

Notes to the Young Architect

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Living quarters can start their career serenely vacant; life casts on shore driftwood to litter the scene, so that man finds himself finally in tough competition with his own accumulated bric-a-brac. His greatest belonging remains the natural scene into which he inserts his structure — or any shred of this scene that gives reassurance to his long nature-adapted life processes.

From kindergarten, to recreation center and to college, from office building to kitchen, lasting comfort hangs on the nourishing navel cord of natural circumstances, which must not be cut off carelessly.

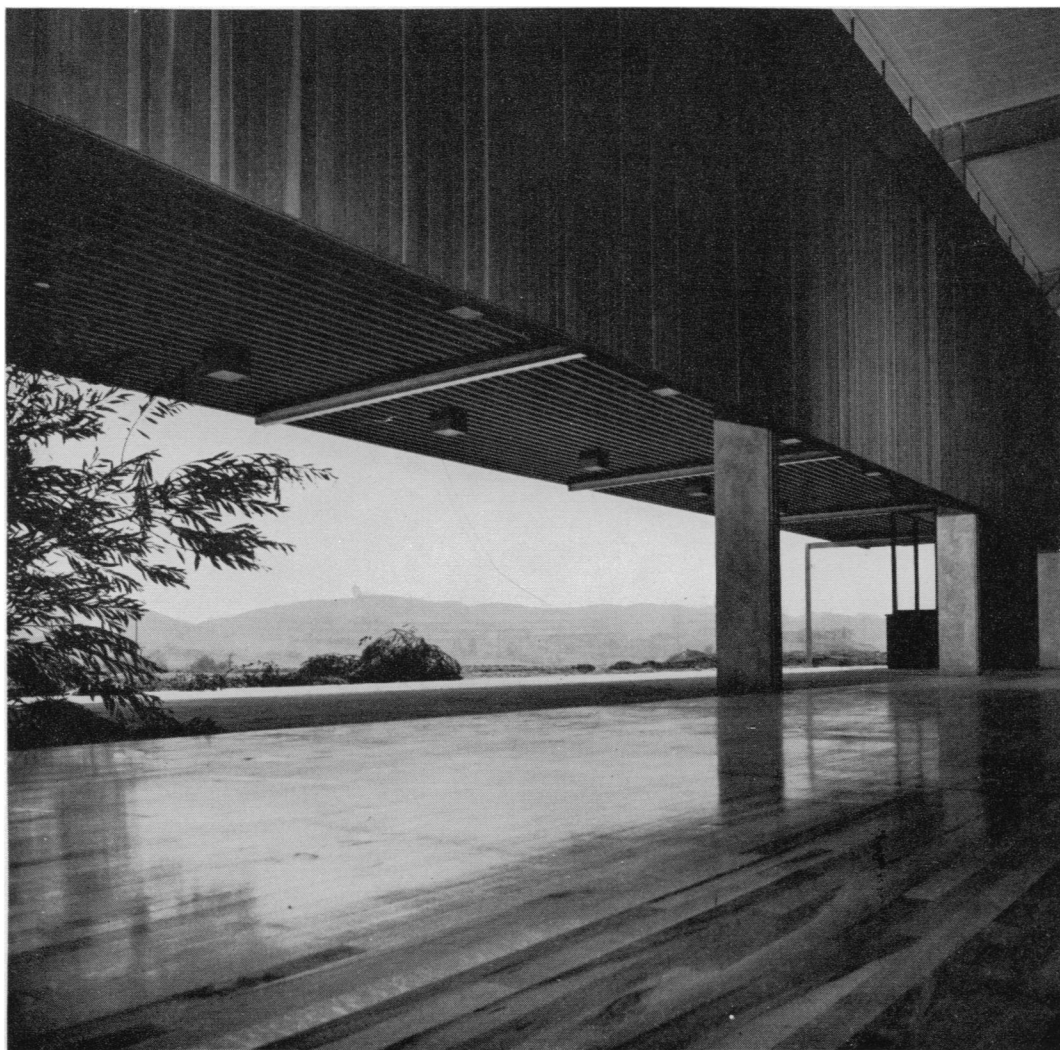
Students of our profession from Istanbul, to Manila, to Milan, to Caracas naturally see no clearer way than their elders, the adult architects, to go through their lifes' careers. There are so many different things published in magazines, issue after issue, that we can surely not blame a young man for being befuddled, where all wise men are in doubt.

