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CONFRONTING THE TERRAIN OF POLITICS IN ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE: ASSESSING STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

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Architects and architecture students may not know how to deal with the political situations they face or will face in their practice. They need a better understanding of the terrain of political strengths and weaknesses they may encounter in such circumstances because the actions they take can serve to either maintain or challenge existing political systems. Likewise, their political actions are oriented to serving themselves (self), serving others (social orientation), or meeting public requirements (social obligation). Circumstances arise that force architects and students to confront the terrain of political strengths and weaknesses. Understanding this terrain can better situate them to use methods of practice to identify and solve problems.

INTRODUCTION

As what may be termed a “social art,” architecture can be analyzed, critiqued, and understood from many angles, just like the society of which it is a component. One can look at it from many points of view in terms of its economic value, artistic expression, environmental load, technological performance, and utilitarian function. Often these factors are mutually reinforcing or contradictory, making the work of architects and critics a necessarily open-ended challenge. In vernacular building cultures, where the designer, constructor, and user of a particular building might be the same entity, innate contradictions tend to get resolved in a seamless, natural way during the design and construction process. But in “modern” buildings, which are of a technological complexity unbefitting a vernacular approach, and “modern” societies, which exert a greater regulatory need and capacity, political influences become more pronounced. As designers, constructors, users, financiers, and regulators stratify into categorically separate entities and influences, the political dimension becomes more significant and pronounced in our understanding of buildings and the environment in which they exist.

In their position as designer, with the responsibility to understand and resolve competing visions and interests in the conception and execution of a project, the architect is in a potentially tricky spot as the arbiter of political (and other) forces influencing a project. Daniel Willis (1999:175) noted that

[T]he professional architect primarily came into being in order to create a “space” where architectural practices could be insulated from the direct influence of the newly emerging capitalist market, as well as from the modern tendency to convert uncertain practices into efficient techniques. From the outset, the professional architect has been a party to a sort of truce, a compromise, with the societal development we know as “modernity.”

But architects continue to have a political voice. Henri Lefebvre (1991) argued that for ideas to have meaning, they must have space. In this light, architecture provides an opportunity to positively influence symbolic expressions and social actions within the realm of politics.

Cynics can easily criticize architecture for having political weaknesses in a society where architects serve elites, designing their residences and business buildings to sustain their socioeconomic position. But architecture also has its strengths, which we may too easily overlook. For instance, architects have played a role in designing low-income housing. The profession is often so self-critical that practitioners, academicians, and students underestimate the positive contributions of creating new designs that can improve the lives of many people. Architecture theorists tell us what is wrong with what practitioners, academicians, and students do in the name of architecture. Here, though we cannot ignore the weaknesses, we acknowledge plausible political possibilities.

Architecture’s political strengths and weaknesses include issues regarding what architects face in practice and what architecture students experience during their education. One might argue that students, who do not really influence what gets built in any meaningful way, should not be part of this discussion. However, we argue they should be included because many of the core values one develops and holds for an entire career are shaped in school. In that sense, formal professional education, as the place where many critical attitudes and values are born and nurtured, is a critical part of this discussion. Politics is the place where values come to rest and exert themselves on the public stage. There is the tendency to relate political issues to ideologies, social systems, or built forms shaped by historic circumstances. But the everyday world of architects and students is filled with practical political circumstances that are related more to basic working and study conditions than the abstract concerns of ideologies, social systems, and historic edifices.

In this paper, we offer a terrain of political strengths and weaknesses within a theoretical framework to provide a clear declaration of what is at stake when architects and students face design issues

TABLE 1. Sources of political action and system dynamics of political strengths in architecture.

Source of Political Action	System Maintenance	System Challenging
Self	Remembrance	Utopian expression
Social orientation	Institutional identity	Advocacy
Social obligation	Protection	Forum making

in the office or design studio. An underlying structure for political strengths and weaknesses exists between the social systems in which practitioners and students are involved and the political actions they use to participate in architecture. First, practitioners and students practice along a spectrum from maintaining the existing socio-political system to challenging it (Mayo, 1996). Second, their political actions are oriented to serving themselves (self), serving others (social orientation), or meeting public requirements (social obligation). In the end, these two dimensions help to construct a set of contingencies within which practitioners and students constantly make decisions. Mapping the terrain is a metaphor to illustrate the various dimensions of political issues given the two theoretical criteria used in the analysis. In Tables 1 and 2, the sources of political action provide a theoretical latitude and architects' orientation along the socio-political system spectrum (from maintaining it to challenging it) provides a theoretical longitude of situational issues in practice.

Before embarking on a discussion of political strengths and weaknesses, we need to understand what is meant by the term "political." Social scientists have traditionally defined politics in regard to power and authority. Political power is gained through the dominance of one group over another. Authority is legitimized power within an institutionalized structure. In reality, there is often a mixture of both power and authority in a society. Each of the six strengths and weaknesses presented in this paper represents a particular situation where architects can face political concerns regarding varying degrees of power and authority. These 12 types can vary in both power and authority, depending on the historic conditions architects face at a particular place and time. Some types may be more related to political power, such as utopian expression, while others, such as legal limits, are mostly related to authority. No type is totally characterized as power or authority.

POLITICAL STRENGTHS IN ARCHITECTURE

As shown in Table 1, practitioners and students use their political strengths within particular contingent situations. First, designers can symbolically manifest *remembrance* in the structures they create to address past political events. Second, they can broaden the horizon of societal possibilities with the *utopian expressions* they provide in their designs and theories. Third, architects serve the public interest and create an *institutional identity* when their building designs address and reflect the public-interest concerns of government institutions and other public-minded institutions. Fourth, they can interpret the public interest differently and *advocate* for their interpretation. They can be rationalists — deciding what the optimal course of action should be within a rational framework. They can be idealists — deciding what ends need to be attained given their principles of moral action. Or they can be realists — deciding what ends can be achieved with the means available to them (Schubert, 1960). Regardless of which definition or articulated combination of these options they may choose or confront, practitioners and students can play a key role in advocating political action for minority interests in the action-oriented projects they produce. Backing support for a minority position, Klosterman (1980) argued that interpretations of the public interest do not need to include everyone, only the individuals and groups taken into account. Fifth, architects can design (as, historically, they have) buildings that *protect* political systems so public order can be sustained. And sixth, architecture can play a positive role in *creating forums*, or political spaces, for public decision making.

