

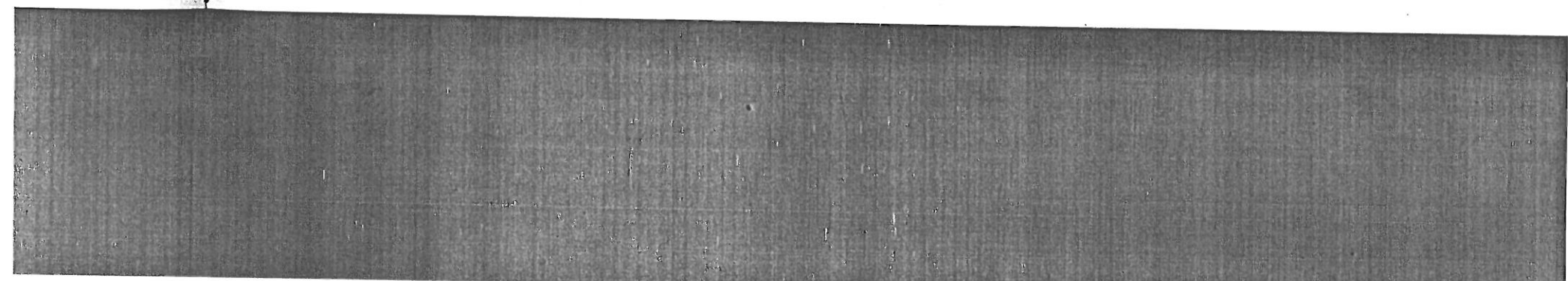
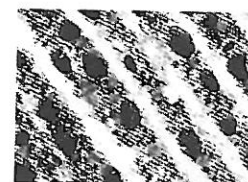
F I S D | DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE

The Making of Design Principles
Kyna Leski

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EMPATHY : MATERIAL AND SPATIAL



EMPATHY : MATERIAL AND SPATIAL

Tens of centuries ago, rafts were constructed in order to cross the great seas. Huge trees, cut, trimmed, and skinned of their bark were bound together using a fibrous rope. Knowing the relentless forces of the sea, the people building these rafts used a particular fibrous rope with a great strength. Although strong, this rope was not often used near the sea. Salt broke down its fiber; sea salt ate away its strength. In these rafts it worked; the trees were bound in a way that the rolling motion of the sea dug the rope into the soft wood of the trees; the particular knot and binding of the rope allowed the push and pull of the sea to work the rope into deep grooves in the wood. As the wood swelled in the water, the grooves closed around the rope, sealing and protecting it from the sea salt. These rafts present a rare and particular intelligence, a creative anticipation, and experienced navigation of material, force, and time.

The project Design Principles begins with the knot as root and source; multiplied and divided, expanded and contracted; a calculus emerges; knots within us contain us, move through us, include us, bind us. Knot as flint stone sparks a fire, rising through the asymmetry of desire, a fragile ground providing structure, housing, and being housed in eclipsing succession; "Som en' out O noth en." A wonderfully difficult enigma emerges: the strength of fragility, the fragility of strength. Heard in their own proper beat and measure, these works offer a sonnet whispering a deeply human question: What holds what?

As in the telephone game, each knot ever so slightly alters the message it passes on. Each note is different; they are all true. In gentle overtones each knot/note speaks itself and its exchange, a constellation of life lines empathetically calling us close to say, "What holds up one, holds up all."

This publication presents a rare and particular intelligence capturing a unique period in the life of an

exceptional school. The nuance, precision, and emotive power of the works documented here calls for slow absorption, for considered time, for a deliberate unplugging from the flood of fragmentary images, word clips, and sound bites that blog our days. This work is a gift of celebration and longing, an invitation for thoughtful reflection on the discipline of architecture and its education.

