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Recommended Citation

William Reckmeyer, "Architecture as Responsibility" in Essays Presented to D. Kenneth Sargent, ed. Paul Malo (Syracuse NY, School of Architecture, 1971), 47-48.

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ESSAYS PRESENTED TO
D. KENNETH SARGENT

THE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY SYRACUSE, NEW YORK

JUNE 1971

ARCHITECTURE AS RESPONSIBILITY

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William Reckmeyer teaches Advanced Design at the graduate level. He came to Syracuse after appointments at two other universities and he is registered for practice in several states. He has been awarded several degrees (B.S. in Engineering, B.Arch., M.Arch., and Ph.D. in Comparative Arts), together with other honors, including service as chairman of the Design Curriculum at the School of Architecture, Ohio University. On coming to Syracuse he was elected the first chairman of the Faculty-Student Board and since has continued in that office.

Architecture has been consistently associated with art. The connection is stated in many ways: "Architecture is the most available and public of the arts"¹; ". . . architecture is partly an art, involved with feelings . . ."²; "Architecture is a social art."³

Perhaps the connection between art and architecture is related to the fact that architecture is composed of shaped space which can affect the observer in more ways than any other art form. "Architecture is the most comprehensive of all visual arts and has a right to claim superiority over the others."⁴

Perhaps the connection between art and architecture is related to the fact that architecture has a greater potential of influencing people than any other art medium because people are consistently and involuntarily exposed to it. In every other art except architecture people may *elect* to be exposed to that art or not. People *decide* to go to the art gallery, a play, a concert, and so forth. However, people cannot escape architecture and the effects of its durability and its character: restrained or ostentatious, authentic or meretricious, meaningful or irrelevant. Therefore architecture has a superior social responsibility when compared to the other arts.

Perhaps the connection of art and architecture is related to the fact that both art and architecture have subject matter, content, form, and technique. Every architectural project has a title, that is, a subject matter, which usually is concerned with people. Content has to do with values and meanings implicit in the subject matter. Form, of course, is the physical shape of art and architecture. "FORM is formulation—the turning of content into a material entity, rendering a content accessible to others, giving it permanence. . . ."⁵ Finally, technique is the *means* of creating forms.⁶ To the painter, technique may mean paint, brush, and canvas. To the architect, technique means the necessary responses to utilitarian requirements such as pragmatic functions, economics, construction, administrative concerns, and so forth.

It is in technique that the greatest difference between art and architecture occur. In art, technique is that which is a *necessary but not a sufficient* condition of art.⁷ However, in architecture, technique often changes from that which is *necessary but not sufficient* to that which is *necessary and sufficient*. Perhaps because of its comprehensive characteristics, architecture's technique is very "heavy." Technique, the necessary responses to utilitarian requirements, is important to the client, is extremely complex in its nature and its scope, and is time-consuming. "The sheer labor of preparing . . . for creative work, consciously acquiring the requisite knowledge of a medium and skill in its use, is extensive and arduous enough to repel many from achievement."⁸ Therefore in architecture, technique is so strong that it can and often does replace

content. The resulting architecture is merely the expression of technique and becomes shallow when compared to architecture's significant inherent responsibilities; it is the most comprehensive visual art, it has the strongest potential of any art for influencing people, and it has content—its more important responsibility.

Furthermore, the expression of mere technique has become mistaken for creativity. It has previously been established that there are seven crutches to designing architecture, all of which relate to the expression of technique: the crutch of utility, the crutch of pretty drawings, the crutch of history, the crutch of comfort, the crutch of cheapness, the crutch of serving the client, and the crutch of structure.⁹ The list can be expanded to include the crutch of ego design, the crutch of code expressionism, the crutch of tools that become ends in themselves, and the crutch of design methodologies—to name a few. “. . . why should we at this stage be that crutch-conscious? . . . The act of creation, like birth and death, you have to face by yourself. There aren't any rules. . . .”¹⁰

Furthermore, the expression of mere technique becomes increasingly shallow with the passage of time, because technique tends to become forgotten. The quality of the work remains long after utilitarian requirements, budget limitations, time limitations, and other elements of technique are forgotten.

Therefore it appears that a significant work of architecture must move through and beyond technique and become responsive to its indigenous responsibilities of influencing people—by its comprehensiveness and especially by shaping its content. When this occurs the work will become associated with art.

“The making of a work of art is the creative process that enlists a man's utmost technical skills *in the service* of his utmost conceptual power. . . .”¹¹

Footnotes

1. William A. Coles and Henry Hope Reed, Jr., *Architecture in America: A Battle of Styles*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1961, p. vii.
2. Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture 1750-1950*. Montreal: McGill University Press, 1967, preface.
3. Paul Heyer, *Architects on Architecture*. New York: Walker and Company, 1966, p. 11.
4. Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architects*. Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1963, p. 16.
5. Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content*. New York: Vintage Books, 1957.
6. Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953, p. 40.
7. Bertram Morris, “The Art-Process and the Aesthetic Fact in Whitehead's Philosophy,” *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead*. Chicago: Northwestern University, 1941, p. 483.
8. Brewster Ghiselin, *The Creative Process*. New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1952, p. 28.
9. Philip Johnson, “Remarks from an Informal Talk to Students of Architectural Design at Harvard,” *Perspecta* 3, *The Yale University Architectural Journal*. New Haven, Conn., 1955, pp. 41-43.
10. Johnson, pp. 41-43.
11. Langer, p. 40.