

Dwelling or

Sculpture

With the increase in praise towards sculptural architecture, there seems to be a growing disconnection between architects and the general public. According to the United States government, "...a successful building project is one that (1) when completed meets the needs of the user..." (Clipson). However, in today's practice this no longer seems to be true. Architects are losing their value in the public's eye as they continue to design buildings which "look pretty" but ignore the needs of the occupants. At a recent American Institute of Architects (AIA) summit, the awards system was brought into question as a result of this growing problem. Over the years, the AIA has chosen buildings which it believes emphasize great design, but in fact were very much disliked by the general public. A prime example of this is the John Hancock Tower in Boston which has been the subject of many building failures over the years (See Figure 1-2). It was awarded the AIA Twenty-Five Year Award in 2010, the AIA National Honor in 1977, and was rated the third-best work of architecture in Boston history in a poll of architects by the Boston Globe in 1994 ("John Hancock Tower in Boston...").

Architects are looking beyond basic human needs and safety concerns in the name of design and losing respect for their profession in the public's opinion—the client's opinion. Architect Richard Neutra addresses this issue in his essay "Human Setting in an Industrial Civilization." "If architecture is soul-stirring, and indeed it can deeply be so, an uneasy question arises. 'How' can it be so if we increasingly lose the immediate contact with the individual in an architectural mass treatment of people?" (Neutra). In his writing, Neutra describes his philosophy of "biorealism," a balance among people, buildings, and the environment. This belief is further emphasized by psychologist Abraham Maslow who demonstrates in his pyramid of the Hierarchy of Needs how creativity and aesthetics cannot be appreciated without the fulfillment of more pressing basic concerns including physiological need, safety, belonging, and esteem ("Abraham Maslow"). For the purpose of this essay, the focus will be on the initial three: physiological need, safety, belonging, and esteem and how they are developed through the built environment. In order to regain value as a profession, architects must become sensitive to the needs of the public and create buildings which reflect this sensitivity through their focus on the personal experience of the individual.



Figure 1⁵



Figure 2⁶



Figure 3⁷

Engage the senses

To be able to fully experience a building, one must be able to engage it through more than just the sense of sight. According to Maslow, human physiological needs are the most basic of all and include breathing, food, water, sex, sleep, homeostasis, and excretion (“Abraham Maslow”). While buildings cannot be held responsible for all of these needs, they still can have a great impact on them—primarily breathing. Installing operable windows or a ventilation system which allows fresh air to effectively penetrate the space is extremely important. Not only does it affect how an occupant temporarily feels, but it can determine one’s long-term health. Well ventilated spaces prevent the buildup of toxins such as volatile organic compounds which often lead to sick building syndrome in occupants. This is further described by historian and critic, Reyner Banham in his essay “A Home is Not a House.”

The early justification of air-conditioning was not just that people had to breathe: Konrad Meier (“Reflections on Heating and Ventilating,” 1904) wrote fastidiously of ‘...excessive amounts of water vapour, sickly odours from respiratory organs, unclean teeth, perspiration, untidy clothing, the presence of microbes due to various conditions, stuffy air from dusty carpets and draperies...cause greater discomfort and greater ill health (Banham).

While the glass panes of the Hancock Tower reflect the scenery around it, they do not allow fresh air to easily penetrate the building. This places the responsibility on mechanical systems which, in turn, requires more energy.

On the other hand, these glass panels allow daylight to penetrate the Tower which enables occupants to connect with the natural environment to some degree. During the winter, workers are able to feel the warmth of the sun through radiation. However, in warmer weather, this may be a source of discomfort since no louvers or shading system was designed. Occupants must once again resort to air conditioning.

If the Architect had tried to utilize nature further, he not only would have saved energy but also would have inadvertently met the physical needs of the occupants. Architect Tadao Ando addresses this concern of phenomenology and site in his essay “Toward New Horizons in Architecture.” “The elements of nature—water, wind, light, and sky—bring architecture derived from ideological thought down to the ground level of reality and awaken man-made life within it” (Ando). By connecting a building with nature, an architect is providing a connection with the individual by means of the five senses. According to Ando, modern and postmodern architecture fail to achieve this.

