Toward an architecture of engagement

H. M. Steinberg
Department of Architecture, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Abstract
The architect as artist is the model that has pervaded architectural education for several generations. In this model, it is the pursuit of beauty that separates architecture from the more technical professions such as engineering. Today, formal aesthetics dominates the discourse of criticism and theory. The ideal of the 'architect as artist' with the reliance on beauty has served to render the professional marginal, away from the realm of decision-making. A change in paradigm might become the 'citizen-architect' and a new criticism and theory might be developed derived from the human experience in architecture.

1 Design: A conversation across the generations

Architecture is a response to a fundamental human need, as human beings need places to sleep, stay dry and celebrate life. As a profession, architecture is the creation of places of social association. What, how, and where we build is a critical reflection of our cultural values. How we use our resources directly impacts the quality of our lives. As John Froshmayer, head of the National Endowment for the Arts under President George H. W. Bush has said, “design is a conversation across the generations” [1].

Consider the following observations:
The proliferation of gated communities across America in which the ideals of a New Urbanism create old-fashioned towns primarily for upper middle class nostalgists behind locked gates. What does this say about our society when many of our real towns and cities are crumbling? How far have we come as a society from the original English settlement at Jamestown that was an enclosed fortification in the wilderness?
The destruction of the American landscape through the unbridled commercialization of the ‘edge city.’ We create places such as Tyson’s Corner, Virginia with sleek office structures elbowing the latest super-box, category-killer lumbering beside an hotel masquerading as Art Deco-lite with 8-lane freeways, no side-
walks and oceans of parking. What does this say about where we are when we are there?

The zoning laws that allow for gated communities and suburban sprawl. As educated middle class consumers, we pride ourselves on our sophistication and marvel at the vitality, charm and depth of older cities. And yet, most zoning laws in the United States restrict development that would foster the evolution of cities as places of layers of human contact. Ray Suarez [2] has written, in Preservation Magazine, of a Zulu leader anxious to return to South Africa because he missed the smell of his people. Do we still want to smell our people?

It wasn’t always so. Homogeneous cultures of the past, through political will – religious, royal or military – could work to create places that were a representation of a communal ethos. Karsten Harries in The Ethical Function of Architecture argues that it was the Enlightenment, with the birth of Reason and the death of God that the objectification of art began within the Western tradition. The 18th Century saw the dawn of art for arts sake. The Gothic cathedral, on the other hand, was a text for believers of shared values and was understood as a portal to the Kingdom of Heaven [3]. Centuries of singular communities worked to create these works of shared values.

America in 2002 is far from a community of shared vision. Rather, it is a country that was founded on the belief of the sanctity of the individual and shaped and tested by the often-conflicting cultural goals and aspirations of competing agendas – cultural, political, economic, social and artistic. It is a country in which freedom of speech is held sacrosanct and working for the common good is an often-elusive goal. And yet, the terror attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 have rallied the country in a way unprecedented since the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. Indeed, President George W. Bush [4], has called for every American to dedicate 4000 hours of volunteer community service over a lifetime.

And there is much work to be done. Many of our older industrial cities struggle to come to terms with a deepening economic recession and the quality of public education in our inner cities is shocking. White flight has decimated the social fabric of many of our cities – enabling our suburbs to succumb to the toxic effects of rapid development, poor planning and segregated zoning policies. Indeed, experts have concluded that the state of New Jersey, with 8,200 square miles, will be completely “built-out” in 30 years, becoming a single exurb of New York and Philadelphia [5]. And in Philadelphia, Mayor John F. Street [6] has launched an unprecedented $250,000,000 neighborhood transformation initiative to arrest the scourge of urban blight.

2 Civil society and voluntary association in America

It is clear that the architectural profession has much to offer society at large. As planners, problem solvers, and comprehensive and optimistic generalists, the architect has valuable skills to offer the community, the business world and the political arena. Of signal importance are our professional attributes of civility, cooperation and openness. Our professional training makes the architect well
suited for engagement in civic life. How do we begin to define civic engagement and develop a framework for meaningful action?

In *A Call for Civil Society, A Report to the Nation from the Council on Civil Society*, published by the Institute for American Values in 1998, a bipartisan group of concerned citizens constructed a strategy for renewal of our democratic moral truths. The report identifies twelve core civic values that include the arts and arts institutions among those aspects of our society that constitute "...our foundational sources of competence, character and citizenship" [7].

Another bedrock value of American society identified by *A Call for Civic Society* is our voluntary civic organizations. Indeed, the American penchant for creating voluntary civic associations was one of the defining traits of American civil society that Alexis de Tocqueville observed during his trip to America in 1831–32. Tocqueville observed that aside from political associations, voluntary civil associations are the means by which Americans act cohesively within our democracy, affording the average person the ability to attain a degree of power and prestige in working towards a common goal. Without these associations, according to Tocqueville, "...civilization itself would be endangered" [8].

