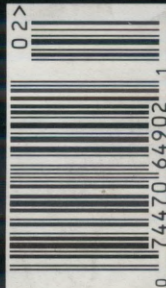Summer 2000

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Design
and Class

An Education in Distinction

On the Class in the Class, by **Margaret Crawford**

"IS THERE CLASS IN THIS CLASS?" This is the question historian Richard Terdiman poses in his provocative essay of the same title. To attempt an answer, Terdiman conflates three meanings of "class" usually kept distinct. There is, first and most obvious, the concept of "class" as a social and economic category within the political economy. Then there is the academic institution of "the class," the locus of educational practice.[1] That these two forms of "class" are closely related has long been clear. Despite innumerable social and educational reforms to equalize access to public and private education, the connections between family income and academic achievement remain as strong as ever. In the university, such connections become even more specific. The close correlation between income and achievement serves to reproduce and perpetuate the existing social structures: University graduates from privileged backgrounds become privileged members of society. Indeed, in our society, education has become the primary determinant of class, and attending one of the elite colleges provides additional social and economic benefits.[2]

But Terdiman asserts that it is a third, less obvious meaning of "class" that operates most profoundly and pervasively within both education and the social order. Terdiman is referring to the act of *classification*, of creating categories and of ordering those categories into hierarchies. And classification here involves much more than a neutral operation of taxonomy: Classification is a mode of separation, an assertion of power, and sometimes even an instrument of symbolic violence. Inherently hierarchical, classification always begins with an implicit but powerful act of exclusion; to define categories is to assume the kind of superiority necessary to make such distinctions. Classification requires evaluation and, inevitably, subordination. Moreover, in Terdiman's schema, classes and classing are irreducibly social: In life, if not in logic, differences become meaningful and operational in real situations. Every act of classification is thus an exercise of one's own power against that of others. One of the main tasks of the university, of course, is to classify—and thus to subordinate. "It is not only that the class you take determines what class you get into," Terdiman argues. "It is that in classes we learn to class. Thus, there is always class in our classes."[3]

It is impossible, whether in life or thought, to eliminate categories; but it is not impossible to study them critically.[4] We can begin this process by interrogating the classifications that structure individual academic fields. In the field of architecture—a professional activity with a related but not congruent intellectual discourse—the dominant category, and thus the basis for subsequent classifications, has for almost a decade been that of a "high aesthetic." The triumph of this particular category is the result of a complicated history that began in the 1960s. Reyner Banham was only the first of a line of historians and critics to expose what they saw as the hollowness of the Modernist engagement with social, functional, and technological issues.[5] This critique provoked a crisis of belief among architects, the culmination of which was the abandonment of the Modernist faith and its seemingly illusory promises. By the middle of the decade, architects were more and more influenced by Robert Venturi's argument that "the architect's ever diminishing power and his growing ineffectualness . . . can perhaps be reversed by narrowing his concerns and concentrating on his own job. Perhaps then relationships and power will take care of themselves."[6] The architect's "own job," as many would come to believe, existed mainly in the realm of the aesthetic and symbolic. And eventually this delimiting of the architectural role became not really a choice but rather a necessity, for as the years passed, adjacent professions (including engineering and interior design), and commercial enterprises (including real estate development and shelter magazines), began to colonize much of the professional territory previously claimed by architects. And as it turned out, even architects' control of aesthetics became increasingly tenuous. Postmodernism, the dominant ideology of the late 1970s and early '80s, emphasized inclusivity and eclecticism—but it also produced, albeit inadvertently, a cacophony of competing formal vocabularies that blurred the once-clear boundaries between high architectural design and popular or vernacular culture. The popularity of these vocabularies with developers and contractors further dissolved the borders between architecture and "mere" building. Faced with the breakdown of Modernist aesthetic certainties, architects and academics needed to reformulate a new, purer, and more objective basis for aesthetic judgment.

