

# The Architectural Community and the Polis:

## Thinking About Ends, Premises, and Architectural Education

PHILIP BESS  
Andrews University

### THE ENDS OF ARCHITECTURE

Historically, architecture has been understood in terms of multiple ends, and these ends often exist in a state of tension. One long prominent end of architecture has been defined with reference to communities, more specifically with reference to the buildings commissioned by communities. In the architecture commissioned by representatives of religious or political or artistic or athletic communities, architects have understood themselves to have a primary obligation to address the variety of practical and formal issues important to their patrons—and I would argue that addressing the concerns of patrons (even the formal concerns of patrons) is a **pragmatic** duty not superfluous but intrinsic to architecture.

But there are other equally prominent ends of architecture; and a second has been a definition of purpose in architecture with reference to the architectural community and **its** history and standards of excellence. These standards include not only such abstract traditional architectural virtues as durability, convenience, beauty, and decorum, but also particular works of architecture that have functioned as iconic and authoritative points of reference: the Parthenon, the Pantheon, the Colosseum, the Arch of Constantine, San Andrea at Mantua, the Tempietto, San Carlo alle Quatra Fontane, the University of Virginia, the Robie House, the Villa Savoye, the Chrysler Building, etc. It is not too much to say that for architects these purposes are primarily, and in my own view not improperly, **formal** rather than pragmatic. And although the formal concerns of architects cannot supersede in importance the pragmatic concerns of their patrons (for if they did, the architecture would likely not be built), these formal concerns are in some way the essence of architecture and **are** what distinguish architecture from "mere" building, to which architecture is otherwise and at all times necessarily and intrinsically connected.

It should be easy to see the potential tension between these two historic ends of architecture. This tension can be succinctly summarized as the inherent possibility for conflict between what the patron wants and what the architect wants. We know however, from seeing successful works of architecture, that such conflicts can be resolved more or less satisfac-

torily. But there is yet another historically prominent end of architecture, one that goes beyond the good of the patron and his community, and beyond the good of the architect and her community; and that end is the good of the city. This end is implicit in the traditional architectural virtue of decorum; and it links the community of architecture to that larger community, the city. But this third end implies something more: that architecture is not only an end in itself, but is also one contributing means to (as well, perhaps, as one tangible manifestation of) some higher end. This higher end is the good life for human beings, which in an even more direct and fundamental way is also the end for which the city exists.

To reiterate: Historically, one purpose of architecture refers to the interests of particular communities that function as patrons of architecture. A second purpose refers to standards of excellence within the architectural community. And a third purpose—which I will call civic purpose—is similar to the first two in that it also refers architectural ends to a community; but it differs in that the community to which it refers, the city, is rarely if ever the direct patron of architecture. This difference therefore requires some further consideration of just what kind of community the city is, and the nature of **its** purposes.

### THE ORDERS AND ENDS OF THE CITY AND THEIR PREMISES

I propose that the city is best understood as a community of communities, the foremost purpose of which is to enable its citizens to live the best life possible. This is the end than which there is none more comprehensive, for one does not seek the best life possible for the sake of something else; and this is an understanding that is broadly Aristotelian in its outlines. I am quite aware that there is considerable disagreement today about both the good life for human beings and the nature and ends of the city; and I will discuss some of those disagreements shortly. But our language itself testifies to this traditional understanding of the city as a community of communities, for the very word **politics** designates the **art** of ordering in right relationship the various communities that comprise the **polis**.

As a community of communities, the city exists dynamically and simultaneously as an economic order, a moral order, and a formal order; and I would neither deny, nor can overemphasize, the fact that these orders interact and overlap in complex and unpredictable ways. But we can see for ourselves the economic order of the city embodied in commercial and familial institutions; the moral order of the city in institutions of religion, law, medicine, education, politics, and family; and the formal order of the city in architecture and urban design.