Robert Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone*, documents the nadir in civic engagement in American civic life at the dawn of the 21st Century. Civic engagement, Putnam writes, reached its peak in the early 1960's when the "can-do" spirit of post-WWII America was rebuilding American social life with clubs, social groups and community organizations, creating the cohesive social glue that allows communities to grow and thrive. Today, Putnam notes that Americans have retreated to their cars in long commutes from developments that contribute to suburban sprawl. They have been deadened by the numbing and solitary influence of TV, cable and electronics and they choose to participate by writing checks to a wide range of organizations rather than actively engaging in civic activities [9]. (While we have seen a resurgence of communal values in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, the permanent impact on American's civic habits has yet to be understood.)

What does this mean for us as citizens and as architects today? Some of the questions that we might consider are as follows,

Are we to understand that there is a fundamental democratic relationship between the arts and civil society?

What role might we play in replenishing America's social capital?

Were we to continue to disengage from active engagement in public life, what are the consequences for the profession and for the public wealth of the country?

Speaking to Parliament in 1943 about the rebuilding of the House of Commons, Winston Churchill remarked that "we shape our buildings, and afterwards they shape us" [10].

3 The architect as artist

The architect as artist is the model that has pervaded architectural education and practice for several generations. In this model it is the pursuit of beauty that separates architecture from the more technical professions such as engineering.
Today, formal aesthetics dominates the discourse of criticism and theory. The ideal of 'architect as artist' with the reliance on beauty has served to render the profession marginal, away from the realm of decision-making. A change in paradigm is appropriate at this point to help reinvigorate the profession. This paradigm might become the 'citizen architect' and a new criticism and theory might be developed derived from the human experience in architecture.

Architecture is a collaborative profession. Notwithstanding an acknowledged cooperative foundation, our foremost professional honors, the AIA Gold Medal and the Pritzker Prize are awarded to individuals who achieve the highest levels of design excellence – within a set of standards that are established and judged by other members of the profession. Our professional journals lionize the new and the eccentric. Scant emphasis is placed upon the interrelationship between architecture and the human community.

There is a contemporary ambivalence about architecture by those who practice it and those who experience it – an ambivalence that is due to the fact that architects have become largely impotent in making important changes in the physical environment. Architects are rarely vital to the decision-making process and we have responded with undue emphasis on beauty, self-reference and architecture as a visual art. Writing in *The New Republic*, Martin Filler paraphrases Philip Johnson's assessment of the current relationship between architect and developer, noting that “by the time that the architect gets his hands on a high-rise project these days, all that remains to be done is to clad the pre-determined volume in one material or another and to decorate the lobby” [11]. We have in large measure cultivated an architecture of retreat.

The public has responded with bafflement and the attitude that architecture has little meaning and the profession has withdrawn to the safe world of architecture as art. As professionals to the very rich (architecture as status) and the very poor (government subsidized projects), we have done a poor job of convincing the middle class that architecture can enrich their quality of life. And yet, it is the middle class who increasingly live in contractor-built houses located in developments laid out by civil engineers with respect mainly to minimizing the costs of infrastructure and meeting local planning codes. It is the middle class that controls most of the consumer spending in our country. Conventional wisdom says professional design input is just too expensive for the middle class yet the proliferation of books and television shows on home and garden design suggests this is just not the case.

4 The citizen architect and the architecture of engagement

This is a call for the engaged-architect, for the engaged-citizen-architect. This is a call for the profession to connect with society-at-large. For the profession to throw off the yoke of a tired, post-International Style, theory-driven elitism and work to create an architecture that is grounded in the human experience – an architecture that embraces popular culture, technology, history and the social sciences. Architects must be able to work comfortably with business people, policy makers, planning committees and community groups. We must acknowledge and
celebrate participation in all walks of life, including alternative career paths, in order for the talents, skills and visions of the architect to be recognized as crucial to the social and civic health of our communities and our nation.

The architect’s skills as creative thinkers, problem solvers, planners, listeners, organizers and implementers are valuable and needed skills within the public arena. It is important to acknowledge that many architects are already engaged within their communities. Architects have embraced and promoted many worthwhile social causes including the environmental movement, urban blight, the plight of the homeless and historic preservation. This paper calls for a larger, more substantive professional commitment to the substance of civic engagement.

