Hesitation and Heroics: The New Spirit (Again) in Urban Design

BRUCE THOMAS
Lehigh University

The author Marge Piercy explains that she writes reviews when she believes that "something being admired is less than admirable; perhaps meretricious, perhaps dangerous." This essay is written for the same reason.

Some of the most seductive recent proposals put forth in the name of the so-called New Spirit or New Freedom in design call for reshaping the landscape at an ambitious urban scale. Central to these proposals is the belief that basic assumptions about society, and consequently about the city, need to be redefined. Rocks of stability such as the epistemology of the Enlightenment, faith in social systems of order, the rational basis for architecture, even Humanism itself, are, we are told, swept away by the chaotic tidal wave that is our nearing-the-millennium modernity. In the headlong rush to embrace the latest Zeitgeist, certain accepted truths are being reconsidered. In architecture, Humanism is no more than a vestigial reminder of the way we were; now we are about displacing, as Peter Eisenman exclaims, "man away from the center of his world." At a larger scale, the belief that the making of an urban landscape is an inherently public art, that the designer is charged not just with satisfying his or her creative conscience but also with the responsibility to make a better physical world, is also apparently being rethought.

Recent urban design proposals curiously are split into two contradictory approaches. On the one hand, in recognition of the hyper-ephemeral nature of our times, and out of fear of replicating the mistakes of Modernist schemes, new urbanists advocate a timid, go-slow form of design that largely eschews building in favor of providing "frames" for "events." It is, in effect, a design-by-others design process. On the other hand, some theorists and designers propose schemes as overly self-confident, heroic and potentially destructive as Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin or the demented visions of urban renewal bureaucrats.

Many of today's thinkers and makers of the New share with their Modernist predecessors a myopic view of the world, an assumption that what is happening in their time is unlike anything that has ever happened to anyone before. Daniel Libeskind writes, "something has happened culturally, across the barriers of old that has fundamentally altered the mood and modality of people's feelings, desires, and consequently, thoughts."[1] This is exciting talk. But it may be less than accurate. If human beings' feelings, desires and thoughts have been fundamentally altered, why does the New Spirit in theory seem to speak to such a limited segment of the building professions and almost none of the general public? Could it be that today's theory, which speaks first and foremost only to its own circle, is delivered from the same avant-garde perch as has been the case for the past hundred years? Is it not by definition impossible for the avant-garde to accommodate the prevailing human condition, to represent any feelings, desires and thoughts other than those of its own self-defined narrow sliver of society?

Today's avant-garde falls into the same trap as did its predecessors, believing that it rests atop the pinnacle of history, poised as none before have ever been poised to leap into the future. Such a view was the principal cause of large blind spots scattered throughout the often brilliant histories and theories of Giedion, Pevsner, and Le Corbusier, as well as the work of lesser purveyors of the Modernist gospels. It is a belief that can seduce otherwise rational and prescient scholars and builders into assuming that they are, in the words of the historian Herbert Butterfield, "co-operators with progress itself."[2]

Being a partner of progress, capturing the essence of an age that is claimed to be fundamentally new, particularly one that is also the culmination of history, creates a great and dangerous freedom for the designer. He or she is able -- in fact, may be required -- to create completely new standards by which to build and judge, values that because of the nature of the avant-garde must reject precedent. The problems to be solved are often great, especially when architecture is expected to drive social agenda. Pressure to adopt a new system of values often leads to foolish naivete or arrogance. Le Corbusier once dismissed urbanism's single most important element, the street, because "our hearts are always oppressed by the constriction of its enclosing walls," and then rejected it completely because "when all is said and done we have to admit it disgusts us."[3] In a similar vein, Ludwig Hilberseimer abstracted and systematized the trouble-

some human component out of urban theory, and legions of urban renewal bureaucrats followed suit. In England after the war, between a blitzed out urban landscape and a socialist government, some Angry Young Men (and Alison Smithson) discovered a New Realism, and extracted from it a transcendently brutal Sheffield housing, and legions of urban renewal bureaucrats followed suit. Not to worry, the English *enfants terrible* explained; they were merely giving "form to our generation's idea of order."[4]

