

BUILDING TO LAST

ARCHITECTURE AS ONGOING ART

Architectural Book Publishing Company, 1981

INTRODUCTION

Are we building buildings today worth preserving for tomorrow? This book illustrates how an armature-way-of-building can create unique historic structures as permanently renewable cores in a city or neighborhood.

The author proposes a collaboration between architects, artists, developers, facilitators, crafts-people and people of all ages in a process which allows citizens to once again take part in building and ornamenting their cities and neighborhoods.

To conserve resources, an armature-way-of-building creates a building type that is solid and long-lasting, yet responsive to additions, alterations and ornamentation by generations of individuals.

In an armature-way-of-building, architectural design can encourage public and private investment, create jobs, and give shape and organization to free-market additions and indeterminate development.

Herb Greene's exciting drawings suggest that a building, whether large or small, can become the aesthetic and social commentary of a community. Contemporary science and philosophy, painting and sculpture are seen as inspiration for a new approach to architectural design.

This is a book for architects, artists, preservationists, developers and all who would like to see place and history built into cities again.

FOREWORD BY HERB GREENE

In this book an armature is a public element in a neighborhood or city core to which space-enclosing structures and ornamental surfaces of individual determination can be added or subtracted. It is solid and long lasting. It is richly encrusted with the crafts and arts of as many as thousands of participating citizens. Since buildings constitute a principal part of production and are a basic necessity, an armature provides on-going work and an outlet for the talents of citizens not now included in the building process. The accretion of people's art and craft work and the modification of certain spaces and forms designed by architects to accommodate alterations, make the structure a vehicle of cultural memory, a medium for expressing change and a metaphor for the passage of time.

The concept of an armature is not, of course, completely new. A few contemporary architects have designed structural and utilitarian frameworks which can be added to by users. Many examples of folk building show satisfactory and even beautiful building stock which has evolved over the course of time. One role of an armature is the recovery of the malleability and human scale of this preindustrial vernacular.

I am asking that the architect give these same qualities to new structures which will bring forth a creative response in future designers and citizen artists. It is possible for a reference frame such as "ruin" to co-exist in a form that has a capacity for several other meanings. While it is important that the ruin reference not be so vague that interest is dissipated, still, if the reference is too blatant there is insufficient stimulus to the imagination. Many say we can't physically and should not ethically build instant ruins, but this is to misconstrue the intent. I'm saying we can reconstitute the image of ruin which suggests that there was once more to the structure and that there could be more than we now see. Architects from Alberti to Maybeck to SITE (Sculpture in the Environment) have utilized images of ruins which let us compare an imagined past with a corporeal present. Such a structure can be technically safe and visually stimulating with spaces provided for infilling. Painted surfaces, planted vines, (effective as sun shades), the sculptural form of the structure and the color and textures of back-up wall materials can sustain interest until more elaborate additions are realized.

In designing a long-lasting armature we can incorporate qualities often found in older buildings that give us a state of well-being. These are defined by Patrick Horsbrugh, by the term "energesis." Tactile comfort, the sense of security, stimulation of the imagination, preferred scale and color ambience are among the difficult-to-measure factors. As we began to find new uses for older buildings in the 1970's, many pre-Modern mills, warehouses, schools and other structures built of stone, masonry and heavy timber were found to possess energestic values to a higher degree than is usually found in later buildings. The scale and texture of stones, the rhythm and detail of windows, the sound, smell and resilience of heavy timber floors, combine to make a space inside, not the abstract space of the International Modern style, but a tangible, palpable space. The goal of the architect for an armature is to find new poetic images that, like Wright's Pauson House ruin, draw us to the building over the centuries and which incorporate energestic qualities in their new spaces and forms.

When I say we can return to nature for new symbolism, I am going beyond the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' romantic rediscovery of nature and natural beauty, drawing instead on twentieth century concepts that derive from the natural sciences.

The transformation of the material of the Earth's crust- fossils, vegetation, sediments, and magma-are taken as the basis for an armature metaphor, a building that does not merely sit on the Earth but that seems to be derived from the Earth itself. I see the armature as a kind of underlayment symbolic of the earth as a background form which functional or fanciful forms, fragments of historic styles and contemporary additions can be seen to emerge as if from more primordial elements.

Properties most amenable to symbolic reconstitution are signs of stability, mass and erosion and the evidence of great age as seen in layers of rock and sediments; transformations from seas to solids; bands of fossils; and human settlements as unearthed by archeologists. Paralleling nature, forms and textures of the armature refer to the dense and the diaphanous, growth and decay, stability and change. I am seeking an expressive form in which the evolutionary process and the phenomenal properties of Earth will be seen as a context for an evolving cosmology.