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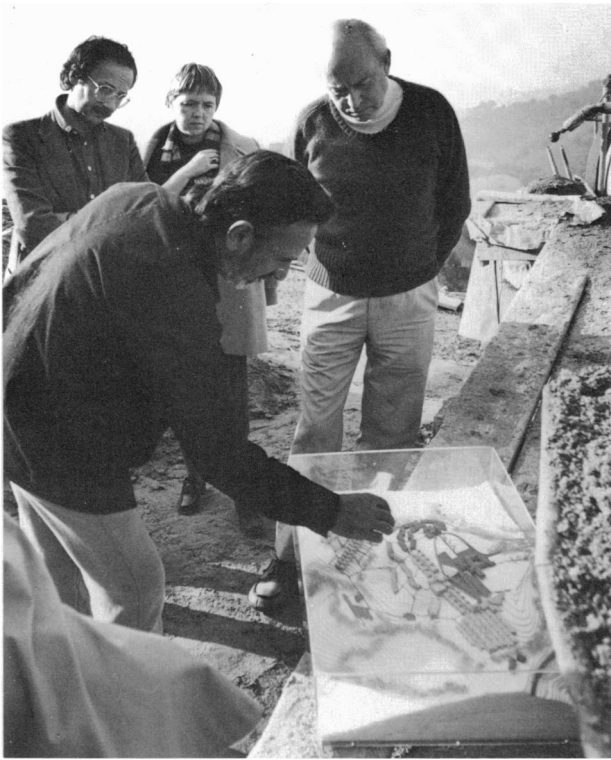
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An Architecture of Participation



Giancarlo De Carlo

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I believe that architecture in the future will be characterized by an increasing participation of the user in its organizational and formal definition. But, in an effort not to confuse my predictions with my hopes, I ought rather to say that in my opinion contemporary architects must do everything possible to make architecture less and less the representation of its designers and more and more the representation of its users.

To begin, I would like to consider a few observations on what is happening in architecture today.

If we turn to an architectural magazine, we encounter the presentation of a series of buildings which have been photographed and published without people. The editor, the architect, and the photographer seem obsessed by an insistent and compulsive need to eliminate people as if they were contaminating germs. If we read the articles, the notes, or the captions, we realize that cancelling the presence of people is premeditated.

Now and then, publications will go so far as to name the client and state his economic, technical, or aesthetic requirements; but they almost never say how the people for whom the work was built do use or could use it, and if it corresponds perfectly, somewhat, or not at all to their needs. The evaluation of the work is always completely independent of the evaluation of the use which will be made of it. The work is considered good, mediocre, or bad in relation to other values—generally aesthetic values.

If, instead of leafing through architectural magazines, we turn to sources of information which are more permanent and should be less subject to fluctuations of fashion—for instance, books on the history of architecture—we see immediately that there is no change in the manner of evaluation. Nor does it change when we turn to schools of architecture, or even if we audit one of the many conferences where architecture is discussed. Everywhere the problem of the user is avoided as if it were in bad taste.

The prevalent idea, so it seems, is that architecture being an art should not, by definition, be contaminated with the concrete aspects of everyday life.

This dichotomy between architecture and reality, today so widespread in all branches of criticism and information, has not always existed.

In the past, before architectural books and magazines existed, when architecture was represented in painting, people were not eliminated from the scene. On the contrary, they often appeared in the foreground actually using the architecture which had been designed for them. People appeared as the real subjects of objects created for their use. Architecture consisted not simply of buildings but of people and buildings bound in a relationship of reciprocal necessity. (1)

To provide a historical reference point, we could say the elimination of people from architecture entered architectural criticism with the appearance of a romantic conception of art which involved architecture as well: that is, around the last decades of the eighteenth century. I realize this is not very precise, because it is like saying the bourgeoisie was born at the time of the French Revolution when we know that, in fact, it was born long before: let's say, during the Renaissance. Therefore, it would probably be better to say that everything changed with the appearance of perspective (individual-monocentrism of vision) or with the development of bourgeois philosophy (political and cultural domination of one class over the whole society). (2) This statement probably appears bold and would need some more explanation, but it doesn't seem fruitful now to enter into an argument which is too entangled and complex. Therefore, I return to the question which we want to discuss and immediately take up a primary and obvious objection.

