

Towards an Ecumenical Architecture

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Abstract

Present trends in architecture prove that we are in fact moving towards an ecumenical architecture. We are gradually moving not only towards similar solutions but towards solutions which are themselves basic to humanity and not bound to a particular locality. The reason for that is the socialization of architecture. We are being led to an ecumenical style because it will be basically human and because the whole developing civilization is tending to similar patterns. We must remember that a contracting world has drawn people together. People are now becoming aware of solutions which are considered modern in the Western world, but which are already very old in the East. Architecture is a discipline not of designing buildings or houses but of building the human habitat which consists of a technique, art and science. Much more, it has to be seen as a service provided for the people and not as art or a mental exercise in the abstract.

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Introduction

Architecture leads towards the formation of cities. This is true for all cities of the past built for human beings. Now they have been taken over by machines and cars and turned into confused cities. Today to live in any of our cities is a nightmare and this prevents us from understanding what architecture is. We as architects are supposed to be the leaders in the field of architectural creation. Can the role of an architect be limited to buildings? Should we leave the city dilemma to the traffic engineer or to the town planner? Is the town planner an architect or not? We do not know whether the architect is supposed to design buildings or neighborhoods or cities? My generation has witnessed a revolution started by architects like Le Corbusier, Gropius, Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe, they have remained designers and most of our schools were no more than schools of architectural design, whose purpose was to create new styles. Now our cities are congested by all types of buildings, tall buildings, a square or a spherical house, at other places prefabricated houses or a series of shells, a monumental architecture of the past and present. Today one can see Gothic cathedrals and Byzantine domes or maybe Geodetic domes. As architects we have to face the dilemma of finding the ways by which we are surrounded and to understand where we are in space and time.

Now the rate of change in architectural designs is the most characteristic phenomenon of our age whether we speak of technological progress or of population growth or of social or cultural phenomena. We must develop the concepts of the past and evaluate the problems of the past to design for the future since architecture follows the trends of its

age. The evolution is today more intense and more rapid than before. Our old houses were traditional and were created not by architects but by time. Now we are obliged to create the new while living in the midst of the old which is still in existence. The old is again being imitated because the public very often demands the traditional as they are influenced by its surroundings. The public demands classical ornaments and appendages on the facades of their houses. One of my clients said “I want a home to live in not an office building”. This fact expresses the love of the average citizen with the past in terms of architecture, an architecture which must conform to what is prevalent, and which looks exactly as what one sees every day, not alien solutions! This made the architect a slave of his surroundings.

The Role of the Architect

Architects should liberate themselves from their surroundings by isolating only the facts which they require and avoid the influence of any style, whether contemporary or traditional. However new the style, it has no meaning when it breaks with the past unless it makes a positive contribution to the future. What was in the past is local production based on the skill of local people and the use of local material. This is now turning more and more into an activity based on materials and constructional parts which are incorporated into buildings as whole units. The architect is now becoming a co-coordinator of architectural creation not working like before, but has to work with prefabricated materials and to move from an architecture which was a product of handicraft to one which has become an industrial product. This implies a shift of architectural solutions from the local towards the international level.

When I was studying in the United States of America an adjacent hotel of 300 beds was built and occupied within three months. I was expecting it to take five years. I did not see men mixing concrete or laying steel wires but a crane is located at the middle of the site and is used to locate prefabricated parts ready made in the factory and jointed together on site. Nothing is spilled in the site. This proves that the modern architect is forced to move from an architecture which was a product of handicraft to one which has become an industrial product. Architecture thus moves between the local and the international to create a better world which includes similarity of solutions but regarding environmental control solutions for every site of country.

Architects think that their job is to create another Parthenon or Taj Mahal or follow Mies van der Rohe style. Instead of being the avant-garde, their main task is investigate and do research in order to achieve progress in theory and implementation. They should be the crusaders in the construction of houses for the masses, and not impose any kind of acquired ideas and disciplines. They need to find an approach to the problem, not of how the architecture is looking, but how it is to serve the people who want to live in it. People demand that their new houses look better aesthetically too!

Because of the numerous buildings and parking spaces of cars man has lost his relationship to architecture. Our buildings are not related to man. The monuments and

statues too can no longer be seen in their proper perspective because of the break of the relationship between man and his surroundings. This will overwhelm humanity, for men will discover that they become the slaves of their surroundings compelled to adapt themselves to that condition of living under the impact of congestion and waves of traffic.

In such conditions the architect has great responsibility to study contemporary problems and propose solutions for them. These solutions are not merely for problems of architectural design but problems of architecture within a developing society in the form of buildings and designs in the necessity for a new architectural creation and he is bound to follow the trends of his epoch. The architect has to understand the meaning of industrialization and standardization for his own creation for humanity. I expect that the architect will have to enter industry and produce his design inside the factory for the purpose of moving towards the socialization of man's way of life.

Architectural research is very limited, and there is very little work being done regarding the proper conception of architectural space inside and outside buildings or the relation of man to his living space in terms of physiology, micro-climate or aesthetics. Accordingly, architecture is lagging behind in the field of constructional techniques where its contribution is still elementary, in contrast to the revolutionary achievements elsewhere. Architecture is lagging behind from the point of view of art, too.

