

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

01.2001

Cover: Steinhüde Sea Island Recreation Facility, Photograph by Peter Hübke
Right: Melbourne Museum, Photography by John Gollings



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The AIA/ARCHITECTURAL RECORD Continuing-Education Opportunity
is "Photovoltaic Technology Comes of Age" [page 121]

1. *Yves Saint Laurent*
The Parisian fashion house's
famous slogan, "L'Amour, la
louange du corps et l'art de vivre,"
is repeated on every garment.

2. *Yves Saint Laurent*
A YSL perfume bottle, which
is shaped like a slender, tapered
cigarette holder. It's a classic
example of how YSL has always
been at the forefront of design.

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Today's architectural publications project an air of self-assurance, excitement, and optimism, presenting alluring formal innovations as signature objects of art. Concealed beneath an explosion of architectural imagery, however, is a less encouraging prospect: architecture is becoming an endangered art form. Architecture is threatened by two opposing tendencies of our obsessively materialistic and hedonistic culture: paradoxically, shrewd technico-economic exploitation simultaneously turns buildings into instruments of vulgar utility and objects of calculated visual seduction.

We live in an era of shallow, momentary impressions that emphasize image over essence in everything from individual behavior to fashion and politics. Even buildings compete for attention with consumer lifestyle commodities. But a collection of idiosyncratic buildings does not make for a sane architectural culture. The role of architecture is not to entertain or thrill us but to structure our understanding of the world and of our very existence, to articulate how the world touches us, to use an expression of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Architecture creates frames for action, thought, and emotion. It gives expression to human institutions and establishes a hierarchy for them. It articulates

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PHOTOGRAPHY: © PHILIP GOULD/CORBIS

Our image culture and its misguided ideas about freedom

Critique

By Juhani Pallasmaa

the interplay between background and foreground, normality and uniqueness, grayness and color, the commonplace and the celebrated.

Today's architecture, however, seems to have become increasingly detached from its cultural context and collective soil. As a consequence, architecture is losing its authentic existential ground and turning into aesthetized fabrication. Instead of structuring and integrating experience, our buildings frequently contribute to disorientation and meaninglessness.

One reason is that the values and ideals of the architectural profession have become confused. Formalism and whim have replaced a sense of balance, arbitrariness has replaced reason, and arrogance has replaced compassion. True architectural talent is not to be found in the realm of formal or spatial fantasy but in an understanding of the essence and hierarchies of the human landscape and mind. Architecture calls simultaneously for expression and restraint, innovation and a consciousness of history, courage, and modesty.

Disturbing conservatism

A particularly disturbing aspect of today's image culture is an architectural conservatism that wishes to impose classical attributes on modern buildings. An example is the building designed for 21st-century scientific uses but clad in quasi medieval garb. Architecture is one of our most fundamental existential expressions, and it communicates simultaneously on several levels. We

are usually affected only by the surface message and ignore the unintentional unconscious messages, but they are the most significant ingredient in a work of art. In my view, the message of concealing science and technology behind medieval architectural elements is clear and alarming. It is a rejection of the contemporary world, a reflection of a disoriented, split identity, and an alarming cultural escapism. In 1934, when the world was focused on the rise of Fascism, the American Modernist architect George Nelson interpreted the Third Reich's classicizing stone architecture, whose overt purpose was to evoke authority and awe, as an unconscious tendency toward self-destruction. He recognized that classicism's dark side carried unintended architectural symbolism. Today we need an equally penetrating analysis of the secret architectural expressions of our age. What should we make, for example, of the necrophilia expressed by some of the most technologically advanced buildings in history, some contemporary hospitals and international airports?

Architecture that focuses on aesthetic effects emphasizes the photogenic, instantaneous qualities of visual imagery detached from existential reality. One reason that buildings have lost their tectonic presence and material authority is that our speed- and control-obsessed culture favors an

architecture of the eye that provides instantaneous imagery visible from a distance. A tactile architecture, by contrast, promotes intimacy, appreciated and comprehended gradually like images of the body and the skin. In *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin* (1971), Ashley Montagu writes, "We in the Western world are beginning to discover our neglected senses. This growing awareness represents something of an overdue insurgency against the painful deprivation of sensory experience we have suffered in our technologised world." Touch, not vision, is the sensory

DEPARTMENTS



Calming repetition in the Procuratie Vecchie on St. Mark's Square in Venice.

Critique

mode that integrates our experience of the world and ourselves. It unites even visual perceptions and integrates them into an extension of the self. Tactile experience evokes the experience of a temporal continuum. Vision, by contrast, places us in a continuous present. The flatness of today's architecture extends

imagination may be becoming impoverished.

Beauty is always the result of nonaesthetic, often mundane concerns, such as a quest for precision, truthfulness, sincerity, or simplicity. Beauty that takes a lasting hold of our emotions arises from a full sense of life, with all its complexities and

OUR INNATE CAPACITIES OF IMAGINATION MAY BE BECOMING IMPOVERISHED.

to temporal experience; we live in a world of flattened time.

The prevailing flatness of buildings is reinforced by today's construction processes and a weakening sense of materiality and craft. In addition, computer imaging reduces the plasticity and emotive power of architectural structures to two dimensions. It is disturbing to think that, in the era of the high-tech image, our innate capacities of

contradictions, not from mere visual imagery or sensory pleasure. True artistic beauty, unlike momentary seduction, projects a timeless and unattainable ideal. Buildings are not just visual compositions; they are magical, mediating structures that evoke and enhance images of life.

Today the cult of the eye and novelty has led, on one hand, to formal elaboration and articulation and, on the other, to reduction ad

absurdum. But architecture is a discipline of noble restraint and repetitiveness; buildings are made up of repeated structural units and patterns of materials and detailing. One only needs to recall the noble and calming repetitiveness of the Procuratie Vecchie on St. Mark's Square in Venice, or of the buildings of Mies van der Rohe.

A mistaken notion of freedom is partly to blame for architecture's essential losses. Journals and juries praise projects for the "freedom" of their expression. Yet, great creative individuals hardly ever speak of such a shallow notion; they are concerned with the inherent limits and challenges of their discipline and its materials, not with attempting to emancipate themselves from these essential realities. In his seminal book *Escape from Freedom* (1969), Erich Fromm distinguishes between freedom from something and freedom for something. Fromm argues that our pursuit of illusory freedom deprives us of the ability to utilize our actual freedom.

The task of architecture is not to free buildings from anything but to weave them into an existing cultural continuum that has collective significance. A building moves us when it succeeds in reverberating with something concealed in our humanity, and when it echoes images and sentiments stored in our subconscious. Architecture is not a formal game or an exposition of novelties. Architecture is not an art form of pure self-expression. Architectural meaning resides in human experience. It is evoked in the acts of occupying and inhabiting space, in one's experiences of space, matter, gravity, and light.

A significant work of architecture is never the product of a single individual. It is always a collaboration with history and tradition, with the silent wisdom of the discipline of architecture. An architect who understands the essence of his craft accepts his role as a builder of a tradition, and he places his work in the context of this continuum with combined humility and pride. ■