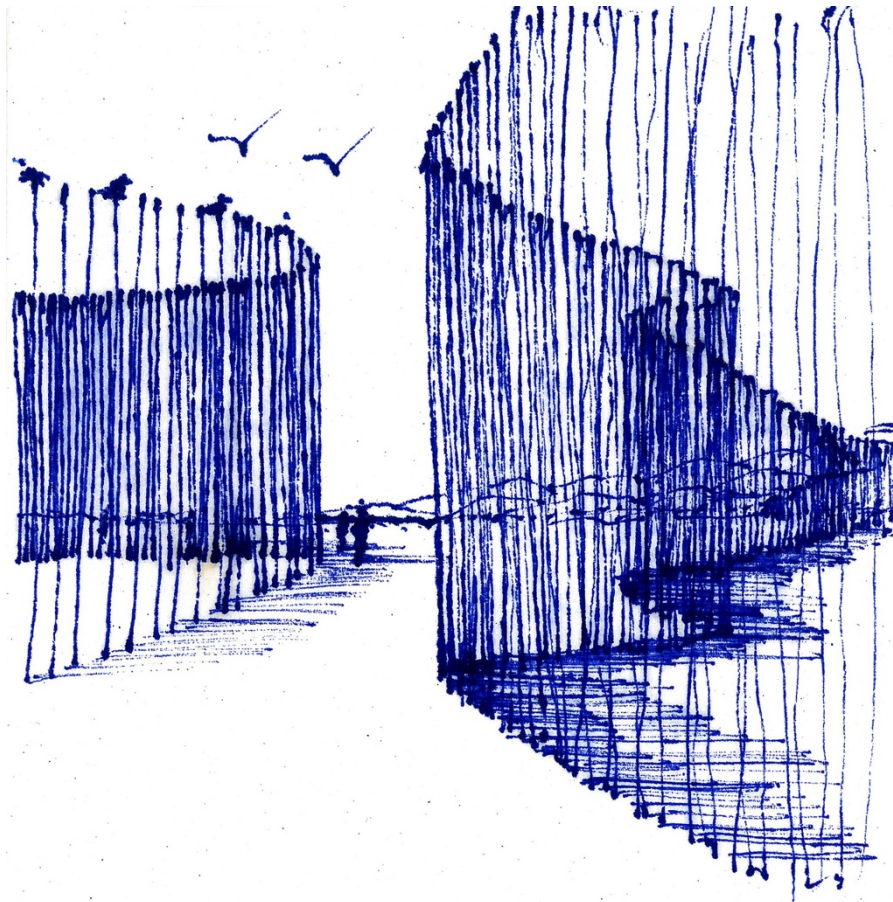


## Threads of Continuity: The Future of Architecture (Workshop)

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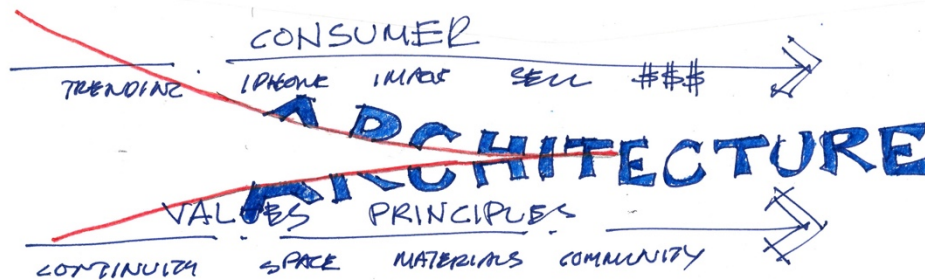
### ***The Way It Is*** by William Stafford

There's a thread you follow. It goes among  
things that change. But it doesn't change.  
People wonder about what you are pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.  
While you hold it you can't get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
or die; and you suffer and get old.  
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.  
You don't ever let go of the thread.

