

An Interview with Kenneth Frampton

Oz Editors

How do the qualities of a particular tectonic system determine the lasting tangible implications of a building? In particular, we are interested in the contrast between buildings which may seek a level of monumentality versus those which are constructed of an intrinsically articulated system.

This question raises the issue of durability in both a physical and a cultural sense. Normally, we associate durability with traditional heavy materials such as, marble and granite; hence, there is an unavoidable association between the monumental and durable. It is conceivable, however, that one can build out of high quality industrial materials and also attain considerable durability. Under certain conditions very well made wooden buildings are also durable particularly if they are maintained. Today there is an ecological aspect to durability; hence the ethic that one should not design and realize buildings that are disposable. To this one may add the spiritual and cultural dimension of tradition, as something that is indispensable to sustaining the continuity of a place and its sense of identity. The tectonic plays a role in

terms of determining the quality through the way in which it is built.

Do you see any problems today of architects attempting to create amortizable buildings which do not seem to have a particular age, and eventually become worn instead of well aged?

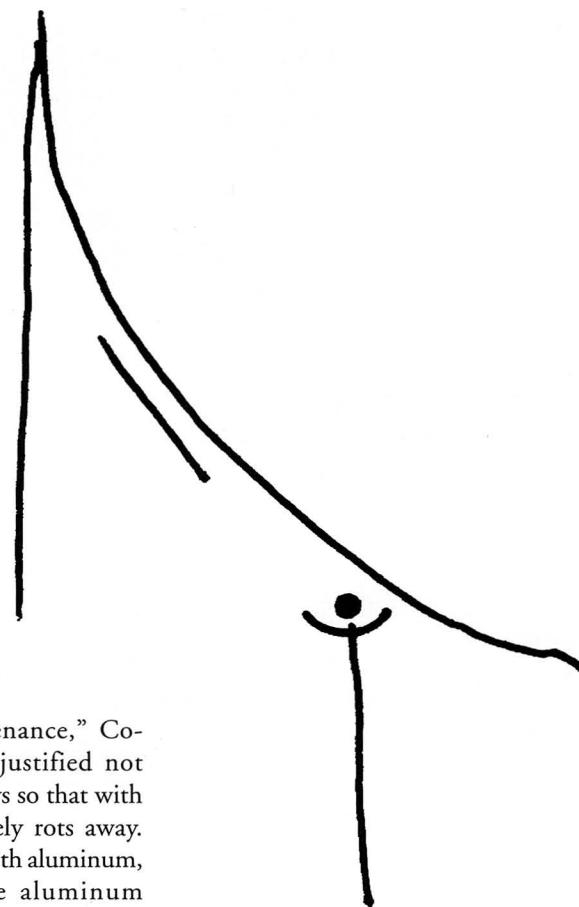
Well, of course I do. One could say that this is a real issue about amortization, namely that the buildings become reduced to commodities. There is this phrase by Auguste Perret, "Architecture is that which makes beautiful ruins," but I think we may approach the same consideration in a more pragmatic way. It is regrettable that today almost as soon as a building is completed it starts to deteriorate. Japanese lightweight vernacular is an interesting contrast to this in as much as it is a rather temporary building culture, which has long life because it is constantly maintained or restored. The fact that it was made of fragile material did not mean that it was impermanent. This was a vernacular culture that was at one time alive by virtue of being maintained regularly.

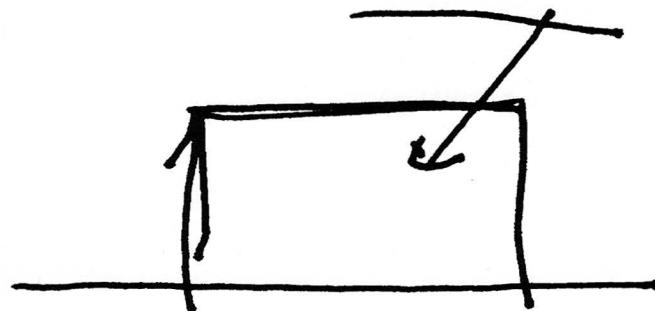
The question of maintenance is an ethical issue. By virtue of the Orwellian

phrase "delayed maintenance," Columbia University has justified not painting wooden windows so that with time the wood completely rots away. Then you replace wood with aluminum, since theoretically the aluminum window is maintenance-free. Needless to say, this compromises the character of the original building.

Could you discuss your ideas on the relevancy of time, specifically as a cyclical process, and its effects on the materiality of built objects and how we relate to them.