Can words clear things for us, bring them to convergence so that ideas and motives begin to jell? Young men must know about their future: years to be filled with a pursuit which is steady and deeply satisfying, because it is filled with responsibility — a pursuit which they themselves and their public will find worthwhile.

*Born in Vienna in 1892, Neutra received his education at the University of Zurich and began his career as an architect and city planner in Switzerland. Coming to the United States in 1923, he has conducted his own practice in Los Angeles since 1926.*

To write an article or a book is to put together words. Words can be self expression or service to others. Perhaps both of these chances can be fused into one. I started my career practically alone in this entire Western hemisphere, where the work of Frank Lloyd Wright was unappreciated and resented, — more than a generation ago. I had nothing to show, not even comparable work of anyone else, who was acceptable to a possible client. Nothing of the sort was at all known to the human being of America from Montreal to Buenos Aires. Look at the architectural and home-builders' magazines of 1920. The relativity of my effort, or the lack of it, will become awfully clear to you, as well as my terrific loneliness, as you make this interesting little excursion into the past.

When you ask your librarian for those old issues of the powerful magazines, you will suddenly see the slim chances of a young man of that time to do something beyond and outside the most painfully misunderstood "convention". Perhaps you will find those reams of illustrations ridiculous, but this they were surely not. They were frightening and formidable to a young man who wanted to start a career and support a family by making a clearing in these woods as a pioneer. For me the woods were not, in any single instance, cleared by windfalls of happy patronage. This makes a career like my own much better understandable, much less accidental. Had I had "contacts", married the niece of the mayor, sprouted easily "connections" in the upper or even the intellectual brackets — maybe all this would cloud the issue: how to get started with something new of consequence. The every day surrounding scene is the background against which the work of singlehanded persons is best silhouetted, if those persons should become helpful and instructive.



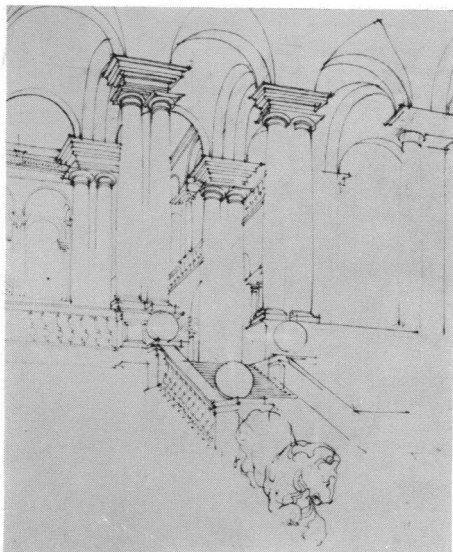
*Eagle Rock Club House, Eagle Rock, California*

I had no one to fall back on, no funds whatever, no examples on a magazine page to show, nobody who was interested or wanted to understand the thing in which I believed. If one could see through this, much might be gained for future careers in architecture.

I glance now myself at those old magazine issues — and you should do it also if you care to follow this train of thought. It surely looked like living in a hopelessly icy atmosphere, alone among polar bears. I then fell on the idea that human beings would become friendlier if I understood them. Of course, to “know man” has been a philosophical advice as old as the hills. You could not serve man, unless you knew him. You could not provide a polar bear with a setting, with a habitat in a zoological garden, unless you knew and loved and began deeper and deeper to understand polar bears.