This objection states that the Modern Movement occupied itself fundamentally with people, and gave enormous emphasis to the relation between form and function, between architecture and its use. This seems undeniable.

We should not forget that although the Modern Movement was born in a period of great intellectual expansion, it was also a period of great simplification of interpretations of human and social behavior. All disciplines of human thought and activity were intensely concerned with man, but they were concerned with man as if he were a strictly individual subject within a strictly functional viewpoint.

Why did the contributions of the Modern Movement so often give results much different from those envisioned? Because the problem of organizing physical space was approached with the same criteria as those used in organizing the production of commodities. Therefore, the suggested solutions were more easily grasped and exploited by those who thrive on reducing human activities and thoughts to commodity than by those who suffer from this reduction.

Why did the Modern Movement place more emphasis on the aesthetic rather than on the global aspects of the problem? Because the Modern Movement lost contact with—and even knowledge of—the context in which it wanted to act.

(1) "Town Hall, Haarlem,"
 Painting by Gerrit Berckheyde,
 Wadsworth Atheneum,
 Hartford.

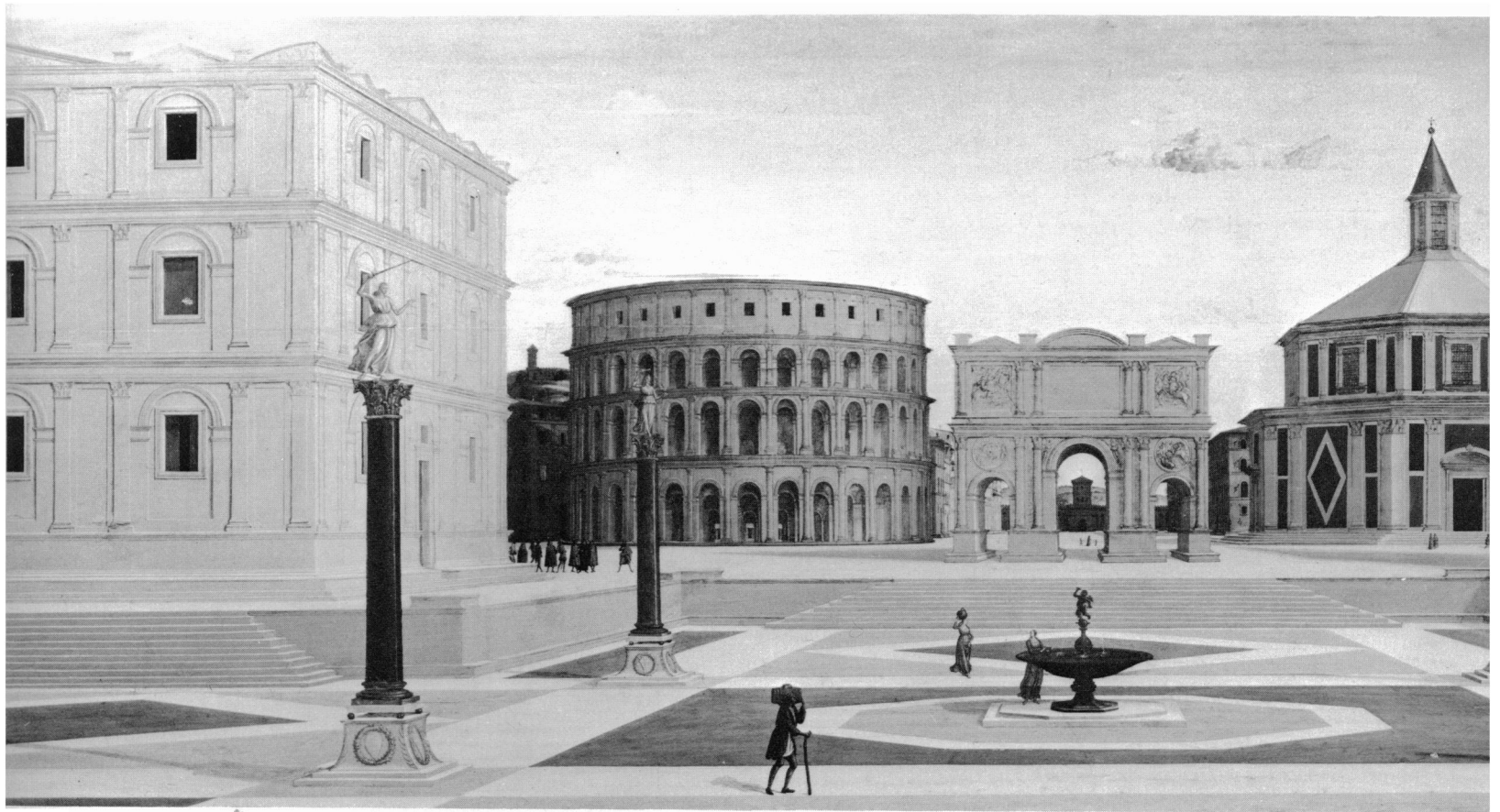


The equation form-function—however disputable it may now seem—could have been much more fruitful if the second factor had not been limited to a bare representation of conventional behaviors, but instead, had been expanded to include the entire range of social behaviors, with all their contradictions and conflicts. But this sort of comprehension would have required the direct participation of the protagonists; whereas, according to the method pursued, the protagonists were inevitably unheeded and even strictly excluded.

Through losing knowledge of the context, the original intentions of the Modern Movement were first altered, then nullified. Consequently, the only alternative left was escape into the hot arrogance of art or the cool neutrality of techniques—the excitement of aesthetic research or the comfortable tranquillity of professional practice.

In the foregoing answers may be found both a criticism of what happened in the recent past and a hint on what could happen in the near future. That we are now at a fork in the road seems beyond doubt and the direction we take will be crucial, not only for architecture, but also for the evolution of relationships between physical space and society.

It also seems clear that, except for a few untouched backwaters, control of the environment is about to be withdrawn from human consideration and bound over to the logic of obscure, automatic mechanisms of power which completely bypass men's intentions. Environmental transformations conform to this logic and assume the structures most appropriate to the symbols by which power expresses itself.



