

dared to label his ideas “comprehensive” which signaled to me that I could seek to unite my several interests in a cohesive whole. Mostly, my more megalomaniac designs have only been visualized on a screen inside my skull except for “Watershed Communities” and a few essays and drawings.

the Marxist analysis of industrial capitalism, but where was a convincing “design” to replace it? In my estimation, Marxism comprised two ends against the middle. In my America of the ‘50s, the proletariat was intent on becoming middle class, and the intelligentsia was intent on getting tenure. A hopeless cause leading to a questionable outcome seemed like a bad design solution, and still does. Add in brutal Stalinism engaging in a nuclear Cold War with an America wedded to world domination by its corporations, and a design for endless apocalyptic anxiety seemed our only choice.

My fascist Uncle John—a mystic as well as an Anglo-rural militant—took his dreams seriously. With great gravity he told me of a dream he had of two pigs—one representing capitalism and the other communism—racing to the high-bank edge of the fields of his Whidby Island farm and plunging over the cliff to their deaths on the rocky beach below. That was before his LSD experimentation, too, but that’s another story.

As a twenty-something family-man, I earned my living as an architect during the week and as a jazz musician on the weekend. Continuing a habit begun in college, I read social and economic theorists for recreation. The contest between the bourgeois and the bohemian derailed a smooth course for my personal life. Although society was allowing me to fulfill my goals as a practical artist (if not the author of great art), continual anxieties around nuclear holocaust, a boom-and-bust economy, and a general sense of alienation from mainstream America continued to haunt me. I was a passionate believer in the freedom that delivered me the agony of incompatible choices. My passionate belief in democracy gave me the opportunity to vote for consistently losing candidates. The responsibility for children put sharp limits on the narcissistic individualism of my artistic ambitions. Architects, I discovered, were bureaucratic functionaries first; artists as an afterthought. Marriage was a prison where eroticism was sent to die. In this context, looking for solace in the optimism of Keynesian economic theory and intellectual broadsides against middle America and corporate conformity gains credibility as escapist literature.

The ‘50s were a time of great intellectual and artistic ferment. Sartre’s existentialism, the beat poets, electronic media as a brand new canvas for art, entertainment, and information, abstract expressionism in painting (Kline’s slashing angularities and Pollock’s dense drippings), bebop emerging as the cultish cutting edge of the fading swing era, Schoenberg’s atonality gaining primacy in the classical academy (newly-tenured theorists tangling fingers and embouchures in conservatory practice-rooms across the nation), while rock ‘n roll was germinating in the nation’s teen-age libido—all contributed to a bouillabaisse of fascinating—if at times perplexing—cultural evolution. As an architectural student, I was more-or-less force-fed the emerging, sometimes formalist, techno-pragmatism of the European international style modernists Van der Rohe, Breuer, and Gropius where I would have preferred to follow in Wright’s footsteps. But then along came Buckminster Fuller with his dymaxion car and geodesic dome. I was seduced as much by his self-imposed outsider status and his eagerness to design across accepted boundaries as by his actual work. From the present vantage point he seems fixated on technology and mathematics to the exclusion of humanity, but at that time faith that progress was technology’s most important product was near universal. He

For my part, I was grateful for being able to exit active practice without having to face either a lawsuit or having my license revoked. But what I didn't leave behind was the habit of looking at the world through the eyes of a designer. How could this be made more beautiful? How could that be more efficient? Is this really the best we can do? What of the past should be carried forward into the future? How best to harmonize human aspirations with Nature's imperatives? Human culture, it seems to me, arises out of the fruitful interaction between problem-solving, the legacy of former times, and esthetic imagination. According to me, there is nothing that should be safe from the impulse to augment or replace it with a superior design.

I was a schoolchild before and during WW II. I was made aware of the Great Depression most vividly by my older male relatives who all had adopted conflicting extreme positions on our economic condition. My Uncle Holace was a socialist. My Uncle John was a home-grown fascist. My Grandfather Frank was a technocrat. Listening to their arguments at family reunions piqued my curiosity. In junior-high in Pasadena my social studies teacher, Mrs. Walker, encouraged me to read New Deal theorist Stuart Chase. I read "Looking Backward" by Edward Bellamy. The sub-text I took away from these experiences was the sense that society's economic, political, and social practices could be—and needed to be—shaped by intelligence and compassion. But they didn't seem to be. The problem was that people seemed to disagree about what those were.

