

Thom Mayne 2005 Laureate Essay

An Essay on Thom Mayne

By Lebbeus Woods

Lebbeus Woods is an architect and teacher who has known Thom Mayne since they shared space in the 1974 awards issue of Progressive Architecture magazine. Over the years since that time, they have encountered each other professionally at the MAK Vienna symposium "The End of Architecture," in 1992, the "Sarajevo: Reconstruction and Resistance" workshops in 1994, and the "Again Architecture" conference in Havana, in 1995, as well as numerous other public and private occasions. Their many opportunities to exchange ideas and opinions, as well as the author's first-hand familiarity with the projects discussed, have informed this article.

After a century of global violence, cultural upheaval, and technological transformations that have radically restructured everyday life, architecture remains a monumental art securely rooted in its traditions. Great buildings are still defined as singular, exceptional objects, set into landscapes of the ordinary. In the utopian dreams of modernists and post modernists alike, architecture with a capital A was to have dispersed itself by now into the fabric of everyday life, acquiring a small a without giving up a shred of its aesthetical and ethical mission—but this has not occurred. At the same time, we can observe that a generation of fiercely independent architects, now approaching or entering their sixties, who were the great hope of architecture's future, are now entrusted with the design of large public projects. Confronted by clients whose wealth and power enables them to commission significant buildings, this generation faces a crisis. They can accept the mantle of their maturity and take on the ages-old task of designing monuments valorizing hierarchies of power and authority, or they can seek ways to carry forward their former ideas, which—in one way or another—aimed at realizing a transformation of architecture, and of its meaning in society. Thom Mayne is one of this generation, and not just any one, but particularly prominent, celebrated and influential. In very tangible terms, he personifies the crisis of thought, and of conscience, in architecture today.

Thom Mayne has been, throughout his career, regarded as a rebel. Even today, after his recognized success as an architect of major building projects, requiring the management of a large office—Morphosis—and a world-wide practice, terms like "maverick" and "bad boy" and "difficult to work with" still cling to his reputation. Part of this is the attraction of the popular press, where he appears frequently, to anything racy and even slightly scandalous. Part of it is a sign of respect—we want our American heroes to be tough and independent, having their own ideals, charting their own paths. Part of it is, in Mayne's case, simply true. The profession of architecture is so filled with gray personalities, corporate equivocators willing to say and do anything it takes to get commissions, that when an architect comes along who is uncompromising and determined to make the architecture he wants, he inspires both love and hate, not to mention resentment and envy. Mayne's early years as an architect were filled with conflicts and struggles—with clients, potential clients, and the builders of the few small projects he was able to get to the stage of realization. There are stories, apocryphal and not, of him walking out of meetings with clients who demanded some unacceptable compromise, and blowing the commission; of his going to a construction jobsite, demanding changes in what the contractor had built and, when refused, returning with his own crew to tear it down. There are stories of his telling journalists to go to blazes when they asked what he thought were stupid questions, and tales of his aggressive behavior at conferences and other public events. Anyone who has known Mayne well over the years recognizes that most of the stories are exaggerated, if true at all, though he is the first to admit that in recent years he is more relaxed and open than he once was. And there is another factor: at a broad-shouldered, lanky six feet five inches tall, with a chiseled face, and a direct, unblinking manner, he makes a physically intimidating figure, without his saying a word. In the 70s and 80s he wore longish dark hair and beard, which added to the effect and used to get him regularly searched as a potential terrorist by airport security people whenever he traveled. Today, with very close-cropped hair and beard, leavened by gray, his presence is softer, a bit, but he is, as they say, nobody you would want to mess with.