"Just as a writer surrenders to language, permitting the words to lead his hand across the page, so will stone, brick, wood, glass, and marble suggest to the architect the manner in which to use them. To denounce these correspondences between artists and material as mere animism would be to misunderstand. The architect who denies these connections does so at his own risk. The soul of his building will not be visible. He will have become a barbarian." Dr. Richard Selzer

The above statement of Dr. Selzer may be a good place to begin. It recognizes the capacity of the material world to engage the creative mind in a tangible exchange. This is expressed not as an artful possibility or a distant aspiration but as an acute pragmatic necessity, carrying grave consequences if denied.

I find it simply miraculous that a surgeon, who certainly understands the importance of close attention to the material one is cutting, can recognize the same potential for barbarism in the cuts made by an architect. Barbarism being closely associated with extremely aggressive, violent acts, we may at first think of its use as an exaggeration, a poetic means of expressing something more like, "The architect who denies these connections will become a dimwit or buffoon."

However, given that the statement is being made by a doctor whose oath and vocation is to heal, to guard our well-being and, ultimately, repel violence, it may be worth asking: What if he means what he says? What would bring a doctor to declare an architect's denial of a connection to the material world to be a descent into the life-threatening condition of barbarism? We may find some clues to this in the work of another doctor, a neurologist named Frank Wilson, who wrote a wonderful book entitled The Hand. In this book he speaks about jugglers, pianists, puppeteers, mechanics, painters, sculptors, and the many modes that each engages the world with their hands. He develops an analysis of the communications that occur between the hand and the mind in these hand-intensive acts. Looking at the many forms of knowledge that the hand holds, he makes the incredible proposal that the brain grew "out of" the hand.

Paraphrasing but something like:

"When our forearms were no longer load bearing,"
our hands went in search of new activities and questions whereas
prior to that, they had been occupied full time, holding us up as we moved; but with our standing up,
our hands were freed up to search out new tasks. In evolution, this period directly coincided with an enormous expansion of the size and capacity of the brain.

Wilson links the increased cognitive capacity of the brain with the increased complexity of the questions being generated by the hand. The brain grew in order to keep up with the hand. This raises all sorts of questions about how the brain is actually structured as a result of this period as well as the kind of communications that are occurring between the hand and the brain today. His research exposes the "marriage of hand and mind" which developed in evolution as a crucial "knot" in our individual cognitive development, in our understanding of the world and our ability to act in it. Frank Wilson also speaks of the "divorce" from the material world as causing violence, "psychological violence" to children when their education is based solely on filling the child with information.

Both Dr. Selzer and Frank Wilson recognize our exchanges with the material world as inseparable from our cognitive, perceptual, and creative being, inseparable from our humanity. In describing the essential nature of this correspondence, they both evoke violence as a consequence of its denial, an internal violence caused by a rupture with the external material world. In Frank Wilson's case it is specifically "violence psychologically." Dr. Selzer's reference "become a barbarian" indicates an internal becoming, a violence linked to an inner disregard of another's humanity. Both position our engagement of the material world and the act of construction itself as deeply intertwined with our physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

If we can recall the experience of seeing an abandoned building or structure on the side of the road, perhaps a barn with a collapsed roof, as we look at this collapsed structure we know, intuitively, that there is a direct relationship between the abandonment and the collapse, that the structural collapse is linked to the departure of the life within. This further implies a link between the structure, when it stood, and the life that had inhabited it—that the life itself held up the roof. This link, between our lives and the

structures we build, is at the root of the discipline of architecture. There is every reason to believe that this link is reciprocal; that the material world is both holding up and is held up by our lives; that the entire province of mankind, of human language and memory is engaged in an empathetic exchange with the non-human world of substance; and our well-being rests in the precision of this exchange.