In retrospect, this reformulation began to happen in the mid-1980s. Gradually the classifications of architectural aesthetics were reconfigured, and as the outlines of the new categories began to emerge, architects started to redraw the boundaries of the field. By the mid-1990s, despite an apparent plethora of approaches, a new aesthetic was successfully

consolidated. Underlying diverse formal and stylistic manifestations were three identifiable tendencies. First was the reassertion of abstraction, achieved by eradicating references—to history, culture, place, or any of the larger contexts that Postmodernism had incorporated. The second was the obscuring of intent; this occurred within a new discursive arena that encouraged architects and critics to situate and justify their work in the terms of theoretical and philosophical discourse, using language that was deliberately arcane and that required an education in philosophy to understand. The assertions that resulted from this were, in essence, unverifiable. This theoretical turn has been so powerful and effective that, rather than proffering alternative explanations and conceptualizations, many architects and writers chose instead to keep silent. The third tendency of this new aesthetic was a renewed interest in investigating aspects of architecture unique to the practice, such as structure, materials, and representation. In accordance with the insistence upon abstraction and the interest in theory, these design explorations often took reductive and intellectualized forms that reinforced the autonomy of architecture. Because the redefinition of the field that resulted from all these operations has proved difficult to incorporate within the professional practices of architecture, it has occurred mainly in the university, with its extensive culture of publications, lectures, and other forms of academic explanation. Naturally, this redefinition has also informed architectural education in fundamental ways.

Although various interpretations of this aesthetic restructuring have been attempted, few have used the word "class." Invoking all three of the meanings of class noted by Terdiman, however, we can identify this restructuring as an act of reclassification, undertaken largely in the university, with the goal of reasserting the social power and status of architects. *Distinction*, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's massive empirical study of cultural consumption, illuminates the social dynamics and cultural mechanisms of this operation.[7] Bourdieu demonstrates how aesthetic outlook, or "taste," works as an instrument of power in society. Unlike the Marxists, who construe classes and their constituents in economic terms based on their relations to the means of production, Bourdieu identifies an additional kind of capital: symbolic capital. Symbolic capital operates in the sphere of the cultural, consisting of the social power acquired through control of symbols and concepts, ideas and beliefs. Although more elusive and contradictory in its effects, symbolic capital, like economic capital, is not only a powerful possession but also a weapon in the ongoing struggle of different groups within a social hierarchy. According to Bourdieu, the aesthetic functions within the cultural field as a form of symbolic

capital. And like all forms of classification, aesthetic judgments are instruments of social domination. The judgment of "distinction" thus involves more than the acquisition of status—it is the assertion of power.

Bourdieu's analysis of Kant's aesthetic philosophy is relevant here. For Bourdieu, Kant's elevation of the category of "high" or pure aesthetics above all other forms of aesthetic expression is particularly germane in the effort to understand how aesthetic judgments in the field of architecture function as social maneuvers, even as the acts of symbolic violence referred to above. Kant's aesthetic hierarchy was the laborious result of a series of distinctions based upon and structured around the rejection of the "impure." The first and most obvious of any

such rejection is the disgust felt by the proponents of the ascetic and difficult "high" or "pure" aesthetic toward the facile, easy, and pleasurable attractions of the "low." This antagonism gives rise to a familiar series of dualisms, easily organized into paired oppositions: the elevated versus the vulgar; deferred pleasure vs. easy enjoyment; the profound vs. the superficial; educated reflection vs. sensory submission; distance vs. involvement; vision and hearing vs. smell and taste; etc.[8] Once this crude division between the cultured elite and the debased masses was delineated, however, Kant defined two further distinctions. The first is the opposition between "free art," created by artists who seek autonomy, and "mercenary art," manufactured by servile producers who work for money (this activity is analogous to "low" art). The category of pure artists includes not only painters and writers but also intellectuals, in particular philosophers (like Kant). But even as early as the latter half of the 18th century, when Kant formulated his aesthetic philosophy, the nascent social category of the bourgeois intellectual occupied an ambiguous and uncomfortable position: superior to that of the masses, but inferior to (and scorned by) the aristocracy.

