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“From the Editor”  
By Elizabeth S. Padjen FAIA  
Page 3

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# In Your Face: The Good and the Bad of the Ugly

**W**here would we be without ugliness? The quick answer is: in a much better place. Only after reflection do we realize that ugliness often serves a purpose.

It's easy to label something "ugly" — it may be the most common term of popular critical judgment. Like pornography, we know ugly when we see it. The hideous, repugnant, gruesome, repulsive, discordant, loathsome, disgusting, discordant — we not only recognize the ugly, but we also expertly identify all its subspecies. (Language can be counted on to provide a bountiful vocabulary for the concepts that resonate most in our lives.)

Ugliness has obvious utility in survival mechanisms in which the ability to recognize ugliness might warn us away from things and conditions that would do us harm. But the ugly is often also synonymous with the new; we recoil from that which is unfamiliar and threatening. Confrontation with the new — the cycle of rejection, analysis, understanding, and adoption — is the engine of human achievement. The participants in this issue's roundtable discussion argue the point forcefully and convincingly.

And yet it is hard to escape the uncomfortable feeling that we are seeing the rise of a new cult of ugliness that does not necessarily represent a parallel flourishing of vibrant new ideas. The willfully ugly — ugliness for the sake of ugliness — springs from a different well and values a peculiarly aggressive cynicism. Distinguishing among this ultimately hollow, smug ugliness and the ugliness that heralds true innovation and the ugliness that springs from sheer ineptitude may be one of the most difficult challenges facing the intellectually engaged citizen today.

We fool ourselves into believing that we can be impartial judges. Authorship matters. Just as in high school, the cool kids get a free pass and the loser kids get left out. Surely much of the debate over New York City's 2 Columbus Circle — Edward Durell Stone's Huntington Hartford Museum — revolves around Stone and not his building. The Palladian tower of Boston's International Place would have been a non-starter if its designer had not been Philip Johnson. Imagine any number of buildings by certified cool kids Rem Koolhaas and Zaha Hadid; now imagine

how they would have been received if they had been designed by any of the relatively anonymous design firms that make up the bulk of the profession. (The argument that those firms would not have had the ability to design a Koolhaas or Hadid building is hardly relevant, especially as imitations are already starting to percolate down through the profession.) The question of authorship is often a question of celebrity, but we are also more willing to give the benefit of the doubt to those who are proven purveyors of new ideas.

In this issue's roundtable discussion, Robert Campbell FAIA notes that the "gap between the architectural subculture and the taste of the larger world is the biggest issue in architecture today." He is right. Normal people — those who are not architects — are

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rightfully suspicious of acts of willful ugliness. Willful ugliness is inherently violent — an in-your-face assertion of ego that is both uncivil and uncivic behavior. But they also often distrust what is simply unfamiliar.

We need to recognize and understand the utility of the ugly. But in making a case for its usefulness, let's not forget that it is not the only path to advancement. Quiet works of great elegance and sheer, yes, beauty are made every day. To produce a beautiful work of enduring significance requires talent. To produce an ugly work of enduring significance takes talent combined with some measure of brashness and disregard for the rules of engagement. As we applaud the courage that the latter requires, we should stop to ask which approach is really the more difficult.

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