**Architectural Models Network: Practitioner in Focus**

**Interview:**

Interviewer: Matthew Wells (PhD student, History of Design, V&A/ RCA)

Interviewee: Biba Dow (Director, Dow Jones Architects) and Alun Jones (Director, Dow Jones Architects)

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Location: Dow Jones Architects, Station Parade, 10 Balham High Rd, London SW12 9AZ

MW: Ok. Hello, so do you just want to state your names and maybe just in a few sentences introduce Dow Jones Architects and the sorts of projects you guys have been working on.

**BD:** So, I’m Biba Dow, I’m the Director of Dow Jones Architects.

**AJ:** And I’m Alun Jones, the other Director.

**BD:** And the projects we’re working on at the moment are the new Maggie centre for the Cancer Caring Charity in Cardiff and we’re also working on Bevis Marks synagogue in the city of London to make a new museum.

**AJ:** And I think we, you could sort of characterise what we do as being contemporary architectural additions to complex building, complex places, and so there’s very much an interplay between the contemporary and a found situation.

MW: Fantastic, thank you. So, the first question is: what is the place if the architectural model in the design process, with the practices design process?

**AJ:** I think we’ve always worked with models as a way of helping us think about how we design buildings as, it’s sort of part of, if you like, a sort of trinity of thinking. So, we think with pencils and make sketches. We think with computers and draw orthographic technical drawings and then we make models. And those three components sit, so those three components sit together as a part of the design process. And so, in the way that we make different sorts of technical drawings, we make different sorts of sketches, we make different sorts of models at a variety of scales in a variety of materials as a way of exploring how we think about projects. So…

**BD:** I was going to say, I feel like, one thing to say is, you have always made models and I have sketched. We met as students and Alun always used to laugh at my models because they were never, they never stood particularly. So, I think models are brilliant and I look at them, we talk about them. But I must say I don’t make them, you’ve made them.

**AJ:** Yes.

**BD**: Because you’re much more precise in that kind of thing than I am and I’ve done more sketching. And I guess that’s another part of the conversation, isn’t it?

**AJ:** Yes definitely, but I think also one of the key things here is that, very much when I was a student and having been taught in the late 1980’s at Bath by people like Michael Braun, and Patrick Hodgkinson and Peter Smithson, that sort of, if you like, the end of a kind of modernist tradition, there was very much an understanding that, you know, the beauty of a scheme came out of the plan, the elevation was just a, a direct if you like technical or…

**BD:** Expression?

**AJ:** Yes, an expression of that plan and you would then, having designed your building, you would then make a model at the end, you know, to show people what it look like. And so, I think that way of thinking ran through architecture schools for many, many years. You know, you have your idea, you draw it up, you make a model. And I think that.

**BD:** That’s not the way at all we were taught at Cambridge, is it?

**AJ:** No.

**BD:** Which was you start with a sketch, start with a collage, and then a building comes out of that. And models that you make explore bits of, bits of buildings and bits of cities.

**AJ:** But yes, and arguably, but not very model heavy.

**BD:** No, not model heavy and certainly not, I think that’s probably why I got away with not learning how to make precise models. And I still remember the model making tools, well we still have them, the tiny set squares you had.

**AJ:** Yes.

**BD:** And the spirit level, well I bought you that spirit level.

**AJ:** Yes.

**BD:** But you know, that sort of level of tweezers, things that I hadn’t done my degree in.

**AJ:** When I first met Biba, she used to make models with scissors.

**BD:** I had forgotten that. I had edited that out of my past.

**AJ**: But that’s the funniest bit. But I think, so, making models has always been, if you like, more part of my background. But where this all kind of totally changed was when I started working with Adam and Peter at Caruso St John, where they would, making models at different scales in different materials. So, it was very much a constant through how they thought about their work as well, so there was a kind of, that really gave me something to sort of work with, to see them working through models.

**BD:** And I think that was very much part of how we then made our practice.

**AJ:** Yes absolutely.

**BD:** And I think there’s an amazing, models have an amazing capacity to summarise an idea very clearly, don’t they?

**AJ:** Yes.

**BD:** And then of course, the way you could use them to then talk to clients is extremely valuable. Clients and then other consultees.

