

UNSOLICITED ADVICE TO ARCHITECTS

Burton Blatt
Centennial Professor and Dean
School of Education
Syracuse University

Thoreau Would Have Given Better Advice

Henry David Thoreau, the 19th century naturalist and philosopher could have given good advice to modern architects and others who dare to claim they create environments for people. And for those of us who think we're working on behalf of the disabled, his instruction would have been invaluable. Unfortunately, it's too late for that, and not enough time to wait for another Thoreau to emerge. So we must make do with what we remember from that great man's life, and with what we can make out from our own more ordinary lives.

Thoreau once said that people too would sing like the birds if we spent as much time and thought on our shelters as they do on theirs. And he said that long before we built houses so much alike on a street that a person could hardly tell his from his neighbors. What would good Henry have thought of our office buildings whose windows can't open, and where you must use the elevator because you simply can't find the stairway--which is always secluded behind a forbidding grey door? What would he think about our plastic lawn so we wouldn't have to mow it? And the bicycle in our basement, whose wheels turn but it doesn't go anyplace--so we can get the exercise we missed because of the plastic lawn? Or

the artificial rowboat in the spare bedroom that will never feel water or do anything more useful than be a substitute for useful work?

Henry David Thoreau was a master architect. He not only built a sturdy and functional house on the shore of Walden Pond, but he created a strong and purposeful life for himself--with genuine work to do, taking from the land only what was necessary for him to take, giving back to society more than he took from it, keeping only what he needed, giving us what we needed even more. Henry David Thoreau gave anyone who would see a glimpse of a life which, itself, was a work of art. To this day, his life can inform us on how to create an honest life in an hospitable environment.

Some of My Best Friends Are Architects

I have selected architects for discussion because they are viewed as professional creators--and so many others (especially in our field) are viewed as professional destroyers. But I could have dwelled on the work of builders, planners, administrators, treatment specialists, others who contribute (or not) to the ways the disabled are asked (or required) to live. I also selected the architects because, with them, I could be both kind and honest. Not so with some of the others.

From what I know of the published expressions of their aspirations and activities, it may be concluded that architects' means vary more than their goals; so means may better reflect genuine attitudes of

architects (probably other workers in the field too) than their public goals. Or, to state it another way, goals in the field bear striking (unnatural) similarity, while the means (the work itself) are wildly different. Let's begin with some commentary on access, offered by H. David Sokoloff, a distinguished architect long associated with environments for the mentally retarded.

Sokoloff asserts that architects play major roles in shaping environments for all people, including of course the disabled (1982). "But, who are the disabled," I ask? We're not dealing here only with those who are visibly handicapped, such as the blind, or those with missing limbs, but we must also be concerned with those whose disabilities don't easily reveal themselves--the speech impaired, the hearing impaired, the disturbed and, of course, the mentally retarded. Most everyone agrees on the goal to provide appropriate access for all people to share in the normal world and its normal experiences. But what do we find? Sokoloff despairs about, "A gang toilet without partitions in an institution serving mentally retarded people" (p. 13). I could ask (a cheap shot?) Sokoloff, "If the toilet had partitions, would the institution now provide normal access, a normal life style?" Is this a relevant question?

Sokoloff worries that there are architects who feel that designing special environments for the disabled is a nuisance. To be sure, that's a worry. But suppose such work weren't a nuisance to the architect. Would it make a difference if the environment he was designing turned out to be a thoughtfully created institution or a thoughtfully created community

setting? The goals are always the same--dignity for the disabled, access for the disabled, thoughtfulness in the creation of their living and working spaces. But there is something fundamental that goes even deeper than those goals. And here, so many of the architects are silent. Can an institution ever be a proper place for the architect to implement decent goals? Or, to ask the question differently, can the institution ever be a proper means to achieve access, dignity, a chance to live like other people? Here we have an age-old problem, a paradox: To the degree that specialists are needed to design an environment, or serve in it, the people so served are set apart--as the specialists themselves are set apart from other professionals and ordinary citizens, who usually can do such work--except when, for example, the disabled are concerned. So we have "specialist architects" to serve the disabled--which may be another burden for the disabled even as the specialists actually help them.

At once, people like David Sokoloff both serve society admirably and cause us conflict. They improve environments for the disabled; where once the environments were degrading, now they may be livable. But also, the specialist in architecture (as the specialist in law, education, medicine, you name it), knows "too much" about disability to let ordinary people solve some of the problems which they are capable of solving for other ordinary people. And thus, the specialist sets the disabled apart while, admittedly, he does better for them than when they were lost in the maelstrom.

In another paper, Ruhnau (1982) describes a school he and his colleagues designed for exceptional children in California. It's a wonderful school, in the sense that there is a place for everything needed for such children and everything is in its place (as the saying goes). But the fundamental question isn't addressed: Do we need another special school for exceptional children, or may those children have been served as well in ordinary schools? It's an important question, even if you finally conclude that these particular children needed the special school, with its special bathing areas, toilets, sinks, ramps, therapy rooms and classrooms.

And so it goes; in many of the publications devoted to barrier-free environments, special environments, early learning environments, and experimental environments, we find an array of solutions to architectural problems for the disabled. What's often missing is a discussion of goals, not so much a discussion of goals for a better environment (which there is in abundance, and which has been so regularized as to be entirely predictable but nonrevealing), but a discussion of goals for a better life. Yes we have the means, but they are driven by the wrong goals, or no goals, or goals not yet meaningful or carefully articulated. The work of our architects may be exemplary, but one must be chary of the purposes--if there are any genuinely beyond the implementation of the means. This is harsh criticism, especially of people who not only are trying to improve

the lot of the disabled but, in a very real sense, do improve the lot of the disabled. Sokoloff and others are both creative architects and humanitarians, and yet the enterprise seems to be failing. Else why are there architects all over America who are creative and humanitarian who continue to build special schools and special institutions?

I Wish I Could Give Better Advice

Rule One is to be certain about the goals. Rule Two is to have decent goals. Rule Three is to have a decent set of means. But what is decent? That's Rule Four, which I have yet to formulate. Or, is it a part of Rule One?

And the last Rule: Work. The artist, Isabel Bishop, tells the story about a shy painter who, when given an honorary degree, mumbled a "thank you" and sat down. That was not enough to satisfy the admiring crowd.

"Please, give us a few words of advice. You inspire us. Your wisdom cannot but make us better artists, better people." With that, the celebrated painter spun around, grinned from ear to ear, and said, "Work. Work. Work. Work."

Creators work, but so do destroyers. If I add anything to Bishop's story it would be, "Work harder than the destroyers. Work harder and you will make the world a little better."

References

1. Ruhnau, D. The Nicolaysen center, a school for exceptional children. Architecture California, 1982, 4 (1), 14-15.
2. Sokoloff, H. D. Commentary: Disability or access? Architecture California, 1982, 4 (1), 13.