

Architecture and Public Life I Essay

Penny Lewis I August 2011

In 'The Human Condition' Hannah Arendt argues that man is, by his very nature, a social being but that 'the public' is a feature of society that is not naturally reproduced but is reliant on autonomous individuals who choose to exercise their judgement about the progress of society. For Arendt there is a distinction to be made between what we do as part of a division of labour as a result of the fact that we live in close proximity to each other and therefore interact in the general running of our day to day lives and what we do publicly as a matter of choice.

Today our understanding of the idea of the public is confused. There are very few ways in which the free and independent individual actively involves themselves in public debate; public life occupies a very narrow terrain. We often discuss 'the public realm' without any reference to the autonomous individual that sits at the core of the idea. The word public is often used to describe things that we do of necessity as part of our survival strategies. In fact most of what passes for public life is not really public at all according to Arendt's definition.

Habitually institutions such as government sponsored agencies, local authorities and even central government itself are substituted for the public. Public pools, libraries and public events are generally government organised or institutionally directed activities designed to create a sense of our social obligations and responsibilities. The issue of public and private is often reduced to the administrative question of 'who pays'. Our culture has become enveloped by proceduralism, risk aversion and superficial accountability. As a result our understanding of public life is often reduced to little more than the management of liability, an all embracing insurance policy that often prevents us from acting in the public realm rather than facilitating it.

Where does architecture sit in this context? It's a difficult question to answer because architecture relates to public life in so many different ways, some of them quite abstract, others that are very concrete. But just as the idea of the public is not contingent, its most immediate expression - our built environment is as Aldo Rossi (1966) said: "Architecture gives concrete form to society, it is intimately connected more than any other art or science...The contrast between the particular and the universal, between individual and collective, emerges from the city and from its construction, its architecture."

Just as any new building has a relationship of some kind with its neighbours, so too does it have a relationship with the recent and distant history of architecture. Moreover it is also a product of the knowledge and experience of all of those that have built and reflected on architecture. This is not to suggest that the idea of the public demands an element of nostalgia or operative architecture based on historic pattern books – but it demands a recognition of the development of ideas as part of an ongoing historical process as opposed to one in which with every new idea we must abandon our accumulated knowledge. This is particularly pertinent in the current climate when there is a tendency to believe that the contemporary uncertain and contingent nature of economic and social life makes it appropriate to abandon our accumulated understanding in favour of a so-called 'critical' and flexible outlook.

It's a very difficult question to negotiate the relationship between the architect as the autonomous creative individual, and the culture context in which he or she works, which clearly is a determining influence. When we as a society deny the capacity of architects to express anything more than its most immediate function, or alternatively we demand that they provide instantaneous sense of meaning, certainty and a sense of belonging through metaphor and symbolism, then our architectural production is likely to be poorer. Naturally architects will strive to produce work of interest regardless of the conditions, but this will be a private passion unless nurtured by broader society.