

**The Cultural Significance of Architecture:
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**Communicative space: Architecture's contribution
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Dalibor Vesely's interest in architecture as part of human culture was revealed by his term 'communicative space', structured by 'temporal and spatial continuities of experience'.¹ We might agree that this is a most basic understanding of architecture, but one that is often overlooked in architectural and urban research today. Dalibor often pointed out the problems of pigeonholing architectural thinking into the requirements of science and technology. But here, I should like to extend the concerns he voiced into the role of architecture with respect to the social sciences.

I do this at a time when architecture is rightly becoming more aware of the need to relate to the conditions described by politics, sociology, anthropology, geography and other socio-political disciplines. We could say that architecture is becoming increasingly aligned with the social sciences. In my own research on the nature of urban conflict I have worked extensively with social scientists, learned a great deal from them, and benefitted tremendously from these collaborations. As we all deal with an increasingly complex world, the social sciences have become cognate subjects and interaction with them is essential. This is particularly important if architecture is to be relevant and increasingly effective in contributing positively to the humanitarian factors of major world issues: population density, migration, climate change, conflict, natural disasters, food security, etc. This is now a major direction for both architectural practice and research and it is quickly becoming an important part of teaching.

But – and there is always a 'but' in a period of change and new directions – where architecture sits, and what it has to contribute in these areas is not always obvious to others, and it is often unclear to the discipline itself. In practice a number of offices now try to incorporate social expertise into their work but it still remains mostly an oddity; relying upon tested technological solutions is quicker, easier and usually more straightforward. In academic research, the social sciences are enormous and well-established disciplines whereas architectural research is nascent, having deferred for too long to architectural history and/or the building sciences. Several areas of the social sciences have very confidently taken responsibility for studying cities and socio-spatial interests have become standard features in the literature. Architecture has been left on the side-lines or is even absent from the discussion.

To this I would say it is largely our own fault, because we have been delinquent in developing the ability to engage in an effective way with social and political disciplines. Not often enough do we recognise their relevance. More significantly, it is not clear to architects what we have to contribute. In

¹ Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation* (Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 2004), 48.

the present interdisciplinary climate, it is common to try to take on the social scientists at their own game. Yet, surely our aim should not be to carry out third-rate sociology or geography. A more promising direction is to remember that we design. Dalibor has said that everything must come together in the design studio; in many ways this is true and manifested by some of the new design-research programmes, like our MAUD course in Cambridge. However, the explicit and direct combination of design and research is a difficult nut to crack, and it cannot fully deal with the questions probing what exactly is the academic discipline of architecture and what its research should achieve. Design exists apart from other disciplines, still a mysterious practice for most outside of it. Donald Schon's notion of design as a reflective practice remains true, and as such we would not want to dismantle it in order to break down disciplinary boundaries.

Thus, we return to the role of space, and here I would say that Dalibor's communicative space presents significant insights for understanding architecture beyond itself. First of all, and at the risk of making over-generalisations, I would note the deficiencies in some social science conceptions of space which, at their worst, are limited in their descriptive capacities, so abstract as to be divorced from any spatial experience, and understood as little more than a commodity to be produced. At a more fruitful level, social scientists may observe space effectively from without but not consistently as lived in a fully participative manner. In social science, space is regarded as dependent primarily upon being realised by explicit human interaction: if you cannot speak about it, it does not exist. If this sounds harsh, we can, of course, match the problem by remembering architecture's general difficulty in effectively engaging with the human needs and responses to space.

The divide between the limitations in these two subject areas is not only disciplinary but ontological. Hence the idea of communicative space becomes appealing. Dalibor's understanding of space that is structured through a relationship between embodiment (the concrete) and articulation (the more explicit meanings) is at one and the same time differentiated yet has continuity. It offers a vertical spectrum that is generally unnoticed in the social sciences, where space is regarded as a horizontal structure between human beings. Dalibor explains continuity as initially being symbolic, to be realised in concrete experience, which includes human interaction. The spectrum is structured not simply as Plato's divided line but as a vertically differentiated and multi-dimensional field. Inherent in the relational structures are change and movement; space is never static. Dalibor refers to this as 'communicative movement' that is 'ontological and situational because it animates and transforms human circumstances as a whole'.² This richness of space is something that is seen reflectively in architecture and by many architects; but I daresay it is difficult to find such richness where space is merely 'produced'. Communicative space is no longer simply space, but world, where 'only in symbolic articulation are we informed about the richness of events that take place in the depths of our human situation and experience'.³

² Ibid, 74.

³ Ibid, 63.

I suggest that it is in these ideas that we can find a way for architecture to contribute to spatial research according to its own capacities. Despite the importance of verbal communication, the space we inhabit does not only mimic the relationships between human players; it should not and cannot be restricted only to a horizontal structure. If we want to retain such an experience of space as the primary environment for architecture – for indeed, this is our bread and butter – and to understand it as the primary ground in which we research, we must regard it fully as a multi-dimensional and non-static field in the totality of its relationships.