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*Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation* (2004)

## The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production

### Chapter 8: Toward a Poetics of Architecture

#### Introduction: [SLIDE: CURRENT STATE]

Vesely begins the introduction by putting the current state of architectural practice on the table: outlining the problem:

Architecture is seen as a discipline that can be treated as an instrument or commodity. Architecture used to be the broadly oriented art of building. It is now seen as a separated profession, judged mostly by the criteria of technical disciplines. The outcome, which is characteristic of the current profession, is a mosaic of expert knowledge, brought together as abstract systems or as intuitive improvisations. (3)

The genuine creativity that comes from unity of different levels of knowledge is no longer. There is now a tendency in practice to separate the needs of the users, the creative vision for the space and the material construct of the building itself. (3)

Attempts to come to terms with this approach has forced architects to sacrifice poetics in the event that they do not readily fit into any particular class of technical achievement that all parties understand. Some architects compensate for this sacrifice by cultivating personal experiences and architectural visions on the side or they silently accept the “instrumental” nature of their job as the current official culture. (3)

The occasional success of personal vision that penetrates the mainstream culture in architecture are most often directly related to the marketability (“instrumental” value) of the work. (4)

There is a wide gap separating the “instrumental” and communicative understanding of architecture. Any serious attempt to bridge this gap requires a new kind of knowledge. We need to reconcile genuine creativity and creative spontaneity with the productive power of contemporary science.

The tension between the productive and creative reality can be better understood if we look more closely at the role of representation.

Representation seems to be a secondary and derivative issue. But careful study reveals that representation is a critical and universal problem because what we call *reality* is a result of our ability to experience, visualize and articulate - in other words - represent.

## Chapter 8

### Toward a Poetics of Architecture [SLIDE: ABSTRACT FACTORY]

Present understanding of architectural representation is confused and ambiguous. There is no clear notion as to what architecture should represent or if, in fact, it should represent anything other than itself. (356)

But because architecture does have an appearance and a physiognomy, there is an inevitable residual meaning in the work that comes to express itself, whether it's purposefully or by its own accord as it is situated in the world. (356)

Even the most abstract structures have a certain physiognomy that can not be ignored. The problem is not so much with the appearance of the structures themselves as with the context in which they are situated.

We call this the Crisis of Representation

### Crisis of Representation [SLIDE: STREET SCENE]

Not a lack of meaning, but a displacement. The distance between cultural context and appearance causes this displacement. (356)

### Symbolic and Instrumental Representation (often stand in conflict)

Symbolic representation is reconciliatory, participatory, filled with meaning and unity based on cultural understanding. The symbolic does not simply point toward a meaning, but rather allows that meaning to present itself. (358)

### Instrumental Representation

In instrumental thinking, the problem of representation tends to be reduced to the obvious relationship between the instance of representation and the process of its genesis (technological). There is a belief that somehow the building "represents" by referring to something that is not present. This is problematic because the only way we can experience any reference is when both the building and the person are part of the situation. Instrumental representation tends to be aggressive, autonomous, dominating and controlling as opposed to inclusive or communicative. (358)

### Character [SLIDE: MATERIALS]

Our current concern for the proper relationship between the purpose of a building and its appearance is a result of the significance of character. Our care in choosing the right materials for the overall nature of the space also speaks to the origin of character.

The architects who framed the classical, renaissance and baroque did so based on a paradigm of cosmological thinking. The earliest architectural paradigms, coming from Classical cosmology, were derived from annual movements of sun and moon, division of time into seasons and separation of the world into four zones (cartesian axis).

This cosmological framework was important as a focus and foundation for architectural thinking. Architecture sustained the unity of culture through the 17th century.

However, original modes of character began to be simplified and became more aesthetic. Character eventually lost its deep relation to culture and as a result began to be manipulated freely. Although attempting to create a connection to the past, by creating an illusion of order, character ultimately began to support relativism, arbitrariness and confusion.

What was important about character is that it was communicative within its cultural setting. Vesely is calling for a return to communicative architecture that takes into account humanistic situations encompassing the natural world and the nature of our everyday lives based on the inherently human patterns of daily existence.

The essence of human existence has its roots in the Greek word “Prepon” which is a term that encompasses both ethical and aesthetic reality. In its fullest meaning, Prepon can be understood as a harmonious participation in the order of reality, as well as the outward expression of that order.

