**Essay for *Rob Wellington Quigley*, ed., Magalie Larsen (Rizzoli, 1996).**

by

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In the last forty to fifty years, broad cultural and economic changes have affected the architectural profession in America. These changes are imperceptible day-to-day and cumulative. No one architect or firm can do much about them, and yet the challenge they pose, collectively, to architecture as an artistic and socially altruistic enterprise is enormous. It is Rob Quigley's remarkable energy and ethicality in responding to these challenges on the front line that is southern California that makes him the signal architect he is today.

Now, Quigley is not a prolific writer. But he is eloquent in person and in writing. In an 1991 article in *California Architecture*, reprinted in this book, Quigley outlines what he calls the "Six Contradictions" that form the regional cultural context of his work: • the conflict of values around transience vs. permanence in inhabitation; • the contrary needs of community and privacy brought on by electronic communications; • the mixture of liberal and conservative ideals that swirl around the act of building; • the interlacing of work and leisure in the new economy; • the increasingly multi-cultural, multi-ethnic nature of America; and • the contest between respect for nature and climate and the liberation from them offered by technology. An insightful analysis.

Quigley's optimism shines through every word; as a true entrepreneur, he sees opportunity in every problem. In the next few pages, however, I will take a somewhat darker view of what has happened to American architecture of late and of what faces it at the turn of the century. My comments will address economic rather than cultural forces. I shall try to show how in this darkness, Quigley's struggles to make a living *and* a humane architecture shines all the brighter.

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In the ten years between 1975 and 1985, the number of registered architects in the U.S., as a fraction of the population, had more than doubled. The profession has continued to grow at this pace into the 90s. Now, this would be acceptable if the national building economy were growing at somewhere close to the same pace; but it is not. The portion of the Gross Domestic Product accounted for by building construction (residential and non-) has been dropping steadily for decades. Also, although it is subject to a roughly 8-year boom-and-bust cycle, the number of square

feet (residential and non-) built per year, on average, has risen very little. Put these numbers together and what do we have? This overall picture: more and more architects fussing over relatively fewer square feet on paper and, perhaps more important, over relatively cheaper square feet on the ground. With notable exceptions, to be sure, Americans have been deciding *én masse* for decades that making and enjoying fine buildings is worth less of their time and money than making and enjoying other fine things, such as ever-more-sophisticated movies, music, medical care, weapons, cars, clothes, sports equipment, communication systems, real estate deals, and financial instruments.

Let me go back to talk about the growth and democratization of the profession for a moment. While it is true that once we did not require lengthy educations and professional titles to be draftsmen, today, by and large we do. This would account for some of the growth in the number of architects. But one look at how quickly architects are adopting Computer Aided Design (CAD) tools ought to give us pause. For used correctly from the rational economic point of view, the productivity of a CAD architect/draftsman can be roughly double that of a drawing board architect/draftsman. This has profound implications for design, for the kinds of buildings that will be built.

This is not the place to go into all implications of CAD for architectural design and practice, however. The point to be made is this: when architecture firms compete with one other––as they must under constant government and market pressure to lower their fees––and when these firms use CAD to do so, we can expect considerably more unemployment for tomorrow's architect/draftsmen.

How has Quigley responded to all this "rationalization"? He is adopting CAD slowly, careful to use it not to improve productivity by keeping employment down, but by increasing the services offered: better drawings, better accounting, better specifications, and more flexibility…, not for reduced fees but for the same fees or higher. Good enough. But larger than this, and responding to the democratization of the profession in the more general sense, Quigley is committed to finding new things for architects to do and new ways to operate: working directly with local communities, becoming involved in their lives and aspirations, taking risks with new building types such as the private/public SRO hotel series you see illustrated in these pages (projects which won his firm international notice even as they helped "make money from the poor"), refining commercial construction techniques such as site-cast tilt-up walls for use in community structures such as at Sherman Heights, and conceptual programming of hybrid public-private structures such as at San Bruno. Quigley also takes care to present himself neither as the clever architect-of-independent-means nor as the humble builder/architect-of-the-people, neither as the suited architect of blue chip corporations nor as the hip-pocket architect of commercial developers. Rather, he is a unique presence: a casual and yet dogged, experienced and yet always-young architect (and sometime college teacher), just as capable of winning stylistic flourishes as he is of cut-to-the-chase frugality, a man

entirely realistic about what can be done, when, and for whom, this without apparent bitterness, and indeed, with an enviable *joie-de-vivre*.
He is a model, I would suggest, for young architects everywhere.

