

The trouble with style in contemporary architecture has three sources. One cause is artistic: the absence of a canonical set of forms sustained by authoritative standards of expression and representation. The second basis is social: the inability of any one group in society to get its anxieties recognized as the ones that count. The third root, and the most important, lies in engineering: the increasing failure of physical constraints to determine the shape of buildings. The attempt to disclose in the outward appearance the internal structural necessity — an ideal most fully satisfied in the emergence of late Gothic and early modernism — now seems to have lost its premise if not its point. As a result, the commitment to a particular style may appear to be both coercive and gratuitous. The architect's stylistic positionings may seem tainted by narcissism or pandering.

How should architecture respond to the trouble with style? And what does this response say about the nature and value of individuality — the individuality of the architect and the individualities of the people for whom the building is built? My central theme is that, rather than taking refuge in self-indulgent virtuosity and prettiness, architects should faithfully uphold the commitment to express in physical vessels a shared vision of collective life. In the conflicts of their contemporaries they will find the materials for such visions: each of these conceptions offers a distinct proposal for how to live or how to work; the most significant among them supply anticipatory images of the possible futures of a more democratic society and a more empowered individual. To turn architecture in this direction, architects must change their program and their practice: they must become citizens so that they may be artists; and prophets so that they may be citizens. We all know — and, should we forget, we are endlessly reminded — that this effort may easily degenerate into a self-defeating sacrifice of the artist's insight and the craftsman's integrity to the ideologist's passion or posturing. But a public art must reject the choice between political dogma and antipolitical luxury and put aside the illusion of independence from ideas about the possible and desirable forms of social life. I develop my theme as four theses.

My first thesis refers to the criticism of contemporary architecture. Although there is a conventional critique of the broad range of architectural forms sometimes called postmodern, it is hard to identify the constant and central elements in the polemic against the new approach. Two arguments, nevertheless, stand out: one, political; the other, plastic.

The political argument is the idea that, in rebelling against the authoritarianism of modernist architecture, this contemporary architectural practice also repudiated the characteristic modernist ideals of austerity and equality. By surrendering to clutter, so the argument goes, it has weakened our defenses against major forms of social and cultural subjugation. The criticism has its famous forerunners in Adolf Loos's attack on the Jugendstil and even John Ruskin's

discussion of the grotesque in Renaissance art. It gains a sharper edge when wielded against the ironic distancing resorted to by architects who, in carrying ornament to the point of luxurious whimsy, dissociating surface from structure and function, or pillaging vernacular styles and parading historical allusions unrelated to hopes for the future, always seem to suggest: I do this, but I don't really mean it.

The plastic element in the conventional criticism is that much of contemporary architecture plays out an almost predetermined agenda of the visual imagination. The commitment to rigid linear proportions and centrally organized space in Renaissance architecture gave way to the polycentric dynamism of the baroque, although this proliferation of spaces and forms remained under the spell of an ideal of axial symmetry. Similarly, the modernist commitment to a generic regularity far more comprehensive than the Renaissance proportions has been followed by a turn to systematic irregularity, a breaking up of basic symmetries and correspondences. The pendular swing between rigid order and studied disorder seems merely to have continued with ever wider sweeps. The willingness of contemporary architects to play a role in this prewritten script would weaken if only they saw it more clearly for what it is; the script usurps their power to choose a future for architecture resonating with a future for society.

This familiar criticism, with both its social and its aesthetic aspects, is a caricature that nevertheless contains a substantial amount of truth. Its greatest defect is its failure more directly to relate the political to the plastic. I propose to extend the conventional criticism by developing it into a more focused political idea. What is bad about much of contemporary architecture — bad artistically as well as socially — is its passive service to a particular form of social life and to the diminished idea of personality that this life sustains. In this experience of society, politics — the big politics of society — is supposed to cool down, reduced to the cultivation of minimal decencies and practical prosperity, the better to secure the individual against the extremes of destitution, risk, and inequality. The real action should go on in the lives of individuals rather than in the politics of society; and politics matters, in large part, as a means of equipping individuals with the practical and cultural equipment with which to define and execute their life projects.