Via Nuovissima, Genoa, 1913



In those early days there had been no persecution or turmoil in Europe and I came to America, not because of bitterness, but because of cosmopolitan conviction.

I set to work and learned to understand the language of the beings surrounding me. Having a warm heart myself, I supplemented the conversation with a friendly facial expression of sympathy and slowly earned a little of the same from others, in spite of my designs, which looked more like Lever Bros., than Woolworth, that great gothic monument of those days.

But, above all, I fortified and familiarized myself passionately with current research and progressive information. True, I also experimented with information on laminated glass, the economics and techniques of riveting and welding, open truss joists, stress resistance of moulded sheet steel, brand new prestboard and metal window standards. The information, that fascinated me more and more was not so well advertised. I found it magnificently plentiful, as it flowed from the research papers of several hundred first-rate journals on physiology and human biology — and it helped me understand much better my own clinical experience with people.

From New York to Moscow, these periodicals are publishing annually the most pertinent facts about how man, woman and child can be better understood in all the stunning aspects of organic and human functioning. It's almost a brand new, fascinating science, no second to electronics — in fact often quite related to it. Architects, no matter how you look at it, cannot be happy in their profession if annoyed by man as an interferer in their abstract inspiration. They will and must find the deepest and most stimulating inspiration in him and his responses, which are more sensitive than those of any machine or material. The strains and stresses in him, their distribution and alleviation are every bit as interesting as those in a space frame, geodesic dome or other ingenious engineering feat.

I have experienced, and in my own practical way pioneered in engineering, and my enemies then used to call me a mere engineer, which in the twenties was a word of calculated insult in architects' circles. It is now hard to believe that this should ever have been so! But it can be easily checked in those old back numbers of magazines, filled with “historical” reminiscings. Now we more frankly enjoy and proudly express, without looking backward, that we live in an age of unprecedented power. A friend in San Francisco told me what tremendous feeling of power he has during rush hours, when his motor breaks down on the bridge approach and he holds up twenty-five thousand cars for forty minutes. No, we no longer look back. We busily commute to and from our wives, keep the Hi-Fi turned on in a bottleneck, or have the best ideas at the steering wheel. What is the safe role of the architect in all this as an environmental determinant of mankind?



*Warren Tremain residence, Santa Barbara, California*

The universe, our first surroundings, tall, handsome, or really pretty chaotic and originally unmanaged by us is, we know, very preponderantly anorganic. So much so that most scientists would agree: Organic life is limited to only a tiny fraction of this infinite expanse, perhaps only to our pretty planet. In other words, the organic is a very smallish and late insert in the anorganic world.

But man, himself a part of this organic insert, has, since a hundred thousand years, started to adopt and to produce anorganic tools and accommodations. This is the *technological insert* in that organic insert we spoke of before. And this rather new man-made anorganic core, lately — I mean during the century or two of industrial revolution — has been growing by leaps and bounds. The anorganic stuff in our midst is mushrooming like a hydrogen bomb and that bomb incidentally is part of it and of our large scale sterilizing production.

Once more, here is the picture: A huge anorganic universe. A small insert in it of organic life, existent and highly evolving, for only a few billions of years. And now within this for a mere few thousand years, the cumulative anorganic technology of man, evermore quickly inflating itself, pressuring organic life, so to speak, from the inside.

*all photographs by Julius Shulman*

Man and all his organic ancestry has survived by adaptation to the outer universe. At present he has no time to adjust himself safely and slowly to the inner anorganic collisions and pressures produced by his own explosive inventiveness.

The magazine pages are filled with color cuts of the "new to buy", and the editorial pages, interspersed with all these brilliant offerings, bring the new fall and spring fashions of ladies' apparel and all the other arts, architecture included.