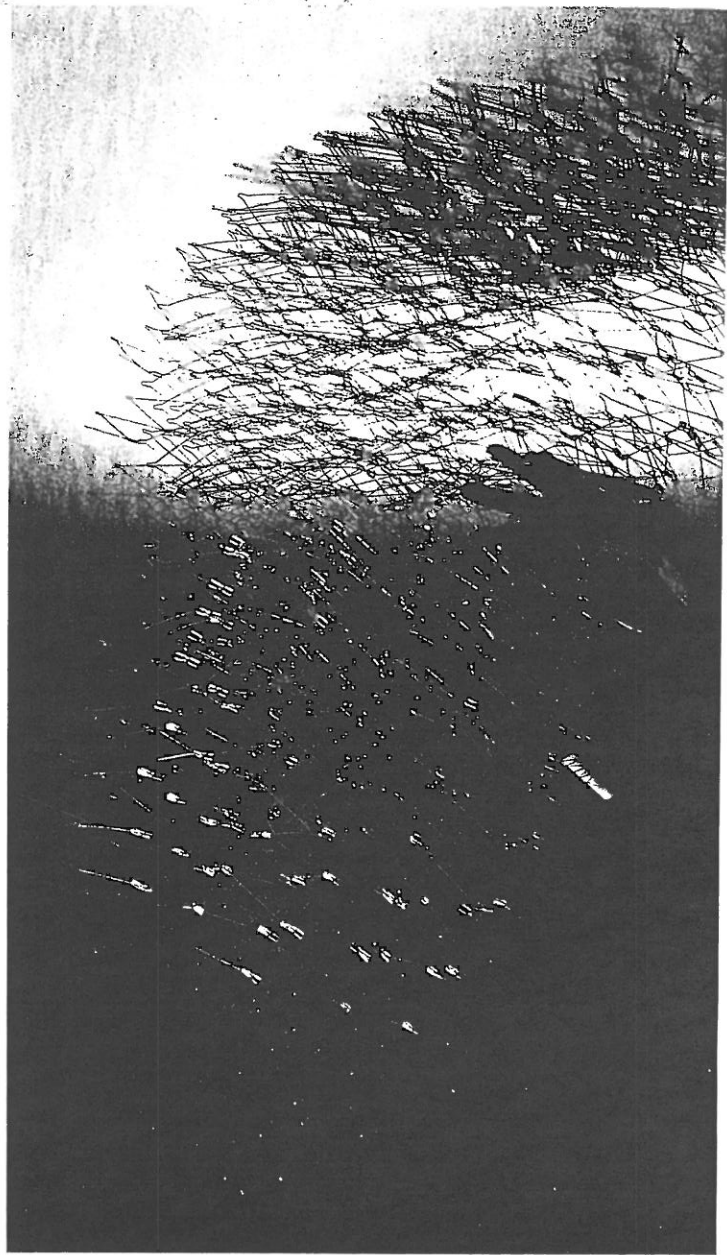
The potential and complexity of this material reciprocity is focused and magnified when we consider the articulation of space. Working with materials in order to shape space introduces a certain inversion; the articulation of substance offers our only access to articulate the "immaterial substance" of space. In other words, materials are all we have; but as architects, "space" is what we are actually making. It may not be enough to think of this inversion in terms of *solid/void* or *figure/ground* or even to say that the *subject* of material articulation is the immaterial substance of space; for like language, the separation of content and vessel is a provisional illusion, collapsing with fully embodied participation. The enigma and promise of this "inside/out" act of articulation lies in the anticipation of inhabitation.

Articulating space in anticipation of inhabitation opens a reciprocity between materials, spaces, and the people who inhabit them. This exchange holds the capacity for our interior thoughts to construct literate spaces, spaces of participation inseparable from our memory and imagination, inseparable from our being.

Architecture is, at root, a discipline of mediation. Our ontological, cultural, and functional desires and necessities echo through the discipline of architecture in a constant exchange with the world.

Central to this exchange is the "literate substance" and space of drawing. As a participatory form of mediation, drawing directly engages each component of the constellation of hand, mind, materials, language, and space. Each tool of drawing positions us within this constellation; in concert they establish a means of perceiving and acting in the world.

