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Social Concern and Architectural Discourse

The many failures of social design and the oppressive formalism of some planning in the modernist era are cited as justifications for the abandonment of social concern in architectural discourse. But architecture is inextricably linked to social institutions, and it is unhealthy to ignore the responsibilities of this bond, just as it would be unhealthy to disparage untrammeled flights of imagination and invention.

There was already a social component in the architectural thought of the earliest Renaissance theorists. In discussing the design of cities, Alberti, Francesco di Giorgio, Filarete and Serlio were concerned primarily with the psychological and physical well-being of the privileged classes and to that end advised zoning according to class and trade. On the whole, however, the housing proposed by these theorists represented an improvement over what was being designed for every class.

There were revealing instances of ameliorative government action based on social policy even before the era of theorists. In the fourteenth century the Venetian Senate provided mass housing near the shipyards for retired sailors. That development, called the Marinezza, was livable enough to function to the present day. A century later there were similar interventions in Ferrara (where, exceptionally, a new town was constructed following an architect's design), for indigent widows. In Augsburg, a private developer, the Fugger bank, created a lower-income neighborhood.

Similar examples could be cited in the course of the following centuries of government by aristocrats, kings and emperors. The Enlightenment and the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution brought significant change in the social attitude of architectural and urban theorists. The ideal city of Ledoux was influenced by egalitarian political philosophy and placed citizens not by their social rank but by their occupation. A generation later, reacting to the desperate overcrowding and the misery of the poor in the industrial megalopolis, Pugin also proposed a utopian amelioration in terms of building

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types, in this case modeled on the forms and institutions of the supposedly idyllic Middle Ages. Fourier evaded the new urban problems by setting up Phalansteries in the country where, presumably, all classes would be treated alike. But the later nineteenth century anticipated the present situation by creating the one-class garden city as well as the aestheticized City Beautiful.

In the premodern period the accommodation of architecture and theory to the institutions and functions of society usually took the form of representation or symbolic communication. A building functioned primarily by advertising the political and economic status and intellectual interests of a client, and to this end, clients were prepared to suffer inconvenience and discomfort. This sort of architecture was still being designed in this country up to World War II.

Early in this century a competing concept of function emerged, stimulated by the growing prestige of technology and machinery. When I was in school we were encouraged to believe that it was strictly behavioral and utilitarian, seeking only efficiency and convenience. We later saw that it was also a bid for a new kind of representation, which should communicate egalitarian ideals and ethical principles of a rather Puritan sort, such as Purity, Honesty and Cleanliness. Much of the confusion that followed in the discussion of the social role of architecture derived from an unwillingness to recognize that the functionalism of utility did not drive out the functionalism of representation.

Our generation first became aware of contemporary architecture at a moment when its social role was a burning issue. It was a few years before World War II—not long after Hitchcock and Johnson, in their book of 1932, introduced Americans to what they called the International Style. That book represented the so-called modern movement not in its social context but in the typical formalist terms of the art criticism of the time. Formalist criticism isolated the work of art from other aspects of life and history and focused on the character and interaction of spaces, planes, rhythms and so forth. The significant context in which any particular work of art was to be understood was exclusively one of other comparable works. The social relevance of all the architecture discussed was acknowledged only in slighting references to some of the workers' housing of the previous decade.

Yet social concern was in the foreground of European discussions of architecture, encouraged by socialist governments which made it possible for architects again to build for the working and lower middle classes as well as for the rich. Even in America, where there has always been reluctance to deal with social and political implications of design, Lewis Mumford was insistently pointing them out in his historical and critical writings. Le Corbusier and other modernist associates formed the *Congrés Internationale de l'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM) in the late 1920s to create an ongoing forum of leading architects concerned with the interaction of architectural and urban design and with mass housing. The social thrust of this aspect of contemporary architecture became more apparent in writings of the 1940s, notably in the Giedion's *Space-Time and Architecture* and Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design*, which were required reading in every architectural school in the country until the early 1960s.

