BUILDING ON VALUES

by

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Introductory Essay for *L'Arca* monograph on Overland Partners

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Conditions facing American architects at the beginning of the 21st century are in many ways similar to conditions facing European architects at the beginning of the 20th. There is once again the feeling of being at a *turning point* of sorts, one that demands reappraisal of the old and a vital interest in the new.

In the early 1900s architects had to embrace the reality of industrialized production—the rational, the speedy, the expedient, the efficient. Not sentimentality but practicality had to become the ideal, not elaboration but simplicity, not splendor but elegance, not time but speed. The First World War and its aftermath in Europe set these preferences in stone.

Now another wave of technology is cresting—digital computation and communication systems. And another round of appraisal. We must ask how information technologies will affect architecture's methods and materials. We must also question what seventy years of modern architecture has already done to (and for) modern life by embracing such technologies as electrical lighting and power, air conditioning, high-strength materials, telephony, television, cars, and everything to do with accommodating them. Up for reappraisal too are the economic conditions under which most American architecture in the 20th century was created, which is to say, under the sign of business and real estate rather than of community, polis, or state, and with scant regard for the long-term repercussions of high energy use and low settlement densities.

The legacy of 20th century design is therefore not limited to what we find in glossy architecture books and magazines—those catalogs of hothouse flowers. That legacy is what we drive through on the way to the airport. It's a landscape of what Rem Koolhaas calls "junkspace:" smaller buildings thrown about like litter in "the space of flows" (to use Manuel Castells' related phrase) and larger buildings serving as hardly more than conduits for such

flows: strips and shopping malls, airports, garages, and hotels identified by brand and logo, traversed by escalator and elevator internally, and looped together externally by freeways, air lanes, and wire. Add masses of indifferent housing and you have the global landscape of development: billboards, weeds, underpasses, barricades, blacktop, mirror-glass, traffic, precast everything...all adding up to nothing, and everything gracious, everything generous, a hundred years old or more.

Among architects, this reality engenders several responses.

One response is acceptance—with the hope of redemption though high design. For, as Modernists still, most architects believe—or rather, want to believe—that the energies released by development, industry, and technology can be harnessed and molded by Great Design into satisfying patterns of living that may bear little formal relationship to those of the past. On this view, openness to the changing conditions of practice is the first step towards creativity, towards fulfilling the original Modernist promise of a high-tech, high-performance architecture that serves the life-styles of a new century. All else is nostalgia.

Another response is reluctant acceptance, with the hope of redemption through a different kind of design. In love with the unsung architectural gems of the world (but mostly of Europe), many architects find themselves trying to create spatial and civic experiences that go back hundreds if not thousands of years: the experience of streets, squares, and open-air marketplaces; of bell towers, arcades, and paths-next-to-rivers; of windows that open in rooms that are *rooms*, and so forth. These are the places ordinary people *really* want, such architects believe, and that people could *have* if only they would put their money (and their votes) where there hearts really are. Engineering and technology plays a supportive role, not a leading one, and is best when invisible.

Yet a third response is resistance. This response can range from becoming a no-growth activist and/or "green" architect (high-tech or low-), to refusal to participate in commercial projects at all (or at least, to participate in them on the terms usually given architects), combined with an interest in putting new technologies to work in ways not intended by their marketers. Such architects must choose their clients well. They must cultivate moneyed—and preferably maverick—cultural institutions and patrons. They must publish and show their unbuilt work no less often than their built work. They must attach themselves to universities, travel a great deal, and eschew color in their daily wardrobe. Interestingly, their rhetoric often overlaps with the first group.

But this three-category analysis of responses to junkspace is too simple. Most architects selectively combine components of these responses depending on the client, the project, and even the *stage* in the project at hand: now progressive, now nostalgic, now high-mindedly abstract; now business-friendly, now people-friendly, now unfriendly (prophet) or cool (functionary). How else could it be, they ask, when every new building lies at the intersection of so many lives and interests?

But such eclecticism carries the price of incoherence. Few architects can form a coherent picture of their practice, and of their times, out of such a congery of responses, and it shows in the tepidness of the architecture they produce: not *bad* perhaps, but not good either, neither cooperatively civic nor individualistically heroic, and permanently bullied into a defensive posture by economic forces.

Some architects find a coherent response to current conditions, or seem to have, by offering an outwardly consistent and recognizable style in their designs. Other firms seek coherence of a deeper kind. They commit not so much to a style—to a preferred set of materials, colors, and forms—as to a coherent set of ethical *values* that guide design as well as professional behavior. One such firm is Overland Partners.

