THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF ARCHITECTURE

by Johann Albrecht

Les défis lancés à l'architecture contemporain sont nombreux et se renouvellent sans cesse. L'article qui suit examine comment l'architecture d'aujourd'hui doit répondre rapidement à ces défis, en particulier ceux qui ont trait au contexte social, si elle veut garder sa légitimité en tant qu'institution.

The dramatic changes that have occurred in contemporary society as a result of, or concurrent with, technological changes, and the failure of architects to inquire into the nature and implications of our changing social context, is discussed in this article. Professor Albrecht argues that architecture must address the evolving social context if it wishes to remain a legitimate and socially responsible institution.

"The present situation is still hostile to the essential role of architecture as a primary form of reconciliation: the architect is made to respond as either <u>engineer</u> or <u>decorator</u> under the pressures of a technological world-view."
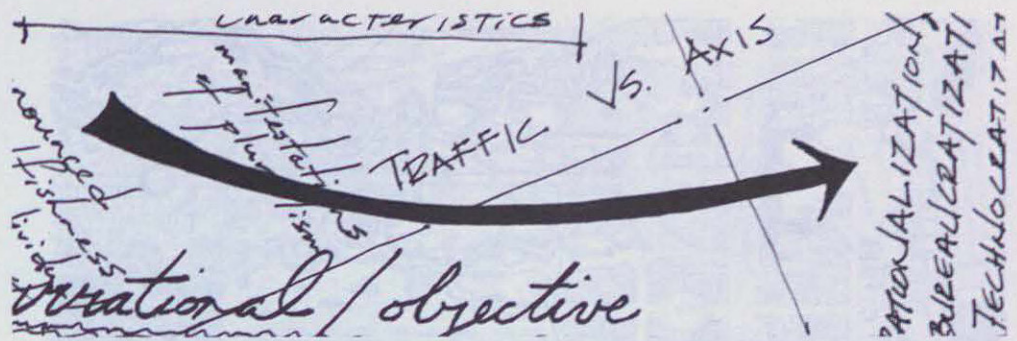Alberto Perez Gomez[1]

"<u>Metaphysics of the present</u>: Where only trivialized works of art win exhibition value."
Walter Benjamin[2]

Currently architecture enjoys an unprecedented popularity with the general public. This can be explained, on the one hand, through an eagerness by the press to glamorize the more spectacular results of new

characteristics

Traffic vs. Axis

irrational / objective

rationalization / bureaucratization / technocratization

developments in architecture and, on the other, through an increased public knowledge of past architectural achievements. Disappointment is certain, however, if one expects to find this popularity paralleled by a thorough awareness of the present condition of society in the work of architects. Never before has architecture disassociated itself so completely from social issues and problems. This happens at a time when pronounced social change has taken place, change which not only requires reactions by architecture, but which is also bound to influence the nature of architecture and its role in society. Unfortunately, role models of the past are unquestioningly accepted; or the position is taken that the purpose of architecture is self-evident and not in need of continuous definition. It seems reasonable to state that architecture faces a crisis of legitimacy. What are the dominant characteristics of current society and recent social change, and what are the implications of these on architecture? What follows is a brief discussion of these questions and an attempt to outline how architecture can respond to the challenges of the current condition of society.

I. One of the salient characteristics of present society is the all-pervasive belief in rationality; but what appeared previously as a sure safeguard against all irrational tendencies has now become itself irrational. The logic of positivism allows only for rational thinking with regard to means. Statements about objectives and ends remain subjective, according to positivist postulates, and are, therefore, at best, a-rational. As a consequence, goal-finding processes are considered to be an irrational activity; the only kind of rationality possible is functional in nature. These positivist tenets provide the epistemological and methodological framework not only for the natural sciences, but also for the mainstream of the social sciences: value-free conduct is the generally accepted norm in the scientific realm.[3]

