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Selfish Form, Selfess Nature

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Homo faber, the technician, the tool maker, is possessed with a need to create, to wrought a mark on this world. His dwellings, public buildings and monuments attest to that. But something is amiss. This urbanizing world, its discrete structures on discrete sites often depart from a sense of order. Out at the fringes, in the exurbs, where shreds of nature lie under pastoral veils or further out ensconced within the vast undeveloped reaches of mountain and forest and plain, built form contrasts violently with nature and sunders her. Modern architecture has borrowed its forms and its materials from an industrial technology. But while it may portend power it touches on an unresolved cognitive dissonance in America. Leo Marx's insightful book, *The Machine in the Garden*.¹, traces this paradox. We Americans, it seems, are simultaneously seduced by the power of technology e.g. the building or structure and the Arcadian myth of a "nature landscape". We eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and its meaning yet wish to remain in the Garden. In the end of the power of technology predominates and separates culture from nature denying humans their mythic roots². This denial is perhaps the reason for sensing something amiss. And what's amiss is the lack of fit between forms bereft of natural meaning or any meaning at all.

What man has struggled for since his outset, dominion over nature, may soon be consummated. Natural man, or as novelist John Fowles calls him, “Green man”³ has become technological and urban man with such force, scale and inexorable success that nature is permanently transfigured. And it is not only tangible nature which has changed. Most importantly our fundamental perception of nature has changed. Today, according to environmental historian, Paul Shepherd, “...we live in an avalanche of sensation and excitement with a thousand artificial ways to get pleasure and comfort. Few of them are directly dependent on other organisms and none except gardens are designed as a microcosm of nature...the garden is [has become the only?] an abstraction of the natural organic world”⁴

However we derive our abstractions from other sources as well. William Irwin Thompson asserts our “notion of Nature is simply cultural history” because “natural history is a subset of cultural history. Nature is not a state, a place or a ground.”⁵ It is largely an idea; culture, when it creates (art, architecture or landscape) art interprets Nature as well as mitigates our place with in it. Kenneth Friedman points out, “Human beings create art as a cultural act commenting through culture on culture itself.”⁶ Man’s separation from and denial of nature has been subconsciously expressed and embodied in built forms just look at the rudeness of deconstruction because these forms are artifacts which interpret culture. Artist, Carolyn Bloomer declares, “The philosophy of an entire society is expressed through its architectural

treatment of space...modern glass and steel buildings emphasize simplicity, efficiency and technological power. Each time and culture reveals as well as imposes philosophical concepts of humankind by the way it structures its public and private space.”⁷ For example, traditional or vernacular architecture has borrowed its forms and cues unself-consciously from nature.⁸ Dennis Mann reflects that vernacular or traditional architecture, finds “an awareness of a state of agreement between the buildings and their surroundings.”⁹

Still, while being *Homo faber* is part of being human, are all our products art? Friedman says “the drilling [rig] of an oil company is as much a part of the ‘environment’ as a tree.”¹⁰ Yes, but it certainly is not art. The creation maybe cultural but the engineers’ intent is strictly, functional and economic, it is devoid of any intrinsic meaning. The viewer must confer all meaning on an oil rig, because there was none ever intended by its fabricator. Architects, landscape architects and artists create. We should expect they convey meaning by their “design as introduction of intent into environmental events”¹¹. Meaning is crucial to our understanding, evaluation, and appreciation of built forms and intent must be clear and unequivocal if it is to be the wellspring of meaning.

This is true if the designers wish their products to be more than technological objects. Dennis Mann notes, “Architectural form is self reflexive; that is, the form itself is the content.” No meaning there. The designer only tells us, “What it is.” and does not engage us to ask, “What

does it mean?”. Amos Rapoport and Robert Kantor have expressed it this way, “The problem with much contemporary architecture and urban design is that it has been simplified and cleaned up to such an extent that all it has to say is revealed at a glance. A range of meanings and possibilities has been eliminated...If all is designed and settled there is no opportunity to bring ones own values to the forms...”¹² Or the obverse according to Gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnhiem is “..so many people have become blind to the meaning of form that they believe they ‘see’ when they absorb meaning without form.”¹³ Landscape architect and teacher Patrick Condon has made a valuable analysis of what he calls “cubist space” and “volumetric space”. “Cubist space...is made by placing solids in space; volumetric space is made by enclosing space with solids.”¹⁴ Cubist space, like modern architecture, tends to be exclusive while volumetric space tends to be inclusive. This may be why modern buildings tend to ignore their context, while site design and landscape must by its very task define and integrate. But building form as object represents a trophy to architects because it seems more real and tangible than process. And the process of design is an open-ended, messy business.

