

“Our Way”

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MONUMENTS

Way back in the 1960's when I was a student, the architectural monument was politically incorrect. One was to avoid simplistic *monumental* scale and strive for elusive *human* scale. In place of serving the Superhuman, be they traditional Gods and Kings, or the more modern super-institutions of big business, we were to serve humanity. The very definition of Architecture was broadened to include not only the “Monuments” of the rich or powerful, but the creations of the “little” man and sometimes the remnants of entire societies. Thus we admired “Architecture Without Architects”¹ and “Anonymous Architecture”² right along with the work of the Masters.

We took great pleasure in the delicious idea of architecture with a small “a” which was as sensible as it was noble. The decency of it all was obvious but it is only in hindsight that we can see that architects had moved out of necessity to broaden their client base.

Notwithstanding this, dreams of immortality have persisted in the architect. This can be understood by looking at the contrasting sides of our ideological development:

- On one hand we studied about 5000 years of the history of architectural monuments and Heroes. We started in almost 3000 B.C. with the tombs of Mesopotamia and Egypt and ended in Hero worship with Mies Van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright.
- On the other hand, even as we exulted in the capital “A’s” of these heroic modern Architects, the intellect was creating the architecture of the small “a”. This architecture with its base in “design” was not to be a high art but emphasized the *craft*. To some degree, this contradiction was offset by the fact that our Super-Heros were supposedly serving the masses by creating *visions* of how they could and *should* live and in some cases making great art, mass-producible for them - so - although the work was Capital, it justified itself by serving the lower cases.

To the extent that this education was schizophrenic it eventually led to a demoralization of our young (now aging) architects who tried to get around their frustration by either concocting justifications for banality (- as in some of Robert Venturi’s writings) or in playing at Super-Hero by building models or samples of the future (As in the work of the rush of MegaStructure architects in the 60's and 70's.).

Conversely, this education was dishonest to the extent that it turned *necessity*, in the form of tasteful examples of “good building”, into *virtue* in the form of an “Architectural”

movement validated with the name “The International Style”.

This is well summed up in the following little History of Modernism excerpted from Stewart Braand's *How Buildings Learn*:

“Modernism began in the 1890s with the arrival of whole new kinds of buildings. - factories, department stores, high rises. Form, stuck for precedent, followed function. Then that insight was aestheticized (and anesthetized) by the Bauhaus movement in the 1920s and 1930s,... So matters stood when all of America and Europe needed new buildings after the war - America to express its new prowess and prosperity, Europe to replace its devastated cities. Modernism got renamed the International Style ("because no one wanted to claim it,...") and suddenly the worlds major cities began to look the same...

Architect Peter Calthorpe says it's as if architecture suffered a stroke after World War II, lost its language and intelligence, and couldn't articulate real buildings any more, so it just made boxes. With Post-Modernism, the profession was finally beginning to manage a few words again but it still couldn't handle sentences and paragraphs. Instead of settling down to real homework, the Post-Modern movement increasingly fragmented into shards of self-consciousness. Obsession with such distractions as French literary criticism culminated with a suicide dive into blatantly 'postfunctional' Deconstructivism."

ARCHITECTURE A LA MODE

How does this affect us? It is important because the lack of clarity in their education has caused Architects to get confused. They have been mesmerized by the semantics of the word *Architecture* as opposed to *Building* and developed a love hate relationship with words like *Style* and *Movement*. This has thrown them out of step with their societies who they view with contempt even as the favor is returned with an almost universal lack of popular interest or pleasure in modern architecture. We architects have missed the point that architecture is usually *a la mode*. It is Mode-ern building. People have throughout history built modern buildings. Even in our humble little cities of the Caribbean we see the various modes through which the taste of the builder has passed. Georgian, Victorian, Art Deco and Modern. Interestingly, all of these were also “International Styles”. We are proud of this “heritage” as we should be. We aspire to be equal to it and even understand its basic humility. But we also feel embarrassed in that we lack Heros and Monuments. How ironic, for the monuments of our past to be the work of the relatively unpretentious and anonymous builder and we are so much at odds with his work today. Why is this?

I can think of two related reasons:

The first is that the very idea of professionalism is characteristic of modernism. For all but the last one or two centuries of our 5000 year period of study, the architectural profession as we know it did not exist. We can talk about a few individual Masters, but the specialized professional of the 19th and 20th centuries is a very different creature. Sheer numbers alone preclude him being a dilettante and his role is less and less artistic and removed from the actual process of building. As the role has changed and the numbers have grown, so has architectural education, thought and Architecture's very relationship to society evolved into something new.

