George Clayton Pearl — Project for an experimental theatre of the Department of Drama of University of Texas. This was a thesis project accomplished at the University of Texas in 1950. Non-illusion in Drama was the underlying principle upon which this design was based. The suspended ramp serves variously as a proscenium arch, acting area, work platform, and audience seating area. The space is cooled by a continuous work area for lighting and other needs, which is entirely supported by the four columns. The ramp itself rests over the depressed seating area when a flat floor is needed. The arrangement of the proscenium shown in these photos of the model was for a Shakespeare production.
George Clayton Pearl—philosophy and buildings

I am going to express the rationale of my work in architecture. This is pompous of me in view of the small significance and large inconsistency of the work which I have so far done. But the attempt, I believe, is timely and obligatory, for these are days of the waning of the validity of intuitive action. Valid intuitive action sprung, I believe, from the complete aesthetic assimilation of environment. Complexity and rapidity of environmental change have destroyed this degree of understandability of environment and have forced us to abandon all mystiques and to search for rational architectural criteria. I do not mean to say that the architect's intuition should be entirely supplanted by his rationality. The data from which a design springs is too incomplete and too amorphous to admit of complete logical analysis and synthesis. I do mean to say that the basic directions and meanings of a design must now be determined by logic, to which the intuition must be subordinated. This high destiny, to which we have been irrevocably committed since our expulsion from the garden, is at last thrust upon us. Whether we rejoice in it or regret it is, I suppose, irrelevant, although I see much cause for rejoicing and much cause for regret. The regret is involved with the passing of the richness of myth and ceremony which we can no longer create, and the beautiful falsifications of theologies which we can no longer accept. By these has the individual been sheltered from the tragic loneliness of reality, and the bitter dilemma of moral man's inescapable existence within amoral nature. But even if for no other reason than that they are no longer effective, these opiates must be abandoned, and we cannot but feel optimism and pride at the consequent enlargement of those peculiarly human characteristics of rationality and love of truth.

Since I must reject logically those traditional and current definitions of architecture which base the category upon physical size of artifact, or degree of sophistication of the artificer, it is therefore necessary that I state my own definition of the category.

Architecture clearly belongs in the broad classification artifact, which includes all human constructions which result in an objective material form. Within this class of artifact, a distinction can be made between objects which pertain to a material function and objects which do not. Architecture clearly belongs to this sub-class of objects which pertain to a material function, and is therefore more closely related generically to a pipe wrench than to a bust of Julius Caesar. Another subdivision is apparently required before we can isolate architecture, yet I am not able to define the category in terms which admit Boulder Dam or an autonomous factory yet exclude pipe wrenches, coffins, top coats and coffee spoons.

I am forced to conclude that the distinction which I seek, the distinction which limits architecture to the definition of spaces big enough for people to move about in, is an arbitrary distinction, rooted in convenience and tradition rather than in logic.

My arguments are obviously oversimplified, and I am aware that the categories which I describe are not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, I have arrived at a generic differentiation between two classes of artifacts. Architecture falls in one of the classes, and painting and sculpture fall in the other. These three and others are commonly lumped together within the sanctimonious isolation of the fine arts. It is vital to my point of view that a distinction be made between architecture and sculpture-painting on a basis of integral and applied subject matter. Through this distinction architecture can be seen to partake of scientific disciplines to which painting and sculpture are not subject. Although the painter and the sculptor are usually involved with a specific subject matter, the subject matter is ordinarily free to move and to change and becomes a discipline only to the extent dictated by the will of the artist. But when the architect begins his work he approaches a mass of existing and pre-determined and definitely limited subject matter which consists of purposes, materials and processes, personalities (including his own), time, place, etc. To these his skills are applied, and from these his finished product is derived. In much the same way, when an archaeologist begins an excavation the data to which his knowledge and reason are to be applied lies irrevocably determined in the objects and conditions which his excavation will reveal. For architecture is a science as well as an art. If an architect should bring to his problem subject matter which does not exist within the problem, for example, by limiting the materials and techniques to those in use in the Thirteenth Century in France; or, as flagrantly absurd, limiting the materials and techniques to those developed in the United States after 1900; or by a podium, that buildings may be related to the sky establishing a canon that all buildings must rest upon in one of seven satisfactory ways, or that this particular building should be composed entirely of hexagonal plan elements), or if he should arrive at objective conclusions not derived from the subject matter, (for example, that prisons are noble social organisms, that it is pleasant and dignified for men to spend their workday in a completely artificial environment, that it is socially valuable to manufacture non-essentials to satisfy an artificial demand created by advertising) then his position is an undefendable as that of an archaeologist who plants an alien potsherd in his trenches for his assistants to uncover, and then bases a relation between two peoples upon.