According to Bourdieu, this social ambiguity helps to explain Kant's final and most crucial distinction, the opposition between "pleasure" and "enjoyment." Kant defined pleasure as based upon ethical purity, which allowed him to reject not only the base gratifications of the masses but also the refined satisfactions of the aristocracy as mere "enjoyment." The latter he termed "civilization," which he critiqued as artificial, the result of the desire for luxuriousness, the lust for possessions, mere social or fashionable interests. In this final

classification, economic detachment and sensory disinterest became forms of moral virtue. Thus was promulgated a cultural hierarchy with "pure" aesthetics at the top, and with autonomous or "free" artists or philosophers as the arbiters of aesthetic judgment. By proposing the fundamental separation between cultural capital and economic capital, this hierarchy established a contested field in which Kant and successive generations of artists and intellectuals could assert their social if not economic power through their classificatory role in defining and evaluating aesthetics. And here, as Bourdieu points out, we come upon one of those instances when apparently universal and disinterested principles turn out to have beneficial associations with a particular

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social and economic position.[9]

Remarkably, in schools of architecture, although less and less in other cultural disciplines, the aesthetic categories that Kant delineated two centuries ago still prevail. Indeed, they are currently so pervasive, so explicit and implicit in the curriculum, that they might be said to constitute the chief content of an architectural education, the larger agenda that underlies all the others. Interestingly, the power of "pure" aesthetics is much weaker in the profession itself, where aesthetic concerns are necessarily influenced and deflected by the impure constraints of budgets, codes, and, of course, the tastes and preferences of the client. The domination of "pure" aesthetics requires that students, from their first day of architecture school on, rethink, if not discard, every aspect of their aesthetic codes or beliefs, both as producers and consumers. Reenacting Kant's "disgust" at the coarse, at the ordinary and the facile, they reproduce the separation of the high from the low, creating their own categories and hierarchies and forming their own architectural judgments. This complicated and often unexamined process is multidimensional, ranging (for instance) from the reevaluation of their parents' living room (usually found wanting) to the acquisition of a new wardrobe (accounting for the striking—and perhaps surprising—homogeneity of attire among students of design). The intensity of this process is in almost direct proportion to the prestige of the school, being particularly pronounced at the elite institutions.

The triumph of this aesthetic has by now produced a particular type of architectural graduate, one whose lack of economic power is compensated for by the secure possession of

cultural capital. In fact, for certain young(ish) architects today, their very lack of remuneration reinforces their ethical position in the field of aesthetics, a position untainted by the pecuniary or possessive interests of clients, developers, bankers, or other participants in the activity of building. Although many students entering architectural practice will be forced by circumstances to surrender at least some of their adherence to "pure" aesthetics, the values learned in school will nonetheless prevail. Assured of their cultural superiority to both mass-market building culture and to the vulgar world of their wealthy clients, they will affiliate themselves, at least symbolically, with other "free" intellectuals such as artists and philosophers. Having successfully internalized the hierarchies of purity, they will continue to look to the university and other intellectual arenas as the arbiters of high aesthetics. Attracted by the symbolic resistance to professional, cultural, and economic demands, many of the brightest and most talented graduates will return to the university to become teachers themselves. Once there, they will become stakeholders in maintaining the categories of "distinction" and continue to reproduce them both in the classroom and in the discourse.

One might question, however, the broader implications of depending so heavily on such a narrowly defined form of "distinction." To be sure, adherence to "pure" taste serves to maintain the architect's claims to cultural capital and to support, at least in the academic and intellectual realms, a certain degree of autonomy. But such distinction comes at a price, which includes access to other forms of symbolic and economic capital. By emphasizing the separation of their discipline from the spheres of both economic power and the broad popular market, architects restrict themselves to a small field of influence. By renouncing economic power and embracing an ethics of aesthetic disinterest, architects remain marginal in a building culture predicated on economic rather than cultural capital. By accepting much lower fees and wages than seemingly comparable professionals, architects undervalue their contributions and significance in the marketplace. Finally, and most crucially, by clinging to the "high" at a moment when the older aesthetic hierarchies are being supplanted by a more fluid culture that seeks to mix high and low to create new and hybrid forms, architects seal themselves off from the vitality and energy of the "low." As a result, in an increasingly global commodity culture, architects do not really occupy, as they might wish, the elite cultural position that their training would seem to fit them for, but merely a niche in the market, and a rather small one at that.