With the death of Apprenticeship and the growth of the School as the preferred method of mass producing Architects has come the analysis of Education not to mention Creation into constituent elements and modules of knowledge. Whole new professions in the form of Historians, Critics and Tutors have been invented to service the education machinery. With this development of Architecture as a "Subject", has come consumerization. This has, over the last 50 years, produced a flood of publications of all types *on* and *around* Buildings, Personalities and Movements. This is the essence of our disquiet when we compare ourselves to the builders of our "cities of the past." We *suspect* what is *obvious* to everyone else. We can never be nor should ever be like our anonymous heros. They were of *their* time as we must be of *ours*.

The second reason for our dissatisfaction with our builders is that ironically, even though the intellectualization of architecture has been part of the twentieth centuries move to internationalism, the self consciousness of the process has sown the seeds of nationalism and regionalism. This trend has grown all over the world but more so in smaller societies such as ours here in the Caribbean. Even though there may be individual regionalists within the larger societies of the United States and Europe, their architects seem generally satisfied with the continuing meanderings of the International Style. Their immersion in this is so complete that it must be impossible for them to realize the degree to which their art has degenerated due to incest and inbreeding. The values established within the closed family of Architects, Critics, Schools and the Media repeat on themselves and supersede those which are rooted in the relationship between the Architect and Society. In contrast to this, partially because of the absence of development of an intellectual establishment, all throughout the Caribbean, there is a hunger for relevance and personality which extends past the profession to the whole society.

OUR WAY

I maintain that our lack of development is our greatest asset as what passed for development has produced a glamorous but soulless, coffee table architecture, which lacks any of the sense of mission which I think we must nurture in ourselves. Some years ago I tried defining what I had learned about Jamaican attitudes to architecture. I share it with you here:

- *Jamaicans can be moved emotionally and spiritually by architecture. They articulate this most often as "Pride" but sometimes refer to qualities of the building such as a feeling of "rightness" about its parts.*
- *They often use the word beautiful - which can refer to anything from very seductive ornament or use of color to the feeling generated by the complex manipulation of horizontal inter-penetrating space.*
- *They are totally unforgiving of waste but love adventure in form when it has a*

sense of rightness about it.

- *While they unquestionably enjoy the sophisticated and stylish materials of the developed world they are genuinely grateful for anything in architecture which they feel is "Jamaican" (as long as it is done successfully).*
- *They love gestures toward nature but will ruthlessly make it impossible for any such gesture to succeed; for this is an area in which they feel equal to the designer.*

I mention all of this because I feel that most of the preoccupations of the architecture of the North are irrelevant to our Caribbean societies. They are not even relevant to the societies in which they have developed but in fact exist only for small elites.

Although I think that an Architecture which is based on gratification only is likely to be superficial, I think that the first thing we should do, if we are to produce a relevant art, is to study what pleases us and excites our intellect (It is not the same for all societies). I think that we all have a long search ahead of us but feel that we are more fortunate than our northern fellows in that they find themselves in a vacuum while we only have to discard baggage. I think that there are great rewards in store for those of us who can manage to do this.

MY WAY

Finally, I wish you to visit with me some of the ideas which have fascinated me over the years. I think this is important because we must remember that no matter how much collective discourse there is on the subject, Art is a personal creative journey that each of us must complete individually.

I used to think that as I grew up in the United States, I had lost out on being Jamaican. Later I realized that at worst I was in the same boat as everyone else. The fact is, that from an architectural point of view, there was no Jamaican-ness or Caribbean-ness which I had missed. Indeed, it was suggested that as a member of the first generation of post colonial architects, I carried part of the responsibility to define an appropriate Architecture for us. To this end, it became clear that I possessed both advantage and disadvantage:

My principal advantage has been that, although my training was "foreign", its essence served me well. I had been deeply indoctrinated with the idea that, for the Architect, Architecture was an art of Context and was meaningless outside of Place, Time and Culture. Unquestionably, it was a wonderful subject for categorization, criticism or just simple appreciation, but these sides of it were not the central issue for the Architect. For the Architect, Architecture must always have clay feet.

Contrary to my taking part in the present exercise, my great disadvantage has been my discomfort with fixed philosophies and rhetoric. Although highly architectural, my work has always been dominated by personality and intuition and has never been a vehicle for the expression of philosophy. Thus, any direct contribution, to the development of ideas thru the message of my work itself, is limited.

