Contemplating Architecture as an Instrument of Policy Implementation: 
Or Translating Rhetoric into Architectural Form

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Abstract:
Just as means are to an end, public policies are to the documentation of the general will, 
administrative processes are to public policy implementation, and building regulations are to 
arithmetic. Consider then that architecture is an instrument of public policy 
implementation. The dictionary definition of instrument is, “3. that with or by which 
something is effected; means; agency.” In the case of government, the implementation of 
public policy is the result of administrative procedures. In the realm of the built world, 
arithmetic is the effect.

Examined under a different light, both public policy and architecture can be considered the 
instrument by which something else is effected instead of being the result alone. If we 
recognize that public policy reflects the general will of the people, then in its rhetorical form, 
it is used to articulate the desires of a society. It is the agent of a democracy. Identifying 
arithmetic as a means instead of an end is more difficult since it is rarely considered as such 
consciously.

Architecture, unlike public policy, is often open to interpretation. For some the term 
arithmetic evokes images of well known buildings, for some it is simply the quotidian built 
environment, while for others, “Architecture is whatever in a building does not point to 
utility,”. Once the term architecture is defined by designers and users (just as procedures for 
enforcing public policy are legislated) one can propose considering architecture among those 
methods by which something is effected.

The importance of the contemplative architect to society is clear when distinction is made 
between projects where architecture is an end and those where it is the means to an end as 
identified by the general will of a society.
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“What is the role of the professional architect in today’s society?” Aside from constructing sound structures that incorporate aesthetic sensibilities into the planning of the built environment, architects make social impact through their projects. Typically rules and regulations, as much as the architect’s design skill, play a role in the development of a project which must ultimately address the needs of a client. It is important therefore that the architect recognize what a client wants and what society desires. Policies are an example of the articulation of these needs and desires and it is the contemplative architect who is able to translate that rhetoric into its tectonic form. It is through such action that architecture can itself become an instrument of policy implementation.

Thoughtful architects are subsequently in a position to mediate between the policies of the private client and society. To do this, they need a clear understanding of not only their clients’ and society’s agendas, but also their own. On one hand, it is assumed that architects will determine for themselves which policies they support and intend to promote through their design work since architecture that is the action born of a thought will necessarily reflect, tectonically, the intention of that original thought. On the other hand, the notion presented here is that the architect’s role in the implementation of policy can produce intended private and public consequences when the design process is self-conscious, collaborative, and concentrated on the stated policies of all parties involved. Just as governmental processes must rely on legislatively stated intentions, the architectural process is entitled to have access to the same or similarly articulated agendas (i.e. corporate mission statements). These are herein referred to as “policies” and are typically understood to be documented in such a way so as to be referable.

The assumption for purposes of this proposal then is that the term “architecture” refers to the process of designing and constructing the built environment and that “policy” is synonymous with the private client’s mission statement or a society’s documented public policies. These are citable statements of these groups’ agreed to collectively formulated initiatives. In Western society, there are established ways of documenting a collective public thought: through representative government. The American democratic process is founded on this principle; political representatives to the legislative branch of government are charged with representing and documenting the general will or more specifically the “happiness” of society in the form of laws. The Enlightenment presented us with the concept of “general will” and the Benthamites adapted this term with an explanation of the motive behind democratic legislation as a community’s effort to address the happiness of a community as a whole or in other words, the interest of the community is, “The sum of the interests of the several members who compose it”. The motivation to abide by or at least consider the
reason behind legislated dictates (or laws) however, remains up to the individual member’s interpretation of that law.

Practicing, “the art or science of planning and building structure”\textsuperscript{5} in a manner that contemplates a process of public policy enforcement, would respond to the general consensus of a society’s desires instead of producing unintended consequences if the policy’s intentions were left unexplored. In the American judicial system, law enforcement officials following agreed upon procedures established under the executive branch on federal, state and local levels, as well as members of the judicial branch of our government are often required to interpret written public policy. Members of the judicial branch must decide what the intent of the legislation was when the policy (law) was created.\textsuperscript{6} Antecedents of interpretations might play a role in their decision of intent, just as their understanding of the current-day general will of their society could. As members of a society, architects can understand the intent of its policies. And as members of the design profession, they can reference precedents within the realm of the built environment when they interpret both public will and private agendas as outlined in a policy.

As an integral part of the development of society, professional architects are often required to be aware of both the societal and professional expectations of the environment in which they are practicing. This is an intangible context. The perception that a company wants to project into society is often outlined in a mission statement (a type of policy). Whereas United States citizens are empirically familiar with the U.S. Code of Law, confusion often occurs in a corporate setting when a client’s agenda is not articulated or conveyed to the architects or other professionals working with them. Design problems arise, “…when a designer does not understand a problem clearly enough to find the order it really calls for, he falls back on some arbitrarily chosen formal order. [Hannah Arendt’s “complacent ‘truths” for example.] The problem, because of its complexity, remains unsolved.”\textsuperscript{7} The challenge for architects then is not only to comprehend the policy agenda, but to translate rhetoric into architectonic form.

