

CRIT 18

SPRING 1987

THE ARCHITECTURAL STUDENT JOURNAL

“MEMORY AND THE POETICS OF
ARCHITECTURAL TIME”

Memory and the Poetics of Architectural Time

By Kent Bloomer

If the past resides only in the past our minds must be profoundly detached from events in the past. In linear time we are not only removed from the past by virtue of our temporal location in the present, we are potentially alienated from it because we can no longer possess it, manage it, or change it. The past is behind us.

Memories are about the past. It is a common understanding that memories refer to something that has previously happened or some place that we have previously visited. However, does the location of remembered events in the past necessarily promote feelings or ideologies of detachment or alienation to the things and places remembered? Does “remembered” architecture become automatically obsolete and less potent because it is frozen into an inaccessible past apart from our lives in the present? Is it possible that architecture, remembered from the past, can also belong to the present, with its potency intact? Can a building’s history remain accessible, as though the framework of past-present-future was meaningless?

Some recent studies about the function of architectural places in the formation and structure of memories suggest that the psycho-physical framework of “inside-outside” may reveal more about

the shape of time in architecture than the mechanistic chronology of past-present-future.

The Art of Memory

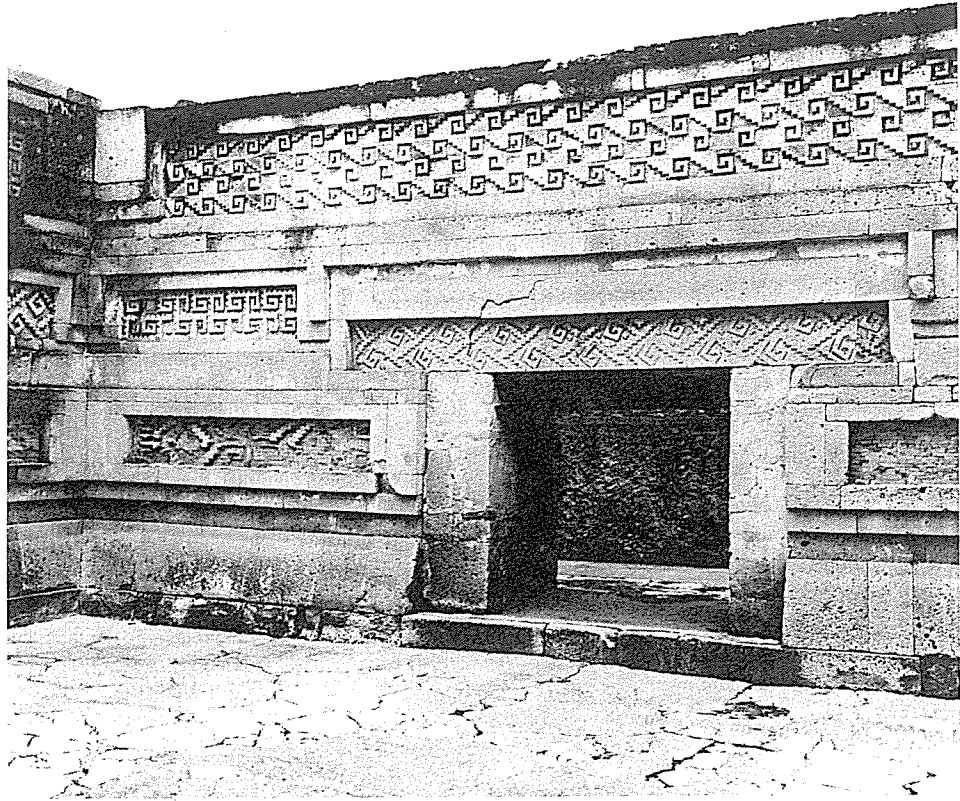
In 1966 Francis Yates published an historical account of the art of memory devised by the Greeks and sustained barely into the seventeenth century, prior to the advent of the printed page. For over two thousand years an art of recalling thousands of “facts” (things and words) was practiced by individuals who were trained to perform extraordinary mental exercises. At the very core of this mnemonic exercise was the requirement that the memorizer imagine a building as the location for the things to be remembered. For example, one might imagine an ordinary house with an entrance hall, two public rooms, a staircase, and other spaces, into which one would carefully locate specific images (simulacra) such as frightful figures on either side of the door, a dove on the ceiling, or a burning candle located precisely above a path of circulation.

