Architecture and Time—Time in Architecture

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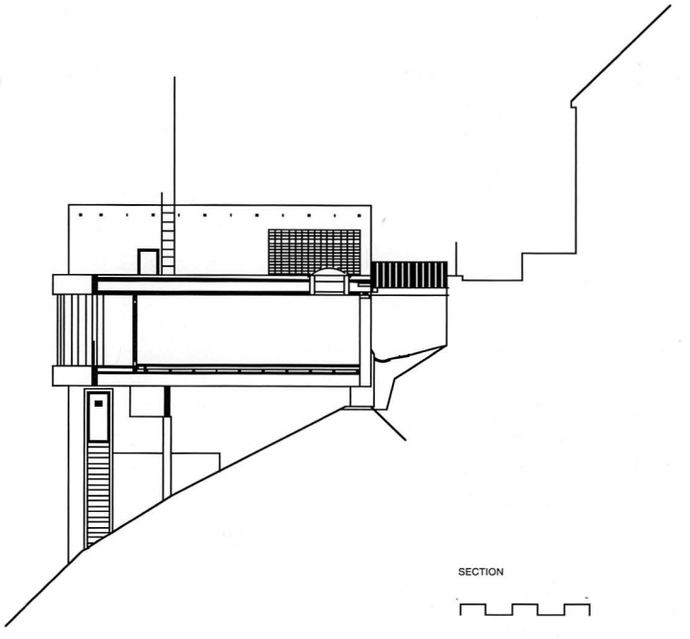

Time is a physical quantity that has perpetually challenged humankind. A meter will always be a meter, and a kilo a kilo, but time can in many ways be interpreted as a relative term. In our contemporary world, many common devices are intricately related to time; the computer, the radio, the phone, and the television for example. We are often succeptable to an illusion that the more accurately we measure and define time, the easier it will be to control it. The truth is actually quite to the contrary. Our fixation with measuring time in seconds, minutes and hours only further removes us from reality. The concept of perceiving time as a physical quantity has shifted time outside of the boundaries of its real effects that can be naturally perceived by humans. We have lost the real sense of time and how it effects our surroundings and ourselves.

While human being's biological time passes in months and years, the time of buildings, and that of architecture, generally passes in decades and centuries. Apparently, we are no longer able to perceive this inconsistency. Quite often, we design buildings as if for the sake of an "appearance on stage." Disregarding the construction period, when a building is completed it is suddenly "discovered" and officially brought to life. Apart from the intention to publicize, which is understandable, the act contains traces of a defamation of the society, which, with its inherent superficiality, is simply looking for more and more provender to feed a voracious media. And the architect? The architect often joins the game, despite being very well aware that this pristine moment is just the beginning of the building's life.

We admire the structures of the past and all of the tortuous narrow streets of ancient cities without fully understanding the aging process that has helped to render them beautiful. For these structures and cities, time seems to pass in a different dimension. In contrast to this, many buildings of our time, which are initially admired, are in need of costly refurbishment within a relatively short period of time. The gleaming exteriors age poorly and the elaborate details quickly decay.

Apart from the outer physical time, there is also an inner moral time, which often produces even more ruthlessly negative effects on the structure. One of the vital features of a structure is that the non-living vessel, the time of which passes in centuries, is filled with a "living" content, such as people, furniture, and machines, whose time is limited to years and decades. Understanding and respecting this fact will add another dimension to the building culture that is collectively referred to as architecture.

What are the ways of harmonizing the outer and the inner time of a building in an architectural design? The key lies in understanding the fundamentals of the physical and moral aging of the

structure and in accepting the fact that a building is a non–living being that undergoes a development of its own.

In addition to the inner and outer time of a structure, which is in more or less specific to each building, there is something which may be called universal time—the time by which the civilization and all its components are aging. Universal time governs the countdown to extinction of buildings that have not yet been built. This universal time particularly effects the process of the continuous aging of cities. Every city gets older, irrespective of the number of newly completed buildings and kilometers of newly constructed motorways. Any endeavor made in an effort to avoid the aging of a city is strained and unnatural. I believe that understanding the city and its age is one of the most difficult tasks for any architect or city planner. This is particularly relevant to buildings in historic portions of European cities. There are many poor examples, such as the perpetually renewed front walls of old buildings in Germany and Austria that give an impression of dolled–up tarts. By contrast, in some instances Italians intentionally add patina to their buildings.

Is it possible to make the above approach to building design more generally applicable? Perhaps it should be added that the aging of a building (like that of humans) is a structured process. Meaning that aging of separate parts of a building is not alike—in both moral and physical terms. The architect should strive to become familiar with this "structure of aging" and to put it in consonance with the "structure of construction." When designing a building, it is important to attempt functional zoning of the house and to carefully select materials to be used with regard to the aging of the building and its parts therein.

I have decided to support these reflections with some notes on a family home currently under construction in Plzen. The house is divided vertically and horizontally into zones that feature the structural and functional logic and also the logic of time. The house is composed of two distinct components a tower, and a bridge.

The tower portion of the house provides for the functional contact of the house with its surroundings (the main entrance) as well as the staircase and the utility distribution systems. In short, the tower contains spaces who's moral aging is comparatively slow. The selection of construction materials corresponds with this concept; brick and reinforced concrete.

Contrastly, the bridge is dedicated to living proper. It has been designed entirely as glue laminated timber construction with light partition walls. This structural design allows the part of the house to "live" together with inhabitants. Wood, being a living material, is used extensively.

Natural aging of the house is preconceived by surface finishes and the colors of the individual structural parts. The wood has been stained with several layers of color, to give a resulting light gray color of timber, bleached in the sun and worn with water. Flashing of the roof and the front door have been designed of titan-zinc sheets that age in a completely natural way. Exterior steel structures are galvanized, while the interior structural pieces will be sand blasted and saturated with a colorless varnish.

The permanent effects of time over the course of years has also been accounted for in the ground and garden arrangement. Short walls, of stone, laid freely one upon another, fixed in place with wire netting, will be fitted into the slope. Eventually, this wall too will become enveloped with growth.