The translation of policy into tectonic terms is a collaborative process. If, “…the function of the architect requires a training in all departments of learning,”\textsuperscript{8} then architects need to work in conjunction with, and not independent of, the other people involved in the organization of society. Even if designers are consciously creating spaces that they believe address those intentions, ignoring the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach to design might create environments that are contrary to the intention (per the policies) of that community’s social order.

Philosophies behind principles of design date back to Antiquity. Ancient Greece’s Hippodamos of Miletus had a rationale for his gridiron urban plan just as Vitruvius documented his reasoning in his treatise \textit{De architectura} in 46-30 BC Rome. These theorists/architects may have founded their design principals on the overall social intentions of their societies without explicitly taking a consensus since their societies were, by modern standards, insular. Their design efforts were successful apparently because they did not need to address a broad range of societal concerns. Over two thousand years later, Western
societies encompass more diverse cultures. Society’s collective motivation itself has become more complex and less readily translated into a singular design philosophy.

There are several aspects of complexity surrounding the modern notion of society’s intentions that warrant exploration on their own accord. A few should at least be recognized as potential support for the proposition that a parallel can be drawn between the way that society implements its collectively legislated intentions and the creation of the built world:

1) While not able to create it, modern architecture should have been able to respond to its own rhetoric that promoted Utopia as Manfredo Tafuri describes.\(^9\) In this case, a design initiative was developed primarily for the benefit of those who wanted to advance modern architecture’s policies instead of the general will articulated by society (or per Bentham, instead of society’s “happiness”). The International Congresses for Modern Architecture (CIAM) architects essentially took on a dual role of policy makers and enforcers. The ultimate directive of the CIAM policies was to promote their own view of Utopia through architecture and so they clearly recognized the direct parallel between society and the built environment that it inhabits.

2) Economic impetus exists for some members of society entirely outside the realm of utility. For example, the Western policy of economic expansion in the early part of the twentieth century led to the development of the metropolis.\(^10\) The design of one part of the city, even just one office building when multiplied, ultimately led to the creation of the whole. The architecture in this case was following an oligarchic, private policy agenda, not a public one; the creation of the metropolis was not in response to the happiness of the community as a whole. In both of these instances the architect’s role as a mediator between the policies of society and the client was not established.

That architecture has been used as a vehicle of the articulation of an ideology appears to be an accepted concept in general. The nature of that ideology and the origin of its policies however are what critics fundamentally attack. However, anything connected to it is subject to scrutiny as well. Contention that arises over ideologies behind a policy might require the architect to defend it. Architects therefore should be educated in the policies of their client and recognize that they might be held accountable for their role in the promotion of that ideology. Even if they are not formally trained in other disciplines within a society, those creating the built environment, namely architects, must be conscious of this complexity if they intend to address the desires of the client or even the “happiness” or “will of all” for that matter. Tafuri claims that, “Paradoxically, the new tasks given to architecture are something besides or beyond architecture.”\(^11\) In the social context of a project, architects play a role in the creation of their client’s image through the built environment that is created. Lebbeus Woods, contends that regardless of the architect’s recognition of this responsibility, once they contract with a client, they agree to support the client’s ideology. Even if the architect fails to reflect on this notion, he or she is still culpable in the dissemination of that ideology.\(^12\)
In certain cases, we can learn from an analysis of design philosophies. Five examples are explored here. While successfully so, some design processes only addressed the will of some but subsequently were considered failures when critiqued in terms of addressing the balance of the sum of a larger society’s individual desires. Examples of such include gated communities and public housing. In other instances, such a critique reveals success precisely because the designers themselves were able to influence a community’s legislation through their philosophies. Examples of these include work by Thomas Jefferson, Frank Lloyd Wright and the company towns of America.

There are two levels of exploration of these precedents. The first concerns the designers’ methods of theoretical analysis of the intent of the project, then their interpretation of that intent in graphic terms, and finally the application of those conclusions to the built environment. The second level pertains to those designers’ self-awareness of (or in some instances, the lack thereof) the aforementioned actions.

**Thomas Jefferson**

“The spirit of the Revolution, which Jefferson articulated and embodied, was to create the framework of a new society reflecting in its constitution, statutes, buildings, furniture, songs and mottoes, the sober, republican, civic virtues drawn from the ancient examples of Greece and Rome.”