In the past architectural creation moved from the smallest elements to the largest ones. A peasant would build his house, a mason would build a refined house, and the best master masons would create the monumental architecture. In the future, architectural creation is not going to work in the same way. It will start at several centers of government economy or education, and spread in all directions. For example an industry concerned with its own research departments will influence architecture immensely because of the products it creates. The government will influence, by defining through its national planning machinery, not only economic standards for every house, but also all kinds of standards related to cost, production and physical aspects. On the other hand universities will be able to influence construction methods through research and education, and these are going to have an impact on architecture.

Nowadays if we want good architecture to satisfy our needs we have to rely on people who are responsible for every building activity, not related to the traditional period in architecture and not confined to the creation of a few single buildings. We have to redefine the role of the architect and what he must be, and how he can work out new solutions for the host of problems we are facing.

The architect must look up and see where we stand, we are born in a difficult era. The architecture we see is not architecture, but merely designing. Architecture is only existent when it is implemented by actual building. The architect must recognize the new needs and the new trends and recognize the fresh forces which have entered the arena such as economic, social, political, administrative technological and aesthetic. It is not sufficient

that we can create the best architecture while we cannot finance it. We live in a developing country, and the only justification for our architecture is its connection with the overall evolution of our society. Architecture must cover human needs within a shell which has to be constructed of elements which are produced by other people and which are to cover the needs of the community. Architects must influence industry for the production of a better type of elements, and use social sciences for the formation of a better human habitat. This is the living unit which is under the control of the architect, who is a coordinator of all forces leading to the creation of the building. As well as achieve architectural synthesis in the spaces created in expanding human settlements, architects are responsible for architectural creation, and in order to achieve this they must gain broader education to lead humanity towards the new architecture.

Growth and Expansion

In the center of our cities today there is a need for large streets for heavy traffic. What we have now are the narrowest streets. We must find a new conception of the city. We need a dynamic city, a dynapolis, conceived as a city which can expand to create a new center and new neighborhoods. The concentric expansion of our cities has strangled centers because they have been left no room for expansion. Cities must expand parabolically, and will gradually take a geometrical shape on the basis of a rectilinear system of axes.

Buildings start at a certain size, but very soon have additional needs either because of an expansion of the same needs through an increase of the number of people served by the building, or because the same people develop new kind of needs. We must therefore plan our buildings so as to allow for growth of all kinds. When we bring our buildings very close together then make them expand as one building complex, we can be sure of an appropriate synthesis. The important thing is that the synthesis must be free, nonsymmetrical and non-academic, so that we can develop our notions freely and let our architecture expand to appear in our cities in the form of major projects. So that architecture can express the life within itself by growing always from inside out. Architecture must have a simple skin conditioned by the life within it. Thus we are led to the notion of a structural frame which can serve many types of changing and different functions at different periods in the life of the building.

Housing and buildings must both follow the laws of an expanding synthesis of positive space, and should be constructed on the basis of standardized units such as doors, windows, panels, walls and even complete rooms. With bricks and concrete blocks, too, we can achieve a standardization which will allow for all kinds of solutions. These notions of standardization lead us to the use of a module in all types of construction. The discovery of electric lighting led to electric chandeliers but later to the incorporation of light bulbs into the ceiling. In the future we shall probably see wall panels producing light which will eliminate discomfort and add aesthetic appearance of the interior.

Time is the fourth dimension of architecture and has become more important than before. In architecture time is expressed as movement. If we stop at one point then we no longer have architecture but mere scenic design. The importance of the axis of movement can be felt when we visit the pyramids of Giza or Luxor temple in Egypt. To feel architectural space requires movement, otherwise we will only have a façade not architecture. When one enters the temple of Amoun in Luxor Egypt, the axis of movement changes in order to express the change by motion. In any case, time is required for architectural experience, since, with the abstraction of time, architecture becomes sculpture or even painting.

Architecture will no longer be limited to a few buildings but we understand the notion of time in the context of the architecture to come. In the past the motion of time was related to a slow growth and to the movement of the pedestrian. Now it is related to a quick growth and to the speed of pedestrian. Because of this growth architecture can no longer be based on an introvert synthesis, but must be conceived allowing for expansion. We will need larger spaces, and different handling of the surfaces of buildings.

As prefabrication lead easily to uniformity but this can be avoided by proper handling of color instead of decoration in the older sense so that architecture becomes a true expression of our real needs and desires. In such condition our architecture will be always contemporary not an imitation of the past, but limit us to the essentials. To achieve this we have to think about new construction methods, and purge our building's forms of any inherited shape or traditional or inspired from outside that created the classical styles. We must not turn architecture into exhibitionism, as was formerly in aristocratic societies. Also cylindrical or spherical houses do not serve residents as interiors especially in bedrooms, toilets and kitchens. Such shapes cannot be interconnected to yield an overall synthesis because we shall realize that we are creating a negative space between them unless we intend to abandon the idea of bringing houses together to create an urban environment with trees separating the isolated units. It is only through proper habitation density that we achieve human scale, economy, best microclimate and a proper space to live in. Architecture must also be humanistic in all its aspects. Every architectural element should be handled in a way that will create a human architecture. Otherwise man will feel condemned to live and work inside an eternal prison. Architecture must not be imposed upon man but to yearn towards it. It is a challenge to create architecture with its own character and style acceptable by the whole society.

