
Heroes and servants, markets and battlefields

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To understand the form-production process, we need an approach which takes account of real people doing practical things. In this chapter, we shall review a range of problematics which might offer what we need here, since they all stress the role of individual action in the form-generation process.

The simplest of these 'problematics of action' is that of the 'heroic form-giver', which is based on the idea that built form is generated through the creative efforts of particular individuals. These heroes propose forms, whilst others merely implement them. More complex is the view that there are many actors involved in the form-production process, and that the outcome is determined by power-plays between them. The most basic version of this approach claims that those actors with the most power simply issue orders to those with less. More complex is the 'market signals' perspective – a more action-orientated conception than the basic market problematic – which sees resource-poor actors such as designers responding to market signals which indicate the kinds of schemes which those with the necessary resources are willing to fund. An alternative, more sophisticated version is the 'battlefield' problematic, in which the various actors are seen not merely as ordering each other around, or as responding to market signals, but rather as plotting and scheming to use their power in the best ways they can devise, in attempts to achieve the built forms they want. In this chapter, we shall review each of these problematics in turn. As our starting point we shall take as 'hero' the architect: in the current complex division of labour, architects are highly visible at the sharp end of the form-production process as a whole.

Both in popular and in professional culture, it is certainly the architect who is most often cast in the leading role. In popular culture, this position is most famously celebrated in Ayn Rand's best-selling novel *The Fountainhead*.¹

Throughout, the novel celebrates the idea that the prime generator of built form is the creative power of the individual architect. Of course, it is admitted, many other people are in various ways involved in the making of a building; but it is only the individual architect who breathes form into the process. In the words of the architect hero:

*Every creative job is achieved under the guidance of a single individual thought. An architect requires a great many men to erect his building. But he does not ask them to vote on his design . . . An architect uses steel, glass, concrete, produced by others. But the materials remain just so much steel, glass and concrete until he touches them.*²

This view, in more measured guise, is deeply embedded in professional design culture too. It is expressed, for example, every time an architect refers to 'my building'. And it is reinforced, and disseminated to a wider public, through all those coffee-table books with titles like *The Buildings of Joe Bloggs*.

This idea that the individual architect has a crucially important influence on built form seems to be supported by a great deal of evidence. It is clear, for example, that certain architects do have remarkably distinctive and consistent personal styles, which mark their designs out from those of other people. Buildings by Le Corbusier, say, at a given stage in