There is also a very Jamaican side to this which is a little embarrassing but which I think deserves justice. We don't normally refer to a spiritual side to architecture. The only times I can remember the idea coming up was in discussion of the works of Gaudi and Borromini. Suspiciously, we don't mention it in the context of our actual work. We are however, very comfortable with the idea that buildings can have spiritual qualities. How is it that we can be, spiritually moved by buildings and pretend that this is some kind of accident that proceeds from ideas? I agree that for the sake of modesty, some subjects are best not talked about in public, but it is really a little ridiculous for me to talk about my own work as if the spiritual was not equal to the artistic and intellectual sides of it. Indeed, I want very much to make buildings that move both mind and heart. This predisposition has led me down paths which are unusual for the cold blooded designer. I am going to take a chance and share some of these with you:

Personality

Lets start with a discussion of the characteristics of "Personality." "Place", in the sense of the *quality* of a location, is one of these. This is different from that "sense of place" which one tries to create in some designs. It is really the other side of *that* idea in that the concern is with preserving existing qualities rather than inventing new ones.

I offer the following examples of these matters in my own work:

At the Law Faculty in Barbados, the sense of light and airiness of Barbados hilltops was the starting point of a building that disappears as you enter it

The Cultural Training Center was a conscious attempt to build on the intimate character of the original wooded watercourse which dominated this site in the middle of the city. This part of the building had possibly existed for centuries.

A pair of small houses which not only responded to Jamaican and Trinidadian perceptions of the personality of their own architectures but insinuated themselves into existing gardens which they seem to capture as their own creations.

Another personality related issue is that of Color. Contrary to the romantic image of colorful Caribbean people, the dominant color of the architecture of the powerful of Jamaica is white. We may have some tasteful off-white variations, but in general big houses and buildings tend to be painted white as are the rocks and the bottom parts of trees in gardens. Poorer people, true to stereotype, enjoy color, but turn towards white when they get a little money. There is an obvious temptation to develop racial explanations for this, but I think the matter is more complex and includes other social

factors as well as geographical quality in its origins. This is a fascinating issue and gets even more so when one contrasts my client's reflexive reaction against the proposals for the colors for the Greater Portmore Shopping Center and the pleasure which characterized the acceptance of the completed project by the public.

I think that Jamaicans naturally find joy in color, but are the victims of their own sense of inadequacy when they begin to rise. This is true of all of our arts and if our creative thought had a dominant color it would be the same respectable white or gray which can go with most things.

Representation

Architecture is not usually thought of as a representational art and it is only in the Japanese Garden that I myself have heard serious discussion of this idea. I had however come to believe that it might be possible to use imagery in a building and in my work on the I.C.D. (now The Mechala Group) headquarters office building I made a conscious attempt at such a poetic representation of my *sense* of Santo Domingo. This took form in details, painterly use of perspective and the complex harmony of its composition. Most interesting was the purposefully mischievous acceptance that a unified building could have completely different character from different sides.

Painter-ly-ness

The process of design can be very linear in that we *construct* the solution to our problem in steps and may not work with the whole except in a period of refinement at the end of the process. Painting is different in that as one is not problem solving, the approach can be freer and the entire canvas or frame of reference exists from the beginning. The use of a painterly approach was mentioned previously in the comments about the Mechala building and another example is to be found in the "echos" of the Wray and Nephew Rum Warehouse in its locale of downtown Kingston. First its vaulted shape was included in the composition of the Mechala Building then as the facade of a nearby recycled building which houses one of the Group's companies. Lastly it appeared as illusion on another nearby facade.

Ornament

Perhaps the greatest arrogance of modern architecture was its dismissal of ornament. Although there was some positive rhetoric, the reasons behind this was generally negative in that it arose out of reaction against what was described as eclecticism. No one could have realized how shallow architecture would become when stripped of an entire level of vocabulary. I have spent some time teaching myself how to talk using this part of our vocabulary, and have found it necessary to develop an ornament whose iconography originates in our environment. In particular, I offer you the Hummingbird/Hibiscus motif originally developed by me for the Jamaica Pavilion at Tsukuba in Japan and the Poinsettia motif used in a house in Jamaica.

Spirits

In a superstitious place like Jamaica, a discussion of Spirit couldn't be complete without a discussion of the spirits themselves. Moved by the work of Salvator a Cuban artist of the Yoruba Religion, I wanted to create an urban environment in Southside which was of the place in that it didn't "preserve" the past but included it as something which persisted. I therefore created the ghosts of the small houses which existed on Ladd Lane when I arrived there. Deeper than this however was my decision to keep the scorecards of the children who played games within the shell which I recycled as my offices. I did this to remind myself of the depth and spirit of the Place that we live in.

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