



THE CHANGING FACE OF ARCHITECTURE RELEVANCE IN TRANSITION

It seems like architects are popping up all over. In 2012, two ensemble comedy shows on CBS aired in back-to-back time slots on Monday night and featured architects as the main characters. Hollywood is getting in on the trend by casting architects as leading men in movies such as *500 Days of Summer* and *The Last Kiss*. Comedian Steve Martin, who is an art connoisseur in real life, recently played an architect opposite Meryl Streep in the 2011 movie *It's Complicated*.

The title "architect" is also becoming a new kind of label with cache. Not a day goes by that blogs, media outlets, or pundits proclaim that someone in an unrelated field is an "architect." Charles Osgood on *CBS Sunday Morning* recently introduced

CEO Eric Schmidt of Google as the "architect of the Internet." In 2004, President George W. Bush referred to Karl Rove as the "architect" of his presidential campaign.

While the entertainment media are putting the occupation of architect front and center, the representation of the profession isn't particularly accurate, considering how all the architect-actors are depicted doing things like drafting and contract detailing, and how they all have a lot of free time! It's encouraging to see the profession gaining notoriety in popular culture, but the discipline of architecture and the individuals who actually practice and teach it are trying to get a handle on new and significant problems confronting the profession.



JENNIE WEST, ASSOC.AIA

What Does Society Want From Us?

"One thing that's very positive and being provoked mostly by students of architecture more so than the faculty is a much broader view of what society needs from architecture," says R. Lawrence Speck, FAIA. "What can architecture contribute at this moment?"

Practitioners appear to be having similar discussions. "If you get a practicing architect off on the side and you bring up these kinds of issues, they are absolutely passionate and excited about the questions," Speck says. "But in our work-a-day world, we're constantly just 'doing it,' so it's sometimes hard to remember the big picture and what we're all about."

LEFT: A hotel and spa in Vals, Switzerland, Therme Vals is built over thermal springs. The architect for the project was Pritzker Prize winner Peter Zumthor.

Although the issues affecting practice and education differ, both are struggling with the same elusive issue: relevance. What does architecture uniquely give to society that society can't get in any other way? What does architecture have to offer that is relevant to society now?

"Our expertise isn't technical or in areas like cost estimating or construction," notes Marlon Blackwell, FAIA, who is also the architectural director of the Fay Jones School of Architecture at The University of Arkansas. "The expertise we claim, that is truly ours, is in the realm of qualities." Quoting from his own essay, *A Hopeful Rant*, Blackwell adds, "We instill qualities in places that were not there before."

The list of qualities is virtually without end. Formally, they ranged from perceptions of clarity, organization, and spatial arrangement to emotional characteristics such as serenity, elegance, and monumentality. Almost every architect is familiar with Le Corbusier's axiom: "A house is a machine for living." Few know he referred to the Villa Savoye by that phrase and also, that a house is a "*machine a emouvoir*," a machine for feeling.

Although quantitative matters and economics seem to dominate practice, the qualitative expertise of the profession needs a stronger voice and advocacy. Architecture exists to insure that it all adds up and is worthy of our affection—worth caring about, or, to paraphrase the Hippocratic oath, makes sure that any new work "does no harm."

While the Age of Information may seem like a nemesis to architecture, information makes architecture relevant if viewed from a different light. The challenge of practicing in an information-obsessed world is that information seems to quickly turn towards measurability. LEED can turn design into a spreadsheet and sustainability can descend into technical issues and measurements.

However, people understand information and numbers. They are drawn to the facts, figures, and percentages that dominate political discussions in the same way that numbers and statistics gauge the performance of the economy and the benefits of a health care system. But people also understand qualities and why they are valuable. What they don't understand is the link between the two or how to map a connection between them. The task of giving form to formless data with a process that will imbue the process with qualities redirects information right into the realm of the architect.

