

In the Manner of an Architect at Work: Questions of Economic Value

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When Mark Twain had Tom Sawyer turn Aunt Polly's punishment into an act of personal gain, he wanted us to believe that Tom triumphed at the expense of his friends' time and pleasure. It is true that Tom is a brilliant salesman who gained his freedom and idleness by enticing his friends to do his work for him, but it is a mistake to think that those who white washed the fence were acting against their will and sense of happiness. Essentially, Tom did not want to obey what he was relegated to do because it would have been a response to punishment, thus provoking a sense of breakdown in his psychological structure. The other boys, however, found in the work an opportunity to lose themselves in the beauty of the day while accomplishing something well needed. One could go as far as to say that the easy movement of the brush under the warm sun was a leisurely act that made the boys think of profound things, well beyond their immediate context. Of economic value here is the way in which work was performed within the parameters of human capacity for pleasure.

But let's say that Tom became excited about his new discovery and decided to start a business where painting services are rendered against profit. Let's further say that after significant success, he went on to purchase helpful machinery and elevate the position of his friends to the level of managers and executives. The company expands and becomes a repository of marketing teams, clerks, computer analysts and even chemical engineers. Would the initial group of painters stick together? Would the new development turn work into a form of drudgery like Aunt Polly's original intention with Tom?

In this paper I want to take up the issue of economic value of work in architectural practice. At the heart of my concern is the way in which capitalistic influences have eliminated the chance for one to cultivate a relationship between one and one's work. The spirit of arriving at a solution by way of intellectual discourse has all but been replaced by simple tasks of routine production, and the result is such that architects are finding it harder than ever to find room for self worth in the workplace. Both Robert Gutman and Dana Cuff have lamented the escalating difficulties of the last thirty

years; they have accurately cited such issues as rising competition, increasing architectural population, changing structure of demand, varying social stratification-all and more as reasons for forcing architects to proceed in ways that go against the grain of their thinking. My intention here is to give these conditions a historical and theoretical perspective in which America will stand out as a nation of complex economic and political aspirations- aspirations that have practically dominated every discipline, from law to medicine and from art to architecture.

This is not to say that other nations are somehow less attached to the value of the dollar, only that America is more fundamentally a nation whose history is an outcrop of financially driven ambitions. The truth to this can be unearthed by surveying the events that lead to the rise of the American Revolution. The perception that America is a geographical bounty of agricultural and aesthetic dimension gave the first jobless European settlers the promise of finding living opportunity and freedom through financial independence. But once here and well exposed to the reality that most of their hard earned tax money was being shipped back to support the imperial appetite of England, they stood up and fought the very system from which they came. Therefore, unlike the French Revolution, for instance, where the uprising was a product of class struggle between the working class and the aristocracy and where, no doubt, the element of financial dominance was part of the tension, the American fight for independence was fundamentally more connected with land value and hard currency. My theoretical departure is to show that much of the fatigue at work is largely the product of the last fifty years to contrive a relationship between capitalistic production and the process of making architecture. The two are imminently at odds with each other, that is, while a shoe manufacturer, for instance, has an imminent chance of success in a capitalistic society, namely because of the size, general appeal and modest price of his product, an architect is bound to fail for exactly the same reasons but opposite characteristics.

As late as the late 60s and early 70s, the profession was largely composed of the equivalent of 19th century artisans

who had a direct and tangible impact on the projects they were working on. The recession in the mid 70s forced architects to step back and take another look at the way they had structured their business. Increased financial pressure coupled with rising supply of architects produced by the baby boomers, ushered a demand for a new philosophy of work. At this juncture, the architect was under tremendous temptation to conform to the capitalistic models that had demonstrated success in other fields. In many ways the architect had no other choice but to succumb to the capitalistic culture around him, which had been swelling since W.W.II. To be sure, some architects had already risen with the tide but it was not until crises had struck that the profession as a whole began to turn around. Of the most significant and telling indicators of this shift lies in the rising number of large firms. As I shall explain later, expansion of small firms into companies, corporations and organizations, is one of the characteristic features of capitalistic production. In this light, Gutman explains that

"The very large firms are a phenomenon that emerged following W.W.II. They represent the advanced edge along which growth in the profession is taking place, and they dominate the market for architectural services. In the ten year period between 1972 and 1982, for example, all firms with employees increased in number by 20%, while firms with over fifty on the staff rose by about 50%."¹