The images were selected to represent the key “players” in the evocation of larger clusters of images. For example, an allegorical figure might catalyze events that took place within an allegorical narrative, and a candle could represent fire, smoke, movement, and certain valences.



Relief carving, portal of stave church at Urnes, Norway, eleventh century.

**This page, Zapotec frets,
Mitla, Mexico, twelfth
century. Opposite page,
corner entrance bay,
Carson, Pirie, Scott
Building, by Sullivan.**



Courtesy Wayne Andrews.

The location of an image above a door in the proximity of another image (which might be facing a tree outside a window) could constitute a specific constellation of images which, in unison, serve to collect an even greater number of facts. The means of recollecting the images and all of their constituent “facts” required both the imaginary construction of a building and the planning of a precise path of mental circulation through the building so that the inventory of images could be mentally orchestrated into a supreme narrative.

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The building employed in the ancient art of memory could be simply a room, columnar space, or a house, or it could be expanded into a city of a thousand buildings. Whatever the plan, it was to be proportioned and articulated in an ordinary and coherent way, employing moderate dimensions, amply-spaced parts, and normal light. Within the building the images and actions, i.e. the “simulacra” were to

be extraordinary, marvelous, beautiful, hideous, obscene, or comical. They were not to be banal or too comfortable, yet should seem appropriate and naturally located. The significance of that ancient art to this study of time is that “ordinary” spaces and forms in buildings are unusually easy to grasp and to fix in our minds. Harmonious and coherent buildings can provide the ideal mental matrix for the insertion and storage of many thousands of memory units.

The Stability of the “Vessel”

Analogous to Yates’ model of memory are propositions by the philosopher Edward Casey; he suggests that certain memories, particularly memories of places, would be fragmented and dispersed if they are not kept largely intact by some ongoing mechanism. Indeed, he points out that we can suddenly remember places in their three-dimensional splendor, such as childhood homes, and we often do so without an expectation or intention of the particular place reappearing in our minds (We’ve often spontaneously sensed that that we were “there” before.) It seems that the unexpected memory in which a former place momentarily “re-exists” is triggered by newly encountered settings containing catalytic features. Moreover such memo-



Courtesy John Szarkowsky.

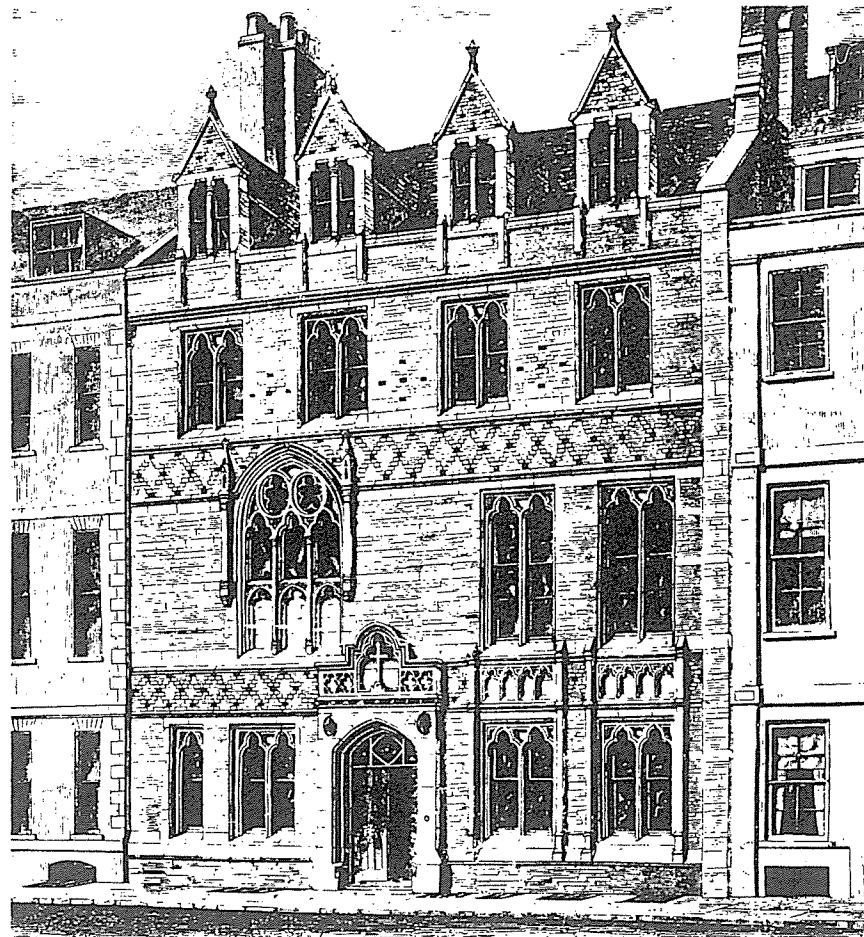
This page, Office of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, by Butterfield. Opposite page, side elevation, Herring Hall, Rice University, by Cesar Pelli.

