

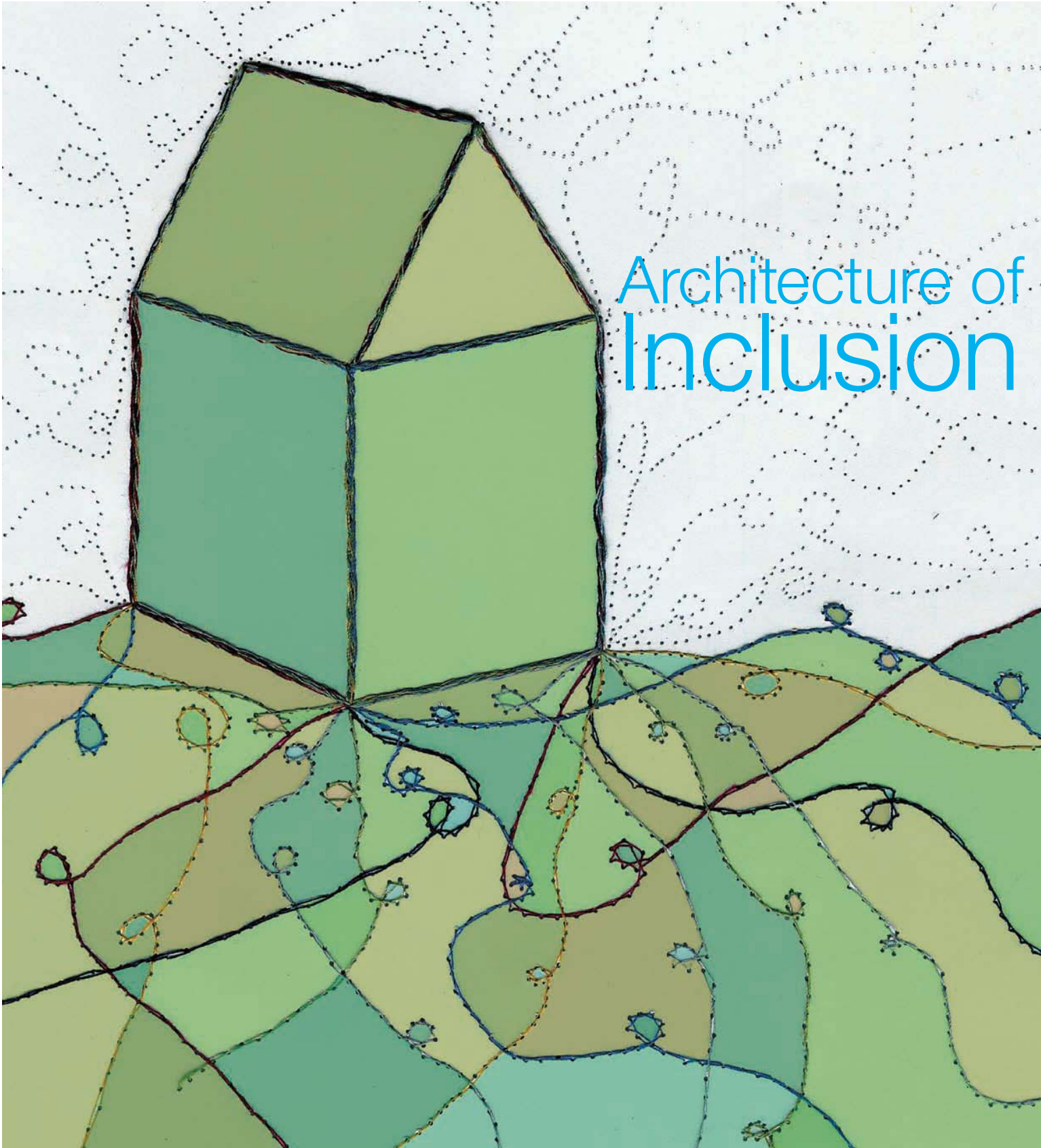
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Equity

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Architecture of Inclusion

Conflicted about Equity

Equity, Culture, and Architecture

By Michael Pyatok FAIA

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ORCO PROPERTY GROUP



The Złota 44 Residential Tower designed by Daniel Libeskind and developed by Orco Property Group competes in the Warsaw skyline with the Palace of Culture and Science, a symbol of Soviet power constructed during the Cold War. Złota 44 houses 251 luxury apartments.

Culture and equity

In post-war Britain, leftist critic Raymond Williams wrote *Keywords*, which demonstrated that the meanings of words evolve with culture and often in sync with the dominant class. Using Williams' method to trace the etymology of the word "equity," we find that the ancient Greeks' word "epieikeia" and the Roman word "aequitas" both referred to situations when cultural notions of fairness, clemency, and conscience were used to ease injustices created by harsh interpretations of the law. The word "equitable," as distilled from the American and French revolutions, promotes the notion of compensation by right of one's labor or contribution, not by right of birth, wealth, or title.

