

J. Carter Brown 1982 Laureate Kevin Roche Essay

On Architecture
by J. Carter Brown

Architecture. Why does it fascinate us so, and why is quality in it so elusive?

We supposedly are in control of what we build, and yet what we build takes us over. We walk around it, through it, it dominates our peripheral vision, our feeling of space and volume, our ultimate sense of well-being or lack of it. To experience it involves the dimension of time. Its very scale prohibits us from ignoring it. No other art form can compete on these terms. Pictures, sculpture, even earthworks, certainly no musical composition or piece of poetry or drama played out on stage, screen or tube, can command the sheer presence nor the sense of weightiness and weightlessness that architecture provides.

Folk buildings, architecture without architects, can often qualify to the highest levels of our built inheritance. Yet everything around us that gives us shelter and therefore security had to be designed by someone.

But so much of what we see is mediocre at best. Why is the art of architecture so difficult?

The basic explanation lies in the number of masters that architecture must serve. The poet at his writing table, the painter at his easel has before him an almost limitless freedom. The architect, however, has a client, be it individual or collective. There are constraints, not only financial, but in program, use, and in the very engineering fiber of what will or will not stand and withstand forces bent on sooner or later destroying it.

Constraints can often help. As Chairman of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, reviewing architectural proposals month after month, I have often watched designs improve as the result of budgetary stringency. Sometimes one can only wish that Vitruvius could have had his way, when he proposed a neat system of fining the architect in proportion to cost overruns. Sometimes, however, the client is better served the other way. The values of the society are what make the ultimate decisions. Philip Johnson likes to point to what must have been the percentage of the gross national product of the city-state of Athens that was allocated to the design of the Parthenon. In the renaissance, when Bernardo Rossellino was commissioned by Pope Pius II to design the town of Pienza and spend 18,000 ducats, the bill came in at 55,000. Whereat the enlightened pontiff remarked, "Now that I have seen it, it is worth all that and more."

Constraints are not just money. There is a sinew of realism in architecture. The engineering must work; the heating and ventilating in an increasingly energy conscious world must come out right; people and things must get in and out and move through it commodiously; it must work for emergencies; it must work often as part of the larger fabric of urban design in which it stands.

Theophile Gauthier once wrote: "*L'art sort plus bel d'un forem au travail rebel,*" or, roughly, "Art comes out more beautiful if from a refractory medium."

In a period when the romantic vision of the artist in his garret still haunts us with the drama of the persecuted avant garde, the architect of our own day has to work more in the framework of the great old master painters and sculptors and composers who had missions to fulfill and clients to please. The resulting constraints often unleash creativity by freeing the artist, paradoxically, from the paralysis of unlimited choice.

J. Carter Brown, 1982 Laureate Kevin Roche (continued)

Constraints need not preclude diversity. At this moment, the variety of architectural expression around the world is healthily profuse. Ultimately, it is not the style that matters, but the quality with which that style is practiced. We are lucky today to have so much ferment in the world of architectural thought. But mere faddishness is no boon to standards.

The world deserves more architecture of the quality recognized by the Pritzker prize. The hope of all of us concerned with the prize is that, by example, a raising of the standards will come about, on the part both of the architects, and of the clients, whose constraints and opportunities can help make great and inspiring architecture happen.

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