What is Architecture?

Edited by Andrew Ballantyne
Chapter 2: The Architecture of Deceit

Diane Ghirardo

The town itself is peculiarly built, so that someone can live in it for years and travel into it and out of it daily without ever coming into contact with a working-class quarter or even with workers—so long, that is to say, as one confines himself to his business affairs or to strolling about for pleasure. This comes about mainly in the circumstances that through an unconscious, tacit agreement as much as through conscious, explicit intention the working-class districts are most sharply separated from the parts of the city reserved for the middle class... Manchester's monied aristocracy can now travel from their houses to their places of business in the center of the town by the shortest routes, which run right through all the working-class districts, without even noticing how close they are to the most squalid misery which lies immediately about them on both sides of the road. This is because the main streets which run from the Exchange in all directions out of the city are occupied almost uninterruptedly on both sides by shops, which are kept by members of the middle and lower-middle classes. In their own interests these shopkeepers should keep up their shops in an outward appearance of cleanliness and respectability; and in fact they do so... Those shops which are situated in the commercial quarter or in the vicinity of the middle-class residential districts are more elegant than those which serve to cover up the worker's grimy cottages. Nevertheless, even these latter adequately serve the purpose of hiding from the eyes of wealthy gentlemen and ladies with strong stomachs and weak nerves the misery and squalor that form the completing counterpart, the indivisible complement, of their riches and luxury. I know perfectly well that this deceitful manner of building is more or less common to all big cities... I have never elsewhere seen a concealment of such fine sensibility of every thing that might offend the eyes and nerves of the middle classes. And yet it is precisely Manchester that has been built less according to a plan and less within the limitations of official regulations—and indeed more through accident—than any other town.

(Engels, 1845: 84–6)
In *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1844, Friedrich Engels exposed the effects of capitalism on the laboring classes. In his analysis of Manchester he also offered one of the first sustained critiques of the built environment. Engels discerned a relationship among political intentions, social realities, and building. Although he was not the last to perceive the nature of this relationship, his approach to building has had little influence on the architecture, construction, and real estate industries in the twentieth century.

Both as a profession and as an academic discipline, architecture prefers not to be directly associated with the construction and real estate industries. All three deal with building and enjoy an enormously beneficial symbiotic relationship, and all three share an atrophied social conscience. Architecture offers itself as different from the other two by virtue of being an "art" rather than a trace or a business and to this end contemporary practice – through highly refined mechanisms of dissimulation – conspires to preserve that precarious pretense.

**ARCHITECTURE AS ART**

William Curtis articulates a particularly cogent version of what amounts to a traditional art-historical position in his *Modern Architecture Since 1900*. Curtis insists on "a certain focused interest on questions of form and meaning." He selects what he believes to be the masterpieces of modern architecture – "I make no apologies for concentrating on buildings of high visual and intellectual quality" – and sets out to write "a balanced, readable, overall view of modern architecture from its beginnings until the recent past." To Curtis, balance implies exorcising political, social, and ideological considerations of the sort that he finds in the versions of history offered by Kenneth Frampton or Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, who "emphasized ideology at the expense of other matters" (Curtis, 1982: 6–11, 389–92).

This critical position – which is by far the dominant one in America – at most admits only passing reference to any larger cultural, political, and social considerations. Instead it involves extended visual analysis, concentrating primarily on a few "important" buildings – the Robie House, the Villa Savoye, the Kimball Art Museum. Such singular masterpieces transcend not only political, social, and ideological contingencies, but their own time as well. In Curtis’ words, "To slot them into the Modern Movement is to miss much of their value" (Curtis, 1982: 388). Set like jewels into the diadem of architecture, they become aesthetic objects *par excellence* and above reproach.

However appealing it may seem, a critical position predicated on formal qualities remains problematical. The standards of judgment are reduced to categories – "formal resolution," "integration," and "authenticity" – concepts which are more opaque than most critics will concede. Except on the most general level, none of these categories denote an objectively verifiable criterion, despite an unspoken assumption to that effect. Even if, in the best of both cases, there is a general agreement to canonize a few works, considerable disagree-
ment usually attends the decision about the particular works to be so embalmed. Indeed, the criteria for selecting one work over another are often arbitrary precisely because judgments based on formal analyses boil down to nothing more than matters of taste. One critic may find a certain degree of mathematical complexity necessary to make a building great; another may focus on the effects of massing techniques; and yet a third may demand an elegant series of references to or comments on the past. Though there is no denying the interest or significance of any
of these aspects, it remains clear that assessing them depends as much upon personal taste as do preferences for a particular style.1

