

Architects cannot bring about democracy, or any other political condition, argues Denise Scott Brown. They should avoid, however, to form physical barriers to the making of connections in the city.



An interview to Pavlos Hatzopoulos for *Re-public*

Pavlos Hatzopoulos: Are architects the main authors of cities?

Denise Scott Brown: The term “architect” is sometimes used loosely to mean “maker,” and in this sense, there are many architects of the city – all those who make decisions there. But narrowly construed, the role of architects in the making of most cities is not a major one. Where it is — in Chandigarh, Brasilia, Melbourne — the city feels raw or unreal until the other authors begin to play their part.

P.H.: Are contemporary global cities becoming generic?

D.S.B.: Modern high-rise construction techniques shared across the world tend to give parts of cities a generic character. But seen in their entirety, and in the context of their landscapes and cultures, we have no trouble in distinguishing between Frankfurt, London, Tokyo, Shanghai, and New York.

P.H.: How should architecture combine the tasks of adding, erasing, and transforming buildings?

D.S.B.: No rule will apply everywhere, or even in one part of one city. Some areas and buildings should be preserved, others should be demolished. It depends on the situation, and we architects cannot be relieved of the responsibility to avoid blanket solutions, to take advice locally about local conditions, and to think deeply, creatively, and collaboratively about specific instances.

P.H.: Do your buildings attempt to ignore, transform, or re-create anew from existing local memories and identities?

D.S.B.: We seldom do the first. We almost always do the others. We have an interesting process, called [“learning from...”](#) that we use to initiate our projects. It helps us incorporate the local and, at the same time, contribute our outside experience.

P.H.: Can public buildings induce public spaces to become more democratic?

D.S.B.: We architects and planners have delusions of grandeur, if we think that what we build can bring about democracy (or any other political condition). But we are, if we are careless, able to form physical barriers to the making of connections. So we should resolve to do no harm, and educate ourselves in how this is to be achieved. Also, people have a right to safe, sanitary, and even beautiful buildings and spaces, and we should try to produce these, which is within our grasp.

P.H.: Is it productive to look at what was designed in the past but failed to be built?

D.S.B.: This is a sad but worthwhile task. It provides a record of aspirations and a clue to a society and its values. Sometimes it provides guidelines for a later generation on how to proceed. It's sad because it often demonstrates a waste of talent. Some great art is seen at first as ugly, and conventional taste avoids it, but a later generation understands and loves it. A painter can perhaps survive this waiting period and paint anyway, but an architect needs a rich client, private or public, in order to build at all, and with the high cost of construction comes conservatism, including conservative aesthetic and artistic tastes. So some architects' best work is never built, and this represents a waste of potential equivalent to a disability or an early death.

I think your group should be asking another question: What are the prospects for design quality in a democracy? It's a fraught question, with two definite sides and many arguments for and against on each.