

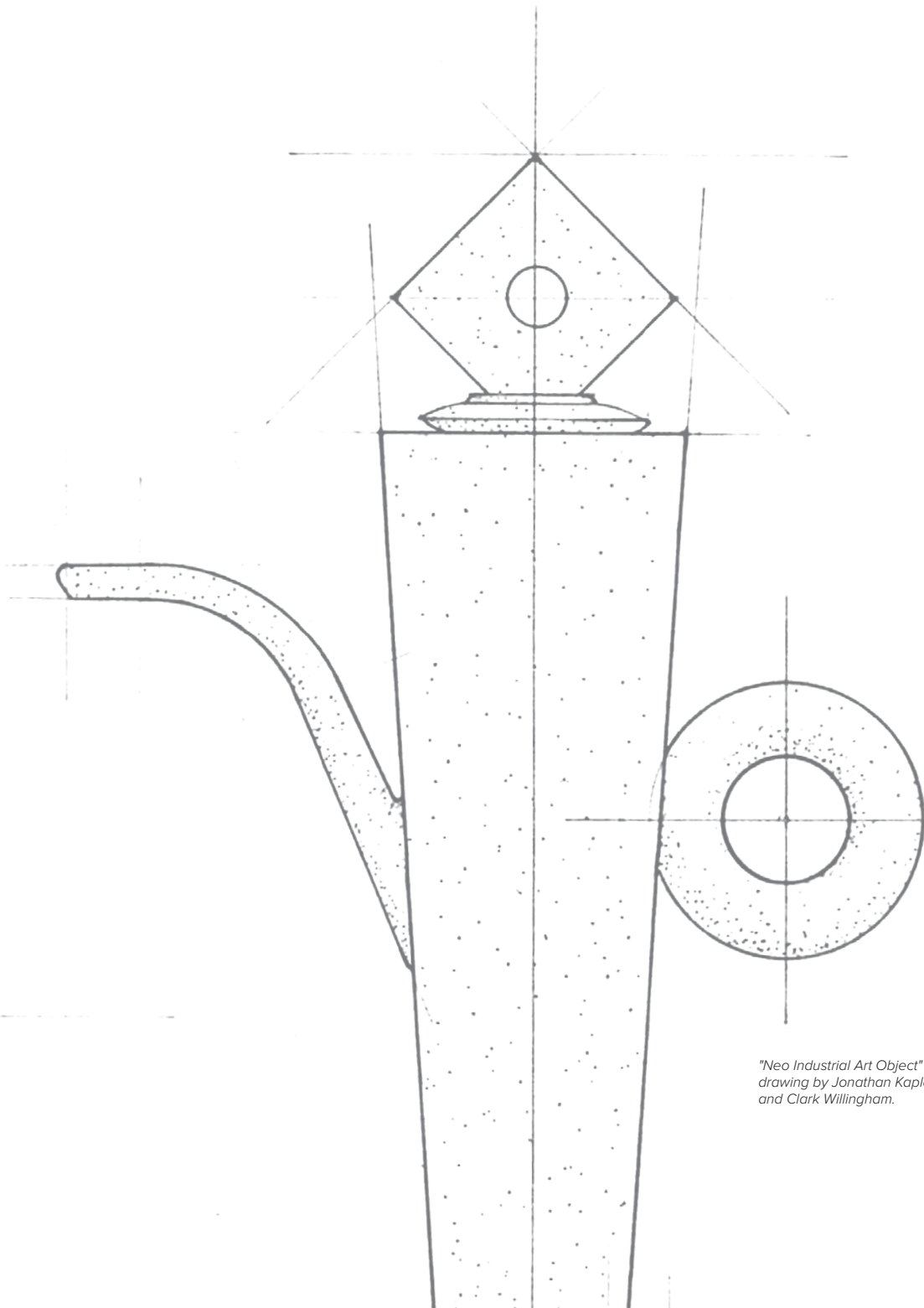
LET'S TALK ABOUT BUILDING(S) ... ARCHITECTONICALLY SPEAKING

BY JONATHAN KAPLAN

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uring my
early years of
college study,

I remember countless conversations with fellow students and faculty about all things architecture, including architect Louis Sullivan's phrase "form follows function." Many discussions included the book *Memory and Creative Thinking*, by Steven M. Smith and Thomas B. Ward with Ronald Finke. Finke uses the term "function follows form" as part of a methodology of thinking called SIT, or Systematic Inventive Thinking, which focuses on the idea that in problem solving all resourceful solutions share common patterns. A significant companion text was Christopher Alexander's treatise, *A Pattern Language*, which illustrates that there are identifiable systems, patterns, and nomenclatures in architecture that redefine



"Neo Industrial Art Object"
drawing by Jonathan Kaplan
and Clark Willingham.

the accessibility of the building process regardless of culture or location. My architecture studies succumbed to the temptation of clay. Even so, those pivotal years studying the physical structure, history, and construction of buildings, as well as architectural design philosophy, were the beginning of a journey to find my own voice in ceramics.

