New Roots, New Worlds, New Possibilities: Giving Form to Quality

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Discourse about possible new roots for architectural education would seem to require deep probes into our professional past to identify fundamental points of departure. Upon further reflection, I have come to understand that any effort to determine the profile of our professional roots may not be nearly as essential as our recognizing and engaging the present "harvest" of those roots—particularly, those elements of harvest reflected in the present quality of the built environment and our professional place within.

BEGINNING AT THE END

Prevailing pedagogical guides for the education of architects typically place us within one of two camps. We tend to be seen (and to see ourselves) either as individual *artists*—standing apart from and in opposition to society or as client-bound *technicians*—responding to the economic realities of social and political order. Neither of these models suggest any passion for the fact that architecture is crafted in direct response to individual human aspirations and that, as such, its unique character and essential roots are future-oriented and spiritual. Implicit in the "artist" and "technician" models is the suggestion that a deep appreciation for the arts and a literacy in computers might be requisites for peak performance. The idea that one might have need for "spiritual literacy" to fully tap his or her architectural talents seems distant, at best. A third model, the architect-as-*cultivator*, has also been put forth; defined by its author as a culturalist perspective, this concept of architect is intended as "a necessary antidote to the oppositional theoretical perspectives (*artist* versus *technician*) that have so consistently dominated architectural discourse."[1] Extrapolated from an activated definition of culture, this third perspective suggests that, the architect-as-cultivator is fully engaged in an active process of interpretation reciprocally requiring care and inquiry and endowing one in return with the broader perspective of community life."[2] Similarly, this perspective suggests that, the architect-as-cultivator possesses a personal perspective animated by transpersonal interaction and motivated to express and embody in living acts and artifacts a humanized, cosmically rooted intelligence."[3]

Design(ing) Fundamentals

As I reflect on a proposed culturalist perspective for architectural education, my thoughts are guided by two basic premises: 1) that designing is a primary human activity for which all human beings have innate capacity, and 2) that any design is fundamentally a plan for change—i.e., an action-oriented medium for directing human resources toward some desired end. Combining these premises, it becomes immediately central to ask, "What ends (as designing human beings) are we pursuing?" If we propose that our primary design goal is to enrich human life, we need to more fully appre-

ciate the broader context within which human life is manifested. If we define this encompassing context as "environment" and accept that it is fundamentally life-sustaining, we can then better understand the interdependent relationship existing between this (our) larger lifespace and ourselves as (designing) human beings. Further, if we see the essence of an enriched human life as each of us having fullest opportunity to pursue evolving life goals through self-determined choices, we can make full strides toward our principal objective. For within a synthesis of *opportunity* and *choice*, we can comprehend the human-environment interface as what it fundamentally seems to be—an unbroken dialogue of evolving interaction; a dynamic and cross-transforming process, where the human shapes the environment and the environment shapes the human.

From this " . . . human, shaping environment, shaping human . . ." perspective, only a small leap in comprehension is needed to make two key conceptual connections. First, if we (as human beings) are continually engaged in a process of creating and being created, then our capabilities are not fixed or static. Second, if the "human creates the environment, creates the human," then, also, our perceptions of our (human) "needs" will be conditioned to a considerable degree by a prevailing (environment). The resulting reality is that, even when we are designing to meet legitimate human needs, in actuality, we are designing for adapting the human to his or her environment as much as we are designing to adapt the environment to the human. In short, even when our intentions might be otherwise—i.e., even when we seek to address our responsibilities as "cultivators"—we could very well be designing for a maintenance of status quo.

Thus, before architects can credibly speak of exercising self-determined choices as independent artists, competent technicians, and/or cultural activists within the Americas, the impacting status quo of the "market" upon our professional self-concept needs to be more fully acknowledged and examined.

Status Quo: Architect-as-Individual-Specialist . . .

Closer examination of the professional architect's own self-identity seems crucial when one considers that within the "invisible hand of the market," all professions are generally expected to view their talent pools as neutral resources and to adopt a self-concept that is purely skill-oriented.[4] Consistent with this expectation, our real and active work as professionals in architectural offices is typically organized so as to advance individual "skills of specialization." Indeed, a self-advancing/skill-oriented norm lies at the pedagogical heart of contemporary architectural education and practice. Not surprisingly, in a milieu where the predominant focus is on individual rights and individual well-being, architects quickly learn to focus attention on their individual talents and the advancement of their individual destinies.

