

# Meet Travis Price, III

**T**ravis Price, architect, philosopher, theoretician impresses that for him architecture is a medium for ideals. Price is a prolific practitioner, as well. Highly committed to the ideals of place, modernism, and environmentalism, and more, he seems contradictory and at all times willing to break with tradition. Education is part of his gig, yet he admonishes enforced continuing education. He is a classicist who believes that practice and self education are inseparable. He is the creative force behind a "new language of architecture" written perhaps to replenish the curriculum for others' continuing education. His architecture may truly be an alternative, or hype, but appreciate the vision in the definition. He has lectured recently on this new language at AIA and ACSA conferences, the Smithsonian, the National Geographic Society, and at numerous universities here and abroad. From this inspiring speaker we are obliged at least to consider the diverse paths that Travis uncovers in his pursuit of design excellence.

**Q** : You are the recipient of numerous AIA design awards. How much has that meant to you?

**A** : It's always a great pleasure to get your comrades in arms to give you some kudos. That's probably the warmest and most heartfelt part of it. AS we all know, once you put your piece in there for an award, it's generally a crap shoot at the very end. Receiving the award is always a wonderful personal fulfillment. The second benefit is more stature with clients and the general public. It also signifies that there is a language outside the daily grinder. Excellence is part of the architectural language. Keeping excellence and design integrity alive in the modern world is a profoundly difficult task and has been so since DeTocqueville's initial critique of the American penchant for downward mobility. The fact that we still strive towards excellence and change with the AIA awards is astounding. To be a part of that is immensely fulfilling. It is a great antibiotic to the overwhelming degradation of today's architecture by the government's over codifications and development's zealous simplifications.

**Q** : What does green architecture mean to you? Isn't this just another form of environmentalism? Do you see a formalistic change in architecture growing out of this?

**A** : Unfortunately all the generations of Eco-words have become so overused they're becoming meaningless. The survival tools of environmentalism have become a legitimate resource catalogue on everyone's shelf. However, conserving our natural resources and making something more delightful with nature is every architect's goal. Although it's very muddy with over use, it is a design language that's here to stay. I see the bio-spheric design movement of the last forty years having a lasting effect on the language of design. I think there is an equally powerful movement going on today fondly labeled; the design revival of "ethnosphere." It is looking at design as it is derived by cultural metaphor. I think you'll see a very serious expansion of the look at designs that reflect the poetic diversity of cultures in a modern idiom. The architecture of the Bio Sphere and the Ethno Sphere together will be long lasting design directives for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. If you look at the green stuff historically, first it was revolutionary, now it's naturally

main streaming and turning into a series of design products, manuals, and codes. But it's not just eco-products and environmental design techniques that fulfill us as architects and consumers. It's critical that the shapes or forms of our buildings themselves give us the timeless power of metaphor in our modern architecture. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, "First we shape our buildings and then they shape us." Just what that shape is and who shapes the shapers and where does modern man find his soul in buildings is my current quest.

All these philosophical movements get started at the edges of our social fabric and eventually they mainstream into design recipes and catalogues. For instance, the recently well presented green architecture exhibit at the National Building Museum showed a lot of high rises with green carpets. I wouldn't call that a real big leap. While there is some superb environmental architecture out there. The general development market simply doesn't allow it to flourish. It does allow slow increments of change and that's where new eco activists like Bill McDonough are doing a terrific sales job on getting the baselines upgraded one inch at a time. Visionary turning point pieces like in my practice strive to highlight a fuller vision, instead of simply decorating with green.

**Q** : There was an interesting dialogue in Boston Architecture, their AIA component newsletter, on the subject of "hype", centering on the profession's fixation with "hying" their service and products, the "form over substance" argument. How do you avoid falling into that trap?

