Provocations for the Global Place Conference

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I wrote these "provocations" to be superseded: their real value was to provoke the invited scholars at our "Global Place" conference to develop their own thoughts. Indeed, what is most important about any conference is not what is planned but what is unexpected: the unexpected themes and passions that only occur when people are brought together. For example, I certainly did not foresee the passion over preservation that Anthony Tung brought to the conference, and the way that passion became part of our concept of "global place."

That said, I believe my "provocations" did anticipate many of the major themes of the conference, and perhaps of the Taubman College's next century. I can see more clearly now what was perhaps implicit in my text: the overwhelming crisis of the next century will be the intersection of mega-city with climate change and resource exhaustion. The explosive urbanization of perhaps 3 billion people over the next fifty years – an urbanization concentrated in the already chaotic and overburdened megacities of the developing world – will demand massive resources just to provide for the survival of these billions, no less the better life that they have a right to expect. At the same time, the planet's energy resources will be dwindling, and the real costs of using the remaining fossil fuel, mostly coal, will escalate with global warming.

This interlinked crisis will be for the next century what the world wars were for the previous century: the overwhelming test for civilization itself.

If the University of Michigan had marked the founding of the architecture program here in 1906 with a conference, the issues discussed would surely have centered on what we have learned to call *modernism*. One hopes the College would have recognized the importance of the young engineer whose factory only forty miles away on Piquette Avenue in Detroit was beginning to create the new era of "Fordism." Ford and other innovators from Edison and Marconi to the Wright brothers and the Lumiere brothers were already building the new world of mass production, mass consumption, and mass media. The "second industrial revolution" had begun to produce in quantity the materials – glass, concrete, steel – that would re-shape the built environment. And prophetic voices in architecture and planning from Frank Lloyd Wright and Jane Addams in Chicago to Albert Kahn in Detroit to Otto Wagner in Vienna to Peter Behrens and the young Walter Gropius in Berlin had already understood that the question of the "machine age" – the issue of modernism – would dominate 20th century design debate.

A century later, the key issues for 21st century design seem to be encompassed in the word *globalism*. Like modernism, globalism is a cloudy, all-encompassing word that has nevertheless become indispensable. Arguably, globalism is nothing more than Modernism II – the realization of the potential for shrinking distance and time that was inherent a century ago in the new technologies of the internal combustion engine, the automobile, the airplane, the telephone, and the radio. But these technologies and their more powerful electronic successors are operating in a post-colonial

world unimagined in 1906. Globalism in part seems to mean a universal global economy and society – at its best a utopian realization of the Enlightenment dream of a universal humanity, at its worst a dystopian universal placelessness dominated by anonymous global capital. But globalism, paradoxically, also means that formerly marginalized and isolated cultures are no longer necessarily subordinated to those of the larger nation-states. Communications and transportation operate in all directions, so that a local economy can compete worldwide, a local look or sound conquer the world. Our conference title, "Global Place," seeks to capture that paradox – the challenge of creating place in a world dominated by the forces of placelessness.

At the height of the modern movement's heroic self-confidence, Le Corbusier proclaimed "Architecture or Revolution: Revolution can be avoided." We have learned to mistrust the hubris inherent in this proclamation, yet the issue of architecture and urban planning as sites of action and resistance remains. What are the responsibilities of architecture and planning in the global era? That is, what can architecture and planning contribute that no other disciplines can toward the humanizing of a global society and its built environment? What are our strengths? Our weaknesses? Our blind-spots? Perhaps most importantly, what must we know to re-shape the world?

Environment and Technology

Although almost no one in 1906 foresaw this, the crucial issue for the twentieth century would be violence: surviving the World Wars that twice engulfed the planet and whose scars are still with us today. Violence remains a crucial issue, from terrorism to the threat of atomic warfare, but another issue has come to seem more pressing in an age of globalism: ecology. The threat of massive disruptions and ecological stress brought on by climate change and resource depletion is more widely recognized today than the threat of world war was in 1906. Yet we seem unable to organize a global effort to combat it, and the paralyzing fear grows that it might already be too late.

If there is to be a response equal to the potential ecological disaster, such a response would clearly involve a radical redesign and redevelopment of our built environment. Yet the practice and pedagogy of architecture, urban design, and planning have so far only begun to recognize this overwhelming issue. "Green" architecture and sustainable urban planning seem caught between an incrementalism that seems inadequate to the problem and an eco-utopianism divorced from practice. What are the strategic moves necessary for green architecture and planning to emerge as the major force they must become?