Are there alternative strategies? In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, literary critics Peter Stallybrass and Allon White propose transgression—the crossing of boundaries—as a social and cultural practice with wide-reaching effects and implications.[10] (Stallybrass and White do not use the term "transgression" as contemporary artists and architects do, to mean moving into an absolutely negative space beyond the structure of significance itself; they use it to refer to a way of manipulating existing social codes to produce alternative meanings.) Operating in the ambiguous terrain wherein categories are structured, the act of transgression, by undermining and violating the categories of distinction, might open up possibilities for repositioning the discipline. Some of the boundaries that architects might find beneficial to cross are obvious: for instance, the boundaries that separate them from economic power and influence, or those that separate architecture and landscape, male and female, amateur and professional, first world and third world, mainstream and marginal. But even more interesting possibilities exist in the sphere of the symbolic—possibilities for analytical methods and modes of aesthetic transformation. Stallybrass and White argue, for example, that the "high" and the "low" are never really separated but instead deeply interdependent and interrelated.[11] Attempting to reject and eliminate the "low" for reasons of prestige and status, those who would champion the "high" usually discover that the one not only depends upon but also contains the other. One could easily reread the historical dynamics of Modernist architecture in terms of this intriguing interdependency. Indeed, to maintain the status of Modernism as a discourse of "pure" taste required a continuous process of exclusion and reduction—the achievement of a purity that at certain historical moments became so arid and aesthetically moribund that the discipline itself was threatened. For this reason, "high" architects—Le Corbusier late in his career and Robert Venturi early in his, for instance— have occasionally been inspired to undertake raids on the "low," returning with formal elements which, abstracted and reinterpreted, helped to renew and revitalize the aesthetic vocabulary of Modernism.

Investigating the potential domains of transgression in architectural culture would identify a plethora of similar intersections and opportunities. These symbolically charged sites—or points of antagonism, overlap, and intersection between the high and the low, the "pure" and its "other"—contain perhaps some of the richest and most powerful symbolic dissonances in architectural culture.[12] If architects and theorists were to abandon the categories that maintain their "distinction," these taboo discursive sites might become zones of exciting architectural and intellectual activity. Transgression offers a repertoire of aesthetic and cultural practices, including the interrogating, challenging, invading, and redrawing of boundaries; the mixing, colliding, and interpenetrating of categories; and the dismantling and inverting of hierarchies. Any or all of this could explode architectural discourse in unpredictable ways, some of which would surely resonate with the larger culture; the university, with its openness to inquiry, analysis, and experimentation, would be an ideal setting. At the same time, however, the possibilities are not unlimited. These symbolic sites of transgressive desire do not necessarily coincide with more objective social and economic boundaries.[13] Even the most radical acts of reclassifying are unlikely to overturn the social order or eliminate the classifying power of the dominant classes. Still, operating at their intersections might produce new forms of socially and politically powerful architecture.

Notes

1. Richard Terdiman, "Is There Class in This Class?" in R. Avram Veeser, ed., *The New Historicism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 225.

2. See Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1977). For a related critique, applied to architectural education, see Garry Stevens, "Struggle in the Studio: A Bourdivin Look at Architectural Pedagogy," *Journal of Architectural Education* 49 (November 1995), 105-122.

3. Terdiman, 227-8.

4. Ibid., 225.

5. See Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (New York: Praeger, 1960).

6. Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 20.

7. Pierre Bourdieu, "Postscript: Towards a 'Vulgar' Critique of 'Pure' Critiques," in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

8. It has been correctly pointed out that Boudieu's view of working-class taste, which he called "the choice of necessity," is highly reductive. See James Holston, "Autoconstruction in Working-Class Brazil," *Cultural Anthropology* 6/4, page 460, for a critique and refutation of this position.

9. Bourdieu, 493. Interestingly, in view of recent architectural theory, Bourdieu also examines Jacques Derrida's rereading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Derrida's deconstructive reading is based on his discovery of pleasure in Kant's attack on pleasure. However, Bourdieu demonstrates how this subversive interpretation still carefully maintains the "aristocracy of intellect" that distinguishes the philosophical enterprise. Despite his apparently radical intentions, Derrida, a professional philosopher, draws the line at uncovering the social relationship of philosophical distinction involved in his own work. Bourdieu, 494-500.

10. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, "Introduction," *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 1-26.

11. Ibid., 2.

12. Ibid., 25.

13. Ibid., 25-26.

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