Future Work:
Will It Be Big Enough?

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I hear voices. Concerned voices writing and speaking about the plight of professions and professionals.

Anthony Kronman, professor of law at Yale University, finds a crisis plaguing lawyers and the American legal profession. Writing in his 1993 book *The Lost Lawyer: Failing Ideals of the Legal Profession,* Kronman observes that "this crisis is . . . the product of growing doubts about the capacity of a lawyer's life to offer fulfillment to the person who takes it up. Disguised by the material well-being of lawyers, it is a spiritual crisis that strikes at the heart of their professional pride." There is a growing sense among lawyers, he continues, "that their yearning to be engaged in some lifelong endeavor that has value in its own right can no longer be satisfied in their professional work. This is a catastrophe for lawyers. Beyond that, it is a disaster for the country as well."

I hear the architect James Stewart Polshek speaking at the University of Michigan in 1999, setting out to "unburden" himself (his word, not mine) "of a number of serious concerns about the downward trajectory of my beloved profession and the difficulties they pose for coming generations interested in becoming architects." According to Polshek, the "Las Vegas-ification of America" makes "a mockery of our architectural heritage"; as a result, architects appear to be "weak and culpable figures." "Miserly attitudes respecting the construction of major architectural projects have become the norm." Too often corporate management believes "that spending resources on serious architecture is a poor investment, politically inopportune, or excessively elitist." The great corporate patrons "have been replaced by in-house facility committees and outside managers whose effectiveness . . . depends upon their ability to reduce construction costs." Research, Polshek notes, "critical as it is, lies far from the battlefield of actual design and construction."

I hear too many interns and graduate architects citing narrowness of thinking and opportunity as their primary frustrations with architectural practice. Oftentimes these are not the musings of an immature young practitioner, but a bright person wondering "Is this all there is?" Too often talented students become uninspired professionals cranking out lackluster buildings.

I hear Joanne Ciulla, author of *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work*: "Most of us have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not big enough for people."

In these voices, and in the three projects profiled below, I hear something unspoken: efforts to imagine work that is important, that is of consequence to the creator, that gives the individual a sense that he or she has made a difference in the life of another.

What does it mean, what might it suggest, this idea of work being big enough? Can organizations provide meaningful work? Work that is big enough, I wonder, what does it look like? What should students of architecture learn so that they can best capture the bigness of their spirits, to best prepare them for big enough careers or too small jobs?

PROJECT ONE

When I began work as an assistant professor in 1995 I met three students—Jerome, Adam, and Devin—with whom I continue to work. In 1997 they enrolled in my third year design studio. We followed that project with several others and adopted the name 26.26.26.25 to mark our attempts. During the spring 2000 semester, their last months in school, Jerome and Devin participated in a three-month around-the-world field study tour that took them to five continents. Just before the two departed, the three showed me a just-completed competition entry for an installation to be constructed in the main lounge area of the College of Architecture and Planning building at Ball State University.

As the two travelers marked the halfway point of their journey, I was informed that the design was to be constructed. Designing on laptops loaded with the FormZ modeling software, Jerome and Devin communicated design ideas back to Adam and me as files attached to e-mails or as video images of hand-drawn sketches sent back with e-mail. Among the inspirations visited on their tour: the Hypo Bank project of Morphosis in Klagenfurt, Austria and the Archeological Museum designed by Peter Zumthor for Chur, Switzerland. Design communications of importance were sent back from Cairo, following a visit to the architecture program at Tsinghua University in Beijing, and after a walk in the Amazon River.

In these transmissions, we explored forms, materials, and construction techniques that represented alternatives to the site's immediate environment and its reliance on uniformity, only. The new architecture would, instead, couple pattern with surprise, repetition with change. The form was to introduce its own structural logic (cuts and folds), shape (churning angles), and off-functional references (not a table exactly, not quite an adventure playground, maybe a bed). The new interior would be both of and other than the building.

When the world travelers returned it became obvious that the design dexterity they exhibited in e-mails did not match their ability to build. As this was a design-build endeavor, we had a problem. Other standard realities—impossible budget ($3,000) and tight schedule (two months after the school year's end and the start of summer jobs)—led us away from stick and panel construction (which we knew but could not adapt) to what was, for us, a new material: standard sheets of ten-gauge steel.

