

Factors other than Price

Architecture: Factors other than Price

Locating the ethical blind spot of a profession in search of its soul Michelangelo worked for years, breaking his back and leg (literally) in order to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Painful? Doubtless. But not nearly so painful as the kind of pain his counterpart, the architect of today, endures, witnessing the state of crisis architecture finds itself in, as an art and as a profession.

Although this condition has been known and discussed in the academic journals and sometimes by trade magazines, it is quite significant when this realization appears in the main stream press and is therefore acknowledged publicly.

However, the real crisis, stemming from a 1972 consent decree between the Justice Department and the American Institute of Architects (A.I.A.) has not been fully confronted. In eulogizing Progressive Architecture, the architectural magazine that was bought and closed by the owner of a competing publication, Herbert Muschamp ("A Victim of a Malady It Tried to Diagnose" New York Times, Sunday January 21st) said he could "forgive P/A its blind spots, because the professional crisis that the magazine tried to address was genuine, and no other publication was confronting it." In the last two years, the magazine had "embarked on an extended search for the soul of the profession." I find myself in a less charitable mood about P/A's attempt to address the crisis in architecture, and Mr. Muschamp does not go far enough to identify the nature of these "blind spots." He does not diagnose the malady any more than P/A did. Critical of the A.I.A. in an April 1994 editorial, P/A missed the point in focusing on the Institute's fiscal operations. Both P/A (in a press release announcing its closure) and Muschamp gloss over the role of the A.I.A. in P/A's demise. Locating one's own blind spot is the first critical step in soul searching. The real scandal in architecture is that the ethical anomaly in professional conduct has not been fully faced yet by its leading journals, professional organizations and architectural critics or academics. The closest to such an acknowledgement comes from Hal Foster, a cultural critic and not an architect, who states unemotionally that "advanced capitalism confronts architects with the possible obsolescence of the category Architecture." What this implies is that we can blame capitalism, technology, the information age and the death of religion and art. All of these have been pointed to before, but there is another side to this story. The A.I.A. as a trade guild has failed its members before. This takes us to the consent decree that allows architects to compete on the basis of price. Up until 1972, architects were forbidden from submitting price quotations as part of a bid by the A.I.A. code of ethics. "A basic principle of our profession is that the worth of architectural services must be measured by many factors other than price" stated a proposed resolution to keep the prohibition. However, the way for competitive bidding based on money was opened in 1972 when the A.I.A. removed this prohibition, bullied into accepting a Justice Department Consent Decree by threat of litigation. Aiming to enforce anti-trust laws, the Justice Department's goal was to prevent what they regarded as a possible conspiracy among A.I.A. members to fix prices and limit competition. In

their view, the practice of architecture is a business enterprise, and the A.I.A. a trade association in the same category as, say, the National Automobile Dealers Association. In terms of materialist free market economics, art and aesthetics are viewed as an expression of emotion or religious belief. Indeed, such qualitative judgements, dependent on the subjectivity of the individuals involved, are unmeasurable in scientific terms and therefore outside the quantifiable exchanges based on measurable worth. Of course, the enlightened client recognizes and values these "factors other than price" but particularly in the economic depression of the early 70s (and in the recent recession) such enlightenment is a luxury. This legislation only encouraged the degradation of the architect, and it was reported that even the board was "no more happy about this situation than are the members." What is a profession to think when its organization is so weak and represents its interests so poorly? The A.I.A. lacked both the will and the philosophical framework necessary to defend architecture as a unique human activity that involves both service and art. In 1978, the A.I.A. loosened the ethical rules forbidding architects from wearing more than one hat, thereby turning a blind eye to manifest conflicts of interest. The old code of ethics specifically did not allow the architect to also be the builder "where compensation, direct or indirect, is derived from profit on labor and materials furnished in the building process except as participating owners." The architect's primary role was defined as one of representative and defender of the client's interests, both aesthetic and financial, vis-a-vis the builder, whose motive was mainly profit. The new code, adopted provisionally in 1978 and permanently in 1980, made it possible for the architect to offer a design/build package of services. That very shift in the code of ethics which was intended to enlarge the field of activities an architect could engage in resulted in what was a disastrous loss of prestige and work for the architect, who today is more and more likely to be asked to offer services as a minor partner to a large construction firm that has been invited to bid for a project. It was in such Faustian deals\*, such paradigmatic shifts in ethical standards, that the professional organizations have demonstrated their failure to support architecture as a core human activity, giving the kiss of death to the image of the architect as the trusted and valuable partner with the owner in all aspects of a building project, and forwarding the idea of architecture as primarily a business interest. It is for these reasons that architecture has lost a great deal of cultural prestige, and not just at the expense of the architect's wounded ego and frustrated visions but at the expense of society as a whole. If the quality of architecture reproduced in the U.S. were impressive and if the general public and critics alike were full of praise for the built environment, this discussion would not arise.