Remembrance

Remembrance through architecture reifies the political beliefs of citizens and the actions they have taken on behalf of political authorities. Symbolism is very important when conveying those values. Memorials are typically the architectural means used to convey the political values citizens embrace and wish to remember in conjunction with particular historical circumstances. War memorials, monuments to remember specific events, institutional monuments, and memorials for significant individuals are the primary ways in which we architecturally reify political commentary for future generations.

Commemoration reminds us of not only the values we hold but also the unique circumstances that compose our political past. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, was an important symbolic step in the healing process of Americans, both veterans and non-veterans, after the Vietnam War. The process of selecting the final design and eventual additions to the design often seemed to be a war itself, but the outcome was a memorial where Americans could grieve their losses and which they soon came to cherish. Oddly, the World War II Memorial was built later. Reflecting Studs Terkel's (1984) reference to it as the "Good War," most Americans have accepted this popular, well-visited monument (Meyer, 2008), which is a collective memorial with each state represented in its design.

Memorials for events and institutions are usually positive statements. American monuments recounting progress show us what our nation can accomplish. Memorials at Hoover Dam; Kitty Hawk, North Carolina (the site of the first airplane flight); and Washington, DC, for the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 show us that our nation has progressed in serving the public and advanced both human rights and our technological opportunities (Goode, 1974). All of these monuments speak to forms of political progress, but not all events are fully progressive. On the one hand, remembering the assassinations of John F. Kennedy in 1963 and Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968 demonstrates our society's desire to honor human rights. On the other hand, these memorials also acknowledge the failure of fanatics to respect the political beliefs of national progressive political figures (Foote, 1997).

Although creating architectural designs for remembrance requires social cooperation and involvement, remembrance itself is often an act of self-reflection. Even in the midst of other people, how we remember is an individual experience. We may visit memorials with others, but we carry those memories as part of our self-identity of what we value in the architectural expressions.

More often than not, practitioners are involved in the creation and design of memorials. Yet, there are also competitions in which students and faculty members can compete to design memorials. Perhaps no architecture student is better known than Maya Lin, who designed the winning entry for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, in part because of the controversy surrounding her design solution (Ochsner, 1997; Scruggs and Swerdlow, 1985). But academics in architecture also play a role in memorial design. Their conceptual critiques in research articles and books help practitioners and students to understand more clearly how memorial design can have a positive impact on society.

Practitioners, academicians, and students involved in historic preservation can enhance the political accountability of our local, regional, and national past. Not all of our history is about political accomplishments. A preserved slave plantation can serve as a reminder of past wrongdoings and enable our society to realize what inhumanity we can create and maintain. Likewise, preservation helps to maintain a physical manifestation of our principles, such as Independence Hall. In some cases, preservation involves a mixture of humanity and inhumanity. Preserving Thomas Jefferson's Monticello helps to honor a man who authored the Declaration of Independence, but at the same time, it is a reminder that Jefferson owned slaves and supported slavery, which the National Park Service now recognizes in its tours and information.

Utopian Expression

Architects, academicians, and students all have some utopian aims within themselves. Consider Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City, Daniel Burnham's plan for Chicago, Frederick Law Olmsted's plans for New York City and elsewhere, Le Corbusier's La Ville Radieuse, Albert Speer's Berlin plan, and Paolo Soleri's Arcosanti. Each of these architects, for better or worse, has used architecture to frame an alternative future showing how a city or cities should be designed. Burnham and Olmsted influenced the spread of the City Beautiful movement. Le Corbusier's schemes were prototypes for architects designing public housing and the surrounding open space. Speer's Berlin plan resulted in misdirected displacement of the city's residents. Soleri's Arcosanti has been a continuous project negotiating how to build communities with minimal impact on the environment. Likewise, in the academic realm, Alexei Gutnov (1968) and other planner-architects from the University of Moscow set forth schemes for the ideal communist city. Leon Krier's (1981) article with the ironic title, "Forward Comrades, We Must Go Back," argued that architects and planners should return to pre-capitalist methods of organizing city form rather than continue using modern methods of zoning that sustain capitalist financial interests at the expense of most people. This treatise laid part of the foundation for the new urbanist movement. Students sometimes participate in studio projects in which urban design projects lead to a new conceptualization of the cities in which their projects are situated.

This utopianism is related to both the physical outcomes of architecture and the application of philosophical theory to architecture that enables designers to reconceptualize how architectural practice is conducted. Architecture theorists have taken political stances in support of critical theory, postmodernism, and pragmatism to resituate how architects should consider the political acts of their work. Critical theory often focuses on the contradictions of rationality that capitalism creates in daily human life. Postmodernist theory looks beyond rationality and accentuates the pluralistic ways in which social life can be created. Pragmatist theory attempts to bridge theory, daily practice, and understandable reason and actions (Bloomer, 1993; Mayo, 1988; Wigley, 1993). These and other philosophical positions urge architecture theorists to consider (or reconsider) how a society's political economy is integrated with the material culture architects design and help to produce. For example, the role architects played in designing Pruitt-Igoe, a public-housing project in Saint Louis, Missouri (USA), was within the bounds of professional ethics set forth by the American Institute of Architects. However, Pruitt-Igoe, along with the problematic public policies that shaped its design solutions, resulted in a debilitating living environment that diminished the social lives of minorities and the poor (Bristol, 1991; Comerio, 1981). These critiques question what constitutes good practice, not only from an ethical stance but also from a position to further responsible political action (Mayo, 1996).

