

## Introduction to CENTER 11: Value 2

by

Michael Benedikt

As the reader will no doubt have noticed, *Center 11* is the second of two volumes of *Center* devoted to exploring the subject of *value* with a concern, ultimately, for the condition and fate of the designed physical environment.

As did the papers in *Center 10*, the papers in this companion volume tackle the subject of *value* at one or both of two levels: first, as the attribute of all things that defines them as "good" or "bad," and second, value as the attribute of all the things that make their way to the marketplace where they are weighed and compared in terms of price, benefit, efficiency, and so forth. The conventional distinction here is between ethical or aesthetic or psychological value (separately or grouped together), and *economic* value, which is always somewhat segregated from the others. But of course, as with most philosophical distinctions, no sooner has one made it clear than one starts looking for "bridges" or "common ground" (as between, for example, ethical value and economic value). Or, instead, one deconstructs the whole debate in order to show how little the distinction holds (outside, perhaps, of the political implications of arguing it one way or another).

Not all of the authors of *Center 10* or *11* launch themselves into reconciling or deconstructing various renditions of "value." At least not explicitly. But all do try to make the connections the editor asked for, either as a point of departure, of arrival, or in passing. That is, each author seeks to advance our understanding of what value *is*, in some deeper sense, and each, from his or her own disciplinary perspective, tries to compare how we value the designed physical environment with how we value other things.

**W**hy bother?

Because the designed physical environment stands terribly neglected and undervalued; not just in America, but the world over. We have every right to herald the exceptions—the fine new buildings that grace the pages of *Architecture*, *Architectural Record*, or *Architectural Digest*—but these buildings account for a small and vanishing fraction of the building stock we live and work in, and that we drive past daily.

Indeed, outside of its wealthy and (usually) historic enclaves, the American built environment is hostile to inhabitation: angry freeways ploughing through wastelands of space;

thousands of derelict and abandoned buildings (with new ones well on their way to joining them); parks that are little more than weed patches with broken swings and a basketball "court;" countrysides that are fenced and billboarded and littered all the way to the national park gates; shopping malls with forty-foot-high blank walls turned to their lake-sized, half-empty parking lots; suburban high schools that are hard to distinguish from minimum-security prisons; and almost everywhere that people work: the same water coolers, the same stale, hissing air, the same squeezed-down, fluorescent-blasted "landscapes" of plastic and metal with the *real* landscape—such as it is, crisscrossed by wires and poles—remotely seen through darkened glass. Not just in its crumbling older bridges and roads but in its newer buildings and streetscapes everywhere, America is a broken-down place, hard and cheap, and becoming more so each year as more and more of its better-off citizens, cocooning themselves in their leathered SUVs and home-theaters, communicate by cell phone to meet in themed restaurants at coordinated, appointed times.

James Howard Kunstler puts it this way:

America (is in) a crisis of the human habitat: cities ruined by corporate gigantism and abstract renewal schemes, public buildings and public spaces unworthy of human affection, vast sprawling suburbs that lack any sense of community, housing that the un-rich cannot afford to live in, a slavish obeisance to the needs of automobiles and their dependent industries at the expense of (other) human needs, and a gathering ecological calamity that we have only begun to measure.<sup>1</sup>

Exceptions noted, it seems that the richest nation on earth has better things to do than make itself a tourist destination, or even a place that would bring a smile upon slowing down and looking around.

In Europe and Asia, the picture just beyond the tourist's gaze and diplomat's route is worse. With densities generally higher, air and sound and water pollution is common, as is choking traffic. In China, in Russia, in Eastern Europe, skies dark with smoke, millions live their lives piled high in housing-block hatcheries with sand lots between, while those less fortunate scrape about, "free," in shanty towns a few miles further out. The modern urban landscape of most of Central and South America looks much the same (if sunnier); as do the newer cities of Africa and the Middle East, where buildings of all types have been reduced to rectangular concrete frames thrown up in a matter of weeks by semi-skilled labor, with large, steel-sash windows filling in wherever there is no brick or cinder block. And everywhere: wires and signs, soot and dust, diesel fumes and the ear-ripping roar of truck and scooter exhausts.

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<sup>1</sup> James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1993), pp. 59, 60; my parentheses.

Now, architects, we can take all this on as our problem or not. We can take on the challenge of "healing the world" (*tikkun*) as Michael Lerner asks all members of the professional classes and intelligentsia to do, or just go on burying ourselves in the pages of our magazines, happy to fascinate and impress a handful of clients and peers. But the spiritual and financial rewards, I would suggest, of just *beginning* to turn our economy towards valuing quality in the built environment in general are so enormous—to our profession, to ordinary people—that understanding how things have value at all ought to be the first order of business for those who, like myself and the authors in these two volumes of *Center*, would seek to give new life and new relevance to architectural *theory*, which is to say, to writing-about-architecture that goes beyond mere journalism (with its easy congratulations and exhortations) and beyond mere art-historical scholasticism (with its endless uncoverings of historical minutiae), to patient and useful consideration of the very phenomenon of architecture in our times: how it is made, how it is perceived, and how it is valued. It is to this purpose that both *Center 10* and *Center 11* are dedicated.

A final note: Most of the photographs in *Center 11* were chosen from among the entrants to national photography contest organized by the Center for American Architecture and Design in the fall of 1997, and premiated and exhibited in the Mebane Gallery at the University of Texas at Austin from March 25 to April 30, 1998. The theme was "The Good Building." Look for more photographs and papers from a conference around this theme in *Center 12*.