In Michael Benedikt, Ed., *CENTER 10: VALUE* (Center for American Architecture and Design, 1997)

Introduction

In this, the age of information, the slow and the still, the "holy and the firm" are at risk. Whatever we call it—infrastructural, architectural, or urban beauty—we are free-riding on the efforts of our fathers to make cities places to be proud of. Swept into our satellite- and cable-fed digital dreams, and tied together by radio waves and wire, we are increasingly deaf to the value of a cared-for physical environment, and increasingly blind to the harm its decline is doing us.

It is often said that behind all this are changing "values" or the "laws of economics." But what does this mean? This, the tenth volume of the book series *CENTER*, goes back to the basics, exploring the theme of economic value, its nature and relationship to other values, to what we do, and ultimately to what and how we build. *CENTER 11* will address the question with further explorations.

Urban sprawl and endless strip development, parking-lot-destroyed downtowns and numbing developer suburbs, cracked sidewalks (where there are any at all), weedy parks, and wire-crossed skies…the bulk of the American landscape is mired in ugliness.

For at least two generations the deterioration and cheapening of the physical environment has proceeded in several dimensions simultaneously: the loss of generosity in the size and quality-of-construction of buildings; the reduction in their complexity and detail of design; the neglect of human scale and socioeconomic variety in neighborhoods and public spaces; the sparse commitment of capital resources to creating new infrastructure and to maintaining the old; the powerlessness of most city councils to restrain developer interests (and the alarm of others who stop development completely): the rule of the road. Perhaps not coincidentally, all this has proceeded together with similar trends in dress and speech codes, in educational standards, and in much else.

But what have we here but the ineluctable play of "economic forces?" America, after all, is a democracy, one in which people are largely free to do what they wish with their votes, their time, and their money. Here, in the world's premier example of a free-enterprise, free-market system, businesses (ironically) must cater to consumers' wishes and values in any way they can, or die. Here, the consumer is "sovereign."

It would seem, then, that if the outcome of this combination of desire and manufacture and law is an unlovely and unloved landscape, then people's values must lie elsewhere. Through the miracle of the marketplace people get what they want, and what they want, it seems, is not architecture with a capital A.

The economist can accept this with some equanimity. But the average architect in average America, putting down his copy of *Architecture*, gazes disconsolately through plate glass at the parking lot and utility poles across the way and thinks: "'unlovely and unloved'...this is a vicious circle." He remembers the cafés and boulevards of Paris and Prague, the park at Seaux, the hill towns of Tuscany, the teeming streets of Tokyo with their $700/square foot buildings ablaze with neon, and as he turns back to the problem of expunging the last dollar of "unnecessary expense" from the project at hand, his mind turns to questioning the "economic forces" that have made the American landscape inevitable. Where is the invisible hand that now guides his hand. What do economic forces and economic laws have to do with value, and specifically the fate of values embodied in fine architecture? Do people really not want a tended, affectionately crafted, and life-enhancing physical environment?

The numbers in the U.S. are revealing. The share of GNP going to (non-military) construction dropped from more than 11 percent in 1950 to less than 8 percent in 1990. The number of square feet built per annum increased over the same period from 600 million to 3,500 million square feet. This means that a 600% increase in construction volume was achieved with a 25% decrease in percent-GNP. Efficiency? Enviable "returns to scale"? This is the economist's way to look at it, and the view of one who does not see that the product itself has changed. For it is clear that we are progressively directing relatively less of our total wealth and effort to infrastructural and architectural quality. Over the same period of time, the share of the GNP represented by the banking, real estate, entertainment, tourism, and communication sectors of our economy grew in precisely the opposite direction. Conclusion? Our environment has become ever more commodified, ever more the subject of short term investment and resale rather than lifelong dwelling. To escape our dispiriting environment we go to the movies. We go to Disneyland, to resorts, and to Europe for our fix of architectural interest and beauty. At home and at work, the television—and latterly the computer screen—has replaced the window, just as surely as air conditioning replaced the fresh air that once blew through it.

Architects: there is no fixing this by delving into the history and theory of our discipline in the usual, art-historical manner. The problem is more urgent. It is time for architects to join the discussion about "values" now underway in American society so that people can hear. Not only this, but in the spirit of true designers—indeed pioneers—theorists among us should plunge into the task of understanding value in all its forms, studying the economic conditions of the profession, creating value with buildings and writings, and ultimately helping the whole enterprise of architecture connect to our culture in a new way.

Center 10 and Center 11 are devoted to beginning this process. In the volume you have in hand, three contributors are economists, two are sociologists, five are architects or planners, and two are moral philosophers; one is a poet, one a psychologist and one a Nobel prize winning physicist. All launch themselves into the heart of the question of value, as they see it both personally and as representatives of their disciplines. I shall not precís their work here. I shall let them speak for themselves.•