MED Remarks

1. I am honored and just a bit surprised to have been asked to speak to you this evening. There are quite a few people here who seem to me more qualified to give what is rather grandly billed as a keynote address. I am thinking especially of those who have directed this program while I was associated with it, first Don Watson, then Pat Pinnell, and now Peggy Deamer, also of the many distinguished alumni present — and I should not forget our dean — some of you will have your say tomorrow. What can I add to what you will have to say?

   It was Kent Bloomer who, if I can trust my memory, first brought me into the MED program more than twenty years ago. But in this gathering I remain an outsider, not an architect, but a philosopher. Should I even accept this invitation to speak to you tonight, I wondered? But then I thought that, given the nature of the MED program, just my outsider status makes me especially qualified to speak to you. For is the very point of a program such as this not, that it furnishes this School of Architecture, and perhaps the profession, with something like a window, allowing some fresh air to enter?

2. A window to what? First of all a window to the university and all the many different things that it has to offer. Implied in this description is a certain lack of focus that is both liability and asset of this program. For what is the university? A loose conglomeration of quite disparate schools and departments, pursuing very different activities and goals. If this program is indeed like a window, then this is a window that allows us to look in all sorts of directions. Just consider the variety of titles of past MED theses. It would not be easy to find here a common denominator. The program's title does not seem to capture very well the nature of the work done under its auspices. Is this lack of focus, which at times may suggest that just about everything goes in this program, a liability? In some sense it surely is, especially for those students who come into the
program with only a vague idea of just what it is they are after. Given the openness of the program, students and faculty alike have difficulty knowing just what is expected and to what standards a student will be held. The more focused a student, the less of a problem this is. Indeed it seems to me that this very openness, even as it invites challenge, is also this program's greatest asset and perhaps its real reason for being.

Windows are easily shut. By its very nature, this is a precarious program. To take full advantage of what the university has to offer, participants in this program depend much more than most students at Yale on the good will of outsiders, for whom this is generally work added on to what is expected of them by their respective departments or schools. Such good will cannot always be counted on. This then is one of the program's problems and makes it especially vulnerable. Unless possessed of an extraordinary sense of duty, those who give it time must find the program rewarding for themselves. And they will find it rewarding as long as the program continues to attract as thoughtful and inquisitive students as it has in the past. To continue to attract such students is the main task the program faces.

3. I called the program a window that opens the architecture school to the university. Almost equally well I could have called it a window with which the architecture school opens itself to theory. Whether one welcomes this or not, and one may well find not only this program's, but architecture's turn to theory troubling, for what I have called an opening to theory has also been an opening to much that is profoundly questionable. Still: for better or for worse, today the concern with theory has become part of the world of architecture. I myself would not have been welcomed by this architecture school and its successive deans as I have -- and by architects generally (the AIA just gave my book its 8th Annual International Book Award for Criticism) — if it had not been for that concern.
That there should be such an opening to theory suggests uncertainty, a certain loss of way. Nor is that loss of way something like an unfortunate accident that happened to architecture: it is bound up with our way of life, which helps shape our architecture, just as architecture in turn helps shape our way of life, a way of life that has brought us an ever increasing freedom, even as it has made it ever more difficult to point to what should bind freedom and keep it responsible; which has brought us ever closer to fulfilling the Cartesian promise that science would render us the masters and possessors of nature, including even our own nature, even as it has become ever clearer that there is tension between such mastery and our humanity. Take the problem of the environment. Or the problem of the city, of this city, for example. If the creativity of our architects has resulted in much exciting architecture these past few years, responsibility has not kept pace with such creativity. The task is to preserve such freedom and yet make it more responsible. I would like to see this program continue to make a small contribution towards opening creativity to such responsibility.

