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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.
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 Congrès 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 creat-
ed new confinements.

It was not just the early masters who were interested in
ametabolism. After World War II, a younger group of archi-
tects 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 com-
munities and even labor unions to realize housing and settle-
ments. 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 architec-
tural design to user-architect teams. That led to some pretty
incoherent buildings exhibiting a complexity and contradic-
tion of which Venturi never dreamed.

The ‘60s constituted a watershed in the story of social con-
cern in architecture. This country had never given wide sup-
sport 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 pro-
grams. Architectural commissions began to come primarily
from large corporate clients, developers and an occasional mil-
liionaire 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 nominal-
ly public or private, American museums are controlled by the
same dollar and yen elite as the corporations, an elite that is
reasonably 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 ametabolism in earlier decades, the
governments, communities and concerned and wealthy indi-
viduals, the concept lost its appeal.

Not only were the social aims of modern architecture sub-
verted 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 twenti-
eth century into a fashionable form without meaning. More-
over, 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 reinvent architecture with a new, indepen-
dent prospect of its significance in society, and offering to the
corporate world a new and less bland image. The latter pre-
vented 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 collab-
orating 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 evolu-
tion 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 exhilarating than the appeal to indi-
vidual 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.

Modernism’s alienation was dismissed as the naive or
authoritarian effect of architects to take on tasks that either
depend 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 responsibili-
ty is realized by architecture that conveys humane 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 miserved by
its miserable English translation. His argument is that in a late
capitalist environment, social amelioration is inherently con-
tadictory because the efforts could be realized only by
the powerful forces that cause the oppressive conditions requiring
amelioration. Socially oriented architecture is utopian, rein-
forging the contradictions of present-day Western society by
proposing cosmetic improvements that make it supportable.
His answer is essential 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 archi-
tectural 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 atten-
tion on the synchronic study of events or buildings in the light of
the consistency of ideas and the social, economic and politi-
cal conditions of their moment, 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 sim-
ply to reveal the significance of the material economic base
supporting the superstructure of cultural activity, but to widen
the scope 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 social
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 commu-
nity of outbreak. But history as it is seen in a postmodern mode
is not the same as ours: ours is rather one of free-floating
motives unmoored in their culture, while historians have
become increasingly interested in root.

But in one sense the new history is isolated from, and the
new architecture is attuned to, a present-day society. In politi-
cic there has been a retreat from efforts to define and to deal
in modern ways with major social deficiencies, such as hous-
ing, 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 suspi-
cious 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 Radleuse and Wright's Usonian house were conceived
not on commission but in 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 forlorn client
but the whole of humanity, that is less in evidence today.

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