

“The Cracks Through Which We Fall: Challenging the Independence of the Design Disciplines for the Built Environment”

David Osborne

Academic paper presented at “Include Asia 2013”, Royal College of Art/HK Poly University, Hong Kong, July 2013

Abstract:

The emergence of China over the past decade as an economic power has seen a phenomenal growth in architectural expressions in major cities, as corporations vie to establish their buildings as artefacts on the urban skyline (Devlin et al 2006). This has led to a disturbing tendency towards prioritizing the iconic value of the building to the detriment of user functionality and neighborhood integration. One consequence of this is an equal prioritizing of the architectural discipline as producer of urban monuments, and a disturbing disregard for the social function of the building and the part it plays in the larger urban fabric. Buildings, individually or collectively, can be regarded as places, and most current models of place (e.g. Dovey 2009; Gustafson 2001; Massey 1994) emphasise the significance of social activities and interactions as the method by which people create place meaning. This does not exclude the iconic value of buildings but, by viewing the building as a place rather than an entity, it sees this value as simply one of many conditions to be fulfilled in order to achieve a socially – rather than aesthetically – satisfying building.

Thus current practices that prioritise the architectural discipline can be argued to have two failings – two cracks, through which real people fall. First, there is the increasing tendency to focus on the building-as-monument, which not only threatens functionality (such as building access and neighborhood connectivity) but also assumes an importance for aesthetics that is not supported by research (Osborne 2011). Second, the current process for the design of the built environment still maintains the architect as the lead consultant – a discipline that offers little in the way of methods for identifying or understanding the needs for social interactivity. In contrast, research and community consultation are essential parts of urban development, yet they rarely appear in the architectural methodology.

This paper utilises empirical research to further these arguments, principally to illustrate that people respond to buildings as holistic environments rather than iconic architectures. The research, based in Hong Kong, was a grounded theory investigation into consumer processes for creating retail place image, and described the process by which people create personal and social meanings which, in turn, was used to develop sense of place and place image. The theory that resulted from that research proposed that consumers position place socially, through a series of interpretive processes that attach personal and social meaning to that place. The resultant image conceptualizes place as an integral and representative part of that social position and, in consequence, there is an associated series of consumer actions, behaviours, and appearances deemed to be expected and appropriate for that place. The research produced a hierarchy of consumer engagements, both self- and social-engagements, that led to the development of personal/social meaning related to the place.

Significant to the argument against the iconic building, consumer meaning is not resident solely in the place – the building - but is a product of the place as a node on a network of social interactions (Dovey 2009; Easthope 2004; Massey 1994, 1995). Therefore the design of the built environment needs to be capable of understanding not only the physical needs of the community but more importantly the extended social needs.

The purpose of this paper is to challenge the prevailing practices that shape the built environment. First, to dispute the priorities that are held to be the significant in buildings – to argue that the priorities should be the accommodation of people and their activities. And second, to dispute the top-down hierarchy of disciplines that defines the current process for designing the built environment. This paper argues that the process should be socially-driven and socially-prioritised; the built environment is only one aspect of 'place', and individual disciplines should give way to a more co-operative, inclusive process that can better contribute towards socially-significant place.