Unfortunately architects deal still with fairly long range investments. They lose credit with their customers and they lose the community's confidence when they slip into the short range fashion business. The young man in architecture needs to have a long steady perspective in front of him, a lifetime of consistent progress, not a breathless check-up and pick-up of fashion appeal in the novelty magazine. The millinery business may rightly be different. He, who enters it, should have open eyes for what it takes and yields. At any rate, we have long enough said: We need a new architecture, "because we have a lot of new materials". We should once recognize that we have not yet truly satisfied the oldest human needs: in fact we may do less so as we go along with all our neon signs, excavation machines and metallic herds of new models, among which we can't find a resting place, in spite of their "superb, knobby printed plastic covered rubberfoam upholstery". A parking place is where someone else has parked his car. There is no anchorage for the soul, because we have lost the feel, pay no heed, and continuously ignore all valid current data: how our million sense receptors — no longer five senses as for Palladio — take on in the world.

How our organic and nervous system functions, would give us the best clue to design. We are in this sense functionalists, "practical" and "progressive". We architects of tomorrow can draw on new and penetrating knowledge of how a human being responds to all the millions of stimuli. We had better stop innocently toying with them. How many inner balances do we upset, how many life processes, subtly coordinated by and for life, do we harm instead of furthering? "Delight" is after all not something apart from natural "utility" and, more than comfort, happiness itself is laid in our hands.

This is basically the job of the architect, brimful of satisfaction and chances for self-expression.

Did I speak here too much of something like scientific curiosity, mixed into a "pure art"? No one in our profession — in amidst our famous "age of science" — seems even half as curious and devoted to scientific penetration as were the artists of the Renaissance, each of whom wrote a book, chewing through the latest unearthings of antique science, and the additions of the age in anatomy, Euclidian proportions and descriptive geometry. A hundred years after Gauss and Lobachevsky we have other, still more contemporary findings to be excited about than Euclid — and this is not to smear the gentlemen. But, because we are architects, we are activated by the new discovery of man, our client. We are beyond all verbal levels and the realm of mere words, more than just caterers to human senses and brains. They have a stupendous intake, but we must not just pour it on. Why rehash old fuzzy phrases, which may have been fine when they once upon a time seemed to truly express discoveries? Now they are lukewarm cliches, hard to revive. Like men, in all the past, let us be enthusiastic about our new chances in methodical observation which, for deeper and sharper penetration, cast aside vaguer speculative concepts that may have well served the fifth century before Christ or the eighteenth after Him.

Do we go on speaking of architecture as "a space-art" and as "frozen" music, when every physiology student knows that all our responding receptors act in time, in space time? Once that venerable slogan may have been great; today it is a burdensome cliché, barring a young man from clearer, more promising sight into his client's essential make-up. His client is man the species and man the individual. Neither is a nuisance, but rather the most exciting phenomenon to deal with — more so than plexy-bubbles on the roof and electronically glued wizardry. Technology surely has its place and it has its well-trained professions dealing with its manifold divisions. Young architects are mere amateurs facing modern stress analysts like the great Dischinger, first calculator of space frames, or his great assistants Finsterwalder and Tedesco, perfecting precise, fool-proof methods for the geniuses of execution and prefabrication, like Freyssinet in France, Nervi in Italy and the great Eduardo Torroja in his Instituto Tecnico in Madrid, Buckminster Fuller with his broad outlook, and Felix Candela with his amazing leapfrog jump over all sedate mathematical approach — in which he nevertheless is a master. The student listens or reads: he has no hope to be more than an interested layman.

When my son studied architecture, I pondered these questions for the thousandth time in my life. What is our niche and assignment, not already filled by some other more competent party?

