Life is the Theme

Essay for MGA Partners' Exhibit and Catalog

by

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One look at a pencil rendering by a master like Romaldo Giurgola and you can see the appeal: the simplicity, the sweep, the air of "solution!" See how the pencil flies over the page, all life, all vibration, all suggestion, as though the wind tipping the birds in the sky and the breeze whirling the leaves at our feet were the Muse, willing this building into being, rendering its broad sides with the same sun and shadows that glide over the buttes of Utah.

The same building pictured by a computer would be authorless and without life: a deep blue sky with seven perfectly-stationary clouds, edges like knives, light without motion, color like fingernail polish. What are we confronted with here but a demonstration of how the Great Nothingness can take on the appearance of a building? Put people into the picture with Photoshop. Add plants. Turn on the digital fog, more lamps, different texture-maps. None of it will help. The more realistic the picture gets, the less the wind of life blows through it.

If the artistic sketch conjures liveliness where, in the future, there may well be less, and if the computer rendering, for all its veracity, sucks life away where there may well be more, then physical models would seem to be the solution. But these too, for all their rich three-dimensionality and tactility, deceive—viewed as they dominantly are from above, made as they usually are from a single material, omitting as they usually do the bric-a-brac of the urban scene, and appreciated as they mostly are in the malleable or diffuse light of an office.

As the 20th century folds into the 21st, more is at stake, of course, than a choice between these three representational techniques, each with its advantages and disadvantages. The question posed by the issue of representation is how life's undeniable and growing complexity can be dealt with by architectural practices. The problem of representation takes us directly to ideas about architecture's own life as a discipline and art form as well as the lives it protects and enhances. It tells us something about the changing conditions of architectural practice, and, not least, it tells us something about the problems and temptations that faced designer-driven "late-modern" firms like Mitchell/Giurgola in the 1960s and 70s and to those that face firms descended from them, like MGA Partners (which was established in 1990).

First, more about drawing: We think it right that a creator who is not God should tremble as he draws—look at a line by Corb or Kahn. Or Giurgola. Le Corbusier in particular was adamant: the proper way for architects to represent the promised lifefulness of their buildings could not be the painstaking gouaches that still issued from the École des Beaux Arts. These, he proclaimed, were eyewash and a lie. They could have no place in modern practice—even less a place, he thought, than the neoclassical buildings that were still being designed there. Instead: the spontaneous, suggestive line drawings of a Picasso or a Miro, and these to be followed by technical documents that were of purely engineering interest.

For his part, Mies van der Rohe would propose his new designs with a dozen ruled lines and a collaged photo, letting the white paper work like the body of a waterfall in a Chinese painting, where only the top (where the water rolls over) and the bottom (where turbulence roils) is rendered while the untouched paper between—the *space*—does the work. Wright's color-pencil perspectives, although more complete and literal and therefore more like the renderings a plain businessman could like, were no less impressionistic—and no less optimistic—about the life they would engender.

Thousands of architects followed suit. Implicit was the proposition that the life of the modern building was located in the swiftest drawing of it, in the gesture, even in the diagram. Architecture was about creating *space*, and so representing anything else, and, by extension, *building* anything else, was superfluous. Gritty realism was neither possible nor desired. People's actual tastes and living habits were to be transcended, and the sciences of light, sound, and weathering, were to be left to the engineers and specifiers. Required, rather, was total trust in the architect and acquiescence to a dozen or so arguments for the inevitable triumph of modern design.

The promise of modernism was, after all, *simplicity*, especially in its International Style guise. And if we think of life as jungly overgrowth, as entropy, as impediment to clarity and purpose, we can see why the machéte of simplicity is useful, even necessary. It cuts through the vines and tangles, it opens a path and lets in light, it makes order. (Begone, malodorous alleys! Begone, musty carpets and drapes! Welcome, wide boulevards and empty rooms. Such were the thoughts of the early moderns.) But who ever said that the complexity of life-as-lived, especially of other people's lives, is properly considered an impediment, something to be cut away? We know better now.

