

The Undocumented Benefits of Buildings

A friend sent, via computer, a photo of an Indian peddler in Bangalore carrying computer equipment in a hand-woven basket on his head. Whatever the photo says about the digital and economic divide in India, it also symbolizes a dilemma faced by every architect. We live in a time in which equipment, be it computers or the computer-controlled systems in buildings, have a greater perceived value than that which contains them, the largely hand-made structures that constitute architecture. Business investment in equipment has increased at the expense of investment in structures, even as the cost of equipment has decreased and that of buildings has increased. Architecture has become, like that peddler's basket, a necessary but under-valued aspect of daily life – and we, as a profession, seem ill-equipped to argue otherwise.

One response to this among architects has been to create buildings that perform – and sometimes look – like the machines they house. This has driven much of the funded research in our field, with its focus on the functional, operational, and technical performance of buildings, which has merit. But it is not the only response we might make.

Consider that peddler's basket. While primitive in some ways, it is more refined in other ways than the computer equipment it carries, having evolved over centuries into an extremely adaptable and durable form, using renewable resources. Vernacular buildings share these characteristics, although, like the basket, we often think of them as unsophisticated when compared to 'high' technology. In terms of investment, the life-cycle cost and financial return over time of vernacular structures is extraordinarily high and probably greater than our rapidly obsolescent machines and machine-like buildings. Likewise, older buildings often prove more adaptable to high-technology; witness the frequency with which up-start dot.com companies have gravitated to rehabilitated warehouses and lofts in the center of cities.

The reason for the relative decline in investment in buildings lies not with them, but with us. We need to continue to seek improvements in the performance of buildings, but we need to do a much better job demonstrating the value of architecture as something different from and yet as essential to the productivity of people as the computers on our desks.

THE EDITORS

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