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Beyond Habitat

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OA Funding Provided By:

National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon
Foundation Humanities Open Book Program.

The title-level DOI for this work is:

[doi:10.7551/mitpress/1575.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/1575.001.0001)

When I was doing Habitat, I was bombarded by painters and sculptors who wanted the opportunity to do a mural here, a sculpture there. At first I just avoided them without really knowing why. And then I realized that most often when so-called fine art was put in architecture, it was like make-up, compensating for the inability of the architecture to respond to life in such a way that it satisfied our emotions. Think of the enormous new plazas in the middle of an American city, with glass towers all around. The scale of the buildings ignores human beings, their form ignores our climate, plant life has not been made an integral part of it, or has at best come into existence in little pots, the plaza is exposed to light and heat in summer, to snow and wind in winter, a threatening barrenness – and we hope that a mural or a great big sculpture in the middle will correct all this.

In Habitat, because the building is air-conditioned and this requires water-cooling, we were able to have fountains in the landscape that the kids could play in. The cooling of the building and the playing of children were integrated with terraced pools and sprays of water. In the same way the grouping of the houses in space created complex and changing patterns of sunlight. The public responds by saying Habitat is like a sculpture! But no, Habitat is environment, not sculpture.

A total and comprehensive design will result in a place that does not need to be saved by art. Conversely, objects and places conceived in an integrated and unarbitrary way have the makings of what we sometimes call art.

Airplanes are excellent examples of man-made objects that result from an evolutionary process of design rather than from fashion. The forms of aircraft have evolved over sixty or seventy years. More perfect solutions to the problems have been achieved at each stage. I don't believe any airplane designer has ever stopped and said, "I'd rather do this because it's more beautiful than that." He is concerned with weight and speed and aerodynamic

behavior and hundreds of other things, and yet I think most people will agree that airplanes are among the most beautiful man-made objects in our environment.

The aircraft is a kind of vernacular design of our time. When we studied the history of architecture at McGill, we started with the pyramids (very briefly, half a day) and then jumped to Greece and studied the Parthenon and the temples of Olympus. It never occurred to me then that these were probably two per cent of all the buildings built by the Greeks and that Athens probably looked like the island of Mikonos today. We didn't regard that as architecture, we didn't even study it. As a student, I really thought of Athenian houses as being little Parthenons. Then we jumped to Roman temples, a little Romanesque, then Gothic Churches, and then for one year, the Renaissance. By and large our tradition of the architect-designer today is the Renaissance concept: the man who is an "artist" – and with *artist* there is implied a certain liberty to be arbitrary. I don't think that's been true of vernacular art.

So, parallel to the history of architecture that we studied was another kind of history of architecture that we didn't study: man beginning to make shelter, man making villages and towns that were really building systems – vernacular building systems, evolved in an organic, morphological way. He was very influenced by the materials. If he had mud he used it in a way that was true to the nature of mud, if he had stone he used it according to the nature of stone. He didn't try to make the stone look like mud or like wood. (Only when he was making temples did he do that – not when he was making shelter.)

A variety of vernacular non-architected architectures evolved in different cultures, and these were similar in form and vocabulary even though they were developed in different parts of the world. This architecture was not designed in our sense, nor was it a work of art in the eyes of its builders. The people who built it did not think of it as art at all, they thought of making themselves shelter in a way that pleased them and in a way that responded to the forces that affected their survival. In the same way the Greeks made utensils of metal and pottery to cook in and to store water and now we treasure them as works of art. The Greeks never thought of them as art. They were just making useful things the best way they knew. They chose materials and processed them and decorated them in a way that responded to their own images but never in contradiction to usefulness.

We have, evolving through centuries, a tradition of non-art, vernacular architecture, and then at one point in contemporary life disappearing. What is lacking today is a vernacular, our own vernacular. We need to create one which is an expression of our life and technologies. The people who built their villages, the man who designed his own house and built it himself, worked in a simple situation. Today we have great factories and industries and organizations producing the environment. Can we recreate the situation where the man who lives in a house is part of the design process, in some way

affecting the end-product? That would totally change the role of the designer. He would not be an artist with license to express himself, he would be an instrument of expression (though in that he would of course also be expressing himself).

