Enduring Form

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As an architect, the buildings we design shall have lifetimes distinctly longer than ours. They shall live on as monuments, defying time in a way that our human bodies could only dream of. The façade will be painted, repainted, the siding will be removed and replaced with one that is more efficient, more durable, more water resistant or more appealing to the eye. The roof shall be replaced and re-shingled, the attic will be packed full of artifacts forgotten to the world only to be cleaned out and reinsulated or possibly even removed all together. Additions might be added for more use and all manner of changes can be made to the interior in terms of the way people choose to inhabit the space including color, material and furniture. Despite all of these changes the form of the building somehow endures.

Looking around the world there are many examples of form enduring and influencing the design world. Structures such as the pyramids have amazed people for thousands of years despite being battered by time. The temples at Paestum are testaments to this immense staying power, and they even went on to influence Greek and Roman design in the ages after their construction. These buildings have outlived innumerable generations of people and have stood defiant through changes of regimes and natural disasters alike. These forms are built of the most durable materials available to man, but materiality does not alone determine the durability of a building’s form. There are hundreds of examples of buildings that have been built and demolished but their form endures in our memory. The Roman forum is an accumulation of rock piles and foundations that used to be the heart of the great Roman Empire. Although very little may remain today, these structures are very clear forms of long lasting ideas. Images of these monumental structures have outlasted their physical forms in the body of writings and drawings of those who lived along side them people. Using these accounts of the building, they have been able to reconstruct pieces of the structures to resemble the buildings and even make computer renderings of what the buildings actually looked like in their utmost glory. The Imperial forum even imprintied its form upon the medieval city of Rome, preserving the shape of the forum in the urban fabric of the city that stands in this day, even though the buildings have long since been destroyed.

The influence of these more historic buildings upon architecture has been fairly obvious. But they were ancient monuments and were built to last this long through time, if not significantly longer. Buildings in this modern age are not as well renowned for their staying power and integral place in the history of design. Just because they do not last for ages, or are seen as monuments to be preserved does not mean that their form has been forgotten to the ages. Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion was a temporary piece of architecture that managed to become a revolutionary structure during its short lifetime. The building was designed to not be a permanent structure and only existed for several weeks before being removed from the exhibition area. The outstanding form of this building survives today through myriads of photos and plans of the pavilion that were taken during its lifetime. Very few people actually experienced this building as physical form, but it has endured as an architectural icon through the memories its physical form created. These memories and images were so powerful and inspiring that the Barcelona regained its physical body so that more people could enjoy the beauty of its form. But is a physical form really necessary to impact the world?

There are many examples of works that have been drawn from the imagination of man, and never built, that have impacted the form of the architectural community. Esher, Ledoux, Archigram, Marinetti and many more have designed many enthralling ideas into existence, but very few have been actually acted upon. The manifestos and works they have created did push the envelope of form and functionality, without actually having a physical form. And without that form they still have created a legacy and platform of design that has outlived all of them, and shall continue to intrigue future generations of designers to create. Even architects with a massive list of buildings to their name are outlived by the form of their structures. Even though they have buildings still in existence today, Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Kahn had many buildings that were also never realized. The forms of these unbuilt buildings are recognizable and go along with Ledoux and Archigram’s works having the image of their form endure well beyond the life of their designer.

The lifetime of a building is not a constraint upon whether the form will endure or not. Form shall endure beyond whatever our lifetime is, as well as that of the building itself. Whether the form has a corporeal lifetime of centuries or is never fully realized, it will have an impact upon later works and designs. It is this impact of these enduring forms that truly cements their near infinite lifetime, no matter how they appear. The forms of these buildings assume many shapes, but what they have in common is the lasting imprint they leave upon society through their form.