, on the contrary, because we need it so much more now that we have damaged our planet so deeply. But it is needed with subtlety, humility, beauty and care.

Beigel's influence has been at the heart of 6a and my teaching. Drawing is central to fusing landscape and history in his pedagogical and architectural project. And many roots of our current work are in the architectural culture and community he founded and still leads at the CASS, London Met.

Beigel's poetic imagination is matched by a precision that has revealed the mysteries of architecture to hundreds of students. Beigel's tireless commitment to the 'art of architecture' brings to mind the final words of Italo Calvino when reflecting on the future of literature: 'To my mind exactitude means three things above all: a well-defined and well-calculated plan for the work in question; an evocation of clear, incisive, memorable visual images; and a language as precise as possible both in choice of words [form] and in expression of the subtleties of thought and imagination.'

Florian Beigel's influence on architectural discourse is immeasurable through the work he has made and the people he has taught. He is a constant inspiration to any students and architects who care about the future and past of our environment.

I cannot think of a more deserving recipient of the Annie Spink Award.

Tom Emerson is director of 6a Architects and professor of architecture at ETH Zurich. This appreciation was originally written to support the choice of Florian Beigel for the Annie Spink Award 2014.

See: <http://www.ribaj.com/intelligence/imagination-and-precision>