Architecture for King Client

A Conversation with Denise Scott Brown

Strangely enough, she did not share in the 1991 Pritzker Prize; it was awarded just to Robert Venturi. But anyone who is really familiar with the architectural work of their design office in Philadelphia knows that the name of Denise Scott Brown is not on the letterhead for nothing. The profession, and in particular the prize-giving bodies, aimed as they are at unique artistic achievements of 'brilliant' individuals, generally have little interest in the social dimensions of design, and so Scott Brown's speciality, the converting of historical and sociological research into concrete design strategies and developing the methodology of that research in the direction of practice, is destined to remain in the background. The same goes even more so for her work in urban planning and development. Scott Brown has published numerous studies about morphology and American city planning. She is interested in the mutual relationships between the various material and social ingredients of the design process. The professional world, concentrated as it is on matchless projects, finds it difficult to perceive these connections, however much Scott Brown, in her own words a 'philosopher of action', wants to apply her sociological knowledge practically in concrete cases.

Scott Brown's speciality is crucial to the way the studio approaches the design process, where what comes first is to pay attention to the effect that forms have for various segments of the public. It is also vital for the worldwide intellectual significance attributed to the bureau since their triumphal progress began with the publication of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) and *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972). Denise Scott Brown sees her work as strictly belonging to the domain of the visible, but her involvement with the social research that has for many years been part of this, prompted us, as editors of *The Invisible in Architecture*, to set out for her office in Philadelphia, situated (how could it be otherwise?) on *Main Street*. Not surprisingly, the conversation was completely 'almost all right'.

On a number of fronts Denise Scott Brown's work reveals a strongly affirmative attitude and the acceptance of today's *faits accomplis.* The titles of several of her essays contain the phrase 'learning from'. She is always concerned with empirical research, fuelled by Popperian 'conjectures and refutations', into provisional hypotheses. In this respect she belongs to a rich Anglo-Saxon scientific tradition. Her empiricism is well expressed, for example, in her numerous studies and designs regarding the reorganisation of the urban landscape. Averse to planning abstractions, she works at the level of urban design, directly connected with concrete experience at street level. That explains too her ever-increasing interest in the symbolic dimension of designing that stands out so emphatically precisely at that level. Her field of activity is formed by the façades, the street furniture, the pavement, in short the empire of signs of daily life. This leads straightaway to her great social involvement, for without an active concern for the actual people who will make use of the executed design, and will be able to identify with the symbolic order, such research has no meaning.

Ultimately, however, her work betrays something even more fundamental, something that, for Europeans in general and poets and thinkers in particular, gives her work such an elusive character. ('No one loves the truth and the good, unless he abhors the multitude.') It is the typically American way of working she prides herself upon:

'One should not merely understand the way a society operates but should try to work with its forces, to the extent that one can without too far compromising goals. I think it's called 'American pragmatism'. It is also an effort to develop a green thumb for cities. (...) We try to talk about important things in an easy, straightforward way; speaking American, not translated French, German or Italian. We have an old fashioned belief in being understandable to others and even to ourselves, so, don't hold us suspect if you find you understand us.'

To want to be understandable, or to think that you automatically are so, and leaving it at that; it does make rather a difference. About the same difference as between rhetoric and an ordinary conversation. To want to practise rhetoric is in fact something that we are not always *willing* to understand. But who's going to fight against this now, since every culture has the right to avow its own identity? Now that the 'Other' in culture is attracting such a great deal of attention, we ought to summon respect for the 'American Dream' too of course, even if this has transpired only very partially and/or for the few. But there exists an intrinsic and problematic relationship between the globalisation of American culture and the threat to regional and cultural identity. Should we see the American way of life as a way like any other, or has its universal success perhaps placed it on a level where it should be evaluated with something other than anthropologically-based relativism? In any event, the vision of 'all you need is a dollar and a dream' (used as well to promote the New York lottery) seems insufficient for a critical attitude with an eye to the future. Perhaps 'the action of philosophy' can offer solace?

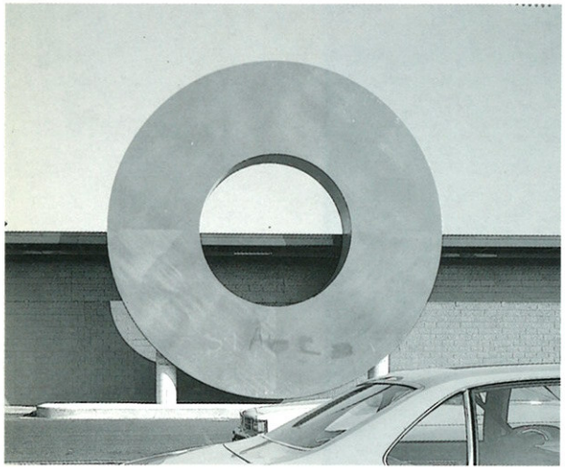
Denise Scott Brown

You have always been very aware of the necessity for someone who wants to become an architect to stop talking and start building. How do you estimate the current stature of theory?

