State of Ruins

The struggle is an accepted trope within the discipline of architecture. Exemplified by Ayn Rand’s character of Howard Roark, the righteous architect who virtuously fights for design integrity in the face of materialistic developers, the ideal architect is the humane and social artist who takes upon himself the heavy responsibility of pursuing art in the face of commerce. While it is a noble pursuit, evidence suggests that we are currently losing the battle; refusing to forsake our idealist notions, we have gotten used to being undermined. The Museum of Modern Art’s recent announcement that it will demolish the adjacent Folk Art Museum, a cherished and innovative work of architecture by Williams/Tsien, demonstrates this fragility of architecture in the face of the capitalist market. Instead of incorporating the unique vertical exhibit spaces of the Folk Art Museum—which is only 12 years old—as an extension of their own galleries, MoMA has chosen to raze the structure in order to make way for a lucrative new development, a joint venture with the international developer Hines, which includes an 82 story tower that takes full advantage of the soaring real estate prices in Manhattan.¹

Detroit serves as a more venerable example of the dangers of our current capitalist driven building industry. Most of Detroit’s historic architecture was constructed when the economy was booming in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. Real estate was an expression of wealth, and was built without limit or consideration for the future. When the economy went bust in the mid 1900’s, development moved on, as it is wont to do, to the next big thing, leaving behind a sprawling landscape of vacancy and ruin. Facing the challenges of a struggling auto industry, a population exodus to the suburbs, and a lack of good leadership in the government, the Detroit of today has few financial resources available to dedicate to the preservation of its wealth of historic architecture, which includes over one hundred historic districts and 15,000 historic buildings,² with more being added on a regular basis. Out of this context of limited resources, the tactic of aggressive demolition has emerged as the dominant method of solving the problem of historic buildings that have degraded to the point of being uninhabitable, in other words, ruins.

In our current developer-driven building industry,³ do architects have a responsibility for the preservation of the built environment? This question is not only pertinent to the field of preservation, but to the future of today’s architecture. Looking at the way yesterday’s ruins are perceived today reveals our society’s perceptions about the value that architecture holds after it has ceased to fulfill its functional role as shelter. These attitudes about the value of historical architecture are also reveal the way contemporary buildings will be addressed in the future. If we do not create architecture that has value beyond function,

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² Jennifer Ross (Detroit Historic District Commission Employee) in discussion with the author, February 2013.

³ In this essay, the “Building Industry” encompasses all of the trades involved in the financing, design, and construction of buildings such as Real Estate Development, Architecture, Engineering, Construction, etc.
or envision viable ways to preserve architecture once it ceases to be inhabitable, then architecture is in great danger of losing one of its most influential qualities: permanence.

In the dominant teaching model found in American architecture schools, designs are created, critiqued, reworked, presented and consumed entirely by the academic community. Yet the reality is that architecture leaves the hands of the designer as soon as the building construction is complete. After the closeout materials are submitted to the owner, the building’s fate rests with other disciplines: developers, government officials, preservationists, and occupants, who are mostly disconnected and unfamiliar with the discipline of architecture.

How then, do we reclaim our stake in the built environment? Can we control how the building will be perceived through the design? Can we inspire the public, through design, to develop a personal connection to our work, thus creating a league of citizens who will be dedicated to championing the preservation of the building should it encounter hard times? Can we gain this control through actual interaction with the community during the design process and if so, should we be teaching students how to navigate the community based design process instead of encouraging them to spend the entirety of their professional education developing abstract ideas unhindered by the realities of the building industry?

I propose two approaches that architects can take to reclaim our stake in the fate of the building:

1. Advance: reassert that architecture has value beyond function through the imposition of symbolic meaning.
2. Retreat: develop preservation techniques that capture the memory of a building while removing it from the threatening political environment of the city.

The imposition of a symbolic meaning to an object is a broad discussion that extends beyond the realm of architecture. Looking at this larger discussion can help the architect understand how the building he or she designs can take on a symbolic role after it is realized and become a visual representation of issues of economy, race, equality, and politics among many others.

The 2005 exhibition “Making Things Public,” curated by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel investigates the ontological shift in contemporary culture where objects are no longer understood as an objective fact or perceived independently of the context in which they were produced and in which they exist. As Latour famously states, “matters of fact have become matters of concern;” the object has transformed into a thing whose meaning is greater than merely the sum of its parts. The thing; the architectural ruin; the contemporary building; the Folk Art Museum, does not stand independently in the political sphere—its greatest value lies not in the quality of its construction, nor the novelty of its design, nor the beautiful patina that the brick has acquired over the course of one hundred years, but rather in its capacity to be a visual representation of the conflicting values in the debate about preservation. Once the building possesses this value of symbolic representation, demolishing it becomes much more contested and architecture acquires the power of resistance.

The alternative approach to advancing: the retreat, acknowledges that traditional preservation is no longer a viable approach in many of today’s built environments, for example Detroit, where ruins symbolize abandonment and are seen as a threat to public safety. The retreat seeks alternative methods of preserving the memory of architecture by removing it from the threatening context of the built environment. Archivist approaches such as making latex casts of buildings document the building’s  

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existence and allow for future reconstruction of the building. Although the building is still demolished in this approach, its disappearance does not have to be permanent. Should it be decided later that the building holds cultural value, the archive provides a template for its reconstruction.

What is the role that we as architects have in the built environment? Are we the service professionals on the periphery of the building industry? Are we the struggling artists that seek creative ways to sneak good design into the relentlessly cost-based model for development? As our buildings, which are both the product of our labors and the vehicle of our legacy, face demolition, are there approaches that we as architects can take to ensure that they do not become forever lost? Whether tis nobler for the profession to take arms against a sea of troubles: fiscal bankruptcy, vandalism, abandonment and the relentless natural destruction that brick and mortar are heir to, or relinquish our authority over this built environment, taking our souvenirs of architecture out of the politicized environment of the city and putting them to rest within the protective halls of the museum? The time has come to stop being undermined and become assertive about our profession’s role in the built environment by extending our authority to the building once it has left the drawing board and been realized within the context of the city.