Today the architect must now build for the masses, creating architecture for everybody. We cannot impose upon everyone an artificial style, but must find some way of serving all our needs in a way acceptable to all people by the leading class of architects who will be responsible for consciously creating a style without having first conceived it in a vacuum. Architects must try to find the continuity which relates the simplest to the most highly developed solutions, because only thus can they build a whole system leading to a new architecture which will also be a new style. What must the architects do

is to create architecture with character through a consistent expression at all levels of architectural creation and for all sizes of architectural space.

Ecumenical Architecture

Present trends in architecture prove that we are in fact moving towards an ecumenical architecture. This will first become consistent within itself. It will then acquire its own ecumenical character and may at length develop into a universal style. We are gradually moving not only towards similar solutions but towards solutions which are themselves basic to humanity and not bound to a particular locality. The reason for that is the socialization of architecture.

Now that the boundaries between cultures have been broken through, however and we are being drawn together towards a common culture, architecture must serve the broadest classes of people everywhere. People are basically the same, so we are gradually moving towards an ecumenical expression through trying to create our architecture in the simplest possible way, in order to be able to serve everybody. People can gradually find the best solutions in conception and detail, not through copying of forms but through a gradual selection by the many. This selection operates in all directions. Through such principles of gradual selection that we are moving towards an ecumenical architecture.

We must remember that a contracting world has drawn people together. People are now becoming aware of solutions which are considered modern in the Western world, but which are already very old in the East. We are being led to an ecumenical style because it will be basically human and because the whole developing civilization is tending to similar patterns. Architecture cannot be the brainchild of the few. It will have to be the child of humanity as a whole. This is because irrespective of technological evolution and special solutions for specific cases, we are going to have an architecture which will grow and because the same solutions will be repeatable on a large scale in condition that it must be acceptable to all people in all countries, and people become aware of their needs and rights and so less apt to be influenced by imported solutions that must also be practical, economical and good to serve the people.

It is certain that the new ecumenical architecture is going to be formalized at the top of human needs. If this human, ecumenical architecture develops into a style it must have a broad basis to survive over long periods in particular areas where people are deeply rooted in the soil of their country as was the case with the styles with classical architecture from Italy. With such an ecumenical style we can create an architecture which will be human in both its conception and content while remaining local in its expression.

Finally, we have seen that we must move from the traditional to the contemporary, from the local to the universal, and that we are returning to an ecumenical architecture. There are many problems to be faced and we must emphasize how we want to live. We must define the notion of living, whether it is to be confined within the walls of a building or whether to be something much more important even if we do not, we shall at

least have the satisfaction of knowing. We must remind ourselves that architecture is a discipline not of designing buildings or houses but of building the human habitat which consists of a technique, art and science. Much more, it has to be seen as a service provided for the people and not as art or a mental exercise in the abstract. Architecture has to be seen as part of ekistics, no longer as regards the differentiation between the layout of a city and the creation of buildings in it, but rather as regards the differentiation between conceiving the whole human habitat and giving expression to the smallest reasonable units of it (architecture).

Architectural creation is both local and ecumenical. It is local in its expression because of the many local factors which are influencing it. But it is also ecumenical because there is a common denominator of human needs and human expression not influenced by local civilizations. But with the evolution of local civilizations, architectural expression became more local and gradually lost many of its ecumenical characteristics. This tendency reached a peak before the civilizations of this world began to merge into one another towards ecumenical civilization. From that moment on, the trend has definitely been one towards an elimination of all local expressions.

Conclusion

Evidently when we are able to have the same type of industry everywhere, the same economic conditions, the same type of prefabrication, the same organization of production and the same type of society, then we will achieve ecumenical architecture. This means that our architecture will have the same ecumenical character but that the solutions will vary from locality to locality and thus create a different impression in each according to our local environmental forces. It will take us a long time to reach the phase in which ecumenical forces will control the architecture of the whole world. However, we should not be afraid if in some cases the right solution is traditional. In contrasting the local with the ecumenical, we are in fact also contrasting the traditional with the contemporary, since traditional architecture is bound to a locality whilst contemporary architecture is mainly influenced by ecumenical trends. We should not be misled into believing however that the problem of the local as against the ecumenical is the same as the problem of the traditional as against the contemporary, because although local expression is very much related to tradition, ecumenical expression is not necessary contemporary. It is true that future solutions will tend to be ecumenical but we have two basic points to keep in mind. First even in the far distant future architecture should not be influenced only by ecumenical forces and second, it will take us quite a long time to reach the phase in which ecumenical forces will control the architecture of the whole world. This means that we have to pay attention to the relationship between traditional and contemporary in every instance of architectural creation. If, we let architecture develop properly it will be led towards a new ecumenical style, the architect of which will be the whole of humanity.

We should not think of forms, but create space, build and live. Architecture will come.