COMMENTS

by

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on

Ervin Galantay's

CULTURAL SYNTHESIS IN ARCHITECTURE

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Commentary   on   Ervin Y. Galantay,

" CulturalSynthesis in Architecture "

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I   INTRODUCTION

Architecture by its very nature is a synthesis. It combines several
disciplinary end~~eavors~~ endeavors-physical and social sciences, art and techno-
logy, culture and engineering. Form and function are interwined in
architecture, as Ervin Galantay puts it, through " knowledge, analy-
tical skills and creative imagination " .

But to assert that architecutre is a synthesis by its very nature is
not to say that the synthesis evolved by architects in practice is
necessarily of " good quality " . Criterion of " quality " is no
doubt value-loaded and cultural-bound. Yet such criteria are impera-
tive if synthesis in architecture is to contribute to an overall
unity of knowledge or universal synthesis. Ervin Galantay's paper
has pinpointed some crucial directions to that effect. In this
short commentary, I would like to elaborate on some of his points
and add few more of my own .

Being a social scientist, I may naturally tilt my comments on the
side of the socio-cultural end of things. My knowledge of internal
workings of architecture are those of a layman. Occasional vent-
tures into those internal trappings may sound to architects as re-
stating the obvious. I ask their forgiveness in advance .

II   Lines of Architectural Synthesis

The irreducable essence of architecture is its human function-as the
design of shelter for Man, his material and non-material products and
activities. This is the first line of universality built into archi-
tecture -i.e. a constrain to balance from and function .

Providing designed physical forms to shelter Man, his products, and
his activities of course, takes into account Man's present needs (and
occaisionally his disires as well) . Since they are changing nearly
all the time , an allowance for future needs (and desires) must always
figure in those designed forms. This second line of universality ,
changing needs and desires, makes whatever present synthesis an arch-
itect may reach a possible anti-thesis of tomorrow. And given the
axiom that Man is a " historical animal " i.e. with a collective me-
mory, his past is an ever part of his present - not only in terms of
accumulation of knowledge, but also in terms of tast, likes and dis-
likes. Hence a dialectic of continuity and change is always at play
in the process of good " architecting ". The so-called revolutionary
departures from the convention in architecture, if they have any las-
ting value at all, turn out upon close examination to be a series of
small incrementalities, which at a given moment may trigger an " ar-
chitectural mutation " . Thus " rupture with the past " is never
really complete-despite colourful verbal metaphore .

Internal logic and harmony in architectural work is a necessary
condition; but it is never sufficient for a good synthesis . What
ensures the latter is external cultural harmony. The validity of
internal logic of architecture may be scientifically and precisely
determined . But its external harmony can be socially determined .
And as difficult and ambiguous as the latter may be , it is as es-
sential as the former . Socio - cultural harmony in architecture
is difficult to codify and   program into   courses   and

manuals , yet its acquision is one of the sharp edges which disting-
uish " good " from " bad " synthesis in architecture. It may be ac-
quired by cultural osmosis or what Ervin Galantay , quoting A. Malraux,
calls " Le Musée Imaginaire " , or Jung's " collective subconscious" .

Thus the lines which coverage to creat a good synthesis in architec-
ture are balanced tentions between form and function; past, present,
and future. internal logic and external harmony. The socio-cultural
factor is a cause and effect in these balanced tensions. The good
architect (self) facing society (others) is condemened to evolve
the balance .

III   The Architect as a Statesman

A saint is obsessed with preaching " The Truth " , regardless of the
number of takers. A vulgar politician, on the other hand , is ever
willing to preach any number of " truths " so long as there are many
takers . The saint believes he is only accountable to God; the poli-
tician is always playing to the gallary.

Somewhere inbetween these two extremes the good architect finds him-
self. Like the saint, he strives to preach " the truth " ; but un-
like the saint (and more like the politician) he must always count
the number and quality of takers. Unlike the politician,he does not
have to change the truth every time to readily suit every audience .
But he must periodically revise his truth, or otherwise strive to
educate the audience to appreciate his truth. Unlike the saint, a
good architect knows there is no one absolute truth. His truth is
relative to space, time , and people. But his synthesis of balanced
tensions is " truthful " nevertheless, so long as it is authentic and
imaginative, crafty and artistic.

Craftsmanship alone implies mastry of accumulated knowledge , and
respect of proven wisdom and practices of past tradition (i.e.
continuity) .   Imagination, alone , implies transcending past and
present knowledge and practices-soaring in quest of the new and the
exciting . Again, the good architect must carve his place inbetween,
or as is often said " with his feet on the ground, eyes in the sky ,
and   hands   at work to evolve a new reality that at once cridible,
implementable, and acceptable .

Combining all these qualities makes the good architect akin to the
ideal type (in a Weberian sense) of a statesman. Like the saint,
he acquires,internalizes , and preaches truth, but without the saint's
absolutism. Like the politician, he acquires sensitivity to peoples'
ligitimate needs,tasts and desires - but not to their whims and vul-
garities. Like the craftsman, he masters past and present knowledge
techniques, and wisdom , but he is not their prisoner. Like the
genuine artist, he is always searching, imagining , and creating what
to the artist is new and thrilling; but to the architect-statesman the
novel and thrilling must be socially shared and appreciated .

It is this kind of statesmanship that provides not just a synthesis
in architecture , but a good synthesis at that .

IV   The Urban Continua

The statesman - architect, as I envision him may be in short supply
or non-existent at all in reality. But surely the spirit of that
ideal-type could be created and infused in present and future arc-
hitects. It is this spirit which can salvage our urban historical
treasures without mumifying them, and can provide for present needs
of growing urban masses without alienating their souls or vulgari-
zing their tast .

With the statesman-architect at work, we could be spared agonizing
and un-necessary choices between dichotomies - tradition vs. in-
novation, nationalism vs. internationalism ... etc. To him reality
(interaction of people , time, and space) is a continuum not a
dichotomy . His synthesis should , and could be , an elegant move-
ment along this continuum. People's life should be his metaphore
and paradigm . People evolve from their past, but they neither
forget it or discard all its products. People live and struggle
the present moment , but most of them often think of tomorrow, and
some even dream of a better next year or next decade. If people's
lives are not always neat and smooth continua, it is the architect's
mission to bring a modicum of neatness and smoothness to its phy-
sical external dimension. At minimum , he should not add to its
strife and confusion by dragging them with him into false dichotomies.

I may be asking the architect to undertake an unbearable task. I may
be even sliding him toward the saint's end of the continuum. I am
also cognizant of the fact that while the saint fights one Devil ,
the architect-statesman would have to fight many devils (i.e. urban
developers, vulgar politicians, unaware masses, corrupt bureaucrats
... etc .) But if the architect-statesman shirked the task there
may be no one else in contemporary society to do it as optimaly as
he would .

Reading Ervin Galantay's paper and recalling his passionate plea
for these and similar ideas (in a previous meeting) makes me think
of him as the ideal-type of the architect-statesman .