## BACKGROUND

### contemporary practice

The practice of architecture has undergone profound changes in little over a generation. What used to be a holistic approach, involving issues of performance, experience and meaning, has been fragmented. The architect's leadership role has been diminished and younger architects are increasingly dissatisfied with the conditions of contemporary practice.



This transformation hasn't been well understood, or even acknowledged, by the profession. It has however, had a huge impact. Many architects feel it and see it as an existential threat to the art and practice of architecture as they have known it.

*"Many architects in the US seem to have been caught off guard by the suddenly elevated importance of performance in their work... Although they may not think of it in these terms, the changes entailed by simulation shock architects because of their anti-humanist implications. Simulation makes of performance an end in itself. Meaning is reduced to operation. The personal, the expressive, the idiosyncratic are denied legitimacy."*<sup>11</sup>

### architecture as tapestry

Imagine the art and practice of architecture as a large weaving, a tapestry, in which the warp, the **threads of continuity**, are interlaced with the weft, the **threads of immediacy**.

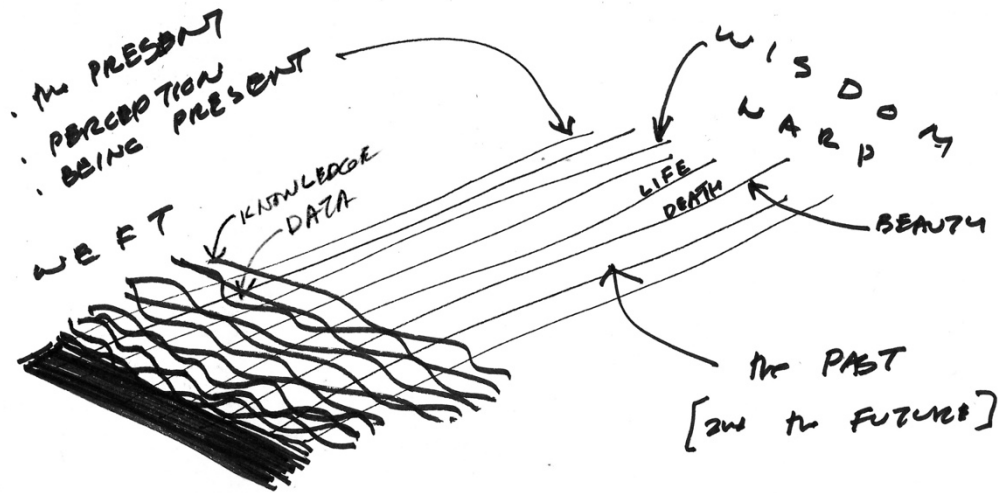
The threads of continuity are the values, principles, concepts, perceptions, and experiences that are timeless and essential to how humans live in the world. The threads of immediacy are the conditions, circumstances, knowledge, tools, and techniques that are particular to time and place.

**warp** 5 a) *Weaving* the set of threads running lengthwise in the loom and crossed by the weft, or woof b) the very fiber or essential part of something; foundation; base

**weft** *n.* [ME < OE < base of *wefan*, to WEAVE] the yarns carried by the shuttle back and forth across the warp in weaving; woof; filling

[Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition, Wiley, 2002]

<sup>1</sup> David Ross Scheer, *The Death of Drawing – Architecture in the Age of Simulation*, ( New York, Routledge, 2014), postscript p. 225-226



