

Architectural Education: Towards the Purpose of Existence

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This essay attempts to locate architectural education and practice within the broader framework of culture and existence. It proposes a new relationship between architectural education and practice. At the core of these arguments is the self. The culture that accommodates architectural practice and modes of architectural production has reduced the self to survival as opposed to liberated existence. I propose an architectural education that addresses larger questions of life in an *arriere garde* role vis-à-vis architectural practice to reinstate the self and reconcile it with the world in existence.

EXISTENCE AND SURVIVAL

Contemporary architectural practice, in the past few decades, has transformed to a large extent. This transformation, from my viewpoint, has been characterized by an increasing dichotomy between the modes of architectural production as controlled by capital, and the self. This has occurred in a time when the idea of progress is primarily derived from and molded by the free market economy. I will address this point, and some of its implications, later in this essay. One way to arrive at an understanding and description of contemporary architectural practice, and its relation to the self, is to overview the state of our built environment: the forces that shape it invariably affect the nature of practice itself.

The relationship between the self and the built environment – the city and its architecture – manifests in the public and the private realms. The market economic forces shaping the contemporary city have caused a steady erosion of the public realm. Michael Sorkin describes this erosion as he characterizes the contemporary city in three ways: first, the condition of placelessness, caused by the dissipation of relations to local physical and cultural geography; second, the obsession with surveillance through both technological means such as security cameras, physical boundaries such as the creation of segregated enclaves, and socio-economic factors bounding pockets of poverty at the urban core; and third, the city as simulation, an increasingly abstract entity controlled by global electronic technology.¹ The city's physicality is rapidly being reduced to the flatness of a screen onto which we project our desires.

In this scenario, it is a challenge to establish a meaningful relationship with the city.

As with the public realm, so too with the private. Our idea of dwelling in an existential sense is in jeopardy: it is difficult to connote "home" in a sub-division thirty miles from the urban core where a hundred houses look exactly the same. The economics of home building have put the average homebuyer beyond where he or she can have control over home building. The high mobility of our post-industrial (or whatever label we may so choose) age does not ensure lasting relationships with either the home or the city; in other words, it becomes more difficult to dwell when one is constantly being uprooted and relocated. The interchangeability of labor along with the fact that jobs become increasingly dispensable – and reformulating constantly – in a global economy also adds to this apermanence. Dwelling in an existential sense very much obtains from the twin factors of place and permanence. So does its analog in the public realm, community.

The erosion of physical communities is being complemented by the spawning of virtual communities on the Internet. The cultural theorist Homi Bhabha however is skeptical of its value in fostering a perhaps authentic feeling of community: the instant connectivity and simultaneity, "drains life of its historical memory and its capacity to register the contentions of cultural differences."² It would be fallacious to assume that the smooth "cyberspace lifeworld" could approximate the complex and textured terrain of multicultural urban communities which are more than ever resembling global communities. Dealing with one's cultural identity is necessary if contentious part of knowledge of self.

Given this overview of the built environment, what, briefly, is the state of contemporary architectural practice? For a start, the architect increasingly sees his or her role marginalized, with decreasing control over the built environment. From master builder, the architect is reduced to the role of facilitator of large teams, with greatly reduced influence. The value of the architect and of architecture has diminished somewhat, for various reasons. Michael Benedikt addresses this in a recent essay.³ The market economy has driven the speculative nature of built-up space in cities. These speculative buildings with their cheap materials and standard details undermine craft. The residential sector is still intransigent to archi-

tecs' advances. A demanding marketplace asks for more and more to be done for less and less: the architect has to make do with a much smaller portion of the pie. Franchise agreements limit both the quality of work and the fee. The use of technology in practice, while having greatly reduced the time spent on projects by and large has neither enhanced the quality of design in those projects nor precipitated profits of the scale in other professions. The global economy, has opened other markets to architects; however, the limited involvement precludes them from overseeing the quality of the construction, besides raising some thorny cultural issues of power imbalances (such as engaging the foreign architects only in the back-end of the project such as the labor-laden construction document phase).