Edoardo Persico remarked on this situation nearly half-a-century ago, when he surveyed the bitter factional rivalries in Fascist Italy between classicizing traditionalists and Modern Movement rationalists. Persico concluded that, although they appeared to reflect dramatically different positions, the polemics in fact masked an underlying consensus. Since all sides took their cues from Fascism, the stylistic debates that flourished in the architectural press concerned matters of taste rather than substance (Persico, 1934). It was no more than a preference for white walls and ribbon windows competing with a predilection for traditional columns and arches. Persico’s critique addressed an unspoken corollary—that both factions fell over themselves to give architectural expression to the ideals of Italian Fascism: to provide luxury apartments for the bourgeoisie, or to design urban settlements that permitted close surveillance of the lowest classes.

Lobotomized history surfaces in contemporary criticism in a variety of guises. Curtis, for example, faults the “whites” (formalists) and the “greys” (informalists) of the 1970s for having nothing to say about the current state of American society; and he does this in a 400-page text devoted to formalist analysis (Curtis, 1982: 355). Other historians laboriously criticize the naïve and utopian visions of early European modernists who associated their architecture with radical opposition to existing political and social systems; at the same time they lament the fate of the Modern Movement under the totalitarian pressures of Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany.

To be sure, the high aspirations of the European early modernists were often unrealistic, as were their exaggerated claims for the role of the architect in shaping the new societies they envisioned. Further, many critics have correctly diagnosed an authoritarian strain in the social programs of Le Corbusier and others. Yet the extraordinary power of Le Corbusier’s architecture sprang in part from their passionate searches for an architecture that would confront contemporary social realities.

ARCHITECTURE AS FASHION

A telling contrast can be drawn between the responses of contemporary architects to the economic decline of the 1970s and the attitude adopted by the radical architects who confronted the economically uncertain aftermath of the First World War. In the immediate post-war period architects turned to dreaming up new worlds to replace the old one; Bruno Taut and Walter Gropius come to mind as architects who attempted to reformulate architecture’s role in society, and they are only two of a large and distinguished group active in Weimar Germany.

Conversely, when building opportunities dwindled in the United States in the 1970s, architects turned to drawings—not even designs of a different and better world, but instead a set of increasingly abstract, pretty (and marketable)
renderings of their own or of antique works and recycled postclassical picturesque sites. Like much building of the decades just preceding, these aesthetic indulgences simply masquerade as architecture. They reveal architects in full retreat from any involvement with the actual world of buildings.
ARCHITECTURE AS FEELING

Another approach attempts to evade the trap of taste and fashion by explicitly setting itself apart from the current postmodernist discourse. Christopher Alexander, an ardent advocate of this view, maintains that "the core of architecture depends on feeling." Alexander talks about the "primitive feeling" evoked by a steeply pitched roof; he believes that the pitched roof may be the "most natural and simple" thing to build, and he contrasts it with the arid forms of contemporary architecture, which are prized precisely because they lack feeling. The task of the architect, Alexander argues, is to produce a harmonious work that feels "absolutely comfortable — physically, emotionally, practically," and indeed, "architects are entrusted with the creation of that harmony in the world" (Alexander et al., 1977; Alexander 1979, 1983).

Like the formalists, this group arrogates to itself the power to decide what you and I will find "authentic," "integrated," "natural," and "comfortable." Underlying this archaeology of primitive forms is a desperate search, shared with the formalists, for a universal architecture and a universal standard of value; there is a concomitant aggressive hostility toward critical positions that engage in dialogue with the unresolved, uncomfortable, politically explosive, and unharmo-

The contemporary discourse on architecture thus fashions the discipline's own neutron bomb, which promises to leave nothing but the vacant buildings intact — an empty bric-a-brac landscape in both style and substance, a literally empty reminiscence of a bygone culture.

THE CRITIC'S COMPLICITY

The responsibility for having cultivated this hardy bloom belongs at least as much to critics and historians as it does to architects. Because they assign priority to the unique formal features of individual monuments, historians and critics diminish interest in anything else. Criticism today borrows the already inadequate tools of art history as traditionally practiced, substitutes description for analysis, and turns architecture into a harmless but ultimately meaningless and consumable artifact. As society's arbiters of taste, critics also help to distribute society's rewards — prestige and money — to those architects who are willing to produce fresh new fashions destined for elite consumption.

