

Vulgarity (Our way?)

(An introduction to a presentation to RECONTRES ARCHITECTURES CARIBEENNES - Guadeloupe November, 1997 on the theme "For a Pragmatic approach of modernity dictated by the social structure")

It is a mistake for us to approach our work as if we are a part of a world artistic elite. Ironically, this attitude establishes us as outsiders within our own societies. We are therefore guaranteeing our irrelevance in our homes. We may see ourselves as a crusading, advance guard of civilization, but the truth is that in parroting the north as if they represented *pure* artistic expression we "play the fool". Architecture cannot by definition be "pure" as it is always a reflection/expression of culture. Thus, when, like children, we dress up in the clothing of other societies, we don't make Architecture. We only verify that our culture is dominated by an immaturity which recognizes value only to the extent that we are able to emulate others. This is foolish for societies that have so much to offer and it is up to us to start to change this - But - what can we do?

Architecture may be a reflection of culture but an Artist is neither a vehicle or a medium and we cannot be passive and expect everything to turn out OK. We have to search for "*our way*" thru an understanding of who we are. Even though to some degree all societies do this, most do so either from a base of tradition, or an established position within an intellectual construct. The latter is the easiest as in that situation, action is a matter of delivering ones message in a known language. The former is problematic as even the most "traditional" of societies are dominated by European values. Thus, countries such as Japan struggle to find an accommodation between their tradition and alien values which they have wholeheartedly accepted. Others like the United States in the early part of this century looked into themselves for their own "nature" as a base for their Architecture. Today, all around, Societies are searching for their own identity. All of their searches are on the "high ground" where the popular is "referred" to with enough superiority to maintain the capital A's in Art and Architecture. We can be "Camp" or "Pop"ular or recognize "Kitsch" but we must be above Vulgarity and Popularity.

But we live in societies where popular expression extends itself to the public realm. Graffiti, Street Art and house ornamentation are major forces in our environment. They *happen* up north as localized experiences but cannot be said to be characteristic. Even where they do occur, they are basically different for the creativity from which they spring is constrained by the larger society and cannot therefore build on itself.

We cannot yet claim working Tradition, but we can begin to build our own architectural language. I suggest that an open minded (and hearted) enjoyment of that popular expression which we have been taught is vulgar is one of the ways that we can build up our basic vocabulary and Grammar. I suggest that we must not be ashamed of the intellectual "low ground". Jamaican popular expression is characterized by self confidence, lack of pretense, humor, "creativity" (As unfettered borrowing.) Objectivity, Pragmatism and last but most interesting - Subject Matter. What an unusual starting point for an Architecture. So let's avoid the arrogance of the missionary and accept a role as vehicles of expression of our Cultures rather than standard bearers for irrelevance.

Patrick A. O. Stanigar
October 20, 1997