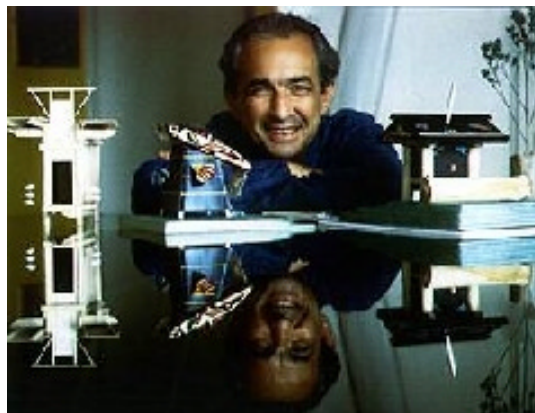
**A** : It's a good question. I read most of those magazines avidly, Architectural Record, Architecture, I far prefer that to something like Architectural Digest. In terms of theory, I prefer Domus, Hauser, and Architectural Review because they are even more committed to the cultivation of architectural excellence. They are also refreshingly less politically correct. It's your chance to read new poetry once a month. However and more importantly, I think it's important to keep your design theory alive daily. I'm writing a book right now and while it's highly eccentric, it is a crucial lamp post for my design work. Along with the theories of course is an immense awareness of the code issues, the practical economies of practice. I find clients generally like it because they want something more than just the practical. I think without the hype we stand to lose the ability to provide the public's need and desire for the poetic side. After all, they *are* asking us for inspiration that they can't provide themselves. In the end, it's healthy I think.

**Q** : Do you think that architects are just too "full of themselves?"

**A** : I think there's a perception by some that we live in a self contained module. The key to avoiding this for me is to not take ourselves too seriously while always taking the subject matter seriously. It's a hard thing to distinguish. Sometimes our fellow professionals are really intense, but I tend to fight that argument publicly. I don't think we're that full of ourselves. It's just like saying that builders and developers don't have a sense of design. I find them interesting, and clients too when it comes to raw design decisions. If you [architects] feel assaulted, I defend that by saying that you do know something more than the public most of the time. We do know a little bit better than the client or government about how to hold the big design picture together. you [client]. Good Lord, we do spend days and nights working on it with never enough pay! We ought to know something.

**Q** : Do you feel you are contributing to the field, to the profession of architecture?

**A** : That's plagued me. I'm trying to be an educator, a practitioner, a developer, and an advocate for theory and all the while preaching what I practice and practicing what I preach. If you want to make a change, just do it, If you try to do it, and the accolades I get occasionally say you are, then I will feel somewhat incomplete when I'm 90. I'm always worrying and thinking about what I have to do over the next twenty years. I always have this mind set that I really haven't started yet. My simple goal is to contribute to the



design language both in word and building in a way that helps to refine life for humans and the planet. That's my goal.

**Q**: Do you think that a contribution is required from everyone in the profession?

**A**: I think of one major question "Is the world any better off because you lived?" And if the answer is yes at least occasionally then you've lived a good life. It should be in our nature to give more than we take.

**Q**: Not to confuse the following in any way with the concept of contribution, have you ever worked pro-bono for a worthy cause?

**A**: I put all my free time—which is about 20-25% of the year - into things like the "Spirit of Place" courses that I developed or in the past with public housing issues. But I would rarely give free time to a religious group, or non-profit organization, not because I won't give advice or lift 2X4's for them, but because I don't believe there's a cheap easy way to give value to these funded groups. I also think that it is stepping on the toes of people (other architects) who do that for a living. Your heart reaches out but I don't think you can give people a sailboat without also giving them a tiller just because they want to go across to shore. It just doesn't work on real projects.

**Q**: On the local scene, do you have an opinion on what is most important to protect our quality of life, from an urban design/planning/architectural perspective of course?

**A**: I think the worst dilemma we face today is the homogenization of the built landscape, corrosive nature of blending as seen in sprawling suburbia or the incessant suffocation of copy cat contextualism. Like being a suburbanite! I call it the pursuit of loneliness. Going to work behind glass, looking through glass when you get to work, looking into the glass of the computer, back home behind glass and then finally being with virtual Friends behind glass. I could put you four different places on the beltway and you wouldn't know where you were when you get out. If we can keep things more poetically complex in their built state and more diverse in their stylistic state we will readily save ourselves. The problem to me isn't crime, it isn't environmental dangers, it's the death of the spirit.

**Q**: In an interview with a potential client how do you know that this is either a marriage in the making or just a first and last meeting?