Ultimately, each of six 4' x 10' sheets of ten gauge steel was cut along three lines and folded on three others, with the three connected cuts forming a tongue that was pulled out and welded in place to provide structural stability. Additional elements added vertical emphasis: two steel sheets, each with the same three cuts as the other six pieces, but with three different folds, extended the installation over ledges and caused the piece to be visible from floors below. Also, a long wall that

bounds one edge of the site was recast with a folded form that provided a working countertop as it completed the project's three-dimensional quality.

Delivery of the bent steel forms brought immediate reactions. Responses, spoken to us as we worked, varied from interest to support to disdain to hatred (as in "I hate it!" and "I think it's horrid!"). Admittedly, the built form was cold, sharp, unforgiving, and aggressive. One could imagine a distracted pedestrian tripping on a small bent that rose from the floor, a detail we missed while designing the installation. The flat work surfaces, when pushed or bumped, moved slightly. The pieces were not familiar, were not a table or bench, or seat exactly, were not knowable in the way of the furniture that preceded them.

Three weeks after the installation was completed, a faculty colleague walked into the steel form, fell, and separated her shoulder. I was told to dismantle the piece and remove it from the building immediately; the college wanted nothing to do with it.

One month later the state chapter of the American Institute of Architects recognized the project's design excellence by presenting 26.26.26.25 with the highest award given at the organization's annual meeting.

Although the occupants of the building include the faculty, staff, and administrators of departments of landscape architecture, urban planning, and architecture, the primary audience for this installation was the students of architecture, all of them, not just the three who worked directly on the design and construction. The full-scale work was intended to challenge their consideration of form, space, structure, material, and scale; inspire their professional pursuits; and provoke discussion among the architectural aspirants. It was hoped that students would not think about architecture in the same way after encountering the construction. Gaps in the form were to act as a kind of lens through which to recalibrate one's awareness of self, world, and profession.

In the same way that the Bar introduced its own structural logic to the space—cuts and folds—I wonder if architectural education and/or practice were cut and folded, what would happen then? What might it mean to introduce a new material sensibility to the education of architects? If the shape of education and/or the profession is seen as faceted, churning angles, what might we see? And what of off-functional references? Remember, not a table, exactly, not quite an adventure playground, maybe a bed?

PROJECT TWO

In January, February, and March I toured south Asia with one other faculty member and sixteen students from our college. After breaking journey in Hong Kong for three days, we moved to Delhi for two weeks where we worked with students and faculty at the School of Planning and Architecture. In Mumbai (Bombay) for five weeks, we teamed with students and faculty at the Kamla Raheja Vidyanidhi Institute for Architectural and Environmental Studies (KRVIA) on the design of a series of interventions into the eastern docklands. We then traveled to Sri Lanka for two weeks, meeting with faculty and students at the University of Moratuwa in Colombo, and then headed back to the U.S., with a three-day stop in Singapore, visiting the National University of Singapore during one afternoon.

You can't imagine India until you've been there, and then, it still proves elusive. In this great crucible of poverty, despair, humility, energy, overcrowding, and beauty, one's understanding of self, the world, one's place in the world are, well, they are not the same. Almost nothing one knows to be the case in the U.S. can work in Delhi or Mumbai. The world stops making sense when you step off the airplane.

This e-mail diary entry struggles with the strangeness:

January 31, 2001

Dear Marcia;

Big, sort of amazing, calm day today. We just finished with Day One of a three-day workshop at the School of Planning and Architecture on how to help what's known as an informal settlement. These are permanent communities occupied by recent migrants to Delhi or long-time Delhites who make little or no money. These settlements are unofficially sanctioned by the ruling elites as servants and taxi drivers and clothes washers and maids and babysitters live there. A typical lot is 150 square feet, the notion of informal is sometimes termed spontaneous, suggesting the impermanence of the dwelling, the relative lack of permanent building materials, the brief stay of some of the residents. In most of the U.S., infrastructure and housing built BEFORE people show up; in informal settlement, infrastructure and housing built AFTER people show up.

Think about what that means.