Just think, for example, of the automobile which, although no longer utilizable as a means of urban transport, continues to be a decisive factor in the localization of activities and in their spatial configurations. There are no technical or even economic obstacles (especially if the social costs are taken into account) to the substitution of automobile transportation in the city with systems of public transportation at a high technological level—fast, silent, and comfortable. However, this is not happening, and probably will not happen for quite some time to come, not so much because the automobile industry and the big oil companies are against it, but because the automobile is no longer simply a means of transportation. Rather, it has become a symbol of near perfect ambiguity.

Its strength lies in its capacity to generate the illusion that power is diffused and within the reach of everyone, while actually, by means of this illusion, power concentrates itself and perfects its control, not only in the economic sector but also in that of human communication.

The myth of the automobile provides the most typical and evident example of the way in which physical space can be manipulated to provoke that state of total alienation which guarantees social stability. Moreover, in examining present trends we could find many other examples, less evident perhaps, but even more insidious: the myth of suburbia in America, or the myth of the historical center in Europe, or the myth of model towns, of urban renewal, of beautification programs.

A part of this last group is the “super-myth” according to which a few nodes of intense architectural quality can counterbalance the tedium of the urbanized networks in which these “nodes” are set. This is a fantasy which is beginning to have a certain success—especially in the capitals of the great metropolitan areas—and its success is, again, due to the power of materializing symbols and, therefore, of generating currents of ambiguity. These “nodes” of intense architectural quality (which generally coincide with the places in which politics, bureaucracy, finance, and institutional information are entrenched) are given and accepted as the expression of the whole community, whereas, in fact, they encourage the fragmentation of social groups, diverting them from the concrete problems of the physical space in which they actually live.



(2) "View of an Ideal City," architectural perspective, ca. 1475, oil on panel, Italian, 1490–1495 Central Italian School, Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore.

A spontaneous change of direction in this trend seems difficult to conceive. And it is even more difficult to conceive that such a change could be provoked by the pressure of a mature technology—which, in any case, does not yet exist.

I do not believe that we can use progress as a justification for technology, or use mitigation of human anguish as a justification for art, and more than this, use technology and art as justifications for architecture.

It does not seem to me that we can consider as acceptable a technical discovery that does not improve the material conditions of man, even if it does constitute a technological advance; or an artistic invention which, although it may work to blunt suffering with the magic of illusion, does not expand the critical imagination. The same is true for a new architectural event which does not contradict the fragmentation of human life, although it may be technically perfect and artistically emotional.