But for capitalism to work on behalf of the architect, the latter must go beyond superficial steps of becoming a better businessman. He must surrender previous views and accept the fact that in a capitalistic formula, work habits and employee relationships exert the greatest impact on the success of profit. From this point on the architect begins to seek ways of harnessing the office setting whereby work is more about production than it is about thinlung. This departure begins rather innocently, but, as Marx has already reminded us, before too long it escalates into a full exploitation of the worker. In the following analysis, I shall quickly explore the historical events that marshaled this concern. The introduction of figures like Adam Smith, Alexander Hamilton, Jefferson and Marx will signal an attempt to make a correlation between factory setting and that of architecture, which to some scholars is a giant leap and thus an inaccurate comparison. It is true that the condition of work in an architectural office is not as harsh and degrading as the case used to be in the old textile industries of the early and mid-19th century, when buildings were overcrowded with workers who worked with machines they did not care for. Nor is the situation as extreme as that created by the assembly line where the division of labor had its greatest impact on the morale of the work setting. However, I do believe that the very motivation that reduced labor to a mindless motion in the examples above are the very same causes that ushered the problems in the architectural office. The situation in architecture could be termed worse due to the fact that the

problems here are not as visible and obvious as they were in the factory; they are masked behind the misconception that white collar jobs occupy prestigious status, and therefore are empty of hardship. This is evident by the comparison that while factory workers stood up in unison and fought the system that usurped their power, architects have been unable to conjure up a collective voice to influence the meaning of work. Rather, the general attitude is one of helplessness.

Division of labor is imminent to the idea of capitalism. The origins of the theory date back to the human philosophy of David Hume and John Locke, but it was Adam Smith who first introduced it as the natural armature of the manufacturing apparatus. What he intended to promote, however, was very different from the way it turned out to be in the hands of capitalists two generations later. Smith approached the subject from the point of view of the individual, who is a selfish creature capable of showing interest only in that part of the manufacturing process that belongs to him. Smith, therefore, was less interested in the making of organizations than he was in the way a healthy economy can be serviced by looking at what is germane in human nature. That the capitalists found kinship with his theory owes much to the clarity of his description of the pin factory at the outset of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). In plain English and vivid rendition, it spelled out the composition of the future assembly line: "one man draws out the wire, another straightens it, and the third cuts it, a fourth points it, a fifth grinds it." Nonetheless, it is curious that despite his outspoken sentiments against organizations, industrialization and machinery, Smith is still perceived to be the father of mainstream Capitalism. Capitalism and Smith are similar insofar as they are both fiscally oriented, but they are dissimilar in that capitalism depends on unpredictable human material consumption, while Smith on predictable demand for agricultural goods.

It was not until the time of Jefferson that industrialization began to shape the American economy. For a long period, Jefferson resisted the idea of opening the continent to industrial exploitation and was adamant about retaining agrarian values. But, eventually, he lost his battle against a congress who had come under the influence of Alexander Hamilton; Jefferson's most ardent critic. Hamilton argued in favor of asserting America's influence in the world in the form of a strong industrial economy: With the aid of "artificial power," natural resources could be transformed into products that would not only replace those that were previously imported, but, if produced abundantly, would generate income through export. Surplus value soon became the emblem of international power while machinery occupied a dual purpose: On the one hand, it was a tool for facilitating production, and on the other, a method of taking toil out of labor and giving the worker greater access to free time. It was from this point on that pleasure and work began to be perceived as being exclusive of each other. If a sense of freedom can only be achieved outside work, then work must contain only drudgery.

In her intensely literate analysis of the *Human Condition*,

Hanna Arendt supports the view that even though the industrial revolution and the rise of democracy eliminated "violence" from slavery and eventually emancipated forced labor, "it is less certain that...(the) progress was in the direction of freedom."² She blames the problem on the first industrialists who incorporated the machine "not...to build a world but...to ease the labors of (their) own life process."³ Therefore, the problem of the industrialists' arguments since then has rested on the assumption that all labor intensive work is demeaning and incapable of inspiring pleasure, which has made human presence on earth appear in the form of a struggle to salvage good time rather than a search to infuse pleasure as part and parcel of everyday life.

Between 1820 and 1850, new machinery and new industries began to reshape the context of work. Manufacturers extolled the machine as a good way of invoking order and predictability in the workplace. Those who complained were quickly replaced by more willing bodies, namely, immigrants who were under pressure to find jobs and get assimilated into the American culture. This new abundance of cheap, albeit unskilled, workers challenged the capitalist to simplify work so that with little or no training anyone can satisfy the needs of production.