I believe that an essential part of form-making is to be truthful to the nature of the solution in terms of material and process. The Greeks carved vertical grooves in the columns of their temples to emphasize and express the fact that there was a vertical element of support. They emphasized natural behavior. But the baroque architect made spirals around his column to pretend it wasn't really acting as a column, or he painted a scene over it to make it disappear, to make it look as if it wasn't there. It was a stage set, a make-believe world. I believe that the expression of truth, calling an arch an arch, makes an architecture of growth, one that is open-ended; the architecture of pretense, of defiance of physical truth, is an architecture that is retrograde because it is dead-ended and arbitrary.

I find myself quite apart from the architects who believe in the cult of architecture as an instrument of expression *per se*. I feel the wrong emphasis is made when Lou Kahn speaking at the International Congress of Architects and Engineers in Tel Aviv in 1967, said, "Expression is all that architecture is about." Buckminster Fuller talked about humanity, about its capacities and capabilities and the materials and the resources it has and how it uses them. The peasants who built a village on a Mediterranean hillside thought of shelter and their community and the relationships between them and the mud and wood they had for building and the sun they lived with and the water they had to collect, from which emerged their environment. They didn't think of it as expression, although it obviously was. They didn't think they were artists, though they obviously were.

So, I basically disagree with Philip Johnson, who says everything is possible in architecture today: "There are no rules, surely no certainties in any of the arts. There is only the feeling of a wonderful freedom."

I absolutely disagree with him. We have very few alternatives to the right solution. Only by being totally arbitrary is it possible to have no rules and complete freedom. In terms of the forces and realities of life today, a solution is a process of moving toward the truth, which is the complete opposite of freedom from rules.

I feel that most dramatically in my relationship to the world of painting and sculpture today. It is not significant to my development. What saddens me is that I feel I am living in a society that has diverted much of its creative energies to the world of visual art at the expense of the art of life. (I'm waiting for somebody to get up and cry, "The Emperor is naked!") I respond more to micro-photographs of rock crystals or animal cells than to most of the painting of today.

To quote Piet Hein:

There is
one art,
no more,
no less:
to do
all things
with art-
lessness.

There is a visual stimulus in our lives that did not exist two or three generations ago. Our visual exploration of nature, the optical devices that surround us, add something to our experience. Just look in the microscope!

I have a cloth picture from northern India on the wall of my office. It is a montage of embroidered fabrics of different colors in the shapes of various animals. It was made by peasants in the State of Gujarat, who use such pictures as pillow cases and as part of their clothing. It is art, but to them it is something they use in their daily lives, an object of daily life. This life object expresses the whole world of animals and nature around them. I'm sure the woman who made it did not think of herself as an artist. In less sophisticated cultures people made things to use in their daily lives, shaped them in their own hands, in their own image. They made pottery to cook in. They wove things to lie on. They made clothes to wear, they decorated the clothes for different occasions, they used color and patterns and everything was integrated into the process of living. The act of making something was linked to the act of living. Art was part of life. Worshipping was part of life. Objects were made for worshipping in the images of man and the symbols of God, not the making of works of art. Today we cherish these objects of life gone by as art; but what about the objects of life today?

Even the presence of this cloth picture on my wall is artificial, for it is not part of my own life.