There have always been oscillations in architecture between theory and practice. Although we can deal with architecture as architecture by the rules internal to its making, we have also to relate architecture to life. But what aspects of life and how? There is a tendency in the United States now to see theory of architecture as a discipline in itself, unrelated to practice. This is evident mainly in the schools, where there has been a proliferation of theory of architecture courses and where the ratio of academic faculty to practitioner faculty has increased. You could cynically say that's because there is no work for architects; when we didn't have work, we wrote theoretically, but we theorised about design and practice. If we are philosophers, we are philosophers of action. The new theoreticians in the schools seem to feel they don't need a strong link to the making of architecture; they are involved at the moment, I believe, with the theory of psychoanalysis. Architects tend to read a book and then to organise their thoughts and work around that book. Kenneth Frampton read *The Human Condition* by Hannah Arendt, other people read the semiologists, and now they are reading Lacan and Derrida. (Or is that already over?) We did not read the semiologists; at

least not at first. We looked at Las Vegas and said 'It's very exciting to us, why?' Then we began to theorise. When going from the concrete to the conceptual we found semiology to be relevant, but we didn't read Jakobson until we had learned from Las Vegas. We don't know if we hate it or love it but we feel a certain shiver when we see it. What is the reason for this shiver? That question comes afterwards. I think practical philosophers and architectural activists should work in this way.

Do you mean an empiricist, inductive way of looking at things and trying to make use of them in practice?



Basco, Inc. Showroom, a letter, 34 ft. high, Philadelphia, 1976

Yes, I think it is a better way for a creative person, although there is an important place for theory in the steps between induction and design. Yet there should not be all that strong a link between theory and practice. If you build a building to demonstrate a theory you achieve a dry building. In particular, if you try to impose too much theory on a small building the building becomes a cluster of bumps and carbuncles; it isn't in the end a work of art, it is a demonstration, a lesson. While designing, you may well fill up your mind with theory; but after that, get a good night's sleep, try to forget everything you were thinking, and start again with the problem at hand. When we do theoretical research and analysis, it's at the applied end.
In order to design, you have to know enough about the specialist fields to ask questions. I've learned, in dealing with for example social theoreticians or urban sociologists, that they don't know enough about architecture to tell me directly what I need to know. I have to frame the questions to suit their field. I at least have a verbal skill I share with them; they don't have manual, graphic or visual skills, which means they cannot bridge to my field. I must be the bridge. I think people like me are needed to make bridges between disciplines and help theory pertain to architecture. I don't want to be a sociologist, but I want to use social imagination to help architectural imagination.
However, there is a difficulty: there aren't enough sociologists and sociologists today aren't interested in architecture. For this reason, I may sometimes have to be the sociologist on my project, suggesting, for example, the sequences and mixes of population groups that may live in certain sections of a city over the years. I assume the role of sociologist not because I want to be one, nor because I'm the best, but because I'll be better than none at all. But if anyone is to make social information useful for design, the architect must do it because the sociologist usually can't.

There are also areas of value judgement where social scientists can spell out implications, but others must make decisions. For example, certain people in the United States, particularly poor people, may want to bring the whole family, mother, grandmother and five kids, to a hospital when they visit, because there's no one at home to look after them. The sociologist can tell the hospital that. The value judgement about whether the hospital wants to deal with the four kids that are not sick is a matter of their policy. It's not mine as an architect, it's not the sociologist's, it's the hospital's. I can't plan spaces for the extended family because I think that's right, unless the hospital tells me to. ***I'm trying to separate out the roles. I mustn't do what the hospital should do and I shouldn't do what the sociologist should do. I should do what is consistent with my role as an architect or urban planner.*** I must be very straight with my client and say what the issue is. I could plan for the extra spaces and for the relation between spaces that fits the policy and tell my client that it would cost you *x* more, and you could use the extra space in this way. If *x* is $ 50 million, they probably won't do it; if it is $ 2.000 they may. The question is, should you plan according to your own values without informing your client. This is a question of morality and of understanding your role.

There could be a lot of money invested in air-conditioning, technical equipment, etcetera, while there is almost no money left for putting the hospital in its site, in the urban tissue. When do you say 'I will only make the building if there's more money for the façade', or 'I won't make much of the façade but will invest the money as much as possible in the programme itself'? What are your priorities?

We must be guided by our clients. We find our hospital clients are much concerned that their new buildings look auspicious. They are in a market situation, they have to attract people. Your clients' expectations are what you should be working with. As a human being I could say 'this hospital should take poor sick children and I don't think you should put marble on the front'. And I can argue quite lucidly about why you shouldn't. But we accept our clients' value system, and if we find their requests totally unacceptable we shouldn't accept the project.

What would you do if public needs were really in conflict with the client's values?

This is a complex question. On the one hand, the needs of the public are protected by laws and regulations that architects and clients must obey. Beyond that, the question arises of who defines public needs. The

architect? The client? The politician? In reality there must be a debate between client and 'public', however defined, and some sort of negotiation must be attempted. In this the architect could (but rarely does) serve as a broker.