Most of the clients who commissioned modern buildings, of course, mainly saw dollar signs: more from less. Taller buildings, thinner walls, lower ceilings, deeper floors, and no fru-fru meant higher returns on land. And today we can judge the results. Still being built all

over America: huge, bare walls facing parking lots once drawn as parks, gigantic wedges of brick or glass turned this way and that for no apparent reason except, it would seem, to turn the complex visual music made by windows into a huge, three-note nursery rhyme. Were cloud reflections ever enough to animate a curtain wall, itself unmoved and un-openable?

One begins to wonder: might the life of most commodified modern buildings be found in those suggestive sketches of them precisely because life would not be found in the buildings themselves, and *could* not—so simple would they be when constructed, so flat, so reduced, so crudely economic, and so far from the creator's trembling, life-giving hand?

Far from saving the day, computer renderings can easily make matters worse. No longer do we need an Artist in the office to beguile clients (and ourselves). No fudging, no false romance. We can see the truth of what we have designed... Or can we? For so enamored are we of the wizardry of the software, of the "perfection" of the output, that we have forgotten how to critique what we have done in terms of what is *not* shown rather than what is. Indeed, I would argue, most architects have forgotten to even *want* what the watercolorist, the pencil artist, was trying to capture: life itself. Why are we surprised, then, when so many of our new buildings turn out looking just like their computer images of a few months earlier: glossy, steamrollered, and fast, like some engineer's wet dream?

Of course, more has changed since the mid-20th century than modes of representation. While the profession has expanded in membership and pushed back the frontiers of efficiency, the economic and legal context in which architecture is practiced has continued to transform. Building construction accounts for an ever smaller fraction of the Gross Domestic Product even as the number of square feet built annually increases. This says something about how much society values architecture relative to other goods. Schedules are tighter, codes more elaborate, people more litigious. Per project, the number and complexity of construction drawings has doubled at least (as this exhibit demonstrates). Meanwhile, architect's fees are everywhere constrained, either by regulation (for government work in many states) or by market competition between architects for ever more cost-conscious clients. The bulk of these clients don't understand what good architects *could* provide because they live, increasingly, in a world that not-so-good architects have provided for other "cost-conscious" clients—or clients, anyway, who would rather spend their money on other things. Moreover, what they want from their architects as "deliverables" rarely leaves time for exploration.

Last but not least in this list of *fin-de-siècle* woes is the increasing fraction of the architectural budget that goes to mechanical and electrical equipment, from high-speed elevators to HVAC to fire protection to lighting and environmental controls, security systems,

and communications wiring. In *Vers une Architecture* (1923) Le Corbusier famously wrote: "a house is a machine for living in." Little did he know how true this would turn out to be by the end of the century, and how little care would be given, ultimately, to the "living in" part of the formula. Set aside the occasionally interesting atrium or lobby: in order to *like* most recently-constructed buildings you have to pretend that you do not notice the air in them is stale because it is largely recirculated. You have to pretend that the light from distant plates of glass does not glare, and that the overhead fluorescents are not just "illumination" but actually *light*. You have to ignore the security cameras, the sprinkler systems, the clanging door-bars to the crypt-like fire-stairs that you must use because code—or economics—won't allow open staircases between floors. You must not to be bothered by floors that tremble as people walk by because the long-span structure below is so whip-light, or by the fact that just above the ceiling there is a writhing mass of ducts, cables, and pipes, *feeding* the space below like a patient on life-support. You have to pretend that garage-raw concrete and cheap finishes and bolt-on rails are cool, and that having all those open, "flowing" spaces means that *you* can avail yourself of them freely. And you have to pretend that a few tables and chairs (in perforated aluminum) next to a thirty-foot-high wall of glass with direct sun streaking in across faces and food in a space with a two-second reverberation time (inaudible, of course, in the slick photos of *Architectural Record*), makes a fine lunch room.

