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On Jerzy Soltan

Comments from the March 2006 Jerzy Soltan Memorial at Harvard University
by **Eduard Sekler**

“Per aspera ad astra” (through hardships to the stars). There are few people I know to whom this ancient Latin proverb can be applied as fittingly as to Jerzy Soltan, the man whose life and legacy we commemorate today with gratitude to him and his wife Hanna (Hanka), whose support meant so much to him. If one wants to comprehend and celebrate Jerzy's true achievement, one should be aware not only of his happy moments of success but also of the difficult times he had to endure.

When he was seven, his aristocratic family had to leave their manor house in Latvia and flee before the Russian Revolution to Poland, an uprooting that must have been quite upsetting for the young boy. As a young cavalry officer in the Second World War, he was captured and spent more than five years in a prison camp. Later as a young architect, though he had enjoyed the privilege of working closely with Le Corbusier, who entrusted him with important projects, he had to practice in a Poland where in architecture the communist regime wanted Social Realism not the Modern Movement. Yet in the end and beyond the confines of Poland he prevailed and found the deserved recognition of his stature as architect, artist, thinker, and teacher as well as recognition of his value as a human being by all those who had come to know and appreciate him, as I did.

Jerzy remembered our first meeting exactly: “It was on a sunny summer 1956

morning, in the beautiful town of Dubrovnik [the ancient Ragusa]. . . . The exact place? On the white—or was it golden?—open terrace of a café, coffee-house, *sub Jove* [no roof] and a splendid golden-white and pink [the roofs] view on the old town of Dubrovnik. Some patches of the blue Adriatic between us and the town. . . . The occasion? The tenth Congress of CIAM.”¹

Our friendship was to last for half a century. Today, in retrospect, I can recognize that one reason for the immediate development of a rapport was that we had so much in common. We shared a conviction about the role of belief and social concern at the core of architecture² and an equally strong conviction about the need for interaction between architecture and the visual arts and for teamwork that disregards narrow professional borders. We were convinced followers of the Modern Movement. Yet we also appreciated the importance of history, most probably due to our family and educational backgrounds.

When Jerzy once visited me in Vienna, we went up to two hills above the city, each crowned by a church. In 1683 the Turkish siege of Vienna was ended when from these hills the relieving troops under the Polish King Sobieski descended to defeat the besieging Turkish army. On this historic site Jerzy asked me to photograph an heraldic coat of arms frescoed on the vault of one of the churches. It was the coat of arms of his ancestor who

Tribute

had fought in the relieving army.

Less positive memories for Jerzy were linked with a visit to his birthplace in the countryside in Latvia. Before the country had regained independence, Jerzy had been able to arrange a clandestine trip to the site, which, however, turned out to be a profoundly depressing experience. The devastated manor house was a ruin, the hamlet that belonged to it was partly deserted, and the family chapel was locked. He could not even obtain the key because its keeper was so drunk one could not communicate with him.

While the Vienna experience was one to make you proud—a pride Jerzy was too modest ever to show—the Latvian one was bound to remind you of the instability and vulnerability of human fortune. Emotions like these and related philosophical thought are crucial elements in the making of the good teacher Jerzy Soltan turned out to be, as the testimonials of former students and colleagues as well as official honors prove. He received the rare Topaz medallion that is awarded “for lifelong achievement in teaching, creative work, and service for the advancement of architectural education.”

He also was awarded an honorary doctorate from the Technical University of Warsaw in a ceremony that took place at Harvard University's historic *Wadsworth House*. For me the most moving moment was when Jerzy, then age eighty-eight, rose to speak. He explained that he wanted to pay tribute to those who had taught and helped him, chief among them Le Corbusier. But he also wanted to leave a record for posterity about the behavior of the German officer who had been in charge of the prison camp for officers at Murnau where Jerzy spent more than five years. This officer not only proved liberal in his administration, he also at the end of the war saved their lives. When he was informed that the next day a Nazi SS commando was going to arrive to execute all prisoners, he found a way to inform General Patton, who was already nearby. In the morning the Nazis, arriving in ordinary cars, found they confronted American tanks and quickly fled.

Jerzy with this account clearly wanted to be fair, and fairness is an essential quality in a good architectural educator. Of course it is a necessary but not a sufficient quality. There are others, so well known I need not enumerate them here. Suffice it to say Jerzy had them all in abundance—and he had the authority gained by his own creative achievement in architecture, urban design, and the visual arts.

While I have not managed to see his much admired work in Poland, such as the Warsaw sports stadium, except in illustrations, I know his American work that was partly done with Albert and Brenda Szabo, and I was lucky enough to visit the house he designed at Sparoza some miles outside Athens for Jacqueline Tyrwhitt. The house, unpretentious yet sophisticated, generously and carefully fulfilled the needs of Jacqueline. Constructed in stone and concrete, it beautifully held its own among the vineyards and olive groves, a model of the way to build in the Greek landscape without pastiche. It demonstrated what Jerzy meant when he spoke of compatibility of the new with the old.

Having had the privilege of watching Jerzy in action for many years, I can say he brought everything he had to give when he acted as a teacher, and he was aware how this curtailed his architectural practice. In his address of thanks to the French Académie d'Architecture for honoring him, he concluded a paragraph with the telling words, “Pedagogy may indeed become a devastating force.”³

From his students, he certainly received an ample expression of enthusiasm, and I wish to thank all those⁴ who talked or wrote to me about their memories of Jerzy. All testified to the lasting influence of his teaching. One, whom I met years ago in Houston, Texas, put it most succinctly “All I have learned about architecture came from two people: Jerzy Soltan and Joseph Zalewski.” Others spoke of the way he taught them “to see and to design with the hand, head and heart,” or how he “had the ability to sense the creative potential in others and always encouraged them to execute work at their highest level of skill.” An alum-

nus, who became a teacher himself, acknowledged, “I have had Jerzy as a teacher many times in my life . . . and there is no last time.” Another expressed it powerfully by stating simply, “He still lives with us as a mentor to be reckoned with.”

For me Soltan was a wonderful moral support in my work as director of the *Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts*. He loved this building by Le Corbusier and its original pedagogical program of visual and environmental studies that was in tune with his own ideals.

Jerzy did not see his teaching as a purely personal affair. He saw the faculty of architecture as a great team, and when he was chairman from 1967 to 1974, he presided over it only as the *primus inter pares*. Here as with the student body he aimed at bringing out the best in everybody, and his capacity for recognizing creative potential led to the acquisition of some outstanding faculty. Clearly the GSD owes Jerzy a great debt of gratitude for the years he brought his broad cultural background to it and served faithfully with energy, inspiration and a never-failing sense of humor.

Jerzy Soltan did not have an easy life, but his was a rich life, filled with poetry and beauty. As a teacher he gave freely of his riches. In the memory of all whose lives he touched, he will live on. □

NOTES

1. *Form, Modernism, and History*, Alexander von Hoffman, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), “Jerzy Soltan, A Letter to Eduard Sekler.”
2. “According to Soltan, ‘Architecture gives expression to the needs of others, based on a set of beliefs.’” Urs Gauchat in *Jerzy Soltan: a Monograph*, Jola Gola, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 1995), 31.
3. *Jerzy Soltan: a Monograph*, 358.
4. Nader Ardalan, Edward Baum, Christopher Benninger, William Curtis, Reggie Graham, George Kelso, Vladimir Music, Edward Robbins, Frederic Schwartz, Ihor Sevchenko. I am also grateful to my wife Mary Patricia Sekler and to William Saunders for their critical reviews of the text.

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