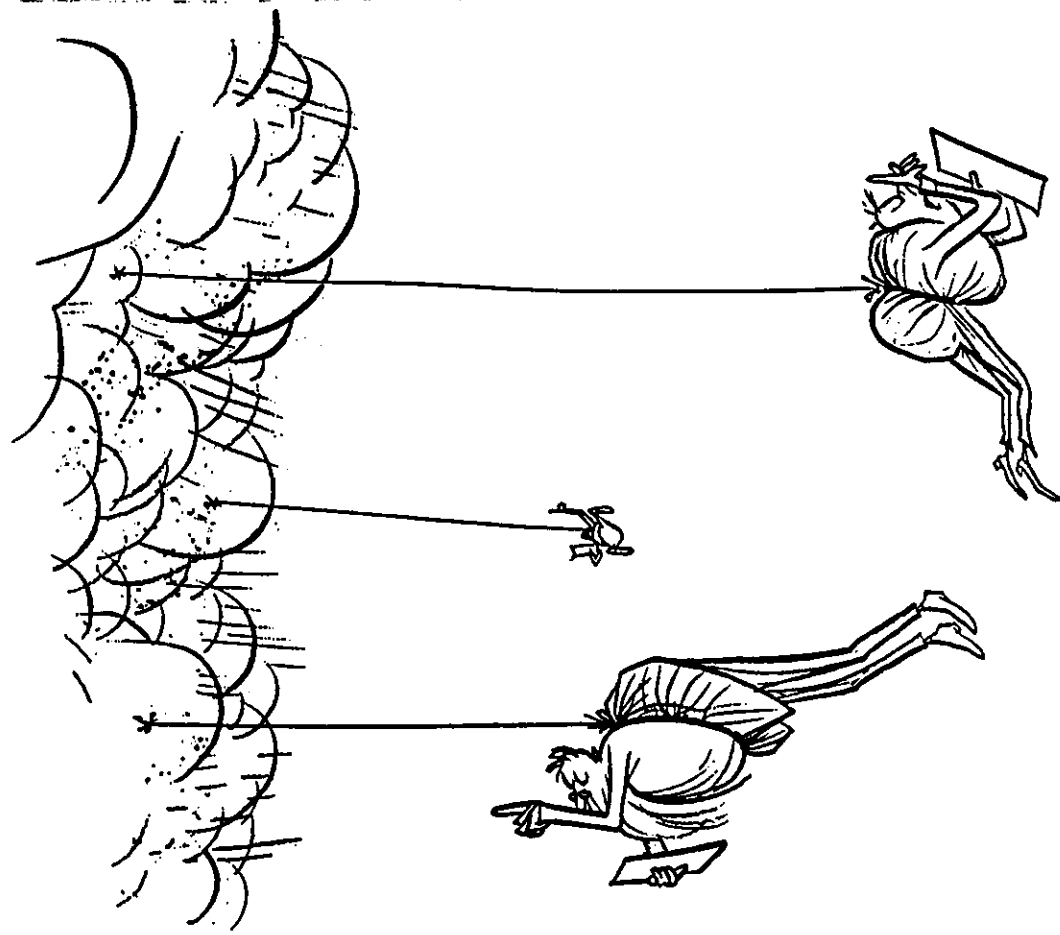


Architecturally Speaking

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Architecture

ARCHITECTURE INVOLVES MANY SPECIFIC considerations—dimensions, weights, stresses, etc.—about which there is seldom room for disagreement. If any question arises concerning, say, the length of a certain corridor or the height of a certain building, it is a simple matter to measure it or to read the size off a scale drawing. We do not sit up nights arguing over the weight of a cubic foot of concrete or the crushing strength of brick. We put it to the test. We use, in short, the operational approach.

But architecture also includes numerous intangibles—unity, rhythm, scale, grandeur, to mention only a few. Concerning these there is plenty of room for disagreement; so much, in fact, that heads have rolled because of them.* And since there is no way of going out and measuring unity or grandeur, the disagreements are seldom resolved but continue to grow in both magnitude and intensity until they finally achieve the respectable status of Schools of Thought.

A certain rather jolly field of study called *semantics* has developed a technique for resolving differences in-

* The Emperor Hadrian of Rome in the second century A.D. ordered the execution of Apollodorus of Damascus, an architect who disagreed with the Emperor over the esthetics of a proposed temple.