Because I don't think it is important to offer architecture an escape from its ancient dilemma between technology and art. Nor does it seem important to guarantee a role for architects by offering them a choice between being technicians and artists.

In reality, the prospect which seems very interesting to me is that of taking architecture away from the architects and giving it back to the people who use it.

In saying this, I do not mean to be arrogant towards those who do the same job as I. Therefore, I will add immediately that I consider the contribution that architects can make towards reaching this goal very important. Precisely here, in fact, is the fork in the road before which architecture finds itself today, and whether the direction chosen is the right one will depend largely upon architects.

A fork in the road has two branches. In our case, one of these is a continuation of the road architecture has travelled up to the present; the other branch bends away from this line and proceeds in a new direction towards the architecture of participation.

At this point, I should try to define the architecture of participation and to give some idea of how it could be practiced.

This is not an easy thing to do because the architecture of participation does not yet exist. Nor does there exist any authentic form of participation, at least not in those parts of the world which we define as "civilized."

We have participation, in fact, only when everyone takes part equally in the management of the power structure, or when the power structure no longer exists because everyone is directly and equally involved in the process of decision-making.

What will change in architecture if we pass from the traditional authoritarian practice to a new practice based on participation? I will try to encompass the question by placing around it just a few observations. The matter is to illuminate some main lines of the whole perspective: after all, the practice of participation can find its full definition only when participation is in action.

An architectural operation passes through three phases: the definition of the problem, the elaboration of the solution and the evaluation of the results. The sequence of the three phases is irreversible and, at the end of this sequence, the operation is considered to be finished. Each phase is separate from the others; it has only a casual influence on the subsequent phase and exerts no feed-back on the preceding one. Only the second phase is really important. The first is used to gather proofs to justify the second; the third is practically non-existent.

The procedures used in the first phase—that of defining the problem—are inaccurate and unsystematic. Often, there is recourse to intuition and equally often to conspicuous compilations of data. Both the intuitive and the compiling approach are often misguided by the influence of the values of the investigator, who is usually the designer. The objectives are taken for granted; the total ends are not discussed, but only the simplest determinants which influence the cost, the technique, or the aesthetic of the project. The resources allocated to the operation are taken for granted, even when (as in the case of low-cost housing) they are distributed so as to maintain inequalities in living standards and, therefore, create phenomena of segregation. The wishes of the future users are either ignored on principle or overthrown by the application of models which suit the interests of the promoters or the visions of the designer.

The phase of the elaboration of the solution extends from completion of the design to completion of the building. The design tends to represent a single object which admits no alternative. It can happen that the object may undergo some alterations before it is actualized, or, at most, that it may be rejected—and another more suitable object may be substituted for it. But when this happens, the controversy takes place between the client and the designer, and the source of the dispute is almost always financial. Once it is accepted, the design is carried out and, once it is carried out, it is consigned to those who are to use it. Its use has no influence on the object which has been produced; on the contrary, the object is considered successful in the degree to which it resists mutation by use. The phase of evaluation is, as I have said, practically nonexistent. Nor could it be otherwise, for two reasons. The first is that an architectural project tends to be considered a work of art, and, therefore, a unique event which, by definition, cannot be subjected to any type of rational comparison. The second is that the short-sightedness of the objectives and the lack of interest in the question of the use of the product makes it impossible to establish any criterion which allows a judicious comparison between proposed and actual accomplishment. For this reason, each new architectural event has few precedents (except aesthetic or financial) and constitutes no precedent (except aesthetic or financial) for successive events: it is an isolated case, and not part of an evolving process.

Up to this point, I have been describing what happens in the practice of authoritarian planning. What happens, now, in the practice of planning based on participation?

Participation implies the presence of the users during the whole course of the operation. This fact gives rise to at least three basic consequences: each phase of the operation becomes a phase of the design; the “use” becomes a phase of the operation and, therefore, of the design; the different phases merge and the operation ceases to be linear, one-way, and self-sufficient.

