

Remembering Dalibor Vesely

I have no better way of expressing my thoughts about Dalibor Vesely as a teacher, scholar, and human being than by saying that I have not known anyone to whom I would rather send a student interested in working in the practice, history, theory, and philosophy of architecture, never known anyone who equals Dalibor as a knowledgeable, ever thoughtful, and (most importantly) caring mentor. That he has set a model others have followed is shown by such scholars and teachers as Alberto Pérez-Gómez and David Leatherbarrow: their debt, not just an intellectual, but a human debt, to Dalibor is evident. They are living testimony to what for many years now Dalibor has given the profession. The extraordinary affection that one meets with in those who were privileged to be his students is perhaps the strongest testimony to the quality of his mentorship.

I was not one of his students. I am a philosopher with a deep interest in history, architecture, and Europe. But many, sometimes very long discussions have let me appreciate the quality of his mind, the extraordinary depth and breadth of his scholarship, his ability to listen, his warmth and engagement. I have had many occasions to observe in some detail the results of his teaching, having examined quite a number of Cambridge master's essays and of four Ph. D. dissertations that he directed. The latter especially gave me a chance to get a sense of what working with Vesely meant to these students. Returning from Cambridge to New Haven I always found myself invigorated. Conversations with Dalibor were intellectual feasts. I had long hoped to have these culminate in ten days spent together in Prague, where he promised to introduce me to its Baroque splendor. That will not happen. But when I now think of Prague I also think of Dalibor.

I don't remember any longer when exactly it was that I first met Dalibor. Was it in London in January 1985, following my lecture at the AA on "The Ethical Function of Architecture," in which I presented the germ of what was to become the book of that title? A memorable discussion followed that lecture, which continued in some small Italian restaurant well into the night, long enough for the Cambridge contingent to miss the last train. What made the discussion so lively and rewarding was, as I remember the occasion, in good part due to the presiding presence of Dalibor, to his kindness and extraordinary openness to new ideas, coupled with his equally extraordinary breadth and depth of knowledge.

I understand why Dalibor took so long to finish his monumental *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production*. It was worth the wait. The expression "The age of divided representation" in the book's title has to invite thoughts of the "Cartesian dualism of man and world, of subject and object," and of dualisms such as that of "reason and feeling, classicism and romanticism, rationalism and organicism" that followed from it. But more fundamental is the "historically constituted tension between the symbolic-communicative and the instrumental non-communicative representation of reality." The Baroque is still ruled by that tension, a tension we both appreciated. But that age came to an end with the Enlightenment and its faith in reason, which brought with it the privileging of the latter,

which is a presupposition of our science. Following such thinkers as Nietzsche and Heidegger, Dalibor recognized that the technical rationality that has shaped modernity tends towards nihilism: But, despite many misgivings, he remained an optimist. He knew that if nihilism is indeed what he called a critical dimension of modern culture, it is only one dimension, and that means that attempts to put it in its proper place by taking a more comprehensive approach are not condemned to failure.

Dalibor never lost his confidence that his attempt to contribute towards a new poetics of architecture is not rendered vain by the hegemony of objectifying reason. I would add that greater awareness of that poetic dimension is also a reward granted to those willing to make the effort to join Dalibor Vesely in his demanding, but always illuminating explorations of the path that got us to where we are today. Especially when Dalibor got entangled in details of, say, medieval optics or of Guarini's architectural interpretation of the mystery of the incarnation he seemed to me make his most telling contributions to a poetics of architecture that may lead towards a more robust architectural common sense.

Dalibor cannot be replaced. But those who had the privilege to get to know him and work with him will continue his work.

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