As a result, societal goals are discussed without the involvement of one of society's main institutions. The sciences do not take part in such a debate; their reflective capacities and resources go unutilized for this vital task. Instead, goal-finding processes occur only in the political realm, leaving societal goals both embroiled in politics and substituted by interests, preferably by ones which can be measured and quantified. The insistence on value-free

conduct by the sciences furthers the trend in society to abandon qualitative for quantitative concerns. Meanwhile, scientific knowledge transformed into technology helps to produce means for which ends have to be found -- surely an inversion of any real rational behaviour. In addition, the influence of the positivist sciences (e.g., scientific management, operations research, systems analysis, and so on) has brought about a rationalization, bureaucratization and technocratization of most aspects of our life. The abstractness of thought tends to overwhelm the concreteness of life. The loss of moral order has been supplanted by technical order. Behavior previously guided by ethics has become role-behavior directed by rules.

Simultaneous with a widespread disinclination to discuss and share common goals and values, a distinct plurality of interests has surfaced, heralding the appearance of a new kind of democracy. Not so long ago, a social and cultural elite occupied the center of power, provided leadership, and determined the direction of society without the participation of the public at large. Today, however, and despite the positive aspects of democratic participation, there remains the problem that any government, in order to maintain itself, may have to satisfy all the particular wishes of numerous special interests, thereby losing its ability for decisive action. The ability to govern according to any given set of principles may be impossible,[4] at least as long as the pronounced selfishness of individual interests remains unchanged.

The manifestations of pluralism appear at a time when the retreat from public life is no longer myth but certainty. This is no coincidence, since both processes are interdependent. The preferred places for activity outside the realm of work are now the family, and associations of like-minded people who have the same socio-economic background and interests. Involvement in such associations is often confused with participation in public activity. With the erosion of public life, not only has the stage for developing common values been lost but also the sense of belonging to a larger entity, namely to a community. The search for identity no longer relies on identification with a given community. The classic milieu of public experience -- the city -- is undoutedly in a state of decay, contrary to exaggerated news about a reversal of this trend. The move to the suburbs continues, and the suburbs
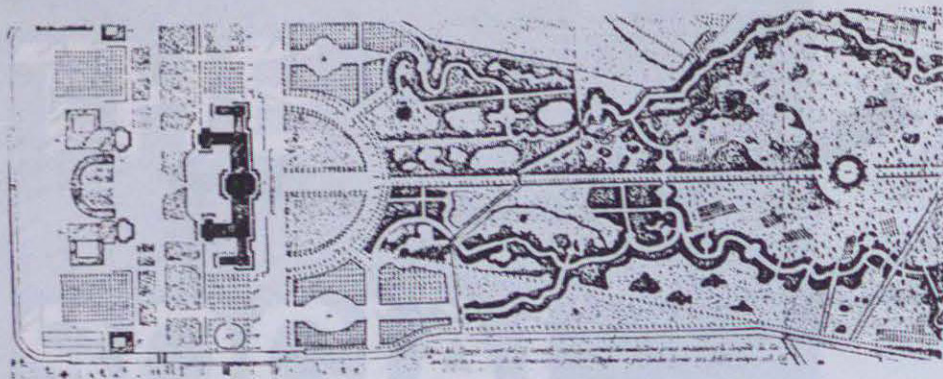
do not foster public experience, nor even a sense of belonging to a community as one might expect; at best they provide a kind of pseudo-community. An ever-increasing mobility prevents people from developing an identity through a profound relationship with their social and physical environment.

Another implication of the retreat from public life is the development and application of two sets of ethics: for family and close friends nobler ethics are applied, whereas for the cherished activity of enhancing one's own interests (and those of the group to which one belongs), less scrupulous ethics apply. The paradox of the loving and caring family-man who also happens to be an aggressive and ruthless businessman may suffice to portray this phenomenon. Unfortunately, this schizophrenic situation is generally condoned and, indeed, taken for granted. The existence of these double standards prevents a genuine discussion of the common objectives and legitimate needs of others.