Let us return to the economic scene. While construction has continued to slip as a portion of the GDP, the real estate and finance sectors have grown. More buildings than ever today, including houses, are being built speculatively and/or in a commercial context for sale, resale, and rental income. Such buildings are means rather than ends––means, specifically, to make money for their titular owners and for the people who finance them. Such buildings are engines of wealth creation, dollar locomotives, nothing more, and the less they cost to build the better.

Now, architects are not fools. This fact about contemporary building is perfectly well known to them. And yet architects are bound, both ethically and professionally, to see buildings as ends-in-themselves, or, if not as ends-in-themselves, then as means to the ultimate end of making better lives for a broader constituency: for the public, for the man in the street, for the building's users or inhabitants, for the citizens and dwellers of the future. From this contradiction flows many a tale—tales that few practicing architects cannot tell by the score, tales, truly, of two cities.

Architects, of course, are also not the only professionals succumbing to the logic of the marketplace. Lawyers are long gone; doctors are next; and engineers can't see what the problem is. But matters are worse for architects because most buildings are not private goods. Buildings exist everywhere they can be seen, smelled, and heard, and everywhere they cast their shade and funnel wind, which is well past their private property lines, and thus are inherently what economists call "public goods" (or "bads"), i.e., objects the use and appreciation of which people can neither be excluded from nor shielded. Phenomenologically, buildings leap over and past their lot lines, broadcasting themselves into the ether of the city like soundless radios that cannot be turned off, entering into the minds and lives of people who are completely innocent of their design, construction, and reasons for coming to be.

This, then, is the implicit advice of Quigley's career to young architects: work, if you can, only for individuals, communities, and institutions. Better yet: work openly with the people who will use the building. No stealth. Make yourself inedible to developers, large corporations, and bankers. We can say this even though Quigley's four SRO hotels (and one unbuilt) were the result of developer-entrepreneurship, because the way these buildings were funded, designed, and even conceived, was civic-minded through and through. These SROs are gifts to the streets they are built on. They give dignity to a community that would otherwise be all but homeless; they revitalize the city; they are a source of pride for all involved as well as those who were not. Importantly, the design of each new SRO project was thoroughly informed by communication with the users of the one before. Precious few buildings are refined in this way by their architects—which is a fact that always comes as a surprise to ordinary people.

Another consequence of the economic pressures under which architecture is practiced today is the continuing drive to find, use, and dignify lighter, faster, and cheaper methods and materials of construction. In this regard, California leads the nation if not the developed world, and we find Quigley at the (budget-)cutting edge. But what else is an architect to do while he waits for the client of limitless budget, boundless courage, and impeccable taste? Economic forces are tidal. Indeed, the reason that the Modern Movement and, specifically, the International Style, swept the world in less than twenty years had little or nothing to do with what architects were then crowing about: rationality, hygiene, the beauty of precision, openness, and abstraction, the new social-democratic projects made possible through rational engineering, teamwork, new materials, etc., etc., etc. Europe between the wars was financially ruined, and *thin, stuccoed, metal-windowed boxes in the Modernist mode were simply cheaper and quicker to build*. No more decoration, no more deep sills, no more "rooms" with tall windows, almost no limits on building height but legal ones.

To be sure, for a brief springtime of opportunity in America, architects could build Modern buildings with pre-Modern budgets. They could demand, and get, the expensive refinements we associate with the early showcase architecture of Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson (the man who led the apologist-historians of the time––whose heirs are working to this day––into legitimizing the abandonment of pre-Modern architectural standards and construction skills).

