

IF I WERE A YOUNG ARCHITECT.

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Five Dangerous Points of Circular Thinking

If I were a young architect, I would find it daunting to access the values supporting the practice of a contemporary architecture. It would be particularly unsettling to attempt to role model leading practitioners, as their work is informed by a particularly insidious form of cynicism: Knowing that it contributes to the urban and ecological unraveling of our civilization, and persisting in that direction. If I were to extract principles out of these practices, I would then confront the following points of circular thinking elevated to a credo:

Point 1:

I practice a single, heroic and hermetic architecture because universal or vernacular languages are not valid today. There is no multiplicity of architectural language possible today, because I practice a heroic and hermetic architecture.

The classical and vernacular traditions have been replaced by a multitudinal order of person-based architectures. These architectures, often unintelligible, self-referential and resistant to criticism, are confusing to the population at

large. They undermine the conventional role of architecture as shared visual culture. They masquerade as Art, Psychology and/or High Fashion. They substitute civic acceptance and popular interpretation with a combination of elitist posturing and fashion mongering.

Point 2:

I undermine the received form of the city because I cannot discern its tangible order. The city is without a tangible order because I undermine it through my individual projects.

The traditional city is still suspect. It is seen as a repository of obsolete, useless buildings and inadequate infrastructure. Its complex integration of various kinds and scales of form, building, space, and infrastructure is denied in favor of a primitive and exclusive reading based on building dominance. Homogeneity of expression now rules, rejecting program, typological character, regional precedence, or site location. As a result, familiar urban forms are routinely violated one project at a time, and replaced with anarchic project fragments. The visual diversity, the usability, and the legibility of the traditional city are reduced to a cacophonous monoculture of monumental trash.

Point 3:

I practice an architecture driven by technical innovation because traditional means and methods of construction are discredited. Traditional means and methods of construction are discredited because I practice architecture expressive of high technology alone.

Obsessively directed by an urge to perpetual innovation, architects have paid the highest degree of attention to riding the wave of technological change. Finding ways to express the latest aspects of technological advancement is accomplished typically at the expense of exploring the building traditions of each locality. These traditions often involve time-tested, common sense approaches to both architectural form and its technical content. Regional patterns of design are rejected at a huge cost. Cultural familiarity, human experience, and the collective memory are abandoned as a measure of assessing the fit between form and society. The rejection of historically transmitted knowledge has transformed architecture from a profession into a spectacle.

Point 4:

I design buildings as isolated objects separated from nature because nature cannot be easily captured within the confines of my projects. Nature is invisible in my work because I design buildings as isolated techno-mechanical objects.

The understanding of Architecture as the design of single buildings in a specific natural and urban setting has fallen out of fashion. Buildings consume and subjugate everything

natural around them without accounting for the consequences. Incrementally constructed and divorced from nature, they slowly erase all evidence of the landscape. Gardens are dismissed as nostalgic attempts to restore psychic comfort to the top of the livability agenda. Water and air quality deteriorate, as buildings increasingly do not account for the physical processes that there are subject to. The irreplaceable energy that it takes to make, maintain, and demolish temporary buildings (all buildings are now temporary) is forever lost.

Point 5:

I depend on the authority of elitist institutions to promote my avant-gardist projects because there is no educated public to support and advocate my work. There is no educated public to support and advocate my work, because I depend on the authority of institutions to promote my avant-gardist projects.

Contemporary architecture has been reduced to the design of a very limited number of cultural monuments, museums, university facilities, and transportation centers. These buildings are most often directly commissioned by private and/or institutional clients, generally following the corporate rather than the public process. Public patronage and the discipline of the market, both demand coming to grips with popular taste. More and more, architects refuse to explain their work or to subject it to public scrutiny. The result is a public divorced from the increasingly esoteric content of architecture. And architects that are enamored by abstraction of behavior and expression, as a result, find themselves disconnected from the values of their society.

In the rush to avoid the public validation of their work, architects also end up obeying and validating existing, regulatory canons such as zoning that are both obsolete and destructive. Destructive because they promote sprawl in all its forms. Obsolete because they fail to take advantage of the current needs of an evolving society.

