conceptual art, community reality, and the planning process
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This place where we all live, this earth, has been manhandled! We have reshaped it; we have beaten it; some have designed it; others have raped it; a few have sculpted it—all this to make a Place: a place to live. For all the effort exerted, what kind of place do we have to live in for ourselves and with each other? If we are social beings, what have we done to make being together valuable—what is the quality of our communities? Do the freeways, commercial strips, housing tracts, apartment blocks, “old-folks” homes lead to the good life?

Somewhere we forgot ourselves and lost sight of each other. The unity of a working whole, of many contributing parts, was neglected, and we began to tinker with selected parts to improve them individually. Somewhere . . . the living values of unity were lost to the intellectual goals of perfecting the parts. We now have an incomprehensible gaggle of highly developed parts that continue to serve their own perfection and con-

tribute little to how we live together in this world.

With the Western butchering, quartering and barbecuing of culture into specialized categories, we have feasted on the parts while we ignored our depleted herd. While many were chewing on broiled nuclear of physics, others were tasting half-baked culture and none of us had any place worth going home to.

Within this “disjointed” world for which technologically inclined human kind must assume responsibility, the artist has come to be another isolated phenomenon along with the many other categorical entities which we add up in the equation that equals our whole—which is a society of categories and not communities. In fact, the arts and therefore the artists have assisted in constructing their own isolation within museums and galleries and are separated from the reality and people they seek to influence.

If artists are to affect the essential nature of all of our lives, they must believe in the value of their work and its relevance outside of the category of pure art. To do this we must begin to relate real problems to the values that artists can bring to solving them. The need then is to understand the powers of the arts and the artistic process in order to establish a unified community in which the artist can function. Here, I mean a true community of many diverse parts that not only benefits the individual artist’s potential but also allows a multi-categorical wholistic relationship that works to make a more functional world. How can artists link these isolated categories of our society into an organic whole? How can artists more directly affect their world as an essential part of it and not be left to react to it as a non-participant? There are several options open to the artists. These options have always existed but throughout history certain ideas have been emphasized at certain times. With these different emphases the work not only changes, but so do the motivation and goals of the artists. When enough artists are working at one time with the same goals, a new art theory is born. Understanding the goals of the artist (as opposed to the “nature of art”) provides the structure for building a place for the artist in today’s communities.

Perhaps one way of understanding an artist is in terms of his execution of ideas and skills. Essentially an artist must have something to say as well as something to make; in fact, the making comes from an attempt at saying. The extremity of poles emanating from a primary emphasis on either skill or idea can
be seen today in the work of the super-realists on the one hand and the conceptualists on the other. The super-realists are precariously close to pure product; the conceptualists are near the realm of pure ideas. And both, at times, are striving for the same ends.

So what does all of this variety do? What does it achieve? It seems to me that the work of an artist can result in several different social and cultural results.

First, the artist and his work can explore, offer, or extol the unknown. He can carry ideas beyond the "visual" limit into new realms of ideas. This work usually influences or changes our culture, our psyches, ourselves. The new concepts and precepts forced on us by the works of Jackson Pollock, for example, caused this kind of new artistic space-time realization. To achieve impact, such work must be characterized by a unique synthesis of idea and skill, in which both are of comparable order.

Next, the skill of an artist can be applied to established ideas to give them new cadence or a more perfect context. The artist here is personally a part of the system's ideas and can, therefore, develop these values into a more perfect artistic context. The perfection—and acceptance—of the work of Andrew Wyeth, for example, has presented many commonly held ideals with a clarity that renders them perfect. There is nothing new in the loneliness of "Christina's World," but seldom can we know it without living it, except through such a work. In this type of work the perfection relies very heavily on skill as a primary vehicle.

Another goal of some artists' works is to bring about change—to directly confront an institution, law or practice in order to see it changed. Where and how an artist applies his skill in this situation is as important as what is produced. This function of challenge and change existed in the works of the Mexican muralists during their revolution and is found in the writing of Alexander Solzhenitsyn today. These works confront the established social, political or economic systems and probably have very little to do with obtuse intellectual concepts, the established arts or personal discoveries. Often such work in its immediacy depends more on the impact of the idea and its relevance to a situation than the perfection of an expressive skill.

Summarizing these three approaches with explanations of who is affected in specific examples will reinforce our sense of the function of these approaches. While Pollock was upsetting his paint and at the same time upsetting the perception of the world of the arts, the world of Eisenhower muddled on. It is probable that Jackson Pollock and John Foster Dulles never heard of each other. On the other hand, an artist like Wyeth is known just about everybody because he is perfecting our common concerns. For instance, good things could be heard about his work simultaneously from Lyndon Johnson as well as from many people in the other political categories of society. An artist like Solzhenitsyn could not be ignored by the Soviets: they knew each other too well. Nor could his art be tolerated by the system. His is an art that confronts, demands and changes. As for the skills often involved in this kind of social art, the established art community can be heard to speak despairingly about the quality of much that is being done today. They are particularly scathing about the work of the urban muralists here in the United States. However, the art that the muralists of various cities are doing is a real part of the community where it is done. The people see it there, talk about it—live with it.