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the evidence of the alien shard.

It would be objectionable to pursue this analogy between architecture and even so unprecise a science as archaeology, and except for the matter of fidelity to the existing data, I do not mean to suggest that architecture should adopt any of the methods of archaeology or any other science. All of the arts and sciences move toward the same ultimate purpose through differing materials. The materials or subject matters are the basis for the differentiation between the various arts and sciences, and it is the material which determines method. It is therefore absurd to criticize the methods of architecture for being dissimilar to the methods of any other discipline.

If we consider the condition of our architectural literature from this point of view or architecture as a science as well as an art, we ought to be startled. Our literature is revolutionary and rarely surpasses in precision or intellectual value the emotional cry “Remember the Alamo!” Our literature, like our physical environment, is composed largely of isolated subjective monuments. We traditionally use words for their emotional connotations rather than for their precise expressiveness. From the Dionysian prose of Sullivan to the incoherence of Le Corbusier about Romehamps, our primary legacy is a priestly and esoteric jargon which communicates little but excitement. We are thus prevented from sharing in and contributing to a common growing body of sound philosophical thought. Also, we isolate ourselves more and more from the consumers of architecture and rob ourselves of the one discipline which ties us most closely to reality—the critical judgment of the people for whom architecture exists. We ought to be able to explain to the people for whom it is being done what we are trying to do. And we ought to use words, not gestures.

In these days when a distinction between faith and prejudice has become a matter for pedantic differentiation, we cannot ask our clients to accept our solutions on faith.

It has recently been said that “The function of an Architect is to produce works of art.” As I interpret the probable connotation of this rubberty term “Work of Art”, this statement comes close to an exact opposite of my point of view. I think of the Architect’s role as being much less priestly and enormously more useful. The function of an Architect, I would say, is to express clearly man’s physical environment. If the Architect’s work is clear, if it expresses thoroughly and consistently the social process or situation to which it pertains, then the Architect has fulfilled his social function. Whether or not the finished work is classifiable as a “Work of Art” depends far more upon the problem than the Architect’s solution of it, and is secondary to the essential point of expressiveness. There is no canon, of course, prohibiting the Architect from also functioning as sculptor, painter, efficiency expert, sociologist or applied anthropologist, if he happens to have adequate command of these disciplines, which is most unlikely. But his essential function is to express, and in our society this is a task formidable enough to challenge the capabilities of Titans.

We would have no difficulty in agreeing, I think, that rapidity of social change has been the most important characteristic of the last two or three decades. From every side come evidences that the changes which we have seen are as nothing compared to the changes which are imminent. Within the next few decades the more than half of our world which is still essentially neolithic will probably be transformed by the industrial revolution (that is, the transition from work of hands to work of machines). The appalling differences in standards of living throughout the world must surely become more nearly equalized, producing vast changes. The increasing population alone, we should assume, will transform our world into something unrecognizable to us. The great ideological conflicts may result in the obliteration of political subdivisions and the unprecedented blending of cultural traditions into a common melting pot as we approach global unity. The effects of the scientific revolution, as contrasted to the industrial revolution, are difficult to imagine, but we would be foolish to suppose that the changes will be other than enormous.

My point of view is entirely rooted in the well-being of the individual. From this is society abstracted, and social goals are meaningless which are based upon anything other than the well-being of the individual participant in a society. Rapidity of social change constitutes the overpoweringly greatest threat to the individual personality. Since the change is not avoidable, we ought to be preparing for it. Under these conditions clarity of expression of the physical environment, always a cornerstone criterion in architecture, takes on enormously greater importance and causes other criteria to fade into the insignificant, or at least the secondary. In the transition from a largely naturally determined environment into one which is consciously and artificially structured by society itself, the individual’s understanding of himself in his current context, every step of the way, forces such criteria as visual delight into the background.

