Is Architecture Going to Reconcile Basic Values?

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Introduction

The title “Real Reality” provokes immediate reactions. There is more than one reality. Therefore we have to talk about realities and we will confront you with a few, but important, aspects which influence our work, both as architects and as teachers.

The built environment all over Europe is the result of an enormous growth in the last 50 years. During this period, in Switzerland around 65% of our building were produced. In countries, which were devastated by World-War-II the percentage must be even higher.

We have to accept as one reality of our profession that:

- in future we will mainly build within zones, which have already been constructed;
- we will not design “new-towns” in the wider agglomeration, but make additions between buildings and complete the existing build-fabric.

Therefore, we will be confronted with two quite different urban fabrics: the traditional towns with mainly continuous masses and the pattern of isolated blocks within a continuous space, the approach of this century. To both of these existing fabrics we have to find adequate architectural answers (fig. 1-2).

How to Characterize the Actual Tendencies?

There are tendencies in actual approaches, which cannot be considered as models for future developments:

- There is a strong appreciation of the pure volume. The building acts as a crystal, selfish, detached, isolated with very little relations to the immediate and wider environment;
- The façade is treated like an image containing a message. The façade of the parking building of Stanley Tigerman in Downtown Chicago imitates the front part of a luxury car. The entrance to the public elevators are placed under the tires. It is a egocentric façade which totally neglects the existing façades of the street;
Fig. 1 City Plan of Parma (Italy).

Fig. 2 Le Corbusier: Project for St. Dié (Both plans are at the same scale).
- The signal box of the Swiss railway in Basel of Herzog and De Meuron is surrounded by railway tracks. It is quite evident that it acts as a free-standing solitaire. The concrete shell is wrapped with 20 cm wide copper strips. The copper-facing suggest to express an effect similar to that of a Faraday cage, an effect which is already guaranteed by the concrete shell. At certain places the strips are twisted in order to admit daylight to enter the rooms. The symbolic expression is more important than the comfort of the people, who might sometimes have the desire to look out of the windows into the nearer and wider surroundings.

The main concern of these examples is the message. According to this approach, the façade has to convey something; it has to give us some information. The façade (even the building and finally architecture itself) becomes a medium. We live today in a world of media. Each medium tries to compete with the others, to be more attractive, to dominate its surroundings, to be more astonishing, more surprising than the others. A building conceived as media has to be fully competitive and to keep this attractiveness in an ever-changing world. How can that be realized? This might be an actual but not an accurate question to architecture. It doesn’t bring you closer to an understanding of architectural qualities.

Architecture Has to Give Space to Basic Values of Human Life
The role of architecture in an ever-changing world is not to act as an advertising media. The world of substitutes, the world of artificial and virtual environment will strengthen the desire and the necessity of real and practical experiences. In our media-saturated times it depends amongst others on architecture, if humankind is exposed to the direct aesthetic, sensitive and sensible experience of the “real”. We count upon our built environment to form the stable matrix of our life. It has to protect us, to stand up to us, to give us places to be at home, to mould our native land. Buildings and all architectural interventions are what one might call “primary objects”. They are necessarily permanent, largely impassive, sustainable and real.

To create one’s own space and to define a specific place of its own, a place to be and to feel good, belongs to basic human needs. Life takes place in space. The quality of the spatial environment affects the human well-being. Architecture has to give space to basic human values.

Why Basic Spatial Qualities Are so often Underestimated?
It is very difficult to talk about spatial qualities. In architectural history and theory there are a lot of treatises about form, construction, use, composition,
etc., but only few about architectural space. There are important epochs in the history of architecture, where the term *space* was not used, even in cases when the buildings of the epoch were spatially of excellent quality. It is furthermore very difficult to teach spatial qualities. There are teachers (and even good and committed ones) which consider this matter as too difficult to be treated in a school of architecture and avoid it. There is very little concrete and formalised didactic experience about architectural space.
The Chances and the Responsibilities of a Full-scale Laboratory

The 1:1 abstractions in a full-scale laboratory makes specific aspects of spatial qualities evident. Spatial qualities can be experienced and treated. The full-scale model is an abstraction. In that quality it represents certain aspects of reality. It is selective and in being so, makes elementary aspects of spatial qualities visible and therefore teachable. The constructions are sensible as real spaces with real dimensions, real surfaces and real forms of a shaped void. The relation between the masses and the void can be changed. The differences of spatial qualities can be experienced and be related to the physical alterations of the massive elements. Space-defining elements can be placed whatsoever or in an sensitive order. The necessity of nearness and proximity can be felt, also changes in dimension and form. Openings between several spaces affects again the spatial recognition. To walk in space means also to go up stairs. To move upward and downward is spatially not the same movement. The spatial verticality can be stressed by continuous walls, by double-height spaces, by balustrades, etc. (fig. 3 to 11).

The full-scale model is one tool among others. Each tool has its limitations and its advantages. There is no complete tool. Every-one is selective and reveals particular aspects of the imagined building. It is evident, that each tool is also an obstacle. No tool can overcome totally the gap between real building and the representation. Every tool is also a trap. It suggests to develop the project in a certain way. We have therefore come to the conclusion, that all projects should be developed by means of different tools, which, preferably, should be complementary in their effect.

Taking into account the difficulties of discussing and of teaching spatial qualities, we have to welcome every tool which leads to a better understanding of these properties. This even more so, when the students can make their experiences on their-own and acquire a personal capacity to imagine architectural space, as it is the case in a full-scale laboratory.

References