How?

Well, for example, when planning the Denver Civic Center Cultural Complex I worked specifically for the three public cultural institutions that hired me, not for the city – although I made recommendations for portions of the city, covering land use, transportation, parking, services, circulation, urban design and landscaping in neighbourhoods surrounding the Complex. I tried to make recommendations useful to the city as well as the institutions, so they would be accepted by both.

When people asked 'Well what did you learn from Las Vegas?' you once answered 'We learned to reassess the role of symbolism in architecture and this helped guide our search for an appropriate architecture for a Post-Modern period'. Coming from Europe, let us say interested in abstract principles and not starting from empiricism, one might ask what you think this Post-Modern period is about for which you are going to find an appropriate architecture.

You must know that we have disclaimed connection with the movement called Post-Modernism. Freud said he wasn't a Freudian and Marx said he was not a Marxist; and we are not Post-Modernists. We feel that we had a great deal to do with initiating a rethinking of Modern architecture, but what resulted wasn't what we intended. For me, a Post-Modern period has meaning separate from that rather bombastic style called Post-Modernism: it's a time when the tenets of early Modernism are no longer applicable. As a very young architect I went to Holland and photographed Duiker's Zonnestraal and the Van Nelle factory. I loved early Modern architecture and still love it; but, although it was wonderful, it is not for our time. Post-Modernism involves a loss of innocence. The people who adored machinery came mostly from peasant cultures. That love affair with machinery should not have survived the Holocaust, nor the war in Vietnam. Our loss of innocence about technology informs our critique of Modernism.

The social goals of the early Modern Movement were important and poignant. The Modernists seem to have assumed that governments would build all housing. That didn't happen anywhere and certainly not in the United States. And the housing that was built, people didn't like. People didn't like what architects thought they should like. Loss of innocence again. The architects, with their high aspirations and their certainty that people ought to live the way architects thought they should live, were accused by social planners in the sixties of causing urban social problems. Again, loss of innocence.

We were taught in the planning schools to be sceptical about our own certainties and to be cautious; to consider whether there could be anything bad about our recommendations for improvement, if our suggestions could have any unexpected consequences. All of this again brought loss of innocence, a Post-Modern condition. I think there is a theology of Post-Modernism that has the Holocaust in mind and talks of loss of innocence. This is more in line with our thinking. Today we architects have ideals that are tempered by irony. Irony is a gentle emotion, it isn't satire, it isn't harsh, in a way it is laughing at yourself. But the laughter is very serious.

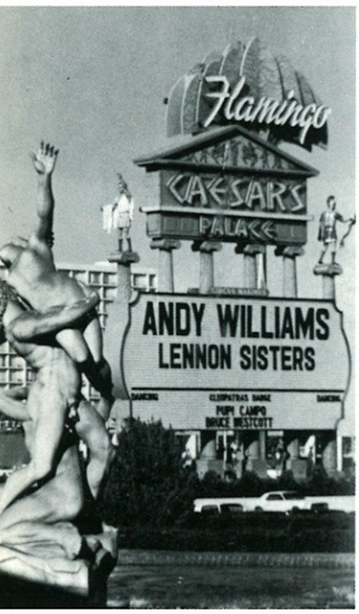
Do you hope that the people who use or see the building will relate critically and consciously to what is happening in the building?

Modern architects felt that the people would come around to their way of thinking, that when revolution came the people would put aside their icons and recognise that factories are beautiful. We felt that the industrial symbolism in Modern architecture was not something we could put our hearts into and that the aesthetic rule-systems of Modernism had become socially harmful and aesthetically deadening. This brought us back to representation and symbolism. Looking at other people's views of allusion, symbolism and appearance would, we felt, make us more sensitive architects. We found Las Vegas aesthetically exciting partly because it did not follow the canons of Modernism but consistently broke the rules, introducing shocking allusions to historical architecture, solving architectural problems, often very directly, in ways that the academy said you should not do. When Bob Venturi and I first met we shared an enjoyment of such shocking solutions. I brought them from England and he had learned them in the United States and Italy. We went round finding things in real life that architects on juries told students you couldn't do. Those made us laugh, because they were supposed to be wrong. But we saw, too, the vitality of architecture you 'couldn't do' and its irony. How do you define irony? In the not matching, not meshing, of the elements of a building or group of buildings there is something funny. But not meshing in the social sphere can also induce irony; when conflicting values are juxtaposed to produce an untidy architecture that makes you

laugh, there is irony in that too. I don't think you have to be a sophisticate to be ironic. Peasant and folk cultures use irony.

That's the old tradition of the irony of the buffoon. But now irony has to do more with sophisticated thought about aesthetics than with the intrinsic value of objects or the world itself. This is the romantic impetus defined by theoreticians like the Schlegel brothers, who said that after the end of the classical world-view and the start of the Romantic era there can be no art without irony. It seems architecture had to wait another 150 years to get that accepted. A few artists had already begun in the nineteenth century, and, if we look at Dada or the collage, art then had a much greater sense of the ironic than architecture. But do you think that ordinary people who see those ironic buildings are actually perceiving the ironic aspect?