There is a spiritual paradox in this social experience. A strong subjectivity demands expression in shared forms of existence. Of two things, one: either the individuals in such a society will have a diminished and desiccated interior life, or their experiences and yearnings will take the form of narcissistic fantasies and private pleasures, turning people inward, toward gratification and isolation.

The worst in contemporary architecture is connected with this spiritual paradox. Remember the "double coding" said to distinguish these buildings: the use of forms that have one meaning

for the public and another for the enlightened. The exoteric allusion to local traditions or historical stereotypes invokes modes of experience that are ordinarily dead or dying; nostalgia for them rarely amounts to more than an alibi for inaction. The esoteric reference to high-flown architectural intentions and fantasies lacks any actual or imagined embodiment in forms of human association. Thus, these double-coded buildings, meant as jokes, stand as lies, abandoning us to the desolation of apathy.

My second thesis is that a better architecture is one treading any one of a number of divergent paths of resistance to the established form of life. The buildings must resist as well as express the society. They should do so out of faith in the power of the individuals who will inhabit the buildings to disengage themselves from preset plans of social division and hierarchy, to work or live together in untried ways, and to affirm a capability of production, association, and insight that no settled order of institutions or rules of discourse exhaust. On the basis of such a faith the democratic idea of emancipation and the religious/moral idea of transcendence find common ground. These remain the two living faiths of our civilization; their capacity to inspire, disrupt, and confound, and their authority as sources of meaning and value, are far from run out. In the United States, they speak with a louder voice; for no idea has been more powerful in American civilization than the hope, at once characteristically modern and characteristically democratic, of forming individuals who, by becoming evermore original, are able to combine with other individuals in ways that produce new experience, new value, and new truth.

A lasting architecture must always be one that both embraces and opposes settled experience: pointing in one direction to the acknowledgment of the established order of things and, in another, to a transformed and ennobled life. Contemporary architects have an additional reason to want their work to undergo this ambivalence. The societies for which they build are societies in which people regularly find their experiences of desire divided into two parts: prosaic wants and intuitions capable of being satisfied within the structure of established arrangements, and daydreams — often of adventure, empowerment, or reconciliation — presupposing an escape from that structure. Human responsiveness as well as aesthetic ambition require the architect in such a society to build buildings that speak to both the revealed and the hidden realities of the heart.

Consider the guiding impulses of three trajectories for the development of an architectural practice that, acting out this ambition, would offer an alternative to the tired irony, nostalgia, and ornamentation, or the arcane and flippant formal experiments, now so often accepted as the antidotes to high modernism.

One such program is the architecture of a visionary naturalism. What distinguishes it is less the use of forms drawn from nature, or the care to make the building fit its natural place, than the

attempt to give the artifact the exuberance of nature, while cleansing this extravagance of any element of subjugation. Buildings that are also gardens, breaking down the contrast between inside and outside and setting practical requirements in a context of effortless play, diminishing the terrors of nature and the violence of society: such is the ideal to which a visionary naturalism aspires. This architecture turns simplicity into a kind of morality. It is persistently attracted to two contrasting and complementary sets of natural forms: primordial, organic, or Stonehenge-like forms that recount a hope of rootedness safe from history; and evanescent, diaphanous forms that bear witness to the experience of fragility imposed by history.

