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### Title:

Architecture as a Universal Language [Designers and Social Responsibility]

### Journal Issue:

[Places, 7\(4\)](#)

### Author:

[Berman, Marshall](#)

### Publication Date:

1992

### Publication Info:

Places

### Permalink:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/9b57d2h6>

### Acknowledgements:

This article was originally produced in Places Journal. To subscribe, visit [www.places-journal.org](http://www.places-journal.org). For reprint information, contact [places@berkeley.edu](mailto:places@berkeley.edu).

### Keywords:

places, placemaking, architecture, environment, landscape, urban design, public realm, planning, design, universal language, social responsibility, Marshall Berman

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sort of golden age of the past. The other is to analyze this emerging context with the hope that as designers and theoreticians we might be able to shape it (perhaps, in part, on the basis of our knowledge of the history of city, town and suburb) in a more palatable way.

I am not as disdainful about following the first course of action as I might seem, because I know there are profound problems in following the second. One of the most important has to do with language. We simply do not have the words or phrases to describe or converse about, in part or in whole, this emerging city (if that is the right term). We seem to be trapped by our language.

Taking photographs in Tampa, I found myself trying to frame compositions according to conventions established by photographers of the urban scene. I was reminded of this recently when I saw some Berenice Abbott photographs. They are wonderful images but I have found that the conventions on which they are based do not seem to be useful in describing this emerging city.

What is needed is the artistic imagination both to create and represent this emerging city. Before that, there has to be a certain amount of faith or will. I can guarantee you that simply disparaging it is not going to make it go away. Amazing things, many of

them amazingly bad, are happening in every part of the American city — in the central cores, in the abandoned areas where the nineteenth century industrial infrastructure was located and on the far periphery.

Designers and theoreticians, especially in the last 20 years, have had virtually nothing of consequence to say about how these inevitable and inexorable waves of change should and can take place. By focusing on a narrow idea of what is desirable, we have rendered ourselves all but impotent.

**Is placelessness  
a problem, and  
if so, what sort?**

— *Marshall Berman*

## **Architecture as a Universal Language**

*Marshall Berman*

Within a number of different occupations, my generation — the '60s or New Left generation — practiced a form of what planners came to call advocacy planning. Planners lent themselves to the community movement, assuming not only that it was possible to determine what “the people” wanted, but also that one could think in terms of the interests and welfare of “the people” as a whole. Then, during the '70s and '80s, what we had thought of as “the people” disintegrated into an infinite number of distinct interest groups.

In a recent *New York Times Magazine* article, “The Secession of the Successful,” Robert Reich wrote that today, when people talk about their community, they use the '60s rhetoric of community control and power to the people, and that to a great extent language that originally expressed a challenge to traditional political systems has now been incorporated into practical politics. But today, Reich notes, “community” almost

always means “people of my ethnic group and income level,” whatever those happen to be, and the people most skillful in using this language tend to be those in the highest income sectors.

The idea of recovering the sense of connection between the immigrant city and the advanced urban economy touches upon a perennial moral as well as political question: How can we see the connection between ourselves and other people who are less well-off than we, who speak a different language and whose lives we do not immediately understand? It seems to me similar to the question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” As such, I think it must be asked anew in every epoch, maybe in every generation,

and translated into a different language of immediate social practice.

How to rediscover the sense of connection? The building in which we are meeting is built along one of the places where these connections are most visible: 14th Street — one of the best public spaces in New York and a place that really does bring together people of different classes and ethnic groups.

An interesting feature of this building is that it is like a bunker. Nearly impermeable, it neither opens to the street nor connects with it at all; it could be in Nebraska, Brazil, or even underground. Its impermeable and placeless qualities embody a twisted notion of the aesthetics of the International Style. Yet

that aesthetics and its accompanying metaphysics were meant to, and in some ways really do, bring people together.

Placelessness can create the possibility for people to come inside a building anywhere and forget where they are; yet in some way it also enables people to talk together.

Accompanying the International Style was the idea of an international language in which people who had not communicated before now could, and in new ways. I admire that aesthetic and its implicit goal of world communication. So while I am perfectly happy to criticize this building, I still think it is important to remember the goal its peculiar bunker feeling was meant, and I think failed, to fulfill.

Were there to be a consensus in architecture and planning now, it should be to help forge some new world culture and communication. But we cannot fully do that unless we can get out to the street.

**An urban bunker: the New School building on New York’s 14th Street.**