The subject matter which I feel it is the architect’s social function to express consists of purposes, materials and techniques, personalities, time and place. These elements are inseparably bound together and constitute a system of checks and balances upon each other. Since expressiveness is the goal, each should be as expressive as the others will permit.

Different aspects of purpose check the tendencies of its other aspects. The long range goal of the social organism which the building houses may be in conflict with its immediate aims, or the more rudimentary meanings of building may be in conflict with both. For example, the fact that a building exists to provide shelter may be overlooked in the architect’s preoccupation with expressing the nature of what is to be sheltered, even though a sense of shelter is likely to be the most important purpose which any building has to express.

The selection of materials and techniques is largely dictated by the purposes of the building, the time, the place and the personalities involved. They, at least, constitute a second level of subject matter through which the more rudimentary elements seek their expression. Once they have been chosen, however, they become a part of the fabric of the subject matter, and the need to express them clearly exerts its influence upon the other elements.

To the extent that the rest of the subject matter is altered by the personalities involved, then those personalities demand expression. It is unquestionably an unusual architectural situation which permits the personality of the architect to become dominant. The
architect’s own house is a case in point. But the dominance of the personality of the architect, which to me is splendidly expressive of the building’s subject matter at Taliesin West, becomes highly questionable at the campus of Florida Southern College. Similarly, the forms of Bear Run appear to exist for their own sake and to be derived from the architect’s preoccupation with a particular system of three-dimensional ornament, whereas the forms of the Guggenheim Gallery are so superbly expressive of the building’s subject matter that they possess the visual integrity of the alphabet. (My impression of the Guggenheim Gallery is not derived from the completed subject, which I have not seen, but from the first model of it which I examined at Taliesin West in 1948).

Of all the elements of an architectural situation, time is the least difficult to express. It is, in fact, very impossible not to express it. I cannot remember seeing an eclectic building which was not easy to date, and the dating does not require careful scrutiny but merely a glance. There are a few cases to the contrary, for example, Williamsburg, where a vast budget was available. I do not mean to suggest that it would be valuable to try to prevent the expression of the time element in a work of architecture. On the contrary I am deeply interested in the preservation of those buildings which clearly express a time other than our own, not only from an historical point of view but also because by contrast they help us to understand our own time. I would like to distinguish between preservation and restoration, however. One wishes to preserve his grandmother for as long as she lives. At her demise, however, he would not send her out to a taxidermist and then arrange her in a life-like pose in the parlour. It is one thing to devote our energies to the preservation of the genuine and quite another to involve ourselves with the restoration of that which is consequently unreal.

Of all the elements of the subject matter of architecture, none is so difficult to express as the element of place, and none whose existence seems so certain to decrease. I view with personal melancholy a world in which a sense of place ceases to matter. Through a sense of place, culturally, we understand our own cultural traditions and forebears. Through a sense of place, climatically, we understand our own relation to nature and to animality. The blending of all cultures and the loss of our own cultural individuality may some day cause any architectural expression of a particular culture to become completely superficial. The perfection of mechanical equipment may some day reduce to superficiality any architectural expression of climate or geographical location. But as long as it is worthwhile to travel, as long as there is any genuine difference between being in New Mexico and being in Rome, the element of place exists and demands expression.

When one is fortunate enough to work in an area which has a genuinely regional architectural tradition, then, if we agree that a sense of place is desirable, it should be easily achievable by simply repeating the forms and materials of the indigenous tradition. But a sense of place may not be had at the expense of the expression of time, purpose, materials and techniques, hence reconstructions of the Palace of the Governors or the pueblo churches become architecturally shallow and irrelevant.

I have not meant to say that these elements of purpose, time, place, etc., are to be equally weighted in all architectural problems. In a specific problem some of them may almost cease to exist as a discipline. Thus place becomes relatively unimportant in my project for an experimental theatre, and time becomes relatively unimportant in my own house. In the Guggenheim Gallery purpose subordinates all the other elements, and in Taliesin West personality is dominant. But none of the elements can ever be entirely silent, and I believe that it is the social function of an architect to weigh accurately and express truthfully each element.

