

Keynote Speech by

John Habraken, MIT Emeritus Professor

Presentation of the honorary guest by Maria Voyatzaki

We are delighted to host Prof. John Habraken, our keynote speaker.

John Habraken is a Dutch Architect, Emeritus Professor of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and, for a number of years, the Dean of his school.

He strongly believes in consistency and continuity. Moreover, he claims that behind architecture and urban design lie the fundamental values of the nature of the built environment – values that signify human behaviour and the ways in which they influence the articulation of space. The urban grain has always been for Habraken the main objective of his research, methods and teaching, orienting the development of this grain, its elaboration and logic of its continuity. The common for Habraken is the base whereby the special emerges. Furthermore, he has sustained the view that design should be seen not from the perspective of the designer, but the designed. For him, building is a social activity, a common effort that transforms the built form to an artifact.

Questions that will not Go Away: Some Remarks on Long-Term Trends in Architecture and their Impact on Architectural Education

N. John HABRAKEN
Emeritus Professor of Massachusetts Institute of Technology



Introduction

Dear Colleagues, the agenda of this conference will no doubt subject you to administrative and organizational topics. These have become only more important now that European higher education must be unified by a radical change of degree structures. I am quite prepared to share with you my experience of more than two decades with the uses of the bachelor / Masters model in the United States if that can contribute to your discussions.

But this evening, I want to raise a more philosophical question. What fundamental images and ambitions have guided us in the past and may guide us in the future? I want to particularly call attention to the way we explain ourselves to ourselves and to those we work with. This question may not seem practical but, ultimately, our self-image determines the way we design: our buildings reflect how we see ourselves. To let you know right from the beginning what I am aiming at, my talk can be summarized as follows: we come from a tradition of monument builders, but today we are almost entirely immersed in design for everyday environments. Where we come from is very different from what we do now. The way we see ourselves is a product of the past and is becoming increasingly counter productive.

The emergence of the Architect

In the past, the architect's job was about special buildings: the palace, the castle, the mansion for the rich and, above all, the place of worship: the temple, the church, and the mosque. You may add a few categories to this list, but it remains exclusive. Consequently, everyday environment was never considered architecture. For thousands of years it

came about through a process so deeply rooted in social patterns and material skills that it was taken for granted, much like we take our breathing for granted. We still make that distinction. When we travel to see architecture, we walk through the streets and squares of a foreign town towards our destination: then we stop and look.

At the same time we know everyday environments can be amazingly rich and beautiful. Think of Venice, Cairo, Damascus, Kyoto, old Beijing and Pompeii, and so many others. As long as human shelter was produced environments of high quality have come about. Master builders are known to have contributed to their beauty, but the concept of the architect we identify with is rather recent. It is the product of the Renaissance. Alberti first formulated the new professional role that emerged in those days:

Him I consider the architect, who by sure and wonderful reason and method, knows both how to devise through his own mind and energy, and to realize by construction, whatever can be most beautifully fitted out for the noble needs of man.¹

For Alberti, the subject is not architecture, but the architect. In this passage and many others, he defines a new kind of person, one who knows how to design. This new professional wanted to be free from everyday environment and its traditions, constraints, and limitations. From now on, focus was on innovations and a new way of building. The common urban or rural fabric was not what Alberti had in mind. For instance, he explicitly recommended to build outside the city in free space unencumbered by adjoining buildings. In that sense too, he preceded Modernism.

The new language of architecture resulting from that emancipation, spread across the Western hemisphere independent of whatever traditional environments were already there. The rural villages in the Russian plains, for instance, had their onion domed churches, but outside stood the Palladian villa of the land owner. In the New England villages on the American continent, that villa was transformed into a court house or a town



¹ Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building, in Ten Books*, translated by Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, Robert Tavernor, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, and London, 6th printing 1996.



hall. In those days, already, architects formed a brotherhood that transcended national boundaries, making architecture in what we now call the network mode. Architectural history is the story of what they did.

The co-existence of architecture and everyday environment has yet to be studied in detail. No doubt there was interaction, interdependency, and mutual borrowing, but for all we know it was a happy co-existence. Architecture as an international culture, found its place in the common fabric which took care of itself, had always been there, and was what those who made architecture could depend on.