Utopianism in architecture has often been a form of practical altruism. Architectural designers typically look to new technologies to serve humanitarian and public-interest concerns. Buildings built according to Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards (and those of similar programs around the globe) can improve society by lowering energy costs, water usage, and sewage costs. The profession has often sponsored low-income housing design competitions in order to consider new ways to improve the living conditions of have-nots.

Institutional Identity

Architecture plays a major role in identifying our institutions, both those that are obviously political and those whose political nature is less apparent. Capitols, city halls, county courthouses, public-agency buildings, and local police departments are easily understood as political artifacts of the nation, states, and local municipalities. But there are other institutions with a political character that we often take for granted. Post offices, local libraries, and fire stations are examples of public institutions that were once part of the free enterprise system. In a few cities, it is still possible to see the inscription "Free Public Library" on the library building. We should remember that local com-

munities have socialized these services as well as others. Although the political message is often overlooked, architects design these facilities to serve the public interest.

County courthouses are very important political expressions in some parts of the United States. In the South and Midwest regions, the county courthouse and its surrounding square are not only the political center of a community but also the legal depository for the surrounding hinterlands, the county. The courthouse has traditionally housed a jail, a courtroom, and offices that administer property taxes, property ownership, and other political functions. In towns in rural areas, the courthouse lawn often contains the only sculpture in the town. War memorials and other forms of local remembrance are embedded on these lawns (Price, 1968).¹

Although often not seen as political, religious structures put forth claims for ultimate truths, which often have political consequences. The Catholic Church has a strong mission to help the poor in the world. Catholicism and other faiths are expressions of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment, which declares the rights of freedom of speech and religion. Recent events in New York City illustrate the nexus between politics and religion. A Muslim congregation hired an architect to build Park51, an Islamic community center that is planned to house a variety of community activities, including a mosque. The project sparked a controversy because the proposed location for the center is two blocks away from Ground Zero, where Islamic terrorists used commercial airplanes to destroy the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The conflict between the right to build a mosque (First Amendment) and the public sentiment to respect politically sacred turf (the World Trade Center) demonstrates how strongly the American public feels that architecture can be a symbolic political voice in an institutional setting.

Advocacy

The effectiveness of exerting political will through architecture is often measured by how well practicing architects can influence built outcomes. But in the realm of advocacy, architecture students (with the help of their studio critics) have been the major source of influence. Their impact has often been significant. City planner-lawyer Paul Davidoff's (1965) theory of advocacy planning encouraged planners to represent minority interests in plans like an attorney would defend a client. In the 1960s, architecture students embraced Davidoff's ideals by using guerrilla architecture to protest against political policies and urban development they believed did not address people's needs. People's Park at the University of California at Berkeley and the "Tent City" in Boston were among the many guerrilla actions that architecture students used to advance the needs of students and the poor (Goodman, 1971). Later, the environmental movement, such as the initiation of Earth Day, led architecture students to build temporary structures to demonstrate that architecture could have an important role in ecology. The maturity of student advocacy is illustrated today with the design-build studios that exist at a number of universities, including Auburn University, The University of Kansas, The University of Texas, The University of Utah, and University of Washington. One academician, Samuel Mockbee of Auburn University, has been lauded above all others. His studio projects directly benefited the poor, and in 2004, the AIA presented its Gold Medal to Mockbee posthumously for his contributions in architectural advocacy (Dean, 1991; Hinson, 2007).

Design-build projects deal with one building at a time, but community design goes beyond singular projects. Professor Tom Dutton of Miami University has dedicated his academic career to community advocacy. As Director of the university's Center for Community Engagement in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, Dutton has openly declared his political advocacy by combining his studio's design efforts and his theoretical writings to advance equality and meet the needs of poor people in their own neighborhoods (Dutton, 1991; Dutton and Mann, 1996).

Not all studio work in architecture schools is as political as these efforts, but students and their professors still contribute in positive ways. Faculty members often assign design projects in a

nearby city that involve providing low-income housing, a new public library, or another public project that can have worthy political consequences. Although they are more distant from real politics than many design-build projects and Dutton's design center in Cincinnati, students become involved with projects that practicing architects actually design later. In the process, students become more aware of their political potential in practice. The real strengths of student projects is that they are independent of existing political structures and faculty members encourage students to provide alternative designs, illustrating the power of good ideas. However, students are short-term participants and cannot sustain their advocacy in political arenas to help minority interests.

Protection

Architecture can protect political power and authority through physical means. Historically, a moat, a drawbridge, and fortified walls protected city-states. Jeremy Bentham developed the Panopticon architectural plan to design prisons so that guards could easily view prisoners. In modern times, protection is offered through a variety of design means. The building design of many airports was inadequate to handle the increased demands for security after the September 11th attacks, so new ones have incorporated surveillance systems and new floor layouts into their designs. The planning and design of military, naval, and air force bases is an operational part of any country's national defense. The overarching aim of all of these designs of protection is certainly the need to maintain social order, but the underlying aim is to ensure political order.

Symbolically, political protection exists with the design and presence of particular architectural statements. The local National Guard armory is a reminder that, in principle, citizens are protected. The nation's military academies are the incubators of the country's military leadership. The Ft. Knox Bullion Depository symbolically and physically protects part of the U.S. economy. The Pentagon in Washington, DC, is the symbolic altar of American national defense, and in the September 11th attacks, it was also a physical defense, withstanding the force of a plummeting jet airliner commandeered by Islamic terrorists. Protection can be both symbolic and real. The plan for the new World Trade Center includes elements of design that emphasize protection, such as structural redundancy, better fire proofing than before the September 11th attacks, backup emergency lighting, and improved stairwell designs. Each of these examples represents a political protection of nationhood.