Within the larger community of the city, smaller communities provide both occasions and social, physical, and cultural contexts within which the purposes of architecture are partially defined. But because the city as a community embraces a diversity of smaller communities (including the architectural community), architects have traditionally felt obligated to give greater attention and prestige to the public and civic spaces of the city, largely through giving formal primacy to public and civic buildings fronting and defining such spaces. Why have architects felt so obliged? I suspect that this obligation has been grounded in a mutual recognition among members of smaller communities within the city that what they have in common with each other is their status as citizens; and also a further recognition by architects—as shapers of the formal order of cities—that well designed civic spaces are both a symbol and a manifest artifact of the urban community of which they themselves are part.

This understanding of the traditional ends of architecture, the traditional ends of the city, and their relationship to one another does not deny inherent and perennial conflicts and tensions between the pragmatic, formal, and civic purposes of architecture; nor does it deny that there will always be conflicts among citizens about the nature of their common good and how best to achieve it. But it does imply that ideas of "the good life" and "the common good" are live ideas; and it also implies that architects understand themselves to be citizens as well as architects, i.e., that they are members of, and therefore have obligations to, more than one community.<sup>1</sup>

From live notions of "the good life," "the common good," "membership" and "obligation," coherent theories and practices of architecture and city making can follow. But I think it is precisely our misery as a profession and as educators that both the culture of architecture and our larger political culture currently lack such live notions.<sup>1</sup> The urgings from the Boyer Report and other quarters that architectural education reorient itself to the making and sustaining of "community" notwithstanding, I see few architectural programs today with the cultural, intellectual, and institutional resources needed to sustain such an enterprise.

### COMMUNAL SOURCES OF RENEWAL

We do not lack these resources entirely, however; but it might surprise (and possibly dismay) some of you to hear where I think they may reside. They do **not** reside, I suspect, in what we tend to consider our elite private institutions of architec-

tural education (and I will try shortly to explain why). They **may** reside as ongoing habits in architectural programs in state universities historically grounded in a regional mission and sensibility; but these habits may or may not be supported by coherent intellectual articulations of the nature and ends of architecture and architecture's relationship to human communities; and where these are not supported intellectually, I suspect their future is tenuous. Where these intellectual and cultural resources **do** reside is in those architecture programs located in academic institutions sponsored by religious communities, of which there are, I believe, four in the United States that have accredited professional degree programs.

Now, I can hardly maintain that any of these institutions are or have ever been widely regarded as leaders in American architectural education; or that it is necessarily the case that they ever will be. I simply maintain that, whether they know it or not, such institutions are unusually well situated and equipped both **culturally** and **intellectually** to promote coherent theories of architecture and urban design that understand these activities in terms of communal purposes—including the purposes of communities as patrons, the purposes of the community of architects, and the purposes of the larger community of the city.

One reason an architecture program located in this kind of academic institution should be able to do this is because, if it is healthy, such an institution is **already an example of** the kind of community that historically has supported and been supported by architecture made with reference to communal purposes. To put this another way: regardless of the theological substance at the heart of any such community (and I am not for an instant suggesting that such substance is either unimportant or that its status as believed truth is unchallengeable), its communal **form** is Aristotelian—and is therefore existentially supportive of traditional Aristotelian views of the nature and purpose of community generally, and of the city in particular.

But there's a second reason why architecture programs located in religious universities seem better suited than their secular counterparts to promote community. Religious communities tend to regard it as a truth of the human condition that individual human well being is necessarily related to communal membership and obligation; but even more importantly, they tend to believe (and **continue** to believe) that discovering, understanding, and serving the truth is the primary purpose of liberal education. And this last point has, I think, larger implications for architectural education than we tend at first glance to recognize.<sup>1</sup>

This idea that truth is the end of a liberal education may seem simply to confirm, or to reiterate in a little different way, both the NAAB's and the ACSA's own professed regard for the importance of a liberal education for the practice of architecture. But there is in fact a problem here; because in many institutions of both higher learning and architectural education—and especially those that aspire to be (or regard themselves as being) on the cutting edge—the very idea of truth, let alone its pursuit, is regarded as illusory. The ambi-

tion instead is to create and propound useful and aesthetically pleasing "fictions;" and to the extent that this is the direction in which the artistic and intellectual leadership of architecture and the academy are determined to go, it poses significant intellectual and practical challenges to architects and educators sympathetic to the Boyer report's call for architectural education and practice to be recast in part as exercises in building community. For while the ambition to create pleasing fictions will always engage the interests of some of the people some of the time, it is a singularly unhelpful approach to the necessarily long term projects of building and sustaining communities. And this is because in order to succeed in achieving long term objectives such as these, people generally need to believe in what they are doing.