Now, with all of these categories arranged with the appropriate artists therein, the problem is to find a way out for those who are seeking to find a community. It may take a new category (a new definition of an artist) or it may require the artist to simultaneously operate in several categories, some of them new for artists. The purpose is for artists to be able to affect and change systems or institutions by being a part of and contributing to the processes which are the life of a community.

Much is, in fact, happening today to pull artists away from their personal work and into other work. Many visual artists and painters are finding that certain areas of communication and graphic design offer the situation and audience to challenge their artistic potential. One thing that has been established over the last ten years by the conceptualists is the validity, in fact, the necessity of the artist to function as a purveyor of ideas. They have freed artists from a rigid skill and separated them from making Things. However, most of their work has been in the rarified world of
the gallery-museum category even when it was attempting to change or destroy the gallery system. It rarely touched the lives of the people outside this system. Conceptual art has not begun at all to be applied within the complex process of the social political system to affect ideas, influence decisions and project a sense of possibility for our total environment.

The need is great for the artist to find ways to operate in the areas of ideas, planning and decision-making that have in fact produced our categorized, non-artistic, dysfunctional world. The nature of this anti-human, technological, unnatural environment in which most of us live is not a product of chance. It is a product of human decisions. As we make more and more decisions at a superhuman scale, it becomes more obvious that things are not working despite the volumes of support data and expertise behind every decision. In his book, *The Zen and Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig comments:

*Technology is blamed for a lot . . . of loneliness, since loneliness is certainly associated with the newer technologies — TV, jets, freeways, and so on — but I hope it's been made plain that the real evil isn't the objects of technology, but the tendency of technology to isolate people into lonely attitudes of objectivity . . .*

It is these gulfs in contemporary life that the artist can begin to bridge with his creativity. Artists can begin to develop ways of applying the artistic dimension of their ideas in the areas of planning and decision making that daily affect the educational, social and environmental systems necessary to a community. All of these technical systems are the closed categories of specialists who have developed and controlled the data and make the decisions that determine the quality of our environment and the nature of our lives. The data is technical material that provides information, but often there is a lack of understanding of the reality outside of the specialist's category. Whenever there is planning done and decisions are made that affect the real world, these specialists must interject varying degrees of value judgments and personal ideas. As most good scientists will admit, there are no absolute truths. Thus, it is in the essentially non-technical areas of value and human aspiration that the artist can function as a primary contributor in planning.

Artists should and can begin to instigate their basic concepts not solely for art's sake, but for our society's sake and the sake of our total environment. We need artist-planners — other planners need artist-planners.

Let me relate this idea of an artist-planner to a specific example in the area of education: curriculum planning. A curriculum planner has information on vocabulary levels, test score percentages, learning exercise methods, etc. If the intent of a project is to design
a book about today’s society, the quality and value that will be reflected in this final product, intentionally or unintentionally, depends on the values, feelings and ideas of the curriculum planner. In this example, the artist can offer more than just “some nice pictures” for the book. For an artist, the development of ideas and the skill to communicate them are basic. The need in this instance, then, is for artists who can be curriculum communicators: not as specialists in reading skills but specialists in communication and values. The goal would be to introduce ideas at the planning level through artistic skills to bring life to the process of learning; to make the projected book mean something to the people who use it.

It seems, perhaps paradoxically, that this need for the artist-planner becomes more critical as the planning becomes more complex. Take for instance the planning of a new community. Here the technical actors put on quite a production: city planners, economists, managers, sociologists, architects, developers. Each specialist has his own vocabulary and objectives. Yet decisions must be reached that combine the essentials of all these areas into a working whole to benefit the people who will live in the environment of the finished community. The point here is that the artist has a valuable role in this line-up. His ideas are critical if there is to be an articulation of the human aspirations of the community. The artists can bring the concept of wholeness to the many parts. Their role starts at the begin-

ning. A piece of sculpture dropped in the town square eight years after the planning decisions are made adds very little to the overall quality of how people live their lives in the community.

In order to contribute to this process as a non-technical conceptualist, artists must get out of any limited museum category and learn to understand many categories or the essentials of the societies and systems with which they can work. Perhaps most obviously the artist can function as a communicator between specialists (ever try to listen to an economist talking with an education specialist?), a role which is becoming ever more critical in dealing with the complex world we have produced.

There are in fact artists today who are not focusing on certain skills (painting, photography, etc.), but are working more generally with their ideas and in collaboration with others as community participants. Their success springs from their ability to make ideas visible, to make concepts real. In turn the ideas become strengthened because they are visible and this helps people to become involved with them. Here is the beginning of the artist-planner becoming a real part of a community.

During his talk at the 1974 Aspen Design Conference, art critic John Berger compared the lot of the Western artist today with that of the historically repressed artist of eastern Europe. Not unlike that area, we too, have
many horrendous problems for which the solution for humanity is far off. The intensifying political, social and technological crises of the last few years have demonstrated this for all of us. In this context, Berger quoted a Czech poet, “It is a time when you cannot love your own unhappiness because it is everyone's.” He went on to state that the artist today must begin to find the hope for humanity in the present. People now know the message of the existentialist, but people don’t know what to do about the absurdity that they have been made aware of.

