

# What is Architecture?

BY AFSANEH ASAYEH



Stonehenge - Wiltshire, England – Architects unknown, 2000 BC

**“As architects, we are responsible for re-imagining the world.”**

This statement, made by Professor Arthur Wigglesworth during a review, took my breath away. I had never thought through the implications, or, as Professor George Kapelos was fond of saying, “unpacked,” the word “architecture.” As architects, the legislation tells us that we are responsible for public health and safety. The increasing traction being gained by the imperative of sustainability aside, nowhere in the myriad parameters and challenges of bringing a piece of architecture into the world are we reminded of this great responsibility. Each act of architecture we commit has important and wide-ranging implications that will outlast our own tenures on this planet.

Throughout the four years it took me to earn my Masters’ degree at Ryerson and beyond, the question of what exactly architecture is has presented itself over and over again. When I went back to school in 2008 as a “mature student,” my objective was to become licensed and complete the intention articulated by my father when I was 14. In fact, I learned much more than I had

anticipated about myself, the world, and architecture.

It strikes me that outside the profession, there is much ambiguity about what architecture is, which contributes to the uncertainty and ambivalence around the value of architecture and architects. Between the Building Code’s assigning of responsibilities and the sharing of the pie by technologists, interior designers, BCIN (Building Code Identification Number) qualified individuals, and anyone else who fancies taking a crack at designing a building, we find ourselves a rather beleaguered profession, intent on protecting our turf – which is not a realistic or constructive way to go about promoting ourselves.

For many an average architect working in the average firm, there is a daily struggle with an identity crisis, and for justification and validity. Challenges come from many quarters, and the general public’s perception of an architect is largely that of a necessary evil. It doesn’t help matters that the term “architecture” is used to describe many things that aren’t buildings or even tangible – everything from sleep to software to the chemical structure of the

brain. Professor John Cirka’s definition of architecture as “order” is one answer to the question of what architecture is, and while it speaks to intention, organization, structure and hierarchy, it also helps to explain some of the ambiguity prevalent around the meaning of “architecture.”

As distinguished from “building” or “shelter,” and defined as a deliberate act of design (and sometimes construction) with meaning beyond the imperative of protecting against the elements – architecture had its beginnings in simple structures: cloth or skins stretched across wood supports to make a space for ceremony and ritual. Aside from sheltering the participants, the intention was to demarcate the boundary between the sacred and the profane, to elevate the activities occurring below the shelter into the realm of ceremony, and to provide symbolic and hierarchical meaning to the space.

Through Stonehenge and Mesopotamia, pyramids and cathedrals, the Coliseum and Parthenon, the realm of architecture remained exclusive and exalted, largely reserved for ritual, religion, and royalty. And as royalty’s imprimatur included the notion that they were deemed the deity’s representatives



and/or anointed by her, architecture primarily served religion and the realm of the spiritual. It extolled and symbolized higher powers, emphasizing the contrast between humans in the hierarchy of society. Historically, architecture, construction, painting, and sculpture were symbiotic, and the architect benefited from multiple sources of status, validation and recognition.

Professor Cirka also spoke of the “alchemy” that occurs in architecture, wherein the combination of a number of ingredients is transformed into something far greater than the sum of its parts. With the Renaissance and the dawn of the age of reason came a transformation across the full spectrum of society, and while architecture was no longer the enchanted “gesamtkunstwerk” that had been a Gothic Cathedral, it continued to serve as a visual symbol of the exalted and of societal hierarchy – which hierarchy now included secular patronage. During this time, art, architecture, and religion were all affected and re-evaluated in the face of science, and architecture started its drift towards secularism and claiming an identity without the explicit imprimatur of religion.