Integrally related to the issue of the environment is the issue of technology. A century ago Patrick Geddes prophesied that the nineteenth-century "paleotechnic era" with its ugly, unhealthy "Coketowns" would yield to a "neotechnic era" of technology in the service of sustainable energy, respect for the natural environment, and other humane goals. We are still waiting for the neotechnic era, despite enormous advances especially in information technology. As we accelerate from the personal computer to the world wide web to the emerging new world of universal Wi-fi and "ubiquitous computing," what are the implications for community, design, and building global place? Are "ubiquitous computing" and related developments in information technology a step toward the neotechnic era, or do they reinforce global placelessness and anomie?

Politics

A century ago Lenin claimed that all of politics can be reduced to a single question: "Who/Whom?" Any discussion of globalism and the global built environment must still wrestle with the basic issues inherent in Lenin's question. Who are the "Who"? That is, who are the people and groups who possess the power to re-shape the world? Who are the "Whom"? That is, those who are the objects of that power? And what is the crucial linkage – the missing verb – that defines how that power is exercised?

Globalism, almost by definition, seems to mean the erosion of the nation-state as a locus of power to reshape the world. But what is replacing it? The abstraction of "global capital" must be unpacked to understand the power relations that underlie it. As one critic has suggested, Wal-mart, by altering its buying policies, could do more to transform global working conditions than the concerted action of virtually all the nation-states on the planet. But Wal-mart and every other multinational corporation work within the institutional constraints of market competition that make such action unlikely or impossible. During the modern movement, architects and planners looked to many different sources of power, from "captains of industry" to labor cooperatives to bureaucrats and dictators. Most were disappointed, no doubt thankfully so. Nevertheless, we must continue to ask: who has the power to re-shape the global built environment, and how can that power be shaped for humane and just ends?

The City

A century ago the great issue for modernism was the "industrial metropolis," the "giant city," which for pessimists like Oswalt Spengler promised the end of civilization, but which Le Corbusier and others believed could be transformed into the Radiant City – the first wholly human and rational city. But such centers as Berlin, New York, and Chicago are now dwarfed by the mega-cities of the developing world. The global world is rapidly becoming an urban world. For the first time in history, half the human population (now over 6 billion) lives in urbanized areas. As the population increases to an estimated 9 billion in the next half-century, almost all that increase will go to cities – especially the mega-cities. We are now at the equinox of the 8,000-year history of urbanization on this planet.

The prospect is not altogether a happy one. The industrial metropolises of a century ago were centers of slums and exploitation, but they were also the centers of innovation and wealth-production for the most advanced sectors of their society. By contrast, the largest megacities often have a marginal position within the global economy, and are thus unable to afford even basic sanitary infrastructure and utilities that would sustain their existing population – no less the millions more that are predicted.

As billions of people are uprooted from the only life they knew – the life of the village – and thrust into megacities at the height of their stress and disorder, there is the danger that the anger and fanaticism generated by this chaos will tear global civilization apart. Not only will the megacities of the developing world be at risk, but global immigration patterns will inevitably spread that chaos to the already-industrialized world.

At the same time, there is the immense historical experience of immigrant vigor – the capacity of the first generation off the farm and village to somehow make their way under the worst of urban circumstances and to build a new life for themselves and for their cities. This panel will consider the urban dilemma: can cities become "global places"?

Practice

From the "starchitects" crisscrossing the globe in pursuit of major commissions to the relentless spread of franchise architecture and standardized planning, the practice of architecture and planning from the highest levels to the most mundane has become global. For professionals with global practices or international outsourcing, the benefits are obvious – but so too are the dangers. As architecture and planning are more seamlessly integrated into the massive international flows of capital that define the global economy, their role inevitably becomes more instrumental: to lend a façade of uniqueness to projects that are relentlessly generic. Even the starchitect's personal touch, however inspired by local culture and design, becomes just one more "brand" whose value on the global marketplace changes rapidly. Although globalism seems to expand this market for transnational collaboration and technical skills, it might at a deeper level signal the design profession's final loss of control over the built environment it attempts to shape. This panel will attempt to bring the experience of those active in global practices to bear on these issues.