At this point I think “clearness” is important and, therefore, I am going to add a few brief explanations. The phase of the definition of the problem is part of the design in that the objectives of the operation and the resources allocated to it become a topic of discussion with the future users. (A program for the construction of a residential neighborhood can be consistent in itself and yet all wrong with regard to the equilibrium of the area in which it is located; the resources allocated to the program can be proportionate to the financial logic of the operation and yet insufficient to satisfy the most legitimate expectations. Only discussion with the users can bring out these contradictions and resolve them, or if not resolve them, at least bring their explosive potential into open conflict.)

The phase of elaboration of the solution no longer tends to produce a single finished product but a sequence of hypotheses which continue to be improved as they pass through the criticisms and creative contributions of the users. **The designer's job is no longer to produce finished and unalterable solutions, but to extract solutions from a continuous confrontation with those who will use his work.** His energy and imagination will be completely directed to raising the level of awareness of his partners in the discussion, and the solution will come out of the exchanges between the two, passing through a series of alternatives which come closer and closer to the real nature of the problem with which they are dealing.

The testing of the results is through the way in which the product is used and the verdict stands upon the degree to which the users' needs are satisfied. It is not only a question of practical needs but of creative needs as well. A work of architecture, besides improving the material conditions of those for whom it is built, **should facilitate the human need to communicate through self-representation.** Therefore, the structure of the work should be arranged so as to permit continual adaptations and transformations, which can themselves become extensions of the design.

The practice of participation, therefore, changes each phase of the architectural operation and changes the system of relationships between various phases as well. Each phase has an effect on those which precede and follow it, until the combination of influences goes beyond the limits of the immediate operation and projects itself onto other similar operations. Objectives, solutions, ways of use, and criteria of judgment, through their reciprocal adjustment, generate an ongoing experience. Architectural planning becomes a process.

Apart from ideological objections, there are two apparently pragmatic objections that are in direct contrast with the definition of participation that has been given. The first deals with the scale of the problems being confronted, the second with the time necessary to face them. It is said that while participation is possible when one is dealing with problems on the scale of small social groups, how can they still be considered feasible when the problems involve entire social organisms or even the whole human race? It is possible to give the example of the enormous infrastructural operations and ecological re-equilibrium. It is also said that while participation is possible when the decisions refer to factors occurring over a brief period of time, how can one continue to consider it feasible when one is dealing with long-term programs that deny the immediacy of individual and group interests? And one can give the example of the production of new kinds of energy and the intercontinental redistribution of resources.

It is possible to disagree with both objections, saying for example that participation is a decision-making process, is a political principle consistent with a precise political framework. Therefore, it must take priority over any technical aspect. One direct implication is that of decentralization, another is that of constant intelligibility, in space and time. If it lacks these two conditions, participation in decision-making becomes impossible. But since it is indispensable to set participation in motion—since the political principle requiring that it be carried out is fundamental compared with the ideological framework from which it derives—these two conditions must be ensured and the technical aspect should be restated on the basis of their requirements. In other words, if on the wider scale, participation is impossible, one must give up working on that scale, or to be more exact, one must arrive at it through the integration of multiple operations on the smaller scale. If, in the long-term, participation is impossible, one must give up the idea of working in the long-term, or more exactly, one must see the long-term as a chain of short-term activities.

In conclusion, we know that participation has been delayed and that the few known episodes take form as guerilla actions, most of the time coming from groups of users and sometimes even by willing architects. To discuss the question seriously, it is necessary to ask oneself how—since almost no one dares declare himself against participation and all rush to proclaim their agreement—this delay has occurred and it is necessary, therefore, to inquire into the direct responsibility. The political power, including the Left, doubt the validity of the architecture of participation because they fear it; it extends the use of criticism and stimulates direct intervention, putting into question the fixed principle of delegation once and for all.

Local administrations hesitate because participation allows for conflicts, confirms a pretense to intervention in future programs, asks for an account of what has already been done, and finds it difficult to accept and understand negotiations, transactions, and compromises.

Public administrators and technical officials are against participation because it implies detailed analysis work, re-composition, and promotion. It interrupts "routine" and disturbs bureaucratic immobility.

Professionals are against participation because it destroys the arcane privileges of specialization, unveils the professional secret, strips bare incompetence, multiplies responsibilities and converts them from the private into the social.

Academic communities are against it because participation nullifies all the schemes on which teaching and research are based.

The list could be continued, but it can be imagined that this initial list, even though brief, is enough to set in motion a critical debate and this seems rather urgent, to be faced seriously and openly.