ries, when they form, are neither dispersed nor impotent. On the contrary, they are often fully embodied, effective, and encrusted with detail. Casey argues that if the memories of place are not embodied they could hardly reappear because the individual details of those memories, like cells or cogs in a larger organism, would float free from the elaborate structure that constitutes the whole place remembered. He argues that place-memories must be sedimented in stable mental containers which allow many and “variegated” circumstances to be assembled in preparation for an awakening.

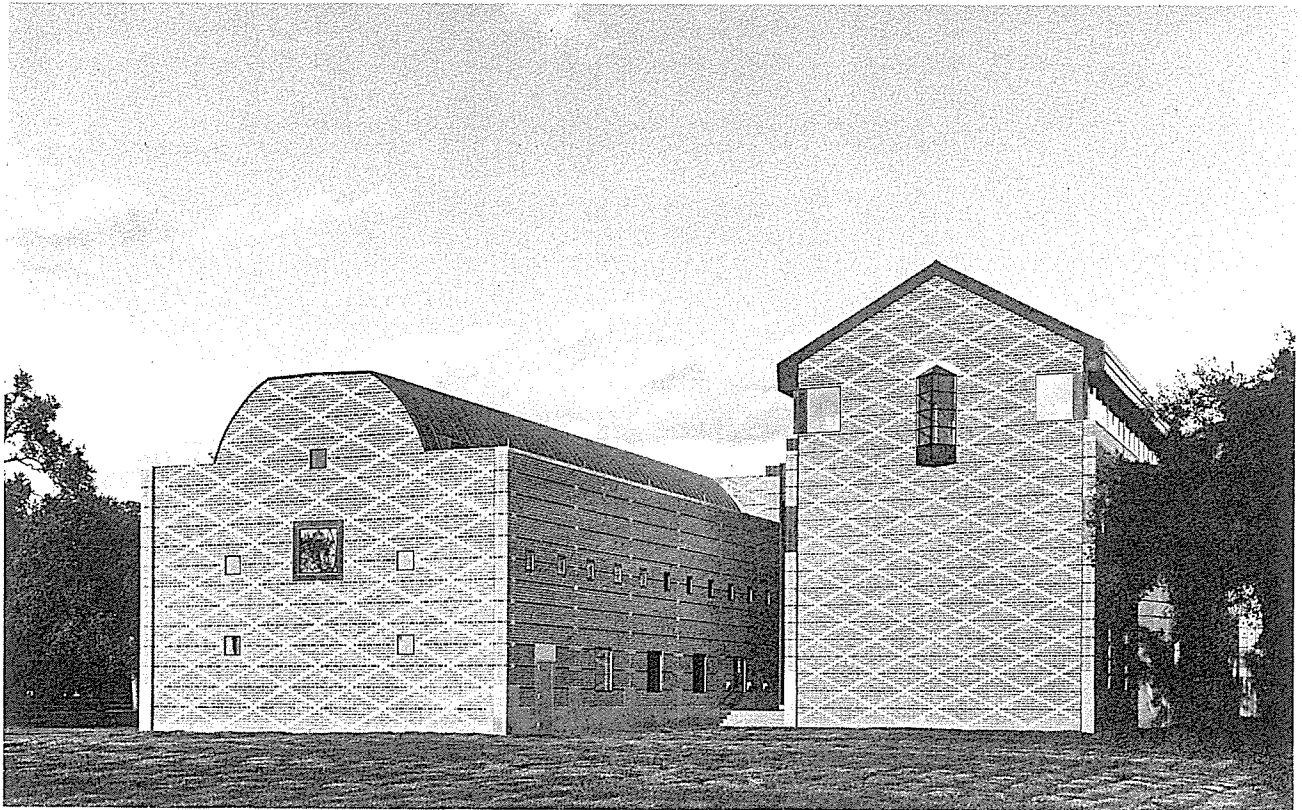
Casey describes a place the same way most architects do: a space or aggregate of spaces defined and enclosed by coherent edges. A place is a topology with an inside and an outside bound and marked by things, images, and protuberances which, according to Casey, have to be particular in order to distinguish one place from another. When we “discover” a place for the first time it is a reaction to a community of things and circumstances which are necessarily unusual, terrible, surprising and marvelous. Here Casey is

