

1988 October 11



Rick and Deanna Pumple
320 Stevens Road
Victoria, B. C. V8X 3X3

Dear Rick and Deanna:

Because of my largely undemonstrative responses to changes made in the design of your house, I owe you a statement of my position on the matter. The purpose of what I will say is not meant to upset anyone, nor do I intend to pursue the issue further. I am speaking out not even solely as the author of your house but rather, because I cannot allow the desecration of original creative work to sail by unannounced.

You approved my design and you approved the working drawings. We made a number of adjustments, at your request, before construction started--to the decks, breakfast area, kitchen access--and I was never led to believe there was any lack of communication between us. We talked at length of materials, colours, window design and various effects both inside and out, and it was understood that I would provide, gratis, construction details necessary to achieve the overall design as well as the design of specific parts.

However, almost from the start of construction, undiscussed liberties with the plans were taken. Dismissal of the deep window reveals on the north was followed by changes in wall heights, exterior catwalk railing, stair design, fascia details, and finally, the devastating change prompting this letter--violation of the major external element of the house: the south elevation.

Instead of a shadow plane within which dark-framed windows and mullions were intended to recede in a dominant squared "arch" of glass, we see patchy squads of white frames screaming for attention. Where there were to be sharp definitions of form and a play of light and dark, files of superficial holes have taken their place. I would be hard-pressed to think of anything so destructive to the exterior design as the changes you have made to the south elevation. These changes are misunderstood, misrepresented, mistaken and totally rejected by me. The house you have built is not the house I designed for you and, should anyone ask who your architect was, I hope you will state my unequivocal renunciation of what has been done.

Presumably you feel justified in having made these changes. Culturally,

TO CLIENTS
OF
RICHARD H.

we are brought up with the notion that we own what we pay for. Ownership conveys a license of will: individual judgements, if questioned at all, are deemed intrinsically right if exercised on things which are ours. If I slice up a forest, poke holes in a Picasso, or blow up a mountain, who's business is it if I hold title? But does morality follow law or is it the other way around? And: what is ownership? What, exactly, can be owned?


Copyright law is fairly clear on this point: protection from alteration to a building design having "artistic intent" lies with the design documents. Copyright is held only by the designer--analogous to the situation with writers--regardless of who pays for a commissioned work. As with books, ownership can be in the fabricated thing but copyrighted documents used to produce the work protect it from alteration without permission from the copyright holder.

The subject of social morality and human rights vs. law and individual liberties is as old as Hellenic Greece and will become increasingly cogent as the evolution of expedient values carries us closer and closer to world disaster. If I understand him correctly, Sophocles clarified that moral conduct on the deepest levels of responsibility could not be codified, but rested on a ground of universal understanding that may seem ambiguous to those in control but which is nonetheless vivid and powerful from the standpoint of the transgressed. Antigone's plea, with its empathetic hope for the resurrection of her brother's corpse in a different world, is a modern appeal for an aborted environment, where, amongst all the arts, architecture--in spite of the dismal state to which it has fallen in our time--is still the best, perhaps the only, means we have of constructing models of how to live on this planet. A blow to the built environment, as with every blow to nature, reverberates beyond the immediate to the unseen, the yet to be perceived. Ultimately, moral action is survival--biospheric and cultural. It may often be difficult but, unlike law, it is deeply known by almost everyone. There is nothing esoteric about this knowledge. When it miscarries, it is not out of ignorance but out of arrogance toward those collective intuitions wherein lie the true limits of individual freedom.

Near the end of his life, Eric Mendelsohn, the great German architect, said, "Art is not easy."

That simple, not so obvious statement with its rich implications for human work is the high ground to which we must return when, as a civilization, we finally acknowledge the true nature of expedient action.

Thanks for hearing me out. I wish you well.


Richard Hunter