The ability to pretend all this I elsewhere call "place-machismo," which is the socially useful ability to withstand or tune out, or to *appear* to withstand tune out, environments that are actually highly controlling, abusive, and depressing. Place-machismo is both a reaction and a symptom, a kind of low-grade battle fatigue from the kind of environment that the average American suburban high school—efficient to a fault, all "systems integration," half prison and half warehouse—sets up as a standard. No wonder Disneyland and the movies thrive. But saddest of all to observe in the year 2000 is this: not only do architects seem helpless to combat place-machismo in others, but the hippest young architects of the day have begun to *embrace* place machismo in a revived and more pragmatic variant of International Style yet.

This is the world in which we find firms like MGA Partners: firms small but experienced, emergent from the leadership of a single charismatic designer, committed to the modernist course and yet aware of its shortcomings, and unable to embrace the historicist-postmodernist "solution" of the 1970s and '80s because it seems to lack integrity. How are they to respond? How have they responded?

One way has been to become expert at adaptive re-use projects. Here, the DNA of an older, pre-modern architecture is preserved even as it is lengthened by new technologies and the need for new kinds of space. Buildings created in this way are more likely to feel alive and to promote life because they actually *are* "old and new" and don't just look that way. Their complexity is apt to be real and not simulated. The memories they deal in are factual, not symbolized, their quirkiness necessary, not affected. MGA's deeply studied space re-use project for Philadelphia's University of the Arts is a prime example. One result is the Terra Building on South Broad Street, which, although it will have an historicist facade by others because MGA would not do it, is completely reconfigured inside to create a modern urban campus building, gracious enough to welcome visitors, tough enough to feel like an arts school.

Another has been effectively to ignore some of their founder's pronouncements while seizing upon others. Here, for example, is Romaldo Giurgola in 1989:

> I attempt to base my work on those principles which could sustain the discipline of architectural thought...principles relat[ing] not necessarily to the condition in which we are, but in which we ought to be... The kinds of principles I am referring to are those which, for example, consider buildings not as material objects, but rather are intended to be concepts related to the making of places.[1]

> [A]rchitects must struggle life-long with the same intensity as scholars,... seeking a crystalline clarity of idea...and a nobility of form which can inspire and transform those who come in contact with the work.[2]

Fine words, these, but a recipe also for forms that might stay too close to their abstract, diagrammatic origins, their dramatic first sketches. Notice also the interest in instruction rather than service.[3]

But here is an earlier Giurgola (1977):

> Unlike the familiar image of unity of a machine, architecture retains the complexity of life, and is founded on them; it develops in a variety of episodes, situations, possible conditions. ...Thus a building is a reasoned fragment, a sign of presence; its aesthetic a condition discovered, not a starting point."[4]

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[1] Romaldo Giurgola, "On the Discipline of Architectural Thought," *Process Architecture 81: Mitchell/Giurgola Architects* (Tokyo, Process Architecture Publishing, 1989), p. 8.

[2] Ibid., p. 9.

[3] Giurgola's words might seem to refer indirectly to the work of Louis Kahn—fellow-Philadelphian , mentor, and builder of monuments—but they really do not. Kahn's buildings, always heroic, were at once more primitive and more refined, more radical and more classical, than any his peers would design.

[4] Romaldo Giurgola, "The Aesthetics of Place," *Process Architecture #2*, October 1977, pp. 36, 37 .

Here is a prominent American architect struggling to bring the heritage of International Style modernism to a new level of habitability without losing that style's signature elegance, power, and economy. If MGA's work can be seen in any light, it is in the light of this second statement. The later work of Mitchell/Giurgola seems to be located just beyond the fork in the road in the mid-70s where American architects were deciding whether to follow Robert Venturi, Robert Stern, and Charles Moore in abandoning the modernist credo, or to redouble their efforts to evolve a kinder, gentler, more complex and modulated modernism—architecture of the kind the Scandanavians were long adept at producing.[5] Tempted though Giurgola sometimes seems to have been by his own skill at limpid diagrams and the vibrant delineation of rather sweeping solutions, Mitchell/Giurgola chose the second road, the path of a more humanistic modernism. And MGA Partners has followed in this commitment.