An additional consequence of the disappearance of public life is growing media manipulation, which is fully in keeping with an increasingly consumption-oriented society. This should not be surprising in a society where a marked shift from qualitative to quantitative concerns is occurring. Unfortunately, when progress is largely defined in material terms, the quality of life depends solely on economic growth. At a time when the majority of people can easily satisfy their basic needs, economic growth can occur only if the consumption of non-basic goods is continuously increasing, and that, in turn, necessitates the incessant creation of artificial needs.[5] Consequently, the rationality of the market dominates most aspects of life. Almost everything is subject to pecuniary evaluation; and efficiency, the fetish for many and the apparent cure for all woes, is replacing humanist concerns. Moreover, the urge to comprehend reality is no longer fashionable. The moment a large segment of the population is occupied with gaining material wealth and achieving success in a career, efforts to understand reality are considered an unnecessary hinderance.[6]

II. What has been said in this rather short discussion of the present condition of society is not new, but this is the socio-political context in which architecture is situated and must perform. We have seen that the pursuit of

rationality, alluring as it is, has some major drawbacks. Due to the influence of logical positivism, rationality has been defined in such a way that the deliberation over values is considered to be of a subjective and, therefore, non-rational nature. In conjunction with this point of view, the concomitant declaration that only empirical investigation will deliver objective knowledge has further provoked the move from qualitative to quantitative concerns in society.

Not only is this situation disquieting, it also poses a direct threat to architecture, as is evident in the uncritical acceptance of this quantitative trend by the commercial segment of the profession. The importance given to issues of form by a minority of the profession could, at first glance, be viewed as a reaction to this trend; but this is not the case. The emphasis on form will actually further and not diminish that trend since form is stressed at the expense of other qualitative aspects essential to architecture. The current independence of form is a reaction to the Modern Movement's scientific and rational approach toward architecture, an approach which resulted in functionalism and reductive formalism. There are no elaborate comments necessary about the results of both scientific planning and the design minimalism of the Modern Movement; the impoverishment of urban life is obvious enough.[7] Yet to replace the rational fallacy with a fallacy of form will not bring about a "better" architecture, nor help stem the quantitative trends in society, nor make a profound contribution to the quality of life. The preoccupation with eclectic and historicist form creates a symbolism devoid of meaning.

The neglect of social issues and of the public good by those concerned only with formalism or commercial design shows a complete disregard for the ethical foundation of architecture. To claim that architecture is an artistic activity and, therefore, spared the task of taking issues beyond architecture into account, misrepresents and misunderstands true artistic activity. The strict fulfillment of client demands, which is used by the commercial branch to defend the disregard of public and social issues, although good business sense, is unprofessional conduct.[8] Such behavior accepts by implication, and perhaps even consciously, the common adherence to two sets of ethics. The commercial "ethos" of many
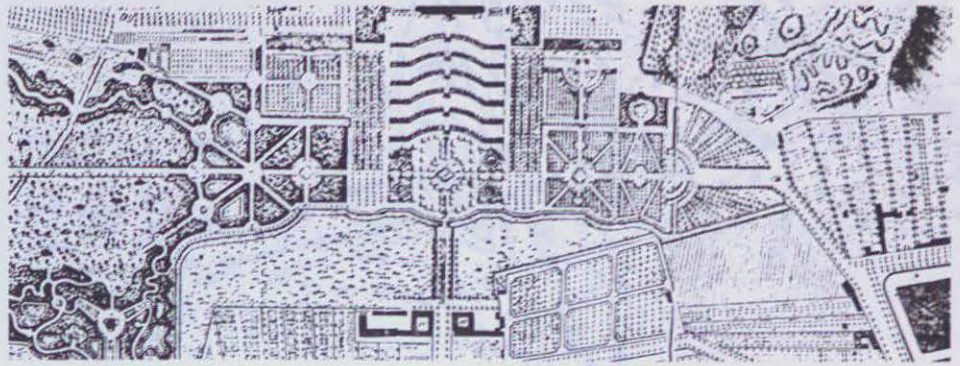
firms and their excessive promotion of efficiency leads to an internalization of rationalization and technocratization processes already so prevalent in society, and this, in turn, produces an externally mechanistic environment. This has recently been cosmetically camouflaged by borrowing from the past.