In today's monetized world, "equity" refers usually to an individual's ownership stake in a home or corporation. Earlier associations with fairness or conscience have been shed. One could argue that the financial class likes it that way: focused so narrowly, the word shines no light on the inequities of US wealth, where 15% owns 85% while 40% collectively owns less than two-tenths of 1%. For cultural workers like architects, a desire for a more "equitable" world can run counter to one's personal stake or participation in the world of "equity."

In this article, we will use a Williams-style, class analysis to show how aspects of architectural participation in the world of "equity" help maintain the interests of the equity class. And we propose returning the term "equity" to its earlier associations: "equity" as a cultural compensation for the inadequacies of laws that protect the interests of the investor/owner class more so than workers.

Where equity meets architecture

The creation of architecture necessarily follows wealth. The exception is in public investment in architecture, which creates places usually available to all, regardless of income. When government invests in architecture, it performs a 'redistributive' role that can ease some of the injustices inherent in a monetized society.

As much as a culture can do to ease injustice, it also runs up against its own collusions with the status quo. Homelessness is an example: even with economic conditions so vile that millions are without shelter, the law may be stymied by propertied interests from responding. Culture seems conflicted by competing theories about homelessness's source, unsure whether it's caused by economic factors or by individual shortcomings. In this environment, architects can be led to ignore the homeless or, worse, keep them at bay. In such situations where moneyed interests conflict with social justice, cultural workers need to do some soul-searching to ferret out their own collusions with the status quo.

Radical individualism: the cultural foundations of economic injustice

Perhaps the most insidious supporters for the status quo are the avant garde, who create justifications for superfluous change—the past has no value, the present is decaying, the only valuable enterprise left to the designer is to seek stranger, never-seen-before inventions.

Detachment from, and distrust of, the 'real' world and its class divisions is considered the ideal by the avant garde. Inspi-

ration must be found solipsistically, from within a subculture of designers who talk to each other through their buildings and writings. The more personal and obtuse the reasoning, the more strange the outcome, the more it is valued. Such radical, yet surface, visual and formal departures are seen as radical breaks from the constraints of society's institutions.

Take for example the museum designs of Libeskind, Gehry, or Koolhaas. Museums are expected to remove us from the ordinary and subject us to the extraordinary. They suspend our daily routines and force reflection; perhaps, in that process, they contribute to societal change. But to what degree are they being made outrageously sensational to attract visitors? Museum curators compete to attract that 20% of humanity (the 'Golden Billion') who have the money to travel to these sensational extravaganzas. Are architects likewise competing to make their designs more outrageous than their peers? Are these creations positively contributing to our urban landscapes and skylines? How long will the novelty last? Do host cities notice that the locals, having paid the tourist-priced ticket once, tend not to return?

These sensationalist tendencies seem even more questionable in upscale home design. The "starchitect," when asked to create a unique residence on the skyline or streetscape, makes the home not merely shelter but a glaring signifier of the client's economic and cultural

superiority. If numerous, these avant garde houses would create visual chaos across their districts; they'll remain in the minority because only the rich and famous get to live in "museums."

Popularity of radical individualism

Why do these acts of outrage become the darlings of those with cultural power: the media, the boards who commission libraries, museums, performance halls? The most obvious answer for media is that it must sell advertising and can get higher prices if circulation is high. The more sensational the stories, the better for circulation—much like *The Enquirer*. But as much as these creations appeal to freak show instincts, the show never threatens the social order.

Major cultural institutions have a similar bias toward the unusual. The stuff of everyday life is not the stuff of real Culture—that belongs to the rich and educated, who share it with us through the

mechanism of museums. The louder such buildings scream for attention, the more they assert that societies are hierarchical by nature: only from the top down will displays of Culture be provided.

To be fair, there are many museums that focus on their subject matter, as the addition to New York's Planetarium by Polshek eloquently does. So too do the Holocaust museums: their subject matter is so profound that designers cannot help but put their talents in service to this powerful story.

