

Princeton's Beaux Arts and
Its New Academicism

From Labatut to the Program of Geddes

An Exhibition of Original Drawings over Fifty Years

Commentary: Robert Geddes

Late in the summer of 1965, Jean Labatut and I had lunch at the Nassau Inn. He had just returned from his sabbatical in France. I had just moved to Princeton from Philadelphia, having been appointed Dean of the School of Architecture. We had never met before.

I liked him enormously. We were together in the School for his last two years, and he has ever since been a source of wisdom and encouragement.

I am not polemical. I do not seek polemical positions, nor seek to make polemical statements. That is not to say that I do not learn from polemical statements by others; rather it is a comment on my own style of life.

Probably my most deeply held conviction is that the ethic and the esthetic of architecture are two parts of a unity; and that the moral responsibility of the architect is to be esthetic, to give "poetic form to the pragmatic." I have always been interested in the ethical roots of esthetics and in the esthetic roots of ethics.

An artist has been described as one who strives for order, and hopes for beauty. This is especially true of architecture. For me, as an architect, the ultimate responsibility is the creation of coherence in reality, the development of form in proper relation to the task of building. I am fascinated by the relationship between task and form, and it affects everything I do in practice, in teaching, and in research. For example, working in collaboration with Suzanne Keller and Robert Gutman on the behavioral assessment of the built-environment, I am seeking to

understand the values of form from the viewpoint of the social scientist. At the same time, in the GBQC office on the opposite side of Nassau Street, I have spent the past ten years consciously seeking to develop and share with others a set of theoretical principles for the formal organization of buildings. We seek to learn from our buildings, and from our shared analyses of the work.

Although some may see me as being different on one side of Nassau Street or the other, I do not sense any discontinuity between my professional practice at GBQC and my teaching and research in the School at Princeton. In both places, I thoroughly enjoy being an architect. I enjoy being a designer, and enjoy explaining to other people what design in architecture is all about, what it means, how it has evolved. I enjoy the contributions that others make to design, and do not seek a competitive, individual self-expression. Probably, I am most effective on the overall formal organization, the gestalt, the ordering principles of the building as a whole; consequently, I am open to participation in the design of special places, the enriching possibilities and details that properly fit with the overall conception. I enjoy engaging with a client in various kinds of analyses including policy analysis, all that contributes to the conception of form. Similarly, I enjoy the contributions of the client; for example, the upper level coffee lounge in the Institute for Advanced Study's Dining Hall was the idea of the Director's wife. In the end, the formal responsibility of the architect remains, the creation of coherence in reality; but the reality of architecture is complex.

As James S. Ackerman pointed out in an article¹ on "Transactions in Architectural Design," "Vitruvius, writing in the first century B.C., set out three essential components of architectural design: *firmitas*, *commoditas*, and *venustas* (which his Elizabethan translator rendered as firmness, commodity, and delight), and ever since they have remained the cornerstones of design and criticism. But the forces at work in the design process seem to me to be too complex to be so neatly categorized and I propose...the image of an open field system in which architectural decisions are made through an unlimited number of transactions among a variety of people who are or should be interested in the making of particular buildings." Similarly, my introductory course sees architecture as a complex physical manifestation of our culture, an expression of its values, an embodiment of its ideas. The explanation of architecture requires, then, the understanding of culture, including the historical culture of architecture itself. The skills of explanation in architecture are underdeveloped, although they are essential for critical inquiry and the design process. My course analyzes buildings, rooms and landscapes, and seeks to develop skills of observation, description, understanding and explanation. To the question, "What is architecture?," nine truths are explored.²

I have had three periods of experience in architecture: the first at Harvard, in 1946-1950; the second at Pennsylvania, 1950-1965; and the third at Princeton, 1965 to the present.

