

Buildings Vs. Architecture

(Or a Failure to Mind One's
Own Business)

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A patient dies.
The cause, poor personal hygiene.
The doctor is blamed.
Society collapses.
Uncontrolled population growth.
The politician is blamed.

In both instances there is understanding and sympathy for the wronged professional. For, although the doctor is in overall charge of the physical well-being of the patient (and the politician, the management of the society) there is instant recognition that many of the secondary responsibilities of this task have been delegated to various other agencies. Neither the doctor nor the politician is thus unduly worried (and therefore minds his own business) and live to worry on the day their essential business (and therefore their specific responsibilities) are found to be unattended to. This seeming selfishness, as Ayn Rand¹ would explain, has its merits. Worry, when selfish, focusses examination on the essentials and therefore, hopefully, on the specific role of the professional. This is how professions evolved and are strengthened and their role more clearly defined and shortcomings overcome.

The scenario in the architectural profession is very different. Any failure in the sphere of housing, any criticism of the shortcomings of the physical environment, makes its members, local and international, tighten their "loin cloths", and trace themselves to a fresh beating of the collective chest and clamour for reform of education, attitudes, skills, mode of practice and infinitum. The inability of the architectural profession to mind its own business (to ignore when the shoes are being nibbled, especially when the shoes belong to somebody else!) has resulted in a tremendous waste of energies and general confusion seriously weakening its capacity to examine the real issues—weaknesses in the discharge of its specific responsibilities. The reason for this general and perpetual state of tension has become clearly evident in recent years. The profession, sadly, does not seem to know whether it is the shoes, toes or the heart that is being nibbled for, it is still unashamedly confused as to what its specific role is.

The argument of the writer is that a pre-requisite to a useful discussion of the architects contribution to sheltering the homeless or how it may be accomplished better lies in a clear definition of his specific role in creating shelter.

The architects role is simply to create Architecture. The obvious question then is what Architecture is. Is it Building?

Our experience of creating and using various types of shelter, over the years, has resulted in a basic division of shelter into two types, viz.,

1. Those types of shelters whose impact on the user is profound and enduring and one that "distracts" him from the specific (building) to the contemplation of the abstract (and thus away from his physical constraints, anger, frustration and poverty). Very much like a good poem, music or a good book, And,
2. Those types whose impact, at the most, is short-lived and keeps us imprisoned in themselves, very much like a bad teacher, a bad drama which make you laugh and keeps you laughing when there is no laughter inside.

The first type is Art and therefore Architecture. The second type is Building, and end product of a process of construction—at the most well made movie, "pop" art.

Architecture, however, is not that simple. A well put together product, a graceful animal, a composition of beautiful words, sensitively coined—products born of good "language"—could be extremely significant and have enduring impact

Visually satisfying shelter, may therefore be Architecture.

Our experience, however, is that "contemplation" flowing the experience of such shelter may be more "distracting" than contemplative thus failing to be useful or relevant to the activity housed or the user.

Architecture thus becomes good when useful contemplation is triggered. Such contemplation is evoked when the environmental cues communicate a message decodable and relevant to the user's frame of mind appropriate to the activity housed are evoked and desired and productive behavioural modes are generated.

Architecture is thus "Significant Building" —building which communicates, building which possesses fine "lan uage" and wears appropriate expression. Architecture is Building which makes Man contemplate. Like a good teacher it is that which renders itself absolute. It is Building which releases the Inner Force of Man and fortifies him against external forces. (It is the Inner Forces and not the mobilisation of external forces that strengthens Man—perhaps one difference between Buddhism and Marxism.

The distinction between Building and Architecture does not rest solely on what it possesses, what it is, what it has. It also depends on who created it and what flowed from the maker to the product.

Why is one product better than the other? What invests, in the art product, the attribute of attracting and binding to itself a beholder, than other products?

What endures in a gift is the attitude with which it is given. What endures in a television performance of song and dance is the gradual realisation in the viewer that the performer is giving of his best and giving from the depth of his soul and is giving it for our benefit and enjoyment—the realization that he and

the song, have become one. In performances of artistic merit there is total involvement of the performer in what he does, he understands and believes in it. Thus his eyes, hands, body are in harmony with the meaning of the song. His concern is with the conveying the message of the song, with evoking in the viewer appropriate feelings—he is concerned with the philosophical and the deeper purposes. His eyes do not roam, he is not anxious of the crowd response—he is not concerned with the mundane.

This is true of all art—all activity that is significant and leads to contemplation. As Coomaraswamy has wisely stated, Art is in its making. **Architecture occurs when a particular attitude is adopted in its Making—when the ones concern is deeply and predominantly with the qualitative needs of the user.**

Experience has taught us that user needs may be divided into Quantitative and Qualitative ones. When the concern is with fulfilling the Qualitative needs of the User, when ones total commitment is to the realisation of the users aspirations, Building is transformed into Architecture.

How one identifies the Qualitative Needs and how the more important ones are distinguished from the rest is a part of the mystery of Architectural Design—a mystery that was known in the past and now being re-discovered. Of greater importance is our research which appear to confirm that those whose works are universally acknowledged as works of Architecture have been passionately concerned with the Qualitative Needs sometimes to the detriment of crucial Quantitative Ones. While not condoning this, the foregoing attitude is crucial to our argument. **It is crucial to defining the specific role of the Architect as that of identifying the aspirations of the user, defining its hierarchy and creating building that responds to it positively and doing so with committment.** This is no simple task. In the contemporary society where society is complex and needs less than clear, Art has separated itself from Craft, the artist from the Craftsman—the architect who deals with the Qualitative needs from the builder, engineer, building scientist and building economist who construct and deal with the Quantitative.

For any Building Programme—a programme to create architecture to succeed the Craftsman and Artist must get together and work as one. Failure to merge preordains failure. But failure in the construction sphere—in answering Quantitative needs—needs to be addressed to those directly responsible, for a sensible answer, and other “experts” must mind their own business. Failure to do this has resulted in the architectural profession seeking to answer criticism others are better equipped to answer and in the ensuing confusion and seeming inattitude the “bull-ring” mentality has set in.

The lament of the writer is that the real failure of the profession is being overlooked in this “everything is everybody’s business” attitude—that once the profession shakes itself loose of these peripheral responsibilities and attempt to progress, it will find its very heart diseased. For it is the question that is not being asked that ought to be asked. **Can the profession deliver what it is supposed to deliver? Can it create paradise out of hell? Can it create shelter for the homeless that is not a permanent reminder of their misfortune?; evoke resentment against social injustice? keep them imprisoned in the stark disparity in living stands? Can the Architect create shelter that does not hide the physical realities but through it, rise above it, to the contemplation of the abstract (and perhaps the sublime)?**

If they cannot, architects have no role, no contribution to make to sheltering the homeless. if they haven’t and want to, the first step is to learn to mind ones own business.

Reference :

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2. COOMARASWAMY, A.K. *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, Mimeshram Pub.. India. 1972.
3. GOODMAN, ROBERT *After the Planners*, Penguin 1972.