

EDITORIAL FOREWORD

Michael H. Mitias and a team of scholars have built philosophical towers in this set of original studies on architecture that strikingly change the landscape of thought and experience.

Architecture abounds, but its status is unusual. When approached by aesthetics, architecture is problematic. While we may visit a work of architecture to view it much as we would visit a statue in a plaza or a painting in a museum, we usually can enter the architectural work and move around inside it. In such buildings we may conduct the full range of human activities. We engage in commerce, have dinner, teach, defecate, pray, love, and sleep. Office building, palace, railway station, cathedral, city hall, apartment block, and private home may all be works of architecture.

The traditional aesthetic attitude of a viewer viewing an object should be balanced by seeing that in architecture the object shapes and facilitates our activities with a view to our functions and goals, which are not limited to the aesthetic realm. Great works of architecture may slip out of the category of works of art as they work for other human purposes.

Does architecture thereby step down from the pedestal of the highest of the fine arts to the position, say, of the highest applied art? Is the artistry of architecture only incidental to its primary service in efficiently housing human activity? How shall we differentiate a good building from a work of architecture, or are they synonymous? If so, what is a good building?

Because of its social use, architecture is subjected to enormous constraints which have no reference to its presumed aesthetic nature: codes and zoning, engineering specifications, safety regulations, provisions for lighting and access. The two features that any celebrated work of architecture must provide are parking and toilets.

If architecture is challenged as an art because of its primary social service, then it may yet make its place in the art of living. It contributes to and expresses the shaping values of people and cultures. It may do this as symbol or as language. Communities often affirm their identity and vitality through architectural works that they take to heart. The Pyramids—Egypt. The Taj Mahal—India. The Acropolis—Athens. The Capitol—Washington. The Eiffel Tower—Paris. The Dome—Hiroshima.

Architectural works work in history. They endure, even when altered and ruined, and they become invested with changing communal significance. While history does things to them, and with them, works of architecture also have a hand in the making of history. Events take shape around buildings.

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And surroundings take shape around buildings. Because works of architecture, unlike paintings, are permanently sited, they have a way of creatively organizing their surroundings over the passage of time. Architecture becomes the architect of its world.

Thus, questions arise about the life of architecture in time as well as the lived time within our visit to architecture. Questions about our experiential encounter of architecture vs. analysis of its formal properties. Questions about the intentionality of the work and the meanings that are found for it. Questions about the interplay between the presence of architecture as construction and the space, activities, and buildings around it. Architecture in site, in sight, insight.

Such questions are studied here with fresh inquiry in a cosmopolitan spirit. In addition to explorative theorizing, the distinguished contributors bring to their task telling examples and rich experience of architecture and life. They fling open doors. In this book, as in the other innovative volumes he has edited, Mitias proves a master architect in drawing the plans for scholars to probe anew the intersecting values of art, thought, and life.

Robert Ginsberg
Executive Editor