I assume you are referring to the way in which buildings weather over time and the way landscape changes in relation to built form and the extent to which contemporary architects do or do not take these factors into account. Apparently, Kahn's Richards Laboratories are currently in a ruinous shape. This is partly due to the fact that they were disliked by the user from the very beginning. Perhaps for justifiable reasons, because Kahn in his idealism didn't interpret a scientific laboratory in an appropriate way. We may say that he over "monumentalized" the form. The consequent antipathy of the user led to the neglect of the building, and I





suppose there will be a crisis in a few years time when they will have to choose between restoring the building or demolishing it.

As far as registering the passage of time is concerned, I've always been impressed with the fact that Jørn Utzon planted trees around his Bagsvaerd Church at his own expense. I believe that this church still doesn't fully exist even though it has now been standing for some twenty years. It is gradually approaching the time when it will be complete, when the trees will have grown to their full height in which case the entire building will then sit within a screen of trees.

Looking at time and architecture, Aalto's Villa Mairea can be seen as a subtle dialogue between modernism and traditionalism. Following that line of thinking, one might ask not how a building receives time, but how a building is received by time, in terms of tradition and, perhaps, the present modern movements.

It is difficult to be precise about how a building changes across time because the ways we look at the environment is also subject to temporal change. For

instance, there is this endless talk today about the undeniable power of media. However it seems to me that the net effect of the media is to distance ourselves from reality still further. The Villa Mairea was consciously suspended between modernity and tradition from the very beginning. It is clear that Aalto never embraced the idea of a fundamentally avant gardist rupture between the new and the old. Thus, the syntax of the Villa Mairea is a hybrid between the abstraction of modernity and concrete dimension of the vernacular. However it is totally integrated; it is neither one nor the other. It is a re-interpretation, a different repetition.

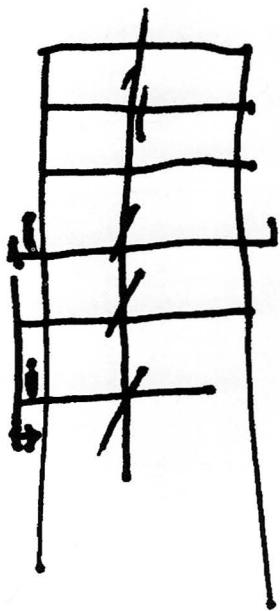
Aalto said that tradition should be a springboard for innovation, do you agree with this statement?

I agree with Hans Georg Gadamer's contention that there is no innovation without tradition and no tradition without innovation. Tradition has to be culturally renewed, but you cannot create significantly without tradition. Certain modern ideologies are absolutely obsessed with rupture, where tradition is to be discarded, but

it seems to me that a constant re-interpretation of tradition is what culture is ultimately about.

Many buildings of the past, which at one time had a very specific use, are now being renovated to fit completely new uses. Do you feel that a building loses a great deal of its spirit when it is adapted in this way?

There was a period, not long ago, when one early twentieth to late nineteenth century building after another became abandoned and seemingly the only possible re-use was to turn it into a museum. This soon degenerated into the ridiculous business of inventing types of museums which had no real fundamental justification. One cannot turn every building into a museum and moreover, when you do transform certain buildings into museums, you kill them. Converting a railroad station into a casino or something of the sort when there are no more trains virtually destroys the building. The primary example of this is Union Station, Washington. They abandoned the building and left the trains outside under wooden sheds for years. Then they decided to restore the building but they never fully re-integrated the trains. The



monument has now been turned into a mega-shopping precinct, into a café and consumer building. Thus, the building is 'saved,' while its spirit has been destroyed.

Would you agree with Kant when he said that the building is purposeful without purpose, not in the same way as post-modernist theory, but in the idea of adapted use?

I don't believe that the concept of being purposeful without a purpose really applies to architecture. I think the way in which society appropriates a building and inhabits it is an integral part of what it is in cultural terms. As we have noted, you can now, up to a point, adapt a building to new uses and it will survive but only if it is enthusiastically consummated by society in its new form.

What about an example such as Terragni's Casa del Fascio in Como, where the building was bound to a radical use which no longer exists, but the building is still regarded as an exceptional piece of architecture?

Well, it is still occupied by a paramilitary body, which is what the police force

really is, so there is a kind of ironic correspondence between the Fascist party for which it was designed and the police force which uses it today. The second point is that Como has remained a very urban city, despite twentieth century development. The square between the Duomo and the Casa Del Fascio remains a civic space so that the original reciprocity between building and urban space remains. Moreover, the institutional opposition between spiritual and secular power is also present. Obviously, many factors sustain the culture of a building in relation to the environment for which it was designed.

Wittgenstein said the meaning lies in the use. Is this a statement that you would agree with?

