

Why Should We Care? Thoughts and Works from the Viewpoint of an Architect

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ABSTRACT

1. Thoughts

1. Why care? 2. Sustainable Architecture or just Architecture, are they something different? 3. On past and future – learning from tradition. 4. On the overwhelming power of design. 5. On starchitecture. 6. On the design process and the golden thread of Design

2. Works

1. Office building – AEGEK Group of Companies. 2. S+B Headquarters, Athens. 3. Concert Halls, Stavanger, Norway. 4. Church of the Most Holy Trinity, Fatima, Portugal. 5. Archaeological Museum, Cairo. 6. Bjørvika in Oslo, Norway.

KEYWORDS

Architecture, Sustainability, Decalogue of Architecture.

1. THOUGHTS

Architectural design is both a science/technique and an art.

Most architects live consciously or unconsciously with a split personality which often affects their work and even their own being.

To put things in a simple way, in the environment of science one plus one always equals two, while in the environment of architecture one plus one equals approximately two, allowing for artistic creativity.

Buildings, the result of multiple driving forces, are created by multidisciplinary teams, normally led by an architect, with the result, and rightly so, that the final output is very much influenced by the architect.

In order to be able to foresee the future, to plan, to design for the future, one must learn from the past. To understand a place one must know its memories. But is just a romantic approach enough? We all admire vernacular, but we appreciate it only with

our eyes. We look at it in a romantic way. This is not enough, what is necessary is to understand the **why** of everything. In the past we had the benefit of learning by way of trial and error. It took a long time for things to develop, progress was slow and sure... There was time to correct mistakes which is not the case today. After all it has been said that “common sense is intuition, when there is enough it is genius (Josh Billing). In past times, means were limited and that forced man to use his brains, to be more clever and make the best use of what he had at his disposal. I strongly believe that where there exist limited means one can only survive by way of unlimited brains while where there exist unlimited means one falls back to the use of limited brains.

The driving force behind most architectural creation is neither money nor the procedure of the whole exercise, but mainly the quest for fame and recognition. The ego of many architects (as indeed that of many artists), which to a certain degree is both normal and positive, is too often inflated beyond imagination. Architecture is, amongst other considerations, an exercise of problem solving, or in other words finding solutions to multiple constraints. However, architects hate constraints. They want to create within a realm of unlimited freedom, thus too often led to ignore real constraints. And as there cannot be any creation without constraints, they make up their own fictitious (and often irrelevant) constraints.

The result of the above is that form and form-giving become the main concern of the architect in his seek of creating “iconic buildings”, or what I would call Iconography in the original Greek sense of the word, which really means creating a picture. This becomes the issue by which he is judged and thus the star or **starchitecture** system is born. Here the recognisability of his work in perpetuum and the extra value that he adds to the building becomes a commercial commodity of significant importance. All this is fine, certainly for architect and the recognition of their role in society. Of course one must admit that it is beneficial for society itself, when architecture has something further to contribute than just being a beautiful object of adoration for the initiated and not only.

But where does sustainability or ecology or energy conscious or bioclimatic, solar or climatic design, or whatever after all we come to call it, come into this picture of stardom, globalism and present-day consumerism? Is sustainable architecture or just plain architecture something different? In former times there was no issue of this sort because everything came together in a natural and logical way. After the first energy crisis in the seventies and the first “addition” of active solar collectors on buildings things started to fall apart.

Energy conscious architectural design at that time started looking like something very different, and one must admit not very appealing. These concerns were treated by mainstream architecture as fringe issues to be dealt with by the “specialists”. And that is how things developed for the next some thirty years and indeed, to a certain extent, how things are still today, with the difference that for different reasons we must recognize that the issues of sustainability have become much more fashionable.

The consumer habits of society and low prices of energy lead to a need for heavy doses of remedial medicine, i.e. building services. These are administered by the

engineering profession or witch doctors (thank goodness for their existence!) in order to remedy the mistakes and inefficiencies of the principal building design, i.e. the work of the architect.

On the one hand we have the **architect** who does not want to be inhibited by “technical issues” and on the other the knowledgeable **specialist** who too often has little patience for the architect and his whims of form-giving. A polarity is once again created between art and technique like so often in the past. And of course both are right (since both are necessary), but at the same time wrong since they distinguish and exaggerate their own way of thinking.

So the question arises: Is Sustainable Architectural Design something different or **in-different** from real time pure Architecture (with a capital A)? Surely not. Neither architectural form (which is much more than sculptural form, since - as I see it - it incorporates both function and climatic considerations) nor sustainability can be aims on their own. They cannot exist but as a part of a much more complex matrix of creation as part of a **decatalogue** of architectural composition with whatever modifications, additions or rearrangements each one of us may wish. The principal aim is to integrate each time, depending in each case on the targets to be set, all the components of architectural design. However, much the matrix may vary from case to case, in no case can one of the components be neglected or totally eliminated. So this decatalogue may run somewhat as follows:

- History/Culture
- Social considerations
- Symbolism
- Function
- Place/topos
- Sustainability
- Climate
- Laws of Physics
- Time
- Cost/Benefit

I believe it is important for architects to come to realize that however secondary or inhibiting they may find some of these considerations, there exists an infinite inner beauty of interrelating them all.

That, if that hidden golden thread of architectural design ever exists, it does not exist in the consistency and recognisability of architectural forms, but in the consistency of architectural beliefs.

So why should we care? Is it our duty? Is it because we cannot do otherwise? Is it just to conserve energy and save our planet? Is it just a matter of economics or logic, eco-logics? Is it just because it is to a certain extent, now fashionable to “think green”?

Mies van de Rohe in his important work believed that “less is more”. It was an attitude of minimalism, of purity of design. I think this was very important and very correct. Robert Venturi, as a reaction to the previous, said that “less is a bore”, that

we cannot regulate everything. Life is untidy, design should be, to a certain extent, untidy too. It was Schumacher in the time of ecologic concern, and sensitivity to the problems of our planet Earth, who said that “small is beautiful”. We should pay attention to scale, many things should be solved on a smaller scale.

What I’d like to add to all this is the idea that “**Less is Beautiful**”, in the way that **less** does not mean **too little**, it does not mean not enough, but it **means the minimum necessary**. It means that there has been both a practical, a technical, a philosophical and a mental procedure of choosing what is necessary, and using that “what is necessary” in our design. And I believe from the philosophical, the design, the aesthetic point of view, that that is in itself both **beautiful** and **creative**.

I believe that only when sustainability is put into this context will it become a part and indeed a most important part of architectural creation.

2. WORKS

The presentation of a number of works by the office will follow:

- Office building – AEGEK Group of Companies
- S+B Headquarters, Athens
- Concert Halls, Stavanger, Norway
- Church of the Most Holy Trinity, Fatima, Portugal
- Archaeological Museum, Cairo
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