I began a studio practice outside of Philadelphia in 1976. The timing could not have been more fortuitous. Wholesale and retail markets were beginning to offer viable sales opportunities. Galleries were opening every month. The public had an insatiable demand for utilitarian work. I produced a line of stoneware pottery, which I sold at major wholesale and retail craft events throughout the country. My work was uncomplicated, had a strong sense of form and simple surface embellishments created by layered, satin matte glazes. As I look back, I can see that those pots were totally market-driven, but they sustained me for thirteen years.

After a three-year break spent working in the ski and bike industries in the Colorado mountains, I returned to making pottery, but the demand for handmade ceramics was in a decline. I floundered for several

years, trying to carve a niche in an anemic marketplace. I had some plaster-working skills and knew how to make molds. Those simple skills morphed into a ceramic manufacturing and design business, and with a core group of dedicated employees, Ceramic Design Group built a diverse client base, which we served for sixteen years.

During this time, I was able to dedicate some time to making my own work, which resulted in a shift in how I thought about content and process. I designed a series of pieces titled *Neo-Industrial Art Objects*. I made them for no specific use, and creating them was the first step in finding my true voice in ceramics. I used slip-cast forms made from models and molds of both found objects and those of my own making. I discovered industrial parts and fittings in the McMaster-Carr catalog that could be joined to the clay pieces. I enjoyed the visual counterpoint that was created between the handmade and machine-made parts. This concept of “parts and wholes” enabled me to think and work in a nonlinear fashion.

In 2006, it was time for another change. I closed Ceramic Design Group and

moved from the Colorado High Country to Denver, where I began a personal studio practice and, a year later, opened a gallery for contemporary ceramic art. I started to work in a new space and a new city, and was frustrated with my inability to envision what constituted a body of work for me. I saw a definite pattern in many other potters’ work that identified them. Form, decoration, line: all distinctive giveaways. Comparing their works to mine, I was at a loss to determine the defining qualities of my ceramics. Given my lengthy, dedicated, and determined career, shouldn’t I have been able to create a body of work that was totally mine? I certainly was not working in a vacuum; I was not isolated from the world around me and did not lack for visual stimulation. What were my influences, and how would I identify them as unique to me? And would those inspirations be enough for me to build and nurture work of my own?

After many false starts, I realized my new studio explorations had a very strong connection to my early studies in architecture and the writings of Christopher Alexander. Alexander’s *A Pattern Language* is about how patterns become evident and

VISUALIZING CONSTRUCTIONS

Kaplan’s creative process involves hundreds of steps. Here are five that provide an overview. Photographs by the author and Dorothy Bensusan.



1 The teapot body, solid cast in plaster from a found object. A cottle at the top will form the lid.



2 The lid is turned using the potter’s wheel as a vertical lathe.

essential in the architectural process. His premise is that there are many archetypal patterns and sequences (patterns being sets of guidelines, which once defined and put in succession create sequences) that over centuries have guided the design and creation of buildings, and that people can apply these patterns to making buildings for themselves. In creating a structure, they might ask themselves such questions as, “Should this door open to the left or to the right?” They understand the utility, the comfort, and the purpose of the buildings they design. Taken together, these experiences become the basics of a language that determines patterns, then sequences for design and construction. They are part of a collective memory within a culture, a society, a group, or a neighborhood, of physical things that work successfully. Alexander states, “These tools allow anyone, and any group of people, to create beautiful, functional, meaningful places.”

In his four-volume series, *The Nature of Order: An Essay on the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe* (2003-4), Alexander elaborates on the concept of pattern language, interpreting it in a more global

sense. These writings about the nature of space describe its influence on ideas about architecture, building, planning, and our view of the world in general. The connection between Alexander’s ideas and my design process solidified as I saw the similarity between the patterns and sequences in the architectural method of concept, design, organization, and construction and their relationship to my design process.

For instance, a “pattern” in a teapot form is the language developed from asking such questions as, What constitutes a comfortable handle? Is the body or vessel overly weighted when it contains liquid? How do you design a lid that helps keep the tea warm and does not fall out when the tea is poured? How does the handle fit the hand and fingers? What might be the design considerations for a spout that does not drip and pours effortlessly? The visual, functional, structural, and ergonomic relationships are all patterns that determine a sequence. The architectonics of my work were based on an underlying structure of patterns and sequences. Those core elements of my early series *Neo-Industrial Art Objects* provided the foundation for further study and exploration.