While the Modern Movement failed in its social intentions and the "physical determinism" practiced during the fifties and sixties did not cure urban ills, these failures should not be sufficient to cause us to abandon social issues. Admittedly, the sociological studies conducted during the last few decades to assess major design projects provided a sobering experience; but it is now evident that the conclusions reached were often exaggerated in the justifiable attempt to counter exaggerated promises previously made by planners and architects alike. It is now also clear that some aspects of these studies were fundamentally flawed, since such empirical studies can only analyze quantifiable problems.

The conclusion is not that architecture and physical planning cannot contribute to the solving of urban problems and to the improvement of urban life, but rather that their contribution must be assessed anew. Unfortunately, there will be no certain and clear-cut evaluation possible because of the qualitative, and thus immeasurable, component of this question. The hope that empirical analysis will solve this particular problem remains wishful thinking. And aggravating the problem is the fact that available scientific knowledge about the urban realm is of a general nature; that is, human needs are expressed in numbers and in abstract categories. Yet the design professions must cope with concrete situations and problems. Both the social sciences and the design professions must come to terms with this predicament. Of course, the solution is not to shun such difficulties; architecture must accept its responsibility. A renewed consideration of social and qualitative questions would reduce polarization in architecture, and would also strengthen the attempts of those architects who do not accept the present status quo in society and in the profession alike.

The pluralism in contemporary society indicates, as previously mentioned, the disappearance of a democratic reality based on elitism with which architecture was closely associated or part of. Many consider architecture to be an elitist activity and there are reasons that support such a notion. Surprisingly enough, it appears as if architecture is not fully aware of the disintegration of the coalition between elitism and design and of the questions which are raised by this disintegration. For instance, does the disappearance of the elite mean that architecture should change its role and forge a new alliance, or does it mean that architecture should remain an elitist activity and be an institution which counters pluralism, and that this will benefit society? If the latter, then it seems necessary to question the attitude that being elitist permits architecture to prescribe ways of living and determine the physical environment at its discretion. Being avant garde can no longer mean being deterministic. Yet this statement needs modification; otherwise, there is the risk of oversimplifying a complex situation.

To consider the alternative, we have the proposition, sympathetic to pluralism, that architecture should give people what they want. This proposition must also be questioned. The obvious objection to it rests on the fact that the desires of society are not only manipulated but actually created by the commercially controlled media. Giving people what they want would, therefore, be irresponsible and would imply an impairment of the creative process, since this process cannot operate without responsibility. Nor can it function without authority when it comes to making decisions of a creative nature. It is precisely this claim to authority that made architecture congenial to an elite in the first place. To fulfill the wishes of people is against the nature of the creative process, and since those wishes are manipulated and artificial, one is inclined to favor the demands of the creative process. But the claim to authority and responsibility, inherent in the creative process, is also against the justifiable demand for participation by all segments of the population on matters important to their life.

It is necessary here to distinguish between the concept of participation and the fulfillment of wants. Could one argue that in some areas, especially creative ones, democracy may lead to questionable results? Obviously, this question needs attention. Unfortunately, architecture has so far been unwilling to seriously investigate when participation must end and when, for reasons of both creativ-

ity and responsibility, authoritative decision-making by the architect must take over. In other words, how much determinism is essential for good quality design and how much determinism is permissible before democratic principles are violated? The common excuse for not addressing this issue is that the principles will vary from case to case. And of course they will, but such a feeble excuse manifests intellectual shallowness, for it rests on the assumption that architectural theory can deal only with problems of form. A profound inquiry cannot be avoided for problems of this nature need theoretical insight and guidance.[9]