Engineers deal with comparatively high energy transactions, tons per square feet, kilowatts. They deal with anorganic problems. We architects have no rivals and betters, if we only know how to deal with the minimal but stupendously important energy transactions in nervous systems, in the organic systems of man, woman and child. Research physiologists furnish us valuable observations, but we can, must and do practice a clinical know-how, like a bedside physician who is undoubted in his power to supplement, sometimes with lightning speed, the labman in his patient pursuit. Intuition divorced from systematic observation is in no field characteristic for this age. Perhaps it never existed except in some fictitiously distorted anthropology. Surely some proud intuition and sensational googie production might be a wrong guess after all. It needs a post mortem check up. Some "arbitrariness of irregularity" in a world where *fatigue* is one of the basic organic phenomena as *habituation*, — easy going along with the same old dynamics, — is the other.

But this is not a time like the one when Henry Ford, against best advice, experimented in his backyard with an innocent and frail model of a combustion engine and built the early automobile from bicycle accessories. The new jets are not mocked up, calculated, tested by Wilburs and Orvilles Wright.

Architects are at best third rate specialists in engineering. If they also are not the fashion experts, cellophane packagers and beauticians — as what will they pass during a life time ahead of them before their public? On what services will they be appreciated and compensated and honestly live and sustain their practice, their private life, their family.

Eagle Rock Club House, Eagle Rock, Calif.



*Following the old path* beaten by long conditioning and experiencing on one hand, and *getting tired of it* and of things too often experienced on the other are not a pair of "psychological" factors. *They are basic*, ubiquitously observed *facts in organic life* from the first drop of plasma to the venerable human brain, which by light years beats all glorious twentieth century electronic automation and eighteenth century automation clockworks.

An architect of the future will know an immense lot, when he talks of "Vision": the breadth of taking in a designed space, by *peripheral vision*; taking in its depth by *binocular vision*; its stimulations, effective through *color vision*, which has different ranges and deficiencies in the two sexes and in a million individuals; its illuminative intricacies, affecting *day and night vision*. A popular hand book on the lovely, receiving, fast moving human eyes, coordinated in pairs, which sit in our skulls' sockets so peculiarly different from a horse's eyes, and are so strikingly and differently oriented from the light reception organs of a phototoxic bee or night butterfly — will open a terrific vista to the designer. It's a vista into what that vision is, to which we cater so glibly by coarse rule of thumb, or without any rule at all. In fact, while the vision sense is called such, it comprises, as we have alluded above, a whole vast cluster of sensorial functions all rolled in one and, again, inseparably connected with the simultaneous workings of all the other senses like, to take only one single example, the acceleration sense in the inner ear. It most promptly reports to us whether we tilt our heads while we look up to that looming cathedral spire, or peep down through a floor hatch into the elevator shaft of the Empire State Building. It surely is a very different sensation, modified extra-visually quite apart from what the eyes do for us. Architecture is taken in as a million sense impacts, all fused by what physiologists call "stereognosia", endless and perpetual and intimate sensorial combinations.

Built into the skin and inside our skin, the muscle packs, too, are sense-equipped to report to us; while we turn and walk through the arches of the Mosque of Cordova, when we leave the level to step on a ramp, climb a stair, get our foot soles icy cold by thermal losses on the stone floor. We feel the draft from the sacristy door, cooling our surface by evaporating the tiny sweat droplets over each pore of our skin; we hear reverberation of our steps on surrounding stone walls differently from what we experience in Hollywood stage settings of studio board — to the eye most faithfully similar.

And there, also, the smell is quite different from that which is exhaled by the microbiotic life settled on old masonry. We could go on and on talking of what environmental impacts are in natural or man-made surroundings and in well or poorly designed settings. What an arbitrary restriction to say that architecture is only a visual art. This interpretation leaves the meaning of “architecture” poverty stricken compared with the implications it could comprise today in a sympathetic and penetrating understanding.

