

Letter From The Dean

Robert A.M. Stern



Architecture's relationship to the wider world it serves continually evolves but always there is at its core an unchanging belief that the act of building is in and of itself a great and ennobling undertaking. In too many schools students and teachers now seem disinterested in building, distracted by cyberspace and a search for ways to transform the art of building into something else. Architecture is not a branch of information science; it is not a kind of electronics.

At Yale we continue to believe in architecture as the most palpable of all the arts and the most public, the art of the here and now, the art of making and preserving fixed places that are the settings for the interaction of people and ideas over time. At Yale, we hold the act of building paramount: the logical manipulation of environmental closure in the service of particular functions and symbolic purposes. This is our overwhelming preoccupation; this is the quintessence of architecture as an art and as a profession. We are wary of trends masquerading as ideas. In a time of hyper-specialization Yale remains

committed to a broad and deep generalism. To be effective, an architect must recognize and respond to a host of factors that taken in their totality describe the architectural problem which a building represents: a building is not the solution but a solution. We embrace the complexities and the contradictions of the contemporary, recognizing that today's issues are not for architects to tackle in a vacuum. Architecture is a collaborative art, embracing local community groups, as in the affordable house that is our annual First Year Building Project, and environmentalism represented by our on-going collaboration in design and research with the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. New Haven, one of America's most representative cities, remains a principal canvas of our investigations into urban issues, but we also turn our attentions to New York and to a number of international sites including Berlin and Shanghai.

The fundamental philosophical breadth of our approach is not only curricular and geographical but also artistic; we refuse to promote a single conception, artistic or otherwise, of what architecture is or might become. We recognize our obligation to the historic moment in which we study and teach and build, but we also recognize that that moment, however unique, is neither singular nor unchanging nor disconnected from the past or the future. Some would argue that in our postmodern era architecture has shifted from an objective to a subjective realm, and that, as a consequence, authority for judgment has passed from traditional measures of function, history, context or even technology to one dominated by psychological criteria, giving rise to a mood architecture obliged only to appeal to the tastes of clients or a limited coterie of aficionados. We are not so sure but we certainly recognize the psychological approach to our art needs to be examined along with those of other specialized, deterministic methodologies. Architecture is never one thing; it is a constellation of possibilities. A university is about open questions and not about definitive answers.

We welcome debate, even disagreement.

Many architecture schools function as academies, fostering a certain "true" way, insistent about one mode of aesthetic expression and one way of doing architecture, straight-jacketing students in isms and ideologies. But today's "ism" has a way of becoming tomorrow's "wasm". Singular systems of design are no substitute for methodologies; our responsibility is to see architecture from many sides; most of all, our responsibility is to think problems through. We do not celebrate a false, single-minded unity or even pretend that consensus can always be achieved; rather we hold open the doors of perception to the wide world of diversity. We welcome debate, even disagreement.

The first obligation of an architecture school should be to its own discipline. But that does not mean that architecture can be studied in a vacuum. We reach outside our field and our school in many ways. We ask critics, artists, environmentalists, sociologists, and others to share their ideas with us. To succeed at his or her art, the architect has to be a thinker and a maker, empowered by knowledge and a certain sense of humility. Everything is possible. But not everything is right for every situation. The important thing is to free ourselves from faddishness: architecture is not a beauty contest or a style war. Beneath the high-flying rhetoric of aesthetic debate lies the fertile common ground on which a life-time of work in architecture is begun: we must focus on how buildings work, how the user fits into the picture, how the systems are integrated--how the building is built.

Architecture constantly makes and remakes our world. There are many ways of making architecture with many more no doubt to come. The human capacity for imaginative invention is limitless but at the

core there are certain standards that always define quality. To thrive as art, architecture must take risks; but risks need not get in the way of quotidian necessity. Ignoring the basics is not to make art out of building but to condemn architecture to infantilism. Great architecture is much more than pretty shapes and gee-whiz graphics. The art of building is very different from a romp through the sandbox of media hype. Architecture is construction, context and so much more: for those who chose to be architects, it is a culture, a commitment and a life long path to discovery.

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