What does an architecture of engagement look like? It starts in the home. With examples being set for future generations demonstrating the importance and value of being involved in the community and caring for the environment. It extends to primary and secondary education with programs such as Philadelphia’s Architecture in the Schools Program – in which professionals and architecture students fire the imaginations of elementary school students with the value of understanding and respecting the built environment.

It continues into professional education. The projects and curricula of our elite architecture schools are heavy with theory and computer visualization courses. Students create seductive computer graphics but are they the makings of a humanist architecture? As physics, calculus and drawing are prerequisites for professional architectural training – so too should philosophy, history, literature, writing, communications, ethics, management and community service be included as academic requirements for the engaged-architect. An engaged-architectural education offers joint programs with business and policy schools fostering a spirit of teamwork and cooperation between the three main players in the world of development. An engaged-architectural education balances theory with practice and imbues a respect for clients and end-users. An engaged-education instills habits of the mind and creates advocates and leaders in the fields of design drawn from the civic experience [12].

The architecture of engagement involves architects and planners working at the community level on issues of housing, economic development and preservation. It is architects working with politicians and business leaders in an atmosphere of mutual respect to help solve problems and create lasting legacies for future generations. The architecture of engagement is the architect as city council person, politician and policy maker; bringing problem solving skills, depth of intellect and a designer’s sensibility to the thorny and complex issues that dominate our times. The architecture of engagement is the architect writing articles for newspapers, appearing on television and radio and providing insight into the compelling issues of the day. Thomas Jefferson, America’s third president, is the model for the engaged-citizen-architect as we begin to partner with our communities for the benefit of the common good.

The architecture of engagement acknowledges that the architect is but one component of a complex and fascinating civic mix – that our ideas and dreams and visions will only be realized if they are associated and grounded within a much wider social matrix. We must build a bridge between the architectural profession
and society if we are to create a finely textured and nuanced indigenous architecture that accurately reflects, challenges and communicates the values, goals and accomplishments of our times. Simultaneously, as we develop a new model – the architect as engaged-citizen – we must also develop a new theory and criticism that has the human experience of our environment at its core. Architecture will once more become a social art instead of being largely a visual one.

This condition is not new. Lewis Mumford, the great social critic, in his book Sticks and Stones, published in 1924, underscored the fundamental relationship between architecture and civilization. Mumford wrote that “our architectural development is bound up with the course of civilization: this is a truism. To the extent that we permit our institutions and organizations to function blindly, as our bed is made, so must we lie on it; and while we may nevertheless produce isolated buildings of great esthetic interest...the matrix of our physical community will not be effected by the existence of separate jewels” [13].

He could have been writing today. Mumford tapped into the essential need for architects to be engaged in the life of the community, writing that “a city, properly speaking, does not exist by the accretion of houses, but by the association of human beings” [14].

5 The Architect and the Street: A Case Study

I learned about civic engagement in California. In 1993, while much of the northeastern United States labored under an economic recession, my wife and I participated in a national architectural competition that proposed putting a fence around Baldwin Hills Village in South Central Los Angeles. Tapping into late 20th Century anger and ennui surrounding urban decay, the competition brief proposed saving Baldwin by fencing it in.

Baldwin Hills Village was built in the early 1940's and represented the final flowering of the pre-WWII Garden-City movement in America. Built on an orange grove on the edge of Los Angeles, Baldwin Hills was a humanly scaled cluster of garden apartments arranged around a public greensward. In its day, Baldwin was lauded as an antidote to blight and was championed by Lewis Mumford, among other progressive social reformers [15].

Over a half century, we have come to question the effects of the Garden City Movement – the stultifying sameness, the segregation of home, work and play into dull and often threatening spaces, and the eradication of the street as a public place. Indeed, Jane Jacobs, in her landmark 1961 prophesy The Death and Life of Great American Cities, written just twenty years after Baldwin was built, decried the Garden City Movement precisely because of its attempt to undermine the traditional fabric of urban America [16].

5.1 The fence and the fertile edge

We reacted negatively to the idea of a fence. After all, a plethora of gated communities are creating wider oceans between the ‘have’ and the ‘have-nots.’ We thought about colonial towns and villages in which people lived above their
shops and daily life was an eclectic and rich mingling of people. We began to think that a fence could be a connection between two points rather than a divider and we started to think about the idea of creating a fertile edge — a place where the clash of commerce and culture creates a rich converging of cultures, tastes, ideas and styles. We thought that this fence might actually be an intricate and permeable matrix that knitted the city back together.

We investigated the Indo-European root of the word for enclosure — *gher* — and discovered a yard and an orchard [17]. And so we proposed encircling Baldwin with an orchard of olive trees and we placed six iconic houses within the orchard — Houses of Hope, Meaning, Memory, All People, Health and Mended Fences. And we thought about these houses as hinges and connection points; like cogs and gears, serving as local nuclei within an ever expanding and interconnected field.