The architectural profession seems deeply divided between those who conceive it as an art and those who perceive it as a service. Few would argue that either of these components can safely be jettisoned, but exactly what their proper relationship ought to be is not clear — nor is it likely to become so. Moreover, anything beyond purely formal concerns in the work of architecture is seen as sullying architecture's purity and rendering it no more than a billboard for political beliefs or the tool of class conflict and competing ideologies. While banal or badly built work presents less of a problem (Speer's Berlin, for example),
a widely acclaimed, complex, and interesting work such as Giuseppe Terragni’s Casa del Fascio in Como is deeply troubling, for its explicit and undeniably political matrix cannot successfully be evaded.

Sometimes architecture is an explicit political billboard; at other times it sets itself in opposition to dominant class interests; and still elsewhere it constitutes an unconscious – but no less real – expression of political and social realities and aspirations. Certainly aesthetic and formal considerations come into play in any
understanding of a building; but the inescapable truth is that these categories are culturally conditioned, often arbitrary, and only two among a number of components that determine the value of architecture.

ARCHITECTURE AND EVASIVE MANEUVERABILITY

What accounts for the architectural community's pervasive refusal to confront real issues in the realm of architecture and the world that circumscribes it? When so much energy is devoted to maintaining architecture's privilege and its purity, one has to wonder what is being concealed.

Academic politics are so bitter because the stakes are so small; in a case where stakes are immeasurably larger – as in the politics of a building – the apparent strategy is to place something innocuous at center stage in order to divert attention from more important concerns. Formal elements – style, harmony of parts, call them what you will – are sufficiently trivial to be awarded top billing in architectural discourse. It is also far easier and far more tidy to persevere in formalist critiques, thereby avoiding the risk of antagonizing moneyed interest. In turn, architects choose the safer course by designing buildings that evade issues of substance.

The position that only formal elements matter in architecture bespeaks a monumental refusal to confront serious problems; it avoids a critique of the existing power structure, of the ways power is used, and of the identity of those whose interests power serves. To do otherwise might entail opening a Pandora's box of far more complicated issues: racism and white flight, exploitation and the manipulation of land values, prices, resources, building permits, zoning, and taxes on behalf of a small power elite – as well as larger questions about our current cultural situation. At the same time, to suggest that the world contains an ineluctable harmony which an architect need only discover in the realm of forms and feelings is dangerously naïve (Sullivan, 1900: 223). An architecture predicated solely upon such principles finds its objective correlative in a Walt Disney movie: soothing in the promise of happy endings, simplified with clear-cut villains and heroes, and seductive in the presentation of a world that in so many ways simply does not correspond to the one in which we live.

In none of its manifestations does the profession dare question the politics of building: who builds what, where, for whom, and at what price. Although arguably one of the most important issues for all architects to consider – and for the discipline to emphasize – it is addressed by few. Certainly as professionals, architects do little to gain a voice in these important decisions – they do not, for example, organize political action committees; by default they are left with the trivial issues of fashion and taste. The anemic architecture that issues from this acquiescence overwhelms our cities. Nowhere is this more grotesquely apparent than in the tenements of the South Bronx in New York. Officials chose to deal with socially troubled, abandoned, and physically scarred public housing projects by spending thousands of dollars to replace broken and boarded up windows.
with decorative panels depicting houseplants and window shades, thereby avoiding a serious confrontation with the community's problems. Public officials in effect aped the activities of prominent architects who currently undertake the same kind of window dressing in their own work.

Only when architects, critics, and historians accept the responsibility for building – in all of its ramifications – will we approach an architecture of substance.

NOTES

1 Postmodernists defend the use of formal elements from ancient or Renaissance classicism, for example, with the argument that meaning inheres only in historical forms – that is, pre-modern forms. With this claim they impale themselves on the horns of a dilemma since it leads them to incorporate historical forms into their works in such a way as to drain the forms of their highly precise historical associations. (In the designs of Michael Graves, for example, the keystone is hollowed out to become a window or raised high to become a scupper.) However contradictory the two positions, postmodernists do indeed want it both ways, and the point remains that they stand on the shifting grounds of arbitrary fashion.

2 If we look at the building by Diana Agrest and Mario Gandelsonas in Buenos Aires, for example, we recognize the references to historical forms that avoid banal imitation, and we can appreciate it as a highly intelligent, accomplished structure, with a high degree of sensitivity to the site, to the urban context, to contemporary building practice, and specifically, to building traditions in Buenos Aires. But what if we ask for whom it was built or inquire into its urban context in the political turbulence of Buenos Aires? Altogether too many critics and architects today would dismiss this line of questioning as irrelevant.