

SELFISHNESS IN ARCHITECTURE

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Architecture is seeing and feeling spaces, surfaces and textures in one's mind through imagination and then, guided by them, making spaces that respond to the demands of society, physical context, the laws of physics and those of the client.

If one separates architecture from society, the physical context and the client either in reality or in the mind of the architect, and the 'architect' chooses to operate at the level of personal (graphic) representation, then the world of architecture becomes akin to the comic, even comical; and this mentality among architects will lead to an endless stream of superficial presentations in a multitude of guises, where each does his own thing. There are no rules, there is no cultural continuity. It is the essence of the avant-garde - to break with tradition in all its aspects. But this is different because, combined with a computer generated visualisations of reality, not only is the self seen at the centre, but the self devoid of sensuality and emotion other than visual gratification.

The past twenty or so years has seen so many architects trapped by a media frenzy borne of inexpensive reproduction and communications. The individual media's demands for their own identities (being fed only by the new or through celebrating themselves), has created a new generation of 'architects' indifferent to their surroundings, victims of their own egos measured solely in 'column inches'; where few are concerned with the wider society -the socio-political dimension, or for the disenfranchised where they live. And are they concerned by how the occupiers feel about working or being in their buildings? I doubt it. They have moved on, another city, another country, another trophy - another image.

I was told that the ambition of one architect was to have a building in every major city in the world - the global archi-ego map exists - I suspect he is not alone in this ambition. It has nothing to do with anything cultural.

It is egocentrism writ large - an architectural tenesmus!
How can it represent a culture, a culture of humanity?

When I ask at interview what buildings they have seen recently, the vast majority of young graduates refer, quite innocently, to the buildings they have seen on the web, and those thinking they are smart, those from our web site. This is the architectural reality for them, and is more important and significant than the physical reality.

I find this exemplifies how thin the world has become. It is an 'in your face' challenge to my perception of experiencing architecture.

Their sensual engagement with architecture seems utterly limited to the visual sense. This means that my fear of architecture being designed for part-robots is becoming true. One senses that their physical world is not the architectural space but the city. If architectural spaces are part of and help make the city, then this matters desperately.

This new generation are the offspring of our thin media, of those mediatised architects who land their projects in a city somewhere, and who, after the opening ceremony, will never return to visit it again to learn how it works or to see what it might look like after a few years.

This is no longer their reality check - this lies in the reviews, the books, the interviews about them. They move on when the media's interest in their last project is exhausted.

The next generation of architects is with us now, and most, it seems, without having had their architectural senses exposed, let alone switched on. What future for a socially responsible architecture? Is the dream dead? This is not about superficial style. In socio-political and economic terms it has never been more important. Every city in the world is desperate to provide decent habitats for its citizens. Who among the so-called avant-garde can imagine this as being central to an architectural manifesto? How many among them have demonstrated an interest in poverty and social housing?

What of the spiritual and the quotidian - the quality of everyday life? How can these students and young architects begin to design sensually comfortable yet inspiring and surprising and mysterious spaces? Even the notion of seeking to make comfortable spaces is a term probably unheard of in today's avant-garde studios and architectural schools. How will they ever know what is visually or acoustically comfortable?

The qualities of silence, of sanctuary, of collective participation - where are these young architects to experience these? Surely not in front of a screen or through debating some tendentious quasi-architectural philosophy that just distances them from the architectural reality I know and love.

Or, perhaps they have no interest in these aspects of architecture. They are both victims and drivers of an alternative reality - one that seeks self interest in a shallow mediated society.

If architecture helps us to understand ourselves and the culture we have come from and are living in, then the reality of today's selfish culture has its architectural manifestations everywhere. They stand alone, they do not share walls, and make no streets or city squares. They stand isolated, like their architects, in an over affluent society where any formal proposal is possible if it attracts the consumer.

Has this architecture become the architect's rather than the psychoanalyst's couch, where their personal issues are so primary?

I have visited quite a number of recent 'deconstructivist avant-garde' buildings. None has touched me deeply, and most are disappointing in their translation into made architecture from often striking visual representations. "Deconstruction suggests that man and energy, but not power, are decentralised from the (architectural) product. It alludes to the insignificance of man in relation to the planet, cosmos or multiverse." (well Connected Architecture p9). Their position to de-centre man from architecture; to be outside of contemporary culture, inevitably leaves their work isolated, sometimes ugly, and unsurprisingly of little utility to society. There are, however, the first paradigms shifting away from this 'manifesto' to a reality I live in.

Whether it will come close, or in fact serve any purpose for a humanitarian agenda of our age is to be seen. What is clear though, is that their influence on a whole generation of young architects, bemused and distracted like the media with the new, has been very significant, and could not have happened without the 'Amused to Death' (R Walters Album title 1991) era that both encouraged and embraced it.

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"Only in intimate communion with solitude may man find himself", he wrote. "Solitude is good company and my architecture is not for those who fear or shun it."

(Louis Barragan)