Only later did the words Decorum = ethical and Decor = aesthetic evolve (364)

The tension between ethical and aesthetic meaning of representation does NOT exist in Prepon and offers us insight into authentic Greek culture.

### **Praxis [SLIDE: PRAXIS]**

The term Praxis can be described as living and acting in accordance with ethical principles (368). It is always concretely motivated and practical - which also includes the fulfillment of human life. Praxis belongs to the fundamental constitution of human beings and their situation in the world.

It is situated between ideas and nature and serves as a vehicle for their unity.

In architecture, the nature of the setting reveals the practicality.

Restoring the practical nature of situation is key

Once divorced from the unity of practical life and cultivated separately, forms and their functions can never be satisfactorily integrated with the concrete reality of architecture.

There is a sharp contrast between inventiveness and novelty and their surprisingly limited effect on the primary nature of the dwelling.

### **[SLIDE: ASTRONAUTS AT TABLE]**

For example, the dining arrangements in the module of the sky laboratory. The astronauts preferred sitting around a fixed table regardless of the freedom of various solutions possible in zero gravity proposed by the NASA designers.

What is at work here is the repetitive nature of human experience, originating in the cycle of daily life on earth. On this level, the identity of morning, evening and daily ritual is most conspicuously manifested. The deeper developments of our lives and natural world change slowly. Paradigms and cultural changes are part of this slow process.

### **Poetic paradigm of Design [SLIDE: CAFE SCENE]**

If we are to understand cultural paradigms, we must understand the conditions under which cultural paradigms exert their dominating influence (376).

We should concern ourselves with the conditions of typical situations close to every day existence, the dwelling place, the repetitive daily cycle and the primary conditions and movements of the cosmos and nature. Vesely calls this The Latent World; The silent background of the natural world, the Prereflective world.

The term "prereflective" refers to the shaping of experience by psychological structures (organizing principles, meanings, thematic patterns) that operate outside conscious awareness. Experience is shaped by organizing principles without this shaping ordinarily becoming a focus of self-reflection. The patterning and thematizing of experience is therefore said to be prereflectively unconscious; The part of our existence relying on bodily experiences and sensory function.

The prereflective world is not amorphous, chaotic, personal or objective. It is well structured with a clear sense of meaning, unity and wholeness, although it lacks articulation. It is constituted spontaneously in a direct response to the natural conditions mediated by cultural tradition.

### **[SLIDE: HORIZON]**

Part of connecting to the given natural situation includes an understanding of the horizon and the role of perspective representation when attempting to open up a dialog.

The horizontal reference is rooted in origins of archaic experience of the imaginary line of the mysterious horizon that always recedes with our movement, but never disappears. It provides the continuity of reference for everything in the visible world and provides a completeness of all human situations. The horizon is not just an imaginary line, but a structural force that holds the human world in unity (380).

### **[SLIDE: PERSPECTIVE DRAWING]**

Perspective - A communicative tool

The horizon holds together the structure of the visual field.

We use it when conventional plans and sections do not adequately represent our intentions.

### **A new poetics of architecture:**

The use of typical situations as a primary vehicle for design, paying attention to the natural given situation and communicating through shared cultural understanding.

An open dialog with given natural conditions of a project. A collection of phenomena of situations representing deep respect for the given reality of the natural world, manifest in the rich articulation of typical situations.

Phenomenology and hermeneutics have made contributions toward opening up the dialog for new form of representation.

The primacy of the natural world as a framework where science and technology could be reconciled with concrete conditions of the natural world and everyday human life. Other disciplines (humanities, social sciences and philosophy) have been working on this and architecture has just begun.

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The purpose of the book was an attempt to understand the cultural foundations of modern architecture, and thus, the nature and cultural role of architecture more generally. (4)

Cultural tendencies are complex and anonymous and represent the historical experience of a particular time and common expectations. Architecture has a unifying power that has the capability to create a continuum of relations, reciprocities and comprehensible communication that can succinctly be described as “communicative space”. (8)

The intention is to understand the capacity of architecture to create or initiate the formation of communicative space. The result would ideally send reverberations through other levels of culture and help to embody them. Restoring the communicative role of architecture is the first step in restoring its role as a topological foundation of culture. (8)