The problems of participation, fulfillment of needs, and the creative process have so far been discussed in the context of recent change in our democratic reality. But these problems must also be considered bearing in mind the current acknowledgement of various "taste cultures" (popular culture). To object to giving people what they want, given that these wants are manipulated, takes on a different meaning if one assumes that beneath those wants there might still be genuine tastes (one must differentiate between wants and tastes). Vernacular architecture in its pre-industrial form was a true expression of such tastes. Until recently, architecture has been associated predominantly with high culture and, as much as architecture is avant-garde, it has indeed created high culture. The contemporary partial rejection of this association is responsible for the current popularity, and the promotion, of the vernacular. This promotion, however, overlooks the fact that the vernacular of the industrial period was not truly vernacular, but a style marketed according to the taste of the builders.[10] Attempts should nevertheless be made to discover the genuine taste cultures and consider them as a source for diversity and an inspiration for creativity. The fine line which separates a manipulation and copying of such tastes from a truly creative response must be heeded. Also, we cannot overlook the argument that the promotion of popular culture will, in the long run, work against high culture in the sense that such promotion lessens the possibility that high culture can give new directions and induce necessary change. It would be a fallacy for architecture to side with high culture at the expense of popular culture.

The task (difficult as it may be) is to work with both popular and high cultures to assure a great variety of

stimulating influences on architecture; but also to permit architecture to have its own creative impact on each cultural realm. Needless to say, that is presently the case. What is lacking, however, is an awareness of the disparity and incompatibility between these two cultures, and a greater insight is needed into both positive and negatives aspects of their interdependency. Missing, too, is a debate about what kind of role architecture should play in assisting interaction between the two realms, and how much high culture must be favored because of directional and intellectual gains for society and architecture alike. The negative possibilities of the association of architecture with each realm are not fully understood. For example, in the case of high culture, architecture could be tempted to remain elitist in a deterministic, instead of suggestive, way. With regard to popular culture, it could mean an unquestioned perpetuation of the negative aspects of popular culture. The beneficial impact that architecture could exert in both instances must be clarified. A creative and positive connection of architecture with each culture would assure a plurality in architecture that would eliminate formal demagoguery of any one position in architecture.

