SPECIALIZATION IN ARCHITECTURE —

A DISCUSSION

By George C. Pearl

In Architecture, specialization is desirable and in some cases, even necessary. It is unworkable, but also dangerous. Allow me to qualify “dangerous”. When specialization is achieved at the sacrifice of adequate general orientation, the productions of the specialists are apt to be disoriented when viewed in their total contexts.

Here is one definition of specialization: “a narrowing of the boundaries of one’s efforts, and a concentration upon a sub-dividing that only occasionally are caus- ing loss of orientation with the overall purpose”.

The obvious advantage of specialization is that it permits a greater depth of analysis within a particular category.

The dangers are less obvious. As we become more and more specialized we have increasingly greater difficulty in seeing our particular category in its larger context.

If we are able to maintain a constant awareness of our specialization through larger and larger categories; if we are able to trace it to a totality involved with human purpose and human good, then only can the specialist hope that his work will pertain to human purpose and good by design, rather than by accident...or the precarious gui- dance of an overworked and un- reliable intuition.

This big awareness of problem in the totality of its context becomes more difficult as society becomes more complex. In three words: complexity engenders specialization. As the demand for specialization in- creases, so does the element of danger.

Since complexity engenders specialization, and since our so- ciety is enormously complex, one would assume that great spe- cialization has already occurred. Architecture itself, as we define it, is a fragment which has ex- isted as a specialization for so long that occasionally are we able to see the larger cate- gory of which it is a part.

Only occasionally, when we visit a potter, a cabinet maker, a sculptor, a blacksmith or a planner of cities, do we get a suggestion of a larger and more valid category of form-givers to which we belong. The very words Architect and Architec- ture are fragmentary.

Artfitter is adequate as the phylum of which Architect is a sub-phylum. But Artifact has become so specialized that it no longer describes the great cate- gory of objects which man has deliberately and consiously con- structed, dedicated and certain to a parti- cular purpose.

Five minutes at the potter’s wheel, or with a trowel and mortar, is enough to make one in- ment the now-antique specialization which separated thinking from doing. But the clean hands, the white shirt and the weak back are ours, more as the ob- served response to the pressures of complexity, rather than the conscious pursuit of Veblenian conspicuous consumption.

Nevertheless, we have found in a lower stratum of the Euro- pean Bronze Age, hand orna- ments which cover all of the joints of the fingers. These orna- ments cause the fingers to be held apart and rigidly stiff. The wearer can be visually recog- nized as one who has risen so high on a value scale that his activities are administrative, ra- ther than manual.

Architecture has been defined by Goldwin Smith as the art of ordering, ordering in a Sears and Roebuck fashion rather than in a Jehovah form- giving sense. I am not criticiz- ing Toccarnal for not playing the cello. I am saying that the sym- phony orchestra is a vastly com- plex medium which, from the standpoint of economy of means, is apt to suffer in a comparison with a solo Segovian perform- ance.

Specialization causes us to rely more upon our intellects rather than upon our intuitive and re- flexive command of the medium. Unfortunately the designers of automobiles rarely begin their work with a consideration of man’s nature and his need for transportation.

They begin with last year’s models. Of course, last year’s models were based upon the year before, and so on. We should be able to trace the situa- tion back to some remote time when human needs were consid- ered. One glance at the vul- garity and impertinence of the newest models is enough to tell us that the designers have not maintained their orientation. Depth alone is not enough.

It is essential to the validity of this example that we be aware that the designer’s program was more involved with manufactur- ers’ aims than with human aims. Private enterprise be- comes a dangerous specialization of interest when the decay of cohesive social forces permit a distinction between these two aims.

I do not mean to suggest a universal equation between com- plexity and the decay of cohes- ive forces. But within a culture where the participants are bound together by common traditions, a common economy and a com- mon theology...and where the media of communication are universal and understood, the form-giver may specialize to any extent.

The cultural aims are omnip- resent; irrelevance of form will not be long tolerated. A system of control is in force which is analogous to biological natural selection.

As social organization moves into a system where the indi- vidual is bound to other individu- als primarily by a largely rec- reational theology, economically stratified amusement club and labor organizations, the form- givers are faced with a task which is enormously more diffi- cult and important. More diffi- cult because the form-givers are called upon to express, in a vastly more complex and un- proven medium, functions which are new and fluctuating and

(Continued on Page 11)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George C. Pearl joined the firm of Ferguson-Stevens and As- sociates in 1950, immediately after graduating from the University of Texas. After serving his apprenticeship, Pearl received New Mexico license in 1953, and was named chief designer at Ferguson- Stevens in 1954. On December 1, 1958, Pearl became a partner in the firm. A bachelor and a gentleman farmer, Pearl resides on his 60-acre farm at Tomé, 50 miles south of Albuquerque.
DISCUSSION...

(Continued from Page 3)

often unconcerned with long-
term social aims.

More important because the
system of controls comparable
to biological natural selection is
no longer in force. Even the one
factor of the rapidity of change
has overthrown the old system.
The unprecedented necessity of
a conscious and deliberate shap-
ing of environment, a "laying on
of hands" upon our culture, is
staggering. Who but the form-
givers are to fill the need?

"But for him (man) it is no
longer mere natural circum-
stances with which he must
cope. It is the restless, explosive
inventiveness of his own brain
that challenges him and con-
fronts him with utterly new con-
ditions. To the new technical
situations he must adapt himself
with preternatural speed.

"No natural automation over
biological ages will serve now.
He must intuitively and con-
sciously conceive and build his
own world and his future . . ."
(Wright, Frederick S., Richard
Neutra — a Philosophy of De-
design, Arts and Architecture, Jan-
uary, 1959.)

In order to perform this new
function the form-giver's pri-
mary obligation is to be ade-
quately oriented toward long-
range social goals. Specializa-

(Continued on Page 12)
tion is an obstacle in achieving and maintaining such an orientation.

Whether increased specialization will lead to increased profits for the specialist is a subject about which I have neither ideas or interest. I leave this to those who specialize in profits. For, in order to be consistent with my lamentation of specialization, I have kept my remarks severely generalized.

The essence of my point of view is that specialization tends to sacrifice breadth for the sake of depth of experience. This tendency springs from quantitative human limitations. In discussions with specialists of all sorts, particularly those within our general category of form-giving, I have been aware of the remarkable depth of knowledge which specialization has made possible.

But at the same time, the knowledge is usually so limited in scope that the productions which emanate from it are irrelevant or intellectually provincial.

The reader will probably be able to cite some conspicuous examples to the contrary. I know a few, also. But in general I feel that specialization tends to produce small areas of splendid analytical precision, floating in a chaos of disconnectedness.