The Industrial Revolution and its subsequent fallout served as catalyst for the notion that architecture should serve and represent all of society. The fruits of the Industrial Revolution and the advent of Modernism brought “Architecture” to the realm of the factory worker as well as the farmer, to the priest and the queen, as well as the secretary and the housewife. While Modernist Architecture aspired to Utopia with

Chartres Cathedral – Chartres, France – Architect unknown, 1250



Fagus-Werk Factory - Alfeld an der Leine, Germany – Walter Gropius, 1913  
IMAGE: CARSTEN JANSSEN / CC-BY-SA-2.0-DE



Schroeder House – Utrecht, Netherlands – Gerrit Rietveld, 1924  
IMAGE: HAY KRANEN CC-BY



Duck Building – Long Island, NY – Architect Unknown, late 1960s  
IMAGE: UNITED STATES NATIONAL PARK SERVICES



Portland Building – Portland, Oregon – Michael Graves, 1982  
IMAGE: STEVE MORGAN

its notions of democracy, service, and a just society, the 20th Century also included architecture’s meaning as a tool which could be used to define, further, and abet the sinister political agenda of Nazism.

The predominance of Post-Modernism in the latter part of the 20th century combined disillusionment and perhaps a debasing of architecture, as well as a more inclusive and celebratory approach to what architecture meant and could be. It could be a duck or a box, cynical or corny, a pastiche of the past or the stirrings of something new taking

shape in corrugated metal and chain link. Arguably, Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum not only put Bilbao on the map, it was also a striking icon for the emerging power of digital technology – and coincidentally spawned the “Starchitect” genre, about which there is much mixed feeling. As concerns “branding,” it is perhaps true that there is no such thing as bad publicity, and that the recognition afforded “Designer Architects” can serve to increase the public’s perception and appreciation for architecture and raise the profile of the “Off-the-Rack Architect.”

In this century, we have experienced buildings of water and air, buildings that beat like a human heart, and buildings that are light. We have re-imagined a world where a freight train line can become a beautiful place for reflection and interaction, and a building can be the very ground rising and falling and undulating to become pathway, circulation, shelter and port. With the inescapable advent of globalization and the flattening of the world, architecture’s meanings multiply as well as diminish.

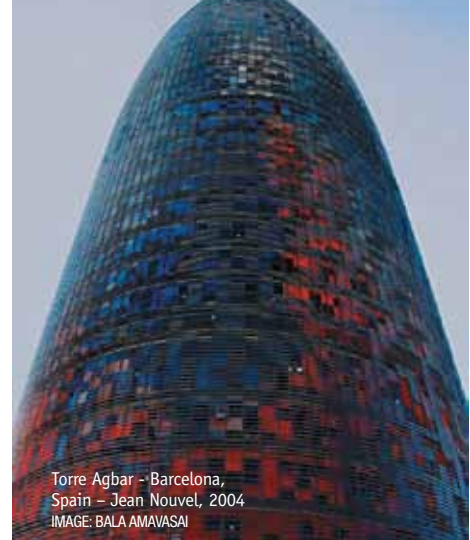
For most of us on this planet, experiencing architecture is a recurring fact of



Guggenheim Museum – Bilbao, Spain – Frank Gehry, 1997  
IMAGE: MYKREEV



Blur Building - Neuchâtel, Switzerland – Diller & Scofidio, 2002  
 IMAGE: NORBERT AEPLI



Torre Agbar - Barcelona, Spain – Jean Nouvel, 2004  
 IMAGE: BALA AMAVASAI

quotidian existence. We are impacted daily by architecture as it not only frames, but shapes and colours our experiences, memories, and dreams, thus shaping us as human beings. Architecture is aspiration and inspiration, symbol and icon, structure and anarchy. It is a repository of history, our daily humdrum, and muse for the best that

we can aspire to. Architecture has always been about the spirit, the intangible, the struggle for deeper meaning that predates religion, the on-going endeavour to create heaven on earth.

For myself, I have found that Professor Ripley's definition of architecture resonates most: "Architecture is everything".

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Yokohama International Port Terminal –  
 Yokohama, Japan – FOA, 2002