These settlements are located in leftover spaces throughout the exploding mega-cities of India, south Asia, the developing world. Thirty percent of Delhi lives in such areas, over fifty percent of Mumbai (aka Bombay), or ABOUT EIGHT MILLION PEOPLE IN MUMBAI ALONE. The settlement we visited today houses 45,000 persons (nothing in India, really) and is located under a long, long bridge spanning the Yamuna River. The settlement floods big-time once every ten years, but every year the city issues a flood warning and all the residents move up onto the bridge for about three months in the rainy season. They do this every year.

We visited this city-within-a-city, Yamuna Pushta, and it was something. We were with student guides from SPA and our students, with authorization of the community leader, so it was all safe, solid. Hard poverty, but people good, strong, smile, shake hands, midwesterners, except they get screwed by every sort of power figure that exists in Delhi, every one, every fucking one. No electricity (candles at night), but maybe a little from the electric mafia which skims electricity (sort-of) illegally and sells. Cops, all officials, ask for bribes. I remember Aditya Prakash in Chandigarh: The first people to break the laws are the people who make them. Sounds like Chicago.

The residents flow with the floods: the government pays them 5000 rupees for the inconvenience. Actually they only receive 500 rupees (about $12 US) because middlemen skim off 4500 rupees before the money reaches those most effected. Incredible stench when we first enter, huge smell of excrement. A solid wall of urine. A city contractor supplies ten toilets per sex for the entire place (remember: 45,000 residents) and charges them to use the toilets too, so always a long line, always stench, and always, always, the MAN takes his toll.

Building materials: bricks, bamboo, plastic tarps, corrugated asbestos sheets, some sandstone. No bathrooms, no kitchens as we understand them. Fires wipe out big sections of the settlement every few months, did I mention that, open fires, kerosene, gasoline, accident. Wipe out. Just imagine this, our house floods every year, yet it is home and we come back and it burns down every once in a while, we can't live in our home three months of the year, have to live in a very temporary shelter we build on a bridge those three months, and we come. We call this home.

Hand water pumps in most of the settlement, with pipe driven into river's high water table which collects all the runoff from the open sewers and dirty water of all sorts, the people recycling, using the dirtier water over and over and over, adding their filth to the water, then drinking with that water, preparing food, washing clothes, in that water.

Did I say that 1/3 of Delhi lives like this? The average lifespan in India is sixty-two years; in informal settlements, thirty-seven. Dens of asthma, tuberculosis, disease, this. As Professor Maitra said, "The people are fireflies attracted to the light of Delhi. They are attracted by opportunity and don't know: they will soon be dead."

India is like that, a miracle of life, really. "A place that has to be believed to be seen," as Bono wrote for the U2 song "Walk On."

The work done by the students, shaped by discussions with faculty members and each other, was disappointing. For a number of reasons. India, Delhi, and Mumbai are overwhelming, life-altering. Nothing you know makes sense, if you want to rethink it. Maybe, maybe, the students asked good questions. Maybe they listened. But they could not convert questions and insights into designs that made any sense at all in the economic, political, cultural, and physical context of the projects. Not knowing, not able to understand, they proposed very western ideas, conventions from the U.S. When asked to upgrade the informal Yamuna Pushta settlement in Delhi, most wanted to move all the residents to private residences, thought it a good idea to tear down the Yamuna River development to prohibit persons from living in such conditions. For the eastern docklands in Mumbai, proposals included housing towers for the middle class, shop-lined arcades, ferryboats with nightclubs onboard, sunken freeways, streets with crosswalks, high-speed trains, community centers. Maybe our approaches, so easily engaged in the U.S. make no sense here. Maybe they've stopped making sense in the U.S., we're just comfortable. Grooving.

Is there any way an architect matters in such a setting? Does anything I learned about architecture, does anything I teach about architecture have any traction for the Yamuna Pushta residents? For my students? For me? I began to say to the students, to myself, think small to make a difference in the life of one person, upgrade the life of one person. If you do that, that's big enough, that's very big, couldn't be bigger, more important. What can you do, as an architect and designer, to be of consequence for one resident of the Yamuna Pushta in Delhi, for one of the eight million persons living in informal settlements in Mumbai alone? Before Charles Correa designed residential towers for the wealthy, he designed the Artists Colony in New Mumbai, where he devised a strong open space plan defined as voids of public space and solids of small, varied residences that could be added on-to, were to be expanded over the years if the home-owners so desired. While we were in Mumbai it was announced that the city planned to add 32,000 public toilets to the urban fabric. Could we imagine an approach similar to these? Could we design and build the smallest house possible? Could we understand the difference one public toilet or one public faucet could make to people living in the streets of Mumbai?