By 1867, Industrial Capitalism had not fully used the machine to exasperate the meaning out of work: most machines were still tools used as extensions of the body and not the other way around. Yet Marx was able to predict with biting accuracy the kind of effect that only 20th century sophisticated machinery could have had on the psychology of work. His critique is central to the stages that preceded the publication of *Capital*, namely, the collaboration between the invention of "Scientific Management"⁴ and that of the assembly line. He did not necessarily dwell on either one of these inventions but on the kind of thinking that stemmed from their unity. Like no other two inventions, they brought about a frightening image of how far Capitalism is willing to go to propel surplus value at the expense of human need for intellectual engagement. What the assembly line did was take the vague idea of division of labor and exaggerate it in such a way so as to demonstrate its accessibility and significance to future capitalists. Before its use by Ford in the first decade of this century, the division of labor was largely spread throughout the fabric of society, where small capitalists worked to supply a segment of a bigger product. The assembly line brought all these separate manufacturers under one roof, and therefore, under one capitalist. Whatever problem there was in organizing such a large population was pacified by management techniques that controlled all decisions before they reached the realm of the worker. The essence of management was, and still is, to eliminate uncertainty by studying and documenting all possible scenarios well ahead of production. In a book entitled *The Degradation of Work in The 20th Century*, the author explains:

"(t)he production units operate like a hand, watched, corrected and controlled by a distant brain...The con-

cept of control adopted by modern management requires that every activity in production have its several parallel activities in the management center: each must be devised, precalculated, tested, laid out, assigned and ordered, checked and inspected and recorded throughout its duration and upon completion."⁵

I have already touched on the issue that the purpose of surplus value is to acquire profit well beyond covering expenses on wages and other assets necessary for production. The capitalist manufacturer always looks to further this aim by reducing the cost of labor. He succeeds by purchasing the kind of machinery that simplify tasks and eliminate the need for expensive skills. What takes place as a result is a formal transaction between employer and employee in which the latter arrives at the table as a powerless body and sells his capacity in the form of general activity. Once the purchase has been procured, the success of the capitalists depends on how well he exploits those who labor for him. In order to realize the greatest returns, he must fine tune the relationship between the pace of labor and that of machinery, so that the two can resonate with efficiency. But to subjugate so many workers to constant production, indeed to turn imminent human complacency into mechanical gestures, it is important to view supply and demand as two disconnected entities, one lagging behind the other: No constant supply of any product can be matched by a similar demand for its consumption.

Imminent in this ideology is the ability to absorb what remains unsold by lack of immediate demand. The inevitability of mass production finds an outlet in, first, storage, then marketing and later shipping. While the capitalist waits for demand to rise again, he must find room for his increasing inventory. If demand does not rise naturally, marketing strategies are employed to lure the consumer into finding a new need for the product. And if this fails again, modern shipping methods are mobilized to find new markets outside the capitalist's regional context. The point here lies in the fact that the success of capitalistic production presupposes the presence of key ingredients; namely, the ability to produce commodities that have general appeal, that can be stored and easily shipped.

The above Marxist scenario finds its way into the architectural office through a different and less linear route. The effect, however, is practically the same. The issue of surplus value is especially crucial to the business of architecture where future demands for architectural services are extremely unpredictable. The architect must acquire substantial surplus value as insurance against fluctuations in the economy. Through cultural osmosis and general capitalistic trend around him, the architect knows that the key to surplus value is in reducing wages and increasing mass production. But simulating the ideas of assembly line thinking is by necessity inappropriate in architecture: Very few tasks in architecture can be reduced to mechanical gestures, and the idea of mass producing buildings is insane at best, even at the

scale of mobile homes where Capitalism and Construction have been known to be one. The architect, therefore, searches for new ways of translating his business into an apparatus of capitalistic efficiency.

In a complex subcultural network of affairs, the new capitalist architect tends towards eliminating centers of thinking. Like the factory capitalist, he accomplishes this by purchasing machines and labor. Unlike the machines in the factory, however, the machines in architecture pretend to raise the level of skill than demean it. At first, the machines present a new level of sophistication, a new professional status if you will. But in the long run this proves to be the most invidious plot against the office infrastructure. What happens is this. Once the new technology works its way into the operational mainstream, it starts dissipating work so that all obstacles are liquidated along the path of financial returns. It not only takes the craft away from design but also exercises power over the intelligentsia. This happens because by virtue of the money invested in it and its operators, it pulls away premature ideas and immediately executes them into production: Machines must continue running to justify their costly presence in the office.

Along with new machinery comes new personnel who further dissolve the intellect into increments of isolated tasks. Construction administrators, construction managers, marketing artists, cost estimators- all work together to dissipate individual talent, and thereby create a pseudo-democratic setting where everyone is given equal attention. Marx pointed out that at this stage there is "a tendency to equalize and reduce to one and the same level every kind of work that has to be done by the minders of the machine..."⁷⁶ In time, when the dynamics of the office settles down, the balance shifts in favor of those who are prepared to "denounce their desultory habits of work, and to identify themselves with the unvarying regularity of the complex automaton."⁷⁷ Those who are able to identify with the language and politics of the market world, ultimately stand ahead of the rest. To be sure, this army of technocrats is not entirely part of a calculated move to lull the office, but is a product of a mounting complexity in the construction and legal industry. Buildings today are technologically more sophisticated than they used to be only thirty years ago, they demand the presence of at least one employee to conciliate between the disparate information of technical consultants.