**WARP - continuity**

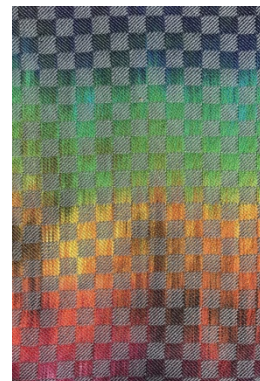
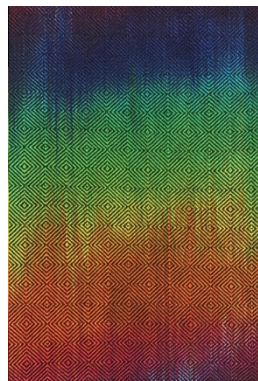
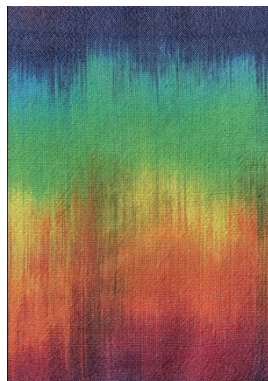
- relationships
- community
- family; decedents; ancestors
- wisdom
- stories / myths / rituals
- mentoring
- value of precedent
- spatial perception
- scale and proportion
- material properties
- structure
- weathering
- drawing by hand
- meaning

**WEFT - immediacy**

- transactions
- the market
- knowledge/data
- computer software
- virtual reality
- image based architecture
- buildings as commodity
- smart phones
- construction techniques
- new materials
- zoning/building permits
- global warming
- site and context
- performance



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*In weaving the warp threads can be obscured.*

The idea of architecture as tapestry, distinguishing warp from weft, continuity from immediacy, value from expediency, gives us a way to talk about architecture and contemporary culture in a relevant and meaningful way with our colleagues, our clients, and our community.

A weaving needs both the warp and the weft to be whole and have strength. So too, are meaningful buildings reliant upon timeless attributes woven into circumstantial responses.

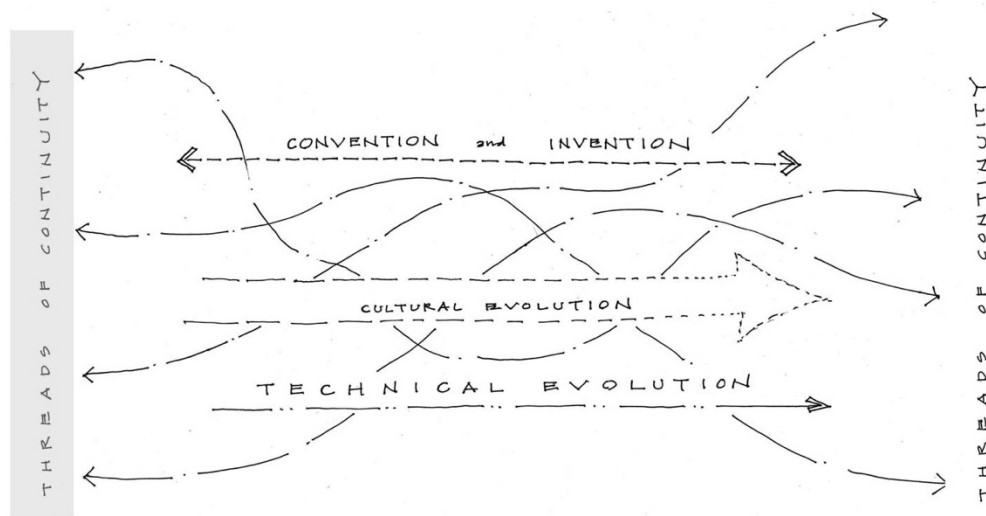
Architects have many problems to solve related to providing safe, healthy, and sustainable cities and buildings. Combined with the fact that our contemporary culture worships the new, and the trending, it is easy to lose sight of the threads of continuity. As a result buildings lack spatial coherence and meaning. While solving immediate problems they have no lasting value.

### the future of architecture

It's tempting to talk about what architecture used to be, what we've lost, what we need to recover. But this attitude engenders resentment and exclusion. Many younger architects feel the older generation is out of touch, if not irrelevant. What's needed is to uncover, expose, and articulate the principles that still apply, that are the foundation of architecture, that are indeed timeless, and that give meaning to our lives.

