

## VII-3. Masonry and the Humanization of Work

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### ABSTRACT

*One result of the Industrial Revolution, is now beginning to surface but is still overlooked by unions, politicians and economists, as they ponder the implications of productivity. It is the matter of boredom and the sense of ennui that increasingly affects the industrialized worker. This is becoming evident in international phenomenon of an apparently divergent nature and scale, as the impending collapse of the oldest industrial society, Great Britain; or of the incredible escalation of house-costs and the growing impossibility of house-ownership for many ordinary citizens of the USA. These are manifestations of the same problem.*

*The industrialized production process in its present form, precludes the worker from the construction of any kind of "Final Form," and it disconnects him from the ancient satisfaction of making something tangible, real and useful. To compensate for these frustrations, and to establish recognition for increasingly anonymous and therefore unpleasant work, the worker has required more compensation, which produces, historically and ironically more inflation.*

*Those people who are attracted to construction work, with its intractable conditions of weather or of employment continuity, are a peculiar breed. Brick masonry is different to the other building trades, in that bricks are eternal, and that each mason can daily see his work evolve into something that his descendants will admire.*

*Modern architecture, as a cultural determinant would do well to consider the human dimensions involved in its construction.*

Reading the preliminary list of papers submitted to this conference was an unnerving experience, for my subject area appeared to be so very different to the predominantly and indecently heavy technical nature of the others. However my courage was sustained by the Conference Organizers perspicacity in inviting coverage of the seven principal areas which magniloquently included "Environment and SOCIAL Considerations." Since this subject was last on the list of conference areas (and SOCIAL last of the last), I gain the impression that the area of my present concern is unlikely to be of vital concern to the participants. But all successful conferences need a grabbag section, in which more general, interdisciplinary and usually imperfectly formulated thesis can be promulgated, and reactions gauged.

Whilst many continue to search, painstakingly, to uncover the properties and correct usage of the ancient material of brick masonry, I would like to consider what appear to be to be some unique social consequences of masonry. Few architects think that their selection of structural methods and materials have much to do with ethical or social philosophical issues, but they do, and perhaps unwittingly we are involved much deeper than we thought possible.

No matter how beguilingly advantageous a system might be, few would specify its employment if it was almost certain to involve the accidently death of the last erection worker to leave the structural shell. Most specifiers would hesitate to include a material if there were strong evidences that it would have injurious, and long term affects upon the health of the involved operators. Asbestos, is a case in point. So, most of us do consider ethical and social issues in a rather low key way. But, in the main they are negative, in the sense that they are of the kind which avoid unnecessary risks or health injuries to other members of the building team. Rarely, though, are many design or specification decisions positive, in the sense that they

actually prescribe, and result in operations, which will have benefits to the building worker, other than the unavoidable and therefore automatic one of employment provision. We do not, during the course of the ordinary office day, decide upon a building process, just because we figure that the rascals on the building site will get the most fun from doing it that way. Yet, whether architects like it or not, that is the kind of consequence to their decisions that does actually occur. We are not accustomed to consider that, a drawing board decision might cause the working experiences of a considerable number of human beings to be either unpleasant, frustrating and demeaning, or very pleasant, stimulating and ennobling. We will not go so far as to claim that one will cause wife-beating and dependency upon hard liquor, whilst the other will cause poetic reasonableness and sensitivity. But surely no reasonable person will argue that the kind of work experience which consumes a monumental half of a human's entire conscious existence, has no affect whatsoever upon that humans social orientation, and their interpretation of the existential and spiritual meaning of life itself. Well, those are fine sounding phrases, but unfortunately, they do not appear to reflect the general concerns of western materialistic society. Or do they?

Are we all so totally committed to the profit motive as are the new commerce commanders graduating from such hallowed institutions as the Harvard Business School? John LeBoutillier in his recent book "Harvard Hates America," provides several illuminating cases of Commercies preparedness to go to any extreme, to trample over human decency to any extent, in order to achieve PROFIT at any costs. Yet perhaps this materialistic toughness is more desired than real. It might be more pathetically wishful than actually real. John Galbraith in his book "The New Industrial State" points out that present corporate enterprises are too fat, self protective and uncreative to make much in the way of profits these days, com-

pared to the original good old robber barons of the recent past. It is sometimes postulated that neither of the two other principal societal segments, the Unions and Government, really wish it any different. Indeed, the Corporate Ethic and its graduate deacons of the post-graduate Business Schools, notwithstanding, many of us have deep reservations about the accuracy of our supposed total societal commitment to the idea of profit, whether it be in the commitment of abstract and impersonal capital, or in the individual dedication of a life long labor.

