

Introduction

Designing

We are all designers.

Every day, we organize things to accomplish goals, from the shape of the table for a peace conference to the strategic development program for a business. Perhaps, like Winston Churchill, we might even be called the “architect of victory.”

Designing means creating, organizing, placing, setting things to achieve a purpose. Working as designers, we make things fit together.

Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones.

—HERBERT A. SIMON, ECONOMIST³

Designing differs fundamentally from both art and science. An artist seeks feeling and expression, and a scientist seeks knowledge

and explanation; but neither works to achieve a predetermined, known, objective, defined purpose. By contrast, a designer is always driven by purpose. Designing—as both a process and a product—is always connected to something outside itself.

Environments

Why do we design where we live and work?
Why do we not just live in nature, or in chaos,
or in ad hoc environments?

We need an **understandable** environment.
We need to know where we are, where we
have come from, and where we are heading.
We need to be able to understand the place
around us—its organization and meaning. We
need a sense of place.

We need an **operational** environment. We
need a functional place that protects us
in our surroundings, enables us to carry
out the tasks of our lives. We need places
that work for us, providing us with farms
for agricultural production, factories and
cities for economic production, fortresses
for military protection, sports grounds for
pleasure, churches and mosques and temples
for religious rituals.

We need an **ethical** environment, because what we build is such a powerful agent of change in both nature and society. The built environment can be a destroyer of resources and a threat to biological species, including our own. At its best, it can provide productive and sustainable environments. But ethical questions always arise: for whom do we build, and with what consequences?

We need an **aesthetic** environment that delights our senses with light and color, the smooth and the rough, the warm and the cool, the vibrant and the still. We need places where we experience order and complexity, unity and diversity, harmony and dissonance, proportion and rhythm. We want to experience beauty and the promise of happiness.

For it is still the case that no one lives in the world in general. Everybody, even the exiled, the drifting, the diasporic, or the perpetually moving, lives in some confined and limited stretch of it—"the world around here."

—CLIFFORD GEERTZ, ANTHROPOLOGIST⁴

By necessity, we live in buildings.
By choice, we live in architecture.

Build we must, to protect and shelter ourselves. To live and work together, we

build buildings. Buildings are our sustaining mechanisms.

Simultaneously, we signal who we are, where we are, what we are doing. We express ourselves, our memories, our social institutions, our places—in architecture.

Architecture in Our Times

Historians tell us that we are in the midst of an “age of fracture,” living in “architecture’s evil empire.” Out of despair, they are crying for help:

But then in the last quarter of the century, through more and more domains of social thought and argument, the terms that had dominated post–World War II intellectual life began to fracture. One heard less about society, history, and power and more about individuals, contingency, and choice. . . . History was said to accelerate into a multitude of almost instantaneously accessible possibilities. . . . In the last quarter of the century, the dominant tendency of the age was toward disaggregation.

—DANIEL RODGERS, SOCIAL HISTORIAN⁵

Where architecture in previous eras was like the continuous text of a book, with foreground and background passages

in mutual support, today's architectural culture has fragmented itself into a maze of disjointed quotations, some individually memorable but collectively disorienting. . . . Something has to be done to begin joining up the pieces—but what?

—MILES GLENDINNING, ARCHITECTURAL
HISTORIAN⁶

“Something has to be done to begin joining up the pieces— but what?”

We need a more inclusive architecture.

It must fit the here and now.

It must be fit for future possibilities.

It must fit.

What does it mean, “fit the here and now”?

It is the opposite of “architecture for its own sake.” It is engaged with social and environmental conditions. It is profoundly political. It is connected to arts and humanities. It works with sciences and technologies. It means architecture that is fit for the purpose and fit for the place.

What does it mean, “be fit for future possibilities”? Some humility is needed here,

because we do not know the future, now; but we can think, design, build, and live with it in mind. That would be a profound step toward “inclusive architecture.” Ask, what was here before, and what might follow us? How should we change, and how should we grow?

We need a better way to evaluate architecture. It should replace the modernists’ “Form follows function” and the always fashionable “What does it look like?” It should be widely debated by architects and clients, users of buildings, community leaders, and makers of public policies and plans. It should be focused, seemingly obvious but actually unlimited in its implications and connections. It should be powerful—like the physicians’ Hippocratic oath, “Do no harm.” How should we frame the “oath of architecture”?

Architecture should embrace fitness—order and organization, growth and form. The “oath of architecture” should be loud and clear: make it fit.

Fit

The architect’s task is to formulate things that fit.

Fit the purpose.

Fit the place.

Fit for future possibilities.

Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472)

Italy: Renaissance

To every Member therefore ought to be allotted its fit place and proper situation.

Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841)

Germany: Neoclassical

Architecture is the combination of various materials into a unit bound together by suitability to purpose. . . . it is clearly manifest that fitness is the fundamental principle of Architecture.

August Welby Pugin (1812–1852)

England: Gothic Revival

The great test of architectural beauty is the fitness of the design for the purpose intended.

Christopher Alexander (b. 1936)

England / United States: Modern

[E]very design problem begins with an effort to achieve fitness between two entities: the form and its context. The form is the solution to the problem; the context defines the problem.

Architecture for Architecture's Sake?

Dear Theo,

*Will life never treat me decently? I am
wracked by despair! My head is pounding!
Mrs. Sol Schwimmer is suing me because
I made her bridge as I felt it and not to fit
her ridiculous mouth! That's right! . . . I
decided her bridge should be enormous and
billowing, with wild, explosive teeth flaring
up in every direction like fire! Now she is
upset because it won't fit in her mouth! She
is so bourgeois and stupid, I want to smash
her! I tried forcing the false plate in but it
sticks out like a star burst chandelier. Still, I
find it beautiful. She claims she can't chew!
What do I care whether she can chew or not!
Theo, I can't go on like this much longer! . . .*

Vincent

—WOODY ALLEN⁷

Architects sometimes insist that what they do serves no external purpose, that it is an end in itself, to be understood purely on its own terms. Like “art for art’s sake,” could there be “architecture for architecture’s sake”? Fascination with the idea of “autonomous architecture” comes from an intellectual tradition with some respectable sources, such as the philosopher Immanuel Kant. When Kant divided human capability into three

categories—cognitive knowledge, moral conscience, and aesthetic sensibility—he opened the door to “autonomous” conditions, in which the true, the good, and the beautiful are separated from each other. Thus writer and critic Théophile Gautier could claim that aesthetics has nothing to do with usefulness: “Only those things that are altogether useless can be truly beautiful: anything that is useful is ugly.”⁸ Writer Oscar Wilde could claim that art had nothing to do with an ethical life: “No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy is an unpardonable mannerism of style.”⁹ And the painter Clive Bell could claim that “we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form, color, and a knowledge of three-dimensional space.”¹⁰

For some architects, “autonomy” seems irresistible. Here, for example, is a contemporary architect’s confession: “Architecture is made by architects for themselves. . . . My best work is without purpose.”¹¹ This narcissistic statement may be just a provocative gesture . . . but it also may be true. How or why a work was initially imagined is not crucial—if it does fit.

“Something has to be done to begin joining up the pieces—but what?”

We need a renewed sense that architecture must be designed to make things fit.