PROJECT THREE

I am the director of the post-professional Master of Architecture program at Ball State University. Typically there are six to eight students, most international (one from Turkey just completed her first year), some of our own recent graduates. In some ways, there is little to lose here, me being the director. The department's faculty has some interest in the graduate program, but they definitely give more attention to the undergraduate program. The enrollment is small, in some ways couldn't be smaller, given the inertia of the program.

So why not do something interesting? Something big?

I hear more voices now. I hear Sam Mockbee, architecture professor at Auburn University, creator of the Rural Studio, thinking big, acting small:

I don't think the 100-plus architecture schools across the [U.S.] realize how alike each program is, how interchangeable their curricula and faculty are. I've spoken at most of them. The faculty are usually all dressed in black. They all seem to say the same things. It's all become redundant and very stale, unimaginative. What's ironic is that you hear professors talk about how out of the box we need to be, how risk-taking is part of being an architect, yet the faculty is often guilty of sitting on their hands. If architecture is going to nudge, cajole, and inspire a community or to challenge the status quo into making responsible environmental and social-structural changes now and in the future, it will take the 'subversive leadership' of academics and practitioners to keep reminding the students of architecture that theory and practice are not only interwoven with one's culture but have a responsibility for shaping the environment, breaking up social complacency, and challenging the power of the status quo. . .

I'm not an academician, but I am an educator. I'm an architect and I'm also a painter. It's all part of the creative act. That is my passion—to be responsible to the creative process. I enjoy certain technical ability, natural ability, and I get to use it. It's what all architects have and want to use. We're living the myth. I was willing to take that jump in the dark, as I like to say, and it's not going to be fatal.

I hear Polshek, again, this time looking forward. Architects must remain "constructive provocateurs." Our profession must be imbued with an altruistic spirit. "Implied is that employment ruled by a quest for profit does not qualify," he argues. "The word 'profession' must be defined as the antonym of the word 'commercial.'"

And I hear Ben van Berkel of the UN Studio in Amsterdam: "We believe architects are not master builders but public scientists . . . It is not a linear model. We not only know how to deal with the materials, but we bring into consideration all the different levels of financing, engineering, marketing, styling."

I'm going to, we're going to scrap our ideas, our curriculum, and look for new visions, new ideas, new questions. I'm calling it, and this is not much really, New Challenges, New Architects. We're rethinking seminars and studios, trying to rekindle the energy and curiosity and fearlessness of our faculty. We'll conduct experiments in teaching, experiments in learning. We'll keep our past in mind, think about the future, but we will work in the present, in the now. We'll probably have a class in critical thinking, in how to ask good questions, in how to interpret findings. We might require a new course in the history of the professions and professionals as a foundation for new careers.

The post-professional degree will become a kind of laboratory, more like an institute. Teams of faculty will submit proposals for a thematic bundle of activities to be addressed through a given academic year. Their research and design interests will drive the lab, the study center, the Master of Architecture program. We'll recruit students, aligning them with the thematic explorations best suited for their interests, abilities, dreams and in alignment with the interests of the graduate faculty. We'll turn the place upside-down; imagine a post-professional degree program that is not just something else, another distraction, but is something central, maybe, is home to the professional degree? That provides the focus for the professional program? We'll innovate, try, succeed, fail. We'll think, question, challenge, build, destroy. We will seek out new professions, new clients, and new biographies.

We'll remember the successes and failures of the Bar, its design and material sense, how and why it upset so many people, and inspired others. We'll return to the men with whom I shook hands in the Yamuna Pushta, and we'll see about upgrading their lives. We'll honor the beggars and lepers of Mumbai, the mother and child who I brushed aside. I don't know what we'll do for her, for them.

But we will be big enough.

Thank you.

NOTES

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