

# Selling Architecture

by Benjamin Clavan

I have serious problems with the idea that architecture should be sold in the marketplace like so much soap powder. But the real dilemma is this: I cannot quite understand what it is we are trying to sell. And if we do succeed in selling "it", my instincts tell me that we will probably deserve nothing better than the status of high-class whores recently conferred on us by one of architecture's most famous Madames.

The predominant group rationalization about selling architecture today seems to be that we are selling a service. We believe we are not selling our souls, only our businesses. At the same time, a few professionals have discovered the idea that what is sold is not a service at all, but is simply style—in the best traditions of advertising, a particularly acceptable "packaging."

Unfortunately, architecture produced under either situation tends to come off rather second rate. There are clearcut reasons why. In the first case, we cannot presume that providing a service itself is of positive value. In the other, because style reveals not only something of the character of the stylist, but also, if it is successful, the broad outlook of his world and the people who inhabit it, we cannot be certain that there is something of value to reflect.

## From Craft to Service

What does architecture have to do with a service in the first place? What is a service? And what does a service philosophy imply about the labor that is being sold?

Marxists among you will recognize that service rendered in anything but the state of original grace admits of slavery. That is, if service is done for money, it is no longer pure or altruistic, unsold by the baser, acquisitive instincts of mankind. For the most part, though, modern thinking goes something like this: Almost everyone likes making money; architects never make enough of it; and in any case original grace is unfathomable. So why not charge a service fee? The question is, are we being paid merely for providing a service, any service, or are we being paid for the value of the service itself. The distinction is important.

The slow and then rapid development of machines during the past thousand years (what we now call industrialization) radically changed the nature of labor. Service traditionally was manual labor. Today service is more often than not labor in aid of a machine. The very relationship between the workman and the process of work has changed, become impersonalized.

One of the few things that philosophers of the history of science agree on is that indus-

trialization only occurred as man separated his soul from the life of the material world. Pre-Renaissance scholars and scientists reveal in their writings the constant inner battle of the attempt to develop a rational view of the world while at the same time retaining the animism of the Middle Ages. By the time of the Renaissance this question had been settled, and the importance of the order of things outweighed all other intellectual considerations.

Architecture itself, until the Renaissance a craft, one of the building trades, was thus transformed into a discipline. Craftsmen were transformed into "service-men." The French Royal Academy of Architects under the leadership of Colbert, for instance, consciously attempted to find a coherent, systematic, positive frame of reference to replace the archaic, sacred, scholastic mode.

Architecture was to be transformed from an unproductive (noncapitalistic) activity, based on the traditional archaic institution of the guilds, into a new, rationally controllable sector. The shift from a human-oriented system to a machine-oriented system thus became reality. The point was no longer simply to build, but to produce, to provide a service as a reflection of man's new power to dominate nature through technics.

## The Architecture of the Machine

Such concerns are today academic. The point is not whether architectural service is production in aid of a machine, but how best to facilitate what is now a symbiotic relationship. The practice of selling architecture toward this end has become so commonplace that we tend to forget how new the phenomenon is. Architectural history is thousands of years old; selling architectural services has only been in play a few hundreds of years, and was certainly not commonplace until the beginning of this century.

Coincident with the shift from a human-based to a machine-based architectural rationale was a shift in architectural styles from human-oriented and scaled designs towards the architecture of the machine. If regimentation and systematization are life goals, then why should they not also be reflected in the environment within which that world occurs?

Beginning perhaps as early as the 1750s, this new architectural style, the Modern Movement, redesigned the built world, supported by mushrooming populations and commensurate exploitation of resources. The ferment in nineteenth-century design centered on rationalization versus organicism. By the turn of the century the issue

had been resolved. Le Corbusier's metaphor of the house as a machine for living typified the shift and became a guiding principle of Modern design.

## Selling Style

Leaving aside the rhetoric of the Modernists, it was also, as we now know, nothing more than another style. Thus we return full circle to the faults with the attempt to rationalize marketing style. For in fact, one of the styles that is being sold today is nothing but a trumped up edition of that original and highly suspect machine-age architecture of the International Style.