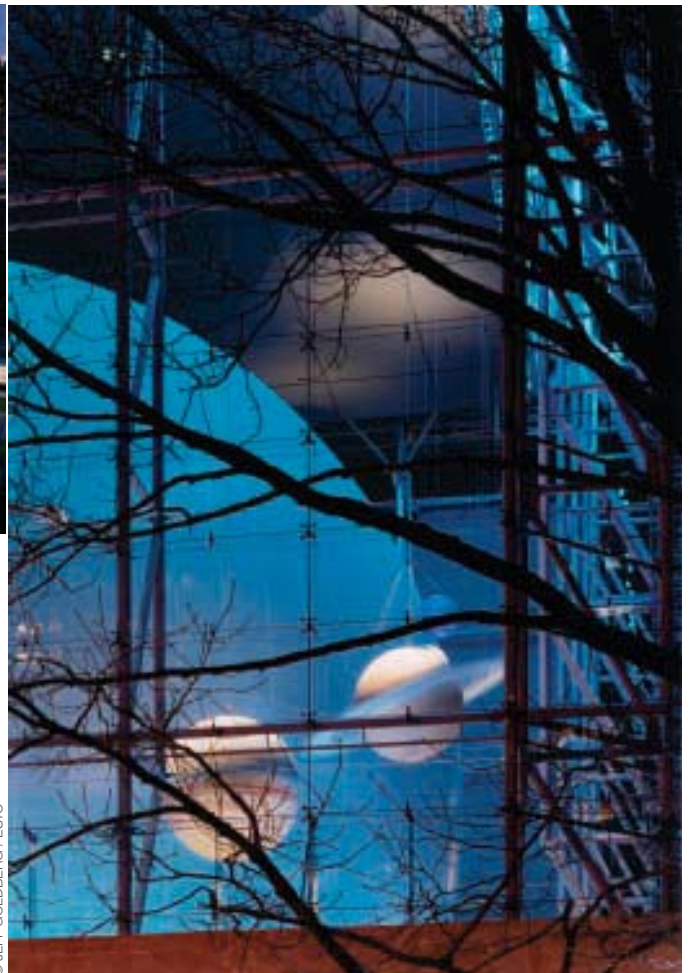
The mandate of consumption

Defenders of capital-driven economies assert that without incessant consumption, these economies would become stagnant, unproductive, even uncreative. The marketplace encourages massive consumption of novelties by linking it to the national pursuit of self-identity (witness luxury car ads tied to the national motto "Life, Liberty, and..."). And so, we have become overfed, over-stimulated, and too distracted to see what this addiction to superfluous novelty has done to our society. With every unnecessary purchase, the limited surplus generated by one's labor is placed back in the hands of those who own the means of production. When we architects worship novelty in design, when we buy all rationales offered up by the avant garde for their design decisions, we become advocates for runaway consumption.

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ABOVE: The Rose Center for Earth and Space at the American Museum of Natural History, designed by Polshek Partnership, houses a planetarium. The structure of the building, while stunning, speaks directly to the subject of the museum rather than to any abstract artistic vision. RIGHT: The Heibrunn Cosmic Pathway at the Rose Center allows visitors to "walk through" thirteen billion years of the history of our universe.



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JAMIE CLARK, COURTESY OF ADPSR

Architects Designers and Planners for Social Responsibility worked with students in Chicago to create a garden for Betty Shabazz International Charter School's new living science curriculum. LEFT: Brian Haynes explains to students about why it's important to know the rotation of the sun in the sky as it relates to buildings and gardens. RIGHT: Students build a wall out of donated tires.



DAN HATCH, COURTESY OF ADPSR

This can be true even within the Green Movement. While lip service is paid to social and economic equity's role in long-term sustainability, much more attention is paid to novelties of form, material and technologies. The new paradigm shift for designing the environment is being co-opted by concerns closer to fashion than to justice. It is not surprising that green benchmarks gingerly step around issues of social and economic justice. The neutrality of current "bean-counting" measures may mask a tacit agenda among those in power that, if the built environment can be made nature-friendly, then worldwide fighting over depleted resources can be prevented, allowing those at the top to keep their places in the present imbalance of power.

Toward equity through architecture

Scattered throughout the world are design professionals engaged in practices that advance opportunities for more of humanity. Such professionals are rarely celebrated in the mainstream or professional journals. These professionals are not competing to see who can put more square feet of titanium on a single building, but how many people they can shelter in comfort and delight, with lowered consumption of resources.

Here's a brief sampling—

The Aga Khan program at MIT has an awards program that acknowledges efforts by design professionals to improve conditions in developing nations. Hassan Fathy of Egypt has been steadily publishing accounts of this work for decades.

Habitat-UN is an international compendium of planners, architects, urban designers, engineers, and others organized to improve the living conditions of settlements throughout the developing world.

While still only a few years old, **Architecture for Humanity**, a Sausalito-based nonprofit, helps like-minded professionals around the world provide services to developing nations and in the US. Design Like You Give a Damn: Architectural Responses to Humanitarian Crises is one of their recent publications.

The Association of Community Design Centers is an umbrella organization representing the interests of over 100 design

centers in the US and Canada. They provide design and planning services to lower income communities in North America.

Architects Designers and Planners for Social Responsibility organized to react against policies of the Reagan Administration. Their anti-military spending positions, early support for green strategies, and work within lower income communities creates a forum for design professionals.

The Planners Network, born in the 60s, is a coalition of planners and architects focusing their attention on economic and social injustices. They publish a journal called *Progressive Planning*.

The best US design journal to celebrate and analyze this kind of work is, by far and away, **Designer/Builder Magazine**, a penetrating, thoughtfully written and unpretentious journal linking design and the arts with a social and economic justice mission.

Conclusion

The quest for equity through the profession of architecture requires a self-analytical critique that digs deep into our learned belief system. The concentration of wealth creates cultural conditions that celebrate radical individualism, steering creative talents away from critiques of social injustice and replacing them with a mindless preoccupation with vacuous stylistics that feed the engines of consumption and class domination. Even the green movement is being co-opted by a fashion ideology, which does not adequately address the global imbalance of wealth distribution.

Architecture is not an art that can exist in a cocoon, independent from the social order or the urgent conditions of the planet. The next Enlightenment may come from quarters far afield from the design professions. Then again, if we can use design as our means within Culture to rectify the shortcomings of Law and the economy, we may find an arena that brings us that much closer to the yearned-for ideal of economic and social equity. ■

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