**ARCHITECTURE'S PUBLIC**

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Architecture is never private. For better or for worse, the effects of a work of architecture extend outwards in space and time. What we build for ourselves always removes space, light, and view from others, and sometimes more than space, light, and view. For buildings displace as much as they emplace. Every interior produces, somewhere, an exterior, and that exterior in turn broadcasts its presence everywhere it can be seen, heard, or learned of—down the street, between the trees, into the future.

But, one might say, architecture itself is experienced privately, as is music, or art, or anything else for that matter. Each one of us is a "subjectivity" facing the world essentially alone and through a single pair of eyes. What more could a composer or designer want to do than enhance the quality of private experience?

However, the observation that all experience is private is no defense—no shelter—from the reality that the making and emplacing of architecture is a public act through and through, and from start to finish. Not just because a building extends itself beyond itself, and not just because large amounts of labor and capital are usually involved in making a building, but because, throughout, things are done for reasons and those reasons are produced by the understanding architects come to of their audience, their *public*. Like rhetoricians, like politicians, architects are required not only to enhance the experience of individuals—essentially to entertain—but also to secure, by means of persuasive presentation, the public approval, legitimation, and commitment to the whole enterprise of architecture that only a *public* can give. And they must do this with every commission, "public" or "private." Without this action, there can only be defection, each architect not contributing to, but free-riding on, the accumulation of legitimacy provided by architects of the past, by their works, their patrons, their more civic-minded clients.

Who, then, is architecture's true audience? Who is architecture's public today? And when does the appeal to that public begin and end?

During school years, the audience for a student's work is not just her teachers, but the hovering presences of charismatic designers, dead and alive, to whom her teachers also address themselves. The education of an architect runs in tight circles, canon succeeding canon, like a coin that miraculously spins ever faster, ever shallower, without settling on the table. History is compressed. Bows are made in the right direction. Healthy self-interest, however, keeps competition boiling and the studio lights on all night.

The view changes drastically when a young architect leaves school, and is lucky enough to find a job. Effort drops, as does time for debate. Suddenly the discrepancy becomes apparent between the buildings that are featured in journals and lauded for their design, and the buildings that appear in the advertisements of those same journals being lauded for this use of rubber flooring or that use of automatic door closers. The discrepancy becomes poignant as she realizes that she now lives and works in the second world rather than the first. The audience has changed, composed now of real clients, to be sure, and a boss, but also a public seen for what it really is: larger than imaginable, and indifferent, even hostile, to Architecture. The single most powerful factor guiding architectural design, she learns, is that most-public-of-pressures upon the private experience, namely, economic law. The single most crucial *fact* about a published, high-style building, she also learns, is the most *private* one: its true cost, and not just to the client, but to the architect.

Of all this, she heard only rumors at school.

Let us broaden our scope. Consider: Other things being equal, the quality of the designed environment—a "public good" if ever there was one—depends on the devotion and skill of architects. The amount of time and skill that can be applied to building design is constrained in turn by the fee that architects can charge for their labor and expertise: the greater the fee, the greater the time, training, care and consideration that can be applied. (We are assuming, optimistically, that individual architects apply their "surplus" fees to design rather than to personal consumption or investment in other areas of the economy.)

But architects compete with each other for commissions; and one of the ways they do that is by lowering their rates, i.e., the price they charge for their services-per-unit-of-time devoted. As each individual architectural firm seeks to win scarce commissions and/or to increase its total profit, and as their clients seek to minimize their costs and risks by shopping for cheaper services and bigger firms, the average fees and salaries of all architects falls. By some accounts, the former have roughly halved since 1971. Firms, to succeed, become larger, and architects as a group become less and less well recompensed for practicing their art. Indeed, they must practice it with ever less care, skill, and time, with an ever-greater number of shortcuts, repetitions, and no-trouble materials and details. Abetting the process: computer aided design, CAD. The architect is constrained to consider as primary neither the public good of the people that will use the building over time, probably for generations, nor the state of her art, nor the fate of her CAD-displaced draftsmen, but rather the profitability of the building for her clients, a private good which, while it may not be inimical to the public good, is hardly identical with it.

Worse still, if her fees are computed as a percentage of the construction cost—which they often are, it is standard practice—then the competition between architects extends beyond being themselves cheap to hire. It causes them to

compete also as to who can design the "most economical" buildings without them (the buildings) appearing to be so.

Over time, the proportion of its resources (as expressed in the Gross Domestic Product) that society as a whole devotes to the design and construction of the public domain falls. Its quality suffers accordingly. Indeed, statistics show that the real cost of American buildings, per square foot, has been in steady decline since the 1920s. Other sectors of the economy have made up the difference: entertainment, military expenditure, bureaucracy, computers, tourism, fast food, real estate, telecommunications, medical care...things both trivial and profound. Every architect, every builder, and almost every client laments this decline. Facades grow thinner, weeds sprout sooner, fountains go out and are not fixed. But each sector of the economy continues nonetheless to pursue what is rationally in its own interest: to "do better" for now with less, and for less, while capitalizing maximally on what remains of the common weal.

Architecture's is the story of every oversubscribed profession, of every oversubscribed industry. Automation increases productivity, which produces unemployment in the industries automated and lowers wages. Without significant technological advances that translate into the quality and complexity of the product, and without a powerful, publicly-endorsed agenda for maintaining the value of that quality and complexity, competition in the marketplace does not improve the product—any product—but cheapens it instead, allowing it to fall to the least, still-acceptable quality for the greatest number of consumers. Architecture is not immune from these laws. Look around.