4. I spoke of architecture's openness to theory. That has also meant an openness to philosophy. There are indeed architectural theorists who have made philosophers such as Descartes, Kant, and Hegel into architects. It has become fashionable to think the philosopher in the image of the architect, as a would-be builder, someone who edifies, where the very word "edify" should make us think: once it meant simply to raise a dwelling or structure, later it came to mean "to improve morally or spiritually," while now it tends to carry a negative connotation. Why is it that we have become so suspicious of all sorts of edification? The word thus invites us to think about attacks on architecture that strangely enough have come into fashion especially among some architects: what, for example, are we to make of the vogue enjoyed by the word "deconstruction" and all it stands for? What of invocations of Georges Bataille's stance against architecture, where architecture stands for an order that imprisons us and should
be destroyed, even if such destruction threatens chaos and bestiality? I would suggest that the kind of reasoning that here makes the prison the paradigmatic work of architecture, a kind of lens through which to look at all architecture, is of the sort that lets Dostoevsky's Man from the Underground call twice-two-makes-four a piece of impudence and celebrate twice-two-makes-five as the ultimate refuge of a freedom that, resisting placement, dreams of labyrinth and chaos. Although themselves claiming something like an ethical significance, attacks on architecture so understood are inevitably also attacks on ethics in its usual sense, which does seek to edify. By insisting that freedom be linked to responsibility I want to counter such attacks. We need a different, more responsible kind of theorizing.

5. I spoke of the openness of architecture to philosophy. Such openness also has characterized this program and I have reason to be grateful. But such openness also presents a program such as this with a problem: People, who often have little background in philosophy are introduced to often difficult, at times deliberately obscure texts that to be intelligible presuppose other work of which those enthusiastic about some author are quite unaware. It is a bit like wanting to enter a building on the top floor or like wanting to play the piano without having to bother about the exercises. Much too often I meet with a willingness to find some text fascinating or deep even though, or perhaps just because the reader is not quite sure what it says. Not every difficult to understand text is therefore deep. Very shallow water is often quite murky. Like Wittgenstein I like to think that what is clearly thought can also be said clearly. And what can be said clearly should be said clearly. That should not need saying.

6. What does someone like myself have to contribute to the MED Program? First of all a critical ear. My task, as I see it, is not so much to point students in some definite direction as to help keep their excursions into the realm of theory, wherever they might
lead, more responsible. And just as I do not see it as my task to lead students in a definite direction, I do not see it as the task of a program such as this to do so. Each student should be free to follow his or her own lights, but we must make every effort to keep such students and their work responsible, to make them more self-critical, more open to the relevant evidence, more disciplined in argument and less willing to accept as authoritative some questionable, if just now fashionable author or view.

7. I spoke of the fact that a program such as this depends on the good will of members of other schools and departments. Let me therefore say just a word about my willingness to give time to this program. First of all there is the satisfaction that comes from working with extraordinarily gifted students, a number of whom are with us today. But there is something else I should mention, that perhaps allows me to consider myself a student of sorts in this MED Program and The Ethical Function of Architecture one of the theses it has produced. As a philosopher I have been forced to recognize not only the power, but also the impotence of reason. As I pointed out before, freedom must be bound to remain responsible, indeed to remain freedom. This is one thing reason can show. But reason can also show that it cannot furnish what finally binds reason. Whatever it is that binds reason must more immediately touch and move us. This is why philosophical reflection needs the arts to keep freedom responsible, just as the arts, including architecture, should welcome philosophical reflection to keep themselves free, open, and responsive to the challenge of an inevitably open and therefore unknown future.

8. I called the MED Program a window that opens the school of architecture and the discipline of architecture to theory. More importantly it should be a window to the future. Every healthy institution needs to institutionalize places where it allows itself and the establishment that supports it to be challenged and called into question. For that very reason one should expect in such an institution the recurring suspicion that what is being
done in such a program can often not be justified given established ways of doing things. In this respect the relationship of such a program to the institution that supports it will be just a bit like that of a medieval jester or fool to the court he served: the fool could dare say truths that needed saying at the time precisely because his was the fool's freedom, where part of such freedom is freedom from what at the moment is taken for granted and considered correct. I hope that the MED program will continue to be foolish in that sense. We all need such foolishness to meet the challenge of an inevitably open future.

As I see the program the ideal student would not be someone who just completed his undergraduate education — such students tend to be not yet ready for what this program has to offer — but an architect who, having worked in the profession for some years, now feels a need to step back, feels a need for disciplined reflection concerning some problem that will not let go of him and a need for persons who can help him to get hold of this problem. To return to my beginning, as I see the MED program, it should be a window, not just for this school of architecture, but for the profession. It is easy to dismiss such programs as peripheral, as no more than a frill. But every time such a window gets shut, even if it is only a small window, we all lose. And so I hope that this particular window will be kept open, that the MED program will not only continue, but flourish as never before.

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