

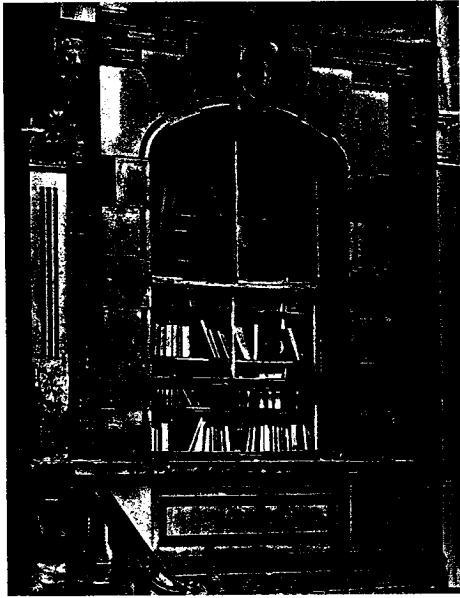
In considering the attributes of "good building," the architect's inclination to offer instruction, and, in particular, some form of moral instruction, is implicit and significant. While other issues might be similarly prompted, the formative and persisting presence of didactic impulses in architecture's modern tradition encourages serious and further scrutiny. However much, and often, didactic motives are revealed in critical discussion, it might be useful here to consider how this impulse to instruct is specifically revealed in the procedures of contemporary building and urban design.

For instruction, moral or otherwise, to occur at all, there is a natural presumption of clarity in communication: in this instance, it is the perceived legibility of "good" architectural intention. This privileging of clarity will always encourage the virtues of the simple and direct over those of the complex and nuanced and, significantly in so doing, inadvertently privilege the experience of the novice over the initiated. As corollary to these presumed virtues of clarity, the didactic urge also encourages the belief that the construction of meaning is ideally rendered in static and unconditional terms. The particular lessons being made manifest are ideally firm lessons – *damn it!* – with the regard between the agency of architecture and that of citizen reduced to one as direct as possible.

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The attributed virtues of this kind of reductive clarity are deeply etched into traditions of architectural pedagogy and professional culture and are seldom taken for anything other than granted. While this form of pedantry may appear uncontentious to some, I would like to suggest that in the contemporary practice of architecture and building this inclination has serious and troubling consequences. While issues surrounding the urge for the didactic in architecture are indeed many and complex, I would like to begin by noting what might serve as key, emblematic concerns that in turn suggest a basis for the speculative consideration of usefully alternative motivations and protocols for action.

1 Gary Cunningham, Cistercian Chapel, Arlington, Texas, circa 1992



The Tyranny of Legibility

The desire to instruct in as direct and precise a manner as possible has encouraged the consistent and often literal adoption of the forms and structures of language within the procedures of building design. Architectural production has come too often to be perceived as a translation of that which is essentially literary into that which resembles building. While the primary effort here might be construed as one to consolidate content in the face of broad cultural relativism – a quest for certainty – such an effort is most certainly doomed to failure. Even when effort is made to deliberately pursue architecture's "own" core values, the direct transcription of intent too often comes to dominate the substance of the architectural experience. The inclination to value the tectonic, for instance, often results in what is essentially a treatise *about* the tectonic, translated through the medium of building. Mies' Seagram's Building might serve as a timely and long-honored instance of clarity overriding reality in this regard, yet those motivations that favor legibility pervade architectural production in considerably less sophisticated circumstances and persist with their own kind of cruel vigor.

