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Urban Architecture

Introduction

The city at once attracts and repels architects. Here their grandest ambitions evolve as a challenge to the designs of succeeding generations, and here indeed rise their grandest projects. Here architects confront the aggregate of the city's expressive power; but here they also face the mass of social, political, economic, and technological requirements that make great urban architecture so difficult to achieve today.

If the city accommodates and encourages architects' creativity, it resists their modern era impulses toward clarity and reform. Functional and visual poverty persist in part because the city grows from forces beyond architectural control. The graceless environment that these often conflicting forces engender seems to persist despite architects' considered attempts at their resolution, running the gamut from design review boards to proposals for entirely new, ideal urban forms (whose conceptual purity often leads us to question the validity of the less comprehensive approaches).

Many promising social visions have emerged for cities, but the awareness that cities also focus our society's ills forces those architects who choose to work in cities to accept the responsibility for many non-aesthetic aspects of urban work as well as the more glorified, aesthetic ones. Threats to the environment and unacceptable environmental conditions brought on by urbanization served to initiate standards of light, air, and plumbing as architectural design criteria. The potentially dangerous impact of high population densities on human behavior and the individual human psyche similarly led architects into the social sciences debates of the fifties and sixties. The contemporary need for architects to apply their organizational and image-making skills in the context of such political and economic urban puzzles as overlapping governmental jurisdictions – between cities and surrounding metropolitan areas over the allocation of tax revenues, or between cities and the federal government over incentives for private development and mass transit – seems to require that architects also serve a bureaucratic function. Architects may be uniquely trained to make tangible the intentions of a society, but, as practitioners, they are forced to confront those areas which, although they were traditionally near the limit of the architect's purview, are now inextricably related.

Architects have been charged traditionally with

ordering the physical environment. So, until recently, such monumental organizational tasks as the generative design of an entire city were conceivably architectural problems bearing architectural solutions. Now architects have both retreated from their past confidence in this area of urban design and advanced in others. Architects have claimed areas whose problematic complexity requires the abilities of the same multitude of disciplines as city-scale work but whose resolution does not threaten the city's fundamental form or character.

"Urban Architecture" has been chosen as the theme of this volume of *The Harvard Architecture Review* because of the renewed and widespread concern with cities not only from architects, but also from historians, preservationists, and the public. The very diversity of recent developments in cities suggests the validity of the general concern. It is in the city that architects accept the challenges of incremental change, that preservationists discover and protect the riches of a culture, and that an increasingly sophisticated public reacquaints itself with the pleasures of urban life. Specific changes in attitude have contributed to this new examination into the character of urban design.

- Mass transit and city living are now accepted as intelligent responses to the interest in energy conservation.
- New academic and professional programs in urban conservation and preservation have appeared in schools of architecture and planning, accompanying the decline of the Modernist principle of wiping the city clean.
- The spontaneous, popular, back-to-the-cities movement has inspired architects to create inviting and enjoyable urban environments once again.
- Cities which were discussed as irreparably decayed and unlivable just a short time ago have emerged as great resources and are now perceived as the locus of architectural quality and history.

By isolating issues relevant to city building, the *Review* expects to contribute to the current exploration of the city. As constituent elements of an exploratory document rather than a polemical tract, the articles in this *Review* reflect a diversity of architectural and critical approaches to urban matters. The contributing critics, historians, and architects express both divergent solutions to similar

concerns and, paradoxically, similar conclusions developed from divergent perspectives. It is a variety that underscores the richness of the contemporary discussion of architecture and urbanism and that suggests that ours is a remarkable period, when individual perception and insight may contribute to the complex urban landscape without submitting to the strictures of any single architectural style or critical method.

Although the articles in the *Review* do not speak with a single voice, they do, overall, reflect a shift among theorists, practitioners, and historians away from the more "universal" views of urbanism that have prevailed since the 1920s. Architects have rejected a reductivist – and elusive – vision of towers in parks, "machines for living," and ribbons of highways that, combined, were to replace the varied forms of urban livelihood with a homogeneous "international style" of living. Today most architects recognize the necessity of repairing the damage of decades of antagonism toward the existing form of the city, and we, the editors, wish to indicate the directions in which this repair is proceeding.

Throughout the *Review*, the authors look to the existing city for its lessons: the city, time tested – though also time worn – is readily accessible. In so doing they free themselves not only from the largely self-imposed obligation to generate a new life for the city, but also from the consequence of that necessarily statistically based activity: the design of the city primarily as an abstraction.

Lessons in urban architecture, the authors demonstrate, lie all around us. From Renaissance Rome to nineteenth-century Chicago skyscrapers; from the spaciouly gridded towns of the American Midwest to the thickly molded masonry that frames the streets of upper Manhattan; remarkable opportunities are available to the architect to develop an urban architecture of both order and diversity, responsive to variables of the city's street configuration, building density and character, open space, and community and private life.