Social awareness manifested itself in two distinct ways. The first, which is usually called "functionalism," was concerned with redesigning traditional building types so that they would conform better with the behavioral patterns of users. Typical examples would be the design of efficient kitchens with easy access to dining areas, Wright's Usonian houses built without basements on flat slabs with radiant heating, or Le Corbusier's high-rise structures opened at ground level by *pilotis*. The second was concerned with the pressing urban problems of the modern super-city: overall urban design in the tradition of the Renaissance makers of ideal cities, solutions for low-cost and low-income housing and transportation. Let's call these two "Liberation" and "Amelioration."

What excited us students was the realization that the struggle of the new architecture for recognition could be associated with efforts to realize a social order of increased equality and freedom. There really was a great gap between the values and manners of the generation of Edwardians and Teddy Roosevelt and those of the postwar period. Modern architecture proposed an environment that gave shape to the desire to escape the era of stuffiness and class segregation. It offered a physical liberation that complemented the psychic liberation of a new generation. In criticisms of modernism today, the fact of liberation is forgotten because it was so successful. Today it seems that people must always have had houses and work places accommodated to modern life, and we hear only of those aspects of modern design that failed to liberate or created new confinements.

It was not just the early masters who were interested in amelioration. After World War II, a younger group of architects broke away from the CIAM to form Team Ten because they found their elders too utopian and because there were fewer socialist governments to support social programs. They found ways to work with individual industrialists, local communities and even labor unions to realize housing and settlements. And in the 1960s, especially in this country, the anti-establishment spirit spawned advocacy design. In its most extreme form, advocacy extended even to assigning the task of determining not only a project's program but also its architectural design to user-architect teams. That led to some pretty incoherent buildings exhibiting a complexity and contradiction of which Venturi never dreamed.

The '60s constituted a watershed in the story of social concern in architecture. This country had never given wide support to government enterprise, and many urban renewal schemes failed catastrophically to improve the lives of poor people. Though the fault was primarily in the structure of our society and in inadequate social and political planning, the failure discredited the architectural concepts that had given shape to the projects.

Toward the end of the decade, community institutions, especially universities, gradually withdrew from building programs. Architectural commissions began to come primarily from large corporate clients, developers and an occasional millionaire homebuilder. The art museum was the paradigm of the new age—what star architect can you name who has not designed at least one art museum? Whether they are nominally public or private, American museums are controlled by the same dollar and yen elite as the corporations, an elite that is presently prepared to spend as much on a single work of art as on the museum in which it will be housed. In the absence of the forces that encouraged amelioration in earlier decades, the governments, communities and concerned and wealthy individuals, the concept lost its appeal.

Not only were the social aims of modern architecture subverted at this time: the style itself was kidnapped and neutered by corporate wealth. The bland glass box of innumerable skyscrapers transformed the innovations of the earlier twentieth century into a fashionable form without meaning. Moreover, the ideals of modernism were blamed for the travesties committed in its name.

Inevitably some kind of post-modernism would emerge to counter this trend. But what kind? There was a choice between seeking to reinvest architecture with a new, independent prospect of its significance in society, and offering to the corporate world a new and less bland image. The latter prevailed. Venturi, who may have intended to choose the higher path in his book *Complexity and Contradiction*, later produced with his partners *Learning from Las Vegas*, a primer for collaborating with and encouraging corporate image makers.

I haven't seen many instances of the first option. One, to stay with the written word, would be Aldo Rossi's *Architecture of the City* and other essays, which accept the improbability of changing the world through architecture and look to evolution rather than revolution.

Rossi suggested that architecture should work out of the underlying forms of the city's past, the types of building and of building groups, to address society through a revivifying of its memories and continuities. This doesn't define any practical design solutions but it does give the designer a responsibility more communal and more exhalting than the appeal to individual clients. The problem is that it is applicable mainly to building in European environments with long histories rather than in a young country like ours.