This inclination to demonstrate tectonic attributes as an expressive force, however, pales in its evocation of didactic ambition when contrasted with architecture's efforts to legibly demonstrate the attributes of functional program. The habit that insists upon naming – and in turn legislating – the prescription of use demands either a static resolve that is inherently conservative or, alternately, an endlessly shifting response to perceived present needs that is as disorienting as it is patently unsustainable. As Stewart Brand so aptly reminds us, "All buildings are predictions, and all predictions are wrong."¹

The degree to which this inclination is part of the popular conception of architecture is profound and becomes particularly problematic at the scale of urban design. While it may be possible to ordain legible function at the scale of individual experience (declaring the geography of entranceway, stair, etc.), at the scale of the metropolis this kind of articulate legibility acquires a sense of ungainly caricature.²

It should be noted that this concern for the consequence of didactic impulse (be it the overarching privilege of legibility or the inscription of intended use in building fabric) is hardly compelling for any formal reasons as such. Rather, the intent here is that such an impulse curtails the ability to sustain social relationships as a dynamic reality emerging over time. It is often suggested that if the "rule" of the marketplace and its attendant communication media insist upon condensed and clarified content, does this not in itself confirm the value of this prevailing condition? Yet at issue here is not only a sense of sufficiency, rather the concern that we are not creating environments capable of sustaining the full measure of potential human action. The social life attributed to commerce, entertainment media, and leisure pursuits, with their increasing synergy of associated media presence, represent only a modest and decidedly extraordinary miscellany of social occasion.³ In this regard at least, reliance upon the marketplace as final arbiter of value produces another kind of tyrant, reducing the depth and range of present public life as it discourages unanticipated complexity in the future.⁴

What is particularly troubling in the midst of this observed tendency to instruct is the continuing presumption that architecture immodestly takes on responsibility for the full weight of meaning and cultural value. No loose ends are encouraged that might rely upon the active engagement between citizen and city, between the architectural setting and the actions of the participant. While only the most extreme advocate of "architecture as instruction" would presume an entirely direct regard between design and behavior, the position argued here certainly favors a role for architecture that is enabling and generous wherever possible.

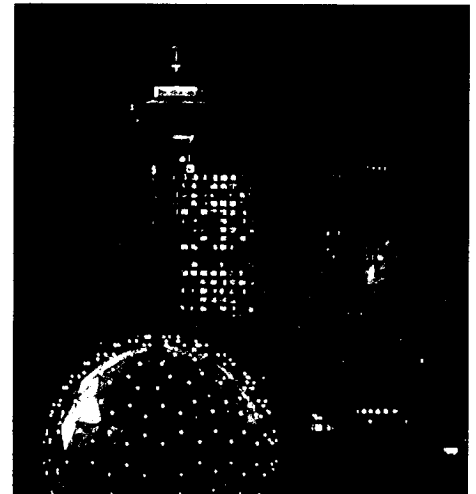
On the topic of immodesty, it is certainly important to acknowledge that these issues of didactic organization and expression are lodged in cultural circumstances far beyond the ebb and flow of architectural discourse. The delineation by building type and use in building regulations and the persisting orthodoxy of zoning in land-use planning legislation validate such a sensibility on the regulatory side. The closely prescribed language of real estate development (and building capitalization generally) equally encourages a view of spatial production with limited range and complexity. While clearly motivations vary across these cultural arenas, the consequence for the majority is an experience of our cities and buildings that encourages the predominantly visual and privileges that which is simple and easy to digest.