... giving Quality to Form

The professional self-concept that emerges within long-dominant market environments throughout the Americas is the reality of the "architect-as-individual-specialist"—i.e., the architect-as-hired-problem-solver—in service to the highest bidder. Thus, while the architect-as-cultivator model may well serve as an antidote to a perceived "artist/technician" split, a deeper conceptual fission may yet demand our professional attention. I am suggesting here that the architect-as-artist, architect-as-technician, and architect-as-cultivator models are all pieces of the same cloth—i.e., they each represent a slice of the "architect-as-individual-specialist"; the highly-skilled, professionally-talented individual often working in isolation who suceeds, at best, in "giving quality to (individual and often isolated) forms."

NEW PARADIGM:
ARCHITECT-AS-QUALITY-VANGUARD ...

As we rapidly approach the dawn of a new millennium, I am reminded of our prevailing world view and of its own dawning some 300 years past. Having deep cultural roots that can be traced to 17th-century physical mechanics, with its emphasis on the value and precision of separate parts, this yet prevailing view of the world began gaining currency at about the same time that the Americas were beginning to be colonialized. Within a present paradigm of hierarchical thought and comprehension, we are encouraged to "reduce" a problem until we understand the essence of its challenge. Such reductionist thinking still guides most curriculums in the academy. Reductionist thinking is also what presently guides most curricula in architectural education. By way of contrast, holistic thinking is an attempt to view the world as an interconnected and interdependent whole. In practical terms, such thinking encourages us to "enlarge" a problem until we gain essential understanding.

... giving Form to Quality

For an ever-increasing number of my former students, the broader values of holistic thinking provides a guiding harmony for their unfolding professional careers. This globally scattered cadre of design studio graduates resonates particularly with the idea of "connectedness to a greater whole." From our extensive conversations it is also clear that these emerging practitioners draw considerable guidance from past studio discussions about the linkage of spirit and form.

Striking similarities in my own professional journey suggests that there is perhaps compelling need now for a grander orientation to guide the education and practice of architects. To this end, I propose an "architect-as-quality-vanguard" paradigm as a "broader canvas" for professional service. This proposed model for teaching and practice focuses on human-environmental "well-being." Specifically, it encourages students and practitioners to gain a view themselves as quality-vanguards having unique professional responsibility for creating a genuine public enlightenment about the need for "quality environments" in totality—not just for "quality within environments." The latter task is viewed as necessary, but not sufficient for a new century of challenges and possibilities. If we move to broaden our professional portfolio of responsibility to one of environmental well-being, the focus of an architect's training would necessarily shift from a professional preoccupation with "giving quality to form," to the grander challenge of "giving form to quality."

VOCABULARY FOR VANGUARDS: NEW ROOTS FOR A NEW JOURNEY

Quality: the expression of our essential human quest to achieve accord/balance/harmony with the whole of the universe in whatever ways we comprehend. This quest for consonance with a greater whole can also be understood as a "quest for excellence." In our pursuit of excellence, each of us is required to draw insight from the whole of our intuitive, intellectual and experiential selves; specifically, we are required to draw insight in a manner that creatively engages the whole of at least three primary dimensions of "well-being"— spiritual, environmental, and cultural:

Spiritual   Environmental   Cultural   /   Our Idea
(cosmos)   (nature)   (human)

Quality can be understood, more specifically, as the measure of "excellence" achieved between an existing degree of well-being and a proposed idea for improvement—the richer the proposed idea, the higher the ratio of excellence, the higher the expression of "quality" ...

$$Q = \frac{\text{(a)}\ proposed\ \text{"well-being"}}{\text{(an)}\ existing\ \text{"well-being"}} = \text{Excellence}$$

Urban *Places* for Citizenship

Concepts of "citizenship" and "family" are fundamentally collaborative in nature and closely tied to human quests for design quality and "well-being." I define citizenship as a unique quality of community gained from exercising our human capacity to care, share, and trust beyond ties of kinship, friendship, and ethnicity—i.e., a quality of caring, sharing, and trusting that serves as a source of collective em(power)ment for individuals seeking to create opportunity for common gain through common enterprise. My scholarship and practice suggest that such common opportunities are best cultivated through an immensely challenging, but also immensely rewarding expression of human bonding that I have come to call *public* family. I define "public family" as a quality of relationships capable of engaging persons who are neither kin nor friend as something other than strangers. This deeply (com)passionate quality of human bonding serves as a primary medium for one's lifelong development as a more human, human being.

