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Designers' Objects

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Introduction

Buildings, especially great buildings, represent religions, nations and ideas. They embody and symbolize; as cultural artefacts they yield insights into that culture. Great buildings embody styles, traditions, types of buildings, ways of building, and even specific architects or firms. Buildings also evoke feelings and ideas that build on each person's experience, knowledge and skills, serving as a means to externalize, to reify an individual's own sense of the world and identity in the world. Buildings tell stories about themselves, their materials, their methods of assembly, their relationship to their locale; and they provide opportunities for contemplation, enjoyment, and inspiration that is independent of cultural or personal reference.

For some time I have puzzled over how, through their own processes of design, architects and designers may enhance the possibilities of creating meaning in all these different senses. In this chapter I have chosen to look at the things they make along the way of design. These things include drawings and other artefacts, both physical and digital. I have chosen to call them "objects" in order to emphasize seeing them in their own right, as well as in their more restricted role in approximating the final artefact.

What, then, is the relation between the objects the designer makes along the way of design and the last or ultimate object that results? The brief answer is intimate and independent. The relation is intimate in the sense that the objects are all made within the framework of a singular quest, that they may share similar properties, and may resemble one another. The relation is intimate

in that objects along the way are intermediate with respect to the ultimate aim of the quest and are, therefore, a part of the evolving nature of the final artefact. The relation is independent in the sense that each object is made out of materials and methods of assembly that are specific to it, along with the associated crafts and skills. It stands to be examined in its own right for its own implications and meanings, regardless of what the designer is trying to achieve ultimately.

In their independence the objects along the way of design can assume the full significance of any object. They can embody, symbolize, and mean in ways that are identical to the cultural artefacts we identify as buildings or paintings or other “finished” works. They can be as carefully made, as beautifully conceived. In their fullness as objects in their own right, they serve to explore and express ideas that may or may not resemble or denote the ultimate design, ideas that nevertheless may play an important role in the creative process.

The interior designer’s collage of materials and colours on a board has nothing to do directly with the geometry or functional layout of the space; it is meant both to convey the particulars of the finished surfaces and also to evoke the mood and character of the space and the resulting multiplicity of associations that can result. Another object along the way of design might be a narrative portrayal of an hour in the life of a proposed place of work, emphasizing the experience of those who work there, as well as the place-specific particulars that support and enable that experience.

Objects Made During Design

I see architectural production consisting of a series of objects. They mediate between the earliest thought and the finished building. Conventionally seen, the primary role of these objects is one of representation. But this is a restricted type of “representation.” They are intended, from rough and early ideas, to represent the finished building with increasing accuracy. Their type varies between resemblance and specification. The accuracy may be visual, in creating a view of the building that will be identical with that view when the building is finished; or the accuracy may be dimensional in order that the contractor may know exactly the locations and sizes of the elements.

In contrast with their role in this type of representation, the making of objects for exploration is less widely appreciated. For designers, it can open up areas of creative potential in ways that the first role may not. In this chapter I stress how integral such objects are to the process of design enquiry and, in particular, how they enhance the architect’s quest for meaning. Thus objects may be created that are not integral to the production of the building, yet are integral to the cultivation of ideas that relate to the building. It is the expressive content of these objects, as well as their representational link to the building, that makes them valuable to the designer as well as to others with whom the designer must communicate.

Exploration may be personal, to reinforce one’s sense of the place, for example, to relate one’s own size dimensionally to the place, to sense more vividly the geometry of a place through bodily actions and gestures, to sense the texture and feel of particular materials through touch, sight, and smell. It