

# LETTER TO THE GSD NEWS

## Overcoming Defeatism in the Making of Social Space

I write to reflect further on the conversation about public space (Winter/Spring 1995 issue of the GSD NEWS) in which I participated as an immoderate moderator.

**1.** The conversation confirmed that a representative sample of the most gifted and progressive reformers and theorists of public space hold little hope for public space. They are mistaken. To see how they are mistaken is to reassess a situation, a vision, and a practice. The small hope expressed by the conversationalists consists in the view that a program for public space today must make do with two main devices.

The first plank of the minimalist platform is the idea of public space as the jumbled and exciting penumbra of many private spaces: the street scene, for example, where people from all social classes mill around, combining purposeful transit with aimless diversion. Public space as a disordered extension of many confining orders, as a happy but episodic and marginalized anarchy, allows the ordinary citizen of a democracy to feel a little like both Baudelaire and his bourgeois enemy: to go shopping, for example, in the middle of the crowds while delighting in an unthreatened and unthreatening alienation. If Madame de Staël complained about the meetings that deprive us of solitude without affording us company, here we have spaces and experiences that afford us company without depriving us of solitude. In such a mixture of sentiments lie both the attraction and the limitation of public space as the disordered penumbra of private space. Instead of transforming, it consoles.

The second element in the little hope is the desire to perpetuate the iconic monumental space enacting the image of a collective history and a collective destiny, the space of grand public buildings and squares or of religious and national commitment. Such spaces may still work when they connect to a living national or religious experience. The romance of a national future continues to speak unmistakably in the buildings and spaces of Washington, DC, for example. However, the latter-day urban icons would work all the more if they became more pluralistic. It is inappropriate for a democracy to inscribe in its collective structures a unified message about the past and the future, on the authoritarian and hieratic model of the traditional political and religious capitals. Pluralism would not merely combat authoritarianism; it would open channels of communication between the public symbols of the state and the real life of society.

In the absence of such a pluralism, the iconic and monumental space becomes, all too often, what the myth of republican engagement à la Roman Republic has generally been in the history of political thought: an attempt to ennoble through moral rearmament and edifying re-description an unchanged set of political and economic institutions. Reduced to this role, the urban icon becomes an alibi rather than a transformation: an alibi for not fighting to reinvent real public spaces in the service of a changed public life.

So the little hope comes down to this: the penumbral space where the distinction between private and public breaks down, without anything very much happening as a result, and the vestigial icons that enable us to fantasize about what we have usually managed to get rid of. This duo is not a program; it is the juxtaposition of two holes. Neither can fill the other up. Rem Koolhaas, as a European, is happy to find in New York some release from the obsessional hierarchies and control mechanisms of European civilization. George Baird, as a North American, wants a larger civic stage on which we inhabitants of the New World can escape our unavailing privatism. The American looks to the European past, and the European to the American present. They have both failed, as we have all, to recognize how the iconic and the anti-iconic spaces they respectively prize join to preempt the role of a transformative, democratic vision in our thinking about buildings and cities.

To the call for greater transformative ambition, the architects and urbanists understandably respond: how can you ask more from us when whatever we accomplish already requires so much struggle with our clients and communities? Moreover—they occasionally suggest—we have learned a lesson from the high-handedness of the early modernists, with their self-defeating efforts to impose an unforgiving program upon an unwilling society.

However, until we achieve programmatic clarity about the route to follow, the weight of all such practical constraints eludes measurement. We need to know, first, whether we have a program to reshape some of these constraints, and, second, how much, in sustained and reasoned programmatic commitment, we can put on the other side of the scales, to weigh against such constraints as we may be powerless to change. To measure our constraints we need to measure—and to define—our hopes.

Before saying more about the direction in which we should go, I shall take a detour and explore an aspect

of the historical experience of architecture in which we can find both inspiration and admonition.