Form provides visual stimulus to our senses, potential meaning to the mind and maybe most importantly, satisfaction to the human ego. Rudolf Arnhiem generally agrees, “If we wish to understand the relationship between visual form and the total [human] organism, we must consider the complex interaction of the many forces that make up a person.”¹⁵ “The

problem of form”, as I call it, is its very palpability, its perfection, absolute and untouchable, that springs directly from the human ego. It becomes ego displayed as built form...offspring from the designer’s psyche. Ego feeds on novelty for novelty’s sake and the recognition which goes along with it. Mann says, “The true measure [of architecture] is not in architecture’s originality but in its quality.”¹⁶ McDonough associates ego embedded into an urban design profession with an “ideology [that] is manifested in its predilection for statistical studies, surveys, pseudoscientific rationalizations, computer-generated investigations and constant categorizations of humanity...It presumes that the built environment is at its best when it is controlled, stylized, quantifiable and rational.”¹⁷ These are left brain functions intimately intertwined with the ego. The ego has no time for meaning especially when posited in a relational, holistic, subjective and emotional way. Artist Alan Gussow however acknowledges the ego’s seminal (though not dominant) role in the creative process, “To be an artist in one way is to have a hell of an ego, because it is saying, ‘By god, what you’ve experienced is worth memorializing; worth making permanent.’...On the other hand to be an artist involved with nature is to be humble since what you create is often a poor imitation of a real thing [nature].”¹⁸ But where is the experience in most built forms? Why would ego want input, (other than praise) from someone else like the user or viewer? So there is the problem, reiterated as an anarchy of meaningless, built form, ignoring a natural context and process richly endowed with potential meaning. Designers and clients sense something is

amiss so to assuage the problem they often apply a balm of green goo, desultory shrubs or barren turf calling it landscape or worse yet, natural.

However design must be process first and last; form and product, second because events which are ever-changing and fluid in the built environment are even more so in the landscape. Nature, landscape, and site are fundamentally different than building. Ancient Chinese knew this because their language distinguished between man-made and natural growth.

Others are also aware of this difference. The late Robert Smithson's opposition of site and non-site fits a dialectic of nature and landscape (site) versus building (non-site).

“Site

1. Open limits
2. A series of points
3. Outer coordinates
4. Subtraction
5. Indeterminate certainty
6. Scattered information
7. Reflection
8. Edge
9. Some place (physical)

Nonsite

- Closed limits
- An array of matter
- Inner coordinates
- Addition
- Determinate uncertainty
- Contained information
- Mirror
- Center
- No place (abstract)

The wind blows; the sun arcs across the sky; oaks drop their acorns; seedlings sprout in the compost. Even buildings can sprout additions, are remodeled and rehabilitated. Urban planner, Carl Steinitz warns against large projects with a “strong concept, fully worked out” as lacking “adaptability”²⁰ to the complexity of events, natural and cultural. Landscape architect Lawrence Halprin urges “imperfect” or “incomplete design” where such “design is to create possibilities for events to happen.”²¹

The products of design are but points along a cycle of process. Here is where design and nature coincide. Painter Joe Miller ascribes his understanding of creative process to nature, “There’s a series of events that are one, [but] they are blind to the future and the past, and just carry out the act at that moment. What they do at the moment affects the future but only the next step. Nature has no overall vision of what is to happen.”²² Nature as process is open and adaptable. It is selfless. Tom Batuska and Gerald Young explored the interface between aesthetics and ecology finding, “They [unity, balance, integration, and harmony] are working properties of a natural system; they must be there if that system is to function. The works of man become unaesthetic with these needed properties are ignored; nature becomes unaesthetic when human manipulation destroys the resulting complex fabric.”²³ The architect, Eliel Saarinen says something similar, “...in

nature, art is synonymous with health and lack of art is synonymous with unhealth.”²⁴

Most completed design or art objects are static. Environmental artist, Alan Sonfist, has created *Time Landscape for New York*, which Architect, Michael McDonough describes as, “stand[ing] in contra-distinction to the manmade city around it, making tangible the wilderness that once flourished there and offering the complex processes of the natural environment as an alternative to the monolithic urban imagery.”²⁵ Saarinen is hopeful, “...mechanization [=urbanization?] of the human mind will turn-when the time is ripe-into humanization of the mechanized mind. Form is bound to follow the same metamorphosis.”²⁶ The seeming chaos of Nature is just that. It is an illusion. Form and pattern exist, yet to simply extract that pattern from nature destroys its complexity. This is why Fowles urges “Seeing Nature Whole.”²⁷ One might think of Nature of as a pattern of patterns, a process; what the late Gregory Bateson calls a “meta-pattern.”²⁸ In this approach to design, true process can help reunify man and nature by mediating a dialectic between form and nature. This occurs as design moves from fixed to fluid, from “non-site” to “site” from building to landscape and from selfish form to selfless nature.

