TECHNOLOGICAL METAPHORS IN THE CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE

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"First we build our buildings and then our buildings build us," Churchill once said. A Walt Whitman poem describes a similar relationship between buildings and the people who live in them: "A child went forth," and the first thing he saw he became on that day, and from that day forward. These two statements express different aspects of the metaphorical and symbolic level of form and our capacity to shape our environment according to our values, culture, and aspirations. Often our forms are pregnant with meaning that we don't understand. The buildings and environmental forms we shape in turn shape our consciousness; and within this new framework we further design new buildings. Forms can be metaphors or symbols for states of being, and these forms with their meaning for good or ill can imprint the subconscious mind and affect future action.

Walking to school and sitting in school a child absorbs the surroundings. "This is a bad school, and I am a bad girl," said a first grade child, epitomizing Walt Whitman's lines, as she kicked the broken wall and barbed wire fence covering the window, her tattered shoe skimming the surface of broken glass. Subconsciously, nonverbally, this child understood the cultural messages which she had inherited from her society and ingested as a reflection of herself. The school was seen as a prison; she was by implication a prisoner in a world she had not created and could not understand. Permanently implanted in the depths of her mind, in future years such a symbol could epitomize her self-esteem. As a designer or viewer she could continue to perpetuate this symbol on future school children without realizing its power and possible meaning.

These symbols express our attitudes and root ideas. In the Egyptian language, hieroglyphics were symbols which had great power because the concrete

image could expand to multiple meanings of many layers beyond the image. Humans are carriers of their culture and activities which occur on many simultaneous levels, including a symbolic or metaphorical level. New activities generally automatically repeat inherited patterns, unless for some reason we examine the deep structure or underlying causes of this pattern. Art education can train people to read and interpret the levels of meaning contained in symbols or the metaphoric nature of public and personal events and objects. Once we understand possible symbolic meanings that things have we can evaluate the meanings and decide how to recombine or reorganize them directing the meanings of the symbols we use.

Our unconscious manipulation of symbols to reflect our values is evident in a variety of activities. The division of time into uniform segments to compose a school day, our use of everyday language, and the design of cities and living spaces are three examples of this phenomenon. These symbols then unconsciously affect the observed layers of our behavior, and further perpetuate their own patterns. There are a preponderance of technological words that have invaded our everyday language and physical forms. For instance, we speak of "input-output" as factors in relationships, or "feedback" we are receiving from our friends. Technological metaphors have entered the sphere of human thinking and interaction and colored the words we use to describe our activities.

When a child sits in a math class, for example, there are many other lessons being learned besides math in a non-explicit way. Let us take some examples: the division of the class into 45 minute segments or the division of the building into separate rooms off a long corridor. While the child is learning English or math, on a subliminal level the child is learning about dividing time. From the structure of the class, the child ingests time as a commodity; it can be captured, cut up into tiny units by a machine called a clock, and released by

the arbitrary ringing of bells. Sitting in class the child learns to divide time, to end one activity and begin a new one with the ring of a bell. Soon, he learns how to gauge his emotional involvement accordingly. Spatially, the child may perceive uniformity, equanimity, and sterility in the classroom design and arrangement, learning that neutrality and cleanliness and fitting-in are appropriate personal goals. Inside the class, the teacher stands at the front of the room, the very pose and relationship designating a hierarchy and power exchange.

Just as the child learns more than math from sitting in math class, so we all learn lessons from the buildings around us and their configurations. As architecture provides the setting of our actions and surrounds us daily, it can be a metaphor for our life. Even its vocabulary expresses states of feeling and existence. The words, "wall," "door," "entrance," "threshhold," "step," "foundation," "structure," "frame," "ceiling," are architectural attributes and also reflective of states of existence. I am sure each of us can think of many examples of how these words are used in expressions. "She is on the threshhold of adulthood," "every new endeavor requires a step at a time." Thus, on a very direct iconic level architectural components can symbolize our emotional and existential states. These metaphors or symbols are deeper, however, because we are not generally aware of their transfer from one part of our lives to another. Architecture is architecture, emotions are emotions, and words are words. The play between them is subtle, but once we understand their relationships, we cannot escape the impact. Thus, the way we design these components expresses how we feel about our own or societal "threshholds" and "entrances."