Some do and some don't, that becomes a question of levels of communication. I see no reason why architects shouldn't have their own language and talk to each other separately from the public about a building, so long as this doesn't harm the public. But if architects do only this, which the Modernists tended to do, then they have not met the public need. I think a great institutional building should communicate on many levels, it should have something for everyone. I wrote an article, 'Architectural Taste in a Pluralistic Society', on this topic. It was in part a critique of *Popular Culture and High Culture* by the sociologist Herbert Gans. He felt that, given the variety of tastes in the United States, each 'taste culture' should have its own art and architecture provided by members of that culture. I think this is unlikely to happen. Artists



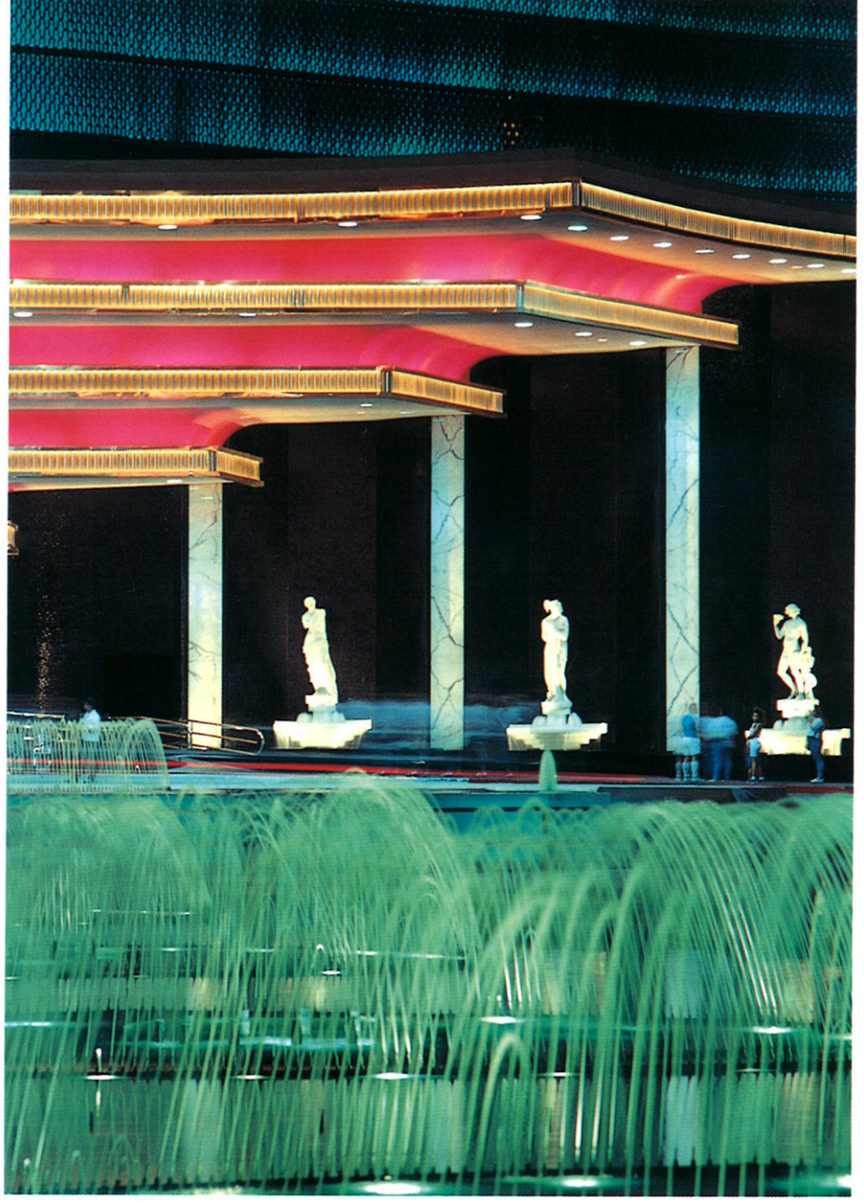
Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas, 1968

Still from 'All in the Family'

who rise within the class system are likely to flee the value system of their original class and choose another one. Certain television-comedies are loved by large numbers of people in the United States. *All in the Family* was one like that. If you were a sophisticate or if you were a simple person, there was something for you in it without its being condescending. Some great art has broad appeal, some does not. When we, as architectural artists, design institutional and civic buildings we ought to try for the former. Talking as I do with you now across a table, watching your reactions, I can build closely to your value system – though as a responsible professional I must warn you that, if your house is idiosyncratic, it may not sell; there are reality checks. But if I'm an urban designer I can't afford to build only what the mayor wants, I must consider what the people of the city want or are going to want. To do so I must take to the people's representatives questions that concern their constituencies and questions about the future.

The Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery in London is a very interesting project for elaborating things we are talking about. As a commission it's very complicated because everything is in it, from the technical basics to social thought and highbrow aesthetics. So the question is 'How can you be ironic according to the programme of such a building?'