Everyday environment becomes a problem

In Modern times, all this changed. Traditional ways of building became obsolete as new materials and new techniques emerged. Age old building typologies could no longer serve the needs of a rapidly changing society. New ways of transportation and communication disturbed familiar local processes. For the first time in human history, everyday environment was not to be taken for granted. It became a problem to be solved. Responding to that challenge, architects assumed invention and design would provide the answer.



The Modernist architect set out to deal with this new task with great ambition and the best of intentions. Indeed, Modernist architecture as we know it, was thoroughly occupied with the idea of a new everyday environment. Think of the many architectural icons we still admire: Rietveld's Schröder house, the laboratory for much what still is part of our architectural sensibility, was the modest residence of an elderly lady

pursuing a Spartan lifestyle. The famous Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart which brought together the most avant garde architects of the time was all about residential buildings. Ludwig Mies von der Rohe's vision of office towers with undulating glass facades was a proposal for a place of work. Duiker's pristine concrete and glass sanatorium was built for working class people and paid for by the socialist party. Walter Gropius' Bauhaus was intended to be an example of what daily working environment could be. Le Corbusier's radical plan Voisin was a proposal for a new everyday environment. His Unité d'Habitation, supposed to stand free, like a Palladian villa, on a well manicured lawn, was only a next stage in his pursuit of that elusive vision. The most elaborate vision of all was Tony Garnier's proposal for a 'Cité Industrielle', by which he set out to convince himself, his peers, and his clients, that in the machine age everyday environment could be humane and pleasant if designed properly. The architectural preoccupation with a new everyday environment was not always benign. European mass housing schemes as built before and after the Second World War were also considered experiments in a new architecture and urbanism. Still today, many millions of people live in the relentlessly uniform apartment buildings that came to cover urban fields from the Atlantic all the way into the far plains of Russia.



Contradictions

All these examples – the famous Modernist icons and the infamous housing blocks – were done by architects who shared the belief that making good architecture, as they understood it, was not in conflict with everyday environment.

But if we examine the properties peculiar to everyday environment and compare them with what architects actually did, we find important contradictions. Most obviously, there is the simple fact that one cannot claim at the same time that the entire built environment is to be architecture and that architecture is special and different. How can everything be special? This question by itself should give us pause to ask what we actually are doing. Already in the seventies of last century, Lawrence Anderson, Dean of the school of architecture at MIT, summed up the dilemma for me

when I heard him sigh: "Too bad nobody wants to do a background building".

Sharing Values

What is common cannot be special, but it can be of high quality. Famous urban environments from the past teach us it is quite possible that an entire environment is beautiful, functions well, and is well executed. That kind of quality first of all requires that those who work in the same location share values to a significant extent. Alas, such a sharing is not part of our tradition. As already pointed out, the Neo Classicists did not heed local custom. Driven by their own vision, Modernist architects as well aspired to an international style among themselves independent of local thematics. But all that is history. Post Modernism liberated us from professional conformity as well. As a result, because everybody wants to be different from everyone else, we just want no comparison at all. Nevertheless, today as in the past, sharing of qualities in a same locality, is what makes a good environment.



Change and Transformation

Another issue where our architectural instincts are at loggerheads with the common environment has to do with change over time. In our tradition, time is the enemy and must be held at bay. Good architecture, we instinctively believe, is the stone in the midst of running water. The common environment, however, is the running water and change by way of adaptation over time is essential for its continued existence.

