Response and Responsibility

Elysabeth Yates-Burns McKee

Common Ground: a Houston undertext, 1991.

In a recent lecture hosted by the Department of History at Rice University, Richard Bernstein of the New School for Social Research outlined variable responses to the so-called "modern" and "postmodern" conditions. Juxtaposing the points of view of Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, Bernstein formulated a relationship between their ideas. I want to apply these ideas to the production of architecture.

The questions Bernstein raised in citing these two critics confront theorists and practitioners of numerous disciplines: What is postmodernity? And the corollary: What is modernity? For architects and designers, conditions of modernity and postmodernity permeate the practice and production of architecture. And yet it is difficult to move beyond a superficial assessment of their implicit, if not explicit, contracts. Modernity and postmodernity suggest definitive operations when apprehended in a rigorous manner. Yet the "modern" and "postmodern" share a common ground that is fundamental to their respective tenets. This common ground lies in the realm of response and responsibility, upon which are founded the fabric of our cities, their institutions and their architecture. By excavating this common ground, we can descend beneath the superficial and stylistic manifestations of modern and postmodern polemics in architecture and the design arts.

Jurgen Habermas is a proponent of the ideals of modernity, and his ongoing project has been the continual redress of the project of modernity, that of reason, its paradigmatic component. He feels that we have not used the tenets of reason – rational thinking – to the degree mandated by the period in which we live, nor have we used the faculties of reason to the fullest in addressing social, ethical, and moral issues. Habermas attempts to formulate a model of conduct among members of society, individually and collectively, with his theory of "communicative reason." Communicative reason depends on the dialogue between individuals and groups of individuals who represent specific desires and interests. It is through the process of "reflective argumentation" among and between social subjects, in which the individual viewpoints are preserved and respected, that differences can be worked out. All parties involved must seek to account not only for themselves, but for the interests of others, giving them equal weight. This is the "undertext" of Habermas's argument.

Such a theory supposes shared forms of social life upon which normative conditions for argument and dialogue can be positioned. What is significant, however, is that these norms, or "normative structures" as Habermas refers to them, are multiple in number as well as multifarious in character. Accordingly, in so-called modern and postmodern societies, it is clear that there is

a multiplicity of contexts; hence, universal "monological" prescriptions – "general theories" – become obsolete. This multiplicity of contexts is what is often referred to as pluralism or a body politic – a point of view that stresses the accommodation of differing viewpoints. However, pluralism within the body politic depends upon the recognition and acceptance of the "undertext," the shared goal of universal response and responsibility. This goal, as yet unattained, is Habermas's "incomplete project of Modernity." For architecture, he sees the "incomplete project" in terms of a shared response and responsibility to the social and ethical problems we as architects are faced with today. The "new historicism" of the 1980s produced an architecture that was largely irrelevant to such issues as urban decay, homelessness, housing, and the increasing breakdown of community experience.

The second part of Bernstein's equation was a brief elucidation of Jacques Derrida's provocative philosophy of deconstruction or, as it is alternately called, "post-structuralism" or "postmodernity." There are indeed slight differences in these terms, some of which may be radicalized depending on the context of the discourse. For our purposes, however, these differences remain slight. Like Habermas, Derrida emphasizes the multiplicity of points of view. Derrida's thesis also represents a kind of pluralism, although his particular project is based on the multiple interpretations of kinds of texts; "texts" include all forms of writing, both inscribed and visual texts. Of late, he has turned his attention to the visual arts (in particular paintings by Cy Twombly) and architecture, having recently collaborated on projects with Peter Eisenman and Jeffrey Kipnis. Through the manifold interpretations of various texts, Derrida maintains that new readings might be discovered, liberating the reader from the hegemony of privileged, and delimiting, readings. Even in so brief an outline of Derrida's theory, it is fair to say that this point of view acknowledges differences of opinion and interpretation – Derrida's *différance*. In accordance with *différance*,

Derrida seeks to accommodate the role of "the other," those voices or referents that have been marginalized or that exist outside of normative and conventional interpretations and social boundaries. It is here also that the critic and maker have a responsibility to the numerous voices that issue from the margins, outside the boundaries of conventional norms. And it is in the production of things (art, architecture, texts) that individuals respond to the desires and interests of "the other," others not like themselves. Collectively, the individuals who make up society respond to the various forces that come into play, most important those forces – people – that compose the body politic of our democratic system.

It is important to note that any complex text, including novels, legal documents, and architectural drawings and objects, is constituted by a variety of conditions. All sectors of the city – all communities, whatever their economic, religious, or ethnic status – contribute to its complexity, variety, and plurality. Recognition of variety, accommodation of plurality, and mutual coexistence are therefore absolutely necessary to preserving the complexity of the city.

During a recent visit, Rem Koolhaas remarked that Houston was the ultimate postmodern city. Its form, Koolhaas said, is virtually unmediated by conventions and established norms. The free play of unbridled economic and architectural production, the total absence of zoning requirements, produce *only* marginal conditions. Development is boundless, describing the "raw data" of economic architectural production. There are few boundaries or explicit urban programs that exist and function to define areas and zones. Given recent changes in public opinion, zoning may soon begin to introduce a kind of discrimination through the implementation of land use controls. And given the zoning code's "phasing-in" procedures, Houston will become a laboratory for experimentation on the conditions of margins and boundaries in the city. For a time, zoning may act as an index of the lack – and the partial implementation –

of its mandated regulations, encoding the differences between the two kinds of cities as they are manifested over time.

In a recent letter to Peter Eisenman, Derrida argues for the architect's response to current problems and his responsibility for seeking their solutions. These comments were addressed specifically to Eisenman in light of his often arcane intellectual projects. Derrida advocates an "other architecture," an "activist" architecture that attempts to embrace and respond, not to aesthetic fabrications, but to the marginalized members of contemporary, postmodern societies. These include the lower classes, the underclass, and the homeless, who have been marginalized by development and gentrification in and around our major cities. This point of view is not new, but it has been given a relatively unconventional theoretical foundation in Derrida's work. The lack of adequate, affordable housing in our cities has become increasingly critical in the past three decades. Many areas that once accommodated various classes and ethnic groups no longer exist. The modern city itself continues to lose vitality and viability; the flight to the suburbs and unrelenting "progress" and "growth" clearly reinforce our fixation on numbers. But what of the reality of our experiences in the city and the community? Who is responsible?

Habermas's proposition of "communicative reason" relates to the word "community." The root of both means "to share." This implies the necessity for response and responsibility. In the case of both Habermas and Derrida, the "undertext" depends on a recognition of plurality (a radical democracy); an affirmation of plurality and difference; and an insistence that citizens, individually and collectively, instigate a "policy" of response to and responsibility for our shared culture. It is the city that both is constituted by and gives form to the motivated action of its citizens. ■