MAKING FRAMEWORKS . . . DOTTING, BORDERING, LINING

Since the completion of the Greater Columbus (Ohio) Convention Center, Peter Eisenman has repeated a number of times a story about a man who became physically ill when visiting the building. Eisenman claims that his building is so new and different -- not unlike, he contends, the early days of flying when air travelers confronted an entirely new spatial experience -- that we are not only intellectually incapable of digesting it, but also physically unprepared to stomach it.[5] The nature of the story, and the fact that Eisenman admits that it is apocryphal while continuing to repeat it, says something about the relationship among the architectural design process, response to human needs, and ethics and values. The fact that Eisenman cites a convention center to illustrate his supposed radical departure in space-making suggests other portentous recent developments as well. According to some definitions of the spirit of our age, it might be argued that the convention center is a characteristic building type of the emerging culture. Eisenman's contentions aside, the convention center is essentially a blank, capable of being quickly made anew for each scheduled show. It serves less as architecture as we have traditionally defined it than it does as a matrix within which more specific (and temporary) building may occur. Unfortunately, the scale of the convention center is often at odds with the urban fabric, and the nature of the building focuses activities inward, sapping life from the street, the most vital urban organ. Moreover, admission and occupation are strictly controlled, a symptomatic condition of many recent "public" spaces that prove something other than what they pretend to be.

The privatization of public space is by now a much-commented on and ever more common phenomenon. Given that architecture is but one aspect of culture making, and at that hardly the driving force, it would be unfair to hold theorists and builders primarily responsible for the erosion of true public life -- although it is disturbing how often the New Spirit in architecture is best represented by a fancy restaurant. On the other hand, recent theory that often cautions against the too vigorous shaping of the public landscape may be more open to criticism. In his *Manhattan Transcripts* and later in the building of Parc de la Villette, Bernard Tschumi stressed the importance of the "event," suggesting that it might properly overshadow the architecture designed to facilitate (or even just allow) the event to take place. Tschumi explains that function in architecture is ephemeral, citing the simultaneity of experiences (events) as a reason to construct "turning points," places where another form of place-making may occur, rather than "origins" or "ends," that which we have traditionally defined as building. In his definition of the event, Tschumi turns to Michel Foucault, whose poststructuralist fashion in philosophy exalted the subjugated and marginalized over the mainstream or less alienated factions of academia or the professional world. Foucault showed Tschumi that the event was "the moment of erosion, collapse, questioning or problematic solution of the very assumptions of the setting within which a drama may take place."[6] Theory and design confront life, but find little to celebrate save deterioration and doubt.

Such theory minimizes the traditional responsibility of the professional to improve the built environment. In supposed accordance with the emerging culture, the making of public space often involves creating a loose frame for phenomena of more ephemeral media, electronic and otherwise. For Tschumi, the event rather than the place facilitates "the rethinking and reformation of the different elements of architecture ... [and] may lead to their solution."[7] Apparently, that solution is something that the new theorist or builder may not be up to himself. One rationale for this approach involves painting our age as relentlessly commercial. Consequently, design, as an inherently public art and thus a part of popular culture, is above all else a commercial product. The commercial milieu is by nature quixotic, less than stable. Building as we have known it is, then, too permanent, too durable for the culture in which it would exist.

One example cited as an appropriate new, less permanent landscape is the staging of performances in a concert tour. Curiously, for a philosophy of urban design skating on the ice of the unprecedented condition of our age, the examples chosen are not quite so new: Mark Fisher writes of the Rolling Stones' "Steel Wheels" North American tour and Pink Floyd's "The Wall." Andreas Papadakis interviews Mick Jagger! Perhaps Jagger, a former London School of Economics student, is less blinded by the dazzle of the New than are the theorists. He offhandedly explains that the Rolling Stones' staging infrastructure "is not a brand new thing, it is a style we've seen for decades but it still looks contemporary."[8] But then Mick Jagger is 50 years old and the Stones have been around for three decades. He realizes that "new" is a relative term.