Architecture can also be used to protect communities. Federally funded levees are engineered to protect cities and towns from floods. The federal government funded the interstate system initially to ensure that mobilization was possible in case of military conflicts and natural disasters. Similarly, one could argue that new urbanist designs are attempts to enhance the social and political worth of communities. By creating designs that increase face-to-face interaction among citizens, new urbanists and social scientists can claim their designs create a healthier climate for local politics than the isolationism created through urban sprawl.² Architects and planners who write urban design guidelines for neighborhood districts, such as a Chicano neighborhood, can visually protect the architectural expressions of ethnic groups. In this sense, enhancing ethnic visual expression ensures political pluralism in our cities (Duany, *et al.*, 2000; Katz, 1994; Putnam, 2000).

Forum Making

Architecture plays a role in democratic decision making. We often hear Winston Churchill's (1943) statement: "We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us." He was referring to the rebuilding of Great Britain's House of Parliament after it was bombed during World War II, but Churchill's claim has been echoed in national capitols throughout the world (Vale, 1992). Politicians and government administrators need designed spaces to maximize political processes, hopefully for democratic ends. But the design of political forums goes beyond the national realm. State houses have legislative spaces in which to debate and create statutes, and city halls have public meeting chambers in which to decide on local ordinances and zoning issues (Goodsell, 1988, 2001).

TABLE 2. Sources of political action and system dynamics of political weaknesses in architecture.

Source of Political Action	System Maintenance	System Challenging
Self	Artifact devotion	Lack of critical thinking
Social orientation	Elitism	Not addressing the public interest
Social obligation	Legal limits	Lack of public authority

The design of political forums goes beyond legislative bodies. Judicial courts and foreign embassies play a key role in the political conduct of various levels of government (Pati, *et al.*, 2007; Robin, 1992). Without the architectural spaces within and between government institutions, politics is reduced to email and cell-phone communications. Effective politics still demands face-to-face dialogue. In peace negotiations, designing how participants work with one another has political significance. Where constituencies sit relative to one another is a matter of political debate. When the U.S. negotiated a peace agreement with North Vietnam, the shape of the negotiation table and its spatial orientation within the room had to be decided before any political negotiations took place (Seidel, 1978).

Although less formal, architectural designers who propose public places in key locations as part of their design schemes can create opportunities for democratic expression. The Speakers' Corners in London's Hyde Park and New York City's Union Square are places where citizens have voiced their political views and held political demonstrations. In 2010, a team of students from Central St. Martins College of Art and Design won a design competition for a Speakers' Corner in Stoneydown Park in Walthamstow, London (Speakers' Corner Trust, 2010). Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley endorsed the legitimacy of the Boystown neighborhood, and designers introduced public signage with a rainbow-color motif that identified the area as a gay neighborhood. Proposing and designing such public places furthers political freedom because so much of the space within cities is under institutional control. Thus, all architects, academicians, and students can strengthen local democracy when they propose design solutions for urban locations that allow them to become temporary political forums (Kohoutek and Kamleithner, 2006).

POLITICAL WEAKNESSES IN ARCHITECTURE

In this section, we use the same theoretical structure as in our analysis of political strengths to evaluate the political weaknesses that practitioners and students may face in practice (Table 2). We argue that each of these six contingencies limit the possibilities of architectural forms in practice. First, although generating interesting architectural forms may create a new visual reality, this *artifact devotion* actually maintains a separation of the political from the spatial. Second, *failing to use critical thinking* to answer how such forms can better society can easily lead to the advancement of a design aesthetic that is merely a fashion statement. Third, practitioners often live within an *elite*, private social network that reifies a local culture, which can lead to the fourth weakness, not questioning how design can serve or *address the public interest*. Fifth, practitioners may fail to question the assumptions of law (*i.e.*, *legal limits*), and in so doing, they fall victim to the sixth weakness, *remaining distant from positions of public authority*, from which they could use architecture to responsibly challenge the political status quo.

Artifact Devotion

In practice, architects are often devoted to architecture as a means of creating aesthetic artifacts more than for its use in socio-political processes and certain consequences of their designs. Some years ago, the rock-and-roll singer Huey Lewis recorded the song, "I Need a New Drug." It often seems that architects substitute "design" or "form" for "drug." Indeed, they are encouraged to be this way. Star architects are not fully successful unless they can establish a design motif associat-

ed with their work. Stevens (1998:208) noted that for such architect stars, “Authoritative opinion is sought from ... the critics of the *New York Times* or *Architecture Review*.” This phenomenon is seen with artists who have established their own aesthetic identity (such as Jackson Pollack’s splatter paint technique or Andy Warhol’s paintings of Campbell’s soup cans) to create artwork unique to their personas.

Architectural clients often want architects to create a unique material aesthetic. Clients buy symbolic aesthetic capital that creates corporate identities or declarative statements of individual consumption. In the 1990s, Frank Gehry excelled perhaps above all architects in generating fame for his designs. But as much as individual fame may occur, architecture is a social art, and designs often have social outcomes with political identities. In regard to Gehry’s practice, some critics have noted that his work was directed toward elite clients so much that a concern for have-nots was absent (e.g., Mayo, 2002). “How far can one go on this particular path without becoming too arbitrary or self-indulgent? ... Functions can sometimes seem tenuously tied to the idiosyncratic spaces that read as dramatic exterior sculpture. [Gehry] could be seduced by popular acclaim and prodigious publicity into a spectacular stylistic formalism” (Huxtable, 2010:29). In such circumstances, it is easy to believe that architects do not care for have-nots.

Sociologist Gerry Stevens (1998:86) has pointedly criticized architects for their love of the architectural artifact: “Architects believe — must believe — that their projects proceed in an aesthetic world, that they are indifferent to the games played in the field of power, that only artistic issues are at stake. But, precisely by so doing, they most effectively produce the symbols that the dominants use to maintain their place at the top of the social order.” Not all architects share this attitude. Some try to make a difference by placing socio-political issues first, but their efforts are often hidden in the shadows of fame that draws public attention.