The preceeding statement describes the potential of such a situation in optimistic terms. It also assumes for a moment that the cultural realm is safe from penetration by the market. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Most cultural products, even those of high culture, have become consumption goods; that is, their exchange value is greater than their use value. Architecture, because of the nature of its products, has been for quite some time the only aspect of culture to resist this trend. But this is changing for a variety of reasons. The widespread habit of considering the home primarily as a possibility for investment and, therefore, as a continuously changing affair, is a manifestation of this change. A similar attitude determines the financing of large-scale projects. Acquiring short-term profits is the objective; long-term considerations, including those of a non-pecuniary nature, are dismissed. Thus, constant selling and re-financing is characteristic of this building sector. Finally, a growing number of buildings have become advertisements in the strict sense of the word. These various processes have made it possible for the "laws" of the consumer market to determine the outcome of the design process; that is, the
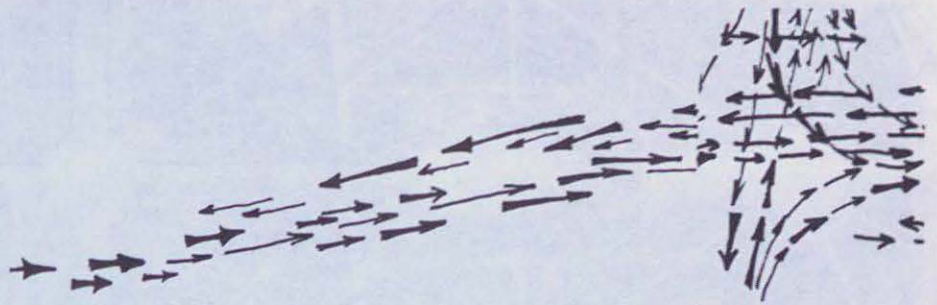
continuous need for new appearances and fast change, with which the market operates, has invaded architectural activity. The present formal emphasis in architecture, where attention can be gained only through exaggeration which surpasses previous exaggeration, attests to this invasion and corruption -- architecture has become fashion. The failure of the Modern Movement seems not to be the sole cause for post-modernism; the total penetration of the cultural realm by the forces of the market might well be the other.·1'''''Another characteristic of the present condition is the disappearance of public life. The absence of public life has far-reaching consequences not only for society but also for architectural activity. Architecture has always understood itself as an activity that depends on public life and public activity. We do not yet know the full implications of the disappearance of public life with regard to the production of urban culture. We know more when it comes to assessing the loss of a setting for discussing common objectives and a means for identifying with a community. And we speculate what the disappearance of public life could mean in terms of severing the ties with tradition and history. What we do know, however, is that, with the absence of public life architecture is in danger of partially losing its justification as a didactic instrument for explaining the past and as a medium for expressing present cultural and social identity.
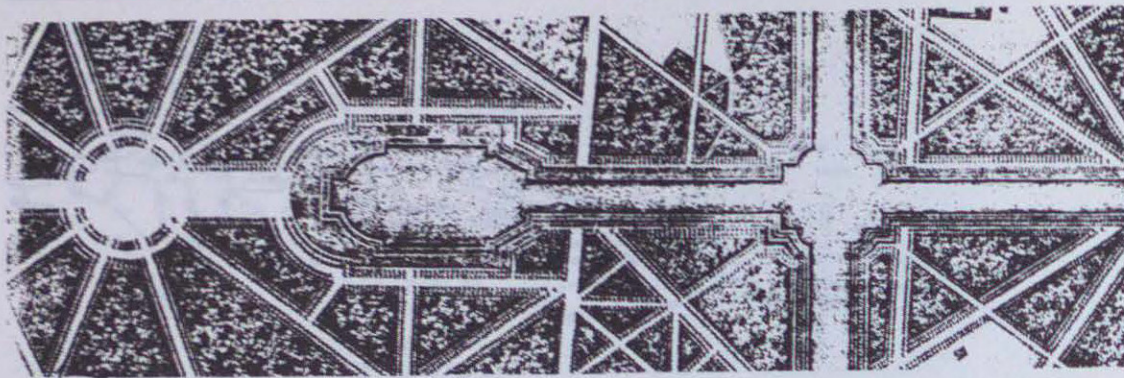
In light of all this, it is ironic to see the appearance of colonnades, porticos, pediments, columns and similar architectural elements in current architectural language. These elements once attested to a rich public life and were part of its symbolic expression: they articulated the drama between inside and outside. Today this kind of dialectic is lacking. There is no precarious balance between these two realms; their areas of separation and transition have become unimportant, unless one is concerned about security. Today the outside has lost its significance, and the absence of meaningful urban spaces is immediate proof of this bitter truth. The outside has degenerated into useless space framed by surfaces for advertisement. It should be evident that with the disappearance of public life the architectural elements mentioned cannot take on any new symbolic meaning; very likely they become initially the appendices and finally the symbols of advertising. Whatever public life remains is threatened with becoming

"internalized", and then misused and corrupted by gallerias and urban shopping malls. The damage inflicted on suburban life and culture by suburban shopping centers continues through its urban duplicate. In the world of Potemkin, public life was abundant; only its built counterpart was missing. Now, this situation has been reversed, though the emphasis on "facades" remains.

Parallel to the present preoccupation with architectural elements that previously portrayed a flourishing public life occurs a fascination with the application of axes. Unfortunately, the preceding observation applies here too. With the disappearance of public life, this application of axes seems a rather futile exercise. In addition, the use of axes overlooks the obvious fact that the manner of circulation has changed profoundly since the time when axes were more common. In conjunction with this alteration another change has taken place. Current sense of space differs from that of previous times, partly because of cultural differences but more so because of our constant over-exposure to two-dimensional stimuli. A full experience of axes needs a three-dimensional awareness of space. In the past, the application of axes symbolized and implied a discernible societal direction: axes were directed toward a center and similarly emanated from it. With the disappearance of an authoritative elite leadership, this kind of symbolism seems to be out of tune with social reality. Pluralism and axes belong to two different worlds. Nevertheless, one could argue that the renewed application of axes and architectural elements that once symbolized public life may be helpful in preventing the total disappearance of public life and that such an application may also be helpful in expressing permanence and continuity. If this holds true, then the reappearance of such devices in architectural activity can be justified. Their reuse must, however, occur with an awareness of, and as an answer to, current social predicaments.