Much of the new theory encourages the urban designer to limit his or her intervention, thereby avoiding the mistakes of commission to which Modernism was prone. Yet it is also possible to make mistakes of omission. Worse, the skilled designer may be impeded from producing vital, real public space; instead he or she is tempted to provide only the framework for other forms of design. Jean Nouvel's approach to designing a new Berlin (the most tempting urban canvas of our time) is a model of non-intervention, a tactic he hopes will avoid mistakes made in the name of progress.

The scheme largely eschews building: Nouvel writes, "It would be irrelevant to laboriously fill in the voids." Rather, he would "use (and abuse) the characteristic anomalies and surprises," which are identified as open lots, large walls ("blind and sad"), bridges, partially completed past urban projects, etc. Nouvel proposes to animate this melancholy, elegiac urban landscape in what might be described as a non-architectural manner by "dotting, painting, informing, lighting, bordering, lining."[9]

A hesitant approach to design is not without its virtues. For one thing, this century's heroic design has had a less than perfect track record. Modernist form-making, when practiced by less than insightful and sensitive designers, resulted in a great number of dreadful urban landscapes. To avoid mistakes made earlier in this century, we must recognize that utopian idealism and pragmatic, perhaps even pessimistic, realism are separated by a great gulf. To cling too close to either shore robs urban design of its complex potential. Likewise, design too seduced by art, by technology, or by social purpose, to the detriment of complimentary considerations, is incomplete. Misguided heroics ignored a truth that is self-evident: the designer has only limited control over the shaping of the landscape. The designer can attempt to influence human perception, imagination and the manner in which a building or space is used, but he or she cannot prescribe with any certainty the life cycle of a design.[10] Yet such insight does not imply that public space-making should be content-neutral. Building can frame opportunity, but building also just *is*. As Michael Benedikt writes, we depend on the built landscape to demonstrate the evident rightness of things as they are, "we count upon our buildings to form the stable matrix of our lives, to protect us, to stand up to us, to give us addresses."[11]

Theory that is overly concerned with the inherent unpredictability of the built environment and so hesitates to act decisively runs the risk of creating a physical world that is little more than a lowest common denominator. Building that is no more than a frame within which the real shaping of human landscapes is to be, as a working drawing might note, "by others" lacks the nerve to be good. Urban design reduced to dotting, painting, bordering seems like nothing so much as a capitulation of professional responsibility. This too we have seen before. A philosophy of non-interventionist urban design, the limiting of architecture to building (or decorating) frames for more significant "events" echoes radical proposals from the '60s (formative years for many of today's theorists) that contended that the best, most socially responsible building was that which was not built. That idea got old fast.

HEROICS IN URBAN DESIGN . . . AGAIN

Inexplicably, even as prevailing theory in urban design cautions against the mistakes to be made by daring to build, some recent proposals for new urbanism are terrifying to contemplate. The graphics and models that are all that yet exists of the most ambitious new urban schemes are admittedly seductive. Made as flashy collages of unusual materials, with rich palimpsest-like layering and dramatic and dynamic slashing, attenuated elements, they are beautiful pieces of art. Arranged in galleries with symbiotically chaotic staging and curious lighting, the new urbanism makes a very good show indeed. But if we insist that this art must be more than just itself, that it be in fact a representation of built landscapes -- in short, that it be real -- then some of the urban schemes of the New Spirit in design share more with Hilberseimer's icy urban aesthetic, Le Corbusier's massively destructive utopian visions, or post-WW II urban renewal than many would like to admit. Daniel Libeskind's Berlin Potsdamer Platz proposal, Lebbeus Woods's heterarchies and scary free-zones, Dagmar Richter, Hani Rashid and others' Los Angeles gateway schemes, Eisenman's "artificial excavations" and "superpositioning" all do not appear likely to engage the individual at a human scale in any positive empathetic ways. Rather, the thrusting "bars" of form, the slashing and layered planes, the aggressively chaotic visual aesthetic that give the New Spirit so much of its exciting look would most likely overwhelm its users.