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Still, the most forceful thing about Thom Mayne has been, and remains to this day, his architecture. His perceived rebel persona has been perhaps inevitable, given his personality and convictions, and has worked both for and against his career, but at the same time it is quite different from his work as an architect. Far from being volatile and openly rebellious against the norm, the work has been, above all things, deeply thoughtful and reflective. This may seem incongruous to those who see only bold forms and spaces in his architecture, which are indeed its most obvious feature, but the clue to its essential inwardness, in a conceptual sense, is its steady evolution over the more than three decades of his working life. Not only steady, but slow, thoughtful, questioning, always questioning of itself. The work has evolved not in flashes of inspiration or one-off projects that grab headlines, but rather in restrained, sometimes almost reticent advances in a realm of ideas he has nurtured from the beginning. Mayne's architecture does not rebel against conventions so much as it absorbs and transforms them and moves on in a direction that demonstrates how buildings and the spaces they provide, both within and without, can engage the unpredictable yet highly tangible dynamics of the present. He accepts the conventional typologies—bank, high school, courthouse, office building—of the programs his clients hand to him, with a generosity that speaks of his respect for the needs of others, even those with whom he shares little in the way of outlook and sensibility. He accepts, but does not believe in merely clothing the conventional in new fashions, creating—as many architects do—the illusion of innovation. He accepts a given program, but then interrogates its contents first by rigorous analysis, then by testing them (perhaps measuring is a more accurate term) against his radical architectural forms.

This is a confrontational act that can easily be misunderstood as mere rebelliousness, or even a compulsion to impose a personal style on every situation. A given program is sanctioned by the social mandate embedded in the agency of the clients—elected officials, respectable business people, or simply the wealthy and powerful—but what sanctions the architect's language of design is his sense of responsibility, to his clients, to those who live and work in buildings, to society as a human institution of ideas and values, and, not least, to architecture as an instrument of human thought and action. Any architect, even one using the most conventional forms, assumes responsibility for the ideas embedded in them. There are times when conventional forms serve well enough—we might think of a hospital, or a suburban tract house—but when to apply conventions and when to challenge them is a critical choice each architect must make and assume personal responsibility for. Form is not a matter of style, but of content.

For those who believe that tradition is the only socially responsible source of architectural forms, or, for those who believe that there are 'functional' forms in architecture, that is, forms typologically wedded to particular uses, Mayne's method of design might seem willful and arbitrary. On the other hand, those who relish artists' idiosyncrasies and personal expressiveness will uncritically support Mayne's confrontational method. However, any of these positions fails to grasp the essence of his approach.

To understand why this is so, we should recall that the idea of functionalism in architecture is a product of Modernist thinking, which held that a building should be efficient and in the same way a machine is efficient: no superfluous parts, each part with an assigned purpose within the operation of the whole. The idea of building typology is much older, traceable to the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris and other schools of the 19th century and to architectural theories that assigned different historical styles to different types of public and private buildings. It is also in line with most people's favoring of tradition over innovation, or, put simply, their dislike of change. Building types have been important ingredients in rendering complex urban landscapes socially coherent. Not only are buildings divided into types, but people are typed as well—different professions, trades, genders, nationalities, races, ages, levels of education, and, not least, economic classes. Each type is assigned its place in the social hierarchy as a result of a long history of political and cultural developments. The argument for typological design is that it concretizes this hierarchy by dictating a building's size, scale, materials, and form. The architect applies a well-established, socially tested formula, with or without individual touches. The fabric of most cities is made up of such architecture. It is familiar and in some ways reassuring. The problem with this approach is that it only works for relatively static social conditions in which people think in

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terms of established stereotypes. So, a courthouse that looks like a Roman temple, symbolizes the authority of law, traceable to the juridical roots of Western culture, for all those who want to share those roots. Also, a courthouse that appears to be modern that still relies on monumentality, symmetry, facades of equally spaced columns, or other features of classical architecture, is following the temple model, without the ornaments and stylistic flourishes—we need only think of the late work of Mies van der Rohe.

Looking at Mayne's design for the Wayne L. Morse United States Courthouse in Eugene, Oregon, we find something entirely different. For its authority it relies neither on a tradition of courthouse design nor on classicist rhetoric but on the forceful interplay of diverse, even conflicting, forms. Not least, it relies on the authority of the architect's mastery over a complex puzzle of interlocking spaces that symbolize, if anything, the nature of contemporary existence. It is a courthouse for a society in flux, one in which the law must be practiced and enforced within ever-changing human conditions, and therefore must, however cautiously and judiciously, change itself. The architecture speaks both of and to this, presenting unfamiliar forms and spaces together with familiar, typical ones, enabling new relationships, modes of movement and of thought. Indeed, two systems—of the dynamic public and the more staid and conservative law—collide. They do not deny each other, but coexist, thanks to transitions that can be expressed only in the spatial language of architecture. Hierarchy remains, not as a dominant presence, but as part of an asymmetrical landscape of human experience. It has not been diminished in importance, but placed, rather democratically, into the context a less rigidly defined whole.