Architects are uniquely educated in how to recognize and understand patterns of visual and verbal information and how to build, alter, or challenge them through design. Nothing makes architecture more relevant for the problems facing contemporary society than the professionals' ability to make sense of a vast amount of in-

formation and interpret it intelligently and beautifully with design.

"Architecture is an inherently synthetic discipline," says Blackwell. "It's another thing we're really good at—constantly combining a variety of issues and constraints and using design to resolve a variety of conditions in an integrated way."

However, achieving synthesis is easier said than done. Typical projects are handled by a team of experts, each one adding his or her own expertise as if good solutions come from piling one topic onto other topics. Design done this way becomes a sum of topics or "parts for the sake of parts," as Blackwell likes to say. They appear to get a job "done," but they also set themselves up to be dismantled, part by part, piece by piece, by forces that can range from public processes and political processes to value engineering.

Language Masters

Architecture gains relevance and credibility through high quality works that are intelligent. "One of the things that pains me in the profession and to some degree also in the academy, is the level of distraction that we seem to operate in that lures us away from developing a real mastery of our own language," Blackwell adds. "Whether it's at the highest level of practice or at the lowest level of the profession, I don't think anyone comes to us and says, 'Hey, can I have an inappropriate, over-scaled, badly proportioned building and I'll pay you for it?'"

"No one asks for that."

The kind of object-obsessed buildings the design media prefers shouldn't be confused with good intentions and qualities. "There is a media subset within architecture that is obsessed with buildings only," Speck says. Most publications on architecture discuss buildings as if they were fashion items and they never "see architecture as something social, political, and as a consequential event." Pick up *The New York Times*; none of those qualities are ever mentioned.

Moreover, nurturing perceptions that architecture is akin to high fashion runs counter to the discipline. High fashion is about the moment and appearance. Author Tim Manners, an expert on corporate relevance and consumer services, points out in his book *Relevance* that "Brands that depend heavily on buzz aren't built to last. Products and services that depend on the vagaries of consumer aspirations, fads, and fashions aren't sustainable for any real length of time."

Speck asks: "Have we really done the job of giving people anything to look at, anything to be interested in, or have we given them the opportunity to get engaged with what we do? Or do we prefer to stand around and stare at our own belly buttons, becoming this little subculture?"

Where are the issues and cultural arenas where architecture stands to make a difference?



ABOVE, RIGHT, AND FAR RIGHT: Syracuse University School of Architecture thesis jury presentations, May 2013.



PHOTOS BY JAMIE YOUNG



Architects as Health Care Providers

Over a century of unplanned industrialization has given rise to urban agglomerations and the problems they manufacture could benefit from an architectural mindset. During a March 2013 lecture at the University of Texas Arlington's School of Architecture, Columbia University professor and architect Kenneth Frampton poignantly recalled a handwritten phrase that was scrawled onto a rendering of a utopian city that was part of a 1980s exhibit at the New York Museum of Modern Art:

"There are no cities anymore. We are incapable of making cities anymore. The machine is incapable of making cities anymore. We have to get used to living in the jungle." Anonymous

The image that cities are mechanical jungles or malevolent landscapes is dramatic and powerful.

Architects generally understand the relevance and relationship between health and the design of individual buildings. Ventilation systems, screen glare, mold, and material off-gassing are just a few of the environmental and health-related issues—but extending that intuition from the single building to the collective form of the city has the capacity to remap architecture as part of the nation's health system. This could be accomplished easily enough by planning cities to be walkable places that promote health and social contact while lowering carbon emissions and air pollution through usable public transit. Presently such awareness

largely eludes society and the profession.

Never, during the recent national health care debate, did an expert come forth to champion a longer and more strategic plan for health care that would eliminate or diminish the burden and/or diminish health care costs by making cities healthier places. The entire debate was about how to pay for chronic symptoms and illnesses and their costs, which are colossal.