Change goes hand in hand with permanence. Houses may come and go, for instance, but the street remains. The balance between what will change and what will remain long term is becoming increasingly important when projects become larger and larger. A housing project of several hundred uniform units cannot just stay rigid when time goes by, but must adapt to life's variety. A sky scraper in which a few thousand people work is not a building but a vertical environment the size of a classical Greek town. Nevertheless, we tend to treat it as just another big building. The large project is with us to stay, but it must become increasingly fine grained and adaptable. Practice already moves in that direction. Today's commercial office building offers

tenants empty floor space to be fitted out by specialized fit-out teams according to a design done by an architect of the tenant's choice. In the shopping mall too, retail space is left empty for the retailer to take care of. A world wide 'Open Building' network of researchers and architects promotes a similar adaptability in residential buildings. And in a few countries like Japan, Finland and the Netherlands, governments support research in flexible building. In spite of this reality, so far, architects do not see small scale adaptability as an invitation for a new kind of architecture. On the contrary, we regard such trends as encroachments on our autonomy. Here again we find a conflict between our traditional instincts and the real world we must operate in.

Distribution of Design Responsibility

The issue of change is closely related to matters of design responsibility. The old masters of Modernity, Gropius, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright designed their buildings down to the furniture in it. We still feel the ideal commission is one that allows us to do the chair as well as the urban context. In practice, of course, such full vertical design is seldom possible. To be sure, there is nothing wrong with someone who can design a building as well as a chair or a neighbourhood. The issue here is not design ability, but design control. For everyday environment to be alive and healthy, such control must be dispersed, allowing different parties taking care of things on different levels in the environmental hierarchy.

Distribution of design control is not only related to change and adaptability. For today's complex projects, partial tasks must be distributed among members of design teams. This also involves many consultants on building structure, utility systems, lighting and acoustics and so on, who, of course, are heavily involved in design decisions as well. Parallel to that, architectural design has become more and more a matter of composition of hardware systems available on the market. Kitchen systems, bathroom equipment, curtain wall systems, or systems for windows or doors of different sizes and shapes, have also been designed. Industrial designers invent the kit of parts with which we play and as such have an increasing impact on environmental quality. Here too, we can speak of distribution of design control.





As we work we therefore are part of numerous and disparate networks of skills and knowledge and what is built is placed in an intricate environmental fabric as well, tied to networks of utility systems, using products and materials shared with many other projects, and adhering to values prevalent in local or extraneous cultures. The very idea of "architecture" as a self contained and single centered act does not apply to work in everyday environment. In reality, as architects, we operate in a continuum of design where we do our bit.

Reality and ideology

In the mismatch between ideology and environmental reality, the former inevitably must give way. It is often said that the architect's role is diminishing and his influence is gradually diluted. From the point of view of our outdated self image that may seem so. In reality architects have not been marginalized at all. In the new distributed way of operation, increasingly aware of local contextual issues in often rapidly changing environments, architects are fully immersed in everyday environment. They are involved in almost every aspect of environmental form. Their numbers are steadily increasing.

Architectural firms of course manage to live with the conflict between ideology and reality. They could not be in business otherwise. But while they do, they often are apologetic for compromising the ideals learned in their student days and often repeated in professional discussions and by critics of architecture. Caught in the tension between self image and reality, they lack an intellectual support system that only schools can provide.

As educators, we suffer from the same dichotomy. The role model which hampers the practitioner in the field, shapes our teaching and thereby separates us from the real world, making it less and less inspiring.

How to come to grips with the new reality? The necessary adaptation will be slow, difficult, and painful. Allow me to conclude with a few broad remarks about that uncertain task ahead of us. They are quiet personal, based on my own experience.

Creativity

First, a disclaimer. In the traditional role model it is

axiomatic that the creative impulse is suffocated by everyday environment's constraints. But truly creative talent is stimulated by constraints. What else makes creativity important? There is no reason to assume that design for everyday environment is less demanding than what our forebears did. On the contrary, sharing values, designing for change and permanence, and coordinating distributed design responsibilities, demands not only great sophistication in designing but also promises an architecture that will be more lively and dynamic and complex than has been seen in the past. It will be an architecture in which the permanent is truly structural and meaningful and the short-lived full of energy and surprises; where form is thematic in unending variation and renewal, and where the act of designing is significant and respected on all levels of intervention. This new architecture demands both invention and talent to come into its own.