In schools of architecture, one often finds the attitude among students that the design studio is the only class that “counts”; students believe courses related to technology, social issues, economics, and the humanities are peripheral to their preparation to become architects. In their eyes, having the skills to provide interesting designs with aesthetic merit is what counts. Indeed, they are encouraged to assume this belief both directly and indirectly. Studio classrooms and buildings are kept open at all hours so students can work on their projects. Instructors in lecture classes sometimes reschedule exams and assignments to enable students to complete design projects. In a school library, among the most read materials are recent architecture magazines illustrating the latest design ideas that might be infused into students’ design schemes in the studio. Architectural journalism in the popular trade publications most likely to be read by practitioners and students consists largely of glowing reviews of the latest buildings produced. The articles tend to be “puff pieces,” with much discussion of the visual style and material qualities of the work. There is little discussion of the social consequences of the work, such as whether the public provided social input into the building’s design or whether post-occupancy evaluations were used to assess whether the building solved any of the problems it was expected to resolve.³ The photography is tightly controlled by the architect’s commissioned photographer to (generally) omit context and portray the work in only the most desirable light, often to the point of being misleading (Gore, 1996). Cervin Robinson (1988:79), a professional architectural photographer, admitted, “[P]hotographers work repeatedly for the same architects or magazine editors and cannot bite the hand that feeds them. They not only are fans of architecture, they believe in photographing buildings in certain especially desirable ways.”

Students are predisposed to devoting their attention primarily to the visual aspects of design because it is the very aspect that likely attracted them to the study of architecture and because they are rarely held accountable for much besides the visual representation of buildings. But like any profession, architecture’s imagined images are typically shallow realities compared to the realities that exist in practice. Building detailing, cost estimating, codes adherence, and systems integration are all things that have to happen in reality, but they are difficult to address in school because

students lack the knowledge, consultant expertise, and time required to responsibly address them. It is enough of a challenge to get students to formally resolve their design ideas at a gross scale in the course of a single academic term. The next level of design — detail — requires an extended skill set, a different order of design thinking altogether, in the interest of making detailed design decisions that bear out and substantiate larger design moves at the schematic level (see Tokman and Yamacli, 2007). A problem that arises with this situation is that many young practitioners are not mentally prepared for the rigors of practice in the real world and find their creativity stifled by real problems in practice. Real practice, for some, is just not as fun as school, where edgy, transgressive thinking is the prized virtue, not the skillful negotiation and compromise between creative design thinking and pragmatic responsibility — the most desirable skill for a successful practitioner.

The current interest among practitioners and students in buildings that meet LEED standards provides an interesting point of debate for political consciousness. Most everyone involved with the profession, from clients to consultants and architects, has joined this socio-technical movement to voice a greater concern for the environment in building design. Admittedly, social movements take time, but architecture firms are largely joining this one because, given the consistent decline in the number of architects needed in the marketplace, without LEED-certified buildings, they will be less able to compete for clients who want to save on energy costs. Although the LEED program has the label of political-social conscious attached to it, architects and students must incorporate LEED standards into their designs for their future economic survival.

Lack of Critical Thinking

The sequestering of architecture to issues of form can lead practitioners and students to practice poor critical thinking — the absence of rational analysis as it relates to evaluating the humane consequences of one's actions for freedom and equality within society (Geuss, 1981).⁴ One only needs to consider the example of Hitler's infamous architect, Albert Speer, who prepared a plan for Berlin that resulted in the displacement of 75,000 people and the confiscation of Jewish properties. Today's architecture students are highly unlikely to be in a position to become another Speer. Yet, they can become part of an indiscernible group of eventual architects who sequester themselves from the political circumstances of their practice.

In his recent work on teaching political philosophy at Harvard, Professor Michael Sandel (2009) noted that the way to understand why we need political diversity is not to make the argument from the position of the have-nots. Rather, a more poignant argument can be made to justify political thought and social pluralism by analyzing the elites. Elites can easily separate themselves from others. They can live in gated communities, attend private schools and colleges, belong to private clubs, and be treated at private hospitals. At the same time, their social acquaintances reinforce their cultural norms, which includes the art they consume and what they consider to be socially acceptable practices. According to Sandel, we need to bump into people from all walks of life.

Sandel's general critique also applies to how architecture students selectively use knowledge and new ideas. Students need to become interdisciplinarians to prepare themselves to avoid political ignorance that can insulate them from have-nots. One sometimes hears the question, how can we bring the knowledge of other disciplines into the design studio? But this question unnecessarily narrows what students can learn. Students need to remove themselves from the studio both mentally and geographically. They should experience how other academic fields can inform them rather than attempt merely to filter such knowledge into the design studio. Architecture students typically know who is at the cutting edge in the architecture magazines, but they rarely have a clue as to who is currently influential in political philosophy or the social sciences. Connections can eventually be made, but the emphasis on design in the studio can be an egocentric exercise that inadequately informs students about how they should conceive of the world and design for it.

Elitism

Many architects lead lives that are more related to the haves in society than the have-nots. Having a formal architectural education, visiting art museums, and traveling abroad can play a role in shaping the attitudes and values architects embrace, but these experiences are more a part of the lifestyles of haves than their counterparts. It is a short mental journey from being devoted to architecture as an aesthetic artifact to embracing elitist attitudes. Stevens (1998:174-204) criticized the architecture profession for its snobbishness. In some ways, his harshest criticism related to the education of architects. In the past, he argued, architects treated research as irrelevant. According to Williamson (1991), those who are most successful come from families of high social status, and these families culturally cultivate their children before they enter the university. The attitude persists that, when studying architecture, only the design studio really counts, although history and theory are important. In addition, other topics, particularly the technical courses, are seen as substantially less important. In practice, architects hire consultants to cover these aspects of design, in essence buying their way out of the need to take personal responsibility for the technical content of their work. Accordingly, those who do take responsibility for the technical content of buildings — engineers, consultants, building scientists, manufacturers, construction managers, contractors — have made themselves more relevant to the enterprise of building production. Monetary compensation follows suit.