A second such architectural program is the architecture of pluralistic communitarianism. This is the architecture of a politics that wants the real action in society to go on in particular, discrete spheres of social experience rather than across the whole society or within the lives of individuals. The devolution of power from the state to society must, for such a politics, go hand-in-hand with the organization of the people so that they may be capable of exercising these devolved powers. A distinct idea of common life is both a condition and a consequence of this capability. The aim of an architecture touched by this vision of human possibility is to fashion buildings that express and empower radically distinct varieties of group life, not in reveries but in the realities of offices and factories, schools and hospitals, childcare centers and nursing homes. Such an architecture develops by undermining the contrast between public and private, preferring spaces that invite joint action and shared experience and avoiding the monumental and the iconographic. For one thing, the architecture of pluralistic communitarianism emphasizes activities overriding the contrast between the public and the private realms. For another, within each of the distinctive worlds it helps articulate, it creates a continuous gradation between more open and more secluded areas. But, more important than either of these methods is the overturning of preconceptions about who can do what where: the images of particular forms of group life developed by this architecture resist subsumption under any master plan of social order.

A third architectural program would express the commitments of a mobilizational democracy: one in which decisive institutional experiments take place on a societywide basis; the economy and the government are reorganized to minimize privileged strangleholds on power and capital; and the individual gains security in a haven of vitally protected interests, rendering him tolerant of an accelerated social experimentalism. Buildings connected with this direction in the remaking of society and sensibility would have public spaces erupt into private ones at the same time that they would detach the meaning of the public from the narrowly political. In this context, public means whatever has a range of significance — political, moral, aesthetic, or religious — that goes beyond self-regarding activity and engages the intimate in the collective.

the workaday in the historical, and the experience of the present in the making of the future. Thus, such an architecture wants to inspire more than to edify or to console; to inspire, above all, a sense of world-making power. It emphasizes the outward-reaching significance rather than the specialized character of what goes on in a building. To this end, it must both reject the stereotyping of groups or activities and impart a larger interest to the specialized and a radiant force to the everyday.

The focus of ideological conflict is ceasing to be the quarrel between statism and privatism, command and market economies. It is becoming, instead, the conflict among alternative institutionalized versions of political and economic pluralism and the varieties of social experience that each of these versions supports or discourages. By taking, through his work, a stand in this conflict — building along directions such as those I have just evoked — the architect speaks in a way less corrupted by solipsism and vanity.

My third thesis addresses the agency of this transformed architecture: What kind of architect can do it and by what means? The small percentage of buildings that reach for distinction continue to be built by businessmen-artists who sell promises of contained destandardization and value-enhancing refinement in exchange for money and fame. These men (for they obviously are men) must, to be successful, find undisturbing ways to surprise. Held in the golden chains of patronage, even the most exacting architect finds himself driven to solutions conforming to established arrangements rather than announcing and enabling alternative ones.

There is no easy and instantaneous release from these ties; to struggle with them is part of the price to be paid for the practice of a public art whose productions cost dearly, last long, and matter much. The architect's best hope may often lie in the search for greater independence through the multiplication of partial dependencies: a workshop combining the production of standardized, even modular designs and services with complete, one-time innovations; a foothold in the academy for the sake of the inspiration and the salary; and, above all, the patient cultivation of bonds — at once practical and spiritual — with groups and movements in civil society whose building needs the architect may both interpret and enlarge.

The revised relation of the architect to the world merely sets the stage on which to enact a yet more drastically transformed practice of architecture. If this practice is to serve as the vehicle for any of the possible futures listed earlier, it must differ in at least two ways from the traditional activity of the master builder.

First, it must be demystified and open to challenge, engagement, and revision by the architect's helpers and clients. It must embody an idea of production that relativizes, rather than reinforces, the contrasts between conception and execution, and between standardization and custom building. The ability of the client — or, more generally, of the user population — to

engage in the initial design or later remaking of buildings may sometimes be served by the use of standardized, recombinable elements and sometimes by the insistence on unique invention. Most vitally, it depends on a willingness to mix the standardized and the singular in ad hoc ways. Unless the users can pressure and participate, the aesthetic will remain unconnected to the social, or the social will remain a conceit without a constituency. And unless the project already begins by inviting completion and revision at the hands of the workshop, it will never seem open to criticism and redoing by its sponsors and users.