But the developers, realtors, bankers, and land-owners––not to say the governments here and in Europe––were quick to see the opportunities for profit which opened up with the new style's cheaper space, higher densities, and rising land prices. So while architects cultivated the company of modern painters, musicians, and dancers, while they played with color and planes at "exploding space" (a very dangerous activity!) and while they generally outdid each other in high-mindedness and revolutionary fervor, while they persuaded each other of the charms of raw concrete and the efficiency of curtain walls, they sold off––no, gave away––everything actually technical and quantitative about buildings to the engineers. With architects thus occupied, the realtors and developers and land-owners laughed their way to the proverbial bank. With every passing year the cost ceilings for Architecture was lowered. Under the delusion that "less is more" (what more stupid thing could an architect say in an aggressive capitalist economy, unless it was to the momentary advantage of the architect saying it at the expense of his professional brothers?), under the impression that nothing less than their God-given creative genius was at stake in triumphantly meeting budgets no matter how much tighter they were becoming with every "success," there was only one way out: to continue to mortgage tradition, to drain away the material content of buildings and with it the expensive demands of crafts and labor. And so, today, stucco, gypsum board, wood frame, paint, aluminum windows, concrete, few improbable shapes here and gay colors there, low ceilings everywhere are all we see; in the land of freeways and loops, feathery steel and glass boxes, signs and boards propped from behind, wires against the sky; architecture as hunger art, architects as hunger artists.

Like all his contemporaries, Quigley has not been immune from these trends. With the constructional media at hand he strives to make an good impression, to be sure, rescuing what he can of the regional taste in forms and colors. At the Sherman Heights Community Center he tries valiantly to find the beauty in tilt-up construction, but "vertical gardens" will wisely be allowed to cover much of it over. From his houses to his churches and community- and mixed-use buildings, Rob Quigley's architecture is full of deft recoveries of the formal possibilities remaining to architects under the new constructional regime. Indeed, he makes these recoveries seem more like happy discoveries.

But in truth, architecture of the sort we admire in Europe, and even here, in North and Central America, of a century and less ago––a materially crafted architecture nourished by generous capital investment, architecture that actually improved upon rather than merely quoted the region's climate- and material-driven history, architecture that was a public-spirited gift rather than a burden to future generations––is hardly possible anymore. Instead, we have become specialists in expressing the exuberance of a cheapness in love with its own consumption, blossoming in the desert at the confluence of rivers of money. That Quigley can do as much as he does to lend dignity to the architecture of our times––which, to my mind, is in its death throes as a material art––is high achievement indeed.

Two other major social changes are continuing to demand and receive architectural response. One is the oft-noted takeover of the landscape, both urban and rural, by the automobile, a trend at least sixty years old that shows no signs of abating. The second is the rise of information-, entertainment-, and communication-based alternatives to *dwelling in the physical world at all*. This second trend has emerged rapidly in the last ten to twenty years.

I should like to conclude with a few remarks about these two factors, if only to sensitize the reader to the importance of Quigley's search for ameliorations if not solutions.

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Every architect in America must make his peace with a future predicated on the needs of the automobile driver. And once again, the architects of southern California lead the way. The sun is bright and the earth is hard in San Diego; for the most part, the 'elements of landscape' are not mesa and swale, but curb and lane, overpass and underpass, i.e. harder yet. The sky is large. Here and there palm trees and eucalypts sway like survivors of the passing Asphalt Machine while roadside brush awaits its turn to be cleared for a higher purpose.

While one might expect a golfing club to be green, softened, and landscaped (see Quigley's Tustin Ranch Golf Couse Clubhouse), we might not expect the same of a quasi-urban, very low budget community center. But, Quigley insists: nature shall have its place there too. The postage stamp grounds of Sherman Heights

Community Center are almost mostly garden, by design, right up the walls and on every balustrade. You would think it is old, bougainvillead Mexico.