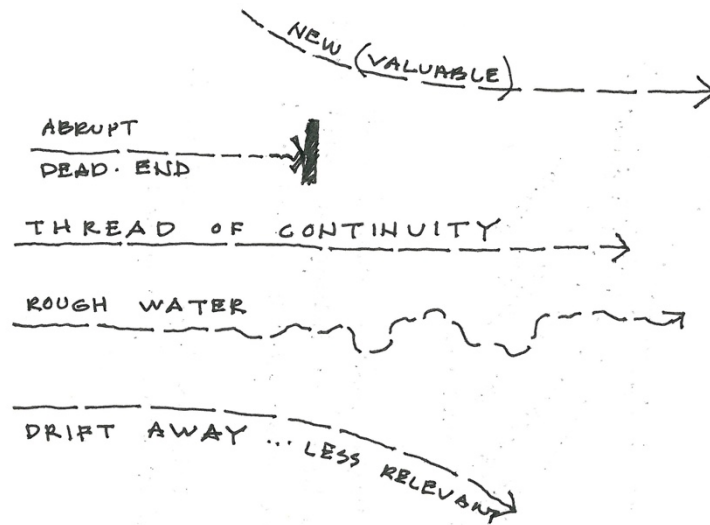
*"The real challenge is that simulation is cutting the ground from under the very modes of thought that we architects have applied to building. We need to re-establish or find new grounds for our work.*

*This is a most challenging time to be an architect. We architects must take up the challenge, work to understand the emerging world, find new ideas and create pragmatic positions from which we can effectively shape a world worth living in. The world needs architects and architecture as never before."*<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup> David Ross Scheer, page 227

We are living in an information age, a digital age, and the current practice of architecture reflects that. It is an architecture of knowledge instead of wisdom; it is more like a maze than a tapestry. We see ever more complex shapes and forms made possible by the power of the computer. And ever more complex engineering allows us to create net-zero buildings or radically tall skyscrapers. But many of these buildings lack coherent spatial experience or indeed any real depth of meaning.



Sorting out which threads are continuous and which are immediate can be a challenge. And threads change over time, new ones come, obsolete ones go. Discerning this becomes ever more crucial during times of rapid change and uncertainty, such as the present. To feel secure, to move forward with confidence we need to know our foundation, know what to advocate for, and how to talk about it.

## teaching

The ideas of *Threads of Continuity* and *Layers of Meaning* were developed in response to the changes I have experienced teaching over the last thirty years. The “literacy rate” among students (and many teachers) has dropped significantly. When you ask them “What is meaning in architecture?” they are at a loss to answer. Students are looking for precedent by searching for popular images on the internet. Their knowledge of design principles and criteria for analysis has all but evaporated. Asking students to diagram the layers of meaning in precedent and in their own projects and to search for the threads of continuity has been a way for them to answer this question of meaning in architecture.

## conclusion

Many commentators on contemporary culture would have us think that the direction of cultural evolution is inevitable. We are urged to follow the latest trend, to employ the latest technology, to stay ahead of the curve, adopting the paradigm of capitalism, consumerism, and marketing. Why should architects accept this point of view?

It is at the intersection of meaning in architecture and the path of our contemporary culture that the idea of threads of continuity has become a useful tool, a lens through which to see and understand this issue.

I believe that if we can articulate the threads of continuity in architecture, and advocate for them, we can influence the evolution of our culture.

## **WORKSHOP**

We will begin with a short presentation on the idea of architecture as tapestry and threads of continuity, including some of the following themes and examples:

- architectural education
- contemporary practice
- sustainability
- evolution of library typology
- rebuilding Notre Dame

Following will be a guided, yet open conversation about the current and future state of the art and profession of architecture. We will explore such questions as:

- Can the trajectory of image-based architecture be altered?
- Is there any place in our contemporary culture for typology based architectural form as significant elements of place-making and way-finding?
- Is contemporary culture replacing the experiential reality of architecture with virtual realities?
- Is sacred space, and ritual space, the only realm in which experiential architecture has a role to play in our culture?
- How can architecture repair the loss of human connection to the earth and to each other?
- And perhaps the most important question - what are the threads of continuity in our culture, and is architecture one of them?