In this context, one wonders what standard architectural history, theory and criticism can do. The broken-up sidewalks and crooked-poled streets, the parking lots and fall-apart malls of the middle-American public realm do not suffer from lack of academic attention. The City does not suffer from lack of academic attention. Never have so many Ph.D.'s in architecture, planning, and public affairs put their minds to "urban problems." No, what we face is a failure of ideas at the most fundamental level: ideas about design, about audience, about work, about value, about procedure, about economics, about what we want for a future.

It is time for our best minds to stop taking sides on matters of aesthetics, form, function, and the rest; it is time to throw out the whole art-historical, art-critical machinery attached to our profession and confront the question of architecture's political economy. Why, exactly, do buildings cost what they do? Where are the decisions made, in government and out, that affect the quality and quantity of building activity? What is the seat of our power and legitimacy? Why did we hear from no architects at President Clinton's national economics symposium?

Why did Kahn die penniless?

It is time to look at the production of architectural design in terms of the production of *value*, especially economic value, on a broad front and for a universal public, and not in terms of their entertainment value to a small idea- and form-intoxicated audience. In architecture schools, we should teach without embarrassment how ambitious a businessman was Le Corbusier, how tireless a promoter he was, of himself, to be sure, but more importantly, of Architecture. So were Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Hannes Meyer, and Wright, and so are Venturi, Stern, Graves, Meier, and Gehry to name a few, successful, design-oriented architects of the day. These men are studied for their innovative styles and philosophies of design. But each also invites study as a proferrer of ways to produce "architectural value" more economically than did his predecessors and mentors. Each has found a way to neutralize Modernism's legacy of environmental commodification with an ideology that makes new acceptances possible—either this, or a way to insulate themselves from the trend to cheapness with the help of a university salary or family money.

It is time for our younger designers not to fall victim so easily to the belief that they can delight any client and meet any budget with pure, white-hot *creativity*. What is true occasionally, or of a detail here or there, is simply not true at large and in the long term. Our confidence in our creativity and our eagerness to build under any circumstances, are our worst enemies. We should admit that symphonies cannot be played on a ukuléle. Our designer's pride does nothing but reduce our communal welfare. While architects burn the proverbial midnight oil in order to make it look easy (and build cheaper), clients are laughing their way to the proverbial bank with our former fees.

It is time for our professional bodies and media to launch the most concerted public education program ever: a training not in history, properness, and the procession of architectural styles on PBS, but in raw phenomenology; architecture sold like jeans—501 architecture—on CBS, VH1, even MTV. There is a difference between hyping architecture and hype architecture.

The physical world is dying of neglect as we spend longer hours passively absorbed by television, stalled on freeways, or stupefied by the enormity of music heard in headsets. The coming, rapid evolution of electronic connectivity will amount to something else, however: the evolution of new public spaces, totally digital, totally mediated, totally unreal, and far from passive. The Internet. Cyberspace. There will be commerce here, and inhabitation, and art. If we cannot stop this movement, we can yet resolve to conquer both worlds, real space and cyberspace. They must be set together not as enemies but as counterpoints, balanced upon each other, needing each other, casting each other into relief.

The essential observation? Both require design.

It is therefore time to quit producing esoteric, polemical, ephemeral, fake, lite, illusory, and entertaining architecture: books do it better, movies do it better, and cyberspace will be more fun, more profitable, and more dangerous.

It is time for a good number of architects to move into the computer and media arts without shame, indeed, with boldness and ambition. Our skills and our sensibilities are appreciated there. Cyberspace is ours as much as anyone's. And it is time for the rest of us—the majority, no doubt—to re-address, rediscover, re-promote, re-insist upon, and renew our pledge to provide what only buildings can provide. I mean: shelter, physical comfort, addresses, unique and abiding presence, unmistakable spatial power, keen materiality, a repository of significance to real lives, an exemplification of labor value over exchange value. I mean, in blessed contrast to the media world, a blessed absence of contrivance or the desire to manipulate, a greater affinity with nature and the nature of Nature. Call it buildings with dignity, buildings with depth.

Call it *real architecture*.

Would that this could be the last word. For with or without more real architecture, the realm of private experience will continue to grow, and rapidly, as it did with the advent of movies and recorded music. With or without fine squares and parks, the public realm of private experience will expand too, as it once did with newspapers and portable radio and music players, each his own. Architects may wish to be Stoic, but they can neither ignore the changing psychical landscape nor call the world back to an earlier time. The craft, the money, the means, of their ancient art are slowly draining away. The continuing production of luscious, intensely-designed places—new resorts, beds-and-breakfasts, and celebrity homes where sunshine, ever-slanted, falls across crystal and fruit and where ocean breezes move the soft-focus curtains beyond—should offer us no comfort. These places are as rare as they are totemic in a public realm whose increasing neglectedness, banality, and cheapness is palpable. It is as though they exist, or images of them do, precisely in order to be disseminated through the media as antidotes, as healing charms, on the promise of the very *possibility* of their unmediated experience.

The works of architecture you find in the pages of *Progressive Architecture* are exemplary. Gathered together in a sort of paginated utopia, they are presented precisely for our education and admiration and empty of people, so that we can mentally move in, pretend possession. They are collected here as in a gallery, in artificial propinquity, for our belief *and* disbelief. But hundreds if not thousands of miles separate them in the real world, and you'll need a map to find them.

We return to our boards and screens. The phone rings. Real architecture is still possible. Isn't it? •

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