

**Keynote Address to the George Brown School of Design
Launch of World House Project of the Institute Without Boundaries
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Design is a much-overused word these days. Everything appears to be design. In a sense it is – metaphors are omni-applicable (good ones, that is). And better that we have a complex and aesthetically rich metaphor such as *design* for the global habitat, for we must learn to see habitat as art on the planet.

I am particularly close to the project of The Institute Without Boundaries, and I'm grateful to Luigi Ferrara for having invited me to speak to you about a project that has had an illustrious trajectory with creative engines such as Paul Carter and Bruce Mau. I am particularly close to the IWB and the World House project, because as Poet Laureate of Toronto, I am philosophically allied to its principles.

I think Luigi invited me here because, as Poet Laureate, I have been keen on the demolition of art as destination point. When I came on board as Laureate the fine print said “cultural ambassador for the arts”. I gave a few speeches, expected to outline a legacy project, predictably a physicalist one; but what I outlined was that city-building would never come to humane fruition until we thought outside the categories of the arts and commerce, culture and the mercantile; silos that Toronto is traditionally good at. Simply, no one would buy poetry until the citizens saw themselves as the authors of the poem called their city. Until artistic principles became a way of life, we would continue to think in boxes and live in boxes. No number of opera houses or festivals is going to unite a city until we learn to see culture as ethos.

This brought me to a notion that I have coined as “civic aesthetic”; that is, until we architect the space between people with ethics and creativity, the buildings will be wrong, the urban design will be wrong, the topography of services will be awkward. Sustainability goes out the window without civic care, when an ethic of entitlement replaces an ethic of sufficiency. And an ethic of sufficiency will never prevail until delight and wonder and enthusiasm supplant the cost-effective, the predictable and the expedience with which the mercantile glibly harvests the global citizen.

The global citizen is waiting for a world design that inspires with implicit care, because good design speaks of care for the citizen. The global citizen is waiting for passion to be unleashed, for his/her creativity to be unleashed, for joy to be unleashed, and this will not happen without knowing what the global citizen seeks, beyond consumer needs.

The primal desire of the citizen is to recognize another citizen as a resource of sacrifice. Good design intimates as much –that something has been done with care, with universal mindedness, with intelligence and with ethics, and these spell out “*care*”-- the notion that someone has gone the extra mile by the true engine of human endeavor-- generosity.

Generosity of spirit is what the citizen yearns to see in the urban experiment, and until it is witnessed by livable design, civic trust and commitment are not forthcoming.

Sustainability is first of all about establishing a climate of trust. Such climate bonds. Good design inspires trust, because the citizen feels loved.

So that I name my theme in these remarks, “Design that Loves the Citizen”.

Let me share with you remarks I made at the Toronto Architecture and Urban Design Awards, for though they speak to architecture, they speak also of the relation of design to citizenry.

“Urban design is physical poetry; it encompasses all the senses, and is the most totalistic of all the arts; for there is no “watching”, or reading, or listening, or being just a spectator in the art of urban design; the citizen “becomes” the art, joins the art, walks through it, lives in it-- completes the art, as the lover for which the design was intended. And the design must love the citizen. It is the only way the citizen believes the design, by an intuition that the intent and vision was a romance intended for him.

In fact this is where the romance of a city begins... It's the romance that one's bones and conversation, one's voice and acoustic, one's sense of play, visual and purposed, has found its proper forum in whatever building and scenario the city offers. This is the beautiful-- to feel invited and to be willing to surrender one's physicality to what is graceful and good, because it does not fight human dimension, but gives it new horizons within the scope of the familiar.

There is one essential philosophical criteria for urban design, and it's very simply the notion of "welcome"; the notion that a design must "welcome" its inhabitant or visitor, through the strange alchemy of imagination and benevolence, through a sense of generosity in the spirit of the artist. Perhaps because the architect loves the citizen.

This is crucial, not just as a principle of design, but as a corroboration of a city's ethic. An ethic of welcome that cannot first be extended to its citizens by architecture cannot be extended to visitors or present a city to the world as an auspicious place. When we feel "welcome" in our structures, we are at home, at ease and prone to be creative, and that "buzz" of creative and rejoiced ambience is felt, and passed on; and a city that is too big in many ways is then bonded, made to cohere by an atmosphere of conviviality and trust. Yes, even trust. Because to be able to entrust one's body to a building, to a street, to a home, is then to be able to entrust oneself to other people, is to be able to entrust oneself to the civic.

I think this summarizes my sense of the relationship between the architected and the civic.

But the design to which the IWB is dedicated goes beyond architecture. It is about *design as habitat*—the notion of body and environment being one organism, resulting in an interactive ethic. This is cutting edge. It is the ultimate silo busting. It is about a zeitgeist of congruence that becomes a way of life, because the technology, the ethic and the intelligence have gone to work holistically. It is about applying information technology and the computer and the materials, and aspects of construction beyond the serviceable and grafting them onto the sensory ecology of humanness. Such confluence is the primal aesthetic request of the citizen. And this requires an understanding of the citizen, beyond the fabrication of amenities provided by the gurus of subdivisions---beyond the city planners that plan infrastructure so that it doesn't get in the way---beyond the stupidity of zoning that compartmentalizes and at best achieves “mixed use” as clumsy lip service to civic integration. The IWB philosophically sees design as total habitat--not inside versus outside, not the human versus what services the human. IWB is about exteriors not being just an expression of the interiors, but providing a simulacrum of rhythms and energies and music and movements inherent in the human body and extending to the body politic.