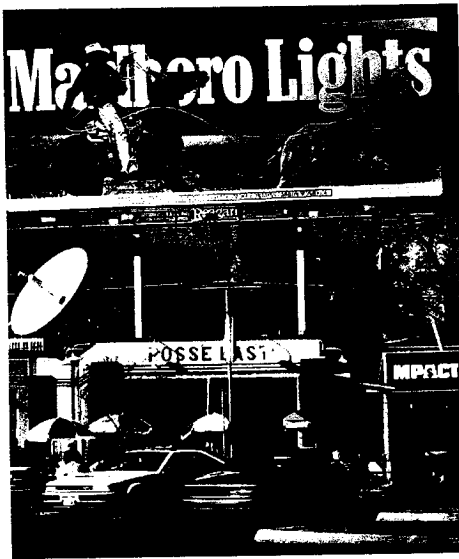
Undisclosed

It is perhaps inevitable that a critique of the consequences of unrestrained didacticism risks irony, at least in its elaboration and effort to maintain clarity. How might we begin to identify and characterize more directly those qualities in architecture that could serve as antidote to this compulsive desire to instruct, without excessive simplification? In attempting to locate a possible terrain in which alternative strategies for architectural action could occur I would like to propose the condition we may term "undisclosed"⁵ to suggest an alternative, "other" domain for good building. The undisclosed would demonstrate the capacity for change over time and as such contain a degree of the conditional in its expression. As well, undisclosed space would presumably demonstrate qualities contingent upon the exigencies of circumstance, acknowledging these within the material culture of building and so deliberately registering attributes of scale.

In this evocation of the material, the cultivated self-consciousness referred to earlier – "built treatises" – would need to be challenged by a more forthright regard for construction. In historical terms, the evocation of vernacular traditions might well serve as salutary, yet even within our contemporary circumstances, building outside of the highly considered realm of architecture might still suggest strategic potentials.

In particular, those architectural settings that frame the modern spectacle – airport, sports stadium, mall – rely upon a "matter-of-factness" in their constructional logic that is of interest. In these circumstances, the direct expression of engineering pragmatism and economic





expediency provides (sometimes quite literally) the framework in which smaller scaled decorative or themed elements may embellish or supplant the overarching tectonic logic. This layering of different scales of elements that acknowledge distinct roles as they collectively complete the architectural experience allows the kind of measured resolve we freely comprehend in the juxtaposition of dashboard and a freeway cloverleaf, for instance. In an analogous fashion, urban structures that support a degree of variation, especially over time, may contain a logic specific to their constructed order while relying upon conditional, local definition to locate and refine more particular meanings.

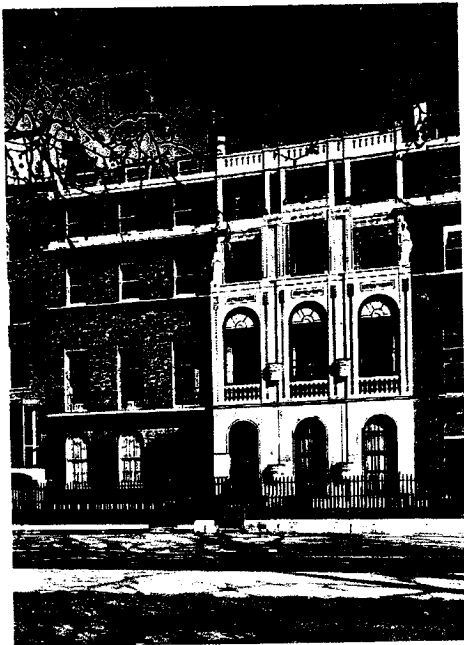
This suggestion of a continuum of experience nonetheless distinguished in its material resolve provides a compelling prospect. In the sense that any single element remains "undisclosed" in meaning and perhaps purpose, the analog of landscape experience with its undeniable force of context might provide a useful protocol to reference. While much has been made of the culture of spatial discontinuity, ultimately we know that this is not much more than a conceit of language. Our experience of the world can be nothing other than continuous, and the fact that a recognizable schism in expression may be observed in geographic proximity does not in itself make this an interesting condition.

In acknowledging this potential for continuity, the distinct roles of different scales of construction noted earlier might be echoed in the regard between disparate spatial identities of varying scale. If the urge to telegraph functional attributes is challenged most deliberately in the urban context, it is possible to simultaneously imagine enriched opportunities for the interior experience. This promise would include the potential for surface to bring a subtlety of expression into the palette of visual experience while enlarging the appeal to other senses.

One might recall the discretion of the Georgian townhouse, in which the illuminated, decorated ceilings of the second-floor meeting rooms enrich their interior world while simultaneously representing private aspirations to the public realm. Such a condition requires active engagement beyond visual communication to become meaningful and valued – an engagement that presupposes a commensurate degree of differentiation and nuance within the social realm.