I am not a young architect. I am an architect in the mid point of his practice. Based on the experience of the first half of my career, I would like to offer the following insights to colleagues who are aspiring to become part of this honorable and essential profession.

In order to break the mold of cynical and circular thinking, direct yourselves to an optimistic and constructive approach to Architecture. First of all, your work is not only yours, but is also part of the construction of an architectural culture and a larger built and natural world. Every one of your projects has the ability to either contribute to, or to disengage and undermine the human habitat. It is your choice.

Choosing an engaged versus a cynical approach to Architecture is an ethical matter. Responding to this simple choice is your civic responsibility. It will define you as it will define the long-term prospects of Architecture in this society.

The terms of an engaged practice are relatively simple, because they are part of a timeless way of operating as an architect in the world. By that, I mean that as a code of responsible professional behavior, they were violated only very recently, essentially on our watch. They are as follows:

Architecture of Continuity

You are not the first and only architect. Architecture has existed before you and will exist after you. Practice in a variety of languages. There is no Architecture without an audience. Your voice is most important when joined with others in an ongoing exposition of form that is comprehensible to them. Practice your ability to be multilingual by studying the vernacular, classical and modern languages available to you in the world.

Heed the lessons of history by becoming an avid student and practitioner of architectural typology. It is the essential bridge between individual buildings and the urbanism of hamlets, villages, towns, cities and metropolises. It is the most creative means of rooting one's self in the past while maintaining the right to self-expression.

Architecture of Urban Heritage

Honor the traditional city. The received city is larger, more permanent and more complex than you are. It has an order that has evolved over five thousand years, and will defeat your attempts to undermine it or diminish its importance in isolated small parts and places. Urbanism is about designing the void between buildings, the landscape in that void and the infrastructure of mobility and services that tie all parts of the city together. It is also about regulating the incremental construction of buildings that validate all of the above into a comprehensible form. It is not about the design of insular and oversized projects.

The city's course is not directed by designers. It

is controlled by financial interests that demand the generation of economic value at every opportunity. Your role is to generate such value through architectural and urban projects. The key to becoming an honorable professional counsel and designer and not a faithful servant to clients is to make sure that through your work, the value generated does not accrue to the first sponsor of a project alone. Instead, make sure that because of the quality and thoughtfulness of the Urbanism and Architecture you have proposed, value builds over time, and allows others to derive benefits in the future. The people that depend on society's practice of social equity in order to survive, especially, are your clients also, and on every project.

Architecture of Appropriate Means

Be skeptical of the advantages of exclusively utilizing any one technology, high or low. The promotion and sale of materials and their assemblies is a business without a moral compass. Choose by becoming knowledgeable about the performance of all building materials utilized in your region over the last fifty years. Stop subscribing to magazines. Photography is the death of Architecture. Photography promotes a view of Architecture as scenography, frozen in time, isolated, and divorced from the physical erosion of the natural world. Do not photograph buildings until ten years after their completion. Before that, they have little to reveal.

Materials arrayed in the proper form can achieve a sense of comfort in every climatic zone of the planet. Study how projects have weathered over time. Try to balance the aesthetic qualities of the materials you

observe, with the sense of permanence and longevity that they embody. You will discover that an appropriate use of materials and methods of construction favors the local, the inexpensive to produce, the easy to assemble and maintain, and the simple to reuse. Building knowledge derived from ongoing experience can then generate a balanced cycle of tradition informed by technical innovation. This standard of beauty — linked to sustainability and permanence — is the true measure of modernity.

Architecture of Environmental Regeneration

The centuries-old analogy of Architecture as a mechanical process needs to be broken. It has led us to dangerous delusions about both human omnipotence and the prospect of survival without constant stewardship of the planet. You must now imagine Architecture itself as a natural process. Added to the complicated traditional task of designing architecture in nature, you should now engage in the design of architecture as nature.