It is evident that the social changes discussed have had, and will continue to have, a profound impact on architecture. It is also evident that architecture cannot avoid investigating the political, economic and cultural context in which it operates, and the social forces which determine our time. Yet it seems as if the profession, while occupied with rejecting the methods and condemn-

ing the results of the Modern Movement, has also discarded the critical and inquisitive mode of operation that proved to be the common denominator for its diverse members. It is certainly not this critical attitude which is responsible for the negative implications of the Modern Movement but, rather, the premature disappearance of the movement itself. It appears we are to experience another disappointment if we think that without such an attitude current architectural efforts will, in the long run, produce better results.

III. The discussion about the present human condition points to a fundamental dichotomy, which expresses itself in such oppositions as the abstract versus the concrete, quantitative versus qualitative and functional rationality versus substantial rationality.[12] Architectural activity displays these dichotomies. On the one hand, there are the thought processes of the engineer explaining problems through causality -- the solutions offered are therefore rational in a functional manner. On the other hand, there is the mind of the artist reacting reflectively to life -- in this instance problems are confronted by creativity. The objective of the engineer is to maintain a system in its equilibrium, whereas the aim of the artist is to transform a system, to create a new reality. Ideally speaking, the architect is both engineer and artist, and it is precisely this synthesizing capacity which could help mitigate the current dichotomy of dilemma in society. Due to the overall and continuing trend toward specialization, this concept of the ideal architect not only seems outdated, but it is also increasingly improbable that such an ideal architect might exist. Yet the ideal must be upheld if we are serious about meeting the challenge generated by these dichotomies; and this challenge has recently become even more critical since, as pointed out, quantitative considerations now far outnumber qualitative concerns. Again architecture, because of its dual nature, is in a unique position for assisting societal attempts to alleviate the mentioned dichotomies and counter the advance of one side at the expense of the other.

In conclusion, architecture must (1) accept its capacity for synthesis and not perpetuate polarization processes by its own polarization; and (2) declare again a critical inquiry into the human condition as an essential part of its

activities.[13] Accepting both demands is in accordance with the humanist tradition. Architecture needs more insight into the reasoning that justifies the constant inducement of artificial wants and the almost total commercialization of every aspect of life. It also needs to be more aware of the implications of an increasing plurality of interests, an ever increasing mobility and a concomitant disappearance of public life and common objectives. To accept the status quo in an unquestioning manner would mean to accept uncritically its underlying ideologies; emancipation from false consciousness would remain elusive, impeding human, though not material, progress.

In case there is the impression that a claim is being made comparable to the one at the outset of the Modern Movement, namely, that society can be changed for the better only if the ideas of architecture would prevail, then clarification is necessary. All that is demanded here is that architecture commit itself fully to its obligation as a socially responsible institution. To do this correctly, consideration of the human condition by architecture must be undertaken in a dialectical manner; that is, architecture must enter into a dialogue with the general public and other social institutions. Given the fact that truly qualitative aspects of life are currently lacking support, alliance should be sought with institutions that voice similar concerns; but again even in this instance, the dialogue remains essential.