This is not to say that the influence of Venturi cannot be detected in some of MGA's projects, or that the historical sensibilities of Philadelphia itself—the people and the place—are not everywhere to be found in the firm's Eastern seaboard work.[6] Witness MGA's success at inserting its architecture noiselessly into difficult, older urban contexts there, and its open embrace of the "complexities and contradictions" of modern *practice* if not so much of form. I have in mind MGA's several U.S. Federal Courthouse addition projects, especially the one in Wheeling, West Virginia, and the one in Camden, New Jersey. Their addition of a new dining hall on the Bryn Mawr campus (Haffner Hall), for example, creates a generous yet humanly-scaled volume on a narrow site, lit on three sides because of its confident, but not bombastic, butterfly roof, creating a double-clerestory.

Yet other projects by MGA Partners take on the empty sky and empty landscape with a boldness that 'Aldo' could applaud from his new home in Canberra, Australia: witness the Children's Discovery Museum of the Desert at Rancho Mirage, California.

MGA Partners is a growing and accomplished firm with prestigious institutional clients. The firm could easily assume that more of the same is in its future. What seems clear from their work over the last ten years, however, and from this exhibit and catalog, is the seriousness with which MGA's partners—Dan Kelley, Alan Greenberger, and Robert

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[5] *Process Architecture #1* of 1977—a whole issue devoted to recent work in Scandanavia— makes interesting reading in this regard, Aalto being the major influence and Utzon its most daring practitioner. I feel sure that Giurgola kept up with developments there.

[6] Indeed, in the 80s, elements of postmodern classicizing can be found in Mitchell/Giurgola's work too, for example, the Health Services Center at MIT, the Walter Davis Library at the University of Carolina at Chapel Hill and the south facade of the Annenberg Center expansion at the University of Pennsylvania, not to mention the grander "modernist classicism" of the Parliament House in Canberra, Australia

Shuman—are searching for principles and practices that will form a continuity with the heritage of Mitchell/Giurgola, and at the same time take them into the 21st century with the means to overcome the ongoing commodification of the architectural project.

One such principle, I would submit in closing—and this is my own offering to their quest—is the principle I have touched on already several times in this essay: the Principle of More Life—more life *in* the building, *around* the building, and behind the building, meaning, in the process of its design and creation. This is why I raised the issue of representation at the outset, and here re-pose it as a challenge. MGA Partners and its peers in this age of computers have yet to tackle this problem, or see it as an opportunity for redefining architecture's priorities. Shall we bring on digital video *and* pastels, VRML *and* multi-medium models complete with bric-a-brac? I say yes. And while we're about it, let's re-think architectural journalism and photography (buy an issue of *Nest* to see how this might go).

As for applying the More Life principle in and around architecture, suggestions are easier to make: needed wherever possible are natural light, natural air and air movement, natural materials, "musical" form and acoustics, orienting views, and scrupulous attention to real people's natural desires and behaviors. Style should be an issue only to the extent that a given style is capable (or incapable) of producing more life—human, animal, vegetable—and sustaining it in the long run. There should be no place for place-machismo, especially from architects.

This much is certain: producing more life in and with architecture will entail greater complexity at all scales of design and construction, in all forms and materials, in technology deployment as well as in contractual arrangements. And managing this complexity will require an increase in the amount of organization applied. Life is a ratchet: evolution is always towards more-organized complexity, more-complex organization. This is why continuing to tout the virtues of size and directness, as the new modernist-pragmatists are apt to do, will yield cheapness and brutality more often than elegance or true verve, while the pursuit of looser organization in the name of flexibility or speed will yield neither—just equivocation and hustle and the abandoned sites of more "architectural interventions."

Evolution or devolution? This is the choice American architecture now faces. As this catalog shows, MGA Partners is one firm set on the promising, uphill path. •

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