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Author

Sennett, Richard

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Designers and Social Responsibility

Good places exist within and respond to many contexts. The following essays suggest new ways in which designers can construct a sense of responsibility to the communities, people and environments that are the context of their work. The essays are excerpted from presentations given last March at a symposium called “Social Responsibility and the Design Professions” — a day-long discourse about the social, economic, ecological and institutional implications of environmental design.

The symposium, sponsored by Architects, Designers and Planners for Social Responsibility/New York, was held at the New School for Social Research and organized by Susana Torre, chair of the environmental design department at Parsons School of Design.

Photos by Todd W. Bressi and André Schütz.

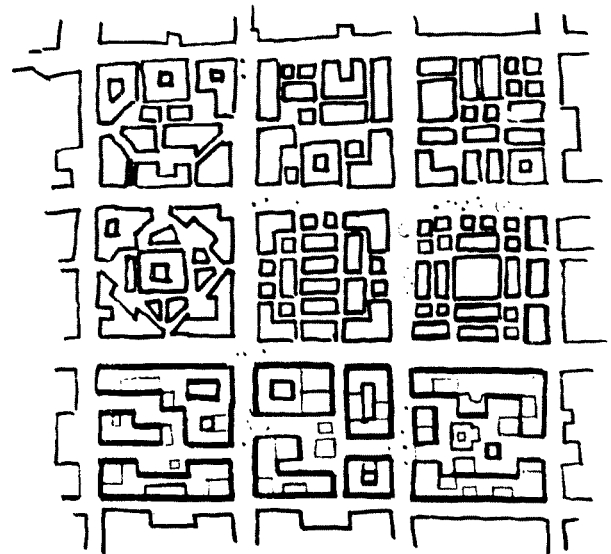
Responsibility and Responsiveness

Richard Sennett

When I was asked to address the question of the social responsibility of architects, I thought it would be interesting to pursue the question of the social responsibility of architectural forms. It also occurred to me that one could ask in what way architectural forms can be socially responsive, which is different from being

socially responsible. I want to explore those two notions by describing the work of the Indian architect Balkrishna Doshi, which seems to me to be both socially responsive and responsible.

Doshi has been working for many years on the rebuilding of Jaipur. The work is an attempt to incorporate a notion that is generic to Jaipuri architecture — that the form of every house represents the cosmology of the universe as it was conceived in the ninth century, that every house is an extension of that rigidly geometric world. Doshi has tried to build housing that is massive in scale, up to a thousand units at a time, and that can be put up in accordance with these old cosmological principles.



Sketch of Vidyadhar Nagar,
from *Balkrishna Doshi: An
Architecture for India*,
William J. Curtis, ed.

© 1988, Rizzoli International
Publications, New York.

Doshi has made his architecture responsive by designing a set of building units that can be put together easily by the people who are going to live in them, allowing people without much money to build their own houses. The housing is responsive to a set of social and economic conditions and uses

To be socially responsible is to believe, whether people like it or not, in a social vision that brings people together. It means talking not about issues of representation and popularity, but about what a social space ought to look like.

— *Richard Sennett*

the very act of constructing one's own environment as a way of bettering people's condition.

Doshi's architecture is responsible in a different sense. It is more than an attempt to understand what the act of participation in building will mean by realizing the sociological relationship between a material and its user. It is an attempt to make a system of building that expresses in its forms not so much the lives of the people who are putting it up and living it, but the ancient religion of those people. The architecture accomplishes this (that is, it involves people in build-

ing a kind of religious shrine that they don't understand before they build it) by incorporating the notion that the act of building can create unfinished or partial objects.

I am not suggesting that we build cosmological cities on the model of medieval Jaipur. Doshi's notion is that even though

there is an established concept of form, there can still be an architecture that is socially responsive, that inducts people into the world. Rather than make completed structures, people are given materials to make unfinished forms, perhaps forms that can never be finishable, like the tenets of that religion.

This example is suggestive of how we can think about what makes a form responsive in our own culture: It should embody some way of inducting people into a reality that is different than the reality in which they began.

A responsive architecture breaks with the

approach of creating forms that realize a specific program or function, no matter who is participating in determining that function. A responsive form must respond to our need for transformation by allowing us to create unfinished or unfinishable objects.

An unresponsive approach results in objects that — although they may be made in a socially responsive way because everybody's participated — do not transform the lives of the people that dwell in them. These forms, by being complete, do not admit of displacement or the kind of rituals of use that grow up.

Think of how inelastic many of the forms we create today are compared to the building blocks of eighteenth-century Georgian architecture, which is enormously responsive in the sense that the forms themselves can be displaced. Think of how difficult it would be to transform a skyscraper that is meant for commercial use into residential use.

The aesthetic problem confronting urbanists is how to create underdetermined objects. What I consider socially responsive architecture is conceiving of objects that are incomplete or even incompletable, that can be added to or rearranged, and of how we can use the advances in building technology that have occurred in the last hundred years for the purpose of making less definite objects.

Finding Spaces and Filling Them

*Janet Lippman
Abu-Lughod*

Effective, socially responsible action takes more than good will and motivation. It takes open spaces in the urban fabric, an open process to fill in those spaces and good timing.

By "open space" I mean something more than public space. There is physical space, which is what architects and planners usually work with, and there is social space, which is what sociologists like me usually work with.

One can think of open space as emptiness or as opportunities. One can look at burned-out areas of our cities as abandoned or as potentially fillable. One can look at empty nests as lonely or free.

I have been working on a project that focuses on New York City's East Village, a neighborhood to the east of Greenwich Village, where the destruction of the physical area and its social fabric has resulted in a large amount of open physical and social space. Arson, abandon-