Sources ranging from *Forbes* magazine, the National Bureau of Economic Research, and *USA Today* indicate that America's obesity problem alone costs the health care system \$168 billion a year. Type 2 diabetes that is related to obesity adds another \$174 billion onto the problem. A modest 10% improvement—possible by reverse-engineering cities to be walkable—could save up to \$35 billion a year.

"If architects don't realize they are health care providers, then they don't understand the power and authority of the discipline they are dealing with," Dr. Richard Jackson is fond of saying. Jackson, who has a PBS special on the relationship between architecture and health, is scheduled to be a keynote speaker at the upcoming 2013 TxA conference in November.

Linking health and architecture is not a new idea. According to *de Architectura*, a treatise on architecture written in the first century BC by the Roman architect Vitruvius, the single most important issue in orienting any building or any city is health.





Relevance and the Environment

Asthma is on the rise, signaling health problems that are mounting from another environmental segment. Thirty-five million Americans, or roughly one-tenth of the US population, have been diagnosed with asthma, adding \$12 billion annually to health care costs. By 2025, predictions suggest that asthma could increase to over 100 million diagnosed cases.

Combined with the fact that 60% of those dying of lung cancer have never smoked and that America is no longer a factory-based industrial nation, it is fair to intuit that most of the respiratory problems are coming from air pollution caused by sprawling cities and motorized vehicles.

Once again, the densification of cities is an architectural problem. Architects can improve the environment and boost the economy in the process through the design of new infrastructure and our urban fabric. It also opens the door to projects that rarely apply the benefits of architectural thinking. For example, the Philadelphia firm Field Operations transformed the world's largest landfill (known as "Fresh Kills" in New Jersey) into a usable public space and a new kind of ecology. In Dallas, the transformation of an abused site into an enclave of modernist housing at the Dallas Urban Reserve demonstrates the same kind of potential and vision.

Cities "make" or "unmake" themselves one building at a time, which is a powerful way for architects to impact the credibility and relevance of the profession by developing solutions that offer urban and environmental improvement.

Technology Forever

The rise of digital technology adds another layer to the relevance of cities, health, and the environment.

In the mid-1980s, Los Angeles-based Morphosis captured the architectural limelight with building designs and an energetic process that involved a profusion of study models. After being altered several times, the handmade, chipboard maquettes were rapidly painted with acrylic modeling paste in bright variations of red and mixed shades of gray and black, which instantly made them suitable for presentation or exhibition. Morphosis has man-

aged to assimilate and transition the digital domain into its unique process, which makes for an instructive case study. Technology tends to drive most architectural firms into unfamiliar methods. Morphosis has done the reverse by adapting technology to fit how the firm conceptualizes and accelerates how it gets "architecture out of the computer" and into the architects' hands for discussion and study.

"The key is getting the building out of the computer," says Aleksander Tamm-Seitz, project designer for the Perot Museum of Nature and Science. "At the end of the workday, we'll send a number of (computer) models to the three-dimensional printer, so they'll be ready the following morning for review," he notes. "Thom (Mayne) may stop by and comment if he's in the office, or he will sit down and quickly draw out a detail by hand."

At the moment, the profession may have the upper hand on the digital issues. "I think the profession has advanced more quickly in means and methods than the academy has," says Speck. "Revit has caught most schools of architecture on their heels. It's an amazing tool to conceptualize architecture, but it doesn't automatically present itself that way. We have a couple of people on our faculty at UT who are just amazing with Revit and they're completely turned on to it."

Architectural education is also adapting to technology. "Very often students are making the rounds to different schools to do their own comparative shopping," says Randall Korman, professor and interim dean of the Syracuse University School of Architecture. "They'll want to know how a school supports the digital domain, what they have in the way of digital fabrication equipment, and if they are on the cutting edge.

"I can't speak for other schools but the private answer is it is virtually impossible for anyone to be on the cutting edge and stay there because the technology is advancing so rapidly," Korman says. "Digital technology is like an alligator, a black hole. You can throw endless amounts of time, energy and money into it and it just wants more."