Security

Another important sensation one should receive from a building is a sense of security. Maslow terms this as “safety” on his second tier of the Hierarchy of Needs. He describes it as the security of the body, resources, employment, family, health, property, and morality (Maslow). The Hancock Tower failed to achieve this from the start when its window panes began falling off the façade due to weak glass. In addition, “...high winds caused the building to sway as much as three feet from side to side, giving those on the upper floors a sensation not common to your average office dweller” (“A Signature Building”). The building was later determined to be unstable and 1,500 tons of steel bracing were installed along its core. This instability contradicts the peaceful and protected sanctuary which a building should embody.

The human body can only handle stressful or threatening places for a limited time. This is why people have a tendency to gravitate towards peaceful spaces, or dwellings, since they are sources of comfort and relaxation. According to Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher known for his studies on existentialism and phenomenology, “We attain to dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building. The latter, building, has the former, dwelling, as its goal. Still, not every building is a dwelling” (Heidegger). To achieve this atmosphere, architects must provide a feeling of safety in all their designs. Otherwise, they will repel the very people the building was intended to serve.

Sense of Place

Another crucial aspect for building design is a sense of place. The building should cultivate a sense of community or belonging among its occupants. This feeling of belonging is Maslow’s third human need. When looking up to the façade of the Hancock Tower, one can only describe the location of his or her office in terms of number of stories from the base or roof of the building. This creates a disconnection between the occupant and the Tower. A residential high-rise in Chicago at Lake Shore East overlooking Millennium Park tries to rectify this problem by splitting the building in half vertically (See Figure 3). The bottom half is then further divided into five sections while the top half is divided into six. Each section is considered a ‘neighborhood’ amongst residents and creates a sense of belonging. Rather than count forty floors up the façade, occupants are able to identify their section and one of the five floors within it.

According to Martin Heidegger, these sections combat ‘placelessness’ by creating a boundary. His beliefs are discussed by British architect, critic, and historian Kenneth Frampton in his essay “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance.”

Martin Heidegger provides us with a critical vantage point from which to behold this phenomenon of universal placelessness...Heidegger argues that the phenomenological essence of such a space/place depends upon the concrete, clearly defined nature of its boundary...and goes on to state that the condition of “dwelling” and hence ultimately of “being” can only take place in a domain that is clearly bounded (Frampton).

Boundaries enable a building to be understood in terms of the human scale, and since humans are the ones utilizing it, it should be designed accordingly. Disproportional buildings overwhelm people and create the sense of ‘placelessness’ which Heidegger describes.

Conclusion

Once architects begin to place more value in the public experience, the public will begin to place more value in the architectural profession. While designing the Hancock Tower, lead designer Henry Cobb seemed to focus more on the building’s relationship to the neighboring church than future occupants’ relationship with the building. “In the determined pursuit of our goal—to achieve a symbiosis between the church, the tower, and the square—we excluded everything that did not contribute directly to this end” (Cobb). Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs can serve as an instrument to achieve a relationship with the general public and better serve their needs. He poses a solution to the architect’s dilemma, one that was addressed by twenty-five of the world’s most well-known architects in a discussion known as the Charlottesville tapes. In the introduction, architect Jaquelin Robertson states:

We don't seem to understand very well yet how our society works or what our people want or need, and are continually caught up in a kind of Alice-in-Wonderland situation of either giving answers to questions no one is asking or ignoring completely some of the more pressing and obvious problems. I suspect this is a partial explanation of our relative powerlessness and why, despite our prodigious effort (we work as hard as anyone), we are so poorly rewarded (Clipson).

This shift in thinking has to start at the academic level where students are spending more time studying abstract drawings and irresponsible designs, than they are studying societal needs and pertinent issues. Buildings shape our lives, and architects shape our buildings. This is a large responsibility that the profession needs to demonstrate it is capable of handling. Architects need to prove they have more to offer than 'pretty pictures' and reveal their full range of knowledge. Some may claim that architects only know a little about everything, but this is more than enough to initiate change—the change we need.

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