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Dear Mr. Saunders,

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 energizing penumbra of
many private spaces: the street scene, for example, where
people, from all social classes, mill around, combining
pruposeful 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 bit like both
Baudelaire and his bourgeiois enemy: to go shopping, for
example, in the middle of the crowds while delightig in an
unthreatened and unthreatening alienation. If Madame de
Stael 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 seak unmistakably
in the buildings and spaces of Washington, D.C., 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 enagagement a la Roman Republic has generally been in the history of political thought: an attempt to ennoble through moral rearmament and edifying redescription 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 struggling to reinvent real public spaces in the service of a changed public life.

So the liitle 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 ennable 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 liberation 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 from our self-defeating 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 antiiconic and the 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 understandibly respond: how can you ask more from us when whatever we accomplish already requires so much struggle with our clients and communities? Moreover -- they ocassionally 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 defies 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 want to 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 now. There is a pendular swing in the building arts. One movement goes toward hierarchical ordering from a central space; transparency of social meanning 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 the protoypical 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 countereaction. The relation of these assigned 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 Alvaro 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, ornmanent, and clutter, it speaks for focus on things that matter, for simplicity without ascetism, 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, presocial being, expressed through biomorphic forms or continuities with the physical environement. 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) and 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 the trouble it has always had. 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 spriit 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 environemnt that romantic love -- an idealizaing projection incapable of surving 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.

Consider now the sector of smallscale 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 noneconomic organizations the chief concern
is to disentangle their message for their memebers and for
society from the stereotyped forms in which this message
ordinarily remains entangled. They require both more
immediatate 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 outsie. For both the economic
and the noneconomic organztaions, the spatial and social
sofetening of the opposition between private and public,
between what is uniquely theirs and what they share, becomes
increasingly important.

Consider 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 to self-organization and self-
reliance, requires the development of a range of
decentralized educational, vocational, and health facilties
closely integrated -- spatially as well as socially -- into
the worlds of low-income housing and unstable labor. The
benefited communities must partcipate 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 of democractic
experimentalism by reimagining 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 hypermobile while labor remains imprinsoned 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 reval 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 arcitecture 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 Faye Jones' Thorncrown Chapel and the Silvetti-Machado 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 prototoypes: of ideas, designs, methods, materials, and building parts. Such prototypes enable us to explore spatial analogies and recombinations, to reimagine more, as befits a practical artist and reformer, 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 conlfict over the alternative instutitional forms of political, economic, and social plrualism begins to replace 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.

Thus, the 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 I have recalled; 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 buidling" 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 reimagine 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 democractic experimentalism through the cosntruction 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 predifined 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 smalltime prophecy.

In our panel discussion, I mentioned three examples of the reconstruction of social space. Imagine society divided into three sectors: largescale organizations; smallscale organizations, tied together by bonds of cooperative competition; and the vast disorganized and disadvantged 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, symapthies, and analogies to one another?

For the largescale organizations -- factories and bureaucracies, hospitals and universities -- there is a design problem 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 semiindependent smaller spaces from larger multifunctional 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 facilities like daycare diminishing the toll work takes on the family. The second is the legally mandated communication of the largescale 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 largescale organization be required to have outer spaces open to the public. Suppose, further, that this principle of required opening extend to include the internal facilties 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.