Stevens's (1998:174-204) criticisms are tough and often true depending on the school of architecture one encounters, but his critique needs to be tempered. Some professors make a conscious effort to engage students in political issues in design-studio projects. Consider, for example, the program at The University of Texas in which students work with poor Mexican families to design and construct their homes. Students at Miami University have been actively involved in neighborhood design to help low-income families in Cincinnati, Ohio. At The University of Kansas, students have been involved in providing facilities in Greensburg, Kansas, where a tornado destroyed the community. Students have also recently been involved with design projects aimed at helping New Orleans residents after Hurricane Katrina (Corser and Gore, 2009; Palleroni and Merkelbach, 2004). And there are other cases where students have played a key role in integrating design with political ends. Yet, Stevens is not entirely wrong. Some students move through the system avoiding such involvement or without having the opportunity to participate.

When students graduate, they may face various forms of elitism when attempting to obtain work. Stevens (1998:174-204) and Williamson (1991:4) found that architects benefited in practice when they came from a socially privileged family, graduated from an Ivy League university, and used family connections to obtain clients. Most students do not have these social advantages when they enter practice. There is no doubt that elitism is in decline in the architecture profession as schools have increasingly attempted to enroll minority students and offer them scholarships. But these efforts continue to be overshadowed by students who come from privileged backgrounds to pursue an architectural education.

Not Addressing the Public Interest

Because architects are primarily employed in the private sector, they are not obligated to serve the public interest unless the client is a government body. Rather, they are mainly devoted to the wants and needs of their clients, who are often from the private sector. Perhaps no recent event points out this dilemma more than the design war between Daniel Libeskind, the principal design architect at Studio Daniel Libeskind, and David Childs, a senior partner with Skidmore Owings & Merrill. In an international design competition, a New York City design panel selected Libeskind's master plan design scheme for the rebuilding of the World Trade Center site after the September 11th tragedy. Meanwhile, Childs was selected by Larry Silverstein, the private developer of the World Trade Center site, to design the Freedom Tower, one of the new towers for the site. The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation was created to oversee all development at the site.

The dilemma with the World Trade Center project was the lack of clear lines of authority and publicly approved design guidelines once Libeskind's design scheme was accepted. Eventually, the battle became architect versus architect, and the situation required New York's governor, George Pataki, to end the embattled stalemate. Although compromises were made, Childs and Silverstein eventually had to concede to public authority. However, the larger issue was who was obligated to uphold the public interest and who was not. Libeskind's design scheme was an indirect expression of the public interest because government bodies representing the citizenry selected his plan. David Childs served his client first, only conforming to public-interest concerns when he was absolutely required to do so.⁵

Practicing architects and architecture students have a substantive voice in public authority when the projects they design involve a public client. Libraries, fire stations, public schools, and buildings with similar functions are clearly public facilities that must meet public needs. However, practitioners' public obligations are subsidiary to serving their clients' needs. The American Institute of Architects' (2012:E.S. 2.2) code of ethics states, "Members should render public interest professional services, including pro bono services, and encourage their employees to render such services. Pro bono services are those rendered without expecting compensation, including those rendered for indigent persons, after disasters, or in other emergencies." Thus, architects are encouraged to volunteer for serving the public interest, but they are obliged to meet their contractual obligations to clients without breaking the law. For students, the aim may be to gain a sense of the public interest, but a design instructor's motive may simply be to teach students how to design buildings that they are likely to see in practice. Thus, the public-interest concern for architects is equivocal, not certain.

Unlike practicing architects, students find ways of expressing the public interest when they create temporary installations in public spaces. Their designs can be visual guerrilla commentaries on political issues. Sociologist Peter Arlt (2006:43) noted, "The guerrilla ... draws his strength from his [physical] surroundings because he does not take the side of state power, he fights it." The classic example of American guerrilla architecture occurred in the 1960s when architecture students at MIT designed and built a squatter community called "Tent City" in a parking lot to protest housing conditions in Boston (Goodman, 1971). The project was successful in the sense that it changed the course of the development proposed for the site in a more positive direction. A mixed-income, multifamily housing project was eventually constructed on the site in the 1980s. Looking back, architecture educators will likely conclude that political activism in the 1960s era of student rebellions was inspiring but ineffective because present-day students have not sustained the guerrilla tactics or political fervor of their predecessors. Today's students are more likely to work on projects within communities without the protests.

Legal Limits

One of the basic political tenets in the U.S. is the right to free speech. Yet, the First Amendment does not protect architecture. The U.S. Supreme Court has historically distinguished two classifications of speech — commercial and noncommercial. More recently, the court identified a third form of speech — government speech, meaning the government does not need to maintain a neutral viewpoint in its own speech. Noncommercial speech is primarily relevant with regard to architects designing buildings that might carry political messages. The U.S. Supreme Court has protected profane political speech but refused to consider architecture as a form of free speech (Costonis, 1989), primarily because the symbolic language of architecture with regard to its visual form is unclear. For example, the court would not support the legal protection of a building because its form represents a new modernist sculptural style if it was located in a design district with specific form controls. However, if a building had a political statement engraved in the facade, the court would protect the right of the building owner to maintain this commentary.

Although the First Amendment does not protect buildings as free speech, the courts have protected historic and new structures using the legal argument that aesthetics can be the sole criterion for

doing so (Smardon and Karp, 1993).⁶ To many legal minds, the sole criterion of aesthetics is a worrisome stance on which to base a legal argument. There are no absolute standards on which courts can evaluate a building's aesthetic merits. In lieu of this standard, Attorney John J. Costonis (1989) has argued for a cultural solidarity principle: what people choose as an aesthetic standard in their community is preferable because such a standard is established through due process.

Architects may believe they have the legal right to practice their art as they please, but that is not the reality. Cities not only enact zoning controls but also overlay district design guidelines that dictate what architects can and cannot do in their design work. Architects can argue their case in front of design review boards, but they are not always successful. Unlike journalists, architects are not given First Amendment rights to design as they please, and this legal stance is unlikely to change in the near future.

