



Image: Multi-family building currently under construction in Cincinnati, OH

The Unfinished Building

Designing Architecture for the End User

Introduction

The desire to shape one's environment is not new. Throughout history, buildings have been modified and adapted. To build a wall or rearrange a room was to participate directly in making one's environment. Knowledge of how to build and maintain these environments was passed through communities by observation and practice. Over time, however, that relationship has become more distant. Architectural knowledge has become increasingly professionalized and specialized. The result is a paradox: there is more access than ever to information about how buildings are designed and constructed, yet the buildings themselves have become increasingly difficult for ordinary occupants to change.

The Modern "DIY"

The contemporary phenomenon of "DIY" reflects a continued desire to make, repair, personalize, and improve our surroundings. Today, people can turn to online tutorials, social media, and digital communities to acquire skills almost instantly. Platforms such as YouTube have created an accessible form of design and construction education, allowing knowledge to circulate far beyond traditional professional networks. But access to information does not necessarily translate into the ability to act. An occupant may learn how to repair drywall or install a fixture while still lacking the permission to alter the systems that define a building. If knowledge about building has become more democratized, why has the ability to shape the buildings we occupy become more constrained?

Standardized Construction

While design and construction knowledge have become more accessible, the way buildings are produced has become increasingly standardized. This standardization makes construction more predictable, controls costs, simplifies maintenance, and supports financing and management. Similarly, standardized sheet goods, engineered products, and manufactured assemblies have transformed construction while providing efficiency, consistency, and performance. At the same time, these efficiencies can make adaptation difficult. However, increasingly specialized assemblies can be harder to understand, repair, or modify without professional assistance or specialized tools. Standardization therefore presents a tradeoff: it has made buildings more efficient and technically sophisticated, but can also create distance between the occupant and the building itself.

Role of the End-User

Occupants possess the most intimate knowledge of what works (or does not work) in the spaces they occupy. Yet when people buy, rent, or lease a building, apartment, or commercial space, they are often acquiring a product already defined as complete. Layouts, finishes, fixtures, and material systems are frequently determined before the end user arrives. The person with the greatest understanding of how a space functions may therefore have the least ability to change it. This creates a broken feedback loop between those who design buildings and those who use them.

Role of the Architect

Buildings contain increasingly specialized layers addressing moisture, thermal performance, fire resistance, acoustics, and aesthetics. Advances in building science have given architects a greater understanding of how these systems work together. At the same time, rising costs, limited urban land, regulatory requirements, financing constraints, and increasingly complex building systems have made uncertainty expensive and made standardization a rational response. Developers need predictable costs, lenders need predictable outcomes, property managers need maintainable buildings, and contractors need repeatable systems. The challenge for architects is not to abandon standardization, but to identify where flexibility can be introduced without undermining its efficiencies and performance.

Designing for Adaptability

Architects should design with the end user in mind throughout the life of the building. Before design, owners and architects can use market research to understand the needs of future occupants. After occupancy, post-occupancy evaluations can reveal how buildings are actually used and what occupants repeatedly change or request. As buildings change, adaptability can also become a design objective. A building designed for a single moment in time will become obsolete as its occupants change. Instead, buildings can be designed to accommodate change, allowing them to remain useful as needs evolve. This suggests a different way of thinking about completion: a building can be designed as a framework for continued adaptation rather than as a finished product.

The Unfinished Building

The "unfinished building" describes a building designed with the understanding that completion is temporary. The goal is not unlimited customization. Safety, accessibility, durability, building performance, and regulatory requirements establish legitimate boundaries. The opportunity lies in identifying where flexibility creates meaningful value and designing for it intentionally.

Summary

The primary responsibility of an architect is to design for safety, functionality, and aesthetic experience. But we should reconsider what it means for a building to be "finished." If adaptability is anticipated from the beginning, it becomes a design strategy rather than an afterthought. The future of architecture may not be about designing buildings that are completely finished. It may be about designing buildings that are prepared to change.