¹ Marx, Leo. 1964. *The Machine in the Garden*. Oxford University Press. NY. NY. 392 pp

² Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*. Doubleday. NY. NY. 231 pp p.21

³ Fowles, John. 1979. “Seeing Nature Whole” *Harpers*. November pp 48-69

⁴ Shepard, Paul 1968 *Man in the Landscape: A Historical View of the Esthetics of Nature...* Alfred Knopf NY. NY.

⁵ Thompson, William Irwin 1988. Remarks at The Land Institute. September 23 Salina KS. (also see Thompson, William Irwin, 1988. *Pacific Shift*. Sierra Club Books S.F. CA. 197 pp.)

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- ⁶ Friedman, Kenneth S. 1983. "Words on the Environment" In *Art in the Land*. Alan Sonfist (Ed.) Dutton NY. NY. 274 pp p. 256.
- ⁷ Bloomer, Carolyn, 1976, *Principles of Visual Presection*. Van Nostrand Rheinhold. NY. NY 148 pp. p. 65.
- ⁸ See Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects* Also see Alexander Christopher. 1964. *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*. Chapter 4
- ⁹ Mann Dennis Alan. 1985. *Between Traditionalism and Modernism: Arrpoches to Vernacular Architecture*. *Journal of Architectural Education* Winter 39(2):10-16. p. 14.
- ¹⁰ Friedman, op cit. p. 255.
- ¹¹ Tatibian, jivan. 1976 *Remarks at the International Design Conference at Aspen*.
- ¹² Rapoport, Amos and Robert Kantor, 1967. "Complexity and Ambiguity in Environmental Design" *J AIP* . July 33(4):p 210
- ¹³ Arnhiem, Rudolf. 1951 "Gestalt Psychology and Artistic Form: In *Aspects of Form*. Lancelot Law Whyte (Ed.) Indiana Press. Bloomington, IN 249 pp p.206.
- ¹⁴ Condon, Patrick, 1988. "Cubist Sapce, Volumetric Space and Landscape Architecture" *Landscape Journal* 7 (1): 1-14. p. 1
- ¹⁵ Arnhiem, op cit, p. 208.
- ¹⁶ Mann. Op cit, p. 14
- ¹⁷ McDonorgh, Michael. 1983. "Architecture's Unnoticed Avant-Garde" In *Art in the Land*. Alan Sonfist (Ed.) Dutton NY. NY. 274 pp p.242
- ¹⁸ Gussow, Alan. 1980. In "The Artists and the American Land" Video, Cultural Affairs Unit, Nebraska Educational Television. Lincoln, NE. 60 minutes.
- ¹⁹ Smithson, Robert 1969. In Lawrence Alloway, "Robert Smithson's Development" In *Art in the Land*. Alan Sonfist (Ed.) Dutton NY. NY. 274 pp p130
- ²⁰ Steinitz, Carl 1979. "The Trouble with a Strong Concept, Fully Worked Out" Letter to Landscape Architecture November 69 (6) 565.
- ²¹ Halprin, Lawrence 1972. *Lawrence Halprin Notebooks 1959-1972*. MIT Press. Cambridge, MA 377 pp. P.81.
- ²² Miller, Joe 1980. In "The Artist and the American Land" Video, Cultural Affairs Unit, Nebraska Educational Television. Lincoln, NE. 60 minutes.
- ²³ Bartuska, Tom and Gerald Young. 1975. "Aesthetics and Ecology:Notes on the Circle and the Sphere" *Journal of Aesthetic Educationo*. July 9(3): 78-91. p. 83.
- ²⁴ Saarinen, Eliel, 1948. *Search for Form*. Rheinhold. NY., N.Y. 3534 pp. p.27
- ²⁵ McDonough, op cit. p. 238.
- ²⁶ Saarinen, op cit, p. 323.
- ²⁷ Fowles, op cit,
- ²⁸ Bateson, Gregory 1979. *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. Bantam MY. MY. 259 pp p.128.