

Some Questions Regarding Your Work

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What personal experiences helped evolve your spiritual consciousness and how and why did you come to incorporate them into your architecture?

I was attracted (intellectually) to spiritual stuff, but in terms of experiences: Japanese architecture and the opportunity to study it in Japan; having our house burn down the night we finished building it, and then finding out that a friend 3000 miles away had dreamed beforehand that our house was going to burn - on that date - and had written it in her journal; having Tantric sculpture in a cave temple in India come alive off the wall into three dimensions; spontaneous experience of chi/ hands-on-healing; working with a psychic massage/energy-worker who irrefutably kept bringing me messages from spirit guides; LSD, fire-walking, discovering the role that chi or life-force energy have played in the cultures of the past, ???

Ever since architecture school, I've felt an emptiness in modern architecture and have sought its causes and transformation. Break-throughs were realization that many "ills" of our culture were merely symptoms of a single disease of the spirit; and secondly that virtually all the tools I'd found which began to restore heart to our places actually worked through the vehicle of chi energy.

What would you say the advantages of that are over architecture without a spiritual component?

Vitality, aliveness, meaningfulness, health, wholeness - massive improvement in the positive impact of our places on our lives, the rest of the natural world, resource use, etc. I've just written a book, *Learning to Count What REALLY Counts: The Economics of Wholeness*, which shows how putting values, ecology, and the sacred together with the economics cut through our culture achieves multiple order-of-magnitude improvements in performance. Our most basic goals are spiritual, so leaving that out of anything dooms it to failure.

In our Western society, how do you find clients respond to the concepts of non-visible energy flows and other spiritual influences, such as the placement or arrangement of objects?

Increasingly, many are very excited, some curious, many still disbelieving. I really don't pay much attention to it in working with clients. It's part of my life, how I work, how I create the kinds of places that I do. Whether they like what I design is the base question, the rest is head stuff figuring out why. If they want to go there, I talk about it, if not, it's not an issue. I'm not crusading!

Do you feel this response has changed in your time as an architect?

Absolutely. Twelve years ago, when I first got up at a "Spirit of Place Symposium" to speak about the sacred in design, my knees were shaking. It was a no-no, and professional suicide, to even mention such ir-rational stuff. But part of the job of being a path-finder is having to run new stuff up the flagpole, and getting shot at until it becomes familiar and accepted. There is a tone to such responses that you learn to recognize, which lets you know when you're on the right track! It is amazing how

rapidly things have changed in just ten years. This last year I turned down over 200 design projects - people are definitely hungry for change.

You mentioned that spiritual practices are utilized in certain cultures to give inspiration for a building, which would act as a touchstone for the whole building process. Do you ever personally utilize meditation techniques during the design process to help bring clarity to a specific project? If so, when and how much of an influence does this have on the design and subsequent building process.

I don't do any formal meditation - either in itself or as part of design work. In a sense, though, most of my working time could be considered a kind of meditation. I do try to hold an "openness" to spirit acting all of the time, particularly when designing, writing, or doing other "work", and try to pay attention to what comes. Occasionally I do set up sacred space and formally call in spirit guides, though I think that now I've got all that stuff automated, and I don't even have to pick up the phone. It's often hard for me to tell what is from me and what is spirit through me. I really don't care, anymore. What comes, however crazy, I try to pay attention to, see what it can contribute, test it for workability, and go from there. The core design of a project does seem now to appear "full and complete", often overnight, and become a touchstone for its design refinement and materialization, as some spiritual accounts of temple design mention.

Regarding the Astoria Bank, the initial thing that struck me was how well this building blended into its surroundings. What do you think makes the building fit so comfortably into the surroundings whilst retaining the sense that it is an institution where people come to do money transactions. Logically it would seem quite alien in such a natural setting?

I don't understand what is alien about it. The building blends into its surroundings because I value that and pay attention to ensuring that it does. It retains its sense of being a banking institution because that is its role, and I pay attention to ensuring it embodies a sense of that institution. They go together because both are part of the intention and approached through wholeness - the banking is represented in means that are in harmony with the place, the place is connected with in means that also fulfill its function as a bank.

The south side of the bank, for example, had some very complex institutional and ecological functions to integrate. Pedestrian access and welcome had to be achieved, on a building side facing 100 mph winds combined with up to 120" of rain a year. Visibility of the interior from the street was important, while trying to get balanced natural lighting and protected pedestrian access. It was the only location for a rainwater catchment/ infiltration pond, on a sloping site, through multiple sight-lines to signs, and with security restrictions on landscaping near the ATM. The pond needed to be visible 360", and from pedestrian and automobile scale. This, and landscaping to give ecological connectedness, had to fit within a 10' wide space. The solution, in retrospect, fits the classic pattern of feng-shui as well!

