

MUSINGS

By Milosav Cekic

As architects and planners, we tend to accept the myth that design—finding particular solutions to particular problems—is the most important formative influence on the world around us. Such a view is erroneous. Designers are only the last phase of a continuum of forces that shape buildings and cities. The whole culture's relationships, patterns, values, motivations, and aspirations are not outside the design process. These are the heart of the matter. And, more than anything else, it is the extent to which the society as a whole reflects this awareness in shaping the environment that defines the culture and differentiates it from others. Only a great culture can sustain great architecture.

If we find alienation, impersonality, and superficiality in the built environment, these qualities do not come from inability to design. They come from something deeper: our society's ideas about nature and technology, about human existence and its meaning. This may sound a bit too global and amorphous to designers, focused as we are on problems and solutions. But I am convinced that until we incorporate a deeper understanding of the whole process, our designs will only contribute to the fund of alienation and superficiality in the world.

Today, most of the American architectural experience is driven by developers who are motivated by money—maximizing profits on each individual deal. Architects, within such a process, allow themselves to be trapped by the technical, functional, or aesthetic aspects of their projects. Deeper philosophical or social issues are seldom addressed within such a value system. The privatization and monetarization of the process is so complete that it has turned city planning into an instrument for recording, not directing. It has made the public domain, in its broader sense, all but non-existent.

This situation will continue and worsen until we change it. And to change it we must start with ourselves, broadening our awareness and deepening our perception of the world *and* our role in it. What makes a great architect is not the ability to draw, to use form and structure. It is the ability to see, to understand what underlies architectural content. As architects we can't express what we don't have inside us.

Consider two projects that illustrate my point: The Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, by the late Louis I. Kahn; and the Stuttgart Art Gallery in West Germany, by James Stirling.

The Stuttgart Art Gallery is, in many ways, great architecture. It shows masterful handling of materials and forms within a demanding site and it creates a memorable urban experience. But Stirling's museum never transcends the world of architecture. At the Kimbell, by comparison, a powerful new dimension is introduced. We feel dignity, simplicity, and timelessness as immediate presences. Structure and materials bring us an awareness of light, its fundamental importance, and its multiplicity of roles. The Kimbell brings us to ourselves. It connects us to connectedness.

It is important, for our own understanding of the nature and purpose of architecture, to learn the lessons of this experience. First, that beyond the world of forms and materials there is an intangible content of invisible, immeasurable principles. Second, that physical objects and spaces, if they are used to show these hidden principles, can contribute to higher levels of consciousness throughout the entire society. Realizing these lessons, I believe, is our fundamental responsibility as architects.

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