THE ECOLOGICAL POST MODERN POSITION
SEARCHING FOR AN ARCHITECTURE OF PEACE

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Abstract

Through the Modern Era the making of architecture has been an act of aggression, rather than peace. It has been used as a vehicle to promote social and cultural division, political alignments, commercial interests and the domination of the natural world. These last four hundred years architecture has been a cultural vehicle for the modern anthropocentric vision of the world. Due to the rapid rate at which our technologies change the condition of the world we are given the opportunity to see the destruction for which we are responsible. Perhaps we should begin to consider how we act and affect our world in order to provide for a more peaceful approach to the making of architecture; a making that is less aggressive, considers the whole and values the environment as an inherent part of living rather than as an object to be turned into resource or captured aesthetically. In this paper I summarize the primary characteristics of anthropocentrism in architecture while providing a new framework for ecological and holistic thinking that could change our building from aggressive to peaceful when considering the natural world.

Introduction

A well known American architect, whom I recently met, explained to me with frankness, that his colleagues shuttered when he used the words spiritual or love, or even peace, within a conversation regarding architecture. "At the very most", he stated, "an architect will, with hesitation, speak of metaphysics." A concern for love and peace almost sounds comic to most accomplished professionals' ears. That an architect would relate such a story, or even admit to such a concern, could deem she or he unsuited in most intellectual circles. But it seems to me, that it is the rest of us who should begin to consider why it is that we find the concern for spirit, love or peace, so at odds with our preoccupations. Instead of peace, spirit or beauty, architects elect to concentrate on activities that encompass criticism, anthropocentric dynamics, aggression, progress, and at times "passion." Architects have been educated to believe that spirituality and peace are without value because they do not fit within the context of our educational foundation.

At the heart of the disregard for issues of peace, love, spirit and beauty in architecture are the primary assumptions with which modern architects operate. The modern architect has been educated to relate to the world through concepts that are not spiritually binding, or based on compassion, but instead objective, exclusionary and dominating. What is produced from these concepts are artifacts that separate rather than bring together, distinguish rather than bind, and fracture the full sense of being rather than hold together.

As long ago as the pre-Socratic and as recently as Heidegger, philosopher's have been concerned that the Western world would ignore spirituality, which they believed would have extensive effects not only for human kind, but for our world. For the past two thousand years we have progressively ignored our spiritual existence and such concerns have become the reality of Western civilization at the end of the twentieth century. It is precisely the denial and lack of consideration given to the spiritual and the modern West's concentration on quantitative value and materiality that has produced the aggressive power struggles between individuals and society, and humankind and the world.

The profession of architecture is certainly not alone in these activities. A number of scholars believe that the anthropocentric position that the modern world inherited and from which we still operate is far reaching and perpetuates a way of understanding humankind in the world that destructs and devalues, rather than supports and values society, culture and world (Ferkiss, 1993; Spretnak, 1991; Turner, 1980). The intellectual concepts that the

modern West operates from can be seen in the split between subject and object, the dominant view of man ruling over the world, the social organization of self opposing other, and the schism between the physical and (often the denial of) the metaphysical (spiritual) world. The practices of Western civilization distinguishes from and lacks consideration for the world, other, object, and spiritual to such a extent that we are mentally and physically unhealthy, commit to practices that degregate the world, and manifest a monumental loss of place. If you remain skeptical to such a prognosis (Ponting, 1991), consider the condition of Western civilization, developing Third and Fourth world nations and the state of the natural world that has been produced by the swift changes of our technology. I am not suggesting that technology is to blame, merely that the speed of the work of technology allows us to observe, in our own lifetimes, changes we make to the world. Changes such as decreasing clean air and water, depletion of forests and minerals, rapidly diminishing species, the consequence of nuclear reactors, the fall out of atomic bombs, the commodification of knowledge, the condition of urban environments, and the general malaise of people who ignore one another, trust no one, fear for their health (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1996; Spretnak, 1991). All are the result of Western civilization's Modern Era.