Students typically have no idea about the constitutional limits of architecture. A course in professional practice may inform them about the principles of contracts and their legal obligations to clients, but students do not know or, perhaps, care that their potential profession is limited regarding the protection of their designs. Although these instances are rare, courts have ordered architects' buildings to be torn down, altered, or prevented because of local planning controls. Sometimes these judicial decisions have been justified, but other cases have questionable judicial merit (Li, 1994).

Lack of Public Authority

Architects have traditionally expressed an interest in urban design, but they have little public authority to back up their concerns. Land-use planners often lack a design background, but they are in authoritative positions to write design controls that become public policy. These planners may be sensitive to design issues, but they are often unprepared to resolve them. The only realm in which architects can exercise urban design fully is within large projects, and even those schemes are subject to public controls. Architects may purport certain design schemes as a plea for public support, but unless cities hire them as consultants, they are typically not in a position to formulate design guidelines. They do not typically work for local governments, and they do not have the authority to say yes or no in design reviews. Although they can defend their designs in public forums, this defense must be done for each individual project. The responsibility for administering large-scale urban design falls on land-use planners. It is ironic that cities have city attorneys and city planners, but city architects who are municipal employees are a very rare commodity (Bressi, 1998).

Typically, the only way for architects to gain authority is to be appointed to design review boards or planning commissions. Architects may avoid this strategy because of the potential conflicts of interest when they want to have their proposed designs approved by local governing bodies. Although political authority at the local level may seem mundane, architects are limited in their daily practice because they largely confine their design skills within their architecture firms, in which their clients are often from the private sector. When they are designing a public building, public officials may be on the front line working with local citizens instead of the project's designers. Moreover, their community-based practice may serve to maintain the status quo more than the interests of the citizens they represent (Hester, 1987; Hou and Rios, 2003). However, architects may serve citizens through their private clients. Working for an empathetic developer, the architects for 4 Square in New York City introduced water recycling systems in the high-rise building that reduced storm drainage, which then reduced the need for public officials to provide clean water or potentially expand the city's storm drainage system.

For students, issues of public authority in the design studio are perhaps simpler but equally frustrating. Students often prepare design schemes that ignore basic land-use controls. This concern is more than acknowledging permissible land uses. They often do not limit their designs to address floor-area-ratio requirements or overlay design-district controls prepared by local neigh-

borhoods or other publicly approved controls. When they ignore these controls, students isolate themselves from the hard-won battles that citizens, architects, and planners have pursued to enhance their community environs. Zoning controls are a common constraint that design-studio professors choose to ignore (not always wisely). Parking is one example. The impulse to ignore parking is not typically borne out of the notion that parking is unimportant but rather that, in a student project, spending time to figure out parking may not be architecturally generative or useful to the overriding goal of learning how to design complex buildings. Other zoning regulations that might be ignored include setbacks, building heights, and lot coverage. Admittedly, there is a finite set of issues that can be addressed in a given amount of time on any particular design-studio project, but instructors need to inform students about what is excluded as much as about what is included. In the best of circumstances, a studio instructor would have an open discussion with the students and explain what is being ignored and the rationale for ignoring it, so that a “learning moment” can be had surrounding such issues.

CONFRONTING STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

We have attempted to demonstrate the plausible political terrain of strengths and weaknesses in architecture. To advance this argument, one could match the two presented tables to discuss contingent dialectic conflicts between them. For example, while architects can play a positive role in remembrance, how much does artifact devotion come into play? Such potential conflicts exist between utopian expression and a lack of critical thinking, institutional identity and elitism, advocacy and not addressing the public interest, protection and legal limits, and forum making and a lack of public authority. Although these dialectical possibilities may occur, reality is always more complex than these dialectics and the theoretical structures we create to emulate reality. Architects and students will likely face a set of multiple contingent issues in which their design solutions involve both system maintenance and system challenging, as well as all three sources of political action (self, social orientation, and social obligation).

Up to this point in our analysis, we have largely focused on designers having some control over the political circumstances in which they practice. But historic circumstances often dictate what is possible, and the conditions may prevent progressive architectural results.

First, architectural solutions may not be effective because the political realities at that given time in history are insurmountable. Historic political realities can undermine the best of intentions. In his analysis of American foreign embassies post-World War II, Ron Robin (1992) argued that the monumental buildings the U.S. used for its embassies could not sustain a stable political symbolism because American policy relied on addressing changing political circumstances in foreign countries with appeasement of and compromise between conflicting political forces. Quite simply, architectural symbolism could not capture the ebb and flow of American politics abroad.

Second, architecture may serve political powers, but those in power may not advance humanitarian political ends. In the 20th century, perhaps no architect created more political architecture with inhumane ends than Albert Speer. His city plan for Berlin and his designs of the Reich Chancellery and other buildings for Germany’s Third Reich abetted a fascist regime that still haunts our collective memory. While few architects will find themselves in the same situation as Speer, we can still expect ruthless political states to emerge, and their political leaders will likely enlist the aid of architects to create symbolic structures to legitimate their regimes. Consider, for example, the Iraqi architectural designers who provided the plans for Saddam Hussein’s palaces and other buildings he commissioned.

Third, even with the best of intentions, architects are often unable to provide design solutions that advance worthy political aims. Designers may make a well-intentioned effort to do the right thing, but they sometimes fail. Consider the design of Brasilia, the national capital of Brazil. The first

outcome of efforts to design buildings for a new Brazil was the slums workers built to house themselves because Brazil's national government did not provide adequate housing for them in advance of the capital's construction. For all of the accolades Brasilia received for its architectural designs, slums were part of the social foundation of its emergence. In the U.S., architects and the public have often criticized the Pruitt-Igoe public-housing project as the result of bad design. But government policies had a significant influence on what design alternatives were possible (Bristol, 1991). Even if those government policies had not been in place and the same design solution was chosen, Oscar Newman's (1972) research later demonstrated the crime dilemmas of internal spaces in high-rise buildings versus low-rise buildings. Quite simply, architects may design buildings where the potential social outcomes are not fully known (Bristol, 1991; Newman, 1972).