What information do I get from form, shape, space, and line? How does it manifest itself in my thinking? How can I make it personal and unique? The design process begins with visualizing the structure of a form. I start with patterns, which are the slip-cast elements, and assemble them. Adding materials – glass, machined aluminum or steel, and manufactured parts, such as phenolic ball knobs, cable, ferrules, and rubber tubing – completes the assembly of the piece. This process is very similar to the designing and subsequent massing of form in the architectural process. Questions that arise during that process, such as How does a building relate to its surroundings? What is the space that it occupies? How might people use it? all apply here.

To visualize my constructions, I often use Ashlar Vellum’s 2-D and 3-D drafting software “Graphite” and its 3-D modeling software “Cobalt” as well as Rhinoceros for the Mac. These programs create a virtual, three-dimensional interface. Manipulating the computer-generated elements can produce new combinations, which can be changed in any way. After I’ve built the model and companion casting molds,



3 The model is cut using a custom band saw jig; then handle and spout forms are added.



4 A three-part mold is made, then used cast the form in porcelain.



5 *Teapot Grid*, 2016, detail of nine teapot forms finished with underglazes, cold finishes, and wall-mounted.

Jonathan Kaplan. Trio, 2016. Slip cast porcelain, fired to Cone 6; glass, machined 6061 aluminum, tempered 3/8 in. glass, hardware, phenolic parts. 30 x 10 x 5 in.



BIO

Jonathan Kaplan has followed his muse as a production potter, ceramic artist, a university educator, a professional mold and model maker, a ceramic designer and manufacturer. He curates Plinth Gallery in Denver, Colorado and is a member of the International Academy of Ceramics.

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slip-casting allows me to reproduce *any* shape and intuitively build towards a finished piece, whose design, when completed, is unique.

If I am using found objects, I also use the very direct method of rotating them, turning them upside down, or otherwise altering their relationship with each other as I hold them in front of me. For example, at the grocery store, I bought a bowl containing pre-cut watermelon pieces. This container was a six-sided, lobed, plastic bowl, a symmetrical and unassuming object. It was not necessary to spend time at the computer to visualize the final piece. Filling the plastic bowl with plaster, it became the model for the teapot body. After adding the slip reservoir, or “spare,” directly on top of the form, the teapot body was complete. I hand-carved a spout and handle from small blocks of plaster. Then using the potter’s wheel as a vertical lathe, I easily created a plaster model for a lid that fit the diameter of the opening of the teapot body. I made molds from these original models, slip-cast the parts, and combined them to form the full teapot. As a last step, I integrate industrial parts or machined components, which creates a visual contrast between hand-made and manufactured elements.

David Batz, a former ceramics instructor at the Cleveland Institute of Art, eloquently stated that what we do as potters and ceramic artists is to “ascribe form for human usage.” This phrase has stayed with me for many years. While we *ascribe* form, we also *create* form. With our imagination and ceramic skills, we purposely balance what works visually with function and ergonomics. How we use a functional ceramic object changes our perception of and relationship with that object. How we negotiate and experience a well-designed building changes our relationship to that space. I reference utility and containment with the form. My teapots can certainly be used, they pour without dripping, the lids do not fall out when pouring liquid, their handles are ergonomic. Yet, I realize that they may never be used; they may just be admired as art objects on a shelf.

My past study of architecture propels my trajectory forward. Whether form follows function or its reverse is really irrelevant. They are both appropriate. Much as architecture is the study and creation of buildings and their environments, their design and structure; the study of ceramics also embodies these same concepts. For both,

pattern and sequence form a core structure, the language and organization of thinking that then becomes represented in a physical object, a house, a barn, a pitcher, a casserole, a simple cup. The design and construction of buildings and the making of ceramic objects are architecturally entwined.

Over time, I have become less comfortable with the tags potter, ceramic designer, maker, ceramic artist. While all are applicable to me, I am a designer working primarily with clay and have a deep vocabulary of tool and technique. There is a well-developed architecture in what I make. I am not bound by any constraint in method or material, nor am I bound by any strict adherence to utility, by preconception or historical imperative. I look in awe at the symmetries between cultures and am humbled by what remains as historical evidence in clay. With an acknowledgement of the deep history of ceramics, I endeavor to make choices in my work that will continue to engage and interest me and, I hope, others. Perspective is indeed a wonderful thing; my voice resonates quite clearly now.