When I said that to a friend one day, she said, "How can you say that, after all such a significant part of our culture is in the visual arts." I tried to explain that what I meant was not that the act of making a painting or sculpture was artificial, but that the artificiality lay in the way it related to daily life and to the environment. I asked her to imagine that she was going to Mars, she was in a space ship built and designed in the best tradition of space ships. It had elaborate controls and dials and watches and warning lights, and it had TV screens, and it had apertures focusing on the sun and the moon and the planets, and it had sleeping compartments molded out of the wall in which you were suspended weightless and other areas molded out of the surface and the floor, for eating and preparing food, it was all one continuous womb of an environment; and I asked her, "Could you imagine a painting hanging on the

wall of this space ship?" After thinking for a while she said, "No, I couldn't." I said, "Could you think of a Mondrian on the wall?" and she said, "No, it would not be right there." She went on to say, "You wouldn't need it because the entire space ship, the dials and the controls and the screens and the panels, they would all form kind of a Mondrian." This was, of course, precisely what I had meant: that the integrated environment generates the kind of intensity of experience which is complete, and to which every activity of life contributes. That does not mean that one should not make a painting or design a record cover or illustrate a box, but that the environment as an experience must be integrated.

It is not the question of art in our culture, it is more a question of the total cultural bias that we live with – a split or duality in the culture so profound that it has penetrated the basic expressions in language. To say "it is functional but not beautiful", or conversely "it is not enough to be functional, it should also be beautiful," is a negation of the unity of nature, of the beauty inherent in the expression of truth and order – an order based in the fulfilment of function in its broadest context.

It is inconceivable that something which is not functional should be beautiful. This schizophrenia is so deeply rooted that even our most profound thinkers fall into the trap. To paraphrase John Kenneth Galbraith speaking of the city, "We must now realize that it is not enough to have functional cities, we must be prepared to pay the price for aesthetics and beauty." Only the total debasing of the word *function* to express the most obvious and simplistic aspects of function could result in a city which is functional but "not beautiful" and it is this schizophrenia that makes us regard the utilitarian objects we use in our daily life as apart from other objects we collect as so-called art.

I am not saying that all art in our lives must be the by-product of utilitarian needs. But, there is a question of cultural emphasis. The fact is, that our life is full of opportunities for the art within us to influence our environment. Instead we ignore them. We uncritically delegate the making of them to others. As a matter of cultural pattern we do not look to the total environment as something that gives us satisfaction in life. The energy that would have gone to that is then replaced in creating a make-believe world that has nothing to do with our life process. Think of some of the garbage hanging in our galleries and relate it to the possibility of art in our life unrealized in the cars we drive, the cups we drink from, the dishes we eat from, the vacuum cleaners we sweep the room with, the clothes we wear. As we enter an era of greater integration of human thought, a return to unitary thinking and yet a new evolution of it, the concept of the artist – the man who, as a professional, makes objects of art for others – must become much less important in our life. Our furniture, our cars, made so that they are more meaningful in our lives, will become our art.

These thoughts are very much inspired by those of Sir Lancelot Whyte. For the first time since the Renaissance, and probably under the influence of Eastern

thinking, we are coming to believe that there isn't a dual world of so-called science and so-called art and humanities. We recognize a certain unity in nature and in human energy. Whyte's concept of unitary thinking is important and suggestive. In his *Aspects of Form*, twelve different people, an astronomer, a chemist, and a physicist among them, talk about form in their own disciplines, and discover that there is a unity to it all. In *The Next Development in Man*, Whyte's central theme is that Western man has been trained to think in terms of dualities: Good and evil, cold and hot – always dualities. But dualities don't exist, he says. Everything in life is process and a mixture of both. There are no absolutes. No absolute light or dark, no absolute good or evil. The understanding of process leads to unitary thinking.

I think that this will be the most important coming change in our culture. The people running to New York art galleries and paying sixty or a hundred thousand dollars for a couple of red circles on a white background are part of an illusionary world and have not yet experienced that change which we are now living. The whole scene would appear incredible to a visiting Martian. As Buckminster Fuller puts it in *Nine Chains to the Moon*:

“When there is time perspective on [Henry] Ford equivalent to the 400 year interval between ourselves and Leonardo da Vinci, which enables us to appraise da Vinci as the greatest artist of the Middle Ages, Ford will undoubtedly be acclaimed by the people of that later day as certainly the greatest artist of the 20th century.”