The challenge is obvious. The artist is now needed for change and not pronouncements. The artist can help bring the wholeness of reality to the specialized categories of technology. If it is to happen at all, it will be the artist who reaches the people and not the technical specialist. A real community must have the essentials of art.

There are a few people whose work indicates the possibilities. Their work ranges from what we can still recognize as art to hard planning projects. Their common ground is their concern for the quality of life in how people live together. In a larger context, their work makes eloquent comment on how we use our environment, what we value as humans and how we live together.

Otto Piene, professor of Environmental Arts at MIT, is an artist-planner. In his book More Sky (MIT Press, Cambridge, 1973), he states, “Technology permits the artist to talk to many, design for many, and execute plans for many. It’s time now to do more than project; it’s time to act.” His art is of an urban scale and its making is the process of community. He is working to bring the artist’s imagination into the forming of plans.

Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) has gone from a literary confrontation with social injustice in works such as The Dutchman and The Slave to doing something about it. In Newark, N.J., he has begun to act by becoming a developer of low cost housing. This is economic and physical development, but done with a commitment and goal not found in the usual business approach.

Corita Kent, who early began, in the tradition of Ben Shahn, to incorporate philosophical and social comments into her art, has been utilizing her exuberance as an artist-teacher to celebrate life as a total community event. Just as her film, We Have No Art, portrayed teaching as a life-affirming activity, her recent work focuses on art as an important aspect of total participation.

Lawrence Halprin, landscape architect and planner, persists in acting more and more like the artist-planner that I have been defining. His “Take Part” workshops were developed in collaboration with Ann Halprin, a dancer, as a part of his planning strategy. The workshops are a participation process for discovering self and environment. They are given for professional planners, decision-makers and community leaders to discover new ways of viewing their problems.

The work of these people are examples of uses of artistic ability that transcend one category. They are all functioning in the midst of reality. Their focus is on those qualitative aspects of planning/decision-making/design that are the proper realm of the artist. Since they work primarily out of intuition, they are by definition outside of the scientific disciplines and into areas that can deal with such non-quantifiable aspects of community as imagination, value, and texture of life.

In order to become this kind of artist-planner and begin to confront the issues that are affecting the way we all live, it has been the experience of myself and of my associates in this work that the more directly we can become involved with a problem the more opportunity there is for us to influence basic decisions. Having discovered that we can effect a productive use of our talents in a number of areas (education, environment, urban problems, as well as community planning), we have formed a group of planner-artists, the Attic and Cellar Studio Collaborative. Our initial encouragement came from the work of the above people and others that work with similar goals. What vitally sustains us, however, is the reception we receive from the non-professional people in the community, who we have found to respond enthusiastically to the option of a multi-disciplined, qualitative approach to planning in order to have some effect on the issues of their community. Their questions are repeatedly directed not at “how many and how quickly,” but to “how good and how lasting” results will be.
One such project is the planning of a new school for the Indian School Board of the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. We are now working there with the school staff and local leaders to define the basic values of their community as a beginning delineation of the projected nature and quality of education for both the students and the larger community. The questions of traditions, values, aspirations, and culture must form the basis for future physical planning and educational programming. As planners, we are familiar with the processes of developing curriculum and building buildings. These specialties will come into play in time. But, as artists, we are first concerned with the fruition and fulfillment of ideas.

The basic idea initiated by the community school board is to open up the making of their school to the total community process. We were brought in by the board to articulate, coordinate and communicate this process that will bring a community together; that will come to terms with what learning means for that community; and that will define the program for the new Indian school.

We have begun this process as a collaborative of artist-planners, holding a series of workshops with the administration, faculty-staff, students and general community. Our core group, composed of a visual artist, a media artist, an actor, and an architect who have each had experience in education planning, community planning, group dynamics and environmental design, has set out to work with the community in delineating the four basic concepts that will define their school. The four concepts are: the nature of the community itself; the values of learning for the children of the community; the traditions of their culture; and the nature of their aspirations for the new school.

In this process, our contribution will vary as the project develops. First we project a process, an order, that can grow out of the dynamism of people working together. The basis of the process is understanding and not data. Next, each of us brings a special skill such as speaking, writing, photography, or design that gives life to the process and makes it visible. Then, to the diverse issues that are contributed by the community, we can provide unifying concepts that respond to the basic community values while relating them to specialized planning-design possibilities. Often we are communicators between the different factions that are part of such a process: community, technical specialists, funders, public agencies. Finally, we can help make “Things” that are needed to direct the process to its goals. Such “Things” might be a community book, a film, a children’s poster story, a photographic essay or an architectural program.

It is this relationship of our individual art to a planning-design process that we find offers opportunities to apply concepts that unify the isolated categories of society and brings artists into a working relationship with other groups of people. This collaboration of people and technical specialties with the quality of artistic concepts may open our “social categories” into living communities!