And is it at all just a “visual” art when every truly informed person opening his laboratory door into our common corridor could prove to you that the world of man is not a department store with vision, camera-shop and TV on the fourth floor, and sport-goods, camp equipment, gravity sense and locomotor perception on the fifth? No, the world and the landscape is one full of “emotional impurity” in spite of the eighteenth century departments of “rationalism” and “practical reason”. Man is to us an indivisible entity with a multitude of senses — every week brings him a new discovery — but a sense of beauty has never been discovered. It is just a rhetorical phrase, meaningless in this world of ours, which is a little more precise, where harmonized coordination of a manifold reception and inner elaboration will have to be patiently studied. Again, this will serve us better than tear sheets or fast reprints of old cliches that say we are or ought to be for beauty and against ugliness and sin. Yes, of course we are, and we shall perish in amidst our turmoil of celebrated progresses, that are so eminently practical and utilitarian, rub off each others duco finish, denting even smashing each others gorgeous chrome-plated trim, and delivering last year’s crop of our civilization to wrecking lots that surround our lives on all sides.



*Herbert Kronish residence, Beverly Hills, California*

That life is ancient must be recognized as the most practical thing in the world and thus preserved by all means. Designers of its housing, architects and community planners of America, have the most responsible job to keep nine million co-nationals of their know-how country from the annual waiting list of psychiatric waiting rooms and prevent other distressing organic disorders. To be and remain human, to design the biologically bearable, and protest by doing against the perilous mischief of the “practical operator” will put the young and future men in architecture in an esteemed and rightly recompensed position.

*Northwestern Fire Insurance Building, Los Angeles, California*

Ultimately, the architect will be well defensible by a current knowledge on what good and what harm can be done by his effort.

“Doing good and Doing harm” are expressions usually not connected with what is considered “esthetics”. And esthetics, like morals, are a discussion subject, on which even neighbors feel it is their privilege and honor not to agree because they argue from different premises. This sort of discussion is, for the young (and the old) architect, the thinnest ice, and he breaks through it promptly into a bottomless sea of weird “likes and dislikes”. There he drowns in helplessness.

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The young architect, as the young physician, must comprehend, — mostly through self-training — how to direct a client, or even prospect — conversation at different stages during the evolution of the project. Surely, he must draw with ease. But graphic presentation to a lay-person has its pitfalls. It might be *too* convincing and then quiet constructive comment, or it may with all its skills still be incomprehensible to an untrained eye. *There are many people, who are on the verbal level much more accessible than through graphic communication.* Like a physician, the architect needs bits of — sometimes unsuspected — information not only for his diagnosis, but also to alleviate emergent antagonism. These must be controlled so that a client’s confidence will not suffer at an early stage and spring a leak which is hard to repair and might for ever impair the creative performance, lasting and noticeable for an amortisation period of thirty years. Iktinos and Kalikrates had the confidence of Pericles; this is visible on the Parthenon after 2500 years. The “budget of confidence” on the part of the client, his willingness to invest his trust wholeheartedly in a professional, holds more promise for the project than the financial budget or the investment of dollars and cents.

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To steer client conversations clear of emotional controversy means to avoid the bear trap of esthetic dispute or answering their likes with counter-likes. Speaking of my own career, I should have perhaps mentioned that *the attitude of the physiologist truly does alleviate the emotional hardships* of controversy on likes, taste and beauty. To know how the eye, in its manifold functions, responds to proposed stimuli, makes an architect a professional; and the weight of his opinion will be increased if he sympathetically deals with associations (conical eradiations) which his design is apt or intended to evoke. A conversation kept on this level, I have found in thousands of cases, never suffers derailment into an argument. And argument be it, now lost or won, tends to whittle away a productive client relationship and its creative potential.

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Creation and creativity is the goal of an architect’s career. Intuitive power will always be at the core of it, but it has always drawn, and will draw tomorrow, on current wisdom and method.

*Mr. Neutra enjoys the collaboration of a staff trained by him in his early office with care and devotion: Dion Neutra, Benno Fischer, Serge Koschin, John Blanton, Tony Schmidbauer, Perry Neuschatz and Gunnar Serenblad.*

*Residence in the Sierra Madre Foothills, California*