And what about mass production? The new architect acknowledges that in order to become a successful capitalist, he must abide by the whole formula. But his inability to externalize the effect of mass production, for reasons already mentioned, namely, that architecture cannot be stored, packaged and shipped- because of this impotence he is forced to look inside his office for clues. He searches for ways to proceed and realizes that the truth of mass production-the pre-existent condition that makes mass production such a lethal instrument- is not so much in the numbers but in finding one good solution that works for hundreds and thousands of people. Thus by reversing the situation and

looking at it from another angle, the architect now finds that the only way through which the effect of mass production can be invested, is in narrowing design to a single solution; either as an office rule or through categorizing plans according to typologies. The former can best be summed by referring to offices that have strict rules about how you build any building, no matter what it is or where it is: Steel structure, brick veneer, metal windows, pitched roofs and so on. There is no time wasted pondering the appropriateness and the poetry of the assemblage. The latter is more open minded and allows for some creativity given you abide by the rules of the established layout: You may choose from a selection of materials, shapes, windows, given you acknowledge the traditional location of lobby, library, gymnasium and on and on. There are examples of extreme conditions: Those who work for a corporate symbol, for instance, do not even touch questions of design; they only worry about where to locate the building on the site.

At any rate, what is interesting about this chain of events is that after a long period of watching the office structure unfold into pockets of different powers, the intellect trains itself to accept the fact that little or no importance is siphoned back in its direction, and that what is expected is not the showing of talent but the showing of obedience. This development does not occur overnight, nor does it assert itself in the form of conspiracy, but rather slowly evolves and falls like a blanket of expectations over the entire office population.

It is interesting to note that even the element of shipping finds its way inside the architectural office. While a shoe manufacturer may ship his shoes across the country to find a new buyer, the architect passes this problem onto the employee, which means that when work runs out people like interns and young architects are the first to be sacrificed and shipped to other areas where work is available. It is not unknown that an intern finds that he has to ship himself two or three times in a period of five years. This sense of instability has become part of the culture of architectural practice, in which economic trends are always studied in search of the next employment opportunity.

The lack of freedom for artistic yet responsible expression has triggered several reactions. In many cases it has meant a back lash of individualism that has more to do with financial exhibition than the kind of personal repose that Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman had in mind. In the case of intellectuals who at one point had the ambition of improving their built context through practice, now have either left architecture altogether or have found shelter in the world of academia. The concern here is about the demise of the proletariat and how he came to identify his work with lack of enthusiasm. In *The Princess Casamassima*, Henry James reminds us that the proletariat need not be the unhappy person whom we have come to identify wage earners with, but in fact is capable of great pleasure at work should he be able to retain the precious insinuation between mind, hand and tool. It may be fruitless to think we can go back to a period

when architectural work was about the kind of craft that Ruskin found so essential to human spirit in *The Stones of Venice*. But it is not impossible to solve the dilemma on individual basis.

Ultimately the whole employment system will have to resort to more creative ways of making use of idle talent. One way to accomplish this is by thinking of architectural knowledge as a repository of different skills- skills that can diversify the architect's opportunities for finding pleasure and meaning in work again. In his best moments, Marx insisted that we must not look at ourselves as experts, but as human beings of varying skills: We may be musicians at night and carpenters by day, or mechanics one season and artists the other. As architects this trait comes natural to us even though recent technological trends have forced us to think of ourselves as either specialists or plebeian workers. In times of slow architectural demand, we can turn to our

skills in carpentry, music, writing, teaching, landscaping, visualizing and whatever else that may speak of our capacity to remain engaged.

NOTES AND BOOKS

- ¹ Gutman, Robert, *Architectural Practice: A Critical view*, Princeton Architectural Press, 1988, P 5 & 6.
- ² Arendt, Hanna, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, 1958, P 129.
- ³ *Ibid*, P 147.
- ⁴ "Scientific Management" is a term invented by Frederick Taylor who divided human action into time slots and thus sought to turn laboring movements into predictable efficiency. The product of his experiments later became known as "Taylorism."
- ⁵ Baverman, Harry, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, New York, 1974, P 125.
- ⁶ Marx, Karl, *Capital*, New York, Vintage Books, 1959, P 124.
- ⁷ *Ibid*. P 126.