Our language fails in the holism required of new design. Our language is dipodic, western, Aristotelian. It requires poets, artists, designers that intuit the wholeness requested by the human experience. World House Project requires that the relationship between person and context be radicalized. For the project is to have the citizen reflected in his/her environment; in this way the city is reflected in its structures and the schemes for betterment emerge from harmony and not vested interest.

I think we all intuit the violations of holistic law. It doesn't require a specialist's degree to realize that harmonies have been neglected in the world of urban design. It takes good sense and a feel for the indices that well never make it to paper. Jane Jacobs described the civic response to bad design as simply the “sullenness on people's faces”. This sullenness, this sadness in the civic mood is caused in part by the smog, the confused infrastructure, the incoherent skylines, the urban sprawl holocaust and the acute societal fragmentation that has resulted in the human being seeking to withdraw in the 21st century.

Make no mistake about it. Human nature has been revised. We have always thought that human beings sought, reflexively, to encounter. But look at the structures being purchased by the contemporary consumer, look at the amenities that are prized, look at the values that are exalted. Already *safety, security and surveillance* are glamour points for civic purchase. And negotiated encounter, negotiated space, transacted buzz is what we aspire to. Communitality and community have become strangers. Distrust, gated communities, condos with more security guards, the hesitancy with which citizens make eye contact—these things speak of a paranoid ethic that IWB must be subversive about in principle. And the kind of housing intimated by the World Housing Project is a habitat where distrust is eradicated; the ecology of trust must be re-established, and this is done by design that loves the citizen.

What does it mean to say that design loves the citizen? It means something is designed with benevolent imagination that identifies not just the needs, but the primal desires of the citizen. It means building, designing not just with a sense of serviceability but with a kind of care that only comes with compassionate imagination. It calls for designer as “empath”, imagining what a blind person would need, what an aged person would need, what the designer himself would want. It means reflecting on what makes a person rejoice. It means designing, not just by visuals, but by understanding that smell, touch and movement are only a part of the human sensorium. The synesthesia of design is complex--the movement of a body in consort with visual requests, the sense of lighting that collaborates with movement to turn attention to others, the use of information technology that is prosthetic to human action and not discrete from it, the use of materials that evoke a sense of the natural, the interplay between one house and another as if they were talking to each other. The principle here is that of *relationship* as opposed to *discrete entities*--to bring the citizen to a sense of integrated habitat because the aesthetic of design mirrors the aesthetic of ethical reach. This comprises design that loves the citizen and it summons appreciation in the citizen—and helps restore a literacy of grace in the social order.

I congratulate the men and women who have gathered from many parts of the world to embark on this visionary project housed by George Brown College. It is hallmark that a knowledge system finds its home as a nexus of collaboration before sharing the fruits of its enterprises by web sites and communications. The spirit in which you will be called to work is a paradigm for creativity crucial to the urban experiment. You will be called to risk and think riskily in a climate that flatters itself to be thinking creatively, when in fact it merely thinks inventively. And there is a difference between invention and true creativity. Invention is well and good; it is the staple of accomplishment. It is the younger sister of creativity. It can be done by new level growth and some imagination. It can be better mapped out, even predicted, and anticipated. Visionary thought however, requires a different atmosphere. It requires in a team the very thinking that the design seeks to create: an atmosphere of trust in which reciprocal delight fosters further enthusiasm, in which creation becomes contagious by encouragement. Creativity requires risk and even sacrificing the short-term fact to the long term hunch. There is no quick harvesting where real creativity is concerned. One is dealing with a mystery that will yield immeasurable profits if one has the largeness of spirit to avoid small-mindedness, and even selfishness.

You will be called to be creative in time frames, while remaining cognizant that time frames can sabotage the maturing insight. This can only be dealt with by collaboration, mutual faith and a constant delight in the exercise of discovery.

The resources that the students and staff bring from different fields is a rare brew for an urban landscape desperate for solution and mired in box thinking. It is quite the challenge to choreograph all skills in such a way that the alchemy of collaborative insight occurs. There is no better team of people to do this than those who have ushered the IWB into the area that "Massive Changed" promised--the implementation of holistic and multi-dimensional thought.

Speaking as a citizen who is fed up and wearied by the holocaust of sprawl, sameness and the calculated harvesting of global needs, I am heartened and enlivened at the thought of the IWB group going beyond the sphere of obvious needs and touching on the desire of the global citizen-- the deep desire to live in mutuality, reverence for environment and others, the desire to find delight in what is aesthetically pleasing because it leads to commonality, the desire of the citizen to build and live in a habitat that reflects hope.

I wish you all God-speed and the best that creativity promises in your task.

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