It is revealing that Mayne was involved in the selection of the site for this important public building. And even more revealing is that the site selected is not at the center of town, where symbols of social authority normally reside, reinforcing impressions of their stabilizing influence, but at the edge of town, among industrial buildings and commercial strips. Here the institution of law aligns itself symbolically with the volatility of change, with the vicissitudes of the ordinary and the everyday. This is a bold move that underscores the radical nature of the building, architecturally and programmatically, in relation to its conventional typology.

Mayne's method of design confronts the typical with the innovative, the familiar with the strange, the program with the architecture. Far from being arbitrary, self-expressive exercises, these confrontations of the formal with the contingent emerge from the necessity to change the ways we think and act. They are challenges to the conventional stereotypes and hierarchy, but ones that actively enable them to evolve, rather than be discarded or overturned. The point is, this enablement cannot come about by simply tinkering with the typologies, but only by confronting them with something new, unfamiliar, that comes from outside.

Sited in the Mission District and across from a neo-Classical Federal court building dating from the 20s, another recent project, the San Francisco Federal Building, announces its bulk of office space in the form of a tall, thin slab a full city block wide. The conventional typology is based on the conception of the building as a regular Cartesian array of office cells, enclosed by a curtain wall designed as a uniform grid of metal and glass, aligned with modular office partitions inside. In Mayne's design, however, every aspect of the conventional is challenged by his analysis. What emerges is not simply an idiosyncratic building that looks different from every other office building of its type in massing, relationship to the street, disposition of public spaces within the building, and layouts of bureaucratic office spaces, but one that enables new ways and means of inhabitation. One is tempted to say that it establishes a new typology, but this would be misleading, as it does not ask to be copied, like a prototype, in numerous possible variations. Rather, it sets a new standard of inventiveness in response to a conventional program of use, becoming a heuristic model, one that teaches architects what can be done in so-called ordinary situations, within a relatively modest budget—the same allotted to any federal office building anywhere in the United States—if they are willing to question the easy assumptions.

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The same applies to ecological issues. We see in this building, with its reliance on an innovative combination of mechanical and natural air-conditioning, and in the Caltrans Headquarters, the new academic building for The Cooper Union and other recent projects, that Mayne's commitment to 'green' design is not like that of many architects who uncritically follow models of 'sustainability'. Too often these provide an excuse for mediocrity. Rather, his approach relies on an understanding of systems, which has its roots in theories of the interactions between diverse systems of organization, dating from the fifties and sixties. Interestingly enough, America in that era was home to the efflorescence of cybernetics, systems and information theories that laid the groundwork for our present computer-driven, internet interactive society. Mayne's 'greenness' grows from these interdisciplinary roots. What firmly establishes his genealogy is his linking of the architectural aesthetic and the ecological. It is clear that he aims at a systems-integrated architecture that leads to new understandings of the interactions of the human and the natural.

Buildings, as we know, remain at their best assemblages of parts often dictated in their form and organization by fire and building codes, trade union regulations, budget restrictions, the vicissitudes of clients' demands, and a host of other contingencies. The average building 'works' only because people's lives are compromised by the same sorts of contingencies, so we are accepting. Great works of architecture, however, stake out a higher ground, one where ideals matter, where moments of clarity are crystallized in the concrete and the down to earth, where we can shake off the dross of mediocrity and compromise and revel in the fullness of our experience. Thom Mayne shows us how architecture can be a uniquely powerful source of such experiences, if it confronts the given program, the design process, and us who use and inhabit buildings with questions for which we do not have readymade answers.

If this sounds demanding, then that is because it is. Mayne's buildings are not easy, in any sense of the word. They demand our engagement, commitment, creative participation. They do not try to seduce us with prettiness or visual appeals to a familiar sense of classical beauty. They are abstract and complex in the ways their geometries, often hard and angular, intersect and struggle with one another, intentionally unresolved by design. And they are difficult to take in at one glance. Like a piece of forest, they are dense with layers, textures, colors, forms.

Density is a term not often used in connection with architecture, because most buildings are declarative statements, single-minded and singled-layered. Mayne's buildings are comprised of a number of ideas, which, though clear in themselves, often combine in unexpected, even startling, ways. Their density results from this superimposition of concepts made visible.