**2.** We all know the easy way to write the history of Western architecture from the Romanesque to the present. There is a pendular swing in the building arts. One movement goes toward hierarchical ordering from a central space; transparency of social meaning and function; and careful control of sensual experience. The opposing movement goes toward polycentric dynamism; sustained ambiguity about meaning and function; and acceptance of sensual delight. Renaissance and Baroque may be the exemplary manifestations of this contrast. However, it had appeared before them, and it has kept reappearing ever since.

Today we find this opposition both repeated and confused. Neoclassicism and the ornamental, historicizing versions of "postmodernism" supply self-conscious and ironic stand-ins for the two contrasting positions. Fancy deconstructivist experiments in building try to push the alternation from the centrally organized to the decentered along a road so high that it risks being airless. The return to an opposing style is never a return to the same thing: society and engineering change, and even a prostrate revivalism seeks some sign of distinction.

The history of architecture would be spiritually and socially barren if this oscillation were, as the art historians sometimes suggest, its governing principle. The rehearsal of this tiresome historical script is, for the architect, a surrender to sloth: if he lacks strong impulses or commitments, he can simply take his assigned place in the generational sequence of reaction and counter-reaction. The relation of these ready-made cues to the vocation of a practical artist is like the relation of the autonomic nervous system to an active and informed imagination: something to use, to master, and to correct, in the service of something else.

What repeatedly stands in tension with this alternation in the history of architecture is a recurrent movement that, at the height of its realization, brings architecture close to our core existential and political anxieties. To this ideal we might properly apply the term "classical," if only we could disassociate the connotations of that term from the Graeco-Roman mumbo-jumbo. Today we see this ideal in many places—in the architecture of a Tadao Ando or an Álvaro Siza, for example. It is a building practice that

evades the contrast between the traditional polarities not because it somehow "synthesizes" them, but because it responds to a more inclusive set of concerns and commitments. Against surface, ornament, and clutter, it stands for focus on things that matter, for simplicity without asceticism, for sympathy with physical and social context without pandering to the arbitrary conventions of a tradition and a place. Into even the most private of private spaces, it brings some reminder of a broader social life. Against the willful

rationalism and the controlling symmetries of the opposite spatial imagination, it gives sensual access to practical interests and spiritual concerns our established ideologies are unable to contain. It evokes our natural, pre-social being, expressed through biomorphic forms or continuities with the physical environment. At the same time it speaks to our capacity to outreach our present circumstances and to be bigger than ourselves, expressed through distance from conventional combinations of form and function, as well as through the marriage of the fragile and the diaphanous with the undying and the opaque.

The classical in architecture is, thus, a building practice wedding spirit to body, and combining acceptance of context (cultural and social) with resistance to context. It is, to use theological language, an architecture of incarnation and transcendence. It gives us usable spaces while connecting our daily cares with realms of experience that precede and outlast the dogmas and institutions of society. For this reason, it is an architecture of human possibility.

The trouble with the architectural expression of this classical ideal today is the same as it has always been. The buildings and building practices that approach this ideal more successfully remain isolated talismans and curiosities in an urban environment hostile or indifferent to their aspirations. Thus, the classical move in architecture is unable to realize, in its relation to society and the city, the promise of incarnation—of spirit embodied in context—that it inscribes within itself. It hovers over the city like the disembodied spirit it never wanted to be. It has the same relation to a shared built environment that romantic love—an idealizing projection incapable of surviving routine and repetition—has to a love capable of infusing a life in common. For that very reason, the classical moments in the history of architecture have always proved evanescent: they disappear quickly, leaving more utopian regret than reproducible practice.

Thus, the history of architecture turns out to have a dramatic relation to the history of cities and public spaces: the failure to shape a larger collective setting for the classical program constantly renews the life of the traditional stylistic alternation; in a very real sense, what people have not done about cities has determined what they have done with buildings.

**3.** Reconsider from this vantage point the inadequacies of the minimalist program of public space—the program that appeals to the jumbled penumbra of private spaces and to the afterlife of an iconic and monumental architecture. Such a program does little to overcome the constraints that have kept the "beautiful building" isolated within the unlovely but living city. It treats the social occasions of architecture as almost entirely given and the architectural and urban imagination as an effort to make the best out of a bad situation. Its two chief versions of public space remain marginal to the everyday life of society. Finally, by failing to challenge and re-imagine the way in which the business of architecture and urban design is organized,

it acquiesces in a practice that becomes all the more dependent upon whatever business and political interests happen to be in charge.