**AJ:** Yes.

**BD:** But they make things, they convey architectural ideas in a very specific way, don’t they?

**AJ:** Yes. But also, in a specific way, but also in a very varied way. There are different sorts of models that people engage with on different sorts of levels.

**BD**: Yes.

MW: And the same model might change depending on how you deploy it?

**AJ:** Totally.

**BD:** Do we physically adapt it? Or just use it in different way?

MW: Or how you, different audiences?

**BD:** Definitely. I mean that model behind Alun, the St. Mary Magdalen one, is a project we must have modelled more than any other. There are loads downstairs. That has been a sort of, well we made it for ourselves to begin with, we made it for designing the façade and the form of the extension, but it’s been at probably 50 meetings.

**AJ:** Which is why it’s in the corner.

**BD:** With planners, Historic England, stakeholders, our volunteer design group, you know everything.

**AJ:** Yes.

**BD:** Its come out and out again.

MW: And you, do you always make your own models?

**AJ and BD:** Yes.

**BD:** We’ve never…

**AJ**: Outsourced.

**BD:** We’ve never not made our own models.

**AJ:** And, well as Biba said, to begin with I made all the models but we’ve always, and we’ve always made a point of employing staff who make models and know their way around a sheet of cardboard and a sheet of UHU. So, we’ve never outsourced and I guess what’s interesting there is, as different people come into the office with different skills, doing different bits of model making, you could sort of adapt. You know, we went through a period of doing lots of casting, when we had a bunch of people from the Met who had done a lot of casting in the studio. So, yes, so they’re always in house and, yes, I still will happily sit down with a piece of cardboard or a lump of plasticine and will start a project.

**BD:** The last one you made with Maggie’s, which is on Laura’s desk, of Maggie’s.

**AJ:** Yes, of our Maggie’s Centre.

**BD:** It’s really lovely.

**AJ:** Yes, but it’s like that model house on the end there, that was almost, that was basically designed through making that model.

**BD:** As were the buildings with Colinator round them in the middle.

**AJ:** Next to the Dow chairs.

**BD:** Which were for a competition.

MW: And the scales, you always work to a series of scales?

**AJ:** Yes, it’s typically, if we’re looking at form we do that at about 1:200. If we’re looking at, if you like, tectonic, that would be normally 1:20. I mean those would be our two sort of go-to scales. Like I think some, you know that little house that’s 1:100.

**BD:** But then we’ve also go the Christ Church panel model.

**AJ:** That’s 1:20.

**BD:** And then we’ve got the…

**AJ:** These bits of, this a 1:1 model.

**BD:** Yes. 1:1 cladding at St. Mary Magdalen’s, so that’s the decorative frieze that runs around the finals panels.

**AJ:** So, each one of these is a model of a…

**BD:** Tile.

**AJ:** …component of things that’s in the factory.

**BD:** I think there are another couple.

MW: At what point does the model become a mock-up? Or is it because it’s not made of the right materials, is it that sort of thing?

**AJ and BD:** Yes.

**BD:** It’s not a mock-up.

**AJ:** Yes, I think so.

**BD:** So, that was to look at whether the scale of the moulding, moulding extrusion, was deep enough. And then we put it at the right height, which was about 3 metres, so we basically we put it at the top of our room to look at what it would look like from the ground.

**AJ:** Yes, but then if we’re making a conceptual model about a project, that might not necessarily be to scale.

**BD:** Yes.

**AJ:** So, yes they operate at different scales, but each scale is looking for something in particular in it and yes, there was…

**BD**: What are you looking for?

**AJ:** I thought I saw a model earlier that reminded me, from a project that we did years ago, never mind.

MW: And so, sometimes plaster, sometimes grey card, sometimes timber. Is there anything that affects those choices?

**BD:** well I suppose the material affects the choice. So, I mean, we’ve only used timber models (is this right, Alun?) where we are making something that has the quality of a bit of furniture.