It can be argued that the effect of the environment on the self is one of alienation. Miming the islands of strip malls, parking lots and other spatial flotsam in the ageographia of our cities, we too are islands seeking meaningful relationships and connections with others and with our built environment, groping for the elusive community, our selves increasingly isolated from one another. I extend this predicament to the realm of practice too.

The very existence of the self is called into question: the self is subject to reductive *survival* as opposed to liberated *existence* that reinstates self and reconciles it with the world. Survival assumes taking narrow slices of life, on a day-to-day basis, and accumulating them in an effort to piece together a life; it is apparently difficult to derive much meaning out of such an assemblage. Existence, on the other hand, assumes a thorough knowing of the self (to the extent possible) and nourishing it with meaning throughout life. Knowledge of the self involves a rational approach, one of constant and rigorous questioning.⁴ The critical stance also means being self-critical, constantly judging the critical distance the self maintains from the action of everyday life.

Knowledge of the self also means a knowledge and understanding of our cultural condition, which the self constantly interacts with and tries to derive meaning from.

ARCHITECTURE AS DERIVATIVE OF CULTURE

Architecture, as a derivative of society and culture, is fundamental to the description of our cultural condition, which is nowhere better manifest than in the urban realm. Conversely, interpretations of architecture can be formed by studying the culture that produced it. It is from the dialectics that structure our thought (which, one can argue, modernity sought to privilege one over the other) that, as Alan Colquhoun points out, the idea of cities – the distinction between the public and the private, individual and collective, “fundamental to the economy of cities,”⁵ has risen. The idea of progress in the Modernist city derived from the belief in technology and adhered to a collective ideal. Our idea of progress is now primarily derived from and shaped by the market economy rather than any ideal.

In the contemporary city and architectural practice, the dichotomies such as public and private, and individual and collective are further ruptured by the forces of the market economy. It is this extreme disjunction, perhaps, that causes alienation and empties the relationship between the dichotomies of meaning. This disjunction manifests in many ways: perhaps literally, the increasing distance between urban cores and suburbs, the increasingly elusive idea of a collective, and the erosion of the public realm.

For the purposes of integrating architectural practice and education within the framework of this argument, I propose a dialectic that perhaps encapsulates the ideas already forwarded: that of *slowness/speed*. Paul Virilio offers the thesis that the form of a city is based on heterogeneous speeds, by the difference between inertia and traffic.⁶ His thesis serves up two central ideas: speed supplants place, equating place or stasis with powerlessness, and speed with power; and the effacement of boundaries, reducing form to an interface for exchange, a mere screen for communication, while abolishing the notion of physical distance. Power now resides with the flow of information in an increasingly abstract way. Global information flows imply that power now shifts, at the rate of flow of information, anywhere in the world. The economy of speed reduces the time for design and producing documents of buildings in architectural practice. Speed can be seen as a succession of instants, and a lifestyle engulfed in speed is drained of meaningful memory; it is analogous to survival.

On the other hand, slowness aligns with our traditional ideas of place, and traditional modes of architectural practice and production. Qualitative and intangible aspects such as the gradual accumulation of historical memory in a city, the creative act, craft, urban rituals, the act of dwelling through the realization of the self⁷ reside under this rubric.

Hannah Arendt draws up an important distinction between labor and work, which relates directly to current architectural practice.⁸ She defines labor as repetitive tasks of necessity that produces what can only be called a product in a measurable way. Work, however, is performed not out of necessity, but to make or construct a world. In other words, while labor strictly pertains to survival needs, work fulfills the existential needs of the self.

THE DILEMMA OF PRACTICE AND DIFFERING VALUE SYSTEMS

The dilemma of the practicing architect vis-a-vis the questions of survival and existence arises out of this argument. On the one hand she or he could completely pass the dominant market economy by and privilege work over labor, and uphold the virtues of craft and creativity. Such a practice, while possible, would be anachronistic and represents a clash between differing value systems rather than a resolution. Without engaging the unique cultural circumstances of the present, the influence of such a radically alternative practice on the mainstream is minimal. To explore the role of architectural education in resolving this dilemma to any extent, it is neces-

sary to understand the different value systems to which education and practice belong.