As it is, architecture barely features in society's consciousness, as a look at the ranking and evaluating of U.S. colleges and universities, carried out yearly by U.S. News and World Report will show. The word "architecture" is completely absent while categories such as "business" and "engineering" are given special emphasis. In the Career Guide of the same publication, the architect does feature but is described purely in terms of a "design/build specialist" with no mention of art or poetics, of cultural sensitivity or social responsibility, of time, nature and geometry or even of space. "People with coursework in construction-related fields and business have an edge." This is just some of the evidence of

the extent of loss of prestige for architecture.

There is another aspect to the blind spot in the P/A argument, as presented in "THE SCHOOLS: How They're Failing the Profession (and What We Can Do About It)" (September 1995). The fuzzy definition of terms blurs the distinction between vocational training and higher education, and indeed vocational training seems to be strongly privileged, in the same way that P/A falls into that same old trap of presenting architecture solely as a service rendered in the market place. The article is grossly unfair to students by evaluating their usefulness solely through the frame of this feeble and pathetically narrow definition of the architect as business person of legal and technical expertise. Surely this is only one aspect of the architect's role? Not according to NCARB's survey of practitioners, as quoted by P/A, which rated technical and legal skills to be more important for a newly licensed architect to possess, even above architectural design principles. It is tragic indeed when this is the profession's own view of itself. We, as schools, have a primary obligation to higher education. Our clients are not the employment agencies or the office labor needs of existing practitioners and their firms.

Our first obligation is to our student body and their needs as they prepare for life in general in the middle of the information revolution, and not only for the short term needs of a materialistic market place. In his day, Michelangelo engaged in direct discussion with nine of the Popes about the meaning of his work, as well as operating as "chief executive officer of a small to mid-size company" (Michael Wallace, "Michelangelo, C.E.O." New York Times). Would today's architect be invited to discuss the meaning and the value of the way we build the environment? Can both the universities and the professional and business organizations propose a more positive definition of the architect, a convincing argument as to why the architects are worth speaking with? What large questions about human existence does architecture dwell on?

Certain basic problems have always concerned all human groups. And upon the answers given depend the particular identity of a culture, and the subtle qualities which differentiate it from all others. What are assumed to be the innate predispositions of humans? What is the relationship of humans to nature? What is the significant time dimension? What is the dominant relationship of humans to other humans? What is human's relationship to space? The task in front of us is to reconstruct the cultural definition of architecture to include ethical and aesthetic phenomena, in other words "factors other than price." At the center of the argument should be the realization that the architectural act as a social ritual involves a non-quantifiable trust, the manufacturing of consent on the meaning and emotional value of the object.

In the Old Testament we read that "Bezalel was chosen to build this Tabernacle in the desert because he knew how to permute the letters with which the heaven and earth were created." Such esoteric knowledge was required since the Tabernacle (the Tent) was meant as a microcosm paralleling both heaven and earth, both the universal, spiritual domain of the infinite, and the concrete domain of the human body. It was not sufficient to construct a physical building. As it was built, the architect had to meditate on the meaning of each part, imbuing it with the

necessary metaphorical properties. These are the factors other than price, on which architecture can and must be reconsidered.

Dan Bucsescu is a practicing architect and Associate Professor of Architecture at Pratt Institute who has watched the profession for thirty years. Alethea Cheng, assistant researcher and writer, is a senior student of architecture at Pratt Institute.

<http://danbucsescuarchitect.com/admin/index.php?content=nestGall.php&navGallID=10001>