

The Role of the Architect

John de Monchaux

I am here to consider with you the role of the architect: and because we are focussing on housing my remarks are geared to that area of the architect's activity. To focus on housing calls immediately to attention the realms of financing, planning, service provision and indeed the very imperative for housing itself. These are critical aspects in any consideration of housing provision. and if we are to meet housing needs, they certainly have to be addressed in a direct and creative manner. If housing opportunities are to be enhanced throughout the world, capable, compatible attention must be given to each and every condition bearing upon their achievement. I stress this at this point because in concentrating as I do upon the role of the architect I want the basis of my remarks to be understood at the outset. I am not arguing that skills other than the strictly architectural are not vital and prime. Neither am I making a case for a drawing back from architecture to any "purer" role.

My argument is that architects should in fact be closely involved in the making of housing. In being so, however, what their work should be called upon to utilise more emphatically are the specialised problem-solving skills which architects can uniquely bring to the task. These are the skills which involve the manipulation of form and space to achieve particular and supported ends. Specifically in terms of housing the special contribution of the architect is to prescribe the forms for housing that will please its users and persuade the rest of us that particular kinds of problems can be elegantly and handsomely solved.

I should deal here with the exceptions which will undoubtedly be cited. Clearly there can be no absolutes and in any event the architect retains the right — within professional ethics — to practise as he wishes. I simply want to influence his choice. Any debate around a professional role has to assume a common context or structure within which particular positions are defended. Sometimes the contexts are not common and the arguments therefore not valid or they are too broad for those arguments to be persuasive. Even if I confine my remarks to the context of housing, or ever more narrowly to housing for the poor in the Islamic world, there are still bound

to be qualifications and exceptions. I want to stress therefore that I am speaking here to general principles which I believe should underpin all our activities as architects, and those exceptions which will inevitably occur should be identified with respect to those principles and not adopted as activities justified in their own terms.

In speaking to the architect's role in terms of what the architect can uniquely bring to the housing task I need also to make it clear that I am talking about every architect who does or may work on housing; and I am talking about every architect who by virtue of his professional qualifications practises as an architect, from the newly-graduated student with his Bachelor of Architecture to those whose work is considered seriously for an award in this programme. Indeed if I am to imagine the kinds of emphasis on form in architecture that my arguments call for, then I am in fact speaking more of the role of the tens of thousands of architects who may never make the international league but who are attentive to their craft and thoughtful in their profession of it.

There are several useful positions from which to examine the role of any professional. In general they involve what "is", what "can be" and what "should be" that role. I want here to use the first two to articulate the last. That is, I want to look at what architects on a day-to-day basis do and then at what they appear capable of doing under special circumstances and use this to explain what should be the proper role of architects.

Any reference to "should" raises questions about the moral order of the world and you may well ask what authority I call upon to justify the positions I take. I could simply say it is my grey hair. More seriously however, it is an informed and increasing concern developed over years of practice with and observation of architects, coupled with my more recent experience as an educator.

Let me begin then, with the kinds of things architects do. They live in a very different world from that conveyed by a classical view of the architect drawing up plans for great palaces, forts or temples. As salaried or self-employed practitioners they design, document and supervise the con-

struction of buildings in a period of rapid social change, increasing if badly distributed wealth, huge amounts of rapidly distributed information, and new and complex technologies — some of which are seen to challenge the very need for architectural skills as the world in general understands them. The financial rewards for these efforts are rarely substantial and the architect's central concerns for form are often ignored by those who pay for or view the product of the architect's labours. In adapting to such a world, the architect sensibly attends to the impact on his work of this changing social and economic setting. The architect thus becomes familiar, and in the end capable, in areas of skill such as finance, marketing, and urban planning to the point where they become assumed to be the kind of skills architects can and in some cases should, bring to the tasks they are given. In all of this however, I would contend that the skills, sensitivities and problem-solving techniques which the architect uniquely commands become diluted and lose their power to contribute what the architect uniquely is capable of contributing to the world. I will return to this later.

Now let us look at what the architect can do. The architect is a professional, educated, skilled member of society's agents of change. Even at the humblest level of operation the architect cannot achieve what needs to be achieved without employing certain collateral abilities, such as considerable negotiating, mediating and advocacy skills. To the extent that much of the architect's time is spent applying and honing these skills, it is not surprising to find that such skills are expected. What fails to be noticed is that much of the time their application has little or nothing to do with architecture. An architect member of a team who is negotiating with a local authority on access to a particular water source or on the acceptability of an on-site drainage arrangement is not practising architecture. That architect is practising politics.

