

FULL AND LARGE-SCALE CONSTRUCTIONS: The Integration of Theory, Craft and Artifact

Thomas Barrie

Abstract

When full and large scale constructions and drawings are an integral part of the studio experience they provide an effective means to both broaden theoretical and spatial concepts, and to address issues of craft, materials and artifact. When students design at large or full-scale they can no longer "hide behind" small scale drawings and models, or verbiage. Instead they must confront the challenge of materials, connections and craftsmanship, and their relationship to conceptual and spatial concerns. The projects provide alternatives to traditional design methodologies and serve to challenge dominant cultural beliefs regarding technology and methodology. In this manner process and product approach a degree of integration, and the orthodoxy of technological specialization is challenged.

The paper argues that the late 19th and 20th centuries are analogous historical settings in that both share a critique of technology and its social ramifications. Specifically, the Arts and Crafts Movement, with its emphasis on simplicity, truth to materials, and a synthesis of design, art and craft, is discussed and posited as a useful model for broadening the contemporary architectural culture. The paper references contemporary social critics, and argues that large and full-scale projects are fertile vehicles for the integration of theory, craft and artifact.

The projects illustrated by the paper include full and large scale constructions, models, drawings, and performance pieces from junior level (2nd year architectural design) studios at Lawrence Technological University and the first year program at the University of Manchester in England.

Introduction: The Technological Culture and its Implications

"We are all cyborgs now. Architects and urban designers of the digital era must begin by retheorizing the body in space." William Mitchell (1)

"The fundamental metaphorical message of the computer, in short, is that we are machines — thinking machines, to be sure, but machines nonetheless. It is for this reason that the computer is the quintessential, incomparable, near-perfect machine for Technopoly. It subordinates the claims of our nature, our biology, o u r emotions, our spirituality." Neil Postman (2)

Our cultural setting is distinguished, in part, by ambiguity regarding contemporary technology and its digital progeny. At one extreme we have a obsequious devotion to technology and its implicit promise to make our lives more productive, easy and satisfying — on the other an often paranoid distrust of its value, and fears that it will dominate our beliefs and strip us of our humanity. Thus, between magazines such as Wired and Plain, for example, there is a polarized debate that The Utne Reader characterizes as "Technology is groovy Vs. technology sucks." Architecture, as a cultural phenomena, participates in this dialectical debate, and displays some of the same prejudices and misunderstandings.

It is clear that contemporary culture generally embraces the promises of technology in an uncritical manner. Similarly, architectural theory and practice views technology as a defining phenomena. A particular theoretical strain in education, theory