The messages of the buildings are subtle and silent, but they symbolically impress upon our consciousness, and we carry them with us to other activities

and spheres of action. They reinforce and extend their patterns to every aspect of our lives. That rational arbitrary division of time into equal units which occurs is one aspect of daily life that is graphically or iconically represented in how we design our landscape. In the same way that we fragment time and subjects into classroom compartments, we also set up our spatial components in our landscape designating areas for housing, schools, industries, and business, making sure that no one use encroaches on any other. The fragmentation and division of daily activities of our thoughts is reflected in our minds.

If one is trained to work with symbols, one learns what they mean and thus combines them in an attempt to direct their meanings. Those meanings may exaggerate the conditions of the times, represent the conditions of the times, or redirect the directions of the times. Even if one is not trained to work with symbols, one still uses them. The builder, the developer, or the planner who designs the landscape works with inherited forms and is generally unaware of the underlying messages that they carry. These city builders rely on precedent and market surveys and preference polls with little realization of how their designs are the perpetuators of a value system and a thought pattern that extends to every aspect of human life. The school administrator who constructs a school day is far more concerned with teaching math, English, and the other necessary subjects and cramming them into the allotted time, than the message for the student that the dividing of time is dividing the person and dividing the mind of the person. Thus, the city builder and school administrator perpetuate a system without understanding the system they are perpetuating. Understanding the underlying meanings of the forms and concepts that we use in our daily life, particularly in the public arena, can allow us to influence a changing conception of our lives.

Mirceau Eliade, in his study The Sacred and the Profane, investigates the arrangement of space by religious man. He suggests that man always searched for a center; this center represented the center of the cosmos, of the universe, of the world of the person, of internal individual. The center was distinguished from the rest of the world or from the rest of the local area. It was often marked by a pole in primitive tribal society or it was left open as a recession, surrounded by dwellings and other functions. It was distinguishable.

> Revelation of a sacred space makes it possible to obtain
> a fixed point and hence to acquire orientation in the
> chaos of homogenity, to "found the world" and to live in
> a real sense. The profane experience, on the contrary,
> maintains the homogenity and hence the reality of space.
> No true orientation is now possible.

Eliade generally attributes the sacred dimension to the vertical, a reaching towards the heavens, and the horizontal is the profane non-religious dimension. Thus, on a symbolic or metaphorical level space can be organized into a center and a surround; the surround represents the profane and the center, the sacred.

Do we have a center in our modern cities and how do we locate it? What functions do we attribute to our center, our vertical and horizontal dimensions? The symbolic center of our cities have been turned over to the management, financial, and business sectors--their physical location and verticality are a concrete testimony to their sacredness in our societal perspective. Within Eliade's framework, it is the monuments of technology, the homes of technological super-structure that become the churches of the modern world. It is those buildings that occupy the center-posts of the cosmos.

Victor Gruen's book, The Heart of the Cities, was published in the early 1960's and in a sense institutionalized a metaphor that offered a concrete example of Eliade's idea of the center and the impact of a simple concept, "the heart", on the organization of our cities. Gruen also gave expression to a pattern which

was burgeoning in our cities with the metaphor: the center as the "heart", the "heart" as the financial and business superstructure. He described a way to develop a mall to revitalize the inner city core. Soon this pattern was adopted in numerous cities with little regard for context or its appropriateness for the particular condition. Shopping center "hearts" of the same type grew up in small towns, large cities, and in suburban areas, a phenomenon described as the "malling of America" in retrospect. The metaphor had lost its original association and become a patent solution, a symbol of our central values.

Surrounding the "the heart", the center-post, is profane space which is a chaotic and disorganized mass. In our society, this is a homogenous sprawling landscape, a mass of dwellings and buildings for daily functions that composes the surrounds of sacred center. It is generally organized in a monotonous uniformity that becomes confusing and chaotic in its very excess of order. It lacks landmarks and contextural references for orientation that the spontaneous landscape provides.

If we look at almost any urban-suburban area we can find some similarities in the landscape we perceive. The structure of metropolitan configurations have lost their particularity and continue to grow towards homogenous forms. In the core of the city, we find increasing concentrations of towering buildings which house the material and business functions of culture. Buildings owned and constructed by banks and the largest corporations dominate the skyline in any major metropolitan area. At their feet, the work functions of daily life cluster. Within the command of the vistas of these commercial towers lie the physical settings of the rest of a person's life--schools, dwellings, recreation facilities. From the business, commercial or financial sector as the central function, we drive on an endless mass of swirling roads which separate our dwellings in their suburban terrain from the corporate structures downtown. Structured in uniform rows,

houses follow particular setbacks and alignments. Each is like its neighbor with only superficial differences of color and a few details as signs of recognition. A repetitious rhythm of housing and yards blanket the land, only to be relieved by an occasional school or playing field, carefully insulated from its neighbor and camouflaged in design. Each house has been carefully analyzed to reflect the appropriate spatial size and configuration of space for families of a given size and age range.