Fourth, designers may not successfully challenge the existing political system for political change. For example, an architect who designs low-cost housing for the poor will often do so under a subsidized government program. In this sense, following policy intentions can make life better for the lower-income people, but the architect is not challenging the system. Moreover, not all government programs advance the interests of the poor. As noted above, many high-rise public-housing units, such as Pruitt-Igoe, subject residents to high rates of crime that could be avoided (Comerio, 1981). Nevertheless, protest movements advocating the needs of the poor have influenced legislative changes and government actions, whether done by architects or others. In the 1960s and 1970s, some universities established advocacy centers in poor neighborhoods to represent their interests with design proposals, and when projects were built, these neighborhoods benefited by having buildings built to serve their needs. Yet, design centers and government policies change over time, and the interests of the poor may not be met.

Finally, architects may not choose to be involved with political change, but it is unlikely that they can avoid political involvement. Some architects have clients who are strictly in the private sector. Specialized architects, such as those who design corporate skyscrapers, work primarily in the world of free enterprise. As discussed earlier, architects are committed to serving the interests of their clients, and skyscraper designers serve profit makers to sustain their economic well-being, if not their class position. Yet, such designers cannot avoid political limits. Public-policy controls for floor-area ratios in certain cities, such as San Francisco, prescribe height and setback limits to protect certain views and minimize the shadowing of parks. Reconsider the trials and tribulations of Daniel Libeskind and David Childs in the redesigning of the World Trade Center site. In these circumstances, architects have no choice but to be involved with politics. Any architect who designs a building that must meet standards set forth in design-district controls is addressing politics, whether to address complaints by nearby property owners or to gain city hall's approval of a building design. One of the serious ways in which architects can choose to not be involved with politics is by making the conscious decision to focus their thinking strictly on form and function without considering how political thinking could improve their designs to serve people (Mayo, 1988).

These limitations lead us to question how effective architects, academicians, and students can be in providing architecture with political consequences, but positive outcomes can still be accomplished. Cities are typically enhanced by memorials to remember past political events. We are stimulated by the utopian schemes and philosophical theories addressing architectural issues. Many government buildings at the federal, state, and local levels perform well in serving the public interest. Advocacy design-build studios have enriched our architectural schools. Citizens ultimately appreciate how their lives are protected through defensible designs when political tragedies occur. Architects continue to seek sound solutions in which citizens and politicians come together to form public policy.

Identifying strengths and weaknesses is a key aim of this analysis, but architects also need to be able to anticipate the actions they will take. Forester (1989) noted that understanding our strengths and weaknesses enables us to locate our potential actions when confronting political situations in practice. There are inevitable distortions that architects face in ad hoc situations. An architect may

have idiosyncratic behaviors that interfere with seeing problems or taking political action. Likewise, in practice, architects often bring more design knowledge to an architectural problem than clients or others know or can understand. There are also socially unnecessary distortions. In ad hoc situations, architects may be willfully unresponsive to the needs of have-nots or deceive people with architectural schemes that cannot possibly address the problems at hand. Moreover, some socially unnecessary distortions are systematically reproduced. Architects may encounter local political groups, government policies, court decisions, and harmful aspects of the nation's political economy that they may only be able to change marginally, if at all. By understanding their strengths and weaknesses, architects are in a better position to act on them (Mayo, 1988).

Habits of good practice are essential to guide oneself in practice. Michael Brooks (2003) argued for a six-step feedback strategy to illuminate attitudes toward a planning (designing) process, asserting that bad attitudes can become habitual. Defining a problem operationally, considering alternatives, making a preliminary choice, experimenting, evaluating, and making a disposing decision are the means to ground a practitioner's design actions. There are no panaceas or rote behaviors that architectural practitioners can use to resolve the political problems they face. Nonetheless, they should be aware of the terrain of political strengths and weaknesses they bring to a given problem setting and Brooks's steps position practitioners to consider what actions are possible given the political circumstances they face. Even with these possibilities for action, ethical dilemmas exist. Marcuse (1976) argued that whether practitioners adhere to certain particular ethical principles versus others can result in maintaining or challenging political systems, such as professing loyalty to one's client compared to practicing dissent.

We do not claim that architecture is an easy endeavor. Nonetheless, we need to be vigilant about the circumstances we face. Rather than being reactive to the profession's weaknesses, we should focus on being proactive so that we are not hampered by our inaction. As Andrew Saint (1996:19) said, *The long-term challenge for the architectural profession [is] to control this irresponsible lust for image that pervades our culture. Architecture is a visual thing, and cannot fail to benefit from that unstoppable urge ... The issue is whether we can educate and empower the profession to negotiate the relationship between image and reality in a manner both engaging and responsible. In that tension between image and reality lays the eternal, ultimate fascination of architecture.*

NOTES

1. Price (1968) describes the various courthouse square layouts that have provided the foundation for planning communities that are county seats.
2. Political scientist Robert Putnam (2000) has provided clear evidence that increased commuting time due to urban sprawl has resulted in people having less time for civic involvement.
3. Thomas Fisher (2000:32) criticized this lack of analytical rigor:
[T]he architectural press in general has stood out among professional publishing in its focus on the most celebrated practitioners, on the most idiosyncratic projects, and on the most current fashions. Measured against journals in other fields, ours have devoted relatively little attention to common practices, typical problems, or broadly applicable solutions, and as a result, we have had a rather poor record in building the sort of knowledge base that other professions have constructed and maintained with great care.
4. Raymond Geuss (1981:58) defines critical thinking via critical theory as "how it would be rational for people to act if they had certain interests; it claims to inform them about what interests it is rational for them to have." These interests then enable people to achieve liberty, freedom, equality, reason, and the good life.
5. The 2004 PBS *Frontline* documentary "Sacred Ground" (Sim, 2004) clearly illustrated the conflict between Libeskind and Childs.
6. Currently, 45 of the 50 states allow aesthetics to be used as the sole criterion in legal decisions.

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