not describing the artful techniques of memory or a purposeful act of memorizing. Rather, he is discussing the unplanned moments in which the human mind unconsciously and unintentionally forms and retains three-dimensional memories, to be darkened like an ember which might spontaneously burst into flame in certain subsequent settings. He is talking about the *natural* acquisition and storage of spatial memories.

In the art of memory an ordinary building was artificially deposited in the mind in order to provide a container for the simulacra. In Casey’s observations the container is a place created in response to the original stimulus. He states, “A place characteristically presents us with a plethora of such cues. Thanks to its ‘distinct potencies’ (variegations and obtrusions) a place is at once internally diversified—full of protuberant features and forceful vectors, and distinct externally from other places.” He goes on to suggest that the “cues” which form the memory of a place must have a resonance with the topology of the place being formed. Indeed the original “potencies” in Casey’s discourse



From *Builder*, London, 1871.



seem to be seeking a habitat, for example, loci in which to dwell; and we respond by forming a memory.

The same resonance between the simulacra (or memory-units) and the container was recommended by the ancient teachers of the art of memory. Thus both the conscious and the unconscious strategies of memorizing and remembering act to employ a common structure in which active agents of memory are protected, that is, fixed in a virtual place in order to conserve their potencies.

The Body as a Memory-Matrix

Our own bodies, indeed our “selves,” are both discovered and remembered by a development analogous to the memory of place.

“At the very beginning of our individual lives we measure and order the world out from our own bodies; the world opens up in front of us and closes behind. Front thus becomes quite different from back, and we give attention to our fronts. . . . We struggle, as soon as we are able, to stand upright, with our heads atop our spines . . . and up derives a set of connotations (including moral ones) opposite

from down. In our minds left and right soon become distinguished from each other in quality as well as direction, as words like ‘sinister’ and ‘dextrous’ record.”

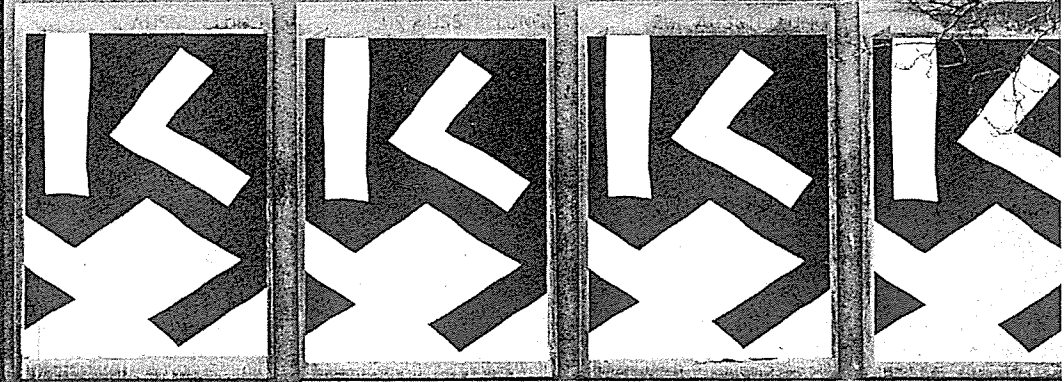
Ultimately we develop a psychophysical boundary around the body, a place of the self, in which to order all these efforts and discoveries.

These words from *Body, Memory, and Architecture* reflect the process of acquiring an articulated bubble of personal space. This bubble becomes a vessel into which the individual can begin to deposit memories of events encountered in the world; it provides the context of a living and intricate body capable of “embodying” certain memories. We each learn to remember the landmarks and geography of the possessed body, both inside and out, as well as a plethora of things that the body encounters in the world, such as the features of a brightly burning flame, with its light, heat and peculiar motion, or the smell of wax.