We should study, interpret, and put to use the multiple variations, the sometimes nearly imperceptible differences in urban form and architecture, from city to city, block to block, and building to building that can make our work one of deepening focus. For small-scale instances, consider

the ornamental and territorial relationships of a house's front door with its garden, or the special quality and meaning of a well-framed view from a city window. Within a larger context, look at the complex bonds between the city's public infrastructure and the myriad personal additions of landscape and architecture made by the city's individual residents and builders.

This issue of the *Review* is not a call for replication or revivalism. Rather this *Review* describes the roles architecture plays in sustaining city life and calls for the architectural provision of what contributes to that life: order and individualist spirit; unalterable beauty and change, for instance, which are essential but intangible; and objective or spatial constructions like commercial buildings and streets. As the synthesis and transformation of these essentials of city life, architecture is evolving while remaining rooted to demonstrated, viable, urban traditions. This is the legacy of architects like Richardson, Furness, Olmsted, and Sullivan, whose work engaged their host cities' traditions while remaining strong and personally expressive.

With several decades of Modernism behind us, we are seeing that it is time to return to the city with fresh eyes, to moderate our tendencies toward clarity and reform, our preoccupation with the notion that the times are particularly desperate and chaotic. Our lives — and the lives of the cities in which we live — are becoming all the better for our renewed appreciation of the abundance of urban architectural opportunities and because we have equipped ourselves to confront the similar abundance of urban challenges.

Approaches to Urban Architecture Reconsidered

Architects throughout the world are finding new impetus to search for appropriate urban architectural precedents, for forms, processes and ideas from architectural history, theory, and practice, that rise above the generating context of a specific program and locale to inform designers regarding concerns that continue to be essential in the time and place at hand. These precedents range in scale from that of a single building to that of an entire city. They range in time, too, from contemporary innovations to those solutions to

architectural problems that endure despite technological advance.

Together, these forms, processes, and ideas are seen to have a renewed potential for endowing today's urban architecture with a legitimacy absent from the architecture of the recent past. The basis for this legitimacy may lie in the strengths of two contrasting approaches: one that is analytic in nature and another that is synthetic. The first involves applying the rigors of Modern architecture to the complex functional and aesthetic relationships of typically dense urban developments. Urban architectural problems exhibit a complexity which invariably requires the architect to resolve each complex problem into a number of simpler, more approachable ones. This simplification process identifies functional groupings within a given situation that need architectural support, and it results in, for instance, concepts of "public space," "private space," "circulation space," and "utility space."

Another approach, recently revived, involves drawing on a store of architectural designs which are classified according to plan or volumetric gestalts. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries employed notions of building-use type that approximate this method. However, the current appeal of this typological approach is that it recognizes as viable formal precedent that architecture which may or may not be related by use or accepted form to a contemporary architectural situation, but which at least allows for the possibility of the contemporary activity. And, as the very process of classification by gestalt necessitates the uncovering of a design's inner and essential character, this method also constitutes a legitimate approach to functional problems.

A method that combines functional "zoning" and the idea of "types" should be attempted as well. The positive qualities of such an integrated method, based on the strengths of two formerly orthodox approaches, could both resolve chaotic situations and assure appropriate meaning for what results. While the former method could enable architects to cope with the obligations of an involved program, the latter suggests the possibility of unifying architectural organizations which possess inherent character. The former also provides a model for a

design process that copes as well with architectural chaos in cities as the latter copes with the emptiness of content and spirit that often accompanies such chaos. Certainly the presence in today's cities of these urban architectural demons – chaos and emptiness – argues for such a comprehensive, yet humane, design approach.

The Articles

For the purposes of this introduction, it is useful to consider the articles as being divided into three overlapping approaches within the search for particularly suitable precedents as described above: one approach that emphasizes historical continuities; one derived from sources outside of architecture as conceived in its traditional sense; and one growing from an appreciation and analysis of urban space.

Several of the contributors view the city as a continuously evolving composition, as a place where architects use the rich experience of their ancestors as the basis of their designs. Theirs is, broadly defined, an historical approach.

Jon Michael Schwarting discusses Rome as the multiple layering of architecture, urban space, and landscape in response to historical, political, and religious influences – as a repository of urban planning ideals which are accommodated to specific contexts. In each case with which Schwarting deals, whether it be the object-like quality of the Campidoglio or the city-texture-generating character of Campo Marzo, we are able to extract the fundamental organizing principle, to perceive a vision of the place which transcends the particular building or space that exists there in fact. Schwarting's article depicts the city as a dialogue between the order of ideal architectural visions and the struggle among the many other generators of city form.

Engaging tradition and design at the level of the individual building, Brent Brolin argues for the use of existing neighborhood forms, scales, and characteristic ornament in new architecture. He advocates a revived approach to creativity: "De-emphasize the cruder variety – originality through novelty – and stress refinement within the aesthetic

confines of the visual context, whether that is modern or traditional."