Now it would be naive in the extreme to suggest that anyone operating in the realm of public policy should not be conscious of the need for political skills. But the point I want to make is that what architects can do simply by virtue of the

realm in which they find themselves should not automatically become what they should do or be expected to do. Indeed I would go so far as to say that an architect who significantly attends to mediation, negotiation or advocacy, for example, becomes one of those hybrid professions who function at the operational transitions of society. the doctor-teacher, the activist-planner, the musician-critic. These functions are vital: they offer opportunities for and are a response to change and in identifying them I am not for one moment suggesting they are somehow lesser functions. The point is that to the extent that architects are called upon to operate with skills outside what for the moment I will call the strictly architectural, the more attentive do we as a profession have to be to the consequences to the operation of skills uniquely identified with that profession: and it is these skills that I now want to address to make the case for what I believe the architect should do in the practice of a profession.

If I have to sum up the unique skills of the architect, I would do so around the notion of “form”. I would stress the particular problem-solving mode of the architect which is to manipulate form and space to achieve what is being sought — on the basis of a wide range of other kinds (financial, social, ecological, etc) of information — information which from his perspective is subsidiary to his own special task.

Before I elaborate on this, I sense that you may think I am making a call for conservatism and a retreat from any wider role for architects in the world of public policy. I am doing neither. All I want to do is make sure that as the profession responds to the world, its unique potential gift to that world is not diluted or even lost, and that we actually make use of that unique potential in the most creative and diligent way possible.

The role that the architect should play — and is uniquely able to play — is that of the master of form. Configurations of solid and void, of path and place, of light and shade, of structure and materials are the ‘stuff’ of architecture. In the built environment, however modest, or however grand, the qualified architect is able to articulate the manipulation of these systems of form, and their critical consequences. In doing

so, architects are able to describe and advocate those which meet given goals and objectives including those which are social and economic. These qualities of the architect's unique skills needs to be evident in theory and in practice, to provide the architect with the conceptual language with which to argue form and defend his advocacy of it.

It may be helpful to recognise this role for the architect in terms that parallel the Vitruvian triad of firmness, commodity and delight wherein mastery of form would be seen in the ability to.

- understand form in terms of the making of buildings, the properties of materials and assemblies and the consequences of their use;
- know form in terms of its capacity to host human activity;
- deploy form in ways that go beyond the expected and the known to ways that bring surprise and pleasure to those that experience architecture.

Before I suggest for you some of the wider implications of the role of the architect as the master of form, let me bring the idea into relief by looking more directly at the architecture of housing for the poor in terms of such a role.

In the attention that has been given to the role of the architect in housing, particularly in housing for the poor, two stances appear to dominate. The first argues for what amounts to virtually no role for the architect and the second sees the architect's role necessarily as a multi-dimensional one, with the strictly architectural activity as one facet of that role.

The first school of thought takes the view that architects should stay out of the arena altogether and simply let the poor — with suitable institutional support — get on with the job of building for themselves. The arguments that have fired this position on the whole come from two perspectives — both a consequence of well meaning but often ineffective efforts to help the poor. One is the design perspective which has criticised the various — or not so various — form of public housing, and the other is the social perspective which conveys the insensitivity on the part of designers to the needs and cultural behaviour of those for whom the housing is designed.

Whether because of a general indifference for the poor, or of a political imperative to use every dollar as effectively as possible, housing for the poor in most western communities has tended to be on cheap (ie inaccessible or uncongenial), land, and built in a form which identifies it immediately as something negatively outside the mainstream of traditional or preferred housing forms. The effects of this, compounded as they have tended to be by insensitive policies and practices relating to tenancing and management, have given public housing and particular public housing forms a bad name. Because tenants and/or their advocates have been vocal and often articulate the view has emerged that there should be greater consultation of their wishes and needs as well as sensitivity to those needs in the design of public housing.

This translates first into the notion that the residents should be allowed a say in design and then into the possibility that they should indeed do the designing. This latter stance is visible not only in western societies but in the non-western world. Here the notion and practice of sites and services development — which has many merits but not I would contend an automatic architectural merit — has served the position that given a modest framework of resources the poor can manage very well on their own, without architects. Indeed, such a process is often advocated as a preferred approach to the massive problem of Third World housing because of the proprietorship and sense of achievement which self-help and self-building give.