The monuments of the corporate structure lie at the sacred center or "heart" of our cities while the metaphor of the machine or technology, a landscape of rationality, expands towards the outlying areas. It is ordered and measured and yet with its measured order is a return to chaos, a quilt of pieces that are all the same so we cannot tell where we are and it doesn't make any difference anyway.

> The landscape of reflection and reason is the landscape
> either created directly by the application of rational
> scientific techniques to particular settings, or experi-
> enced through the adapted attitudes of rationalism...
> it is a strangely passionless landscape which seems to
> deny deep experiences or close attachments.

The physical forms of the contemporary landscape are metaphors of rationality and logic. The arrangement of the forms epitomizes the dichotomization and segmentation of our daily lives and in turn becomes imprinted on our consciousness accelerating segmentation in other areas of our life.

Like Gruen's "heart" of the cities, Le Corbu's view of buildings and cities as "machines for living" captured the imaginations of modern architects and planners, perhaps because it embodied much of the reverence for the new discoveries and improvements in technology prevalent throughout the 1900's. In 1929, Le Corbu wrote:

> The Plan is the Generator,
> Without a plan, you have a lack of order and willfulness....
> Modern life demands, and is waiting for, a new kind of plan,
> both for the house and for the city....

> The house is a machine for living in...
> If we eliminate from our hearts and minds all dead concepts
> in regard to the house, and look at the question from a
> critical and objective point of view, we shall arrive at
> the "House--Machine"....
> Chance will be replaced by foresight, programme will succeed
> improvisation. Each case will be integrated into the regional
> plan; the land will be measured and assigned to various acti-
> vities: there will be clear regulations governing the project
> which will be started immediately and carried out by successive
> stages. The law will establish permanent building regulations
> providing each key function with means to achieve optimum
> expression, through seeing situated in the most favorable lo-
> cations and at the most useful distances.

This particular way of thinking and designing is a sharp break from past
interaction patterns. Jurgen Habermas explores the underlying roots of the
thinking which could result in such a physical form in his work, Towards a
Rational Society. He compares what he calls "communicative action" with
"purposive rationality". When processes happen through communicative action,
they develop through unfolding traditions, through dialogues, whether it be
the construction of a school day or the design of a town. The patterns arise
spontaneously and then become legitimized or accepted because they are bonding
traditions. The processes of purposive rationality are those of rules and laws.
Instead of an internal system they are imposed externally and rigidly enforced.
They are the products of methodical or scientific experimentation rather than the
evolution of form. The metaphor of the "house as machine" fits with purposive
rationality. It may not be possible to eliminate metaphors or the symbolic nature
of expression in the landscape. This is not the goal of this discussion; it is
possible, however, to understand how to read the symbolic or metaphor level of
meaning and evaluate the appropriateness of the metaphor in its context.

Once we understand the implications of a metaphor or symbol and begin to see
how it developed and spread within our society, we can explore its nature. Currently,
it appears that many people are beginning to reexamine the twentieth century metaphors
which we have long taken for granted. Is the "heart" an appropriate metaphor for

the center of the city? If so what are the meanings of the symbol? Are the financial structures and corporate sectors satisfactory expressions of such a center. Is the "machine" the most effective symbol for the quality of life we would like to achieve in our houses? If we are to operate metaphorically, how do we understand the metaphors which we use unconsciously, evaluate their appropriateness, use them effectively, and derive new metaphors which express the values which we would like to hold.

Richard H. Brown in his work, A Poetic for Sociology, 1978 (Cambridge), suggests a framework for approaching metaphors.

> That metaphor retains its consciously 'as if' quality is
> thus a pivotal point, for on it turns the difference between
> using metaphors and being used by them. Awareness of our
> use of metaphor provides an escape hatch from the prison
> house of language or at least lets us know that we are confined.
> To unmask metaphors that have become myths requires negative
> insight and circumspection; to create new metaphors is a leap
> of the imagination. It not only demands that we say "No" to the
> organization of experience as it is given to us in preordained
> categories, but it also requires us to rearrange cognition
> into new forms and associations....The choice is between more or
> less fruitful metaphors, and between using them and being their
> victims."

What will be our future metaphors and how will they serve us? As art educators, we can have a hand training our students to read them as they are being formed and thus to have a voice in their direction.

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