Immediately after the war, at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, I was caught up in

the great spirit of modern architecture at that time. We believed that we were on a frontier, and loved it. The memorable teachers were Joseph Hudnut, especially his lectures on the history of cities; Holmes Perkins and Martin Wagner in urban planning; I.M. Pei and Charles Burchard in architecture; and Walter Gropius himself. My student friends included Bill Conklin, Joe Passonneau, Harry Cobb. We were a few years behind Paul Rudolph and Ulrich Franzen. I am rather dismayed at the expressionism that has come from this group in the years that followed Harvard, and can only attribute it to a lack of understanding or commitment to the aspirations of the modern movement. In this sense, I feel myself a disciple of Hudnut whose book, *Architecture and the Spirit of Man*, was published when I was a student. In his chapter on "Fundamentals," Hudnut argued that:

"That architect is modern who, forgetful of self expression and self advertisement, develops his constructive forms out of the work to be done, the techniques to be employed, the idea to be expressed. That architecture is modern which, addressed to serviceability in a modern world, penetrates to that pageantry, health, wealth and grandeur which lie beneath its outward confusions and dissonances."

I owe a lot to my Harvard experience, and remain loyal to the Graduate School of Design. In particular, I gained an understanding of the social value of design, and the continuity of architecture and urban planning.

My second period was Philadelphia, teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, establishing

the GBQC office, and engaging in renaissance of the City. It was a wonderful time to be in Philadelphia and to be working in modern architecture. For the Mayors, Joseph Clark and Richardson Dilworth, and for the Planning Director, Ed Bacon, architecture was important because it was a social art, a public art. There was a strong sense of comradeship among the young Philadelphia architects in the 1950's. Some of us formed a group of the C.I.A.M. and sent our work to two Congresses in Europe. We entered competitions together, and took second prize in the Sydney Opera House competition. By 1958, GBQC had its first major building commission, an electrical engineering laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania, the first modern movement building at Penn. It won a national AIA honor award, and it remains one of our best buildings. At the same time, we were actively developing a new school of modern architecture under the leadership of Holmes Perkins who, together with Joseph Hudnut and Leslie Martin, provide my role models as a Dean of a School of Architecture. The story of the Philadelphia school is well-known, and needs no repetition here. The senior faculty included Perkins, Mumford, Nowicki, and Kahn; the younger faculty included Venturi, Giurgola, Vallhonrat, Crane, Qualls and myself. It was a great time, both in the school and the city. I have been away from it for ten years now, and it grows in my respect. I learned a great deal about the public nature of architecture, about urban design, about the integration of technologies, and the qualities of materials and light in buildings.

My third period is Princeton, since 1965, as Dean of the School, undertaking teaching and research in the University, and heading the GBQC Design Office across Nassau Street. I am deeply engaged in the intellectual life of this University and community, and find it extraordinarily stimulating to me as an architect. I have grown tremendously in my cultural, historical, philosophical dimensions. I believe I am succeeding in making architecture a strong component of liberal education, and at the same time, strengthening, sharpening the core of the discipline of architecture, that is, the competence to work effectively on problems of form, the creation of coherence in reality. And for me, an important part of reality is buildings, landscapes, and the fabric of cities. I actively seek collaboration with colleagues of other disciplines, especially history, philosophy, and the social sciences, in studies and evaluations of the built-environment. I am strongly stimulated by painting and sculpture that continues the revolution in vision that grew out of cubism and constructivism. And I am seeking to work directly with technologies concerned with the industrialization of the building process.

Across Nassau Street, the GBQC Office is an extension of these ideas into professional practice. For example, we recently won a housing design competition, based upon a research project and conference on Housing for the Elderly sponsored by the School, New Jersey AIA and AIP, and the Department of Community Affairs. The competition substantiates our belief in our ability to translate

into architectural form the knowledge generated by a conference or research project. The ability to deal with information and knowledge is a general problem in architecture. Most of our work has included programming, conceptual planning, and master planning. The buildings for the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, Southern Illinois University, and Stockton State College in New Jersey, are, I believe, our outstanding buildings of the past ten years in Princeton. On the level of formal analysis, these buildings owe a great deal to Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier; and secondarily, to Louis Kahn, Jose Luis Sert, and several members of Team 10. Their multiple influences can be read in different ways: in the materials, in the quality of light, in the landscape, and in the conceptual design.

The three stages of my education and experience in architecture are, then, Harvard, Philadelphia and Princeton. At this point, I am delighted with the prospects at Princeton for the history and philosophy of architecture, and for the practice of architecture, two parts of a unity, perhaps, because as I said at the outset, I am not polemical.

Looking backward, I sense an increased interest in landscape design as an integral part of my work; a decrease in the determining influence of technology especially innovative technology in buildings; and a hopeful expectation for the social and behavioral factors in the design of buildings.