What may well have even further fuelled the argument against a role for the architect are those instances where architects have tried to embody notions of local custom and behaviour into housing design and there is evidence that the outcome in fact has lost all such qualities and indeed in some case been explicitly rejected by residents. While the real question behind such an experience may lie in the kind of information given to designers and architects and its true reflection of design-relevant housing features — how vital, for example, is a seemingly important cultural behaviour when space constraints are removed; or what is the real function of

some design relevant behaviour and how acceptable or even sought for might alternative provisions be — the case illustrates an extreme view of the architect's role in one important area of housing provision and design — namely the claim that they have basically no role!

I cannot take that position: though I will take the position that the degree of architectural intervention may vary.

I believe that the institutional mechanisms within which the architect exercises a role in the design of housing built by the very poor themselves need new designs. Ideally those mechanisms should guarantee that as clients — if in most cases, indirect clients — of an architect, those who build such housing should have exactly the same basic relationship to the architect as any better endowed client. The arguments are two-fold. First on grounds of equity, it is at least disrespectful not to inform housing efforts for the poor with those same qualities of firmness, commodity and delight which we advocate in other areas of the environment. Secondly there is the argument of basic professional responsibility. Just as no one would argue with the basic notion that the doctor has a professional responsibility to heal the sick, and aid the suffering, it is as basic a responsibility for the architect to attend to the achievement of those qualities of the designed environment wherever changes to it are made. They are the qualities which are uniquely attributes of the architectural imagination. That we have few enough examples to demonstrate the potential brilliance of that imagination is testimony to the way we have for defensible but inadequate reasons, adopted new modes of operation without enough thought to the consequences to our responsibility as a profession.

The “multi-role” view of the architect's place in the housing of the very poor argues that such a role should be focussed on the collaborative technical support, or political support, of the process that provides an urban context for self-built housing, that is as professionals that help ensure the availability of land, finance, materials and services. Such a role is certainly fitting but is not sufficient. There will be opportunities for those that build their houses in such a setting to make choices, for

example about a more or less advantageous siting of key parts of the house, about a more or less costly choice of materials, about a more or less sensitive arrangement of spaces and other options where form is a key or even marginal influence on resident well-being. To render a professional service in this setting may well require new modes and ways of sharing architectural knowledge and judgement. But the need for new modes of articulating and supporting professional advice does not deny a role for the architect in the architecture of housing by the poor; it simply shifts the imperative to the search for and development of such arrangements.

Let me now turn to some of the implications of the role I have suggested for the architect, upon which there should be greater emphasis in the theory and practice of architecture.

If, above all, every architect is to bring to every building situation a mastery of form, there are implications for research and education in architecture, for the mode and practice of professional relationships, for the realm and focus of architectural criticism, and for the expectations of those who seek to judge the merits of the work of architecture.

For research and education in architecture, there is the need for a stronger knowledge base and more telling predictive theory about the making and effects of form. There is also the need for a pedagogy that reinforces the exploration of and experiments with form as well as the more rigorous search for plausible evidence about the consequences of form.

In terms of mode and practice, the responsibilities that characterise the architect-client relationship need to shift towards a discourse that poses problems and issues to the architect rather than solutions. By this I mean that all too often the architect is presented with a brief that has been processed or refined by the problem-solving skills of other professionals and identified by them with forms which are assumed to be appropriate. Put cryptically, the briefs are more likely to identify purpose-specific rooms rather than functions with overlapping and/or conflicting elements to which form based solutions should be sought and might offer fresh perspectives on the functions themselves. The programme or brief for a

building, in my terms, would become much more a statement of performances sought and criteria for resolving trade-offs and less a listing of required spaces. On this basis the client/architect discourse would allow the architect to respond more creatively to problems at the same time it might even allow a perceptive architect to suggest that a building may not be the solution at all to some problems.

For the criticism of architecture, an emphasis on the mastery of form as the architect's role will give criteria for, and sources of, a new focus. It would call attention to the fluency and wit of the formal repertoire deployed by the architect. It would address the spareness or elegance with which issues of form are resolved and would explore the range and depth of meanings that might be carried in the forms of buildings, their assemblies and their relationships to their settings.

The implications for us, as the custodians of an award for architecture, are to encourage the search for, and recognition of, those buildings and places in which we see the presence of a gift of form from the architect. A gift goes beyond the ordinary expectations with surprise and delight, it carries a telling meaning about where and when it is offered, it reaches the mind and heart of its recipient through its associations and deeper references to a culture that is shared or admired, and it speaks to the fruits of past relationships between the giver and receiver and to promise of the future. These are the qualities of form we must search for in our awards for architecture.