

Excerpts from writings by Henry N. Cobb,  
published on the occasion of his receiving the  
President's Medal of  
The Architectural League of New York  
May 4, 2015

**On architecture and the university**

**On audacity**

**On Boston**

**On ethics and architecture**

**On the art of architecture**

**On the city**

**On the design studio**

**On the erasure of history**

**On the practice of architecture**

**On the Tower and the Church**

## On architecture and the university

If the world of scholarship can at last accept Nelson Goodman's contention that "the arts must be taken no less seriously than the sciences as modes of discovery, creation and enlargement of knowledge," then the university may yet draw benefit from the peculiar capacity of architecture both to define and to question the relationships between human beings, their institutions, and the natural world. Architecture can indeed be practiced as a radical critique of the culture—a critique carried out in the language of forms rather than the language of words. Surely architecture so conceived and so practiced has something useful to bring to an ongoing discourse within the university; and should this hypothesis prove correct, architecture may yet find a place not merely *at* but unequivocally *in* and *of* the university.

## On audacity

Finally, I would seek to instill in our program an elusive quality perhaps best defined as *audacity*. By this I mean that combination of energy, courage, intuition, and will by which any human enterprise may be transformed into a creative act. In particular, audacity fuels the leap of imagination, the break from convention, the fathoming of the unfathomable that is intrinsic to every work of art. According to Pasternak, “The root of beauty is audacity.” Can a pedagogical enterprise admit this attribute? I think it can and must, for therein resides our best safeguard against complacency and the sterility of dead ideas. We need the nettle of audacity to challenge us in every aspect of our program.

## On Boston

Boston is my home town. I grew up in its suburb of Brookline, not far from the house where H. H. Richardson had lived and worked; I went to college in one of his finest buildings; and later on, my colleagues and I designed the skyscraper that stands just a few feet away from Trinity Church. Out of deference to its neighbor, the Hancock Tower is as silent as any building can be. And this no doubt explains why I so eagerly sought the commission to design the new federal courthouse on Fan Pier. For while my skyscraper had been obliged to remain mute, the courthouse would be invited to speak. And I longed for the opportunity to design a *public* building in Boston—a work of architecture that would be experienced not just externally as object but internally as space, and that not only need not but clearly must not remain speechless.

## On ethics and architecture

The struggle of architecture to speak and act within and against the embrace of power has borne fruit in some of the most profoundly moving manifestations of human intelligence: buildings wherein overt allegiance to power, clear mastery of technique and explicit dedication to use are brought together in such a way that these edifices for human use become, marvelously, instruments for speculative thought— instruments that relentlessly, if covertly, challenge the conventions, the preconceptions and finally the very powers that brought them into being. Then indeed, if all too rarely, does architecture reach the highest realm of art. That the science of morals is as indispensable to this attainment as is the science of building seems to me beyond question: without the latter a work of architecture perhaps will not stand, but without the former it surely cannot *mean*.

## On the art of architecture

Architecture cannot escape active engagement with the issues and conflicts that comprise the human condition. We cannot stand apart from those issues because it is only by engaging them that we may find a significant *subject* for our art. And lacking a subject, any art however finely wrought is reduced to a cipher. But having acknowledged this, it is also clear that we must not confuse the subject with the art. The satisfaction of user needs, the conservation of resources, the invention and refinement of building technologies—these cannot make an architecture. All are necessary, but none is sufficient. What then constitutes the distinction between the art of architecture and mere building? A compelling answer was offered by Paul Valéry: “We recognize a work of art by the fact that no idea it inspires in us, no mode of behavior it suggests we adopt, could exhaust or dispose of it.”

## On the city

Every moment in the life of a city is a moment appealing to three realms of consciousness: a memory of the past, a preoccupation with the present, a dream of the future. In the ongoing and inescapably contentious discourse between these realms—a discourse that defines the very essence of human civilization—the city is both the principal arena of debate and the cumulative, absolutely authentic, minutely accurate record of its outcome. This is why we can confidently affirm that despite all the miracles wrought by our sciences, the city remains, in the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss “*the human invention, par excellence.*”

## On the design studio

There is no prescriptive mechanism, no recordable body of knowledge, that can adequately equip us for the making of architecture. Instead, we must learn architecture by doing it, in a process that is long, arduous, inefficient, awfully expensive—and absolutely indispensable. A particular virtue of the studio method is that it is characterized by an inquiry whose outcome is never predictable. Indeed, all of us who participate in the design studio, whether as students or teachers, are actors in what has been aptly termed a *theater of inquiry*—a theater in which we strive to acquire that habit of mind by which architects, through a process at once conceptual and pragmatic, are enabled to form their intentions and act on them. This is not a matter of seven semesters in a graduate school; it is the unceasing labor, and the very great joy, of a lifetime. But here at least we may begin.

## On the erasure of history

An ideologically driven modernist pedagogy, through its erasure of history as much as through the methodology of its design studios, profoundly shaped the practice of architecture in the decades following World War II. Unlike earlier pedagogies, which typically privileged one historical period over others, the pedagogy of the modern movement, as practiced by Gropius, sought to protect the student from contamination by *all* of history, so as to clear the way for an entirely New Architecture, liberated from the tyranny of dead styles, in which art, technology, and social purpose would be powerfully joined for the benefit of humanity. This attitude was elegantly summed up by Franz Kafka: “The decisive moment in human history is perpetually at hand. Hence those revolutionary movements that declare everything preceding them to be null and void are in the right, for nothing has yet happened.”

## On the practice of architecture

Ours is an art of indirection. As architects we do not make the building; rather, we make an elaborate set of instructions that direct the work of others who actually make the building. Hence, between our intention and the materialization of a built work, a multitude of institutional mechanisms intervene—of finance, of law, of industry, of trade—that inexorably shape, encrust, encumber, and threaten to suffocate both the process and the product of our art. Why, then, have I persisted in a profession so relentlessly burdened? Simply because the practice of architecture is for me inseparable from the act of building: it is an enterprise not just of envisioning but of accomplishing a built work, with the intention that such a work, having satisfied all requirements of use and technique, may yet illuminate and give meaning to the human condition while giving shape to the physical world.

## On the Tower and the Church

The extreme disparity in size between the Hancock Tower and Trinity Church was of course the central predicament we faced. We chose to deal with it not by creating a gratuitous distance between the two—this would only have exacerbated the problem—but by bringing them into close proximity while positioning and shaping the Tower in such a way that it becomes the contingent satellite in a composition of which the Church is unequivocally reaffirmed as the autonomous center. Thus, as a work of architecture, the Hancock Tower is defined entirely by its preoccupation with the task of reconciling without suppressing two opposite and seemingly irreconcilable intentions: on the one hand asserting the power of commerce, while on the other acknowledging the primacy of public buildings and civic space.