It is probably not fair to question too vigorously the urban schemes of the New Spirit: one suspects they are more gallery art than they are urban design. Even Eisenman admitted that in his urban schemes, "I did not know how to activate the third dimension."[12] Recent urban schemes should not be damned if they do and damned if they don't. If a "movement" is to be criticized for timid non-intervention, then other perhaps overly zealous proposals deserve some benefit of the doubt. Yet the urban schemes may suffer from the same misapplication of principles as does New Spirit architecture. Man displaced away from the center of his world; the body damaged, eroded, denied; societal anarchy accepted as determinants for a design aesthetic are difficult to accept as the theoretical scaffolding with which to build a better world.

Sculptural form, visual aesthetics do much to shape our perception of the built environment. But these important characteristics alone do not explain the essence of building and its relationship to human existence. Modernism in this century was responsible for some very striking compositions, manipulations of a visual aesthetic elevated to high art. Yet, it must be admitted, Modernism was also responsible (at least indirectly) for a great deal of building that was anything but high art. For decades, Modern architectural theory was miscast, misapplied, and misunderstood. Now that it is down, it is easy to kick it. Urban renewal, misinterpreting Modernist theory, slashed and burned its way through downtowns and old residential neighborhoods. But it also erased slums and shantytowns. Amidst failures and excesses, it should be remembered that Modernism was grounded in noble sentiments. Now, in a perhaps more cynical, jaded world, it is easy to overlook Modernism's striking successes, from the emphasis on providing better housing for a larger proportion of the population than had ever before been considered, to freeing the designer from the bonds of historicism, to encouraging the

incorporation of new materials and technology.

PROGNOSIS

Without Modernism's foundation of what some have referred to as "good intentions," today's urban theory may not be able to shape effectively the "events" which will structure our future urban landscapes. Worse, when today's theory is mishandled by lesser talents (as has been the case with every other fashion in design) the New Spirit in design may leave behind a residue of social problems attributable to the physical landscape, just as did an earlier Modernism. At other times in this century new determinants, ones more appropriate to the age it was claimed, were substituted for a more mundane and decidedly unflashy empathy in design and a more ponderous charge of responsibility to shape the urban landscape in a positive manner. Temporarily blinded by the brilliance of technology, the excitement of social revolution, the seductiveness of art, designers -- and, more important, everyone else -- have often ended up disillusioned and disappointed by the landscapes that resulted from promising and exciting but shaky premises.

NOTES

[1] Daniel Libeskind, "Between the Lines," in Andreas Papadakis, ed., *AD Profile: New Architecture: The New Moderns & The Super Moderns*, 1990, p.179.

[2] Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1965, pp.41-42.

[3] Le Corbusier, "The Street," in W. Boesiger and O. Stonorov, eds., *Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret: Oeuvre Complete, vol.1*, 1910-1929, Les Editions d'Architecture, Zurich, 1964 (reprint of orig. 1929), p.118.

[4] Alison and Peter Smithson, "The Built World, Urban Re-Identification," *Architectural Design*, June 1955.

[5] See Mark Alden Branch, "Critique: Queasy in Colunbus?", *Progressive Architecture*, February 1994, pp.78-81 for a discussion of the apocryphal story and the experience of the completed building.

[6] Bernard Tschumi, "The Architecture of the Event" in Andreas Papadakis, ed., *Free Spirit in Architecture*, Academy Editions, London, 1992, p.226.

[7] Tschumi, "The Architecture of the Event," p.227.

[8] See Mark Fisher, "It's Only Rock'n'Roll: The Steel Wheels North American Tour" in Papadakis, ed., *AD Profile: New Architecture: The New Moderns & The Super Moderns*, pp.46-51; "Steel Wheels" in Papadakis, ed., *Free Spirit in Architecture*, p.105 and "Mick Jagger & Andreas Papadakis: An Interview" in *AD Profile: New Architecture: The New Moderns & The Super Moderns*, pp.52-55.

[9] Papadakis, *Free Spirit in Architecture*, p.204.

[10] See Dell Upton, "Architectural History or Landscape History?", *Journal of Architectural Education* 44/4, August 1991, p.197.

[11] Michael Benedikt, *For An Architecture of Reality*, Lumen, New York, p.14.

[12] Odile Henault, "Digging With Eisenman at the CCA," *Progressive Architecture*, May 1994, p.23.