**AJ**: Not necessarily, I think, so in that model over there which was our competition entry for Charleston, if it’s grey, it’s existing, it’s ground and then the additions we proposed are in timber. So, we kind of deploy materials I think conceptually to sort of relate to new and old or to express a material difference.

**BD:** Yes, and then the little on up there.

**AJ:** Plaster?

**BD:** Yes, that’s got timber on it and the Park Hill one. Shall we get out a load of models? I feel like we should have done that before.

MW: It’s ok, or we could have some photographs of them. Especially things like the Park Hill model because, you know, I would like to see that. What’s this project for?

**AJ:** This was a competition for, it’s the huge church in the middle of Hull and they wanted to use the interior of the church as like a community space, gallery, a theatre space, a café. And they wanted to consolidate a space for worship. So, basically, they wanted to turn the nave into a bit of city and they wanted to identify the chancel as a, identify the chancel as a place of worship. So, we cast the ground, this is the city, this was the extent of the public space and so this is cast and it’s talking about an idea of establishing this as a civic ground and then this is talking about the quality of the city inside that we were going to make.

MW: Fantastic.

**BD:** And that was the image that went with them I think.

**AJ:** So, this was sort of, so to make this, this scheme was developed between this model and these images.

**BD:** And the timber, it was specifically about timber buildings and therefore we use it.

**AJ:** Yes.

MW: and this is not to scale, this is 1:4 or something?

**AJ:** Well this is probably like 1:1000 or 1:750. It was just, yes, handle-able scale.

**BD**: And then the model we made of, the early model for stage two of the Garden Museum, which has a plaster cast base, which has all the ledges, tombstone ledges across it, that was very much about, an idea about the ground that was different to the building that we supplied.

**AJ:** Yes, so on that model the ground is plaster, the existing buildings are oak, and then our new intervention is made out of copper.

**BD:** And then the later models, the bigger scale of the Garden Museum, there we modelled cladding. So, we made little branches, well they were bits of copper, patinated copper shingle, in order to get a feel for the material quality. And then we talked to clients and planners about it.

MW: And did you have to burnish the copper with fire?

**AJ:** Yes, over the gas cooker at home.

MW: Very dangerous I think.

[laughter]

**AJ:** Yes, you get good colours though. But yes, so that Garden Museum model is interesting. We made that at 1:20 and so it barely fitted on this table. And that model, it started off looking at the tectonic and the sort of, of the proposition and that sort of evolved into being a sort of test rig for our cladding exploration. So, we mocked up different versions of the cladding, photographed them all, changed the cladding, re-photographed it and then we adapted the roof light. So, with that model it was, it was completely hacked to pieces, it was completely destroyed, rebuilt, but incredibly useful and we, as Biba was saying at the beginning, we took that to client meetings and to the trustees’ meetings and really it was that model that sold them the project. You know, and it’s such a big model and they could sort of kneel down and put your head in it. And what’s interesting about that is seeing people engaging with the real thing. Like you lay drawings down in front of them and people, particularly people who aren’t architects, don’t have necessarily a three-dimensional imagination, are completely baffled by drawings. Even a little perspective sketch can be a bit too vague. But you put a model in front of them and it leads to a level of engagement that is like no other.

**BD:** Particularly when it’s not a conceptual or sort of, you know, small scale abstract thing. When it’s about, describes relationships between buildings and spaces, I think that’s when they’re most useful.

**AJ:** Yes.

**BD:** And then there’s the whole, the whole sort of department of model making where we’ve made big 1:20 models that are designed for photographing not for looking at. So, photographing and photoshopping. So again, I’m thinking of the Mary Mag’s model that’s downstairs.

**AJ:** Yes, the huge one.

**BD:** The huge one that you know, comes, I’ve taken to a meeting with planners but really it was designed to photograph. And we’ve done that with a lot of other projects as well.

**AJ:** Yes.

MW: The Crypts.

**BD:** so, the Crypts, the Crypt is interesting because we there, we made it in order to anticipate what the Hawkes-More space that we couldn’t see because there were so many block-work walls in the Crypt, so we made a 1:20 model of the whole space including all the vaulting and then designed into that with Photoshop.

