Architectural evolution: Building toward relevancy

Architectural trends tend to be of the "style" variety, predicting less of what's evolving in the industry and more of what's trending at the moment. Perhaps a victim of its own making, the architectural practice has largely operated the same way for thousands of years. Technology, of course, has managed to push the practice of architectural production from hand produced blueprints to digital documents. Unlike other design and construction-based practices, architecture and buildings have evolved their methods slowly with innovation shifts occurring every 20, 30 to even 50 years. The auto industry and the tech design sector produce new models yearly with each iteration a mass-produced marvel embodying sleek design and updated user driven enhancements. Our appetite as consumers for these products has evolved as well. These products that we use daily do not just fulfill a singular purpose; they often are representative of who we are. When Apple re-emerged from near irrelevance at the turn of the century it was not due to some innovation in the way we used computers. Instead, they focused on bold design with innovative forms, materials and colors (remember the iMac?). This design-first approach took the tech industry from egalitarian to desirable. The brilliance in Apple's concept was not in selling the user experience, it was for what it said about the user themselves. Car design has always used this strategy by appealing to the individual and capitalizing on the status symbol effect of brand ownership. How does this relate to architecture and buildings? It doesn't, but perhaps it should.

In over a decade of practice, I have been educated by hand, evolved to two-dimensional computer aided drafting (CAD drawing) and now practice in our current era of 3D design or BIM (building information management). In essence, buildings used to be designed through a series of two-dimensional drawings that represented the building in various views, typically depicted as if they were 'cut' through to convey information. You know it as a building plan but think of it like a CAT SCAN that takes cross sectional images of your body at different locations. Todays designers use BIM software to model a building three dimensionally which can then generate the archetypical floor plans, sections, etc. While this evolution of architectural practice has evolved, its effect outside of the architectural office is relatively unknown. Artificial intelligence and virtual re-

Jason Streb

ality capabilities provide cutting edge, immersive experiences with the design but stop short of truly offering anything tangible. In short, while the process of designing and representing buildings has certainly evolved, the building themselves are still only evolving stylistically.

What if buildings, design and construction operated more like the tech or auto industry? Technology in all its aspects has infiltrated our lives. The past year has proven we can work, learn and interact in almost any space as long as we had access to the internet and the right piece of technology. Cars have fully embraced this and now operate fully as an office on wheels. It's true that what I am comparing is not apples to apples. Cars and technology devices do not need to respond to nearly all the forces and demands that buildings do (gravity, weather, etc.). There is also an issue of permanence and sustainability. Yet cars and tech devices are accessible and agile. They are attainable to nearly everyone and evolve rapidly. Designing and building a structure is an enormous undertaking financially, politically and environmentally. Few are either fortunate or ambitious enough to take on the task. This model almost ensures slow innovation in the building sector. When compared with the devices we use and the cars we drive, the building and construction industry is forced to question their relevancy.

If the paradigm shifts for tech devices focused on what it represented for the user could building design do the same? If so, how would our buildings look and perform if they spoke to us as individuals or even the collective? The pandemic and (hopefully) post-pandemic world have called into question all our preconceived notions of space and traditional use of space. Flexibility, adapt-

ability and customization are almost certain to be buzz words now and in the future. Steve Jobs famously said, "Design is not just what it looks and feels like, design is how it works." The exciting silver lining to this pandemic could be what emerges in how we think and construct spaces. By being forced to rethink traditions and institutions on the fly we can remove the preconceived limitations that stifled new ideas. The next big trend in buildings is not innovation — it's a return to relevancy. Relevant buildings and spaces will be accessible and adaptable to a variety of environmental and socio-economic forces. Design should evolve programmatically from singularly focused rooms and events to kinetic and responsive structures that perform. Design will always be subjective, and styles will come and go.

Relevancy is not always related to innovation. Bjarke Ingles is arguably the most famous, sought-after architect living today. He recently profiled Jason Ballard, a conservation biologist turned construction technology pioneer for Time Magazine's 2021 Next 100. He appears marveled at the work Jason is doing and speaks to the innovation possible that exists just outside his field of work.

"To achieve utopian goals like designing house-sided printers so that you can spit out homes for people in need, you have to be extremely practical as well as fanatically idealistic," Ingles writes. Ingles appears to envious of the boundlessness of Ballard's work, one that most architects struggle with as they ultimately are a means for others endeavors. Yet Ingles poetically and eloquently speaks to what architects can do. "As architects we don't have political power because we don't write the rules. Neither do we have financial power because we don't write the checks. But we do have the power of giving form, to go above and beyond what we have been asked to do and give the world a gift that makes the world more of how we wished it to be. The gift is not a question of philanthropy. It is a gift because no one asked for it — but now that it has been offered — the world would be a lesser place without it, and future generations will be better off because of it. The gift is the world-changing power of architecture. It is our capacity to design spaces and places that make a difference, that are the change we want to see in the world."

Jason Streb is an architect and associate at CPL and past president of AIA Rochester.