Academicism?

Academicism

During the past twelve years, the faculty in architecture has had two different stages of development. In the first stage, 1966-71, I was seeking the integration of social thought in architecture, the emphasis on the public realm in architecture, and the intensification of formal analysis of buildings. I sought out other centers of architectural thought and brought some of these influences into the School. Two places were particularly interesting at that time, Ulm and England. From Ulm, I appointed Tomas Maldonado; and from England, I appointed Kenneth Frampton and Anthony Vidler as regular faculty, Alan Colquhoun, Robert Maxwell and others as annual visiting faculty. Maldonado's seminars at Princeton formed the basis of his book, *Design, Nature and Revolution*, and provoked Colquhoun to respond to Maldonado in an essay, "On Typology and Design Method." Frampton and Ambasz were particularly influenced by work at Ulm and Princeton; for example, Frampton's analysis of the humanistic and utilitarian ideals in modern architecture was generated in his graduate seminar. The quality of English architectural thought at that time was striking. In many ways, Princeton seemed analogous to Cambridge, vis-a-vis New York and Philadelphia. In this first stage, therefore, we were very British; Peter Eisenman came to our first Beaux Arts Ball dressed as the Union Jack; once, perhaps in jest, Peter Smithson said Princeton was the best *English* architectural school.

By 1971, we turned toward building a new faculty, a Princeton group. In this second stage, roughly 1971-1976, the emphasis was on the development of a strong resident group, with a sense of community and commonality. *E pluribus unum*. We sought discourse and diversity, but not discontinuity. It is this sense of a group faculty that is the replacement for Labatut in the studio-workshops, which are now taught by Alan Chimacoff, Barbara Chimacoff, Neville Epstein, Harrison Fraker, Robert Geddes, Michael Graves, Heath Licklider, Thomas Schumacher, Carles Vallhonrat, Anthony Vidler, Peter Waldman; from time to time, Charles Gwathmey and Steven Peterson; and next year, Leon Krier.

In the second stage, we have also developed the faculty's capacity to undertake courses and seminars on the analysis, theory and history of architecture. In history, following in the tradition of Donald Drew Egbert, we work closely with Robert Clark, David Coffin, Carl Schorske, and sometimes Joseph Rykwert; in engineering, with David Billington and Robert Mark; in the social sciences, with Robert Gutman and Suzanne Keller; and we are developing our own analytical capacities as architects to make critical examinations of buildings. The work is very wide-ranging, and includes courses or seminars on the design analysis of buildings, design methods, historical analysis of the modern movement, cultural and social analysis of buildings, social thought in architecture, environmental analysis, technological analysis, visual thematic studies, landscape, and policy

analysis of several types.

There is a dialectical tension between the course-seminars and the studio-workshops, with some sense of uneasiness on both sides. In this creative tension, there can be the source of continued growth and development for the School, for the students and, most importantly, for the teachers. The most important students in the School are the faculty. The ideas and images of the School are nourished and supported, but also criticized and attacked, by the continuing explorations in both seminars and studios. Perhaps ten years from now, our current students will still be propelled by this tension.

Now, a third stage of development is beginning. Changes in the structure and the faculty of the School are underway, stimulated by the dialogues between theory and practice, the ideal and the real, the form and content, the ethic and esthetic of architecture.

Here is a sampler of some current directions of architectural thought in the School:

Shellman's course is a study of architecture as cultural expression, an examination of ideas governing the making and judging of architecture. The course is "based on the premise that the two major objectives of education are: first, to provide definite knowledge and, second, to give a sense of the value of things that help in the formulation of sound judgment. The course treats with the nature of architecture. The student is introduced to the subject not as decoration or engineering but as an

expression of emotion about the activity the building is to house." The architect is introduced to "the idea that changes in architectural style are not capricious variations willfully conceived, but appear as reflections of revolutions in cosmology." Concerned with the ideas and ideals surrounding buildings, the course seeks to establish that architecture and cities "are of great value as expressions of what men have held to be true and important, and, as records of unique human experience, are not subject to obsolescence in time."

Graves' seminar analyzes "visual concepts and thematic studies in architecture, the landscape, and the urban context." The seminar explores three areas of design: the external space, the internal volume, and the membrane between. In order to "see the synthetic condition of these three areas of design, architectural themes which are common to all" provide the basis for study.

