MAKING A PLACE OF GATHERING

JAMES C. MOORE

Thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture.

September 1995

Approved

William W. Brown, Committee Chairman

Donna Dunay

William Galloway
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract 3

The Whole and the Language of Elements 4

Part One - Classroom Area 5

   In - Between 6

   Classroom 11

Part Two - Support Area 15

Building Section 22

Vita 23

To Mom
"Architecture exists because of man's desire to express meaning in the shaping of his environment, i.e., to express himself, his innate humanness in the making of built spaces that can accommodate the events of his life with ease and grace." David C.S. Polk makes this statement in his essay "The Expression of Meaning and the Necessity of Integration," and further expresses that one of the most fundamental of human desires is to feel at home in the world. Christian Norberg-Shultz illuminates this same desire when he uses the term "existential foothold" to define the need man has to feel connected with the environment, the need to feel a certain "groundedness" in existence. Man, therefore, makes to affirm his existence and to establish a world of meaning which will bring him closer to existing as part of the world, of being in harmony with other living things. A link is thus established between the things that exist among men, and man himself.

How is one to find meaning in the built environment that will serve to offer a sense of "groundedness?" The two dimensions that provide meaning to any system, according to Husserl, are the formal, or syntactic dimension, and the transcendental, or semantic dimension. While the semantic dimension concerns itself with the historical, or symbolic aspect of each element of a system, the syntactic dimension is based on an internal system of rules which govern the order of the elements without regard to external significance. (1) This thesis concerns itself primarily with the syntactic dimension, and the qualities inherent in the material aspect of architecture. As Kenneth Frampton proposes in his essay, "Rappel A L'Ordre: The Case for the Tectonic" architecture can be deemed valuable in its own right as a structural and constructional form. Rafael Moneo states that "architecture arrives when our thoughts about it acquire the real condition that only materials can provide." Architecture is therefore inherently about form, the material aspect of a work and the dialogue that exists among physical elements.

The idea of structure, the overall ordering principle that guides the design towards material reality, is the starting point. Prior to structure, however, is the idea that requires structuring, the idea that supplies what is to be ordered. Rudolf Arnheim calls this the "anabolic creation of a structural theme which establishes what the thing is about."(2) This is not to say that all aspects of a work of architecture must be rationally justified through the structural theme. What is provided is a framework through which the energy of material can be harnessed into the manifestation of a built work, one that can come into being as a "thing", ontological rather than representational. (3)

Through the effort of carrying through an idea of something into a built manifestation of it tension develops. The idea may be as much influenced by the nature of the structural and constructive aspects of the work as it is in influencing such aspect. This dialogue can be found at many levels, including the site, in the tension of the structural idea and the nature of material, between various materials that come together to form a whole. The dialogue that results through any relational condition is a strong opportunity for architecture.

When architectural elements come together, whether to support a load or delineate space, the physical manifestation that takes place offers a structural opportunity. There is a governance of general rules pertaining to an internal order of the elements, principles the elements follow which will maintain a certain cohesiveness when being considered together as part of a whole.

The rules are not so restrictive, however, that they completely relegate the formation of the parts to mere elements in complete service to the whole. To quote Herman Hertzberger, "While the elements may follow a set of rules governing the whole, it is important that there is a possibility for transformation, or growth in richness in the whole which is a result of the elements. It is in a dialogue between these two aspects, parts and whole, that growth occurs." (4)

The richness that results from the interplay of parts and whole can provide meaning in the built environment. It is in being open to richness and diversity while being guided by a structural idea that architecture can emerge.

2. Rudolf Arnheim, Entropy and Art, p. 49.
The Whole and the Language of Elements
The project, an elementary school, is ordered through the evolution of essentially two ideas, both which foster a sense of gathering. In considering the larger scale, the project consists of two areas: the classroom area which includes surrounding hallways; and the additional supporting spaces. Both areas gather around a central courtyard and acknowledge the outward surroundings while simultaneously focusing inward towards a central gathering area.

The development of the building elements evolved through the interplay, or syntax, that arises when the elements engage in a dialogue. The project acquires a language that is both cohesive enough to have a sense of relatedness yet varied enough to allow for richness and diversity in expression. The building elements, while following a general structure that broadly defines their organization, respond differently based on their varying conditions.

The spaces in an educational environment should be diverse in character to allow for a variety of opportunities for gathering. Places ranging from a large formal classroom space to a place for one should be provided.

The building's physical structure is used to define these places, primarily through the interaction of the telluric nature of masonry with the tectonic nature of the column-beam structure. A dialogue takes place between these elements, gestures are made when elements come together.
The generating idea for the classroom area is the articulation of the in-between, the dividing area between one room and another. The in-between becomes a place in itself, a way to enter the classrooms and a place for gathering. The physical structure of the classrooms evolves from the structural aspect of the in-between. The structure orients space both inward and outward, connecting the outlying areas of the site with the interior space and the central courtyard. This transparency allows the building to be spatially influenced by the surrounding site.
Throughout the building materials come together and exhibit their nature. The physical nature of the elements are empathetic to the use of the space, allowing conditions to exist that will bring about a conscious interaction between those who use the building and the building itself.

Places are created at conditions such as a wall and column intersection. The result is not one of subservience where one element must defer to another. The dialogue among elements is enriched by taking the opportunity to allow an event to occur at the point of intersection. Through the interaction of elements a new condition is created.
The classroom is defined and places are made through the deliberate expression of building elements. A variety of places are provided for, places that consider the individual as well as the group, recognizing that an educational environment desires more than a large group space.

The space is not completely filled out, the type of use is not limited nor dictated. Places are provided to allow one to inhabit with their own desires.
In his book *The World of Silence*, Max Picard discusses poetry and the poet in a way that is relevant to architecture and the making of place: "The great poet does not completely fill out the space of his theme with his words. He leaves a space clear, into which another and higher poet can speak. He allows another to take part in the subject; he makes the subject his own but does not keep it entirely for himself. Such poetry is therefore not rigid and fixed but has a hovering quality ready at any moment to belong to another, to a still higher poet."

Architecture and the built environment should allow one to inhabit a space and, in a sense, complete the space with themselves. It is through the effort of making a place one's own that will allow for a place to have meaning. A degree of incompleteness in a work of architecture is left to the inhabitant to complete.
North Elevation
A building's constructive aspect can allow the building to reveal its nature poetically. A gesture is made when a brick is placed on the earth. The relatedness of brick to earth, a relation that is the manifestation of man's effort to make a place for his existence in the world, can be expressed through the telluric nature of masonry, the heaviness by which a wall sits on the earth and separates one place from another. A dialogue exists between the permanence of the earth and man's placement of material upon it.

The column and beam as structural elements take on the importance of providing shelter overhead and exhibit a tectonic nature. The role of material as marking a place on the earth and defining one place from another differs from material that shelters from above. In the essay "Rapport A L'Order: The Case for the Tectonic", Kenneth Frampton makes the distinction between telluric and tectonic by stating that the "framework (column and beam) tends toward the aerial and the de materialization of mass, whereas the mass form (masonry) is telluric, embedding itself ever deeper into the earth. The one tends towards light and the other towards dark. These gravitational opposites, the immaterial of the frame and the materiality of the mass, may be said to symbolize the two cosmological opposites to which they aspire: the sky and the earth."

An acknowledgment of this in a work of architecture and a consideration for the dialogue that occurs among these two basic conditions, a dialogue that can become explicitly apparent at the joining of these two conditions, can embody meaning in how architecture is considered in its formation of a home for man.
Elements engaged in a dialogue
Courtyard Elements

West Elevation
The vita has been removed from the scanned document