From the earliest built projects—such as the Sixth Street Residence and other private houses from the 80s, as well as the Kate Mantilini Restaurant—up to the present large scale public projects, Mayne has experimented with diverse materials—corrugated steel, raw poured concrete, glass, wood, painted stucco, perforated aluminum, even fabric—often juxtaposed in a single project with a directness that engenders a kind of dissonant unity. This is no easy feat of design. In the hands of a lesser architect, it would certainly lead to a jumbled and chaotic collage. But not so in Mayne's buildings. One reason is that he never allows any material to dominate, but instead constructs a subtle, shifting set of hierarchies that read like an orchestration. Walls, ceilings, and floors are rarely single thicknesses, comprised of one material; rather, they are built up of several materials, overlapped, sliding under, above or through one another, assemblages that speak of material, tectonic differences corresponding with nuanced analyses of use. The effect of this visual richness is of a tangible, but also a conceptual, density, one that is heightened by the range of the materials' forms: thick and thin, heavy and light, shiny and dull, opaque and transparent. A part of the visual demand made by this work is our sense that there is something profoundly ethical in it. We have the feeling, confirmed by the dense assemblage of elements, masterfully coordinated, that it is an expression of—or model for—a diverse and complex social construct. Harmony, if it is to be achieved at all, is of a new order, historically speaking, and is attained not by suppressing differences in the name of some greater whole, but by celebrating them. Mayne's

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buildings—for those willing to see them fully—are a new ground on which ethics and aesthetics meet.

In private conversation and public lectures, Mayne gives the impression that he is not often satisfied. This can be unnerving, as we are used to an architect being enthusiastic, optimistically selling his work to others, or to himself. Discussing his projects, he notes how this or that problem was well solved, or might be solved better, but his comments always move to the philosophical. How does this or that element or space express a particular idea? Why is that idea important? These questions are never rhetorical. He is interrogating the work, revisiting decisions, looking if not for ultimate answers, then for something more rare and elusive that could be described as an inner resonance between himself and the architecture, a kind of coherence that some might call ideal. This does not mean that Mayne is an aesthete pursuing esoteric ends, but rather that he understands the complexity—the nearly impossible complexity—of architecture as a confluence of social and individual needs in today's world. Therefore, he knows that an architect cannot hope to answer them all in any direct way, but only to create a set of subtly wrought conditions in which people can pursue their own interests. Coherence of the sort Mayne is seeking cannot be designed, in the sense of controlling an outcome, but it can be fostered, inspired, and evoked.

Architecture of this order can result only from ideas consciously formed and long considered. Thom Mayne's architecture is dominated by ideas his work has addressed from the beginning, and with their ethical implications, yet he has written little about these matters, counting on the architecture to make manifest his thinking, aspirations, and beliefs. It is significant that he has never expressed any interest in theories that could explain his work, let alone guide it. Nor has he ever been politically active, or followed an ideology of any sort. Yet, judging from his work, it is clear that his political sympathies lie somewhere to the left of center. His practice is founded on the design of modestly budgeted public buildings, because he wants his architecture—confrontational, transformative, enabling—to be part of the tumultuous everyday. His political and social activism is his architecture.

Among the celebrated architects of his generation, Mayne is virtually alone in carrying forward a socially aware agenda. His willingness to travel to Sarajevo and make a workshop for students at the height of the siege that enveloped that city in the early nineties is testimony to not only his courage and compassion, but to his commitment to architecture as a redeeming social force. The same can be said of his journey to Havana in the mid-nineties to discuss with its architects the future of their beleaguered city. Others of his generation have been successful in building often amazing projects that exhibit their talents wonderfully and without compromise, as he has also, but Mayne is not satisfied with this kind of self-fulfillment. His talent will be fulfilled only when his work impacts in a way he considers positive the interactions of people who inhabit his buildings with the institutions that shape our lives, and with the human and natural forces activating the wider world.

The Pritzker Prize is a plateau in Thom Mayne's development as an architect, a very high one in terms of recognition by his peers, one that he accepts with equanimity and appreciation. Still, his questioning continues, tougher than before precisely because of what he has already achieved. He recently wrote, "Architecture is a discipline that takes time and patience. If one spends enough years writing complex novels, one might be able, someday, to construct a respectable haiku." It appears his quest for an elusive ideal of architecture is far from over.

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