Holding to values that are ethical in nature rather than aesthetic or economic gives Overland Partners a proverbial moral compass with which to navigate the forest of aesthetic, social, and economic choices that face all architects. Printed at the end of this monograph are the twelve core values by which Overland Partners operates. Not one of them is situational (that is, if A happens, do B; but if C happens, do D) or outwardly directed ("here's what we stand for"). They are, rather, absolute values internal to the firm—the elements of a moral contract between all members of the firm, from the partners to the custodial staff, and definitive of what it means to be virtuous and to thrive there. Such values exist *before* design, but affect design in various subtle ways.

Take, for example, the core value "Relationships That Last." One of its surprising consequences is that ambitious young architects in the firm are encouraged to set up their own practices when they feel ready to do so, even if that means taking a client from Overland with them. Indeed, Overland will use the new firm to consult on some of their own projects, and for a while will send work their way. Consider the effect that this core value has—this promise, akin to grace—on young architects in the firm. What can it do but elicit the bravest,

most joyful work from them, as well as, paradoxically, the highest loyalty? And imagine what it does for recruiting.

Or take their core value "Balanced Life." No partner in Overland Partners will allow any other partner, or any employee, to work so hard that the person's family life or spiritual life suffers. This guarantee sets up a network of care and mutual regard that, not so paradoxically, allows people to give the firm their all without fearing that still more is expected from them, and more yet, until something breaks.

The ethical concern represented by "Relationships That Last" and "Balanced Life" impacts the kind of design Overland Partners produces (as do the other core values). Take the firm's earliest signature work, the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Research Center in Austin, Texas. Programmatically a nexus of research in native plant ecology—itself a long term investment—here is a complex of buildings that set themselves up in a relationship to nature that will last. Not only does the complex protect Man from Nature (as buildings long have done), but more unusually, it shelters Nature from Man too, using only local materials, harvesting rainwater, guiding movement over sensitive land, educating people to the beauty and fragility of the natural landscape. Spatially, the buildings create space in ancient courtyard and arcade forms, with garden walks, field walks, arbors, and tower views... (Recall the second response to junkspace.) If it can be said that a *building* has a life, then these buildings have an extraordinarily well-balanced and sustainable life. Architect and client gave their all to get it built, and now the building gives its all too, with as little complaint and as sure of its values.

The same ethical relationship *vis a vis* the environment now guides the design of the Grand Canyon Transit Center in Colorado, the visitor's center at The Bracken Cave Nature Reserve north of San Antonio, the ReMax Wildlife Center in Denver, Colorado, and the Harrington Research Field School in Comstock, Texas, among others. These are buildings whose very programs are built around the values of Relationships That Last and a Balanced Life. What else, really, does "sustainability" mean?

Earlier I spoke of a "third response" to junkspace, namely resistance. Part of that response was using available technology in unexpected ways. At the South Texas Blood and Tissue Center in San Antonio, water condensate from the air conditioning plant is recovered and stored in tanks. It is then used for irrigating the grounds. The Center's grounds remain green through drought conditions, completely independent of San Antonio's water supply and its

resistrictions. Like an adapted desert plant, the building wrings water from the air itself, where there is plenty.

I have mentioned only a few of Overland Partners' buildings and projects, and even fewer of the design implications, as I see them, of the firm's other core values. Aware that the process of translation is a never-ending one, the partners themselves constantly try to clarify how their core values become guidelines for design. One result is the evolving document they call their Design Philosophy, also reprinted in this monograph. "We realize," they write, "that architecture is not an end in itself, but a component in a broader solution." To what problem? we may wonder. Their designs and their values give an answer: to the problem of living a sustainable and loving life in the 21st century.

Every Sunday morning people travel to the vast indoor amphitheater of the Riverbend Church in the Texas hill country to watch pastor and choir on a stage that seems set under a broad rainbow at sunset, on a hilltop arced over by the western sky. Ten years ago, on this empty land, a fund-raiser for the building was washed out by a thunderstorm. People ran for the tents. After the storm had passed, and as the sun emerged and water glistened from every leaf and bough, a rainbow appeared. Still far behind in funds, the pastor clambered onto a rise: the rainbow was an omen, he said; the site was blessed; the new building was meant to be. Within an hour several million dollars were raised, with people pledging their cars, their houses, their land... This might be an apocryphal story. But the building Overland Partners designed for Riverbend Church—one of the ten fastest-growing churches in America—is an ongoing miracle, at least to that community. The space is a powerful one by any measure, celebrating locale, nature, the human spirit, and God's. It reminds us that architecture is born in generosity. It reminds us that architecture is always a gift to something larger yet. I would say: to Life itself, built on values.

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