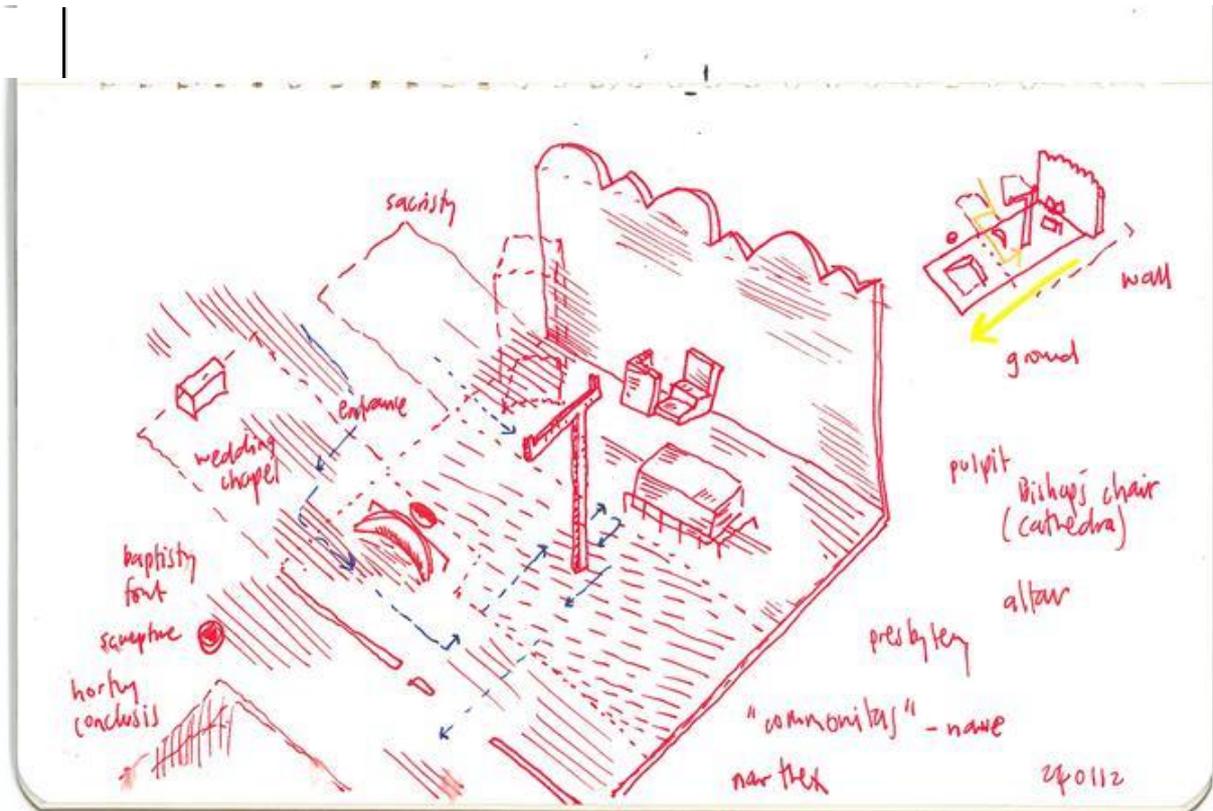


## Is architecture returning to an age of civic mission?

By Nicholas de Klerk | 16 November 2018

Nicholas de Klerk finds cause for hope in Patrick Lynch's latest book, *Civic Ground*



Source: Patrick Lynch

Patrick Lynch's red axo - of objects on ground - of St Peter's Church, Klippan, Sweden, by Sigurd Lewerentz

An architect who makes a habit of examining his or her influences and who then proceeds to share this knowledge with a professional and wider audience is a relatively rare thing – perhaps particularly in the context of practice as opposed to academia.

To do so as Patrick Lynch has done, through a PhD and a series of books, book chapters and articles produced over the last two decades, is an especially rare commitment to this task.

*Civic Ground* is the third in a series of books, both by Lynch and his practice, examining the “architectural and urban significance of aspects of poetics”. It comes not long after *Mimesis*, which was

published in 2015. Civic Ground is based on Lynch's PhD dissertation and, inasmuch as it is constructive to try and distil this undertaking into a short description, it examines the relationship between sculpture and architecture. Lynch unpicks this comparison in an almost forensic fashion and suggests that architects who embrace the idea of architecture as sculpture effectively understand sculpture even less than they do architecture.



Source: Patrick Lynch

West facade of St Peter's Church, Klippan, Sweden, by Sigurd Lewerentz

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The book draws in a wide circle of references, from Peter Eisenman to Sigurd Lewerentz, Richard Serra to Rachel Whiteread and leans on writers such as Joseph Rykwert, Peter Carl, Dalibor Vesely and David Leatherbarrow.