Quigley is characteristically Californian in his acceptance, even embrace, of the automobile. His SROs, however, provide far less parking than the city normally requires for that density of development. To city officials Quigley showed that these requirements were unreasonable, at least for the intended use, and they were waived. Nevertheless, some parking was required, and at the Harbor Place Hotel, for example, Quigley seizes the moment of descent and ascent from the underground parking to create a public space at the entry. (Now it also happens that any building that uses up a city block as fully as this SRO does, needs to give away some space for headroom over the down-ramp anyway, so why not use combine what is necessary--the headroom–– with what is desirable, an over-scaled entry, and save space? Two birds with one stone: that's Quigley the artist/pragmatist.) Our new downtowns are ruined by street fronts that are parking garages instead of storefronts, and by those roaring dark holes to basements that empty cars on to side streets. It's enough to make one long for jammed, on-street parking, for jaywalking pedestrians, for bicyclists dodging diesel trucks, dogs amongst the shoppers and a bit of yelling...in short, for a Manhattan, Mexico City, or Johannesburg street. I think Quigley would agree.

We turn to the effect of the media.

Where are you when you are on the phone? Watch a person using a cellphone––see the far away look in the eyes, those out-of-sync expressions, how their behavior fully replicates a too-soon-released mental patient arguing with himself as he ambles down the sidewalk or sits grinning on a bench, waving an arm, obviously entertained.

Come out of a movie matinee or mall or game parlor or casino. Where are you? Where have you been?

Put on a Walkman––the whole world instantly becomes a movie, complete with sound-track, in which you, the audience, happen to be able to bump into the things you see. Take the headphones off and the angels vanish. The world suddenly and looks and sounds like the boring, grating noise it always was.

Crank up that radio in your car, fill your head with Rush Limbaugh or the Grateful Dead; make that "a concert hall on wheels," buttons to adjust reverberation: "Jazz Club," "Stadium," and "Den."

And really, how nice a place do you need to live in if you have cable television with three hundred channels at the end of your thumb? Before too long virtual reality will be real(ity), a city will squeeze on to a CDROM, you will have eyes around the world, while this reality––your room––will dwindle to a chair, a bed, a tangle of wires, and some half-eaten food. Let the answering machine get those calls!

In short, this is not a world receptive to architecture the way architects are taught it. This is not Haussman's Paris; this is not Rome, or Helsinki. It is William Gibson's Sprawl, a vast decaying Chinatown, with cyberspace coming in through the cracks.

There is hardly an architect practicing today who is more aware of the impact of the entertainment and media industry on our physical culture than Quigley, located, as he is, where the output of Los Angeles meets the border of Mexico, where the Arcadian dream has so recently run out of steam from both sides. Perhaps because his youthful experiences in the Peace Corps lent a realist and populist cast to his thinking, I think Quigley has chosen a most difficult course. On the one hand, he must make public buildings that are striking "on the ground," buildings which somehow demonstrate a mongrel order, a readiness––no, happiness––to serve all comers the way television does, with its reaching out for a broad audience with strong, workable imagery. On the other hand, Quigley must please the gods of Architecture. These gods are jealous of the Order. Moreover, against the idea of a general or correct architecture, even if it is postmodernly correct, Quigley is committed to entering into the particularity of the life of a community and his clients. As one amongst them but not quite, he seeks the political and financial as well as aesthetic grounds on which they can come together around a particular building design, a real place, distracted though they may be by the seductive call to immersion in the mediaverse. No single force usurps attention to the physical world like the electronic media; no single trend more threatens architecture, especially, in the long run, architecture which would accommodate and appease it.

All this, then, summarizes my bleaker view of architecture's condition and the hopefulness of Quigley's contribution. I would commend the reader again to reading Quigley's "An Architecture of Six Contradictions" in order to round out the view. There, and in the pages of this book, you will find a remarkable man tackling what a democratic architecture can still be at the turn of this century with far more optimism than I could muster here, in his honor.

If I might be permitted a slightly strained metaphor in conclusion. Architecture-of-old, in retreat, stumbles away over the hill, waving a beautiful hand-sewn flag; the battlefield is littered with trash and ruins. Quigley rallies the troops and leads a charge back with a more colorful and cost effective flag. "All is not lost," he cries, "not yet! We're doing OK. Take heart. Speak to the people."

Go, Rob! You'll find them at the movies.•