We posited the following thoughts:

How do you draw boundaries that allow for filtration, percolation and infiltration? What signals and subtleties communicate peaceful coexistence?

We are told that when Bedouin tribes begin to establish permanent camps, they delimit their territory with points in space such as rocks, rather than cordon off a yard or enclosure.

5.2 The neighborhood and the street

After submitting the competition I walked out onto the streets of my community and began to blur the edges between theory and practice. Opportunities present themselves and my opportunity was a street called Germantown Avenue in a neighborhood called Mt. Airy in the City of Philadelphia.

Mt. Airy is a wonderful place to live and work and raise children, but we struggle like any inner-city urban area in America. Identified as the model integrated community in the United States by *US News & World Report* [18], the neighborhood is organized along Germantown Avenue, an old Indian trail that includes the site of a Revolutionary War battle. A Victorian streetcar suburb, it is home to many wonderful examples of American architecture from the past 300 years.

As white flight and racial polarization threatened to destroy the community in the 1950’s and 1960’s, determined and courageous neighbors fought to maintain the neighborhoods and the public schools while the central business district foundered. What was once a bustling urban shopping district was reduced by the 1970’s to an avenue of vacant stores and grated cut-rate shops. Germantown Avenue did not reflect the vitality of the surrounding community.

In the summer of 1993, I became president of the Mt. Airy Business Association and embraced the challenge to center community attention on the condition of the avenue. Holding several well-attended town meetings, organizing street clean-ups and establishing an arts festival, I was able to focus positive community attention on the avenue and celebrate the diversity of the neighborhood. With the support of a local state senator, I helped spearhead an economic development plan for the community.
And then corporate America handed me a wild card. A fast food restaurant (one of a handful of viable businesses in the community) closed and the site was taken over by another restaurant chain. This new chain abandoned the site and proceeded to build a new facility two blocks away in a less diverse and more prosperous community.

Gathering local political and civic leaders, I led a concerted effort to play out the issue in the court of public opinion [19]. We demanded that the site be kept clean and graffiti free and we worked to secure the site for other developers. The battle waged on for months but the effects of the recession and an obdurate absentee landlord held our community captive.

5.3 The diner

Five years later, a team of investors wrestled the property out from under the owner and set about achieving their vision for an old fashioned diner in Mt. Airy. And they turned to my local architectural practice for design help. Despite our lack of restaurant experience, these local visionaries knew us as dedicated professionals who understood and loved the community. They knew us as people whom they could trust.

The project involved gutting the old restaurant, building an addition and relocating a classic 1952 Mountainview diner to the front of the building. The making of the diner became a community affair. Word spread rapidly about this new diner and the neighborhood waited in anxious anticipation. The day that the old diner actually arrived and was craned onto the site was a scene worthy of a Norman Rockwell painting of small town America. Policemen, contractors, school children and families camped out in awe of this 60-ton behemoth lumbering towards our community.

The Trolley Car Diner opened to a wave of community cheers during the summer of 2000. Opening to overflow crowds, it sits today in its neon resplendent splendor on Germantown Avenue. The partners anticipated that a good day would serve 350 people. They served 750 meals on the first day and have never served less than 500 meals a day. Overnight it became a local meeting place and community center – a House of All People.

This little diner is but one example of the power of the architecture of engagement. The owners have become believers in the positive powers of architecture and the project received a 2001 Preservation Achievement Award from the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, further demonstrating the powerful potential of the partnership between preservation, development, design and community.

6 Epilogue

The events of September 11, 2001 in America have brought the issue of civic engagement into sharp relief. President George W. Bush has called upon Americans to commit to 4,000 hours of community service over a lifetime and the long-term impact of the attack on the social fabric of the country has yet to
be seen. What is clear is that the architectural community responded with alacrity to the tragedy.

Within hours, architects in New York helped form the New York City Infrastructure Task Force, an ad-hoc group comprised of labor, business and civic leaders with the mission to "advocate a vision for the rebuilding of New York, inform and assist elected leaders, legislators and public officials, [and] provide professional advice and counsel on key matters including the rebuilding process, resource availability, issues of liability and jurisdiction, emergency response procedures, codes and utilities" [20].

The true test of this unique partnership will unfold in the months to come. For now, it stands as a potential model in which the worlds of development, design, politics and finance can co-exist in a mutually beneficial manner. For it is in the development of trusting relationships where the true value of the architecture of engagement lies.

References

[1] Frohmayer, J., presentation to the 1997 AIA/ACSA Practice Education Summer Institute, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT, August 1997
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