The parallel edge is, in fact, a scaled idealization of the horizon that we have looked at over millions of years. The horizon that has, in evolution, positioned our eyes next to each other is brought in to the seat of the drawing board, to the seat of architecture. The earth, the pencil, carbon crosses through this scaled horizon and enters the drawing. It becomes legible; it may now be read as a drawing. With the ideas of plan, section,



axonometric perspective and scale, drawing establishes a means of mediating and navigating literate space.

The scale presents a unique case as a tool of drawing; it hovers between us and the drawing like a prism, dividing a spectrum of mental distances. The possibility of scale change within the representation of a drawing points to the possibility of shifting the distance between one's self and the paper while drawing. The scale affords changing proximities among our selves, our representations, and our world. How and what we can think is directly impacted by our distance from the object of our thought. The central role of scale in architecture points to the fact that "questioning" to a large extent requires the navigation of a constantly shifting set of distances or proximities. It is quite possible that scale is an essential tool in constructing our inhabitations because scale is an essential tool of how we inhabit the world. One could say that how we absorb the world is how we make the world. Through their positioning of our capacity to think, question, and construct, the tools of drawing afford a unique participation in the exchange between our lives and our spaces.

This participation is beautifully addressed by Dr. Selzer in this statement:

*"I have often felt, while fighting in the middle of the night to keep drowning lungs afloat or to stanch a flow of blood, that the room about me was participating in the struggle, how more than once the walls gasped, then stood still at the instant of death."*¹

This "room...participating in the struggle" points to space as a participant in our thoughts and actions. It opens up the possibility of inhabitation as a communicative exchange between our inner being and the spaces we inhabit. These exchanges need not only occur in struggles of mortal consequence or at the "instant of death." Our communicative exchanges with space may also speak in whispers, telling of our fragility, embodying with great nuance the material and spatial empathy of life. This communicative participation with space affords a means of recognizing ourselves in a constant reciprocity with the world.

¹ Richard Selzer, "The Exact Location of the Soul," *Down from Troy, Part 1* (Picador, 2001), 33.

It is quite possible that space is the other half of us; that, as Alberto Perez Gomez has so beautifully articulated, space "completes us" and allows us to understand ourselves and others. One could say that the substance of empathy and ethics is space and, consequently, the articulation of space is intrinsically an ethical question.

Like both doctors, I do not view these correspondences as "distant aspirations" but as acute pragmatic necessities.

Understanding the incomplete nature of being and the life of a discipline requires a careful consideration of language. Language is so embedded in the human condition that to speak of language may already be an insurmountable paradox.

Homer has said, "The gods send disasters so that men will tell of them."

The role and impact of the event is found in its being told. This positions action, in stories and in telling. We share words; they move between us. We all participate in an agreement of words, a word exchange which allows us to speak and write to one another. This consensus of language allows us to speak not only to each other but to ourselves. Inward speech, the constant self-telling and adjustment of our inner story, provides a means of navigation, a means of knowing where we are, where we have been and, quite possibly, our inward speech tells us who we are.

The consensus of words is an agreement that allows us to disagree, even about words. "Agreeing so as to disagree" is a simple expression of the fact that words at once require a consensus of the many and seek to express individual thought. In this sense words have an "inside/outside" life of their own, moving between the singular and the many. In writing the architectural programs of our time, architecture is manifesting human thought and action. Perhaps drawing is architecture's self-telling and its shared story.

Through the precision of our language, our drawing, our making, we fulfill the promise of architecture and its social contract. Yes, the social contract is a form of participation and contribution among our fellow

citizens, but it is also a contract with space itself, the other half of us, a contract to embody the widest, most nuanced spectrum of what it is to be human into our reciprocal spaces. For to the extent that our spaces embody who we are, our humanity, we are all elevated and find ourselves at home in the world.