### THEOLOGY, NATURE, AND ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION

I'd like to conclude with a brief consideration of how architectural education seriously engaged with an intellectual tradition grounded in religious community might differ today from architectural education not so grounded; and my sense is that this issue could be approached from a number of different directions. I've written elsewhere at some length about the difference between ethics and architecture grounded in traditional communitarian sensibilities, and ethics and architecture grounded in contemporary individualist sensibilities.<sup>4</sup> But this is only one area where contemporary attitudes about architecture and the city will logically differ between communities of shared belief and "communities" of shared unbelief.<sup>5</sup> One might just as profitably consider the formal differences that would likely manifest themselves as a consequence of different understandings of human freedom; or of the relationship between memory and hope, and the relationship of these to the creative act; or of the notion of artistic inspiration as it might relate not to the *zeitgeist* but rather to the *heiligegeist*. But here let me limit myself to a consideration of different views of nature and human nature; and suggest some implications for the architectural community that on the one hand follow from an understanding of nature as a product of chance, and the implications that on the other hand follow from a Christian (and antecedently, and still, Jewish) understanding of nature as created by God—a topic I choose because of the currency of, and the enthusiasm in architecture and architectural education for, the idea of "sustainable design.

Many today regard the belief that nature was created and is sustained by God to be irrational; and find it more rational to believe that nature is a product of chance. But although there are reasons that are given and evidence that can be marshalled to support either of these conclusions, in a fundamental way both are theories about mystery; and neither can be certified by the kind of logical proof that we customarily associate with either science or mathematics—indeed, scientists and mathematicians come down on both sides of the issue. In the view of nature as created, nature is regarded as

somehow purposeful, and this is seen as a sign of God's providence. In the view of nature as a product of chance, there is no purpose in nature beyond what human beings attempt—nobly or pitifully—to impose upon it.

In this latter view of nature, the only "law" discernible is the law of struggle, a process Darwin referred to as natural selection, guided by an impulse that Nietzsche referred to as the will-to-power. In this view, human culture is to be understood above all as a series of power relations; the traditional virtue of justice as an ever shifting compromise between parties of relatively equal power; and all historic so-called "morality" as a mask that disguises each individual's will-to-power (most often from him or herself).

We can concede that there is substantial evidence all around us to warrant such an interpretation of nature. But we need to recognize that such an interpretation of nature makes it hard to make a coherent and persuasive case for developing communal sensibilities in architectural education; or for encouraging an ethic of environmental sustainability; or for promoting, say, racial and gender equity in the architectural profession. The fact that some persons seem simultaneously to hold both this view of nature and these aspirations for architectural education can perhaps be attributed to personal sentiments and cultural habits that have not quite caught up with thought—or vice-versa. Regardless, with the premise that nature is a product of chance that issues in a war of all against all, one might well develop for purposes of self preservation the kind of respect for nature that one develops for a crafty and powerful enemy; but likewise, one could not in (quite precisely) good faith engage in sustained communal enterprises without in some fundamental way engaging in intellectual self deception. For to engage in such communal activities in good faith and not be self-deceiving implies a different understanding of nature.

Consider on the other hand an orthodox Judeo-Christian theology of creation and some of its implications for a theory of urban and environmental sustainability. In this view, the first fact about nature is that it is created by God (which, incidentally, implies neither a static view of nature, nor that everything and every impulse found in nature is good); and the second fact—which also expresses a common intuition that human beings occupy a kind of intermediate place in the universe—is that human beings are both part of and different from nature. Philosophically, this view of nature (and human nature) distinguishes itself immediately from at least three other views of nature prominent in the contemporary intellectual landscape.