**AJ:** Yes, but also, perhaps what these things were about was working with vaulted space. When you draw a line on the plan, you can have a rough idea of how it’s going to intersect with a vaulted ceiling above. But when you make this, you can then actually understand how it meets that in three-dimensional space as a way then of thinking well is that…

**BD:** How do we work the tolerant thing on the joinery?

**AJ:** Yes, and is that a wonky wall? You know, or would it be better if you slid it forward in plan? So, you went further down the arch. So, the big model, the big Crypt model, ended up doing two things or three things; it enabled us to see the Hawkes-Moore space, which was impossible at the time, and then it enabled us to use it as a design tool, but also it was then invaluable when it came to things like planners, public consultation. And also, we showed it to, we showed it to the donor who then basically gave them more money, said “wow this is amazing, here’s the money.” So, I think, had we gone to that meeting with a plan and a couple of sketches, it would have been way less clear what the project was about and the cheque book might have stayed in the pocket a bit longer.

MW: Yes, have you ever taken a model to site for a joinery subcontractor or something like that?

**AJ:** Yes. The Garden Museum model, as soon as we started on site, well sorry, as soon as we, the Garden Museum was procured through a two-stage tender process. Once we got the main contractor on board, that huge 1:20 model went to site and every time we met a potential subcontractor, the meeting all took place around the model. And that particularly valuable for the cladding contractor and the roofing guys because the relationship between the form of the building and the roof, even though it looks pretty mundane was quite complicated in places. And so, we were able to sit in the room and this subcontractor would say “ok, what are we doing here? What are we doing there?” and we just basically talked our way around the whole model.

**BD:** And then conversely, when we were tendering, doing the tender interviews for Mary Mag’s, one of the contractors, unfortunately not the one we appointed, the proposed site agent had made a model to try and understand it, which I think is just extraordinary.

MW: Wow.

**AJ:** Because it is so complicated.

**BD**: Because it is this funny little thing with you know two elevations, four levels, and it is really hard to understand and he’d made it just because he was sitting there trying to work out, trying to get his head around the project.

MW: It’s very 19th century, it’s very lots of parts to work.

**BD:** This wasn’t his model, this is our model.

[laughter]

MW: That’s interesting.

**AJ:** Yes.

**BD:** I think it’s very impressive.

MW: So, you talked about Photoshop and Digital photography, are those the main technologies that have, you use in relation to models in your practice? You know here it talks about 3D scanning, digital fabrication, which I think are not things…

**AJ:** No, we don’t go there because, of course, when I started making models it was 35mm and also there was this, at university we had, there was this amazing thing called a modelscope, which was like a mini periscope that you screwed onto the legs of the camera and you could prod it into spaces and take incredibly low resolution, grainy photos inside buildings.

MW: Key-hole surgery.

**AJ:** Basically, yes. But, no, I’ll tell you what totally revolutionised for us the use of models as a design tool is the iPhone. You know and the idea that you could basically, sort of lower your phone into a model, press the button, and immediately see what the model was telling you. You could then take your scale, and then think “ok, we need more light coming down the stair, get the scalpel out, put the model, drop your iPhone back, press the button. And so, I say iPhone, digital photography as a medium totally revolutionised and, if you like, gave them renewed relevance to models.

**BD:** Do you remember when we did the first Garden Museum competition?

**AJ:** Yes.

**BD:** We asked David Gradorge to photograph it and that was part of our entry. So, I think that was the first and only time we’ve ever paid somebody to photograph a model. And that felt like, we wanted to do something that was sufficiently dramatic as an image.

**AJ:** Yes.

**BD**: Which we felt our photography wouldn’t have achieved.

**AJ:** Yes, also because that was slightly pre-digital photography, and so it was sort of on that cusp.

MW: Yes, the quality of the camera that you could buy yourself was not really so high. The David’s digital camera?

**AJ:** Exactly.

**BD**: And you lit it really well.

**AJ:** Yes.

MW: Atmospherically dark?

**AJ:** Yes, very black, very white, very contrasting.

MW: I remember a Saturday afternoon with Sandra in an old abandoned office building in Kingsgate, in Victoria, holding black sheets around the model whilst you took photographs.