Einstein, in thus analyzing what is involved in making a judgment of simultaneity, and in seizing on the act of the observer as the essence of the situation, is actually adopting a new point of view as to what the concepts of physics should be. . . .

Percy W. Bridgman, *The Logic of Modern Physics*

volving intangibles. It is known as "find the referent." In other words, find the specific thing or things to which the intangible under discussion refers.*

The device employed in this fascinating game is the "abstraction ladder." A series of terms is set in vertical order, leading from the intangible (abstraction) at the top to the specific thing (referent) at the bottom. While this process is not guaranteed to settle all disputes, it will most certainly do a great deal toward clarifying the issue and putting a halt to endless quantities of random sniping.

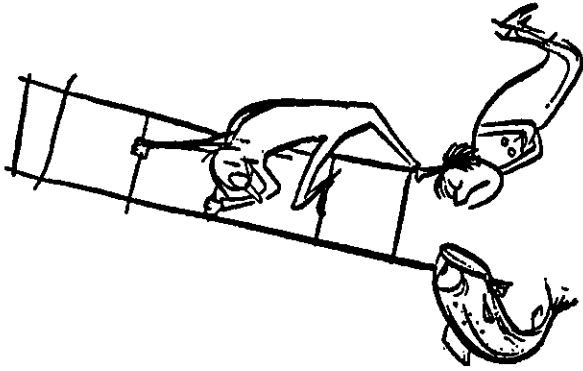
Let us say, for example, that A and B disagree about the nature of happiness. After coming almost to blows, each constructs an "abstraction ladder." A's ladder looks like this:

Happiness
Love
Woman
Sweetheart
Ethel

B's ladder, it turns out, reads somewhat differently:

Happiness
Fun
Sport
Fishing
Trout

A is understandably resentful over any comparisons between the two ladders. The term *semantics* ordinarily refers to the study of meanings and significances in verbal expressions. But *General Semantics* is now understood as the name for a new structural approach in which man is considered as a whole; his perceptions, interpretations, knowledge, intellectual and emotional reactions, and bodily functions are treated as inseparable phases of a total psycho-physiological process.



tween a fish and his beloved, and B fails to see how anyone could waste time on a quarry that puts up so little fight. C, who has been sitting by, is a married man. His idea of happiness involves both his wife and fish, and his abstraction ladder is consequently more complicated. (What about Ethel's ladder? Or the trout's?)*

* The specific referent at the foot of the ladder can just as well be an action as an object, or a combination of the two, as in "looking at architecture," which to those so inclined is the referent for "happiness." Or, in a more general application, the ladder might be set up this way:

Happiness
Self-transcendence
Breadth-of-life sense
Rapport with universe
Watching the ocean

Here the act of "watching," combined with the object watched, "ocean," make up the referent. The subjective reactions, and the reactions to the reactions, lead to the concluding abstraction "happiness."