Certainly, this portrayal of an undisclosed interior condition relies upon a pace of engagement that allows the architectural experience to be truly intimate and may well describe an aspiration problematic to project upon the landscape of suburbia and the motorcar. It might be argued, however, that the experience of our inner cities has for too long been contaminated by the prejudices of the suburban spectacle. Some new measure of cosmopolitan culture and its portrayal in civic building is surely overdue, and who knows, might ultimately present new protocols capable of enriching the ex-urban surround.

Such a shift in the manners and expectations of civic culture might appear implausible to some and certainly a generation ago would have appeared much more remote. Yet current demographic shifts in our urban populations bring a constituency of suburbanites returning to the city core with a mature and complex set of concerns. Enriched by the distinct expectations



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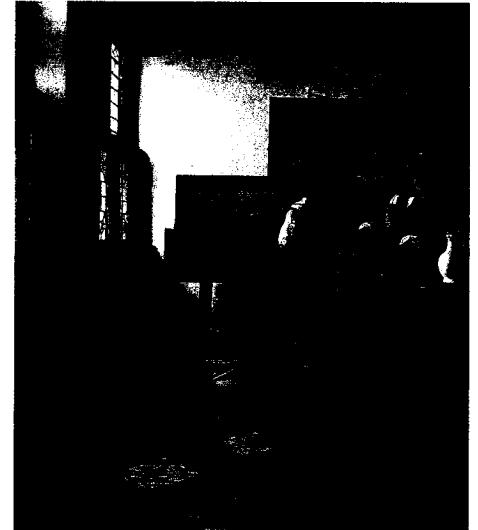
of the global diaspora so characteristic of our metropolitan centers – and whose contributions have been so positive and palpable in the areas of culinary arts, music, dance, and theatre –, we might speculate positively about the emergence of a newly sophisticated urban realm. Such a place might be punctuated by spaces and social occasions beyond the simple transactions of commerce, entertainment, and recreation – indeed, the kind of place in which good building might take on a newly confident role in our lives.

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So there it is. Good building might not be immediately intelligible: it might invite and indeed benefit from a prolonged engagement with its participant audience. In so doing, good building makes a tacit acknowledgment of varying scales and degrees of explicitness in the architectural experience, with a commensurate calibration of material firmness and finesse. Such an acknowledgment may encourage continuities within our constructed landscape that actively reflect the political continuum we are only too eager to profess while promoting a responsibly varied pace of repair and renewal within the constructed landscape.

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Finally, good building could acknowledge that the final inflections and nuances of value will only be brought into being through agencies of change impossible for any design professional to fully anticipate. In this regard, good building appeals to a future that can provide enhanced opportunities to expand the social dimension of human settlement, affording the basis for a cautious but assuredly optimistic resolve to action.



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- *1 Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built?* (New York: Viking Press, 1994).
- *2 Reduced complexity in the service of clarity may be most directly observed in the civic structures that dominate North American practice at present: witnessed in the need for new urban artifacts to conform to the expectations of tourism and the decidedly unsubtle media portrayal of "place" and "locale" that tourist culture has come to expect.
- *3 Whether they are phrased in the accomplishment of a "Bilbao" or the simple brand recognition of a global retail chain, the motivations of the market presume an attenuated range of social potentials in our daily urban lives. The city as a site that gives public presence solely to consumption – increasingly limited to shopping and "leisure" activities – does not only undermine the potential for public life, but as well places an emphasis on private necessities that is commensurately demanding.
- *4 It might be useful here to refer to the so-called "principle of generosity." To paraphrase, if a decision is to be made under circumstances in which a clear, objective measure of relative value in outcome cannot be discerned, judgment should always favor the outcome most likely to produce a greater potential for choice in the future.
- *5 Undisclosed: not revealed or made known; of concealed identity, nature, or amount. See William Little, H.W. Fowler and J. Coulson, *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).
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