

# Design, Literature, and Social Reflection

People, Place, Occasion

A Seminar Modeled on Robert Coles' Literature of Social Reflection

"Space in the image of man is Place; Time in the image of man is Occasion."

Aldo van Eyck

In 1985-1986, during my Loeb Fellowship at Harvard, I became aware of a course by Robert Coles called The Literature of Social Reflection. I was able to audit a number of his lectures, which were quite brilliant. During that year I happened to be on a flight with Coles back to Chicago from Boston. I struck up a conversation about the role of design in people's lives, particularly disenfranchised people. It seemed that he was interested in further pursuing the question. The year ended and that was that.

But the question of some discussion/ seminar that might be modeled after his course with design as the "question" has stuck with me all of these years. We launched the New Practice seminars at Archeworks which have been successful, though perhaps not hitting the deepest issues around the social responsibility of our work as designers.

Some initial thoughts about Design, Literature and Social Reflection and how it might address design and the physical environment of the underserved:

- The writers in Coles' course are critical thinkers and accomplished authors ( James Agee/ Walker Evans, George Orwell, William Carlos Williams, Flannery O'Connor, Ralph Ellison and others) writing ABOUT the poor and underserved, not FOR them. There are two general themes: 1) literature and the struggles of writers who are observing, and 2) the working class poor and their struggles. There is not overt concern for the potential benefit of the writing. There is an acknowledged distance and separation.
- The aim of Coles' course (particularly as described in Coles' book, Handing One Another Along: Literature and Social Reflection) is to evolve the thinking of those who ARE trying to improve people's lives. And in the various writings and discussions there are, for the most part, three sets of "helpers" being addressed : doctors ( psychologists like Coles), lawyers/politicians (wrestling with rights issues) and

teachers; I do not recall mention of those who are responsible for the physical environments.

- The purpose of the Archeworks seminar will be to, as designers, examine the lives and circumstances of people, ranging from poor sharecroppers in the Dust Bowl of the late 30's to coal miners in the north of England after WWI. And to do so through the lenses of some of the greatest writers of the 20th Century. The overall focus would not be design per se but the meaning of design for people in their environments, to make deeper observations about disenfranchised people in particular social circumstances *in* particular places. The value to a design professional might be an enhanced understanding of the very nature of need and a deeper sense of how to approach it. This is not about answers, but seeing the world, people, and myself differently.
- Format: weekly meetings at Archeworks, focused on particular readings from each of the books below, with questions posed in advance.
- Dates: 5/6, 5/13, 5/20 and 5/27 from 6-8pm. Course Fee: \$250

Readings from (first draft):

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, James Agee and Walker Evans

*The Road to Wigan Pier*, George Orwell

*Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison

*Patterson*, William Carlos Williams

*The Death of Ivan Ilych*, Leo Tolstoy

*The Displaced Person*, Flannery O'Connor

*Poor People*, William T. Colman

*Native Son*, Richard Wright