VOCABULARY FOR VANGUARDS:

Vanguard (Fr., avant•garde / a•vant garde):
in the forefront; leaders "by example"

public family: a pioneering cornerstone for common empowerment and enterprise providing both physical and psychological security—i.e., a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, a sense of ground; the medium through which each of us grows to understand that our (individual) well-being is impossible apart from the well-being of others and of nature; as well, the medium through which each of us grows to understand that our (individual) well-being is further enriched as we engage ourselves in ever-more challenging thresholds of caring, sharing, and trusting.

vision: an expression of one's inherent human capacity to (en)vision—i.e., to imagine possible futures and desired relationships not yet spiritually-present or materially-real; the medium through which each of us translates our capacity for en(vision)ing *ideals* into practical *ideas* for daily living.

spirituality: [Latin *spiritus*, the "force of life"] one's unique capacities of em(power)ment—i.e., an "inner wellspring of self-transformative power" drawn from one's uniquely personal link to the energies of Creation; a link that binds one's individual human life to the whole of others, nature, and the un(i)verse; more specifically, a link—accessed directly through intuition and faith—that opens oneself to Creation's wisdom and to deeper truth(s) of reality; further, the source of one's identity and individual creative powers within the larger cosmos; broadly speaking, the source of one's inherent capacity to be self-guiding and self-directing—i.e., a source of inner wisdom not to be confused with organized religion or with

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Vanguards
for
"Quality";

architects
committed
to
developing
quality
environ-
ments
through
a renewal
of faith in
face-to-face
relationships;

relationships
of
citizenship
and
public family;
that aim to
honor both
the
civic
aspirations
and the
spiritual
legacy
of
clients
world-
wide;

to this end,
each of us is obligated
to participate actively in
at least three spheres of well-being:

Spiritual	Cultural	Environmental
W e l	l - b	e i n g

(as) Personal **Guide**	(as) Professional **Advocate**	(as) Global **Visionary**
paying attention to linkages of self and "spirituality"	paying attention to relationships of service and "opportunity"	paying attention to bonds of ecology and "communality"
self /universe	self /others	self / nature
the Spiritual (personal)	the Intellectual (practical)	the Existential (planetary)

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the institutional church; in sum, the source of one's pride of being, one's capacity for generosity, and one's deep sense of connectedness to a greater whole.

leadership: an active quality of caring—rooted in one's spirituality, informed by one's education and guided by one's vision; a quality of "caring enough to act" in ways that serve to inspire oneself and others; an active quality of caring which each of us must choose to exercise (in our own unique way) if we are to make our vision(s), real.

education: a tool for lifelong learning; a journey of self-discovery traceable to educe: to draw out; elicit; evoke; evolve; from Latin root, *educere* —"to lead"; from Middle English, *educaten* —"to lead out"; a journey "to know and to lead oneself"; a journey necessarily focused as much on the development of one's character (*spiritus*) as on the development of one's competence (skills).

environment: a way of perceiving and comprehending Creation such that its totality can be selectively engaged and organized as a *resource* for human activity; an all-encompassing whole (evolving independent of human perception and human tools of assessment) within which life is sustained or diminished, depending upon the quality of human intervention.

space: a human conception of environment as a quantifiable totality—i.e., as the infinite extension or deformation of a three-dimensional (geometric) field upon which life's daily experiences unfold; a way of perceiving and comprehending environment such that its totality can be selectively engaged as a *resource* for human activity.

designed space: a human conception of space as a manipulatable *resource*; specifically, as a resource capable of being selectively engaged and (re) organized such that it sustains human activity.

ENDING AT THE BEGINNING

Reflecting, again, upon design(ing) fundamentals, it now becomes central to ask a second question, "Are we as architects designing *for* 'fixed' beings—where the primary task is to provide static forms to "fit' an externally evolved context; or, are we designing *with* human beings, who, like ourselves, are engaged in the continual challenge of physical, intellectual, and spiritual evolution—where the primary task becomes one of consciously considering what (human) transformations might be achieved in a conscious crafting of (environment)?" Practical translation, "Can we consciously craft sustainable environments that would enlarge our human capacity to care, share and trust beyond ties of kinship, friendship and ethnicity? Further, can we do so in ways that tap our transformative powers of human spirituality? Specifically, can we craft spatial-spiritual *places* for an empowering exercise of citizenship?"

NOTES

[1] Linda Groat, "Architecture's Resistance to Diversity: A Matter of Theory as Much as Practice," *Journal of Architectural Education* 47(1) (September 1993): p.4

[2] Groat, "Architecture's Resistance," p. 9

[3] Rochberg-Halton, *Meaning and Modernity,* pp. 153-154. Rochberg-Halton's quotations reference Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p.94.

[4] Marvin Ray and Adam Rinzler, (eds) *The New Paradigm In Business: Emerging Strategies for Leadership* (World Business Academy, 1993), pp. 231.