

Architecture and ...

When architecture is defined in schools and training academies as “one of the professions,” the drive to pare down its meanings to the bare essentials in order to add sequential embellishments according to specifications imposed to optimize the performance of graduates who become intern-workers for corporate employers, the main casualty is architecture itself as a *locus* or *topoi*, a point among many points in the (humanist) constellation of ideas that, ideally related in the minds of the educated, constituted the *quadriua* and *trivia* — the arts of knowing and communicating.

In its stripped-down version, architecture is re-tooled through the devices of “architecture-and.” Architecture is compared to a number of seemingly distant topics and practices: music, film, social science, the history of cities, sustainability ... the lists are well known by any who have taught or been educated by such institutions where the stripping-down is standard procedure.

The main observation of course is that architecture has not been reduced to an essential core meaning in the stripping process. Rather, it has been emptied out entirely of whatever cultural components have made it, primarily, a human art, a component of life that, with or without professional architects, is key to the civic quality of subjectivity — the relation of human sociability to spatial and temporal organization. It is as if the cleaned-up version of architecture has had its essential amino acids removed so that any one cell is incapable of mitosis, defense, or organic function.

The “architecture and...” model seems ready to add back a wealth of relations to the eviscerated core idea, but the stripped-down version has nothing to hold on to these new associations. It is, in some versions, a reduced idea of functionality; in others, variants of style tossed around by public taste and history. The sanitized core is defined ideologically, however. What goes into its definition is related specifically to the institutional uses intended for the outcomes; better for ideology that the definition be “enigmatic,” or better, “impossible to say.” Put on hold in this way, any student is likely to move quickly to the next step, adding back some meaning that seems to avoid the issue of “pure meaning” of the core by seeking a practical attachment that provides architecture with something good to do for society.

Academic representatives of the “theory and history of architecture” rarely fight back because the subtraction-then-addition process offers so many opportunities to develop one’s career through specialization that the daunting issue of architecture’s “essence” seems suicidal by comparison. Accepting the consensus is prerequisite to entering the society of those enlisted to support the professional aims of the architecture program. The essence question is stigmatizing. One is in danger of becoming an “intellectual,” a “philosopher” — terms used to define an unacceptable margin limiting sociability and, hence, successful advance.

The alternative to “architecture-and” is, however, compelled to address this question of essence. Although there are many paths to the question, there is not a relativists framework for allowing the architecture-and mentality to come in by the back door. Like all questions about essence — which, no matter what “field of study,” seem to be remarkably similar — the procedures are simultaneously empirical (i.e. what *happened* in the history of human cultural development) and ideal (what *must have been the case* in this development). They can neither neglect the difficult question, at the heart of the matter, of what subjectivity really is; nor can they afford to pick and choose examples to prove their case. Architecture, with a capital ‘A’, must fit one and all; it must display a certain historical necessity while allowing for any and all kinds of variations. It is an “anywhere anytime” proposition.