Second, this alternative practice must confidently approach architecture as an intervention in conflicts of interest and vision, not just of style and sensibility. It must escape from the seduction of two seemingly opposite but in fact complementary ideals that continue to set architecture at odds with democracy: the ideal of enjoying an impersonal, supra-factional authority — the authority of good taste or functional necessity — and the ideal of showing the precious refinement of a superior mind. The buildings of a pluralistic society display that pluralism by standing as proposals for one way of living or working together, in open contention with other ways, exhibited all around them. An architectural practice capable of imagining and constructing these buildings must therefore take the study of latent, emergent, or possible social divisions as part of its work.

Such an architecture opposes the idea of the building as a closed and almost sacred object, sufficient unto itself and bound to the spirit of its creator. It wants to be just one more way by which we, collectively, make collective futures within the collective present.

My fourth thesis concerns the core meaning of individuality in contemporary radical-democratic politics and vanguardist art. This distinctive ideal of personality connects the three architectural programs I have outlined with the best and most enduring elements in present-day architecture. The most forceful part of our contemporary conception of individuality is an idea of the disproportion between the person and his contexts. There is more in each of us than there is in the structures of institutions or of discourse that we construct and inhabit. We can always see, discover, feel, connect, and build more than can be countenanced or predicted by any list of institutional orders or forms of discourse that we can retrospectively describe or prospectively denumerate. The inexhaustibility of our powers of insight, production, and association gives tangible and earthly meaning to the idea of transcendence: the lived belief that we are the infinite caught in the finite.

We recognize and develop this quality — the quality of spirit — when we make structures — institutional, conversational, or physical — that lay themselves open to challenge and change; the activities for reproducing them pass more readily into the activities for changing them. By softening the contrast between structure-respecting routine and structure-defying

transformation, we impart a higher measure of freedom and self-consciousness to ordinary, day-to-day experience. And we diminish the extent to which we must play parts in schemes we never devised and barely understand.

To identify the architectural problems and expressions of an earlier idea of transcendence, we may recall how societies with iconoclastic religions, which denied the possibility of presenting God in an image, nevertheless put up public buildings representing God and man's relation to Him. The basic architectural devices of this expression were and are: blankness, vastness, and pointing — pointing to a world outside this world, or to a holy place within this world recalling that other world.

The vocabulary of present-day architecture has added two techniques to this traditional repertory for the pouring of spirit into formed matter. One tool is incongruity: of mass to dimension, of facade to interior, and, especially, of form to function. The other strategem is incoherence: the design of buildings in which the clues of meaning contradict one another rather than adding up to a continuous narrative or a definite point of view. The significance of incongruity and incoherence is to mark the absence of the most important protagonist: the structure-making and structure-breaking self. The building wants to be useful to him while also registering that it is incapable of containing him. It is by such inventions and such a vision rather than by ironic distancing and escapist decorativism that contemporary architecture will have something to say to the future.

There is, however, another way, at once more direct and more inclusive, of expressing the freedom of spirit in architecture. The idea of the structure-creating and structure-breaking powers of the self is connected, in our ordinary life of longing, to one of those great promises of happiness that the generalized skepticism of modern culture has rather reinforced than undermined. I have in mind the hope of finding work that both expresses us and changes us and does both by mastering and transforming some aspect of the structure of arrangements and beliefs within which we move. By changing the world, we relieve it of some of its dumb facticity and its burdensome alienness; we set our imprint upon it. Through such work, we realize more fully the ideal of the context-overflowing self. Through it, we make ourselves more fully into the originals that we all know ourselves to be and develop the conditions on which we can give ourselves, as individuals, more fully to one another.

The architect at his best must make forms enabling people as individuals and as groups to express themselves by changing their situations. In this manner he becomes like the lover for whom the fulfillment of the beloved's life plan is part of his own life project. He lives out his transformative vocation by assisting someone else's. Then, we can forgive him his signature on his buildings. We can forgive him because he makes pieces of stone serve hearts of flesh.