This observation is based on the concept of the body as an instrument of memory in which we can mentally store an outside world of spaces and things. Indeed if the body boundary breaks down, or is radically altered by mental illness or

The Basel School of Design and its Philosophy: The Armin Hofmann Years, 1946–1986

An Exhibition of Posters



drugs, our spatial memories also become disembodied. And while the organization of many memories is dependent on the stability of the container, it is curious that for most people the specific form of the boundaries which surround their own bodies is as invisible and elusive as the remembered places that Casey describes as residing in unconscious vaults.

The Visibility of the “Contained”

If the unconscious vaults of the body-mind contain living memories, can we surmise that the conscious vaults of architecture, that is, its built form as a container, is a memory place of the same kind? If we grant that buildings may have the potential of being memory-places, what principles can we adopt from the ancient artists of memory as well as the modern understanding of place-remembering?

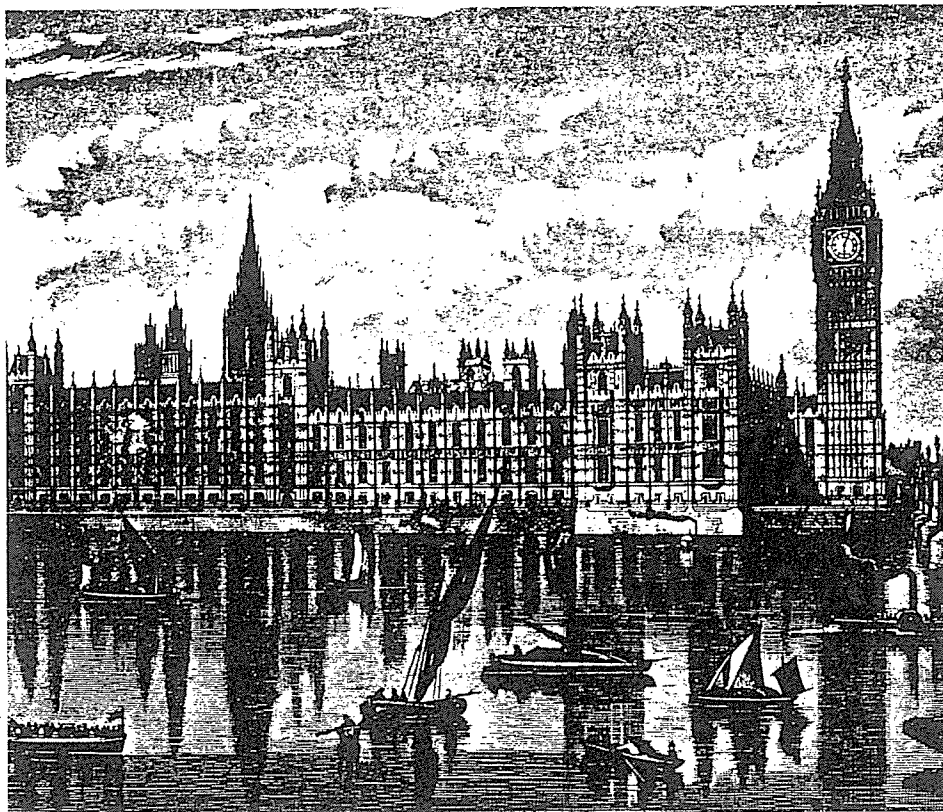
First, the container-form should be stable and limited in its own complexity. Secondly, the “simulacra” or the memory-units in the form of ornaments, variegations, surprises, and marvels, should manifest the visible, unstable potencies of the events and things to be remembered.

The active units of memory must be carefully and appropriately located, so that they resonate within a stable con-

tainer. Indeed the very notion of mnemonic stability suggests that the container possesses an eternal and timeless character, an anthro-platonic character, in contrast to the more potentially fleeting, argumentative and frightful energies of the contained. The contained may be an instant in the past, a mutation, a fright, a diagram, an inspiration, an animal, or any constellation of life-forms which, because of their mercurial nature, require the formation of a sympathetic, firm, protective, and resonant boundary.

Memorable places in the history of architecture illustrate this relation. In an entrance portal of the 11th century stave church at Urnes in Norway, dragons and wolves devour each other in an orderly tangle of threads that delineates a pattern around a door. The conventional and geometrical form of its moldings provides a vessel for the “simulacra.” At the turn of century, Louis Sullivan provided an urban habitat for “awakened” images of foliage stabilized in the base of the corner of a modern commercial block.