One view holds that nature is simply raw material for human consumption, an operative (if often only implicit) notion fundamental to the industrial revolution and modern economies. A second—in part a reaction to the first, but also with a long intellectual history of its own—would make no fundamental distinction between the human and the natural; but this has the conflicting consequences of on the one hand rendering any human intervention in the natural environment inherently suspect, while on the other hand rendering any

such intervention logically immune from criticism. Yet a third (common among today's critical theorists) holds that nature itself is a construct the alleged properties of which are human inventions rather than human discoveries; from which it would seem to follow logically that nature commands no inherent respect.

In contrast to these views, historic Judeo-Christian theology understands nature to exist independently of human beings; that "human nature" is part of nature; and that it is part of human nature to make culture — including physical culture, made from found nature transformed by human efforts into cultural artifacts. Human beings moreover are by nature social; and different cultures are the social and historical forms of individual and communal human aspirations for, and understandings of, the very best kind of life. The cultivated landscape, buildings, and cities are, in turn, the physical and spatial forms of culture. Arts such as agriculture, architecture, and city making are cultural interventions in nature; but are also themselves in some sense natural. Indeed, it is in this sense that Thomas Aquinas meant that reason is the tool with and by which man (male and female) participates in nature, and that art is "reason in making." It is also this sense in which Aristotle meant that "art imitates nature," i.e., that the artist acts towards his or her desired ends in a manner analogous to the way that nature acts towards her ends, because that is man's role in nature as the "rational animal."

To invoke the name of Aristotle is to underscore the fact that divine revelation is not the sole source of this traditional western understanding of nature. But Judeo-Christian religion is the historic bearer of this understanding of nature; and Judeo-Christian theology suggests at least two imperatives that should point architectural education to the ends of urban and environmental sustainability. One would be a general imperative to acquire knowledge of nature, which in architectural education would be an imperative to cultivate among architects and their patrons that knowledge of nature germane to the art of building. The second would be to promote an environmental ethic that in the Christian tradition falls under the rubric of "stewardship."

Knowledge of nature "germane to building" includes an awareness and understanding of the variety of physical and social forces that influence the building design process and its results: physics, materials, climate, geography, human nature, etc. The virtue of stewardship implies **both** a uniquely human ability to be caretakers of aspects of the natural order **and** the responsibility to do so, precisely because creation belongs to God and not to us. Stewardship also implies a recognition that whatever else human beings are, we are also "of nature;" and that to pursue through building and city making our own good independent of a knowledge of and respect for that larger environment of which we are part is to misunderstand the nature of our own good. In this view, the natural order is something which commands human respect, including an appropriate measure of fear that is itself natural; but this fear is less like the grudging respect for an enemy than the respect for a friend whose purposes are sometimes but not

always the same as our own.