**BD:** Of the Garden Museum?

MW: Oh no, sorry for the Lynch model.

**AJ and BD:** Yes.

MW: So, some of the models are sat around in the office preserved, and some are downstairs in your archive slash workshop. Do you ever think about storage, afterlife, measure door frames before you go into places?

**AJ and BD:** No.

**AJ:** And it, the…

**BD:** And before we had this place 6 years ago, we threw most of them away because we didn’t have space.

**AJ:** And we still do throw some away. It’s a shame. This massive garden Museum model, which we took to site, it basically got trashed. It formed part of the strip out for the demolition of the building, which was a huge tragedy because it was a beautiful thing. We’ve, that’s happened to quite a few models.

**BD:** If they get a case made for them, which we usually don’t bother doing, but when we do they always last because they’re protected. There’s one of Poplar cottage we got a case made for.

**AJ:** A massive one.

**BD:** Yes, for that early architecture foundation exhibition.

**AJ:** Yes.

MW: So, is that when things maybe go for to exhibition?

**AJ and BD:** Yes.

**BD:** That is it actually.

**AJ:** They get a case, they then get preserved.

**BD:** So, the little Garden Museum model.

**AJ:** Yes, which was in the Royal Academy summer show that’s got a little box.

**BD:** And a lot of them are downstairs.

**AJ:** Yes.

MW: And will remain downstairs?

[laughter]

**BD:** And will remain. I think we know they need to stay now, the big ones.

**AJ:** Yes.

MW: and there’s no, you don’t think about the degrading properties of grey card or the conservation requirements of these?

**AJ:** No, every now and again, you know, if I’m down in the basement and I can see some copper sheet peeling off one, yes, I often get the UHU out and stick it back on. And we’ve had models, like this little model here which was for a cricket pavilion we designed that never got built but this model our cleaner used to knock it off the shelf each week and the ramp broke off and the steps broke off and the columns got broken. And so, we had, we had a work experience person in and so one of the things that she did very beautifully put a number of these models back together.

**BD:** She just turned out to be good at making models.

**AJ:** So, she fixed that one and this is another one that the chimneys get snapped off once a month and then I glue them back on.

MW: so, the last question is, we’ve sort of talked about it, but is there a, do you have conversations in the office about audience and display when you begin to make the models?

**AJ:** I think the, I think there is, are there two sorts of models? There’s very much a model that’s only ever going to be for internal consumption that might just be looking very quickly at a form or very quickly at a series of spatial relationships that might be mocked up very quickly in foam core and the idea is that no one will ever see it beyond us. And then there’s a model that’s maybe more careful, that there’s a sense that it will be seen or it will go beyond our own consumption. But, having said that, we’ve started making models that are just quick lash ups that have then been added to and adapted in order that they can become something else. And so, if you peel away some of the outside, in the middle there’s something that’s not meant to be there.

**BD:** But I think we don’t think about display to be honest. We do, we definitely think about audience because we’re always thinking “what’s the model for?” and therefore how are we going to make it. I think display has generally been a more accidental thing; it’s not made of display, but it might be displayed in an exhibition.

**AJ:** Yes. The one thing we do that’s like this model, and we’ve made a number of models like this.

**BD:** The Hull one?

**AJ:** Yes, you can take it to an interview and just hand it to somebody and they can, you know, they can engage with it while you’re talking more generally. And I think, so that may be a form of display? It’s a form of interaction that models get made for. But we don’t think about, we don’t set out thinking “of yes, this will be in an exhibition somewhere.”

MW: Do you think this sort of model is sort of your version of the putty, the diagram? Does it almost replace it? This is you boiling the scheme down into two, three things quite simply but three dimensionally.

**AJ:** Yes.

BD: Yes, and then as Alun said I think because it is three dimensional it is perhaps more engaging than a sketch and it’s something tangible. I think the tangibility is nice for having a conversation with people.

**AJ:** Yes.

MW: Fantastic, thank you. Let me turn this off.

**AJ**: Pleasure.