

# What Makes the Difference — Reflecting on Reflecting (on Reflecting on Reflecting)

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What makes the difference between researching and searching? One answer is obvious in the words; the extra syllable in the English word, re-, is what is crucial.

But architects often seem often to miss the syllable and to confuse these two. Many believe that simply searching the catalogues for parts of buildings to specify is research. It is not. It is simply looking. The difference between re-search and search is the again-ness that the prefix re- implies. We search, and we search again. Then the question becomes, what drives us to search again: how do we come to the conclusion that we should do this?

One answer we recognise is of growing importance is reflection. We reflect on our work, we reflect on our searching, we reflect in the sense that we withdraw into a meditative state of formless thinking. And we reflect on reflecting. In many ways, the re- in research takes the form of reflection.

The act of reflecting brings to mind the Greek myth of Narcissus, the youth who got trapped in solipsistically admiring his own beauty to the eventual obsessive exclusion of all others. In the energetic terms of our physics, this may be seen as the origin of the perpetual motion machine, of our fascination with it and our fear of it.

And this in turn brings to mind the danger of self-referential systems. So great is this danger seen to be in Western culture that we have acted to exclude it from the legitimate. Self-reference is the great no-no of logic, of our formal arguing. Yet the moment we accept the inevitability of being the actors who carry out our actions, it becomes unavoidable, inevitable: we cannot talk of our actions without implicitly recognising that it is the very we who talk that is the we who act.

We have a symbol we have used to describe the danger and yet the productive mystery of self-reference: the orobouros, the snake that eats its own tail: the perpetual motion machine of self-(re-)generation, perhaps the ultimate Narcissist.

Can we act reflectively without becoming Narcissistic? The answer must be yes: we do act to produce something other than an appreciation of our own beauty and need not be caught in the obsession. We can consider ourselves and our acts without getting lost in private worlds of our own making, sucked down the solipsist vortex. (One day, maybe we will wonder if this is such a bad thing.) Here, we must take our lead from experience, not from theory.

How, then, can we enter a reflective world without fear of the solipsist trap? One answer is to separate the act of reflection into two components: taking the mirror to embody our metaphor, to consider the sending of that which is to be reflected off the mirror as distinct from receiving that which has been reflected off it.

In this action we begin a conversation with ourselves. The act of reflecting is seen as an act not in which we simply re-inforce what we wish to believe, but in which we utter a statement and then, changing role, we hear that statement not as (we) the speaker wish, but as (we) the hearer do. Thus we find the new: what we are learning talks to us and takes us with it.

There is more than one way of talking, and, reflecting the metaphor back to us, there is more than one way of reflecting. Reflection, as a mental act, comes in different flavours. We can reflect in analytical-critical mode, with our minds firing on all cylinders at the front of our consciousness. We can reflect dreamily. We can reflect meditatively. We can reflect without knowing, leaving our subconscious to get on with the job. We can reflect with wonder, and we can wonder as our way of reflecting.

Sometimes in reflecting we seem to destroy, even if only for a moment, the distinction in our stream of experience, between our selves and that we reflect on. At that moment, through reflecting, we may undo a lifetime's thinking and we may undo reflection, only to return cleansed and renewed.

What does this reflection bring us? As actors, as those who propose and then take actions (or, sometimes, take and then propose actions), it brings a greater understanding of what we propose, and, particularly, of its value. Because reflection can be conversational in form, it allows us to express what we find, and thus to make it available to ourselves and our colleagues: to let what we find enter into the public domain. It allows us to enter into groups and to share. We develop our understandings and our actions; our understandings of our actions; and the actions of our understandings.

Should this appear a solecism, we should ask ourselves what else we might do, how else we might, and do, act?

And yet, to reflect you need something to convert the spoken into the heard: the mirror. And you need something about which to speak. How, then, can you begin a programme on reflection: how can you talk of the use of reflection in research before you have any research to reflect on—as we were asked to?

There have been experiments in which microphones and loudspeakers are left in silent

environments, in anechoic chambers: in places where there is no noise either internally generated or seeping through the walls. After a bit, there is sound. The tiny noises that we don't hear and our instruments don't detect, the small, spurious sounds randomly generated, are picked up. The resonances of the system become audible and there is sound. Silence does not last.

John Cage told of his surprise when, on entering an anechoic chamber he found there was no silence, but two sounds: the high pitched whistle of his nervous system and the low pitched rumble of his blood circulating.

There is always something.

And when we wish to reflect, thinking we have nothing to reflect on, we have reflection. Thinking we have nothing is a reflection of our wish to reflect. Reflection is itself a topic for reflection. This is self-referential. The giant circular argument of this introduction is self-referential and we have returned to our outset. The process of reflecting on reflecting is self-referential. It is the circle of self-reference that characterises reflection and which, in the end, gives it its value: the confused value of the orobourus.

Here, you see people reflecting on reflecting, and, in doing so, learning to reflect so that their search, in, through and from their work, can become re-search.