I think we were concerned with the place of the individual in the whole, and the place of the secular in the sacred – the equivalent of where the laundry hangs out in the *palazzo*. We wanted to make vivid architecture from these juxtapositions.



Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas, 1991

Pennsylvania Avenue Project, Western Plaza, Washington, 1980

And to show a kind of conflict without making a building which you can't use?

Seattle Art Museum, 1992, with sculpture of Jonathan Borofsky

In a large complex building not all spaces will be equally convenient to use, but those that people use most frequently or intensely should not be sacrificed for expressive aims. Another important juxtaposition is between light and dark. Our Seattle Art Museum has sheer blank walls because daylight is not wanted in the exhibition spaces. Also it has only two public entries, for security. Yet, contradictorily, we wanted the building to be open and inviting. There is a lot of glass at the ground level; here one sees the conflict between the desire for openness and the requirements of security. Upstairs, in a few spaces that are not galleries, you can look out at the city. In all our museums we draw the street into the building. The materials of the museum entrance and ground-floor lobby are hard and mostly stone, like the street. Wide stone stairs lead to the art, located, as in many museums today, on floors above the entry. Although the museum is only five storeys high, its scale must be larger than that of the high-rise buildings that will eventually surround it. We have employed scale relationships within the façades to suggest a civic scale. At the top of the building is a sign, big enough to represent the national importance of the museum. Where the striated limestone of the façade touches the glass face of the ground floor, we introduce a sinuous band of coloured stone and terracotta tiles. These modulate scale, from the very big sign to smaller and yet smaller elements, eventually to those at the scale of a person. Within the big scale stone walls have small windows that break the monumentality. Small accents of black and white syncopate the rhythms of the band of stones. At the base of the building, at the doorways, are small columns scaled to one person. Then a very big person, a Jonathan Borofsky silhouette figure in cut steel, stands near the doorway where the human-size person goes in. Having carefully set up the hierarchies of scale, we contradict them with a figure that's much too big. This is to keep the monumentality human. We try to mediate monumentality with irony or a little self-deprecation – the building laughs at itself or the architects, *not* at the client. The monumental is there, but the individual is placed within it to give it a human face. The big has the small set against it, the individual is set within the community.

Mostly in a museum you can't find out how the elements are organised. You don't know how the building itself works, especially in very traditional exhibition spaces. A simple trick is to let the people have a peep in the storerooms when they walk up to the exhibition so they see the difference between the rough material and the exhibition.

I think something else is happening in museums now. In the museums we designed we had to provide a great deal of non-museum space. Today's museum is part restaurant, part shop and part education department; it is full of lecture halls, conference rooms and computer spaces, where visitors can find information away from the paintings. Museums want to offer people different ways of knowing art. All this sits on the lower floors, yet people must be able to visit the art without their eyes being so assaulted by modern media that they can't look at Renaissance paintings or Native American masks. Our large stairways are in part a decompression chamber for the eyes, in part a build-up of expectation for the art.

We've tried to ease the complexity of today's experience of art by evolving floor plans that are so simple that people can retain them as ideograms in their minds and understand where they are. In the National Gallery and Seattle Art Museum the big stair rising up one side of the building, giving access to different levels, performs this function. If you can hold the idea of that stair in your mind, you can find your way in the building. We learned that from Walt Disney. Disneyland has a wagon-wheel organisation. Once you know that the Magic Mountain is in the middle and everything else forms the spokes and spaces of a wagon-wheel around it, you can find your way. In the National Gallery the rooms have been designed for the paintings there now – much more so than in the Seattle Art Museum, where the collection will change and grow. The National Gallery rooms need to be airy and light, which is difficult given the restrictive light standards for the conservation of paintings. A great deal of engineering was needed to make the lighting work. That's where technology is very important with us. But the rooms as perceived are like the rooms of a Renaissance palace, not exactly but vaguely. There is a chronological sequence to the display, but there are opportunities for choosing other sequences via numerous doorways. You can go east to west as well as north to south through the collection and from many galleries there are vistas to different eras (and from some to the city beyond). So we try not to be coercive, not to force an interpretation people don't want.

Is it true that when you go deeper into the building you are less involved with ironics and more with concentration? Do you mean that when you are concentrating on the paintings you don't need irony any more, you want to see the paintings as clearly as possible?

We give pride of place to the paintings; we make a space that is eloquent, I think, but not ironic. As you

approach the Sainsbury Wing from the main gallery, there is a vista a block long, the length of the whole gallery. When you stand far back in the existing building and look down the vista, you don't know that there's a new building. You see the painting at the end of the vista as if it's in the existing building. Then as you enter the link between old and new you see a perspective of columns, just the architecture and one painting with, inside it, two windows. There's no irony here, but a bit of magic (it's actually a false perspective). In this spot the building is perhaps romantic, but in a very low-key way. This reflects our judgement of the needs of this particular building. In another, it would be different.

So style depends very much on the interpretation of the site and the programme?