Nevertheless, creativity cannot define a profession. Creative people are found in all walks of life. They shape medicine, law, science and engineering. It is not enough to call ourselves a creative profession and claim privilege for it. Donald Schön, in his reflections on the practitioner's role in society, has pointed out that the skilled and knowledgeable professional must possess what he calls "an artistry" to be a good practitioner. That goes not only for architects, but also for engineers, lawyers, and medical doctors. But a profession's identity is defined in terms of knowledge and skills. It will be asked: What is it your profession knows that others do not? Do you have the skills and methods to apply that knowledge successfully?

Skills and Method

The new skills we need all have to do with cooperation. Sharing environmental qualities makes us listen to others. Change must honour what was done earlier by others and permanence must offer space for who will come later. Distribution of design control calls for ways to parse design tasks so that they support one another.

The tool of cooperation is method, it comes to the fore wherever we seek to work together. Method is no more or less than a generally accepted way of working. A good method allows each of us to do our own with a minimum of fuss. But method does not dictate results. It facilitates interaction between designers, leaving judgment to the individual, allowing her to experiment and explore. Indeed, in architectural design as in music, method allows coordination, but thereby also stimulates improvisation. In music, we play together because we accept methods of scales and tonalities and harmony. Given an accepted theme, each can improvise as part of a larger whole. The skills that come from using method creatively we may call 'thematic skills'.

In architecture such skills include, for instance, making variations on an accepted typology, or using agreed upon patterns, or setting up a system of parts and relations for the creation of different forms in the same style. All this helps to share values. In terms of change too, the abilities to explore variations allows us to anticipate possible changes in programs, or in context, without abandoning form principles already set into play. In terms of distribution of design control, thematic development of possible lower level variations helps us to assess the capacity of the higher level form we are working at. Just as we assess the capacity of a room to hold different uses by imagining how it might be fitted out as a bedroom, or a study, or a play room.

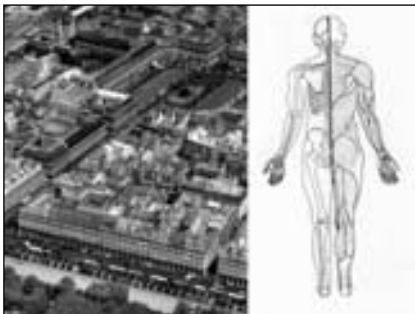


New teaching formats

If you try to organize your design teaching that way, you will find the traditional studio format does not help. Learning a skill demands exercise, and exercise demands failure and time to try again. The jury invited to a design studio does not ask what the student learned, but only looks at what is produced at the end. The studio format is the sacred cow of architectural education. I hesitate to question it and do not argue its demise. But in studio it is impossible to exercise distribution of design responsibility, or to deal with the sharing of values and qualities among designers, or to handle issues of change. Studio can no longer be the only format for teaching design. Other ways must be invented.

Research and Knowledge

Finally, we need to teach knowledge about everyday environment. How it is structured, what we can learn from historic and contemporary evidence, how different examples compare, how it behaves over time and responds to change of inhabitation or other circumstances. Teaching architectural design without teaching how everyday environment works is like teaching medical students the art of healing without telling them how the human body functions. You would not trust a medical doctor who does not know the human body. Knowledge of everyday environment must legitimize our profession.



Recently, schools of architecture promote research, if only to establish their academic credentials. But we do not have a clear research agenda of our own. Architectural research is mostly attached to other fields, like building technology, management and economics, or the social sciences, to all of which we add a certain architectural perspective.



In contrast, the three questions about everyday environment I have mentioned earlier - how values are shared in environmental design, how change and permanence make environment live, and how the distribution of design responsibilities can make it bloom - are questions architects are best equipped to investigate because it has to do with the making of form and with the ways in which it is done. In other words, only by a return into everyday environment can our profession establish a research agenda of its own.

I already have spoken too long. Yet, my exposition remains rough and incomplete, for which I apologize. But I have spoken with a sense of urgency. We have been in a state of denial for too long as a result of which we suffer a lack of direction and confidence. To restore our self-worth we must say out loud what we have suspected for some time: that we are part of everyday environment and depend on it, and that the everyday environment shapes us before we can help shape it,.....and that we must find ways to contribute to it to the best of our abilities.