The subject matter from which my own house is being derived contains several points which should be stated. I live in Tomé, thirty miles south of Albuquerque, where adobe blocks are the most available and least expensive building material. I take delight in the simplicity and understandability of the material, and I physically need the hard manual labor which building with heavy masonry provides. The prunings from our apple orchard provide adequate firewood to last through the winter, and I like the labor of cutting it. In building this house I began with three de-
Community Building for the Pueblo of Laguna, Laguna, New Mexico Ferguson, Stevens and Associates; Robert G. Mallory and George C. Pearl Associates

The Blue Cross Building, Albuquerque, New Mexico Ferguson, Stevens, and Associates; Robert G. Mallory and George C. Pearl Associates
cayed buildings, closely grouped together and have utilized as much as possible of the existing work.

In my house I have tried to express some of the problems of myself, not of society. The budget, however, is low enough to be acceptable even to Thoreau. The primitive satisfactions of manually constructing shelter for my family and myself are great. The point which I wish to make, however, is that none of the machines which we have invented have made obsolete the work of our own hands. On the contrary, our machines have enormously increased our leisure and have likewise reduced us to physically sedentary work days. Our machines have thus provided us with the problem of boredom, and the problem of the weak white arm. It does not necessarily follow that every man should build his own house, but it is clear that golf provides only a partially satisfactory answer.

In relation to the system which I have tried to describe, the Blue Cross Building was, indeed, done a long time ago. There are three things which I would like to say about the building.

First, the painted ornament was, I feel, a false step in a nevertheless fruitful direction. That is, painted ornament or plain surfaces can, I believe, become enormously valuable, and, so long as it does not damage the understandability of the surface to which it is applied, is philosophically as acceptable as it was in the Sistine Chapel or the facade of the church at Santo Domingo. Painted ornament can be used to clarify the purpose of the building. It is also one of the ways in which a sense of place can be heightened without sacrifice of sense of time. At Blue Cross, however, I missed the mark on all counts. The Navajo ceremonial figures were unsuitable in scale and flagrantly irrelevant in subject matter. At close range they are decorative but startlingly confusing as to what they mean in relation to the insurance company. From as far away as the viewer in a passing car they are so ineffectual as to do nothing but add grayness to an otherwise admirably white expression of thickness of roof structure.

Second, in retrospect I can now see that the patternning resulting from negative and positive projections of concrete block crosses, despite the obvious pertinence to the building's subject matter (at which one is inclined to snicker), partakes of a trend which has now become so unhappily widespread. A few days ago in Phoenix I heard an architect urging a concrete block manufacturer to make more shapes for projections and recesses — "No one is interested any more in just a plain concrete block." Now it seems to me that this revolt against the 8 x 8 x 16 concrete block is a denial of a part of reality and is involved with the artist's ancient tendency to falsify — to force what is into the shape of what is not. In one sense, ours is a concrete block culture, and the 8 x 8 x 16, logically bonded course by course, is the clearest expression and the most you can get out of it. We begin with the plain block wall and descend from there to the point where the "wallness" is lost in the superficialities of stacked bond and tortuous projections.

Third, most of all I regret the specific handling of the South wall, which is carried out beyond the enclosed space to form an accentuation of the entrance. To an extent this expression was merely a fashionable form of the day, and even of today in fact, although now "old hat." But despite its career as a cliché, the form has some distinguished predecessors and cannot be flippantly dismissed. (e.g. Mies Van Der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion, Frank Lloyd Wright's Winkler and Goetsch House, and the atrium of the church at Laguna). My use of the form is undefendable in that I was in part trying to destroy the expression of the building's enclosed space, a simple cube which I seem to have been unwilling to accept. But in part the form was a reaching out of the building toward a tie with its environment. The projected wall stops brutally short of the property line, as all such projected walls must. In cities, particularly, it is the property line rather than the designer's feeling for organic termination which stops the wall. The wall should continue until it ties together our fragmentary physical environment into unity. The essential point is that our physical environment is fragmentary and disconnect ed and structureless. Whether or not I regret it concerns me greatly as an individual participant of the society but should not concern me at all as an architect. My job is to express, not conceal, the disconnect edness and to allow a consequently informed society to change itself, if it chooses and if it can.

George Clayton Pearl

NMA, January '60