We should discard the minimalist program in favor of a program serving democratic experimentalism through the construction of social space. Such a program requires, first, that we shift our focus from public to social space, resisting the simple contrasts between public and private and valuing what these contrasts suppress. Second, we should explore a number of distinctive ways in which the architectural imagination can interact with emerging forms of association. Third, we should continue to develop practices of design, building, and professional organization capable of broadening our margin of maneuver. It is part of the animating impulse of these proposals to struggle against the imaginative and practical constraints that threaten to turn high architecture into the production of impotent and irrelevant icons, and ordinary urbanism into the marginal and episodic softening of the harsh urban realities the icons leave untouched.

Private and public space are limiting concepts; they draw much of their meaning from their opposition to each other. Most built space is social, supplying a setting for a life in common. In a society energized by democratic experimentalism, people never take entirely for granted the scope, method, and character of their shared activities. They redefine tasks collectively in the course of carrying them out. Association is not merely a means to pre-defined goals; it is the process for the ongoing revision of these goals as well as of the methods for attaining them. Consequently, no particular set of correspondences between forms and functions, or between setting and substance, can be stable. The social spaces of an experimentalist democracy are not a repertory of physical structures clearly demarcating groups of people and their specialized jobs; they are more like diminutive versions of society itself, with its promise of inexhaustible possibility. They invite recombinations of roles and mixtures of people. They offer havens for secular and small-time prophecy.

In our panel discussion, I mentioned three examples of the reconstruction of social space. Imagine society divided into three sectors: large-scale organizations; small-scale organizations, tied together by bonds of cooperative competition; and the vast disorganized and disadvantaged remnant of society. What would be some of the starting points of an architectural and urban program that, while responding to the distinctive needs of each sector, would help draw all the sectors into a richer set of bonds, sympathies, and analogies?

For the large-scale organizations—factories and bureaucracies, hospitals and universities—a design problem is presented by the need to facilitate the central impulse in organizational development today: the pressure to combine large aggregations of scale with decentralization of initiative and flexibility of purpose. The spatial expression of this imperative is an ordering of space that makes it easy to break off many semi-independent smaller spaces from larger multi-

functional centers, merging them back again into the centers or into one another whenever necessary.

Two other practical imperatives complement this major aim. The first is the inclusion in the space of the large-scale organization of practical accommodations like daycare, diminishing the toll work takes on the family. The second is the legally mandated communication of the large-scale organization with the society outside. Imagine, for example, that, like the temple of the ancient Jews, with its outer courtyard open to the gentiles, the large-scale organization be required to have

outer spaces open to the public. Suppose, further, that this principle of required opening be extended to include the internal facilities such as daycare: some of the spaces would have to be reserved for outsiders. By such devices we counteract the tendency of the large-scale organization to become a world unto itself. We affirm the commitment to a space overriding the contrast between private and public.

Consider now the sector of small-scale organizations: retail shops, small firms, and professional offices; churches, clubs, and schools. For the economic organizations the overriding spatial imperative of the future is the physical expression of cooperative competition: small firms must be able to pool their means, sharing resources and facilities, at the same time that they compete. For the non-economic organizations the chief concern is to disentangle their message for their members and for society from the stereotyped forms in which this message ordinarily remains entangled. They require both more immediate access to the worlds of work and neighborhood, and a more inviting set of transitions between the inner space of their core activities and the peripheral space where they meet the society outside. For both the economic and the non-economic organizations, the spatial and social softening of the opposition between private and public, between what is uniquely theirs and what they share, becomes increasingly important.