Roy Strickland and James Sanders discuss the success of the Harlem River Houses, the nation's first federally subsidized public housing, in terms of its synthesis of historic New York housing-reform ideals and the traditions of New York tenement and street life. A combination of Depression-era pragmatism and Modernist idealism, the project is an inviting balance between precedent and innovation.

Each of these three articles lends insight into the making of urban architecture that is successful in expression and resolution of the tension between the architect's urge for creativity, his appreciation for history, and the complex demands of his building's urban site.

There are many non-architectural aspects of city life – past *and* present – that nonetheless influence urban architecture. Several of the authors emphasize them. Politics is an important determinant of city form that Schwarting, Strickland, and Sanders discuss, but it is one that falls, traditionally speaking, outside of architecture. Economics and physical city planning are others. Coming to terms with these vital concerns of city dwellers must be a primary task for any urban architect.

Stanford Anderson and his students at MIT are studying Savannah, Georgia, and the interdependent relationship of the physical city and its inhabitants. The city plan is seen as a functional framework for the inhabitants' current use as well as their future development. The plan accommodates various patterns of use, yet it is neither an organization devoid of life and character, easily reshaped by the residents, nor is it socially deterministic. Anderson carefully explains this "possibilist" characteristic of the Savannah plan and in so doing develops a basis for conjecture about American cities in general.

Advocating that architects take advantage of existing block and lot characteristics, Paul Groth presents important information about the city grid as an element of urban geography. The use of grids has moved in and out of favor throughout architectural history. But instead of stressing the use of the grid

as a formal system, Groth exposes the grid's significant role in creating urban character: the subtle differentiations within grids, even the meaning of street names helping to order the complexity of the gridded cities of the United States. Reacquainting architects with the proper use of the grid, Groth suggests an urban architecture that embodies the street, its hierarchies of public and private space, and the varying building forms which give the gridded city its spatial quality.

David Handlin stresses the positive qualities of city change as a response to both technological achievement and socio-economic developments. He points, for example, to George E Hooker, an early twentieth-century Chicago planner and social reformer. Seeing the advent of an improved city life in the integration of technology and the city's physical structure, Hooker practiced a design approach based on both pragmatic and social concerns. But his role in the development and criticism of the 1909 Chicago Plan suggests his interest in aesthetic matters as well. Handlin not only adds to our appreciation of Chicago's prominence in architecture's evolution as a multifaceted discipline, but he also aids our understanding of the many forces that shape and strengthen the modern city.

The notion that architecture often embodies the spirit of the age which produced it is well accepted. Thus the use of architecture as a cultural artifact is promising territory for architectural inquiry. Randolph Langenbach interprets the social history of Lowell, Massachusetts, in these terms, examining its industrial, "new town" architecture as well as the civic architecture of later years, when Lowell had developed both community spirit and industrial competition.

The *Review's* articles also express the notion that urban space is a vital element of urban form. Schwarting, for example, considers Rome a city whose dominant features are open spaces — *piazze*, *cortili*, and streets — in a setting of dense building. By contrast, Peter Smithson, in the first published article related to his work on American space, has looked at American cities and finds their dominant pattern to be one of isolated buildings and intervening open space. In America, Smithson maintains, open space assumes the functions of

those physical elements of the traditional European city that act as spatial mediators. Smithson develops the thesis that "interval" or "distancing" is the language of American urbanism: in American cities, there are streets, to be sure, but mostly there is space.

Recognizing that the architecture of streets is essential to urban architecture, William Rawn investigates the architecture of "asymmetrical spines" — generically, forms of various sizes of street-like spaces that act as armatures for construction and activity. He cites clear examples of both successful and unsuccessful urban spines and then studies the effects of their characteristic elements. Together, the examples and analysis provide a model for such a morphological inquiry.

The discussion of urban space continues in the presentation of several urban projects by Richard Meier and Romaldo Giurgola which the editors feel exemplify particularly positive efforts.

Richard Meier explores urban architecture of both street space and open space. His Atheneum for New Harmony, Indiana, rises as a distinct object in the flat, Midwestern landscape — like its neighbors. But in Manchester, New Hampshire, his downtown urban renewal scheme explores a morphological type in which the relationship of building and exterior space is reversed: here the building wall is a generator of street space. Different contexts suggest different architectural forms. Meier writes that in both projects his particular blend of Modernism *does* respond to the context, if not in the site-specific way Brolin would prefer, then in a broader sense that includes the historical and metaphysical contexts in which a project may be seen to exist. Meier, as a more orthodox contextualist, would "make the building in such a way that it recognizes and responds to its surroundings and invites a reciprocal involvement."

The results of Meier's efforts may be compared to two projects by Romaldo Giurgola that also *recognize, respond to, and involve* the surrounding city fabric by integrating public and private space. In his commentary, Giurgola provides conceptual support for these positive site relationships that he has designed. He describes architectural "itineraries" and "parts" which "represent the present, that which is tangible, directly perceivable