Yes, 'style' or 'signature' are scorned words in architecture, but perhaps we cannot avoid them. Even fashion – defined as a way of doing things at a time – it is questionable whether designers can really avoid fashion, much as they may think they can.

Maybe there is something more than only fashion, there is also authorship. That is the reason why you can recognise over a span of several years a certain consistency in the work of this firm.

Some of our buildings look very different from each other; particularly among the houses, some are more romantic and others more formal. Yet there are many similarities too and I think they're all recognisable as ours, even though they adopt a vocabulary from their surroundings and are suited to their context. In the Sainsbury Wing our context was Classical and also honky-tonk, given that our most immediate neighbours were the existing National Gallery building, designed in 1837 by William Wilkins, and the tourist buses parked at the site immediately opposite our entrance. We picked up the Classical rhythms of the National Gallery, then syncopated them. Against this we juxtaposed the large openings of a world-scale attraction, which four million people will visit a year. There is irony in this, but there is also aesthetic enjoyment. We say the building is Palladio from east to west and Aalto from west to east. Where they meet, there is a dramatic clash of scales. Those 'Aalto' openings are very big. They're scaled to Trafalgar Square, and also to the munificence of the gift. The portico of the existing main building is very formal and lifted above the ground. Ours is at ground level and will take baby carriages, people in wheelchairs, and many others. During the 1991 demonstrations against the war in Iraq, people were all over Trafalgar Square with banners saying 'Peace now'. Our doorway rose magnificently over them, seeming to protect them and give them a setting. Our main façade does everything urban that we wanted, although it is also agonised in some way.

In a lot of your public buildings the entrance is behind the façade. It's put inside, more or less.

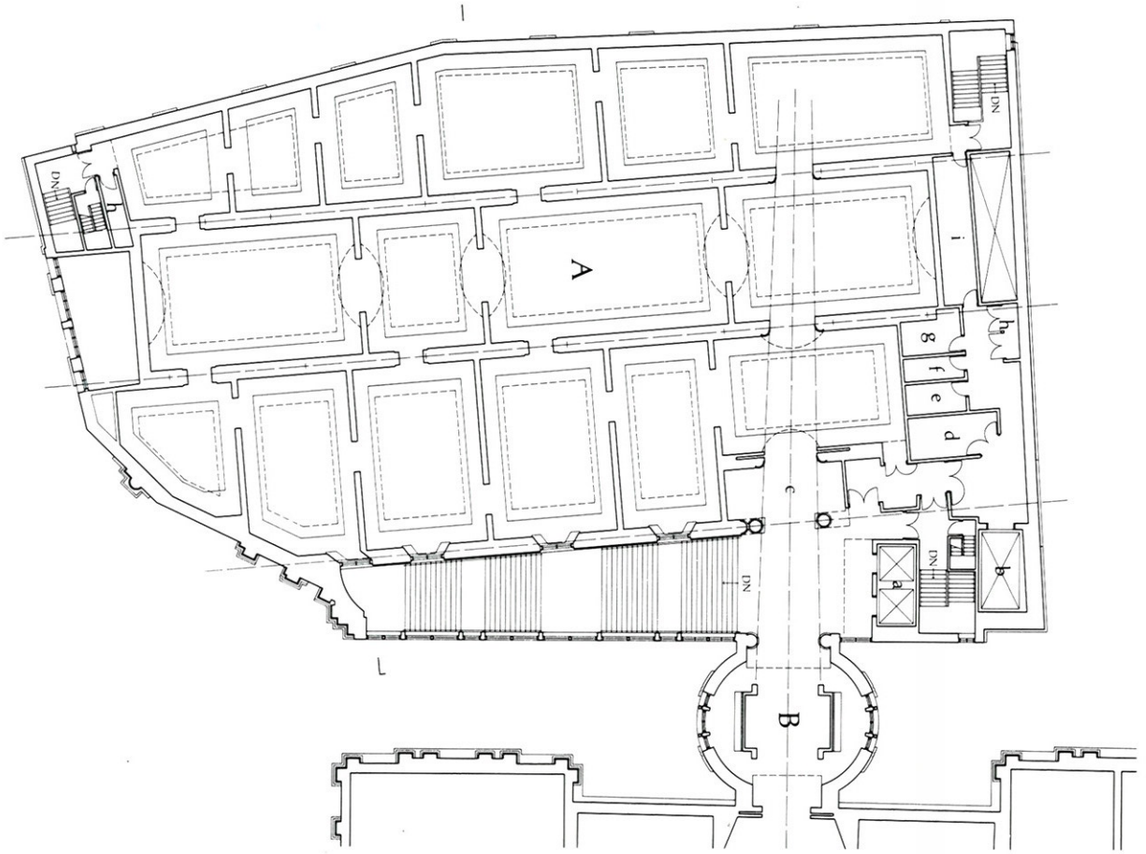
Yes. In this case large openings were created on the front and a skin behind. Functionally that gave us control, at the actual doorway, and shelter between the two skins for people waiting to come in. Urbanistically it gave us a means of defining the new wing and its entry at the scale of the square, and a means of enclosing the interior and providing a smaller opening at the scale of the individual. Philosophically the National Gallery is an ancient institution in a Classical building, yet right beside it is the highway that has gone through all our lives. There is a clash. The original building was intended for an élite, this building is designed for great numbers of people. The art is fantastically precious and yet on a Sunday afternoon people will walk through the galleries fifteen abreast, and each should feel welcome and able to establish a personal relationship with individual paintings. These are the conflicts the building represents.