Just as Thomas Jefferson’s political views were influenced by the classical principles of a republic, his architectural impulse was to rely on the models offered by Antiquity; he trusted these established concepts. Today, Washington D.C.’s plan resembles the nation’s triangular governmental structure (as outlined in articles I, II, and III of The Constitution of the United States: the separation of the Legislative, Executive, and Judicial branches of government). The capitol city’s plan is anchored on two points. One is at the Capitol building and the other is at the White House. Triangulated, they point to the Potomac River (and today Jefferson’s Memorial). Encompassed in this triangle’s perimeter is the Mall (where many of this country’s achievements are gathered and on display at the Smithsonian). It has been observed that when the lines of axis of the Capitol and the White House converge, the letter “L” (e.g. Legislation) can be discerned. Jefferson’s rare position of both having articulated the general will in the form of the United States Declaration of Independence and later being presented with the opportunity to reiterate those same ideals architecturally, allows for the assumption that he was indeed self-consciously using architecture to implement public policy. (fig. 1)
Broadacre City  “Wright, however, wanted openness without dominance; his ideal was always an ‘architecture of democracy’.” 19

The policy that Frank Lloyd Wright was responding to with the Broadacre design was based on an apparently democratic capitalist set of principles that included a respect for the mechanization of the world. The principles were based on a notion that harkens back to the founding principles of America, the right to independence and to own property. In the 1930s, this translated into owning an acre of land to live on or use as well as having an automobile. 20  In Wright’s Broadacre City, elements of the community were to be laid out in graduated concentric circles originating not from a central (pedestrian orientated) park, but components of the municipality. 21 Smaller scale homes were relegated to the denser town center while the larger homes were situated on the edge of the urban fabric. (fig. 2) 22  The Cartesian grid was borrowed from the Garden City plan as much as it was from Corbusier’s plan for Ville Radieuse. 23 Though still present in Wright’s Broadacre plan, agriculture is pushed further to the periphery alongside the spaces designated for use by industry. If Wright’s policy for urban planning was based on the aforementioned set of underlying conclusions born of an “architecture of democracy and capitalism” then in the case of the Broadacre City diagram, architecture was used to implement a policy.

Scotia, California

“…to purchase timber land, to erect sawmills, to construct booms and piers, to construct team tugs and tow boats, or purchase the same, to cut and transport timber and lumber, to saw lumber and sell the same, to do all things that may be necessary to the production and sale of lumber…” 24

- The Pacific Lumber Company mission statement in 1883

This (America’s oldest) company town’s mission statement doesn’t directly relate to the development of a town understandably because it wasn’t in the town-making business. Ultimately, the motivation of the company was profit. But without a loyal skilled workforce, this goal would be impossible. The creation of the town of Scotia was the indirect result of the company’s goal of lumber production. The sawmill was built and lumber was processed and sold from the mill and factory in Scotia. The mission statement was adhered to thanks to the buildings that were constructed, and the employees living in Scotia benefited indirectly from this.
Windsor at Vero Beach, Florida

"Windsor is a private, seaside village reminiscent of historical coastal towns like Charlestown and Nantucket. A typical enclave with elegant Anglo-Caribbean homes along intimate lanes, Windsor combines the ambience of village living with premier amenities including golf and croquet."\textsuperscript{25} - policy as stated in a Windsor Brochure

Gated communities such as the Windsor in Vero Beach, Florida (a neo-traditional sub-urban planned town), represent a white collar version of the company town. (fig. 3).\textsuperscript{26} The initiative however comes instead from a commercial community developer who is in the town-making business. The Windsor Zoning regulations that dictate materials and design rules (i.e. "Steeply Pitched wood or metal roofs; open eaves that are deep and have exposed rafter tails..."\textsuperscript{27}) ensure that the style of homes and atmosphere of the town do reflect what the developers advertise. There is one element of the mission statement that seems to be difficult to implement: ultimately this community is not a village. Due to its commercial or corporate origins, the town itself and its houses are larger in scale than the traditional villages cited. Additionally, the seasonal nature of the residents who are there precisely because they seek privacy when they are in town, does not promote the formation of a community. This results in a gathering of individuals instead of a community. The economic motivation of the developed gated community, (instead of a policy born of the general will of society for example) does not allow Windsor to create a built environment that reflects the rhetoric of its mission statement. Because the designers and developers were so closely affiliated however, their unarticulated policy was probably what they intended to address and did; the town exists and appears to be profitable.