I sense that your question arises from conventional experience and attitudes towards banking. I find it important in every job to seek what is the heart of the institution involved, not how it has evolved in a culture of greed. That is what guides the "banking" in this project. For me, money and banking - at heart - are a vehicle for community sharing and exchanging priority of their dreams so all can best be fulfilled. That certainly isn't what most banking has been recently in our culture, but it is what community banking is, what the Bank of Astoria is, and what is evoked in the building.

What changes do you foresee taking place in architecture in the 21st century?

I have little connection with or concern about mainstream architecture. It reflects and is part of a culture I feel is deathly sick and in dire need of transformation. 9/11 slammed open a door for change in both. I see major opportunity for order- of- magnitude improvement in physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, community, and ecological effectiveness of architecture. I was appalled, looking at an exhibit of prize-winning international "green architecture" recently, to see not a tree, a blade of grass; not a person, nor other life. Only hard, cold, abstract "architectural" fantasy spaces. There is DEFINITELY room to grow!

What advice would you give to Young Architects who are seeking to help bring about this transformation?

Take heart, go deep, seek clarity of intention; ignore TV, the media, the fads of architecture and culture; unlearn what you've been schooled in, listen to the song of life around you, get out of your heads; learn your own soul and touch those of others; co-create with Nature and Spirit. The hard part is done - we know it can happen and how, and momentum is building already! You are inheriting a door open to immense possibilities.

Do you have a specific way of working which you take to every project? and if so, what was the vision you had for the Astoria Bank project and how did you feel it turned out?

Probably yes and no. There is method to every madness. Most architects I see start sketching before there is any understanding of the project. On one level, I try not to even think "solution" until I have as full as possible an initial grasp of the goal, program, institution, client, constraints of budget, site and regulations; climate and context - how all that interacts and the topology of its relationships. On another level, I have bags full of things I've learned, discovered, or am excited about, have had no opportunity to apply, and am checking to see if any fit this project. And on yet another level, there seems to be an answer already there when I sit down to design. Whether that comes from the spirit world, my own unconscious, or what, I neither know nor care.

On any project where I'm trying something in the least radical, I make sure that the fall-back positions are there if technical, budget, client or other conditions necessitate. With the Bank of Astoria project, a curved glulam instead of a tree for the ridge, flat rather than curved roof, etc.

My intention with the BOA was specific: local ecological fitness; state-of-the-art energy and ecological design; demonstrating community, spiritual, and energetic dimensions of sustainability; honoring community, culture, and skill; embodying in the building and the process of making it what community banking is about. I am pleased with how it turned out - not only esthetically, but for the community, the building crew, the bank, and even the ripples out into the wider architectural, business, and cultural communities.

Your competition entry for the Museum of Korean art and Culture in LA, is very innovative. I was wondering what inspired such a unique approach to the project?

It's hard to remember now what was innovative about it! I think that the burned-out ghetto site, history of rioting, and the diversity of cultures and cultural tensions were important roots out of which a design had to grow. My project mantra on that was

"What can we GIVE?" I don't like museums - it makes my heart ache that we are so impoverished that we don't produce wonderful stuff in such quantity that we don't have to lock it up in isolation and out of context and use. I wanted to find what the project could give that could bring diverse elements of the community together joyfully participating in creating new art, music, dance, theater, life - out of that diversity, and with the relics of the past as inspiration and assurance that wonderful, wonderful new heights can be achieved.

The sewage/roof-farm was an inspiration out of that pocketful of dreams....turning waste to wealth, producing wonderful local foodstuffs that would bring the whole neighborhood into the project, that would slip outside the constraints of zoning and produce ecological as well as health benefits. For me, the heart of the project was people getting together experiencing and participating in something fun and exciting....so the theater became the center, and with the climate, opened to the outside. And around it were gathered the resources of history, wisdom, skills, tools that the community could draw upon. The forms came out of honoring the traditions of Korea, and as it turned out, many of the other cultures in the community.

Also do you know who won the competition in the end, and what were the deciding factors?

I don't remember, and don't know if it was ever built. The winning design was a formalistic "esthetic" composition . . . it was in the period where every "avant" project looked like it was made from toilet tank floats.