



On Architecture as Art Theo Dorgan

Theo Dorgan opened the Describing Architecture Exhibition at the City Assembly House, South William Street, on 3rd October 2013. This is a paper he previously delivered *On Architecture as Art*.

It may well be that among architects, privately, there is a great deal of discussion centred on architecture as an art form, but if this is so, precious little of any such discussion filters out into the culture at large.

Architects in our time, in our place, are only rarely considered or discussed as artists, only rarely speak of themselves as artists — with the corollary, that architects in their formation are not encouraged to think of themselves as artists. This is both a-historical and an impoverishment of the culture in general.

Superficially, it's easy enough to see why the idea of the architect as artist has become obscured in the present moment. For one thing the work practices of architects have become rather more collective than was the case in even the recent past, making it difficult enough to recognize the signature contribution or aesthetic of individual architects; for another, the ascendancy of the client (and the client's balance sheet) during the recent years of greed-driven building has tended to focus attention on the utilitarian value of buildings, at the expense of their aesthetic qualities.

Of course significant buildings of enduring aesthetic value have been built in our time - but it seems to this outsider that architects in general, some outstanding buildings aside, have become curiously reticent about claiming artistic value for their work.

Architects, like artists in many other fields, have developed a curious shame about beauty.

Some of this is to do with a larger crisis of confidence in the culture as a whole, especially among the makers: we have all of us in one way or another come under pressure to monetise our work, to defend our practice on grounds of its commercial or economic value. There have been other kinds of demands, for instance that art should align itself to the prescriptions of political or social agenda-setters. From the left, artists have had demands made on them that their work should be 'socially useful' - according to ill-defined criteria which rarely amount to much more than reflexive squawkings of bourgeois guilt. From the right we have had to defend ourselves against charges that art is parasitic and unproductive of economic value, is 'unrealistic' and immature when it is not spitefully subversive of good sense and common values.

As is usual in these periods of uncertainty, faced by conflicting demands from outside themselves, artists have reacted in different ways: some by retreating from a robust belief in the value of what they do into a kind of wounded silence, some by adopting a kind of protective camouflage, disguising their work inside the rhetoric of some party line, and yet others by denying that they are, in fact, artists at all. Many, of course, just sail on past, getting on with the work.

Now it's difficult for a poet to go on publishing poems while denying that writing poetry is in fact what they do; equally, it's difficult for a painter to deny painting, a composer to deny she is making music; architects, however, seem to me in many cases to be subsuming themselves inside collective practice, and to present their work in public as if they were problem solvers of a rarefied kind in the business of engineering, wedding organizers presiding over the shotgun marriage of money and concrete.

I am, of course, caricaturing things here, the situation is neither as simple nor as desperate as I seem to be suggesting, but for all that, there is a real problem in all this.

I can perhaps frame the problem between two quotations from modern masters:

Frank Lloyd Wright: "The mother art is architecture. Without an architecture of our own we have no soul of our own civilization."

Mies van der Rohe: "Architecture is the will of an epoch translated into space."

Lloyd Wright's language will scarcely appeal to the hard-headed moneymaker types of our time - many of whom are clearly without fathers, some of whom are, I suspect, brought into the world without benefit of mothers. The cluster of ideas that hover around the word 'mother' in his formulation includes nurturing, quiet, repose, longevity, lineage and benign authority; more problematic to contemporary taste are the words 'soul' and 'civilisation', yet they point to, encourage, a cast of mind as irreducible in the furnace of the moment as it will prove necessary in the coming times. Lloyd Wright, to put this as clearly as I can, understands that the making of art is fundamentally a human endeavour - perhaps I should say, is a fundamental *human act*.

Mies, on the other hand, has had a mesmeric appeal for those self-styled 'masters of the universe' who have brought the developed world to its present unlovely condition and, in their blind arrogance, have brought many an agnostic to a point where, unable to believe in God, they are certainly willing to believe in the Devil. The cant of this type is, in a curious reversal of Marx, that the unfolding of markets, the engrossing of wealth, is a function of impersonal forces at work in the world - they see no reason to value any human not concerned with the service of Mammon - theirs is a world where 'Miesian' architecture can be indefinitely reproduced by a cheap laptop, properly programmed. "Architecture is the will of an epoch..." - how easy to imagine the sentence issuing from the mouth of Albert Speer.

If there is something properly repulsive about the naked will to power, there is something sleazy and unhealthy about an idea of art that sees art as the handmaiden of power. Imagine Mies had said: "Politics is the will of an epoch translated into action..."

Between these points of view there is a great gulf fixed. Anyone now in training as an architect might usefully consider what, in fact, the difference is between these two points of view.

The distinction can be made with brutal simplicity: you can be an architect-artist, finding lessons and echoes in sibling arts that develop your understanding of your own, you can see yourself as a human being engaged in a profoundly human activity - or you can be a cipher, an empty soul in the service of empty-hearted, arbitrary power.

All good art comes out of a community of shared and inherited meanings, agreed values. Truly great art will find its truths at a slant to those values, will often upset, reverse or reformulate those values, but great art is never arbitrary - or for that matter abstract, that is to say, divorced entirely from the material world we share with others, from our common tradition, our common human story. All genuine artists know that only when you have understood the past can you try to make something new in the present that might, just possibly, endure in that future where it will become the past of some artist yet unborn. That is the bluntest truth I can think of for any artist. There is no substitute for humility before the dead, camaraderie with the living, personal courage and discipline - and a healthy wish to leave something of value behind when you go, for the benefit of the unborn.