Remember finally the sector of the disorganized and the disadvantaged. For such groups, the most important spaces are the spaces connected with the practices of organization, for without organization there is no escape from powerlessness. In the neighborhood and the housing project, organization means space for a broad range of cooperative economic and social activities. For local and national governments, the need to combine the provision of welfare with the encouragement of self-organization and self-reliance requires the development of a range of decentralized educational, vocational, and health facilities closely integrated—spatially as well as socially—into the worlds of low-income housing and unstable labor. The benefitted communities must participate actively in the design and implementation of such programs.

These are all variations on the recurrent theme of social space, actively constructed, rather than just passively expressed, by the physical setting. Although ambitious and inclusive, such a building practice remains incomplete. We can complete it in the spirit

**One must struggle against constraints that turn high architecture into the production of impotent and irrelevant icons, and ordinary urbanism into marginal, episodic softening of harsh urban realities the icons leave untouched.**

of democratic **experimentalism** by re-imagining and redirecting two other, older architectural enterprises, each of them in its own way an antidote to the privacy of all our private spaces: the architecture of national life and the architecture of visionary naturalism.

Once we see civil society as a dense network of interlocking experiments, with analogous and fluid rather than starkly contrasting and fetishized physical forms, we can enrich our view of what the most public of our public spaces should be like. Instead of a single authoritative expression of the national past and the national future, we need a range of alternative expressions, speaking in the voices of the different groups and traditions of a society—speaking and telling how each of them views the whole from their distinctive angle.

In the contemporary world, where capital becomes hyper-mobile, while labor remains imprisoned in the nation-state or in blocs of relatively homogeneous nation-states, the national idea will be evermore contested, from within and from without the nation-state. Our public architecture must reveal this contest, and help turn it into a conversation. It cannot achieve this goal without diminishing the distance between the architecture of the state and the architecture of civil society.

An architecture of visionary naturalism reaches beyond the worlds of politics and history to the natural setting of human life, moderating the transitions between the building artifact and the settings, forms, and materials of nature. (Examples can be as different in style and motivation as Fay Jones's Thorncrown Chapel and Machado and Silvetti's house in Djerba.) In the New World such an architecture has always had a twofold meaning: while marking limits to the claims of society upon us, it also suggests within society the inexhaustible power and possibility of life, natural or social. By extending the chain of energizing analogies outward, from society to nature, it supplies another source of encouragement to us in our efforts to live and to feel on a larger scale.

This renovation of social space, with its accompanying revisions of national and naturalist architecture, requires, for its development, a connected set of innovations in our practices of design, building, and professional organization. Consider two such sets of revisions as examples of a longer list:

We need a richer system of modular prototypes: of ideas, designs, methods, materials, and building parts.

Such prototypes enable us to explore spatial analogies and recombinations, to re-imagine more, as practical artists and reformers, by seeing more. They also help draw the client group into the work of co-creating, with the architect and the urban planner, its own space.

We also need ways of practicing the business of architecture and city planning that give the architect and planner an intimate, sympathetic connection with the problems of particular groups: professional practices with an insider's rather than an arms-length connection to their actual or potential clients. No formulae can govern the development of such connections; the strategies must be as diverse as the circumstances. We must nevertheless struggle to achieve these ties if we are to democratize, in the interests of a truly social architecture, the traditional models of professional success: the famous artist-businessman selling an aura to the rich and the powerful, or the uncommitted team of specialists parachuting into an alien social world on which they will never again lay eyes.

**4** We can easily misread the situation today. Ideologies seem tired and hopes chastened. However, the old struggles are dying in one form only to be reborn in another. All over the world, an emerging conflict over the alternative institutional forms of political, economic, and social pluralism is replacing the traditional quarrels between statism and privatism, command and market. In the rich and powerful countries, this new set of controversies is more subtle than in the developing world: the conflict over the basic terms of social life, having fled from the ancient arenas of politics and philosophy, lives under disguise in the narrower and more arcane debates of the specialized professions. There we must find them, and bring them back, transformed, to the larger life of society.

I urge the faculty and students of the Graduate School of Design to live the moment in this spirit, understanding the active construction of social space as a special contribution to democratic experimentalism. The further they go, the more disillusioned with disillusionment they will become.

—Roberto Mangabeira Unger  
*Professor of Law, Harvard Law School*