Form and Process in the Transformation of the Architect's Role in Society

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This chapter describes how the stance of the architect relative to the culture of production changed over time, and how that change has affected the quality of the built world. The profession of architecture as we know it today emerged during the nineteenth century, as the process of designing buildings split from the process of building them. This split changed the nature of the design process itself, resulting in a profession in which the intuitive judgment that was once central to the architect's ability to respond directly to design issues as they arose individually is no longer present. The chapter concludes with a description of how recent theoretical work into the relationships between the creative design/building activity and the quality of the built world provide a basis for challenging the dominant paradigm governing architectural practice.

1 The Question of Process

Most architectural criticism is concerned with questions of the building itself: its form, aesthetics, the way it functions, how it fits or does not fit its context, how it contributes or does not contribute to a sustainable world. Such criticism often assumes that the architect is a neutral agent, and that indeed, what the architect does has not changed over history. "Architects" built the Parthenon; "architects" built Chartres; architects practice today, so they must all have been doing the same thing. Although historians often see the Renaissance as the time when the modern architect emerged, there is relatively little discussion of what this actually meant to the form of the built environment, of how the architects' actual processes of working affected buildings.

There was for example a time when people believed that the Gothic cathedral was the product of craftsmen who were acting completely intuitively, even without drawings, and that was to be contrasted with the rationality of the Renaissance and everything that came after – except perhaps the minor revolt of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

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The reality is more complex. There were indeed explicit rules that guided the design of the cathedrals, and these were understood by the architects, who happened also to be master masons. And these architects did drawings, many of them. But the drawings were not all done preceding the beginning of construction, as has been the practice for large buildings for over a hundred years now. The design of the cathedral was done hand-in-hand with its construction, so drawings were produced as they were needed, in the context of what had already been built. This was necessary for a building that might take many decades to build, and that would be built by different teams of masons each of which had a subtly different way of building, of cutting stone, of shaping details, within the overall canon of Gothic building. The context was one of gradual change of both the builders and the building over the decades it took to build the cathedral. There were different clients, different masons available, and money drying up and then coming from new sources. (James, 1982) Yet all of this was happening within overall shared understandings of what the building would be, in its style and general form, when it was completed. However, the detailed final form of the building was unpredictable at the beginning. This could happen partly because building was on a pay-as-you-go basis. There was no general contract, no general bid, no thought of specifying the building down to the last door handle before the first spade of earth had even been turned over.

Architects today operate very differently. The most critical difference is that, because of the general contractor, and the general contract, and therefore the need for a bid, the building has to be specified completely before construction. This means that the architect has to predict details without having the context of the building itself to work in. To the extent that the design activity itself represents this kind of prediction, the architect is a designer. But most of the architect's work is completely separate from the activity of building. Where before, the architect's primary role was involvement in the building site, now the standard architectural fee has 1.5% of the cost of the building for something called "construction administration", an activity that follows design.

So the medieval architect and the modern architect each had or has overall responsibility for the form of the building, and each made or makes lots of drawings which if put together specify the building. But the processes they engage in are different. The activities of one, the medieval architect, are intimately woven in with the construction activity, and those of the other, the modern architect, are separate from it.

As will be elaborated later in this chapter, the practice of architecture today has aspects that are guided by artistic innovation, as well as aspects that are normative, or guided by rules that lie outside the control of the architect. Those two sides of the architect's work have always co-existed. Increasingly during the nineteenth century, however, the shared social understandings that had formed the basis of normative practice changed under the impact of industrialization, and became rules that were more technologically determined. The bulk of the built environment has always been made up of buildings that are largely the result of normative practice rather than dominated by artistic innovation.