Centennial Place, Atlanta, Georgia H.U.D. 2000 – Urban Revitalization

The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (H.U.D.) under Secretary Andrew Cuomo released its State of the Cities report in June 2000. In it, H.U.D. outlined four factors that contributed to the results of its findings in that year: a new economy, a new demographic, new housing challenges, and new forces of decentralization.\textsuperscript{28} The policy for improving conditions in America’s cities and suburbs that was formulated was labeled “Building on Success."\textsuperscript{29} The principles behind this policy agenda are that urban housing
conditions can improve, without harming and with the help of, neighboring suburban communities. The Atlanta Housing Authority (A.H.A.) teamed up with private investors and developers to create a community that resembles the standardized private housing being built by developers throughout the nation. The country’s oldest public housing project, Techwood Homes, was supplanted by Centennial Place with its contemporary mixed-use community of townhouses. The location of the new housing complex offers the opportunity to literally connect to the existing community as the school will be on-line with Georgia Institute of Technology, the apartments are wired for internet connection, Atlanta’s mass transit system (MARTA) is accessible to the residents and corporations in the area are expected to lease office suites located within the development. Additionally, the goal of inspiring self-sufficiency is addressed by the mixed-use element of the program since the social stigma that might be experienced by the low income resident is potentially eliminated because subsidized apartments are indistinguishable from the standard-rate units. The percentage of units designated for public housing residents is equal to that of those for standard-rate ones. It is anticipated that this will also encourage a sense of local pride among the community members and lead to care of the property.

The project however does not seem to address what appeared to be a key objective of the “Building on Success” policy: addressing the issue of decentralization. The urban core of Atlanta is still separated from its many suburban edges by a multi-lane beltway: The Perimeter. Aside from the imitation of the style of housing that can be found in the city’s periphery, a connection to suburban communities is not evident. For example, some program (even housing) components could have been located off-site or some suburban communities could have been considered among the commercial leased space candidates. However on the larger scale of the urban plan, the potential for using architecture as a tool of policy implementation was overlooked.

Ironically, with the exception of the aforementioned H.U.D. example, the clearest examples of architecture used as an instrument of (public) policy implementation are those in the urban planning and programming realm. As the scale of the program recedes and the scope and articulation of the policy decreases, the matter of translating the general will or even utilitarian principles of the greatest good for the greatest number into architecture becomes difficult. In some instances, the mission statement or public policy isn’t articulated at all. The small company, for example, might not have a formal mission statement to share with the architect. Or in the case of one of the most informal forms of society, the family, members would likely fail to recognize that they empirically adhere to any collective family policy, let alone be able to verbalize this (to use the socio-architectural theorist, Frederic Jameson’s definitions) “particular” side of politics to an architect. It is precisely in these most difficult instances that the thoughtful architect can encourage his or her client to state their
company’s, family’s, etcetera “general or universal” guiding principles and in so doing, he or she will exceed typical professional design expectations.

To carry this task out sincerely and successfully, architects are also required to develop and state his or her own personal mission statement. This process starts with defining what architecture means to the architect himself or herself. It might be “organic”, “… a stable structure, which gives form to permanent.”, or “the art or science of planning and building structure.”. In the realm of policy formulation, architects can also exchange and develop agendas right along with, not only the client, but with the whole of society since they contribute to that whole by creating its manmade context. The same is true in regard to policy implementation. It is true that in some cases, an architect might be satisfied to create a built environment that expresses their personal agenda (architecture as the end). Others, however, recognize that they can better serve their community by “thinking” (in the manner that Arendt describes) and therefore anticipating the sociological consequences of their design actions. They recognize that they can adhere to their own mission statement while simultaneously addressing society’s and the client’s policy initiatives. As a result, the contemplative architect, in conjunction with his or her society, creates architecture that still reflects the architect’s personal convictions without overshadowing the overall architectonic statement being made by the client (architecture as the means to the end).

Public and private policy can therefore be represented by the built environment. Observation of the social context of a design and construction project can lead to the conclusion that public policy does articulate the desires of society. Only architects who are prepared to anticipate the possible societal consequences of his or her actions are in a position to utilize architecture as an instrument of policy implementation. If the process is successful (if the architect’s and client’s mission statements and policy agendas are respected) then both professional architects and society benefit from the use of architecture as instrument of public and private policy implementation.
ENDNOTES


3 The reference here is to Rousseau’s definition of general will, “… the general will studies only the common interest while the will of all [what all individuals want] studies private interest, and is indeed no more than the sum of individual desires. But if we take away from these same wills the pluses and minuses which, cancel each other out, the balance which remains is the general will.” Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, The Social Contract. Trans. Maurice Cranston. Original Publication in 1762 and First Translation published 1968, (England: Penguin Group, Clay Ltd., 1968), p.73.


14 ibid, p. 168.


16 ibid, p. 7.


20The All-Wright websitehttp://www.geocities.com/SoHo/1469/flw.html


23ibid, pp.161-171.


27 ibid.


29 ibid. p.79.

30 Easley, Marie. A Closer Look At Mixed Income Housing. On the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta - Community Development website: http://www.frbatlanta.org/comm_affairs/partners/v7n2v7n2_1.htm

31 ibid.

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