An inventory of themes is examined, grouped in categories: 1. mythic, such as man/nature; 2. configurational, such as orthogonal/oblique; and 3. cosmic, such as literal/phenomenal. The inventory of themes is rich and varied, including:

in/out	up/down
horizontal/vertical	solid/void
additive/subtractive	conceptual/perceptual
ideal/real	objective/subjective
sacred/profane	connection/dispersion
male/female	simultaneous/sequential
surface/depth	planar/volumetric
opaque/transparent	virtual/formal

Vidler's seminar, "Towards a Critical Theory of Modern Design," addresses "a central problem of contemporary design: to what tradition, and according to what principles do we relate our own practice in architecture? In what sense are we still legitimately able to claim an identity with, or see ourselves as active agents of, the "Modern Movement"? Have the conditions of architectural production altered so radically in the fifty years since the end of the so-called "Heroic Period" of modern architecture as to render any assumption of its forms and premises eclectic or even archaic? In what way do the questions raised by the modern movement remain valid, or to what extent do they now act as distorting filters by which we mask the fundamental problems of our own time?"

Somewhat in response to these questions, *Vidler* in the introduction to his studio-workshop program proposes three possible ways of approaching architecture, that is: First, architecture conceived as autonomous art, having available to it a repertory of form-giving elements. Rationalists have explored the transformations of this architecture, its infinite permutations, its mathematically precise combinations. The architecture that expresses its own abstract reality is reproducing its own essential, interior life; Second, architecture conceived as a high cultural art also having available to it a repertory of form-giving elements. Culturalists have explored the transformations of other, deeply loaded, civilization-fraught arts, the transformations of literary

metaphor, the references to other architectures; and Third, architecture conceived as a functional mechanism having little available to it but diagrams of behavior from the adaptive psychologies of quantifiable happiness, on the one hand, and charts of economic resources from the planners of populism, on the other.

Geddes' introductory course is aimed at the general liberal arts student who seeks to understand buildings, landscapes and cities. Architecture is seen as part of the physical manifestation of our culture, an expression of its values, an embodiment of its ideas. The explanation of architecture requires, then, the understanding of culture, including the historical culture of architecture itself.

The skills of explanation in architecture are underdeveloped, although they are essential for critical inquiry and the design process. The course analyzes buildings, rooms and landscapes, and seeks to develop skills of observation, description, understanding and explanation. To the question, "What is architecture?", nine answers are developed:

1. Architecture is the production, distribution and consumption of buildings: that is, architecture is an instrument of development.
2. Architecture is the "third skin," the construction of a micro-climate to serve the biological and physiological needs of the human body.
3. Architecture is the construction of a place for social activities, an action-space for personal, group and community life.

4. Architecture is an instrument for social improvement, amelioration, justice and well-being.
5. Architecture is an instrument for moral education; that is, architecture has moral effects.
6. Architecture is a means of communicating emotion; that is, architecture expresses the feelings of the architect, the owner, the user, or the society.
7. Architecture is an image, a reflection, a reference, an imitation, an association with another *reality*; that is, architecture has an imagery of the human body, or landscape, or other architecture.
8. Architecture is an image, a reference or association with an *ideal*; that is, architecture has an imagery of utopia, cosmos, myth, or idealized nature and society.
9. Architecture is a formal structure of elements and relations, an organic whole, a hermetic synthesis, a coherent composition.

Gutman's seminars have been aimed at the root questions of architecture in society; his profound influence on the School can be seen by the questions his seminar explores:

1. How should we define the *realm of the aesthetic* in order to understand the social nature of art?
2. In what sense is architecture *social*?
3. How does architecture differ from the other arts in terms of its relation to the social order?
4. Why is architecture a form of *action*, a type of *praxis*?

5. What is the nature of the *intermediary links* which connect architecture and society?
6. Is there reason to believe that some societies are more favorable to the production of architecture, others more hostile to it? Where does American society today rank along such a continuum?
7. How does architecture influence society?

¹ *Critical Inquiry*, December 1974, pp. 229-243.

² See "Academicism" for an elaboration of these "truths."

This is a document preliminary to a catalogue which will include reproductions of the drawings exhibited as well as manuscripts from the Forum which took place to mark the opening of the exhibition.