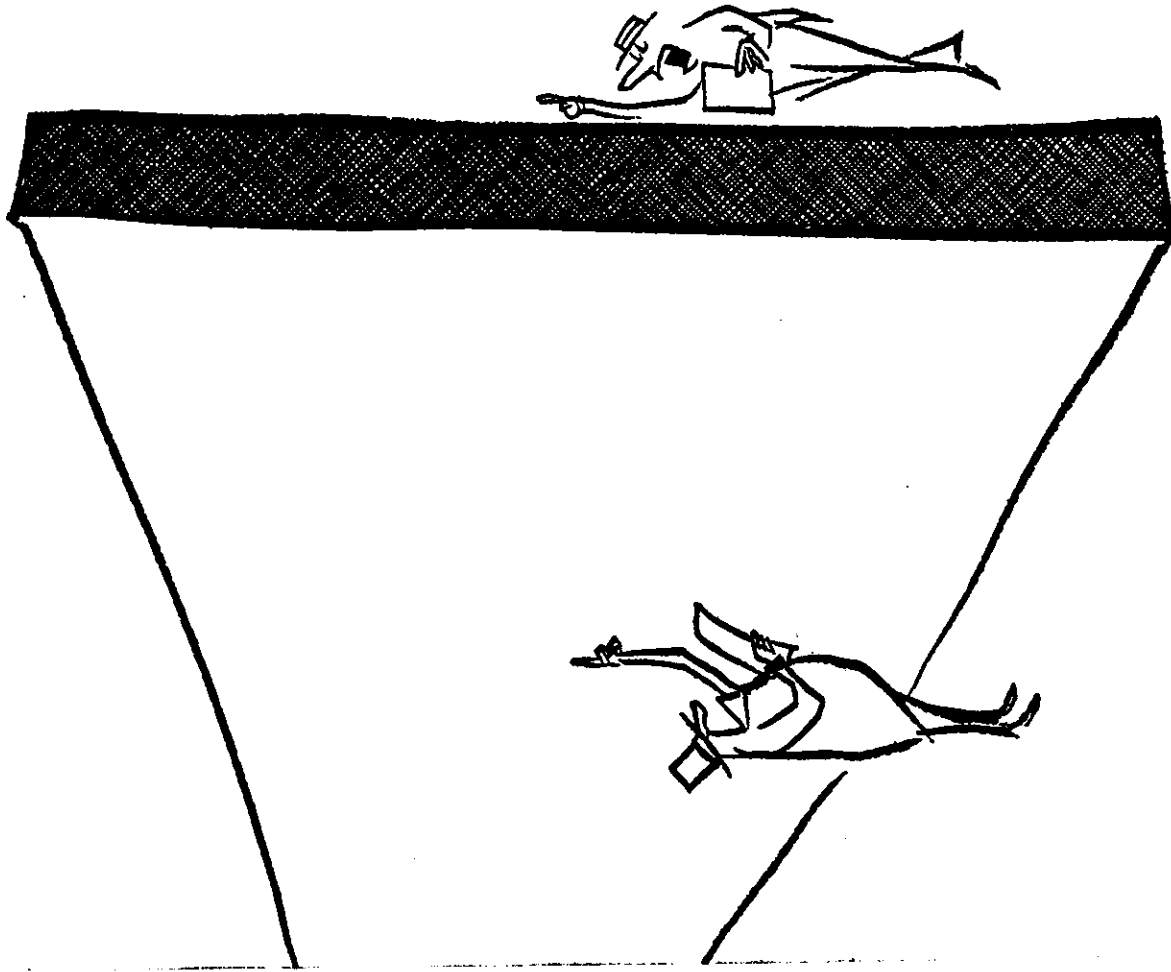
At any rate, it should become clear to Messrs. A and B that although they might discuss the relative charms of Ethel and trout, there is very little point to their arguing about happiness. Their referents for the abstraction "happiness" being different, they are not talking about the same thing at all.

Unfortunately, most people never bother to find the referents for the abstractions they use. If pressed to say what they mean by one abstraction, they will often answer with another. This process sometimes results in elegant language but seldom in any clarification.

Take the term "architecture" itself. Even men who devote their whole lives to architecture find it hard to say just what they mean by the word.

X will say it means "the art and science of building." Of course, both "art" and "science" are abstractions of a high order, having to do with processes in which the rational and intuitive faculties are used in widely varying and unmeasurable proportions. One could argue indefinitely over what one means by "art" as distinct from "science,"* let alone how much of each is involved in "architecture." Y prefers Sir Henry Wotton's phrase, "commodity, firmness and delight." Since each of these would describe Marilyn Monroe just as aptly as the Parthenon, the phrase is not much help in arriving at a definition of architecture. Goethe's poetic expression, "frozen music," which Z swears by, has an intriguing sound

* "... mathematicians have an intuitive predilection for selecting their terms and pursuing their line of enquiry among possible meanings . . . the feeling which directs the selection of material which is . . . interesting and important is akin to the artistic sense, but, unfortunately . . . has been neglected by 'psychologists.'" Alfred H. Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*.



but a disappointing lack of substance, for music at a standstill has neither melody, rhythm, nor harmonic sequence. It is just as difficult to grasp an image of such music as to accept architecture without theme, pattern, or sequence.

What, then, is architecture? Or rather, what *specific* referents can we find for it?

I remember as a small child being taken to some public building by my father. There, on one of the walls, was a great mural painting depicting a muscular giant, almost nude, holding a cluster of ships in one hand and some trucks in the other. Airplanes buzzed around his head, and a long train wound its way between his outside feet.

"Who is that?" I asked, clutching at my father's leg. "Transportation," he replied. And even to this day I get curious mental pictures when I read in the paper that Transportation Is Tied Up, or Transportation Increases 50%. The effect of this kind of personification is to make it hard to realize the extremely simple fact that the abstraction "transportation" has vehicles, drivers, cargo, and passengers for its referents. That's all. There is no giant, clothed or otherwise.