For those who follow Lynch's social media accounts, it will be unsurprising to learn that the argument is fundamentally an ethical one, but also one which maintains a deeply serious engagement with aesthetics. In a chapter entitled *Decorum*, Temporality and Urbanity (author's emphasis), Lynch connects these two imperatives under the rubric of "civic humanism", which in part suggests that creating beautiful, essentially urbane buildings and amenities lends virtue to otherwise morally purposeless mercantilism.

Lynch establishes the militarist etymology of "avant-garde" and futurist approaches to architecture (an argument which both belies the latent aggression and makes clear his antipathy to such schools of thought). He sets the groundwork for a "civic architecture", whose own latency is one of immanence. Lynch takes aim at architects who embrace empty spectacle and formalism in their work – which he suggests is deliberately (and misleadingly) conflated with progressive social values. He charges that not only is this kind of architecture fundamentally narcissistic in formation, it also fails to fully exploit the promise of technology that it often claims as its *raison d'être*.



### Zig Zag Building, Victoria, London by Lynch Architects

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Returning to the architecture / sculpture dichotomy, Lynch establishes – through examples of work by Serra, Judd and Eisenman – that the notion that architecture’s response to context is primarily one of scale is a kind of cipher – albeit one that architects are taught and return to throughout their careers. Instead, Lynch suggests – by means of a quote from David Leatherbarrow – that “the individuality of a building ... is measured by its participation in shared conditions”. This short statement provides an entry point into a far broader terrain – the civic ground – within which architecture can be situated, and which Lynch proceeds to examine in the following chapters.

Lengthy chapters on Lewerentz’s chapel at Klippan, Rafael Moneo’s Kursaal at San Sebastián and Alvaro Siza’s Santa Maria at Marco de Canaveses explore this territory in depth. Lynch follows this with a chapter on his practice’s own work in London’s Victoria – examining these principles in this context. There is a sleight of hand in the switch from the building studies which are of projects that are mostly institutional or ecumenical in character, to the practice’s buildings in Victoria which are commercial and speculative. In a chapter on Heidegger and Chillida, he cites Ignasi de Solà-Morales who suggests that while we are in an “age after monuments”, there is poetic resonance still in the “tremendous clangour of a bell that reverberates after it has ceased to ring”.



Source: Patrick Lynch

Mass at St Peter's Church, Klippan, Sweden, by Sigurd Lewerentz

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To me, at any rate, this suggests that these projects offer a cultural inheritance that finds relevance in new civic structures that serve quite different purposes. Quite how this transfer is achieved, and what the agency of the architect is in making that transference, is perhaps the most interesting underlying aspects of this book. It's also one that I would have liked to have seen explored more directly, but then it occurs to me that the Lynches (Claudia and Patrick) have already done this in *Mimesis*.

This brings me to a broader observation about architects increasingly working in collaboration, both with other people and with their influences – which is evident throughout the book. If the emergence of practices and thinking such as this is evidence of a cyclical return to a more civic mission for the profession of architecture, I for one welcome it.



I'd just like to point out that the context that we are working in today in the UK is obviously different to the past, but nonetheless, "civic" is a cultural ambition as much as a political one. I mean, the Victorians built civic buildings before the emergence of the Welfare State, and the whole of Pittsburgh (and most of North America) was built, in imitation of Renaissance patronage, as a philanthropic civic mission, alongside the desire to make money. It's demise is our context: both the demise of the Welfare State, and declining ambitions of architects and patrons. In the specific context of Victoria we are working on a number of different "types" and Use Classes. The Silver Forest artwork sits on the side of a local government building, Westminster City Hall (which is leased to the council by our client LandSec, who own the building) - the project is not speculative and it is not commercial (it's the part of the Section 106 agreement relating to the apartment and office buildings that we designed next door - this also included funds to refurbish and extend The Passage, the nearby convent and housing foyer); the public library that we are working on further down Victoria Street will be built by LandSec and occupied by Westminster City Council on a long lease; our competition project for Westminster Cathedral Piazza (which doesn't look like it will be built) was similarly a hybrid project involving many land owners and various complex easements and planning conditions, going back over a hundred years. PFI funded schools are another example of the complex nature of "public" building projects today. "Civic" is not a "sector", it doesn't just mean "town halls"; it does not preclude or exclude any building from being part of an urbane conversation with others, nor does it prescribe this or that style. Alberti thought that even city houses owe a debt of civility and decorum to their neighbours. In retrospect, our house on Greenwood Road in Dalston is "civic" in this sense, offering a critical sense of openness and equilibrium between private and public life. We mostly seem attuned to these nuances in daily life, in our dress and language; and the mystery is why, when architects pick up a pen (or worse, a mouse), they often seem to forget everything they know about the world as inhabitants of it.

OK, apologies for the Apologia. Wanted to show my hand though, as it were.