My comments here should be interpreted neither as an exhortation nor as a plea; nor do they represent any sort of triumphalist political ambition for either Jewish or Christian religious communities. My comments are meant instead simply as an observation. The culture of architecture, including architectural education, seems to me in disarray. We want artistic independence and communal belonging, a sense of inner-driven artistic vocation and more respect from other professions, equality of opportunity and guaranteed results, regional identity and a global economy, advanced technology and communion with nature, consumer goods and a simpler life; and we want it all, right now. I suspect most of us understand these and other such desires; desire is fundamentally human. But human life is a condition in which unlimited desire is certain to be frustrated; and part of the art of living well is knowing how to order our desires. I have tried here to suggest the kinds of cultural and academic contexts that seem to me the most promising intellectual soil for nurturing and advancing a communal understanding of architecture, the city, and a sustainable natural environment. Whether this understanding will soon become central or long remain marginal to the culture of architecture, only God knows.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Please note that I am not saying that the obligation to the **polis** always trumps every other obligation, or that the **polis** is always in the right. It was, after all, in the golden age of Athens that the city put Socrates to death; and a combination of the highly advanced civic and religious leadership of Rome and Israel was responsible for the execution of Jesus. It is to say, however, that membership in a political or religious community requires of those who challenge the community's authority some account of the failure of that authority to promote the primary ends that such authority legitimately exists to promote, viz., the well being of the members of the community. In other words, in communities so understood, authority is not challenged because authority itself is inherently bad or malevolent, but rather because some particular authority is insufficiently authoritative.
- <sup>2</sup> One could argue that there is a kind of rough and ready intellectual consensus in today's culture of architecture, but that it is incoherent and self-contradictory. I think many if not most architects would agree with the following propositions: that the city is the community to which architects are morally obligated; that the city is above all a place of ruthless Darwinian economic competition; that architects must be true to their art; that architects have an obligation to formal innovation; that architects have an obligation to celebrate and express "difference;" that architecture gives physical and spatial form to existing cultural ideals; that architecture can and should be a force for cultural change; that architects have an obligation to be ecologically responsible and to promote and design durable buildings; that architects working in the conditions of the modern marketplace can properly disregard durability; that architecture is first and foremost about making places for communities; that architecture is primarily a manifestation of power relations; that good architecture and urban design should promote equality and cultural and economic diversity; that culturally authentic architecture can only be created and understood by an elite avant garde, etc., etc. Any or all of these propositions may be defensible in the context of some larger framework. But currently that framework is missing, and

the professional "consensus" that such propositions may represent is simply incoherent, little different than no consensus. Notwithstanding the philosophical and religious origins of education in western culture (including the institution of the university), the long and in some places continuing struggle in the west to demarcate the proper spheres of theology, philosophy, and modern science has made the idea that theology and philosophy aspire to and can say something about truth suspect to both the modern and the post-modern mind. To the modern mind the only truth we can know is scientific truth; and the metaphysical realism of theology and philosophy is dismissed as a charming or not so charming narrative or myth. But perhaps the most important post-modern insights have been that science itself is a kind of narrative, as Thomas Kuhn has argued in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*; and that human beings engage no part of the world unmediated by narrative. Taking their cues from Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida, many in the academy now regard scientific truth as skeptically as modern scientists have long regarded theological and philosophical truth—notwithstanding the incapacity of these new post-modern narratives to account for their own truth or falsehood.

For persons intellectually unable to abandon questions of truth (whether in science, philosophy, or religion), Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* characterization of man as a being who by his nature is a teller of stories, and by his history is a teller of stories that aspire to truth, suggests a philosophical narrative that justifies an understanding of truth and our ability to know it as being at once true and provisional: "the best truth so far," a commitment to which necessarily involves a critical engagement with and exten-

sion of historical traditions — a type of engagement that, needless to say, is necessarily intrinsic to the purposes of academic institutions sponsored by religious communities.

<sup>4</sup> See especially Bess, Philip, "Ethics in Architecture," *Inland Architect*, (May-June, 1993), pp. 74-83, republished as "Communitarianism and Emotivism: Two Rival Views of Ethics and Architecture" in Nesbitt, Kate (ed.), *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture*. (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996); and also Bess, Philip, "Virtuous Reality: Aristotle, Critical Realism and the Reconstruction of Architectural and Urban Theory," *The Classicist, Volume 3* (1996), pp. 6-18.

<sup>5</sup> I am here assuming a certain self-consciousness and intellectual consistency among both unbelievers and believers that are often in fact empirically absent. My own sense is that in the modern/post-modern west, many secularists retain affections for the formal and communal aspects of traditional urban life unaware or unappreciative that such attitudes are a dying vestige of traditional Judeo-Christian culture. At the same time, one often finds among religious communities (including their leadership) unreflective enthusiasm for suburbia and no understanding whatsoever of the virtues of the city; and I think this reflects a certain lack of awareness of how contemporary religious life is so frequently organized along the individualist/therapeutic model embodied physically in contemporary culture by suburbia. My entire argument for the potential urban formal contributions of religious communities presumes a growing intentionality and self-consciousness within such communities about who we are and what we do.