It is obvious that the academic side of architecture has a special obligation to perform, not just because of the particular task but also because it enjoys greater independence from economic and social pressures. To teach only professional skills or aesthetic competency under these circumstances would be to ignore or even to oppose the obligation of architecture. If the demands outlined are met, especially the call for critical inquiry, then architecture could live up to its intrinsic purpose, that is, to enhance the human condition and make life more meaningful -- the legitimation crisis of architecture could end.
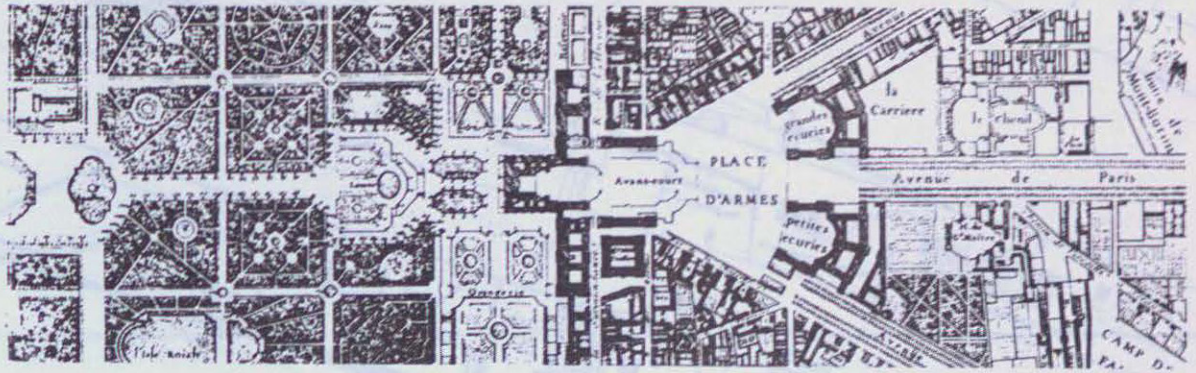
Notes

1. A. Perez Gomez, (1982), p. 55.

2. W. Benjamin, (1969), p. 188.

3. Value-free conduct is based on the drive for objective knowledge that is founded on the belief that there is nothing that is not given in stable objects and that cannot be perceived by the human mind and logically ordered and thereby made intelligible and communicable. Yet this quest for certainty is paralleled by, if not steeped in, a fear of liberty. While a reduction of all to a universal objectivity avoids the anxieties and risks of personal responsibility and decision, liberty and choice must cope with the imperfection of knowledge, namely with uncertainty. K. Jaspers in H.J. Blackham, (1959).

4. One of the more vigorous remedies for this danger calls for a drastic reduction of the role of government. This would eliminate the possibility that a nominally omnipotent government becomes the pawn of all the separate interests it must appease in order to secure support. F.A. Hayek, (1978).

5. H. Marcuse (1964) asks for the replacement of Marx's concept of "economic exploitation" with the Freudian notion of "instinctual repression." Repression characteristic of most historical situations was necessary because of scarcity. It is for this reason that repression is not inherent in human nature but is a historically conditioned phenomenon. In a society which is increasingly capable of removing scarcity, repression tends to take the form of "surplus repression." Conflict in society is caused then by the clash between the rationality of the market and real human needs; the uneven development of the productive forces prevents societal emancipation. Uneven means, here, that our moral and reflective capacities are not as well developed as our productive capacities. Cf. K. Mannheim, (1940).

6. W. Shawn, (1982).

7. The extent to which the abstract tendencies of positivist rationality or "ruthless economic exploitation" are responsible for this impoverishment is, in the opinion of K. Frampton (1981), not yet clear. In my view, both must be held responsible.

8. The professions differ from other commercial activities through an adherence to ethical standards that, of course, need redefining according to changes in society. What remains constant, however, is the acceptance of the notion of the public good which guides any professional activity. The colloquial usage of the word "professional" disregards its original meaning.

9. Urban planning literature has been addressing these problems since the '60's. Admittedly, the situation in planning is not exactly the same, but many parallels exist.

10. It ought to be mentioned that the vernacular of the period was, nevertheless, embedded in regionalism which had its own economic and social base, whereas today this base has disappeared for a variety of reasons, though cultural traces of regionalism may exist.

11. C.W. Mills, (1963).

12. These dichotomies are part of the Cartesian split between mind and body, cognition and reality (res cognitans and res extensa).

13. A. Rossi believes that "the gulf between art and profession can be bridged through the search for the basic human condition", (1982), p. 21.

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