Modernist amelioration was dismissed as the naive or authoritarian effort of architects to take on tasks that either belong to social agencies or are irrelevant. The attack came from two quarters, right and left. The right, identified with writings by Peter Blake, Charles Jencks, Denise Scott Brown and Robert A.M. Stern, proposed that true social responsibility is realized by architecture that conveys humanist values. It is hard to argue with platitudes that are not backed up by any serious articulation of principles. The impression was that an Ionic column, an oculus or a pitched roof—all of which are irrelevant to the experience of the average modern person—is a humanist value regardless of how it is used.

The attack from the left was represented by Manfredo Tafuri's *Architecture and Utopia*, which has been misserved by its miserable English translation. His argument is that in a late capitalist environment, social amelioration is inherently contradictory because the efforts could be realized only by the powerful forces that cause the oppressive conditions requiring amelioration. Socially oriented architecture is utopian, reinforcing the contradictions of present-day Western society by proposing cosmetic improvements that make it supportable. His answer is essentially to give up the effort so long as we remain in the present political and social condition. We have been offered the choice between fuzzy disregard of the social dimension and paralysis of imagination.

The neglect in current discourse of the social implications of architecture is in sharp contrast to the evolution of architectural history since the modernist period, and this contrast is a sign of disarray in our intellectual life. Architectural history in the course of the 35 years that I have been practicing it has moved steadily toward the interpretation of the architecture of past times in terms of social, political and economic forces. The constructed formalism of Hitchcock and Johnson's 1932 book, which focused on individual and period style evolving in an autonomous architectural culture, was characteristic of both the historical and critical stance of the time.

The current approach to historical interpretation is the outcome of a remarkable flowering of ideas in Europe during the 1960s and 1970s, involving structuralism and its analog, semiology, the Annales group of historians in France, and neo-Marxism, notably that of the Frankfurt school.

The thrust of this diverse development was to focus attention on the synchronic study of events or buildings in the light of the complexity of ideas and the social, economic and political conditions of their moments, rather than to see them in diachronic terms, as part of a sequence of like occurrences or buildings. Further, the neo-Marxist achievement was not simply to reveal the significance of the material economic base supporting the superstructure of cultural activity, but to widen the sphere of ideological criticism. Architectural works might be seen in terms of the ways in which they fulfilled not only the stated needs of the client or the program, but also those ideological needs that were subliminal, unconscious and so intimately tied to the needs of the social and class structure that only an outsider, like a historian or anthropologist, could perceive them. This made it possible to subject the program itself, as well as the building design, to criticism.

It seems paradoxical that criticism and the writings of architects have moved away from references to the societal contexts while historians—not to speak of psychiatrists and anthropologists—have been moving toward them. We are all subject to the same intellectual influences and we are all addressing the built environment. The fact that designers, now that they are employing motives from the past, have become much more sympathetic to history than they were at the end of the modernist period ought to make for a community of outlook. But history as it is seen in a postmodern mode is not the same as ours: ours is rather one of free-floating motives unrooted in their culture, while historians have become increasingly interested in roots.

But in one sense the new history is isolated from, and the new architecture is attuned to, a present-day society. In politics there has been a retreat from efforts to define and to deal in modern ways with major social deficiencies, such as housing, health care and racial and sexual inequities. The socialist parties abroad and the left at home are in disarray; all of the major Western governments are now headed by leaders suspicious of social programs and oriented to individual entrepreneurial initiative. The condition is analogous to the abandonment in architecture of societal programming and the return to a focus on the individual client.

We ought, however, to be able to come together in support of an architecture able to transform, as great architecture has done in earlier centuries, those aspects of the architecture of the past that arouse a response and stimulate the imagination today. This means seeking a deeper knowledge of the forces that formed past architecture and a committed search for the forms that embody our communal aspirations today.

Can we expect architects to take on problems that no one is putting before them? Yes. Le Corbusier's Citrohan house or Ville Radieuse and Wright's Usonian house were conceived not on commission but as a way of articulating ideas about the accommodation of modern life. It was an ethical dimension to their careers, an effort to serve not simply the fortuitous client but the whole of humanity, that is less in evidence today.

Architects, as specialists of the manmade physical environment, have the opportunity and responsibility to suggest solutions that under more hospitable political conditions could ultimately stimulate further experiment in an abandoned area.