Dedicate yourselves to making architecture and landscape architecture inseparable. The design of towns and cities of potent urban form adjacent to inviolate nature remains the highest design ideal of our age. The first ten percent of building determines whether a place is urban or rural. This pattern is fundamental to our survival in nature and your projects should help affect it. You must revitalize the millennial art of designing gardens for pleasure and for contemplation. Nature must be celebrated and, in the process, our dignity and humanity as parts of it as well.

Our biological relationship with nature should be repaired. Your projects should fully align their physical and chemical properties and processes with those of their surroundings. Consider every piece of your work to be an agent against the mindless consumption of nature. Design to produce energy, to clean and recycle water and sewage, to produce food, export clean air, and re-use materials. The view of Architecture as the ephemeral consumption of superficial images and irreplaceable resources must be reversed. The pursuit of permanent form and environmental replenishment is your next mission.

Architecture of Civic Engagement

After 50 years of divorce between architects and builders, you need to become re-engaged with the design of production housing for all classes of people. It is this kind of housing that, because of its enormous volume and its inflexible form, has become the principal carrier of the sprawl virus. It is this kind of project that demands engagement with the market, and therefore with popular taste. It is mass housing as urbanism that begs the reform of zoning codes and a more prudent approach to the use of land in all regions of the country.


Design public buildings that are permanent, and make visible the deepest civic values of this republic. Design commercial buildings that are changeable and responsive to the unpredictable needs of the market. Make all buildings active players in the definition of a stable realm of public space that enables free and random human interaction. It is this kind of often residual, cheap space that is essential for social and civic life.

Be an architectural activist. Engage your local political process while remaining a practicing designer. Get appointed to committees and commissions. Get elected to office. Lead your fellow citizens by advocating and explaining the importance of physical design to the quality of their lives. Understand this kind of professional posture as being enabling to you and to them: Providing everyone with life options while elevating architecture to an art that everyone can afford.

Discover how differently people feel about their relationship to buildings, the city and nature. Don't assume it. Don't generalize hypothetical clients for specific projects. Don't pander to them, and don't extrapolate their wishes indefinitely into the future. Listen to them and educate them. Don't design just for yourself, design for the rest of us as well.

Conclusion

The future of Architecture is not guaranteed. Every human generation needs to shape it in the image of evolving cultures, societies, and markets. After almost eighty years under the sway of modernist ideology, Architecture has veered from one end of the cultural spectrum to the other. The early ideal of a normative and authoritative single language to replace classicism has evolved into a state of debased, infinite languages, as many as there are practicing architects, good or bad. This professional relativism has diminished the status and the quality of Architecture worldwide. It has reduced the natural and urban environment to a state of unprecedented barbarism and degradation.



It is now time to begin to advocate personally, academically, and professionally a different kind of Architecture: Clear in precedence, of form and material appropriate to the particular tasks at hand, focused in purpose on the reconstruction of the city and the regeneration of nature, and dedicated equally to the service of status and wealth as it is to social equity.

Editorial Note

This article was written in August 2000. It has circulated widely, however, among architecture students in the USA. It was published in: Andy Pressman, Editor (2001) Architectural Design Portable Handbook. McGraw-Hill, New York, pages 24-32. The copyright holder is Stefanos Polyzoïdes. We are fortunate to be able to publish it in Archnet-IJAR.

Stefanos Polyzoïdes is one of the world's most respected urbanists. He is one of the founding members of the Congress for the New Urbanism, a US-based organization dedicated to reconstructing the American metropolis and preserving natural resources. He also co-wrote the Ahwahnee Principles, a set of new community planning guidelines for the State of California. Following the success of numerous New Urbanist projects in the USA, other parts of the world have formed allied congresses, which provide traditional architects with international support. His work promotes the imperative of linking community with sustainability in town making and architecture. Polyzoïdes runs an international practice with his wife, Elizabeth Moule, in Pasadena, California. Polyzoïdes had this to say at the conclusion of the Tenth Congress for the New Urbanism in 2002: "We need to respond to the needs of the rest of the world. Whether in Europe, Asia or Africa, people are looking at the United States as the country whose success they wish to emulate. We must share new urbanist ideas with them." Stefanos Polyzoïdes can be contacted at Moule & Polyzoïdes, 180 East California Boulevard, Pasadena, CA 91105, USA