While our capacity to understand human thought and the space of human thought is a deep, often internal question, it is not detached from the present. In fact, it has a great deal to offer the present. This is dependent on the ability to understand the world we live in, on our ability to recognize the facts in our increasingly complex time.

"With its seemingly unlimited growth of material power, mankind finds itself in the situation of a skipper who has his boat built of such a heavy concentration of iron and steel that the boat's compass points constantly at herself and not north. With a boat of that kind, no destination can be reached; she will go around in a circle, exposed to the hazards of the winds and the waves." Werner Heisenberg

The laser of capital has produced a concentration of the globe's resources leaving an unprecedented number of people in the dark.

Three billion people, half the world, live on less than two dollars a day. As a proportional indicator of capital's capacities for distribution, it is quite shocking. One billion people do not have access to clean, drinkable water.

It seems that the doctor meant what he said. We see the potential for barbarism in the self-consuming authorship of capital and its program of accelerating and continuous consumption. Its program for culture to, in fact, be capital threatens our very dreams.

Remembering the possibility that space is the other half of us and the impact of our shared stories on our individual thoughts, we begin to ask:
Whose words are we speaking?

What spaces are completing us?

To ask: do we fit?

What aspects of the human condition are not reflected?

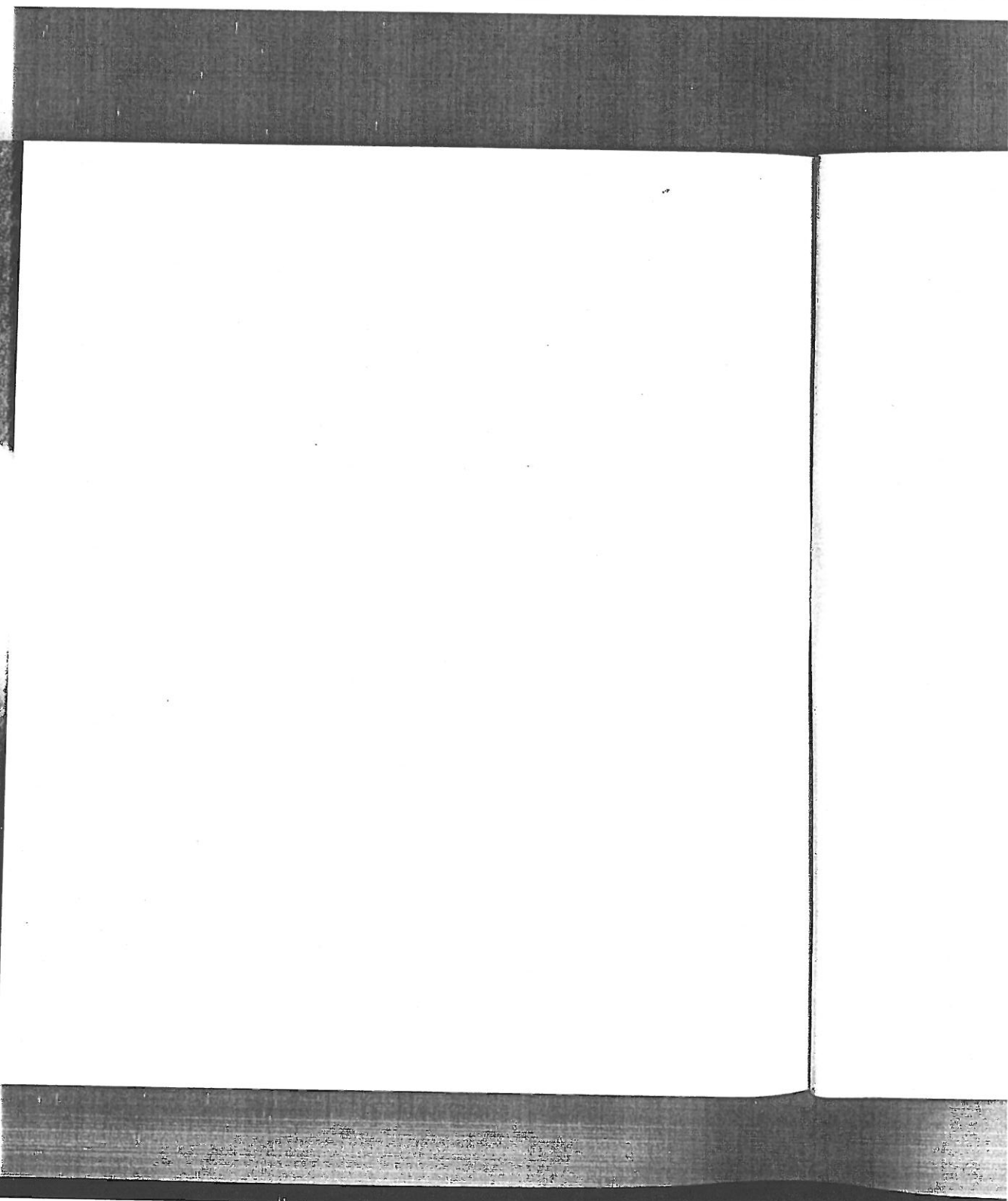
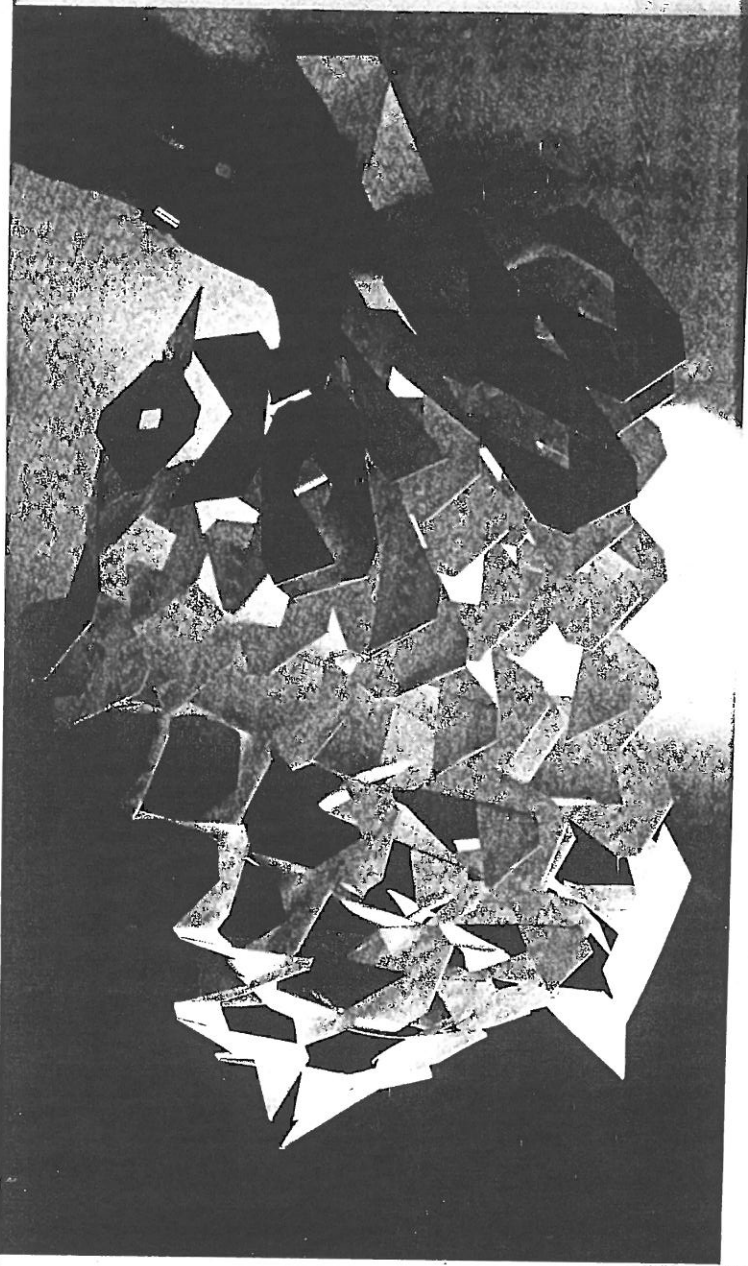
Does the full spectrum of our humanity fit within the prism of capital?