Similarly, "architecture" consists of architects, buildings, and people. There is no gracious lady in classic robes, holding aloft a pair of dividers and a triangle, however thrilling such an image may seem. And there is definitely not so much as a single chip of frozen music.

Insofar as the architect is concerned, architecture is above all a *creative process*. He has an idea in his mind, an effect, an emotion, let us say, which he wishes to express in terms of structure. His intention of going

beyond mere utility to express something of greater human meaning is architecture, to *him*, regardless of the success or failure of his actual accomplishment. To the architect, in short, architecture is a subjective matter dependent upon his purpose. The element of *purpose*, therefore, must find its place in our definition of architecture.

The observer (people-in-general) is uninformed as to the architect's purpose. He looks at a building, and an image falls upon the retina of his eye by a process as mechanical as photography. This image has no meaning to him until his mind has interpreted it and his emotions have responded to it. Of course, such interpretive and emotional responses are totally dependent upon his personal sensitivity and the degree of his training. The observer's consciousness of architecture, in other words, is as much a subjective matter as the architect's purpose. There is no architecture for the observer, except insofar as he is aware of it. *Awareness*, then, is the second element in our definition.

Thus far we have been speaking of matters existing either in the mind of the architect or the mind of the observer. What of the structure itself? Surely the structure, to be architecture, must contain some characteristics that have an objective reality other than dimension and weight. Here we are on softer ground. We can say no more than that the structure must be composed of shapes, colors, textures, lights, and darks—physical elements, in short, which are *capable* of evoking the emotional awareness already referred to as the observer's response and *capable* of expressing the purpose of the architect. We must always come back to the observer and the architect, as representatives of the human spe-

cies, because architecture exists only for humans. We do not expect a dog to be stirred by the majesty of the Pantheon or the tracery of Rheims. Clearly, therefore, when we attempt to define the objective characteristics of architecture we are doing nothing more than approaching human subjectivity from another angle.

Architecture can thus be understood in three ways—three levels, if you like. One, the creative intention of the designer; two, the potential evocativity of the structure itself; and three, the response of the observer.

Usually when people disagree over whether or not a certain building is architecture, their differences of opinion lie in each of them having taken only one of the three possible views of the matter. One may be attacking or defending the intention of the designer, another may be revealing his own sensitivity—or lack of it—while yet a third may be attempting to analyze the building in accordance with some esoteric formula of proportions.

The abstraction "architecture," tracked down to its referents, becomes a trio of emotions—emotion intended, emotion inherent, and emotion evoked. The common element is emotion, and if one must use a single term to define architecture, that is it. Architecture is emotion. If the emotion is mild, so is the architecture. If the emotion is great, the architecture is great. If there is no emotion, there is no architecture; there is only building.

I am blandly using the word "emotion" here as though it were a term with a single, well-accepted meaning. Since it is very far from being such, I must specify not its "true meaning," for there is no such thing, but the sense in which I mean to apply it.

Actually, the complex neural reactions and interactions that go on within us can no more be separated into parts labelled "intellect" and "emotion," than "space" can be separated from "time," or "body" from "mind." These splits, which are possible only under the Aristotelian structure of our language, have already been discarded by modern medicine and physics.

But granting that "emotion" and "intellect" are inseparable, there are still neural activities which are more thalamic than cortical, or more cortical than thalamic. They are more (or less) in the lower, automatic areas of the brain or more (or less) in the upper, cortical layers, in which association and reasoning take place. It is in this sense that I use the word "emotion"; "feelings," "moods," "states of mind," etc., fall into this category.

It is significant, in view of many of the points to be made in successive chapters, that these "feelings" deal almost exclusively with the individual's relation to his world, which is not surprising when one considers that matters such as fear, safety, and so forth are among the most fundamental and ancient concerns of all living creatures.

In relation to specific buildings, examples of architecture, we feel ourselves to be small (a sense of awe); exalted (a sense of belonging to something larger than ourselves); protected (a sense of shelter); dominated (a sense of the power of authority); uplifted (a sense of the mystery of God). In all these cases, and many others that come easily to mind, the thing to note is that the observer asks himself, "What is this building to me?" or rather, "What am I to it?" Large? Small? Weak? Strong? Protected? Exposed? Threatened? Scorned? Gratified?

The basic desires and fears of the observer as touched and activated by architecture are the "emotions" to which I refer. They are the essence of architecture, the core of the meaning of architecture, on the lowest primitive levels of survival-motives no less than on the loftiest transcendent aspirations of which we are capable.

Style