Further—again, as a schoolchild—when I expressed doubt about my Sunday school teachings to my father, he told me, "Every man has to make up his own mind about these matters". At that time he was apparently still making up his own mind. Later, under the saintly influence of my step-mother Agnes, he would embrace born-again Christianity. Ironically, his advice that I follow my instincts led to my firm and irrevocable rejection of all messianic religions. For me, spiritual realization would have to come, if at all, from the same source within that prompted me to seek to embrace life as a creative person.

So from an early age I was concerned with the process of artistic creation, with society's seemingly irrational brutality around money and power, and with discovering a personal purpose to guide my life. My focus on artistic creation as a fundamental purpose in my life left my questions about man's inhumanity to man unanswered. I took seriously Ghandi's point that no structural solution to humanity's social and economic faults could succeed in the absence of a general spiritual enlightenment. And yet, the intuition that the remediation of poor but improvable design accounted for much human misery continued to kindle my interest in the quest to rationalize and humanize society. Partially I was motivated by the quaint notion that this was my civic responsibility, but also by unresolved questions lingering from my childhood in the Great Depression.

One of my girlfriends in college was a Trotskyist. Our romance foundered over her taste for Beethoven and "Joe Hill" and mine for Bird and bebop. But while ongoing, this affair afforded much time to discuss Marx without the chore of actually reading "Das Kapital". That was a good thing. Why waste my time? If the socialist revolution was historically inevitable, my sacrifice in the cause was irrelevant. The dictatorship of the proletariat—any dictatorship, for that matter—rubbed against my grain. It was difficult to argue with

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I was a practicing architect for many years. Rather than a nuts-&-bolts kind of guy, I was a “designer”. Although I thought of myself as an artist, my actual work was largely mired in the exigencies of the construction business. As a consequence, I had occasion to see many projects through from beginning to end. This resulted in an awareness of the varying interests of the multiple stakeholders involved in the production and use of the contemporary built environment.

Even the construction of a new residence involves a crowd of concerned interests. It is the architect’s responsibility to harmonize the client’s conflicting agendas some of which the client may not actually be aware. The financial or real-estate investment angle always lurks in the background as a deal-breaker. Building and zoning codes define what can and cannot be built. Even within those constraints, additional consideration for the interests of neighbors may rule out otherwise desirable options.

Then there is the task of getting the damn thing actually built. Contractors seek maximum profits. There are no sets of specifications that ensure quality control where oversight is lacking. Sub-contractors must have their feet held to the fire to perform on schedule. Building construction is hard, dirty, dangerous work. Those who do it for a living are often tough guys lacking much appreciation for an architect’s lofty esthetic goals or the eventual inhabitant’s classy life-style. The major players in the project—the architect included—may find themselves unable to resist the lure of costly mid-course corrections. Details such as the finish on hardware or a cupboard door swinging into a light fixture can convert an otherwise soundly conceived edifice into a seemingly haphazard assembly of ill-fitting parts. This is a universe ruled by Murphy’s Law wherein Murphy is revealed to be an optimist.

Despite all the hurdles, the projects I designed (that were funded) came to completion in some semblance of my original expectation, if not necessarily my original vision. There was a good deal of satisfaction in that; enough so to make me feel glad to have that experience before I was seduced by the allure of a life as a musician.

But what about the intended occupants themselves? Did the new environment facilitate or negate their use and enjoyment? Will it stand the test of time? Will it prove to be a sound investment?

And what about the surrounding community and the environment? Will their interests be served as well as those of the client’s?

To embrace the practice of architecture, one must have either a naïve faith that somehow or another everything is going to come out all right, or the imperious charisma of the megalomaniac genius. Frank Lloyd Wright, the archetype of the latter, when called by a client complaining that his roof was leaking water on his desk, was summarily advised to move his desk.