All this, of course, inescapably, requires a great deal of hard work, a willingness to immerse oneself in the tradition, to learn from the past as the precondition for developing a style and courage of one's own. This is, as everyone knows, an attitude inimical to the spirit of the present age, where a 14 year old boy winning a heat in a TV talent competition will blurt out "Oh thank you, thank you, this is what I've dreamed of all my life."

The architectural expression of this mindset is post modernism. This unlovely (and thankfully short-lived) fever had its roots in the childish idea that one could arbitrarily appropriate elements of past styles as garnishes on pedestrian architecture, in the deluded belief that one was making something new by stealing ignorantly and at random from the dead.

(Incidentally, the most grotesque example I can think of is the Vauxhall Cross headquarters of the British Secret Intelligence Service, MI6. The work of a paranoid colour-blind Legomaniac, it is in its own weird way the perfect objective correlative for the work and persons of the unlovely service it houses.)

"The mother art is architecture..." - among other things, I think Lloyd Wright means us to understand that to make shelter, home, temple and theatre is a primal and ancient

impulse, one carried on from generation to generation. This is not, properly understood, a conservative proposition in itself; it asks of us only that we identify and respect what is good and eternal ('recurring', if 'eternal' makes you uneasy) in what humans make. A revolutionary himself, Lloyd Wright saw no need to stake his identity as a grown artist on the death of the mother. The point is to be an adult, not a matricide. And the point of being an adult is, surely, to stand on your own two feet - the ambition of any good mother, of course being that her child will grow to do exactly that.

One could say, of course, that Lloyd Wright is being a touch sentimental - not everything mother tells us is true, as we know - and there is something to be said for Mies' unremarkable intuition that the spirit of an age is reflected in its architecture - but it is not my business here to set up one against the other. I choose these quotations because they seem to me to point up an interesting moment in the education of young architects, a choice if you wish.

A young architect today who is not grounded in the history of the art, who is not taught that architecture is art, seems to me to be facing into a hollow second-class professional life. One must immerse oneself in the lineage before breaking free. It seems to me, too, that to launch yourself at expressing "the spirit of the epoch" is a snare and a delusion - as setting yourself an abstract target always is. This state of mind, distressingly commonplace at the moment, is properly termed 'empty dreaming'.

The trick is to situate yourself exactly where you stand in space and time, confident of and aware of the past, alive in the present, expectant of the future.

The past is full of unfathomable riches, lodged in the obliging matrix of memory. Some of it, as you will discover, is not without merit. More importantly, in the study of the past you will find you are exercising memory, training memory to sift and store, ultimately to retrieve when needed, the spur to imagination when, at last, you have the opportunity to shine.

And what will it mean, to shine? To make something beautiful, powerful and meaningful that will endure in memory.

Let me give one simple example. The Temple of Aphaia, on the north-eastern corner of the island of Aegina, is one of the most beautiful buildings in the world. Reduced to bare bones by the passage of time, it no longer has the polychrome intensity that must have struck its first users with such force. Too, the function for which it was designed is no longer available to us, our belief-systems have changed so radically, and we cannot hope to recapture the sense of community that must have given the building its charge of meaning and power. So, why should it have such a powerful effect on us still? Well, the site for a start. The classical Greeks had a profound sensitivity to location, and very often chose places of immense intrinsic felt power as sites for their most important buildings. Almost all Greek temples are built on sites of great geomantic power, very often sites that have long cultic histories before ever being chosen as sites for buildings. They used

the word *temenos*, sacred space, for such locations. The architect would have been schooled in what we might call the prehistory of the site, alive to the powers of the site, familiar with other temples built on similar sites, conversant with the uses to which the temple would be put. He (this is a long time ago) would also have known, without making a fuss about it, that he was sending his building into the future - without putting any particular value on that. It's just that, well, they built to last - in stone on a stable site, in an equable climate, in a settled society.

To me, visiting today, these are speaking stones. They echo and somehow complete the surrounding context - bare sun-broken rock, deep-shaded pinewoods, the sea glittering far below, the bowl of the sky a deep rich blue overhead. I sense the hand that shaped the stone, I am entranced by the dance of proportion and measure, I hear the music of geometry, I feel myself in the presence of living minds.

Here is architecture that I understand as I understand a poem - and I am sure a musician would understand this temple as she understands the architectonics of a piece of music.

There is a mystery here, and the heart of the mystery is that the building speaks across time. It endures across time and in time, it commands the experience of itself, it lives in the space it inhabits, in a slow dance with time, decay and the eternal.

It isn't done to say so, but every work of art expresses an ambition on the part of its maker that the work will outlast the time of its making. This is a right and proper ambition for an artist, but it comes at a price few are prepared to pay: you must learn to serve your art with true humility, choosing the survival of the work over the survival of your name if that's the deal you're offered.

We cannot live outside history, in a willed dreamtime of our own, a kind of defiant solipsism, and nor can our work be free of the watermark of the time we live in, the world and the language we share with others. Nevertheless, because we know that art not founded on memory is meaningless, we can legitimately hope to produce, from time to time, a poem, a painting or a building that will outlast its moment, pass on into the afterlife, into the memory of those yet to come. To do that, to send a message into the unknown future, we must be capable of receiving, responding to, the messages sent on into the once-future that is our living present.

The more perfectly we give ourselves to the past, the more likely we are to transcend the present with a gesture that achieves the future. The more likely we are to understand what Frank Lloyd Wright meant when he said:

"A great architect is not made by way of a brain nearly so much as he is made by way of a cultivated, enriched heart."

The proper foundation for all art is the study of what cultivates and enriches the heart.