**A**: When the retainer check comes you know it's a real marriage. When people come in they know right away whether they're going to be happy or not. You've got to figure that at least six degrees of separation exists for almost everything. You've got to figure that people have gotten into your life because something has brought them there. It's not the yellow pages - that's no marriage, it's just how cheap are the plans.

**Q**: In those first interviews, do you talk about design philosophy, a willingness to serve and satisfy, or what else to convince someone you are the one?

**A**: I spend a lot of time on the Philosophy. I use Willie Pena's quote from "Problem Seeking" often, "90% of the solution is defining the problem". I talk about costs right away and dollars per square foot and of course functions. Once we narrow down the cost and are comfortable about their needs, then we jump deep into philosophy. If they're really not happy about the philosophical design direction, it doesn't work for us. That's pretty straight right up front.

**Q**: You have been traveling recently. To where?

**A**: Mostly for work and re-education I have spent a good bit of time in Ireland, Nepal, Peru, France, Italy, and Greece. Iran and Australia are coming up next. The travel is largely about developing environmental architecture projects and teaching. Many of my real clients in these countries are interested in developing a modernized architecture that's based on cultures and metaphors--there's a web site [www.spiritofplace-design.com](http://www.spiritofplace-design.com) and it explains the whole educational component. As a result of working on these international design projects, I'm working on concepts for 5 international interpretation centers at world heritage sites and a new Explorer's Hall for the National Geographic Society.

**Q**: You were AIAPVC president, and also on the Board of MSAIA. When you look back to that time, is there anything you wish you had done then?

**A**: I think we did a lot, I was very happy with the results, especially promoting design excellence and membership participation. The economy was good. However, I suppose it would have been wise to push more against governmental interferences with practice like the onerous IDP and the phony continuing education issues. I obviously believe that we should self

regulate as much as possible. The codification of life in the US especially has turned most of architecture into a check list and most architects into exterior decorators.

**Q**: Do you think that an architect or other creative artist can become the victim of his own ideas?

**A**: I don't think you can become victim to a good idea, maybe a mad slave. You have to live for your goals. If you tell the client right up front that it's a wild card, like all the contestants might say about the WTC, hey, we're going for this, it's an idea, then when the budgets come in, I'm sure things will modify. The architects of the Sidney opera house kept the visions moving. However, don't get me wrong, if you keep trying over and over again and you don't build, then there is something wrong with you. The worst mistake you can make is to quit.

**Q**: Do you feel you were adequately prepared to run the "business" of architecture?

**A**: Absolutely not from architecture school. From my degree in Western philosophy, absolutely not. By working in the ghettos in New York as a housing organizer and a leftist organizer I was very prepared to jump into the business world, with an attitude of flexibility and delivery. It took getting burned a few times of course to learn. For instance little insights like, when the client makes you the banker you're in trouble. One of the best teachers of business for me was and is the AIA comrade. It's not the sharing of fees, that's of course a no-no that we all adhere to, but more importantly, it's the help we give each other on operational mechanics and navigating projects with builders, clients and regulations that really makes a difference. You get great clues from your comrades. The best thing about the AIA (meetings) is that you sat around and talked a lot about, or called friends and asked questions like, when you deal with this or that what are the red flags here, and people helped. We architects compete a lot getting business or on style issues but we rarely compete on fighting government incursions, or helping each other with practical matters.

**Q**: Architecture as a profession requires internships formerly known as apprenticeships - do you have a plan for the interns or neophytes who work with you?

**A**: There are so many levels to that. As a practitioner, I'm constantly dealing with intern level architects from the university to recent graduates. I take high school and grade school kids on my architecture expeditions. But when someone comes into the firm, and there's the IDP requirements it becomes a well known hypocrisy through most firms, that you can't let interns run things or spend all day being generalists. Some people are just gifted at different skills and will naturally best fit into specific arenas. Since we are a studio style firm, everyone is exposed to everything and IDP seems almost superfluous.

**Q**: What advice do you have for interns?

**A**: Get ready for a hard run. Hone your skills around the arts and numbers and business. Get some construction experience. More importantly - go see a great building once a month.