The idea of profit or gain is many times taken for granted as being as basic to the human spirit as is the act of breathing. This is not exactly true, but is rarely questioned. Robert L. Heilbroner in his classic "The Worldly Philosophers—the lives, times and ideas of the great economic thinkers," makes this penetrating observation,

"The absence of the idea of gain as a normal guide for daily life—in fact the positive disrepute in which the idea was held by the Church—constituted one enormous difference between the strange world of the tenth to sixteenth centuries and the world that began, a century or two before Adam Smith, to resemble our own. But there was an even more fundamental difference. The idea of "making a living" has not yet come into being. Economic life and social life were one and the same thing. Work was not yet a means to an end—the end being money and the things it buys. Work was an end in itself, encompassing, of course, money and commodities, but engaged in as a part of a tradition, as a natural way of life. In a work, the great social invention of "the market" had not yet been made."

Heilbroner, apart from suggesting that the very concept of gain is a very recent invention in human history, indicates that work is no longer integrated with social life; it is now just a means to an end, it is separate and ABSTRACTED. Heilbroner continues,

Land, labor and capital as agents of production, as impersonal, dehumanized economic entities, are as much modern conceptions as the calculus. Indeed, they are not much older."

So, it would seem then, that only very recently have we given up the integrated idea of work as a natural intrinsic part of living, for the idea of work as an abstract activity valuable only for its monetary payment. We can picture the mason of a few centuries ago, following in his father's footsteps, carefully and creatively constructing a House for God in the middle of his community, assisted by his children, who would one day take his place. His work would be daily admired and commented upon by his life-long neighbors, whose progeny would use the building for very many centuries to come. And we know that today the mason leaves his family in the morning, returns eight hours later after laying several hundred bricks in a straight run of stretcher bond. The requirements of the Industrial Revolution have changed things, and it is not improper to occasionally wonder if it is all for the best.

When reading the more serious popular press these days, it is difficult to avoid its apparently insatiable concern with the new subject (almost an academic discipline in itself) of Comparative Productivity. Thusly, and as a fair and typical example, allow me to draw to your atten-

tion this quotation from an article entitled, "The Miracle of Japan—How the Post-War Was Won," in a very recent issue (5/26/79) of the respected Saturday Review.

"In 1975 one Japanese worker could produce cars worth about 1,000 English pounds every nine days, whereas at Britain's Leyland Motors a worker took 47 days to produce as much. In 1976 none of the major European car producers (Fiat, Renault, or Volkswagen) was able to produce as many as 20 cars per man-year and Toyota turned out 49. In 1962 the Japanese produced roughly 100 tons of steel per worker, compared to 400 in England; but by 1974 Japanese productivity in steel was estimated to be two or three times that of England. By 1976 a typical Japanese worker in a ball-bearing factory produced about three and one-half times as much as a worker in RHP, the leading English manufacturer."

That sounds bad for Great Britain, but even worse follows for the plight of the United States of America,

"The extent of Japanese superiority over the United States in industrial competitiveness is underpublicized in America. But the true state of affairs was reflected by a high official of a leading Japanese research center who privately acknowledged that the United States, with its highly competitive agricultural sector, has by now taken the place of Japan's prewar colonies, supplying agricultural products and raw materials to a superior modern industrial machine."

This is a shattering analysis, disturbing and provoking. It is incredible that the USA is now Japan's Breadbasket. The established pecking order has been reversed. The nations with the longest and the second longest involvement with the Industrial Revolution have been supplanted by the nation with the most recent involvement in this revolution of productive process. Our Harvard men claim that it has to do with such things as war damage and capital intensiveness. I do not believe this, and would suggest that the real reason is to be found in the fact, that the workers of these two particular nations, have been exposed to the consequences of industrial production longer than anyone else. Consequently they have been the first to slowly, but very surely sense debilitation and emasculation. And they have been the first to experience a despondent sense of ENNUI (which by definition is a sense of weariness and dissatisfaction), and to manifest the frustration of meaningless work, and therefore the impossibility of prideful and satisfying accomplishment, by an increasingly blatant determination to obtain ever increasing monetary reward, for the performance of the constant, and always unpleasant, task of work. Herein lies the destructive germinations, likely to overwhelm the cooperative basis of any society (witness the social collapse of Great Britain in 1978–79), or to self-destroy an economic stability by inflation (witness the sudden difficulty, even inability, of the North American building worker to finance ownership of a new house—a product that he has himself constructed). Something is going wrong, forces of all kinds are going askelter. What has already happened in the West, will also happen, inescapably, but a little later to the Orient, then to South America, and then to Africa. It is always reassuring to think that we will not be alone in our foolishness, but at the same time it is sad.



Work, as is generally required upon the assembly line or the construction site is repetitive, unchallenging, drudgrous, in the main it is a BORE. Less and less are western workers called upon, or ever allowed, to exercise those precious abilities which distinguish a human from a machine. Less and less do products, artifacts or buildings, look as though warm blooded people produced them. Perhaps we are secretly ashamed, to have to admit that we are not yet clever enough, to have made ourselves entirely dispensable (except, of course, as consumers).

