

ON TRADITION AND ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION

The English journalist Gilbert Chesterton opined in 1908 that "the modern world is not evil; in some ways the modern world is far too good. It is full of wild and wasted virtues. . . virtues gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone. Thus some scientists care for truth; and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians care only for pity; and their pity (I am sorry to say) is often untruthful."¹

Mutatis mutandis, it seems that just such an isolation of virtues has occurred in the education of twentieth century architects. There no longer exists among architects a consensus about the nature and purposes of architecture. Vitruvius wrote a comprehensive treatise on the architecture of his day being characterized by durability, convenience, beauty, and propriety. *The Ten Books of Architecture* became authoritative not because Vitruvius wrote it, but rather because it articulated an understanding of the nature and purposes of architecture that was not only reasoned and reasonable, but also to a great extent already shared by other architects. The twentieth century, in contrast, has witnessed a variety of architectural schools and / or movements that have identified the essence of architecture as, in turn, *either* structure *or* function *or* decoration *or* as the necessary expression of (pick one) the architect or the Age. Whether architecture is civic or autonomous; whether architectural form should be governed by the engineer or the social scientist, by the artist or (radical thought) the architect; whether architecture should ally itself with legitimate authority or set itself against all authority; all of these questions receive different answers from precincts prominent in the contemporary architectural landscape, answers that demonstrate and underscore the lack of consensus among architects. Whether one calls this condition pluralism or anarchy, it is the situation in which the culture of architecture finds itself today.

Our own attitudes toward architectural education may be inferred partially from our invocation of Vitruvius. We believe that an orderly and beautiful built environment is not possible in the absence of some new consensus about architecture, and that no consensus will be achieved without some critical reappropriation of tradition. Another way of saying this: the next consensus (if there is one) will see itself as a continuation of the tradition of western architecture (including modernism) rather than its overthrow.

Our emphasis here is on the word "critical." Whatever differences of time and place will make twenty-first century architecture different from first century architecture, we understand Vitruvius's concerns to be central rather than peripheral to architecture and architectural education. To us, the reappropriation of tradition means a renewed appreciation of these concerns. It is not to be conceived as either the prescription or proscription of classicism as a style; neither is it permission to appropriate decorative motifs from history in service to some vaguely conceived "post-modern" style.

What are the central Vitruvian concerns? Vitruvius began *The Ten Books of Architecture* by observing that persons "have no right to profess themselves architects hastily, without having climbed from [childhood] the steps of. . . knowledge of many arts and sciences [to] the heights of the holy ground of architecture."² His steps of knowledge are illuminating. After noting that an architect must be both naturally gifted and amenable to instruction, Vitruvius says that the well educated architect should be "skillful with the pencil, instructed in geometry, know much history, have followed the philosophers with attention, understand music, have

some knowledge of medicine, know the opinions of the jurists, and be acquainted with astronomy and the theory of the heavens." And if it is not possible for an architect to be an expert in these various disciplines, it is nevertheless desirable that he be acquainted with them all; for all these studies "have a common bond of union and intercourse with one another," and "a liberal education forms, as it were, a single body made up of these members."

What does a liberal education have to do with architecture? Why is it necessary for an architect to acquire competence in these various disciplines? The answers are implicit in Vitruvius's definition of architecture. The foremost concern of architects, says Vitruvius, is the art of building, and he divided building into two parts. The second (and by implication of secondary importance) of these is building for private individuals, i.e. houses and housing. The first, and foremost, is the construction of towns and cities, and of public buildings. There are in turn three classes of public buildings: buildings for military defense, such as walls, towers, and gates; religious buildings such as shrines and temples; and "utilitarian" buildings such as meeting halls, harbors, markets, colonnades, baths, theaters, and promenades. All building, governed by that sense of propriety that takes into account its purpose, "must be built with due reference to durability, convenience, and beauty."

Vitruvius's comprehensive view of architecture leads him to insist that architectural education be a comprehensive liberal education. Although the craft of building, the knowledge of materials and how to put them together, seems to be missing from all this, it too is implicit in Vitruvius's concern for durability and is addressed explicitly in his book; for, as he says, "knowledge is the child of practice and theory. . . [and] those who have a thorough knowledge of both have the sooner attained their object and carried authority with them."

Speaking within the Vitruvian tradition, and specifically with respect to architectural education, we would add our voices to the chorus of those who advocate a renewed understanding of architecture as a marriage of contemplation and craft. The craft is of two sorts: the craft of drawing and the craft of building. The drawing craft concerns itself with the development of motor skills through which students learn to represent three dimensional objects and spaces in two dimensions. These skills are descriptive and depictive. The descriptive skills are the ability to represent objects and spaces accurately by means of orthographic, perspective and axonometric drawings. The depictive skills include the ability to represent the play of light, shadow, and color on objects and surfaces by means of various rendering techniques--freehand drawing, watercolor, etc. The building craft is more complex. It includes knowledge of the material components of building construction, the ways in which these components are assembled, and the principles of physics that will guarantee their minimal motion, as well as consideration of those environmental concerns--climate, orientation, altitude, prevailing winds--that will have a significant impact on the comfort and durability of buildings.

These crafts should and can be learned in part through the study of what one might call the literature of architecture, i.e., the examination of good architecture of the near and distant past. Such architecture should be considered in two equally important ways: first, for its formal and material qualities, by means of plan, section, and elevation studies; second, for the relationship between its formal qualities and its philosophical content as mediated by the particular social institutions for which it was made. These two concerns make the literature of architecture the bridge that joins architectural craft to architectural contemplation, the consideration of the nature and purposes of architecture. And if, as we assume, architecture bears some relationship to human well being, the nature of human well being--in its biological,

social, moral, philosophical, economic, aesthetic, and religious aspects--is an important topic in the well designed architectural curriculum. Here again we return to the Vitruvian ideal of the importance of a liberal education in the training of architects.

If architecture is a marriage of contemplation and craft, the academic studio setting and the professional apprenticeship (for which the academic studio is the twentieth century substitute) ought ideally to constitute the period of engagement. The proper role of studio education--and the office apprenticeship as well--is integrative, a progressive drawing together of motor and intellectual abilities. Too rarely is this accomplished, and we question whether this is because studio education is divorced from both the contemplative and the craft dimensions of architecture. It's true that if one thing is being improved in contemporary studio education, it is drawing skills. It also is true that if one thing seems virtually absent from studio education it is the integration of material and constructional concerns into the design process. And if there is a welcome openness in certain schools of architecture to more speculative and contemplative thinking, we should like to see this interest incorporated into a more structured and comprehensive curriculum. We have said many times, in contemplating the nature of architecture, that we believe the central problems and purposes of architecture are perennial. In proposing a critical reappropriation of tradition in architecture we are *a fortiori* proposing a critical reappropriation of the best values and virtues of western culture. Vitruvius understood that architecture should be a symbol of both power and communal values and virtues--which is to say that architecture should rightly aspire to symbolize and embody authority. Unless architects again are educated to believe likewise, architecture will continue to be nothing more than a symbol of power.

This essay originally appeared in the "Chicago Architecture Police" column in the May 1987 *Inland Architect*, and was co-authored with Howard Decker.

NOTES

1. Gilbert Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1959), page 30.
2. This and all subsequent Vitruvian quotations are taken from *Vitruvius: The Ten Books of Architecture*, translated by Morris Hickey Morgan (New York: Dover, 1960), Book I, chapters I-III, pages 5-17.