Even if it were not, the problem with selling style is that style is cyclical. It has no permanence and thus very little importance. It reflects only a common mood of the time. Many of you (Marxists or not) would agree that the times have very little of value to reflect. This perhaps explains why the best architecture has happened anonymously, indigenously, reflecting more universal and timeless qualities of the society.

Anthropologically, one could extend this argument further by contrasting the styleless, heterogeneous character of today's modern architecture with medieval models of stylistic unity, equally heterogeneous in terms of implementation of design, but homogeneous in totality. The cultural values and spiritual values themselves were homogeneous and could be reflected in the work, while today such collective response is impossible.

It is interesting to note that one of the major causes of the International Style, and the apparent acceptance worldwide of Modern architecture, was also a result of marketing. Periodicals, by nature ephemeral, less tied to permanent values, replaced books as the main source of architectural information in the late 1800s; the first issues of some of these magazines are revealing.

Periodicals are normally launched in the wake of lofty ideals. The architectural magazines tended to be a bit morelachrymose.

A. Holland Forbes, who published *Architecture* from 1900 to 1917, took over publication of the *Architect* in 1923. To him, the problems of architecture were clearcut:

The architect's education is sadly lacking. Can he sell himself to the public? ... Can he show a manager why his plan [of a hotel] will make money for the manager no matter how many [Volstead] laws go into effect?

And the solution equally so:

When we have simplification, standardization, plastering machines, and a well-finished brick residence back to forty cents a cubic foot, then will the architect's lot be a happy one! ... The fact is good design pays.

*Architectural Record*, which began publication in 1891, extolled in flowery phrases the merits of Art as universal savior, but isolated architecture as the most practical of the arts. *Pencil Points* (1920), later to become *Progressive Architecture*, subtitled their

publication, "A Journal for the Drafting-room." They devoted themselves to matters of interest to draftsmen, designers and specification writers.

What this begins to indicate is an entirely new way in which architecture and architectural discussion was influenced. The quality of the information changed to fit the new medium. Periodicals began to sell the Modern Movement as a commodity to aid a new breed of professionals. What was communicated was not information about building as such, nor simply aesthetic judgments, but concepts about the design product.

Today, the major architectural indexes list hundreds of periodicals dealing with architecture. In them we can read about "complexity and contradiction", or "walking cities", and the words create images. These images are reinforced by a host of seductive drawings and photographic-slide-like glimpses of buildings. These words and images, which are broadcast almost instantaneously to a worldwide audience of students and practitioners, become an idiom—a conceptual framework.

## Creating the Demand

Such conceptual frameworks lie outside the understanding of most laymen and have no particular affinity with daily human activity. An early case in point was the development of architectural movements linked to movements in abstract art early in the century. De Styl paintings and De Styl buildings were interchangeable. Cubism similarly became three-dimensional.

Certainly the corporate architecture of today is precisely the result of this sort of image making, of commodity architecture. Big business buys and creates a demand for corporate images, which architects satisfy with gleaming skyscrapers and the like. These are products, like boxes of soap powder, the next differing from the last only in packaging, despite claims of their relative power to whiten or brighten.

It is an architecture devoid of content, unnecessary and profligate. It is an architecture of technology in which even technology is abused. The crowning horror is that this is the only kind of architecture that can be marketed. Marketing implies standardization, repetition, minimal deviation from the norm. You cannot sell something that has no fixed image. Given the image, sales can proceed unimpeded.

We have images of architecture from all periods of history, but the International Style, Modern architecture, Post-Modern architecture were all created as images, and then sold to the well-primed public. And that is the next thing to selling oneself on the street to whomever can pay. This kind of merchandising is obviously not for those with weak stomachs or strong hearts.

It is finally a question of survival and self-respect. The desire to believe oneself to be morally or physically inviolate is a curious thing. It allows one to forsake self-appraisal. The reality is much different. And the result is a blindness of vision to the essence of what we do in the pursuit of our ambitions. □