Recognizing the fragile human dimension of the architectural program as a mode of housing and embodying the widest spectrum of our lives affords a means of contributing to the complex coherence of the larger story we all share. The promise of this exchange rests in the literate, poetic, spatial, and material imagination not as a distant aspiration but as perhaps the most pragmatic means of confronting our current orthodoxies.

That is why I believe as Susan Sontag has said, "...literature is freedom."

Literature is freedom because it affords a means of architecture to stand up and, like the hand, search out new questions while increasing the capacities and precisions of space as the other half of us. Literature is a dimension of human life, pockets of words within the collapsed structure of accelerating consumption. Literature is a mode of insurgency, a language of empathy and difference that includes our nuanced fragilities in our shared story. In this sense, architecture is a life-sustaining discipline, an empathetic discipline with a life of its own, reciprocal to ours.

The poetic imagination is the most pragmatic means of addressing our social and political lives because it affords a means of comprehending this fragile globe and its people. It introduces a politics of slowing down, of searching for new modes of concern for the other, new modes of rebinding freedom.



*"Where is the architect who, from the very moment he begins his design, will be aware that in each room of his finished hospital someone will die? Who, while seated at his drawing board, will pause to feel upon his naked forearms the chill wind of his mortality? One day, he too will enter this building not as its architect but as a supplicant in direst need. If I am wrong, and such human emotions cannot be expressed in architecture, why then, it is time to surrender the hospital to writers who will build it out of words and dreams."*² Dr. Richard Selzer

Each word resonates with our discipline and our humanity: "seated at our drawing board...the chill wind of our mortality...build it out of words and dreams." I would say that he is not wrong. Architecture will not be surrendered; it will be built of words, dreams, substance, and space. This building will be found by looking closely at the first line, perhaps the most powerful words in the statement, "Where is the architect."

Where is this architecture with a life of its own, reciprocal to ours, this empathetic architecture with the capacity to embody our humanity, to pause and feel our mortality? I believe this architecture lives within the shared stories and inward speech found in school. The reciprocal relationships intrinsic to education shelter the depth and largeness of being found in the precision of our poetic imagination.

Schools shelter the promise of architecture to manifest a material, spatial, and social contract locating the hope of architecture within the students and teachers of a very few schools who recognize the communicative potential of their own cultural contribution. School in its fundamental sense is not a means to a predetermined end but, rather, a place for significant works, a place for slowing down, a place where the life of the works reflect the life of the school.

² Ibid., 34.

Where the debates within the works reflect
the debates within the school;

Where the depth of the works reflects
the depth of the school;

Where the ethical dimension of the works reflects
the ethical dimension of the school;

Where the space of the works reflects
the space of the school;

School itself is a prism,
emanating the widest spectrum of who we are.

I believe that exploratory, independent, uncontainable works of architecture will spark from the few schools who resist the cultural homogenization of consumption as participation and who, through the pragmatics of the imagination, search for the ethical dimensions of the discipline. Architecture must struggle to find a largeness of being that survives the prism of capital that our world is becoming. Perhaps the greatest source of this largeness of being is found in the frailty of being; for in the act of recognizing frailty, ethics find its meaning, and ethical practice becomes significant.

The works presented here emerge from such a school; we see an architecture pointing north, built not of "a heavy concentration of iron and steel" but of the fragile strength of empathy: material and spatial.