

## ARCHITECTURE: MORE THAN JUST FORM

### *Architecture Cannot Be Measured*

The famous Lao Tse said: “*The most important part of a glass is not it’s shape but the fill*”. More and more, architects and their clients reduce architecture to measurable facts like the program of requirements, functional aspects, and technical and economic issues. They neglect the qualities that are not that easy to measure, like spatial and cultural values. Architect Louis Kahn explained: “*A great building in my opinion must begin with the immeasurable, must go through measurable means when it is being designed and in the end must be immeasurable*”. The discussion about architecture concentrates on form, ignoring the aspect of well-being. Often, designers don’t succeed in making the right synthesis between the past, present and the future, between science and tradition, between technological progress and local building traditions. These important aspects are culture related and thus can give buildings more meaning. If architecture is immeasurable, how can we measure the quality of buildings? Is there a universal value, or constant, that can appeal to everyone? “*A quality without a name*”, as Christopher Alexander calls this in his book: *The Timeless Way of Building*. This quality is objective and precise but cannot be named. There is an objective difference between sick and healthy, complete and broken, dead and alive, or between a lively or a dull city. It’s the difference between self-sustaining and destructing. The character of a space is not only determined by it’s geometrical shape but by the activities that take place in that space, day after day. And that is what architecture is all about!

### *Shape, Material, and Color*

Space is shaped by bringing materials together. An honest use of materials gives the most natural result. When materials appear in their most original shape and texture, they appeal to our basic human instinct. Materials must stimulate feeling. By their texture and shine they can give warmth, or give coldness. Form may refer to known images, but it must do so in a sincere way. In the respected architecture magazine *Architectural Record*, I saw an ad for Ionic columns stating that they were “*amazingly authentic*”. Form must have more meaning than being just a copy of the well known. A conscious use of color, again difficult to measure, is also often neglected. Sometimes it seems as if the use of color ends where building starts. People prefer neutral colors to avoid choosing the wrong one.

### *The Better Way*

Real quality seldom happens by coincidence. All parties involved in the building process have to deliver their maximum efforts to reach this goal, thereby recognizing the individual capability and talent of each of the participants. Architects are trained in design. Contractors are experts in materializing the design of the architect. Clients are the ones in need of a specific building and (hopefully) have sufficient funds to fulfill those needs. Even as a student I realized that an architect needs a lot of convincing power, a capacity that most architects lack. The architect needs to convince his clients, the contractor, manufacturers and government, not by rejecting their opinions but by shaping them. Like my Dutch professor Aldo van Eyck said, “Architecture nowadays is like contraband, you must smuggle it into your design, over and over again.

Which personality fits the architect best? Should or could he be spontaneous, sympathetic, sensitive, assertive, controlling, patient, trustful, open, competitive, courageous, serious, aggressive, progressive, flexible, critical, humorous, superfluous, fast, slow, commercial, dependable, arrogant? Can an architect who is an introvert make an open building? It appears that certain architects always get projects in the same sector, like commercial buildings or buildings in the social sector, like schools, nursing homes or community homes. Should an architect who designs an amusing building be amusing himself? I think this is a must. While I defend this opinion I realize that Van Gogh was not that happy at all, he even committed suicide, due to the lack of recognition. Today his beautiful paintings live on.

### *Back to the Origin*

The famous Catalan architect Antoni Gaudi said: “*originality is returning to the origin*”. He showed us that by going back to the origin of things, he could create very original solutions for daily design problems. To reach creative, honest and contemporary architecture we must analyze more consciously the human and cultural aspects that can make a building unique.

For inspiration, maybe architects should get more feeling for life itself, where humans protect themselves against the elements, feed themselves, care for their physical and mental health, laugh and cry, yell and stay quiet, love or hate. Frank Lloyd Wright founded the architecture school Taliesin, where the first year students were forced to live under the worst conditions before becoming architects. Another talented architect, Tadao Ando, never studied architecture. After high school he became a boxer, and then traveled for 10 years. Back in Japan he just began his career as an architect. The depth he reaches in his designs unfortunately is not common for most architects.

### *Caribbean Building*

If what we build is not satisfactory, what can we do? Should architects leave building to the simple citizen, or should we try to get more involved in local life and culture? I think that within the rich context of our region, it must be possible to make a definitive local, Caribbean, architecture. Maybe we have to give up some “*design*” and our architect’s ego. By increasing our knowledge of the elements that make up Caribbean culture, we must be able to get more inspired and enhance our creativity and abilities. We must realize that life is lived by the interaction between the spaces we make and what happens within them: to make architecture based on unfolding instead of adding, similar to language where we use the same letters and words to make different phrases, poems, novels. Compare architecture with nature: waves, water droplets, leaves, they are all different and still part of a whole. It’s all there for us to use. Picasso said: *I don’t search, I find*.

Herman Hertzberger explained this as follows: “Where else than in the chess game can we see that the rules do not limit the freedom of possibilities but instead create them?”. Building must become a fundamental natural activity again, like nature sustaining itself and language developing.

Ronny Lobo, September 13, 2006