

EDITORIAL

Would you accept a job from this man?

"How apolitical can you get? If the Devil himself offered Mies a job he would take it."

Philip Johnson

The relationship between politics and architecture is complex and eternal. Of late, it has been the barely visible forces of government controls that have reshaped the form of our architecture. Indeed, as life in general becomes more and more (in)efficiently controlled by legislation, the architecture of the age tends to be given its form increasingly by zoning bylaws and decreasingly by the traditional giver of form, the architect.

As our cities lie suffering from the wounds inflicted by now infamous (but nonetheless ongoing) socio-political urban policies, it becomes apparent that the tangled bureaucracy we now accept as inevitable is a very recent thing. Prior to the social upheaval precipitated by industry, the idyllic age of absolute monarchies and tyrannical feudal lords allowed for a much more direct manipulation of architectural form, dictated entirely by the architect and his patron. As opposed to the forces of legislation, patronage can be a timeless method of building, and the monuments commissioned by the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt and by Pericles in Greece continue to have significance today.

The possibility for architectural permanence is at least partly due to the dynamics of the patron-architect relationship. Both have the power to impart what the other needs, and in the process each will have to give something up. The patron sees the architect as a giver of form able to create, because of architecture's social nature, a public manifestation of his (the patron's) existence. In addition to any aesthetic intentions expressed by the architect, the work necessarily immortalizes the patron and expresses some of his beliefs. An example of this is Baroque church architecture, where, as well as expressing exciting new formal concepts, the churches are imbued with the religious fervor of the Counter Reformation. Indeed, the clergy were less concerned with undulating facades than with drawing people back into the Catholic fold. In return for this powerful tool of propaganda (used equally well by religion and state) the patron pays a relatively small price: financing of the project and some form of remuneration to the architect.



G.W.

The architect, while working superficially for survival, builds for a reason akin to that of his patron, immortality. However, unlike painters and sculptors who pursue very similar aesthetic intentions in their work, the architect has the opportunity to exert his presence on a grand, public scale. While the architect's intentions might initially be misread - they will constantly change as the building weathers time - the creator of the work will never change so long as the building remains (we still know that the architects of the Parthenon are Ictinus and Callicrates).

In exchange for this quest for immortality, the architect pays a huge price, that of (political) integrity. Since the architect's task requires more than pencil and paper, the need to build often forges odd partnerships. Mies made a concerted effort to build in Nazi Germany but his forms were labelled Communist, and only the stripped Classicism of Hitler and Speer was believed to sufficiently express the spirit of National Socialism. Yet, both Mies and Speer professed to be completely apolitical men, and neither had any taste for Nazi doctrine, or any other political doctrine for that matter. Does simply proclaiming oneself to be apolitical remove all political and moral obligations from the architect? Is the need to build more important than responsibility to society?

Government intervention in effect isolates the architect from these socio-political issues. In the majority of cases this is a good thing, since there is no telling how far the average architect would go to appease his ruthless developer. At the very least the law guarantees a certain level of existence, even if this is at the cost of interesting architecture. The socio-architectural fiascos of the Fifties and Sixties, the result of design by committee according to government programs, have become increasingly rare. Rather, the government (in Canada, West Germany, etc...) has begun to pursue an alternate method, whereby a master plan for a project is formulated, and portions of the work are doled out to numerous firms. This serves to humanize the scale of the project (a divergence from the mega-project mentality of old) and also gives the architect increased autonomy and the opportunity to produce more notable buildings.

Great buildings, however, continue to be the result of an enlightened patron commissioning an exceptional architect. The architect of the Villa Savoy or the Robie House is so completely a master for his forms, that issues of functional adequacy are no longer relevant. Great architects transcend the issues addressed by legislative controls and they alone are equipped to converse at that higher stratum of universal meaning.

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