In the twelfth century at Mitla, in Mexico, the emblematic Zapotec frets of a spiral (meander) and zigzag (steps) were encased in the solid stone elevations of courtyards, while in the 19th century William Butterfield paraded the vector-force



From Wallford, *Old and New London*.

Opposite page, posters
by William Longhauser,
photographed for
announcement of
exhibition of Armin
Hofmann's art. This page,
the Houses of Parliament,
London in 1860.

of a chevron pattern across the elevation of a London office building. Upon the volumetric stability of two new elevations at Rice University, Cesar Pelli contained the immensity of an infinitely extendable diaper pattern. In Basel, Switzerland, a student of the contemporary artist Armin Hofmann designed a poster, repeated along a concrete public wall, with a curious affinity to the Zapotec patterns.

Memory units can be contained inside or along the boundaries of a building, or they can protrude as large-scale ornaments on an urban vessel. In the space of the city of Westminster, London, the visible towers of Big Ben and Victoria escape upward from the stable mass of Barry's geometrical palace below. The small town main street of early twentieth century America evokes powerful memories—why? Certainly it is not from an alignment of cornices atop a row of buildings on either side of the street, or a flat continuity of their elevations and setbacks along the sidewalk; such dimensions seldom exist on the typical Main Street. The power of this image derives from the potencies of the “simulacra.” One finds juxtaposed institutions: an art Deco shoe store stands next to a three-story brick hardware store, near a Georgian post office. These buildings seem to exist in a

controlled, resonant, and stable place that almost possesses the absent continuities which induce us to construct an imaginary place called “Main Street” in our memories.

If the memory of place depends on a *resonance* between potent units of memory and a sympathetic real or imaginary vessel, we may conclude that the time of memorable architecture cannot be reduced to its mere location in the past (e.g. its period or century) as chronicled by most art historians. These chronicles are rarely

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concerned with the psycho-biological or cultural space of “inside-outside” in which memories dwell.

For the same reason the time of memories could not depend on our capacity to mentally reconstruct the form of the container, that is, the geometry or plan belonging to a building from the past. Geometry, as we often proclaim, is timeless or eternal. In other words conceptual form is homogeneous and, in its pure

state, officially unknowing of contingent events. However as designers we generally understand that “geometry” realized in the perception of built-forms, i.e. the perceived form of a building or place, is a psychic measure against which the individual potencies of that particular place may establish their peculiar locations somewhere inside or outside that form. Indeed those individual potencies, as we have suggested, would disperse or vanish without the resistance of the container.

Memory of architecture, therefore, seems to depend more on our ability to perceive the embodied situation. Moreover those situations are subject to particular catalytic moments in time— those instances in which the energies of both the container and contained become virtually indistinguishable. The timing of those moments is uneven, poetic, and anisotropic. It would be impossible for the constituent elements of a place-memory to sustain a constant equilibrium or frequency of resonance in time.

Individuals and cultures are led from one memory to another by both their active interests as well as certain circumstances of repression. For example, believing admonitions that the “past” is dead or accessible only by pejoratively characterized “historicistic” and “nostalgic” inclinations indicates a submission to repressive commands. Being blinded to “accidents” such as spontaneous sensory insights, as well as a refusal to participate in ceremonies of renewal and commemoration, such as reading inscriptions, paying attention to ornament, listening to benedictions, or marching on memorial occa-

sions act to hide the potencies of memory.

It is sad that some critics of architecture attempt to alienate us from the millennium of architecture and ornament by characterizing so much of it as belonging to an inaccessible or “nostalgic” past despite our capacity to experience and embody “past” architecture in our lives today. Worse yet is the tendency of some contemporary designers to eliminate memory units from buildings today by arguing that the art of architecture is essentially about enclosed space, geometry, and materiality, that is the “building” itself. They are concentrating on the container at the expense of the potentially “contained.” In Ruskin’s words, they are focusing on “mere building” rather than architecture. This viewpoint can contribute to a psychic loss of time, as well as the antiseptic and immemorial character that pervades our buildings, lives, and environment today. ■

Kent Bloomer, Professor of architectural design at the Yale School of Architecture, co-authored *Body, Memory, and Architecture* with Charles Moore in 1977. Over the past ten years, he has focused on figurative ornament in architecture and landscape, as a writer, lecturer, and practicing architect.

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**View of Main Street,
Northampton,
Massachusetts in 1905.**



Courtesy Smith College Archives