

The Representation of Making in Urban Form

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"The art of progress is to preserve
order amidst change and change
amidst order"

-Alfred North Whitefield

A concern for the order of urban form persists and is growing. In some cases this awareness has created new opportunities to establish or re-establish urban forms that have a great deal of value. In other instances a new formalism has come about which is as self-referential and abstract as the modernism it seeks to replace. This formalism suggests that the qualitative improvement of the urban condition can be made by creating a "reflection" of an existing context, much as the preservationists movement would have us believe. This insubstantial tendency exists regardless of whether the attitude is classical or eclectic, because both refer to traditions which came to fruition under very different conditions of culture. Lacking this rootedness in culture form is separated and disjointed from a basic sense of its content or meaning.

Little attention has been given to the role played by the seemingly less significant process than making plays in shaping the character of an urban place. Sadly, little has been said about relating theories of architecture to the actual process of building. Even less is said about this effect on the aggregating of buildings into urban patterns. In contrast to the heroic singular vision, urban form can be seen as a profound, persistent and collective-

ly motivated human condition. Urbanism attains greater dignity when it reveres the life of those who are its makers. A maker is here defined as anyone who contributes order to a place by even the small act of placing of a flower in a window along a street or the mason whose nuances in texture and shadow contribute to the character of the street. These are the most basic, but in many ways, the strongest memories of a place, and they set the basis for an overall order. Conversely, many times the tyranny of an order negates the participation of smaller individual makers, and lacking their contribution, the best of urban compositions become empty shells, void and innocuous. In these terms more value is given to the expression of architecture as an activity of culture than to the effects that architecture has as a determinant of culture.

It has become difficult to maintain a belief in the progress of society. On one hand we have the severe orders which Wallace Stevens has called a disorder, and although not wholly the purvey of political or military regimes, the inflexibility of preservation based tenets or singular visionary schemes remain a severe order. On the other hand change for the sake of change without the respect for the orderly progression of a culture has

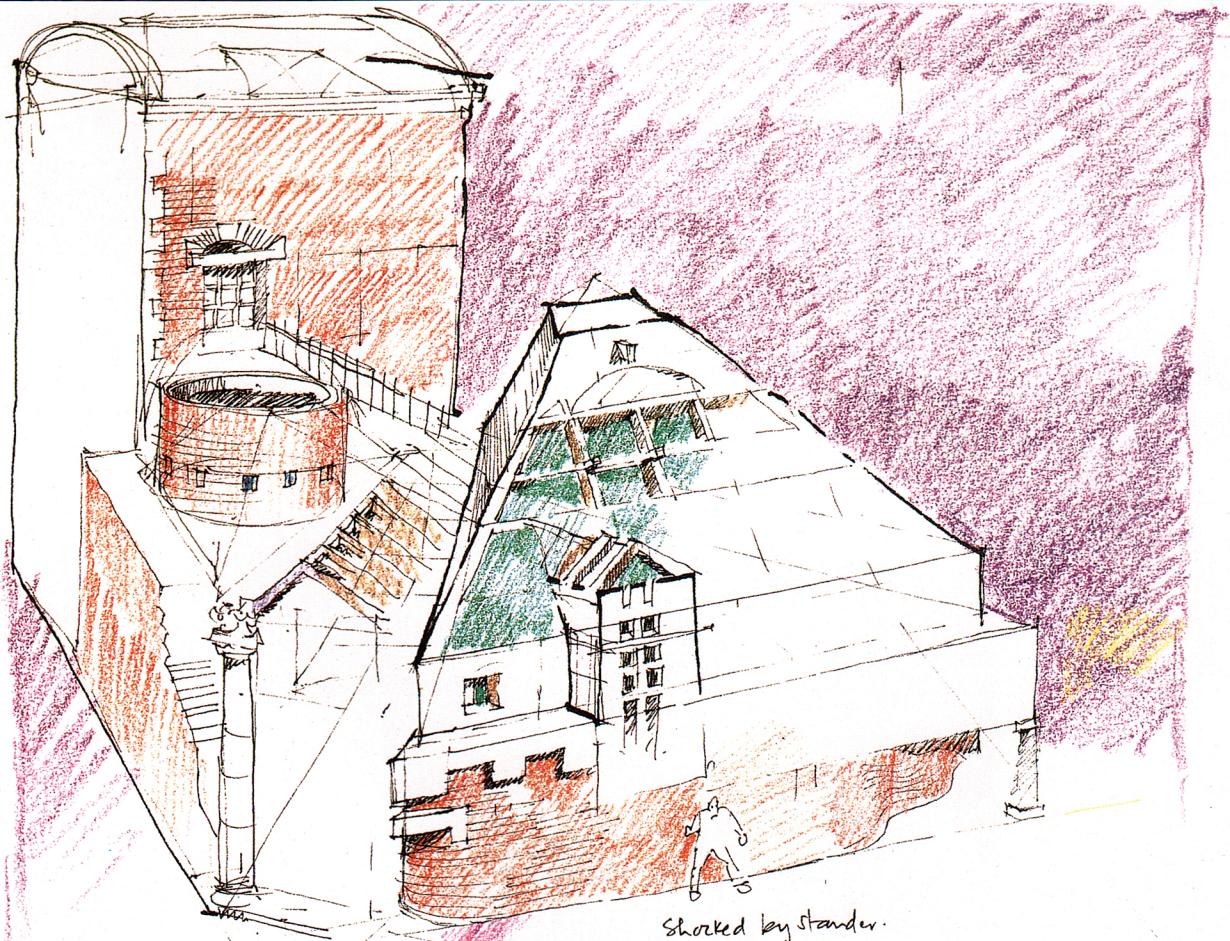
always plagued architects, who, for lack of content, indulge in the whims of fashion. This seems to be the field of modern and post-modern practice.

These drawings for a residential project in the Boston urban context seek to understand by close observation the anatomical structure of building rather than its cloak. Here is an attempt to understand building as a continuous and active pursuit in the refinement of a culture. It seeks to understand building as an equal privilege and responsibility of authorities, architects, workman, and dwellers. Within this framework the notions of materials, methods, scale and the expression become central to understanding patterns of building.

How then does one make a positive contribution to the progressive ideals of a culture yet avoid the grasping at straws of fashionable cycles? What things must engage our minds and actions in setting out on a supportable but progressive path? In *Mackintosh Architecture*, Barbera Bernard introduces the concept of "absorbition." It is not imitation, it is not reference, nor adoption or reflection. It is a fundamental act of re-creation as a creative force. A breathing of new life into old forms through the creative process of

association. The focus is on the process of creating by association or reference rather than the formal representation of such references. In this sense it is vital to respect the sense of order for it is the source of inspiration in the process of giving a newness yet stability, to urban forms. Along with Mackintosh's strong connection to naturalistic things Bernard recounts the indebted qualities of his work to the Scottish Baronial tradition. Mackintosh is never slavishly bound to this order but progressively recreates fresh, new, and lively architecture.

Drawing is a companionable tool in the process of absorbing a context and simultaneously testing the latent potentials that it has for the present. It is a means of coming to terms with the cultural process which makes individual buildings and urban patterns. The design process through representation should be directed and informed by the language of making. Not by dogmatically following the conventions of processes which would merely yield more "authentic" imitations, but by questioning and challenging their limits and validity the process of absorbition and creation begins.



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