Why is it then that so many critics of your work still stick to the idea that the consistency in the œuvre of this firm displays a certain lower-middle-class taste culture, whereas the method you describe implies that in every specific project or commission you are trying to embody all those different kinds of taste cultures?

Of course we admit that we are élitists, we don't argue with that; and as élitists we sometimes use popular culture themes symbolically. Also we try to be moral and responsible architects and, because we are urbanists as well, we know that we must satisfy a great many different tastes. It is all right for us to enjoy, for example, the tailing-off of columns and the windows that are partially there because they don't hurt anyone (except a few critics). But it would be very bad if we were to deny the educational aims of the museum, by saying, for example, that it's vulgar to use computers to describe art and that only art should describe art – the things high artists sometimes say.

The criticism just mentioned refers to the Pop element, which you so expressively staked two decades ago and which is still playing its role today as a ghost in whatever way one perceives your work. But it's also your use of the term 'what people want' that sets critics off. Reading your texts, the word 'people' comes up very often; the question is then 'What kind of people?'

National Art Gallery, Sainsbury Wing (extension), London, 1991



National Art Gallery, Sainsbury Wing (extension), London, 1991

I don't like it when architects say they are going to plan for 'the masses'. That's too global. We architects should understand the needs of small groups. We must consider taste cultures, lifestyles, market segmentation, we have to find ways of learning what groups want. When we design public housing, for example, we must simulate a community if we don't have one and try to meet with its members face to face and in other ways. However, you can't design a courthouse for one market segment. Ideally, you should find ways to appeal to everyone.

Aren't you afraid that in the information society, in which people see a lot of signs all the time without perceiving a substantial meaning, without a link to reality, the building will only be seen as entertainment?

If we learn from Las Vegas and its signs, which are brash and interesting but send only superficial messages, does it mean our signs need to have superficial messages?

So you want to cut across the marketing segmentation of different lifestyles or taste cultures, to do something more? Are we right if we say that as a professional you respect what the client wants, and what the people who are going to use the building want, but you would also like to say something more about society? Are you an intellectual who can build?

Yes and no, that is we don't set out to say something about society. We set out to do our job. And we set out to follow the clients' values. For example, if they feel they have a world responsibility, we want to show that. I think there is some kind of social comment that comes out of our architecture, but we don't say 'Now I'm going to do social comment.' We may have arguments with the client as we go along, about details. There is always some element of negotiation with the client. You can also try to get the client to do something more than they had intended; you may succeed or you may not. And you may see comment in retrospect. Looking back on what you have done, you may see symbols, and metaphors, as I see the highway going through our work. And some agony. Picasso said of his *Maids of Avignon* that others would make it beautiful. For me that means other people, following later, using his inspiration will find ways to do beautiful paintings. I think our buildings have some of that quality. This makes it hard for us to find work because most clients would rather not have the anguish.

I imagine that apart from your professional skills, developing year after year, you also have a certain view of society as a citizen. Between us there can be a civic debate, and I guess that the talks you have with your client are not only talks between two professionals, for example the political professional and architectural professional, but also a talk between two citizens talking about a certain hidden agenda of what society should be and what architecture can contribute to it. Could you describe some moments in your past experience where it was possible to do something like that?

The intention of the National Gallery client group was to support and display a precious world resource and to find a way for the British nation to present that work to the world. That's the kind of motivation. Also they wanted to meet the needs of all the people and help them form a personal relationship with the art.

Now certainly it means trying to make a better society, but it is more specifically about the art. I think the vision of the Sainsburys, who gave the money for the gallery extension, is that their country needs help in the arts. There isn't the money any more for the government to do it. They have a duty now to help support and enrich this heritage.

