

Becoming Mindful Architect

A contemplative design process to create spaces of connectivity for the displaced

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We live in a highly connected world but displacement reveals itself in many aspects. Whether one's sense of displacement is physical, social, emotional, or spiritual, we all seek "places" where we can experience a deeper connection with our environment, others and ourselves. We crave a "home", an "outer temple" where we feel a sense of belonging, refuge, inspiration and communion which breaks down the deep sense of isolation we carry within us.

Such outer temples are rare, in part, due to the absence of a more conscious intention of the architect to make manifest the higher order creativity, deeper awareness, beauty and mystery of their "inner home" - their "inner temple". As architects, we are continually displaced from our inner temple due to forces outside of our control. The act of design becomes an unconscious reactive process rather than a conscious creative process.

How can we, the displaced, create outer temples for the displaced?

Louis Kahn pointed out "*The way I do things is private really. Intuition is your most exacting sense. It is the most reliable sense...turn to feeling and away from thought. In feeling is the psyche.*"¹ The extraordinary buildings of Kahn and his design process have been extensively researched and analyzed. The transcendent emotional power of his outer temples has been experienced by many. However, as Paul Goldberger recently lamented about Kahn, "...what went on in his head at the moment his pencil touched the yellow tracing paper on which he made his exquisite, telling sketches isn't something that Kahn himself may have been able to articulate, and it certainly isn't something that any biographer can fully convey."²

Why is it that we know so much about the great buildings of architects (the *what-product*) and their design methodology (the *how-process*) but very little about their minds (the *source-cause*) from which they created? Donald Schon introduced the concept of "reflection-in-action" to describe the process employed by experienced designers and other professionals whereby tacit knowledge combines with a willingness to experiment in real time to address and continually "reframe" an uncertain or novel situation.³ Furthermore, it has been proposed that professionals learn and respond to change at three levels: Level 1 or "reacting" (i.e. responding by operating on pre-existing habits); Level 2 or "redesigning" (i.e. changing the underlying structure and process); and Level 3 or "reframing" (i.e. changing the underlying pattern of thought). Schon and Chris Argyris characterized Levels 2 and 3 as "single-loop learning" and "double-loop learning", respectively.⁴ Although valuable insights into how designers can use past knowledge and experience to inform decision-making and problem solving, these concepts shed little light on *how* the designer or team can cultivate the deeper aspiration and inner temple attributes to create outer temples that extend beyond the aesthetic to profound peak experiences for its users.

Albert Einstein famously said "The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking that created them." So much cannot be understood at our level of awareness and through our traditional capacities of seeing and knowing. "We need to develop and refine ... a mind that knows and

¹ Twombly, Robert. *Louis Kahn: Essential Texts* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2003)

² Goldberger, Paul. "The Mystic", *The Nation* (2017)

³ Schön, Donald. *The Reflective Practitioner*. (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1983)

⁴ Argyris, Chris and Schön, Donald. *Organizational Learning*. (1978)

sees in new ways, that is motivated differently.”⁵

Mindful Architect is a contemplative and generative design process that aspires to develop the mindset, skillset and toolset for building the inner temple of deeper awareness, intention, attention, and empathy, among other attributes, within the architect so that inspired and compassionate “outer temples” of refuge and transformation can be manifested in our built environment. The nature of the inner temple is clarity.⁶ It is a “place” which has no form, dimension or color. It is boundless, yet it occupies no space. Hence, in order to build this inner temple, we need to familiarize ourselves with different instruments and tools – its inner technologies.

Mindful Architect’s theoretical and practical framework proceeds from the following suppositions: The creative process is not the creation of an object outside of ourselves, but an intertwining of the object and the mind, i.e. the place/space being created and the mind that creates it. The mind and its object arise simultaneously and are inseparable.⁷ How can we truly design from the “inside out” without the understanding that the quality of the result -the outer temple- is a function of the quality and depth of the source- the inner temple- within the architect or team? The creative process is before all else an intense encounter with oneself. How do we connect to the future space of possibility and express the highest vision of our emerging future self during the process of design and bring it forth into the present?

Mindful Architect is not a program that teaches meditation techniques to architects. Instead, it develops a meditative approach to the design of the built world by intentionally turning the camera from the building/space (the product/effect) to the mind (the source/cause). Based on my training as both a practicing architect and a student of contemplative practice, I have developed the following initial framework of movements within which the inner technologies will be practiced, interrogated, and evaluated:

1. **Creating Space**
Slowing down. Pausing. Stepping back. Becoming aware of the inner space. Consciously stopping the enacting habitual patterns and following distractions. Awareness is key to creating a space where we can transform something into a creative resource.
2. **Connecting to Mental and Emotional Blueprint**
Asking questions to clarify and illuminate deeper intention of design and who we want to become through its process. It is not goal or achievement, but our heart’s aspiration. Making intention conscious through connecting to an evolving mental and emotional blueprint in the present moment through familiarity empowers the process with focus, energy and movement.
3. **Expanding Perspectives**
Letting go of inner resistances, preconceptions and judgments and opening up to wonder and empathy. Actively deepening our listening, seeing and sensing capacities and expanding conversations and engagement with others, built environment, design process, ourselves and what emerges from the collective, revealing experience of creativity.
4. **Dissolving Boundaries**
In an open flow state, we allow insight and understanding to arise by connecting to the contemplative space of future possibilities that is not bounded. We experience the deeper

⁵ Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Coming to our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World through Mindfulness*. (New York: Hyperion, 2005). p62

⁶ Gyatso, Geshle Kelsang. *How to Understand the Mind: The Nature and Power of the Mind*. (New York, Ulverston: Tharpa Publications, 2014)

⁷ Gyatso, Geshle Kelsang. *Ocean of Nectar: The True Nature of Things*. (New York, Ulverston: Tharpa Publications, 1995)

authentic self – a “no self” – which is not separate from the experience of creativity but one with it. We tap into higher level awareness in relationship with the larger emerging whole as an active participant in the moment with agency.

5. Iterating and Becoming

Integrating the intelligences of the head, heart, and hand as an intentional iterative force to become the emerging future of the creative work and ourselves in the present, through imagination and creative confidence.

Indeed, practice and familiarity are key to the Mindful Architect process. Etymologically, “mindfulness” has its roots in the Tibetan term *sgoms* in Buddhist contemplative practice which refers to ‘development of familiarity’, particularly familiarity with one’s mind⁸. When we learn to communicate from the inner temple and trust its wisdom and creativity, we begin to function as an intentional vehicle for the highest vision of a future we want to create. The act of design then becomes an act of compassion that brings connection and grounding to ourselves as displaced architects and other displaced we want to serve.

In conclusion, *Mindful Architect* is a work in progress. It is founded on the understanding that inner temples build outer temples and, in turn, the experience of outer temples helps build inner temples. The *Mindful Architect* design process is a journey, constantly unfolding in a perpetual present tense of *becoming*.

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⁸ “What is Mindfulness?” *Contemplative Mind in Life*.
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