The modern world view, by way of its abstract concepts and fragmented sense of knowing the world, creates a society that comprehends no whole sense of being. We must begin to find ways to experience ourselves as a concerned participant rather than as estranged individuals. The modern anthropocentric concepts must be eclipsed in order for us to find a way to operate in the world that is more sympathetic, compassionate, and peaceful, and where the spiritual is at home with the physical. Architects, as contributors to our culture, have the opportunity to play a large role in this vision, because architects are responsible for providing the environments society dwells in, the places that by their embodied presence, either exclude or include humankind in the world.

The Modern Architect

The modern architect predominantly operates from an anthropocentric position, corroborating the modern world view by producing buildings that dominate, distinguish and fracture society's ability to gain a holistic sense of being. This architecture provides little connection to the world, does not embody cultural and environmental responsibility or extend world reciprocity. The modern architect has become less and less concerned with the architectural value of the place designed and more concerned with the profit to be made. The primary problem of the Modern Era - the lack of the whole sense of being - is perpetuated and exacerbated through such practices.

The anthropocentric position is made present through two predominant assumptions of the modern architect. The first is that the art of architecture only need be responsible to the creator, justified by the superficial interpretation of "art for arts sake." The second, is that the unbuilt world (material and place) is perceived as inanimate and without inherent value prior to its assemblage into architecture.

These two assumptions become operational through practices of the profession. Elitist postures create a subversive aggression in the relationship between the architect and society. The outcome are practices of closed intellectual discourse that operate within a purely intellectual referential system; a system aligned with the methods of scientific thought, and based on lessons of architectural "objects". Architecture fails its societal responsibility when it operates within this context because it draws little from extended relationships or experiences of the qualitative and tangible world in which people live, denying the traditional values centered on the embodiment of cultural practices of myth and ritual. The profession also rejects the traditionally valued contextual and unbuilt world. The outcome of this rejection are buildings that disreagrd place, fracture people's experiences of the whole, and deny the inherent value of the "natural" world (Meyer, 1991). The potential connection of experiences with the world, such as sun, wind, rain, and scent, are exchanged for the ease of environmental systems. The industrial transfiguring that trees and rocks and other "natural" materials are put through in order to change them into commercially standardized and abstract items for ease of construction and profit disengages human kind from the sense of being of the world. Abstracting the natural world, strips it of its "naturalness" and world memory, resulting in human kind's perception that they are materials without animation or life, history and context. The unbuilt translated into commodified material is also stripped of the perceptually explicit sense of being. When society is surrounded by an artificial and abstract world, built from these materials, as they are today, they are all but anaesthetized from the world. Through modern structures the world is primarily experienced as secular fractured parts and pieces, without any expression of the connection to the natural and authentic world. These activities deny the spiritual and innerelatedness of humankind to the world.

Architects seldom act responsibly toward society and culture, and instead concentrate on the modern activities of economic advancement and consumption. As an economic and political agent for industrial and post industrial consumption the fractured product of architecture is perceived only as an economic tool, devoid of spirit. Once reduced to a profane product, architecture is primed for cooption into secular consumerism. Architecture, in the exclusive context of science and technology and through its secular role, becomes just another product for service to compete for greater shares in the consumer market. The concentration on the secular material aspects of the world divorces architecture from any expression of the connection between humankind and the world.

The consequence of such architecture is a social conditioning that occurs by living and working in such buildings. Society expects less and less of human made environments, turning to unbuilt environments for their transcendental "fix" at the end of a sensorially dulling week. They no longer recognize the experiential connection that can occur between artifacts and the extended world. The places in which people live are no longer expected to be a mediator or to house their world bound rituals. Society only expects to be physically sheltered, for the least money, because they perceive no other value to architecture. The assumptions with which architects operate deny humankind's interrelatedness with the world, that result in socio-cultural outcomes that infer no value in the people who inhabit their buildings, or value to the places in which buildings are built. It is time for architects to find a better way to envision the world that involves practices that support rather than destruct Western civilization's cultural activities in the world.