Here I adapt Gary Coates' analysis of the fable "Stone Soup" in which he identifies the gift economy and the market economy as the two complementary modes of community and dwelling to this discussion.⁹ Architectural education derives from the gift economy, and architectural practice as described is generated by the market economy. The gift economy, the dominant form of material exchange among tribes, small agricultural communities and guilds, is premised on the ability to give, to transmit knowledge in this case, and make sure that this transmission of knowledge is in constant flow. In other words, in the gift economy, the distribution of the gift is equitable and its success depends on the ability to move, and not accumulate at places and hence create scarcities in others. This, of course, is in the best tradition of education. Contemporary architectural practice, as has been discussed earlier, is an operative of the market economy, where wealth accumulates at places, as does power. There is intense competition to effect a redistribution of resources, which in the current market economy is information-power (flowing, it may be added, at instantaneous speed).

One vital difference between the different value systems is the question of value itself. In the case of architectural education, the creation and accumulation of value is necessarily slow, perhaps constant, and intangible. Here it is analogous to the value attached to the creative act and that of craft, as also in place making and dwelling: the inherent value may not be realized at the moment of formation, but is slowly accumulated and released over time. The growth of cities is another example. In the case of contemporary architectural practice, as discussed earlier, the value of architects and architectural services has greatly diminished. Not only that, the value of buildings - products of practice - is volatile: instantly soaring or diminishing, dependent on market flows and trends. The value created is tangible and extrinsic: it depends on external factors that are at most times random, arcane and disconnected. Less depending on the materiality and craft of the building, its value becomes exchangeable and replaceable, factors that are antithetical to place-making.

ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION AS ARRIERE GARDE FOR EXISTENCE

Having sketched out the different value systems that define architectural education and architectural practice, what is the potential for architectural education to assume an arriere garde position to the process of reinstating the self for existence vis-à-vis conventional practice? The arriere garde position, as opposed to the frontal, nihilistic characteristics of the avant-, is one of protection, conservation and defense. The following prescriptive approach derives from the hope that it is precisely these qualities found in the value system of architectural education that can provide a rearguard to the value system of current architectural production to realize the larger project of existence.

1. Location, location, location:

Architectural education should extend its philosophical bases and address three crucial questions of location that directly deal with existence: *the location of architectural knowledge* within a field of other knowledge; *the location of contemporary culture*, that in ways produce this knowledge, in a field of all cultures, and finally the *location of self* in culture. Essential to the knowledge of the self is establishing moorings in time and space, which these questions of location try to address.

An understanding of architectural knowledge is necessary to provide a lens to examine the current modes of architectural production and practice. Its location with respect to other knowledge helps constantly to seek alternate modes of practice whenever possible within the dominant value system, and to study other professions towards applying some desirable aspects to contemporary practice, while constantly evaluating the state of practice. Current practice tends more than ever towards narrow specialization, which is also one of the reasons for the decreasing value of architect as master builder who has a broad understanding of the building process and architectural services. Responding to such practice, education provides skill sets rather than generalized knowledge. Analogous to the slicing of life on a daily basis in survival is the narrow sectioning of knowledge. The generalization of knowledge with a liberal base as in the Renaissance ensures this continuum of different kinds of knowledge analogous to aspects of existence.

As with understanding of knowledge, so too with culture: as mentioned earlier, cities, architecture and its production are derivative of culture, and it becomes necessary, indeed critical, to understand one's cultural condition. The history of architecture and urbanism is intimately linked to the history of culture itself; a reconsidered treatment of the subject is one way towards such awareness.