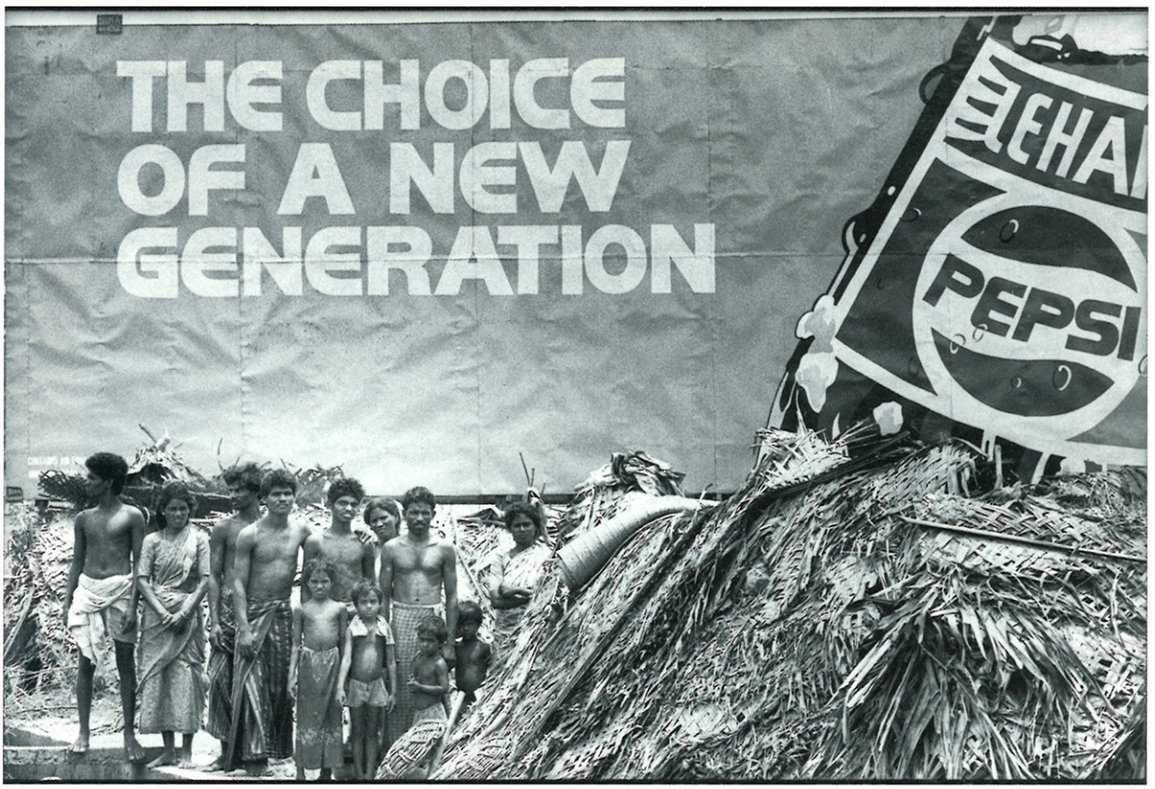
There has been a basic need throughout all the different stages of human development: all people need idols. What seems to be lacking in your approach is a capacity to discriminate, to distinguish between what ought to be done and what should not be done. What ought to be idolised and what not. And if you take taste cultures or lifestyles as a point of departure, how would you position yourself, politically or ideologically: as an architect or as an intellectual who knows how to build?

When you say 'ought', the opposite is 'is', and the tension between ought and is ought to be part of a committed professional's lifestyle and work. If the oughts come too quickly, they may not be suitable and creative ones. Looking only at what is will not produce great art. But architects have at times been too quick to proclaim oughts, just as economists have at times been too quick to consider only what is. As a teacher, I told my students from economics 'You ought to express more norms and values', and my students from architecture 'Listen to what people are really telling you they want'. It seems that somewhere there is a good balance between is and ought. I was taught by urban social thinkers that ***if you see something that is actually in existence, the presumption is it's probably needed or it wouldn't be there;*** so at least be sceptical before you say 'This is bad,

let's clear it away'. Yet at the same time judgement must be made and judgement ought to be explicated; you should say why you're making certain judgements. And if you are working for a client, the judgements ought to be made bearing in mind the values of the client. But of course I'm very involved with aesthetics and with trying to make something beautiful, though the beauty might be an agonised one if it is drawn out of the tension between is and ought.

The norm you just described has more to do with how to design, how the process should be organised, how long you will listen to clients, which people should be participating in the talks before you are going to design. But this doesn't say much about your world-view, your wish of how society should be. Your norm is more focused on the process than on the content isn't it?

How I feel society should be is not all that easy to translate specifically into a building, and besides I don't believe I can (or necessarily should) dictate social relationships through building design. We have resigned from some commissions because we thought things were happening that should not happen. We were hired to design an apartment building in a north-eastern United States city. Most of the housing was for upper-middle-income residents and twenty per cent of it was for moderate-income residents. We evolved



Along the road to the airport of Madras

plans we believed were right for that site, but the authorities turned them down and presented us with a silhouette and footprint of the building into which we were to fit the dwelling units. They were answering to political pressure from developers to have high buildings and from the community to have no buildings. We did what we were told. It meant a squat, bulky building where most apartments had poor light and, though the view was wonderful, most of them couldn't see it. Then we resigned. We did what the client needed us to do, to satisfy the authorities, then we resigned.

Is there any commission you wouldn't do at all?

I would not be very happy working on a prison. But if I had to keep my firm together and food on the table of the people working here, I might do it. There are many regimes I would not build for and some projects I would turn down for moral or aesthetic reasons. But for us, as well as for most architects, the dilemma is yearning to build, yet knowing that few prospects are good ones and that even fewer will become real projects. We must learn not to fall in love with a prospective commission without first considering whether we have any likelihood of obtaining it, and to say 'No' to invitations to enter competitions or be interviewed for projects where the chances of our being hired are low or non-existent.