Where Do We Go From Here

The ecological post modern position (Spretnak, 1991) offers us a way to understand ourselves as part of a larger whole, with the potential, if intentionally practiced, to mend our fractured sense of being. Its intellectual parameters hold the projects of sustainability and deep world preservation. Its philosophical foundation is built from the recognition of the inherent value of all things in the world, and our interconnection, both physically and metaphysically. The proponents of this view cover the fields of study from system science to nature writers and naturalists, holistic medicine to environmental law. The profession of architecture, also has proponents in this world view.

Traditionally societies have employed artifacts as mediators between the extremes of the "One" and the "Whole" (Snyder, 1980). The cultural legacy of architecture contributed in varying degrees to the spiritual self and its transcendental relation in the world. As Vincent Scully points out, the archaic structures of the Greeks should be understood and experienced as sacred places, inseparable from the landscape (Scully, 1969). The structures were conceived as responses to an already present "quality" of the place, specific and expressive of an encompassing force that gives meaning to the world (Stewart, 1995). Scully goes on to say that it is not surprising that the modern mind does not comprehend these qualities, because the modern mind has been trained to "perceive programmatically and within a framework of pragmatic prefiguration." Inherent to an understanding of the world, such as that of the ancient Greeks, is the belief that all things sensed, need to be contended with not only physically, but spiritually. The traditional beliefs held that through spirituality, everyone and everything is bound together in the transcendental nature of the world.

The ecological post modern architect has moved beyond the mental framework of modernity and begun to re-address the activity of belonging to a larger world than that of human construction. Such a belief, brings with it the assumptions that one's activities and practices have a responsibility not only to society but also the world. For them, architecture, as a cultural artifact, holds the potential to provide a context for the experience of being and world interrelatedness by offering the experience of reciprocity, a grounding for being, and a place for communing.

Their practices can be seen to embody four ways of relating to the world: Poetic cosmos, ecologically deep well being, dwelling in place, and ritual and myth. Poetic cosmos employs the formal and sensual aspects of architecture to extend and describe humankind's connection to the whole. An example is the inclusion of astrological occurrences to mark the inhabitant's place on Earth to the sun and moon. James Turrell's Roden Crater (Adcock, 1990) and Mockbee Coker's Cook House (Ryker, 1995) are examples of artifacts embodying poetic cosmos. Ecologically deep well being addresses the care for the health of the place where buildings are constructed. The choice of materials and technology would be made not only for "resource" conservation and issues of short term

availability but for long term issues of the world's well being. Dwelling in place conveys the tangible sense of being in a particular place through the construction's material nature. This phrase is not to be confused with the current shallow architectural activities regarding place Dwelling in place is brought about through a deeper understanding of the biologic and experiential grounding of a particular geography that develops a specific tradition of cultural expression. Artifacts are made that respond and support this cultural tradition, such as Michael Rotondi's work with the Lakota Sioux. Ritual and myth employs the more traditional methods of embodiment of place and people through inventive spatially descriptive story telling and temporal anticipation. The embodiment and relations can take place on a communal, familial, or individual level; each grounding the inhabitant and extending meaning and relationship with the world. An example is Glenn Mercutt's work with the Aborigines that brings about an architectural response that anticipates and provides their context for daily rituals as well as larger cyclical rituals and myths.

Looking Toward The Future

To date, these four ways of embodying the world have yet to be synthesized into a whole architecture. The reason for this appears to be imbedded in the assumptions of the modern world view. Architects educated through modern concepts have not yet made the complete transition to the ecological world view and find it difficult to practice and conceive of the world holistically, and thus, their practices remain fractured. In addition, the Modern Era is so complexly structured that the making of buildings, which is itself complex, is difficult to manage coherently. Lastly, the activities of the profession are still held within the economic and political structures of the modern world view, making change slow and inconsistent.

In spite of the lacking synthesis, it is through the vision of architecture that embodies the ecological world view that we gain the experience and understanding of the possibilities for the world. Recognizing what these relations are, and how they can move architectural practices and experiences toward a holistic world is the first important step. Synthesizing these relations into whole practices of architecture will provide a connectedness with the place in which it is built, as well as provide the people who experience it a grounded sense of who and where they are in the world. Such architecture will participate in the eclipsing of the modern anthropocentric world view and the transformation into an ecologically grounded culture that focuses on spirit, peace, love and beauty.

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