Preface

Architecture is the thoughtful structuring of places to inhabit. It should be enabling. The architect should make it possible for people to have encounters with the environment that make them able to do more, to know more, to experience the world in ways that augment, rather than diminish, their sense of dignity and competence and joy, and that awaken their interest in one another. Architecture can do that: the light that enters a room and washes softly across walls all through the day; the outlook that brings evidence of the seasons and of judicious neighboring; the path that allows gracious movement between rooms indoors and out; the structure that allows choices between being enclosed and protected or enjoying outlook and exposure—all these add to the course of a day. They enable us to be more aware, more confidently a part of the world than we might otherwise be.

Imagine instead a place where movement is thwarted, outlook is denied, where nothing quite fits and the light is always either glaring or dim. These are the partial prisons in which many disabled people now find themselves. Architecture, prop-
erly cared for, can offer the opportunity to move more freely, to reach more easily, to see with less anxiety, or to enjoy a domain of touch and sounds and smells that expands the imagination.

Architecture can be enabling only if architects develop empathy—not just empathy for the way forces settle to the ground or for how the idealized body stands upright and intact like a column, but for the ways that architecture enters into the lives of people, people we know and love and others for whom we have not yet learned to care. This book is the story of an effort to make such a charge become an integral part of the study of architecture. It asks that we not allow the disabled to become the discarded.

Architectural education is a peculiar enterprise. Its primary goal is to educate people who will tend to the making of buildings that fit society. But society is an abstraction, its purposes vague, contradictory, and constantly in flux. Only in textbooks is society an entity. What architects do, rather, is to make specific buildings, in particular places, often for specific purposes and sometimes for specific people. At least that is what the contributors to this book and many of their peers think that architects would best do. In this they now face a counter trend.

Recently architects have become fond of looking for building types, categorizing the experience of many generations of builders into definitive generic forms that can give direction (and authority) to their own work. The proponents of building type argue that it is inefficient to “reinvent the wheel,” that there is already a common store of patterns that provide perfectly good ways to make buildings, and that we need only understand them well in order to proceed. Further, they argue, the cultural memory of our society is embedded in these types and we abandon or ignore them at peril. They claim that such types, when used as guides to the production of architecture, will bring into the environment a rich set of resonances—memories and associations that have been collected around such forms in other settings—that will touch us all at some deep level. Types allow the organization of urban space within a larger framework: The consistencies of buildings all derived
from a given type establish a basso continuo, as it were, for the melodies of the city.

But it is not often mentioned that many favor type solutions because they are easier to produce than are eccentric or intricate inventions that require the loving attention and patience of designers, builders, and clients alike. Nor is it often mentioned that typifying buildings makes them more predictable, easier to fit into the cash-flow and credit projections. Types, in short, are aids to recognition; they are useful to planners, developers, bankers, bureaucrats, and custodians, to those who have taken unto themselves the management of resources and who face many, often conflicting, pressures.

Types are of little use, though, to those who would know a building or a place intimately, to those who will live each day with the reality of the structure that a building sets down around their lives. Types can be inimical to those whose interests have not been served by a tradition of building that fits only the needs of dominant segments of society. Codification can institutionalize the neglect of minority concerns. The contributors to this volume are passionately dedicated to moving beyond the limits of type. They hold that architecture is specific, that it serves the purposes of individual inhabitants, that those purposes vary and cannot be arrived at by deduction. People differ, their needs differ, and those differences are not to be lightly swept aside in the interests of expediency. Rooms differ, and a room can change a life.

Two sets of people serve as the foci of *Rethinking Architecture*: a small group of physically disabled people and a group of students and teachers of architecture. In depicting an array of processes, aspirations, and tensions, this book maps an illuminating territory and reveals a world that cannot be contained by categorization. The lives of the disabled are shown to vary immensely, and the responses of students to new pressures and processes are shown to be extremely complex. Indeed, it is one of the central purposes of this book to show that, while disabilities may be categorized, the lived experiences of people cannot be reduced to generic types. Some of the people with whom this book is concerned have differences that dramatically
affect their ways of interacting with the world by altering their perceptions, placing limits on their movements, or conditioning their means of communication. They are people who are confronting now, every day, circumstances that many of us will encounter for at least some part of our lives.

One of the most urgent messages of this book is the evidence it gives us of ways that society handicaps those who are exceptionally different in behavior or appearance or physical ability. Several of the authors give freely of their personal experience with disabilities and their feelings about encounters with physical arrangements that profoundly affected their lives. They are candid, too, about their anxiety that they will be stigmatized. They fear that with one set of abilities impaired they will be presumed to have few others. They know all too well the patterns of avoidance, the glances of aversion, the strategies used by the able-bodied to deny, to put out of mind, the threat of a life that is circumscribed differently. They sense, perhaps, that the word *handicap* has come down to us from the language of seventeenth-century competitive games.

The students and faculty described in this book were participants in an experiment in architectural education at the University of California, Berkeley. As in all such efforts to intervene in a working system, the various participants had differing reasons for becoming involved in the project. A great virtue of the book is that it lets us hear the voices of many participants and to hear forthrightly conflicting accounts of what happened. In this it is true to its purpose: it shows us through its structure that the complexity of social experience does not reduce to a sum.

Readers who have not been a part of architectural education will perhaps be surprised by how large a part of the effort is taken up in organizational difficulties: organizing teams of students; establishing relationships between consultants, instructors, students, and clients; and clarifying objectives. (Those who have attempted to teach an unconventional studio course will appreciate the effort.) The studio, in which a number of students work closely with an instructor several days a week, usually on an individual basis, is a well-established cornerstone
of architectural education. It pervades our thinking about curriculums and does much to determine the ethos of an architectural school and the expectations students have of their program. The studio can be a singularly effective means for bringing together knowledge, values, and action. Faculty who lead students through the processes of projecting new environments for people can entangle them simultaneously in the acquisition of new skills (and the languages that describe those skills), in confrontations with life circumstances and social values that are embedded in those environments, and in the difficult task of presuming to take action in an imperfectly defined context and within arbitrary time limits.

Obviously, the studio can be a potent forum for advancing a student’s awareness as well as furthering the development of professional skills. But it can also (and all too often does) revert to the routinized production of emulative drawings, with all questions of purpose sheltered under the wing of a seductive professional elan. Elan is much favored by the architectural press these days, and therefore influential in the schools. Its attributes are more readily recognized in images of visual complexity than in descriptions of lived experience. The typifying image holds all its information at once, waiting to be deciphered or used as the springboard for private associations. To understand the experiences that a building actually conveys to its inhabitants, on the other hand, requires narrative descriptions that are sequential and are qualified by the context in which they happen. Such narratives demand sustained attention.

The stylistic image allows for simplistic identification; the “interesting” can too readily be sorted from the “mundane,” the talented work from the plodding, the “good” from the “bad.” When the attributes of the image become the paramount concern, when they serve as a basis for the most telling judgments, architecture withers. This book would instead have architecture expand and grow.

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