

Alumni Day Speech: Yale School of Architecture

February 1958

Paul Rudolph

The ever evolving cycle in human affairs is at that point where action has outstripped ideas and theory. And so it is in architecture. The last decade had thrown a glaring light on the omissions, thinness, paucity of ideas, naivety with regard to symbols, lack of creativeness and expressiveness of architectural theories as they were developed by the 1920s. Interestingly enough the laymen, especially the cab drivers of America, recognize this more forcibly than many an architect. We have yet to import a legion of cab drivers as architectural critics.

This is certainly not an attack on the great twentieth century architects who evolved what we now call modern architecture, for their efforts in retrospect seem superhuman indeed. It is to say that modern architecture is still a gangling, awkward, ungracious, often inarticulate, precocious, adolescent thing, which has not yet even begun to reach full flower. There are those who would have you believe that we are not tired of those great early precepts, and that we are now at the brink of mannerism. Fortunately this is not true. We are incredibly lucky, for we have yet to see a Golden Age.

Many have asked why I should come to Yale. It is because I believe that action had indeed outstripped theory and that it is the unique task and responsibility of a great university such as Yale to study, not only that which is known, but far more important, to pierce the unknown. My passion is to participate in this unending search. Theory must again overtake action.

We, in truth, do not know how to do many things which other great periods of architecture have known. Foremost is our lack of coherent theory with regard to how to relate one building to another, and to give meaning to the spaces between. The Ecole des Beaux Arts did have theories with regard to this, although they have little relevance to our problems. For six decades now, we have damned the Chicago Fair of 1893, but they did have a comprehensible way of creating a whole. Indeed, if one compares the gyrations now being indulged in at Idlewild Airport, or the collection of the works of the world's greatest architects at Berlin's "InterBau," one's vote must go to the damned Chicago Fair, no matter how brilliant may be the individual gems. The original concept

of New York's Park Avenue, that of a great walled street leading to a gateway to the city, Grand Central Station was probably a superior one to the haphazard redevelopment currently going on. This is not a plea for a return to the Ecole des Beaux Arts' concepts which no longer work, but a reminder that architects have traditionally determined three-dimensional design on the largest scale and this is still our responsibility.

We need desperately to relearn the art of disposing our buildings to create different kinds of space: the quiet, enclosed, isolated, shaded space; the hustling, bustling space, pungent with vitality; the paved, dignified, vast, sumptuous, even awe-inspiring space; the mysterious space; the transition space which defines, separates, and yet joins juxtaposed spaces of contrasting character. We need sequences of space which arouse one's curiosity, give a sense of anticipation, which beckon and impel us to rush forward to find that releasing space which dominates, which acts as a climax and magnet, and gives direction. Most important of all, we need those outer spaces which encourage social contact.

The new scale given by the quickly moving vehicle (they will double in fifteen years), and the whole relationship of vehicle to the spaces between buildings, to the building itself and to the human, presents a complex problem which cries for understanding. The architect's unique contribution has been the manipulation of inner and outer space. Our traditional concepts of space have been shattered by the automobile and the sheer bulk of our building requirements, but we should not retire to nostalgic, romantic, admiration of the European square, which it is currently so fashionable to do. We have something to contribute, and our current abdication to every new specialist is demoralizing and unworthy of our profession. We must find ways of rendering our cities fit for humans, and develop the aesthetics of change. This will be our first concern at Yale.

Second, we will search for more eloquent relationships between the conceptual aspects of building and techniques. The range of concepts is limited now to goldfish bowls, buildings on stilts, and the efforts of the structural exhibitionists. The feeling and respect for materials elude most students, and one fears, some architects. The unique forms inherent in any given material and the construction process must become clearer. In this case, learning by doing probably has little validity because of the number and complexity of the various trades involved. During the next decade the question of whether or not the

ultimate form for the steel frame has indeed been found must be considered anew. We have almost everything, including the industrialized structure which was such a romantic favorite of the theorist of the International Style, but we seldom know what to do with our wealth. Driving down Park Avenue is rather like flipping through the pages of Sweet's Catalog. The 35 percent of our budget which we often spend on mechanical equipment needs reassessment. We should receive more from it than just keeping hot or cold. Structure has caught our imagination but the mechanical equipment has ruined many fine schemes, turning our buildings into Swiss cheese. There is perhaps too much concern in architectural circles about peripheral matters and too little understanding of age-old concepts, such as fine proportions, how to get into a building, relationships of volume to volume, how to relate a building to the ground, the sky, etc.

Third on our list of forgotten fundamentals is the concern for visual perception. An architect should be concerned with how a building looks in the rain, or on a summer's day; its profile on a misty day, the different treatment required for that which is close at hand vs. that which is twenty stories removed, with angles of vision, symbolism and content.

Fourth and last on our list will be a renewed concern with visual delight. This is indeed the architect's responsibility, for other specialists can do everything else that he does and, quite often, much better. The public is confused as never before about the exact function of an architect, for we have gone through a long period where the specialists talked only of social responsibility, techniques, economy and the architect as a coordinator. We have been apologized for being concerned with visual design. This fact is demonstrated again by the difference between a drawing, a model or a photograph, and the actual appearance of so many of our buildings.

I look forward to participating in your program at Yale. It will be our first concern to help perpetuate a climate where the student is acutely, perceptively and incessantly aware of the creative process. We must understand that after all the building committees, the conflicting interests, the budget considerations and the limitations of his fellow man have been taken into consideration that his responsibility has just begun. He must understand that exhilarating, awesome moment.

When he takes pencil in hand, and holds it poised above a white sheet of paper, that he has suspended there all that has gone before and all that will ever be.