**Q**: A local architect made a public statement that in his opinion there were "only a few local architects contributing anything to architectural design". Of course FLW thought he was the only one. Does it follow that the remainder architects aren't doing the right thing?

**A**: Every time I visit another firm it seems that, if they aren't succeeding at better design ideas they are at least struggling to do so. At least they're complaining that they're not doing so, so they keep trying. I don't feel judgmental. I imagine (architects) sitting around saying well I didn't like that Graves piece, or Gehry's wacked, or I don't like that Neutra house, or God save us from the Potomac McMansions, but did you ever notice the headaches you go through to just do a simple addition? That anything outside the dictates of a builder gets done is amazing! Here's the case against the design build industry. A little bit if any of design and a lot of big build. Then before long, things deteriorate into "no language homogenization" - they are really not trying to be one thing or another. Anytime you get caught in that, you're failing, and I guess there's a number of architects that get caught up in that, it's sad really.

**Q**: What would you like to see the AIA do that they are not currently doing?

**A**: (Laughs out loud) Oh man! I know it sounds terrible but I'd like them to get rid of IDP, continuing ed, it may sound radical but I'd like them to become less bureaucratic. They've done a great job at promoting design, they've pushed excellence and other good issues, whatever they can do to

simplify our lives in terms of time spent, that's the tricky part. I'm not very happy with the nature of our chapter, it's become too suburban, and I wish it was a little more high design. Absolutely nothing wrong with the suburbs. I've taught courses at Maryland and Catholic about re-designing Silver Spring, the new suburbia which is becoming this very interesting mix of new interesting architecture but it's still highway driven. We are currently designing almost 400,000SF of space there as well. But there's the way out there past Frederick where it starts to get very "new suburban". I think it would be interesting if the critics would focus on a new language [of the suburbs], what is that language, it's no longer object pieces in the landscape but it's not urban eccentricities either. "Surviving sprawl!" would be a great new activity for the chapter to get into. I know Ralph Bennett and I have spent enormous efforts on this subject.

**Q:** What do you feel has been your great success in the practice of architecture?

**A:** Overall, there are several buildings that I really like, and the best stuff is being built right now, but I feel the happiest and the proudest of the intellectual growth that I've put forth, like being a part of the environmental movement, and now growing the metaphorical language of architecture. The Socratic rewards have been the most exciting to me. And that's developing a new way of looking at things. I see it in the philosophic language, it's about hitting a couple of keystones, from having lectured around the world on the "Spirit of Place." I really believe this language is going to resonate.

**Q:** ...so then your biggest failure?

**A:** Not sending my parents enough love cards...It's been twelve hours a day and you always wonder about your personal life and if you've given it enough time. You always look at your design failures as a growing process, what did you get out of that. I felt like I failed when I got over involved with community change and activism and I didn't have any buildings to show - but later I realized that this was one of the great advantages I had! I wish I hadn't spent so much time in post-modern classicism. I wish I had done bigger projects...it's hard to think back without thinking about lots of little failures, lots of them!

**Q:** What keeps you going, why do you work so hard? Are you feeding your ego, or your family, or is there more than that?

**A:** Well you never stop feeding all of those, but I was on a rooftop in NYC in 1973, two feet of snow, we're building solar collectors at 3 AM in the morning, these students from Yale and MIT with the bro's from the south Bronx ghettos are working with me and someone freezing and tired says "What are we doing up here, it's three in the morning and it's snowing, we're dying up here, why are we here?" I couldn't answer him any other way and I said "History. Guys. History." I just love that feeling of finding a new book, finding a new perspective, in my own work finding a new idea. Yea love and life keep me going. Down deep, when you're really hurting, when your getting kicked around, when you lose a project, or are fighting with the historic commission, you just pull out and get into that spiritual realm, ask yourself what it's worth, and reaffirm that expanding your perceptions is worth it all!

*Travis Price lectured recently in 2003 on his design philosophy at Aix en Provence, Sicily, Italy, The Smithsonian, Kathmandu, Nepal, the National Geographic Society, the AIA, and ACSA*