



Architects and Society

CONVERSATIONS IN ARCHITECTURE WITH MICHAEL ANTENORA



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There I am at a party. I engage in the conversation closest to the corner of the room I have deemed best for people watching. The time tested conversation starter of “What do you do for a living?” usually is only a minute away. Almost inevitably, the next question people ask when they find out that I am an architect is “What kind of architecture do you do?” It is a question that I both love and hate.

I love it because it gives me a chance to talk about something that I am passionate about. And it seems that many other people enjoy the subject too. In that same conversation, I often hear the comment “I wanted to become an architect, but I didn’t study it, because (insert your reason here).”

It is not at all surprising to me that architecture is an interest many of us share. Architecture is intimately intertwined with our daily lives. I like what Spiro Kostoff said, “Architecture is a social act, and the material theater of human activity.”

Think about it. Nearly everything we do involves some form of architecture. We create places to do the things we do. The events of our lives, cradle to grave and in between, take place in and around architecture. Consider the life events that take place in a church— baptism, marriage, funeral, etc. We give the architecture meaning, and then the architecture gives

our lives meaning. The modern architectural master Ludwig Mies van der Rohe said “Architecture starts when you carefully put two bricks together. There it begins.”

Beyond this, the term architecture is also co-opted into many other fields of knowledge (i.e. “architect of public policy”, “computer chip architecture,” etc.) This use of the term implies the notion of structure, organization, and space applied to these endeavors. These are things that we use as architects, except that we use steel and concrete where these others use legislation and silicon.

Yet, I hate the question because it reminds me that my peers and I have not done a very good job of connecting with and informing the general public about architecture. For example, the question about what “kind” of architecture I do, as if I am restricted to create only houses, offices or airports. Which is not the case at all.

This is the same general public who is at once both our clientele and our “audience.” Much of this misconception stems from poor communication. Like many professionals, we architects have our own jargon. At its best, it can elevate discussions of our craft to the level of the lyrical and poetic. At its worst, it can be a kind of incestuous sub-language that isolates the topic from anyone but the self-chosen illuminati. I believe the latter to be shameful.

However, being asked this question offers a good opportunity to correct the misconceptions that people have about architecture and what an architect does. Especially those misconceptions that have to do with The Brady Bunch or other mis-representations in film, literature and television! All kidding aside, I have found that as many people my age have formed their architectural acumen from Mike Brady as they have from Howard Roark*.

British architect and commentator Sir Geoffery Jellicoe said, “Architecture is to make us know and remember who we are.” I believe this is a very sage and accurate statement. As an architect, I would like to help make this sentiment one that we all share, and to elevate the level of public awareness and knowledge about our built environment.

Over the next several issues of *Cityfold*, this will be a regular column regarding architecture and the way we perceive, create, and inhabit space. Its intent is to be thought-provoking and informative as well as to add to the ongoing conversation and public debate at a party, coffee-house, or city council meeting. I hope that you will not only join us in reading, but will add to the conversation as well. I would enjoy reading your comments at michaelantenora@earthlink.net.

**If you do not recognize these references, you either never watched the The Brady Bunch nor read The Fountainhead by Ayn Rand. I would suggest both and then read House by Tracy Kidder, From Bauhaus to Our House, by Tom Wolfe and anything written by Witold Rybczynski. These are the most accessible and enjoyable books about architecture I have ever read. Thankfully, most of the representations of architects in print and film are mostly favorable and positive. However, factually speaking, they can be rather naïve and thin. The three books listed above paint a pretty accurate picture of contemporary architects and architecture, warts and all.*