Well, this would certainly follow from what I have already said. For a building to remain alive it has to be cultivated by the society. However, I don't want to reduce architecture to vulgar functionalism where one determines its significance according to whether it works or not. Wittgenstein probably didn't mean this in any case. How a building is maintained and used

expresses its cultural potential. There are sad situations in which almost immediately after a building is completed it gets to be misused and this is not always the architect's fault. One thinks of Hans Sedylmayr who wrote "the appreciation of a work presupposes adequate intentions."

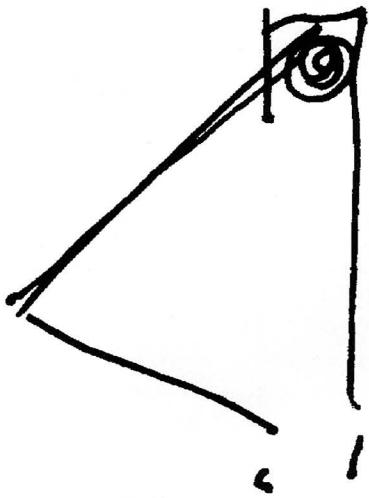
What about an example of a building which no longer exists in a physical sense but the conceptual ideas surrounding the building maintain a great deal of relevancy to current architectural discourse?

Well, we could also consider unbuilt projects and the way in which these continue to contribute to the culture of architecture. I think this is particularly true in the case of Jørn Utzon whose total output includes many brilliant projects that were never realized. The same could also be said of Le Corbusier. Consistently one would also have to concede that demolished buildings, depending on their quality, may possess a similar conceptual power which is still part of the contemporary legacy. Wright's long demolished Larkin Building is a case in point.



Has the programming of a building become increasingly important in the last three or four decades, given the way that building types have changed so rapidly?

As far as programming is concerned your question makes me think of hospitals. In the early 1970s, the medical profession began to insist that every other floor should be a full height interstitial floor. So, if there are eight floors of wards, there would then be some sixteen stories altogether. This created a situation where most architects of caliber felt that hospitals were an impossible problem; that you could no longer render a hospital as a piece of architecture. When a client subscribes to maximizing criteria, these values can force an entire building out of balance. From 1890 to 1950, the hospital was a building that embodied the apotheosis of the modern project. The status of the hospital as a civic and cultural institution was the driving force behind a generally progressive vision. Indeed we could say that a hospital used to embody a "welfare state" in essence. Of course, programming is important but this does not change the fundamental potential of an institution although, as I have indicated it may inhibit its emergence.



In the final paragraph of the introductory chapter of your book 'Studies in Tectonic Culture' you state, "The task of our time is to combine vitality with calm." How do you see this synthesis within the context of the increasingly dynamic nature of our world, which is inspired by both the real digital technology and also the kind of idealized reality that you spoke about earlier?

At the risk of being dismissed as a conservative, I would like to re-state a remark I once made to the effect that architecture is anachronistic, and that this is its virtue. I am in sympathy with Aldo Van Eyck when he says, "What antiquarians and technocrats have in common is a sentimental attitude towards time. Antiquarians are sentimental about the past and technocrats are sentimental about the future." He ends by saying, "So let's start with the past for a change and discover the unchanging condition of man." While the average life expectancy has greatly increased over recent years, I don't think the fundamental condition of our existence has really changed, except negatively in as much as the natural environment becomes increasingly polluted. In terms of the basic

experiences of life, birth, death and the fundamental experiences of pleasure or pain life remains much the same. The myth of progress cannot be believed in, in the naive way in which it once was. On the other hand, the modern project in the sense in which Baudelaire referred to it; the ideal state of "*luxe, calme et volupté*" remains an unrealized condition. At the same time we cannot claim that technology, in general, has not brought human beings benefits.

One of the virtues of architecture is that it makes one very aware of the influence of ideology, because you encounter it directly in the making of things. Where in other fields it is possible to go down a particular path without questioning values, in architecture this is impossible. Scientists, preoccupied with progress, are not usually very reflective about the relationship of progress to what is going on in the society as a whole.

We would like to conclude this interview by posing the fundamental question of this year's journal to you. What gives a building substance in time?

I often think that the greatest weaknesses of late twentieth century architecture

occurs at the level of micro-space. If you look at the carefully modulated works from earlier in this century, you will find a very careful consideration of micro-space; exactly the way the storage facilities are provided and exactly how these storage facilities are detailed, and so on, or let us say, exactly the way a window opening is placed in relation to the enclosed volume and how ventilation and sun screening are articulated. One thinks in this regard of the work of Eileen Gray who understood only too well what was meant by the term "poetry of equipment." This issue of shielding the building from the sun is often a very weak aspect in late modern architecture. For example, the earlier use of roller canvas blinds to protect a window opening. These were used in the nineteenth century and again during the first four decades of the twentieth. Today, however, this is a lost art; however they are still a device which provides for enormous flexibility in terms of sun control.

Sketches courtesy of Kenneth Frampton.