This understanding of the cultural condition is one way towards knowing the self and locating the self in culture. This means assuming an intense, rational approach towards the self. The philosopher J. Krishnamurti illuminates the question of intense self-awareness at all times.¹⁰ It is a rigorous approach of thinking critically, in a non-judgmental way, enabling one to create and maintain a critical distance to culture and everything contained in it. In this way, the self develops a critical resistance to the value system of the market economy, among others. It is this distance which separates existence from survival.

2. Complexity of things:

Architectural education should extend beyond Cartesian boundaries and emphasize the complex nature of things and contemporary knowledge that is in constant flux. The seeming randomness of the working of the market economy, the abstract, multilinear flows of information across the globe, the simultaneity of connections, etc imply the loss of the simple one-to-one correlation between things, and transformation of causal relationships. Deleuze and Guattari's model of the rhizome to deal with the multiple realities of the postmodern age is particularly relevant here: the philosophers

propose the rhizome as a metaphor for this complexity based on the principles of heterogeneity and multiple connectivities which supplant the linear hierarchical tap root model.¹¹ The rhizomatic model needs to be extended to architectural education too.¹² Identifying overlaps between the value systems could create new relationships between education and practice in ways which may benefit both.

The approach towards complexity also becomes relevant in dealing with diverse voices in the multicultural society and understanding issues of migration, minority cultures, and cultural identity, which are necessary towards knowledge of the self.

3. Shuttling:¹³

As corollary to recognizing the complexity of things, architectural education should emphasize the constant straddling between realms, the shuttling to and from between polarities that structure our cultural condition. This action represents the will of the self to mediate between the polarities in a conscious effort to reconcile them. Shuttling privileges the condition of simultaneity, of both/and over either/or. It throws different light on dialectic relationships such as craft and technology, education and practice, slowness and speed. The act of shuttling constantly sets these polarities in dynamic relationships that affect both. It becomes an effective way of dealing with the dominant entity in a way that is participatory and not exclusive. The act of shuttling constantly reverses the center and margin of a polarity.

Shuttling, however, needs to be a conscious act. The dialectic structures in themselves do not change through the act of shuttling; however, it is the relation of the self that does, in a way that liberates it from the dominant entity. It is the conscious nature of this liberating act that creates meaning for existence.

Architectural education, in this proposition, then broadens its base to accommodate these larger questions of existence. It may perhaps not be utopian to think that this educational model might be able to shed its *arriere garde* role in the future and directly partake in the creation of an architecture that has ceased for some time now to fulfill its vital role: allowing the self to dwell, and hence, exist.

NOTES

- ¹Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations On A Theme Park*. (New York, NY: The Noon Day Press, 1992), 30.
- ²Homi K. Bhabha, "Minority Culture and Creative Anxiety," www.oldbritcom.org/studies/stdsinv.htm. 1997
- ³Michael Benedikt, "Less for Less Yet: On Architecture's Value(s) in the Marketplace," *Harvard Design Magazine*. Winter/Spring (1999): 10-14.
- ⁴"Rational" is meant in a more general sense as commitment to reason as opposed to prejudice, judgment, or any other conviction which is considered irrational.
- ⁵Alan Coquhoun, *Essays in Architectural Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981), 95.
- ⁶Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology* (1977). Translated by Mark Polizzotti. (New York, NY: Semiotext(e), 1996).
- ⁷Martin Heidegger, *Poetry Language Thought* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1971).
- ⁸Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 80.
- ⁹Gary Coates, "Stone Soup: Utopia, Gift Exchange and the Aesthetic of the Self-Consuming Artifact," unpublished paper.
- ¹⁰See, for example, J. Krishnamurti, *Talks and Dialogues*. (New York, NY: Avon Books, 1968).
- ¹¹Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
- ¹²Mahesh Senagala, "Towards Noosphere: Envisioning Wall-less Studios and Rhizomatic Pedagogy", presented at ACSA Rome Conference, 1999.
- ¹³I borrow this term from Jennifer Bloomer, *Architecture and the Text: The (S)cripts of Joyce and Piranesi*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 181.