

**Resource Architecture –  
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**Plenum 3: Innovation and Tradition**

**The Innovation of Innovations: Works of Architecture in 2030**

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What works of architecture will most change the shape of our cities in the next decades? The year 2030 isn't very far distant. It is an easy assumption that it will bring us more of what we currently face. It is more interesting to consider the particular milieu in which innovation will have the most profound effects, and to look for the quarter from which innovation is most likely to come. Leapfrogging technological development might crowd the headlines and publication lists in the next few decades, but the fundamental needs will change not a bit for the majority of the earth's human inhabitants. Innovation, as discussed in the context of this kind of gathering, must resist the impulsive search for novelty, rather looking for design intelligence to emerge where it matters most. Habitation, food, water, and cultural survival will become ever more acute concerns for much of the world's population. Architects who choose to be involved in communities where the needs are most basic and most acute will be confronting new issues that will profoundly shape the physical and political context. Designers will be called upon to consider issues beyond the narrow context where Architecture is an activity for the economic elites driven by excess capital. The most significant and interesting innovation will emerge where it is a necessity, not a luxury.

The next decades of this century could increasingly mean a shift from looking at global influences to looking at the tribe and the family. The focus will need to be with children, with women, and with the very aged; in any culture with a long view, these are always the most powerful forces. They remain powerful forces, even when excluded from the institutions of political control. Corporate headquarters and national capitals will be increasingly irrelevant as architectural condensers or architectural symbols, lacking the meaning and means to provide the needed communication links. The village theatre, in whatever form it is variously defined, will increasingly replace these.

The inherent risks of focusing at this scale have to do with communication. The last century should have taught us that international movements are no substitute for effective cultural exchange. They may have a neutralizing, even unifying, effect on cultural forms, but not on tensions between societies and interest groups. Innovation will come from those places where it is most needed, where the stakes are highest. Those engaged, as architects, in the making of culture will be needed most in the context where the issues are most acutely experienced. The context has long existed, but will be in sharper focus in the next few decades. Communication between cultures will be most productive in terms of innovation where the conversations are not one sided.

The greatest concentration of design activity and critical reflection is currently engaged in those sectors where the issues are the least critical. The manipulation of desire for the purpose of directing and controlling consumption currently occupies far too many of our best minds. This milieu values novelty over innovation, and the two become easily confused. The next few years will require that our brightest, most innovative designers be involved with issues directly related to the daily lives of communities whose fundamental preoccupation is with survival. It is our task as educators and design leaders to ensure that an emerging generation of innovative designers has a proportional sense of the issues and their potential to address them. They should not be lulled into

accepting the role of tertiary service providers for the elite, competing with each other for stakes that are far too low; where the concentration of intelligence and expenditure of human energy is entirely misplaced. Innovative work, by definition, will emerge from the margins. The current state of affairs puts the majority of the world's population on the margins. How much more vital for talented designers to be involved in addressing fundamental issues of collective existence in situations where new ideas are urgently needed, to immediate and profound impact.

Changes are inherent in any living culture. It is innovation that will ensure that they are not catastrophic. Marginalized cultures are prone to being treated as irrelevant: completed, finished, consigned to history. In this context, innovation is sometimes seen as inappropriate distortion of a received artifact. Innovation is the acknowledgement of the ongoing cultural viability of a society. Innovation is emergent, not imposed. Innovation addresses fundamental issues; it is radical. In other words, it is rooted.

Architectural innovation in the next decades will continue to look to our place in the natural world. The most progressive buildings, cities, and communities will be those which are responsive to their immediate impacts on the natural context, and increasingly draw their support from this context. The precedents for doing this have always been there in natural history and in cultural history.

Negative inertia will continue to come from the vested interests. Vested interests by their nature resist fundamental change as long as possible. When they do change, it is often only in the face of a crisis, and they bring huge resources and intelligence to bear in making those changes. As a result, the shifts are often convulsive. We have brought ourselves to the brink of our own destruction as a species at the beginning of this century. Hopefully we have put the darkest aspects of what human activity can offer behind us. The world has been through a century of sporadic and convulsive changes at the hands of concentrated vested interest groups.

The spectacular increase of available information over the past few decades has been mirrored by a similarly rapid information loss. Languages, scientific knowledge, mythology have disappeared at an unprecedented rate from indigenous cultures and marginalized societies. It is cross-cultural influences that usually lead to innovation in any given group. If continuing developments in communication technology can create reciprocal relationships rather than hegemonic ones, then innovation will ensure cultural continuity. A culture defines itself and its history by what it dreams as much as by what it remembers. Cultural retrieval in the decades ahead will be as much a matter of dreaming as it will be a matter of documentation and remembering.

If Architecture can be innovative in addressing basic aspects of existence for communities who need it most, it will assume its proper role as the most fundamental of all cultural activities. It is part of a survival impulse and a poetic impulse that addresses and expresses all aspects of our biological and spiritual life. Myths of the Mi'kmaq people of Atlantic Canada tell us that we learned the art of building from the birds. We will continue to draw technique and inspiration from our changing understandings of nature and our place within it. The creation of Architecture is the result of a fundamentally optimistic impulse. This optimism shouldn't be misdirected to an acceptance of a mediocrity or the inevitability of the current condition. We will make increasingly critical choices as societies over the next two decades, and it is part of the architect's role to provide the visions that will help direct those choices.