

Versus

Duo Dickinson

There is a schism in the profession of architecture. Architectural education and those who practice architecture as a fine art turn a cold shoulder to the more typical practice of architecture as a service provided for those who wish to build buildings. This split has damaged our profession, and mirrors other aspects of our culture. Doctors bewail the lack of enlightened generalists, as do lawyers. Politicians and political analysts share angst over America's increasingly radicalized red and blue "mainstreams". Religious fundamentalism rises while more people describe themselves as atheistic than ever before. So it is, I'm afraid, with architecture.

In 1940, an exhibit at the Architectural League in New York was called "Versus". Its iconic symbol, a classical Greek column with a Calder sculpture as its capital, was an effective mirror of the organization of the exhibit in its stately New York venue - the first floor completely given over to the works of Neoclassicists, the second floor given over to the avant garde International style. The present day House of Architecture has had a similar bifurcation, although not as stylistically simplistic. For the most part, schools of architecture are firmly rooted in the aesthetics and ideology of the Modern Movement.

On the other side of the schism, the vast majority of buildings that are built in America today accommodate pre-existing aesthetic realities. This is the architecture of the iconic, of precedent, and the simple reflection of the truth that the vast majority of people prefer to live in neo-traditional houses and have town centers that have a greater affinity for Mayberry than the Jetsons' Skypad Apartments. The National Association of Homebuilders' house organ, Builder Magazine, has a parade of these easy-on-the-eyes designs.

While the rest of our culture has embraced diversity, while the conventional wisdom is that multiple outlooks, talents, ethnic backgrounds, and social perspectives create a value in American society that transcends the easier benefits of comfort and security, one of our leading cultural engines, the art and science of architecture, has, at its root, a fundamental disconnect from communication within its own ranks.

This schism has hurt architecture. The elite academic/artiste star system has created buildings that are untouchable, inaccessible, and which often don't work, and has promoted architects as out of touch, head in the clouds visionaries whose role is to transform rather than to reflect our culture. Conversely, the large Building Industrial Complex has replicated building prototypes that have existed unchanged for decades if not centuries, blind to any cultural, environmental or technological realities that have come into play over the last generations.

So, in the parlance of a political speech, there are two architectures - the architecture for the very few (the fashionistas and academic elites), and the architecture for everybody

else. One is celebrated and held high by a very small group of trend-setting, hyper-hip, art gallery driven self-promoters, and the other is embodied in profit mongering panderers who worship the sale over the ethical responsibility to lead by example.

I believe there is a middle way. I believe there is a way that can call bad architecture bad architecture, without getting into style. The vast majority of the buildings that are celebrated by Architectural Record and in the architectural press are truly worthy of all the honors and plaudits they receive, and are terrific structures. But in that exclusive celebration there goes begging a huge number of projects that deal with context, vernacular, craft, and, yes, even cost (another 800 pound gorilla that is seldom dealt with in our profession). When will those buildings see the light of day in the public's perception of what architects do?