

# Architecture as a Social Art

Dr. Ranjith Dayaratne

## Architecture



is an Art' wrote most students of architecture of the university of Moratuwa in opening the introduction to their dissertations for quite some time. Indeed, from the time Vitruvius wrote the first 'theory' of architecture, the state of architecture as an art form has hardly been contested. The view of architecture as a social art however is of recent origin. As Von Meiss (1992) points out, the conviction that as a society, we must start to redress the debilitating and environmentally destructive practice of reproducing free standing buildings and that buildings ought to be constructed as an occasion for making a place or for adding to the continuous articulation of the human habitat seem to underlie the contemporary thinking that architecture should move away from the display of the ego of the client or the competitive prowess of the designer.

The conception of architecture as a social art however presupposes that art itself is not of social content. While this is a matter for a greater debate in the realm of the arts, the proposition that architecture must now be conceived as a social art perhaps reiterates the undeniable intricate association of the built-fabric in the affairs of the everyday life of the society and therefore its inherent position as both the context and the product of human habitation (Habraken, 1983). It is inconceivable that a society can exist without architecture in as much as architecture cannot be conceived without a social content. This being the case, there is an overriding recognition that architecture does have a social role to play in providing the context for the drama of life, and contributes to the resolution of its multi-faceted spatial needs.

This however is not a call for joining the bandwagons of architectural determinism or the positivistic behaviorism that have consolidated as valid schools of thought responding to the needs for a social orientation in architecture. These misconceptions have yielded nothing but misplaced views of both architecture and society as separate entities and seek to bring about matching equations that can unite the two. Indeed the trouble with these schools of thoughts is that they deny the co-existence of society and space as intermingled entities whose conception as much as creation as separate entities will yield nothing but mechanistic fragmentation of both society and space. As Michael Brawne (1992) writes commenting on architectural determinism, "it is easy to conclude that architecture will indeed determine human activity, if it does so, then through design we shall be able to mould the actions of the users of the buildings. This has been an implied and often stated assumption behind the architectural thinking of the present century and has even enabled it to make moral claims". The conception of architecture as a social art not only denies that architecture can determine human behaviour but positions it as a co-production of both human action and thought. It challenges the view of people as mere 'users' as the behaviourists would perceive them and calls for an understanding of the practice of architecture as an enabling act that allows 'becoming places' and thus facilitates 'poetic dwelling'; the way we become 'inhabitants' of the 'lived-in-world'.



Showcasing the practices of architecture that demonstrate such social content however is no easy task. On the one hand, the idea is so loosely present in practice and even when it is present it will be difficult to find the examples that show us the rich assemblage of poetic space that facilitate the acts of dwelling. Only a few architects seem to consciously or unconsciously practice architecture as a social art and their works have been over and over presented and discussed. In this issue of the SLA journal, the theme was devoted to situate architecture as a social art and in an effort to expose the multi-faceted manifestations of its myriad of forms, specific articles that examine the manifestations of architectural space and form have been included. The issue however is far from an illuminator of the idea of architecture as a social art but deviates from the otherwise popular presentation of the architecture as being comprised of 'mere visual forms' to indulge, cherish and celebrate for their own sake.

\*\*\*\*\*