At the same time, Korman fully acknowledges the potential of the digital age and architecture. "The digital age allows architects to explore permutations at a rate that would simply not be



PHOTOS BY JASON JANIK/PEROT MUSEUM

LEFT AND RIGHT: Children participate in hands-on building activities during Discovery Days at the Perot Museum of Nature and Science.

CENTER: A young boy builds a structure in the Texas Instruments Engineering and Innovation Hall at the Perot Museum.

“The students, they love architecture... They get so excited when they learn about it, they get the heebie-jeebies.”
Larry Speck

possible manually. Architects now have the ability to create models rapidly and with exquisite detail and then enter into the models spatially as if they're actually there. In the end, our school has come to realize that you can't live with it, but you aren't relevant without it.”

Korman also offers a cautionary note about digital technology. “As we move toward greater and greater degrees of visualization and virtual reality, we'll arrive at a point where the virtual representation of a building or a space within the building is indistinguishable from reality. It will be a profound moment fraught with another set of concerns because it will also move the observer (the architect creating the image and ultimately the person who is going to occupy and use the space) further and further away from reality.”

The risk for human cultural is that a virtual world will compete to replace a physical world of buildings and space because it will be cheaper to make, faster to deliver, and potentially more fantastic to experience. According to Korman, “It's going to be a real Frankenstein moment, but we'll deal with it and we'll have to get through it.”

Speck summarizes: “On the one hand, I think the academy runs ahead of the profession and the profession is working to catch up. On the other, I think the profession runs ahead of the academy and the academy is working hard to catch up. I rather like that. It's how it ought to be.”

The Architectural Education of a Society

Korman, who was also Peter Eisenman's first employee, has a theory that connects a lot of contemporary issues. “Society is generally clueless about architecture,” he says. “We know a lot about what doctors, lawyers, and policeman do and why those occupations are important because there are television shows and movies about them that demonstrate who they are, what they do, and how they do it. The kids who watch them, who are the future doctors, attorneys, and policemen, get an opportunity to peruse the fields and eventually measure their own expectations about going into those careers.”

Speck adds a social perspective to Korman's theory. “To

begin with, there is nothing wrong with American culture,” he says. “I teach a huge lecture class called Architecture and Society that has 700 students in it. The students, they love architecture. They never had any idea it touched social issues, sustainability, and issues of form and space. They get so excited when they learn about it, they get the heebie-jeebies.”

“Architecture is inherently fascinating to people,” Speck adds. “We just don't have architecture embedded in our educational system and we don't have enough architects out there who are putting it in the public eye, making it an issue, and demonstrating the benefits of what it has to offer.”

“When I was growing up in the '60s,” Korman recalls, “there was a TV show called *The Invaders* that convinced me I wanted to become an architect. The main character and hero was an architect. He would fight aliens in the morning and then return to his office and continue his practice because every episode ended with him working at his desk or making a model or drawing. Some shows ended with him making a presentation to a client.

“I said, ‘Damn it. That's it. I want to be an architect because I can save the world in the morning and design cities in the afternoon.’”

Considering the magnitude of the challenges before the contemporary world and the breadth of the opportunities that are unfolding before the

profession in real time—the crisis of the urban agglomerations, the environment, global warming, and a misinformed culture—Korman's youthful exuberance, in retrospect, seems

more like gifted insight about where the world is heading today and where an awakened future for architecture might begin. ■

Did you enjoy Kevin Sloan's article, “Relevance in Transition”? Would you like to learn more? Read the entire transcripts of his interviews with R. Lawrence Speck, FAIA, Marlon Blackwell, FAIA, Aleksander Tamm-Seitz, and Randall Korman at www.tiny.cc/relevance.



Kevin Sloan, ASLA, is a principal at Kevin Sloan Studio in Dallas and teaches architecture at the School of Architecture at UT-Arlington.