Specifically I am interested in probing to see if there is anything which we have overlooked about the art and science of masonry, as we scurry to prove its value as an economic and technical panacea above all known universal building techniques! One encouraging aspect to such an endeavour as this, is that the making of masonry is so very, very old. It is an almost timeless activity, which began simultaneously with the very first decisions of early man, to forfeit the pleasures and uncertain daily traumas of the wandering but constant hunt, for the established community. Sometimes, primitive history seems to be a process which early man arranged, so that he could begin at the very earliest opportunity to just lay bricks. And so we find, at the dawn of human history, people rushing to create mastaba and ziggurats in brick, before they could calculate this materials unique value in BTU conservation, or its exceptionable advantage in the eternal comparisons of capital versus maintenance costs! What is the nature and the meaning of this incredible, perhaps even hypnotic fascination with brick work, and why has it continued to successfully compete with alternative systems even up to this day? I have always found most curious that a man, considered by many to be the most dynamic and pivotal figure of the first half of the Twentieth Century, Sir Winston Churchill, should have been drawn to bricklaying for his hobby. Could it just simply be that the spirit and demands of bricklaying (and its consequent appreciation), somehow sympathetically resonates with the very nature of the human spirit, as it has evolved over many thousands of years? Could it be that we just love to put these things one above the other, in endless variation of resulting total form? Whilst always pretending, of course, more proper sounding motives.

I indicated earlier that I think of masonry as a special activity, very deeply rooted in our human psyche in some almost inexplicable, but fundamental way. I have observed on building sites that bricklayers appear to be a distinctive breed, different to their colleagues in other allied trades. Their work is not covered up after the foundations are completed, nor is their work veneered every three or four years by a coat of totally different and whimsically selected paint, and their work is not entombed, never to see the daily miracle of light, as are the doomed contributions of the plumber and electrician. They have always appeared to me to be more sane and sanguine, confident that their work is for keeps, almost eternal. Many smoke pipes too. They seem to be the most composed, but alas, they rub shoulders with their more discontented colleagues, and they are all involved, with you and I, in the intransigent dilemmas of our culture.

Architects, in their work as interpretive artists must be sensitive and responsive to our cultural heart-beats, and so they are in almost, but not quite, every way. You do not have to look far for evidence of this. Consider, as a typical example of architectural concerns, these words from the 1977 Text of the Charter of Machu Picchu (International Review, volume one, published by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development).

"In general, the objective of the planning process, including economic planning, city planning, urban design and architecture, must be to interpret and respond to human needs."

There's no doubt about that. Occasionally the basic idea is daringly extended as follows,

"In the building field, the user's involvement is even more important and concrete. People must participate in all phases of the design process, permitting the user to become an integral part of the architect's work."

So far so good. But there is one concern missing, and that is for the people who will actually put together, on the site, the end result of any design process, the building. There is surely a bellowing inconsistency between stated concerns for the humanization of the environment if it is to be produced by dehumanized work. For, by the way in which we have come to think of brick masonry, lately, we have required the mason to be nothing more than a brick-laying ROBOT. He is doomed to the eternal production of precise and stale stretcher bond in endless walls of undeviating flatness. All of this is in the name of capital economy, to increase productivity and lower costs. But we have seen that dehumanizing the very nature of work, subtracting from it the delightful expressive variances of the individual worker, causes a decrease in productivity, and the very opposite of the required economy. Work dehumanization may even bring once mighty nations to their knees.

In todays spectrum of work, brick masonry has an intrinsic almost majestic chance to reverse the stullifying process that I have described. Compare it to most other crafts and trades, omitting the ubiquitous growth of so-called service industries, and consider how unique it really is. Brick work is

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| a. VISIBLE    | It makes the essential form, color, shadows fenestration patterns of an architectonic form.  |
| b. MONUMENTAL | It is going to last much longer than the mason will, by far. He therefore leaves behind him something that will endure, perhaps eternally. Some part of the mason, therefore, will live forever. |
| c. PRIMARY    | It is never going to be covered up, torn up and resurfaced or recovered, altered or remodeled by fashionable whim.   |
| d. HUMAN      | It has a textural toughness, from the earth itself, poised and ready for any onslaught of storm and sun and  |

ice and time itself. It symbolises preferred human qualities that manufactured metals and plastics cannot.

How remarkable is this ancient skill of masonry. How much more it is ready to be, beyond just providing a water-proof insulated envelope. To make architecture and to also arrest the present atrophy of skill, interest and good will of the mason, as the representative of all crafts-

men, by a new determination to make his actual work challenging and creative, might have enormous implications for the meaning of architecture, and for the very roots of Society itself.

Certainly it could only improve upon the present architectural evasive concerns with the doldrums of historical metaphor, or with the craftsman's contemplation of eternal Ennui.