Preface

There is an important social context in which the design and production of architecture takes place. This context includes the profession, architecture firms, clients, and practitioners' shared ideas about how buildings ought to look and ought to function. By and large most analyses of architectural practice have been historical or have examined the products of practice—the styles and the uses of buildings. Instead, I focus attention on the social underpinnings of design and production activities. The main theme of the book is that there are contradictory features in contemporary practice. They endanger the basis of architects' commitment and their collaboration; they create inconsistencies between architects' intentions and their accomplishments; and they generate inescapable dilemmas for firms that inevitably compete for design awards, commissions, and for sheer survival.

Of course, many scholars have dealt with the social history of the profession and of architectural practice. However, the focus has been on the most prominent architects or the critical events that have shaped the nature of the profession. Instead, I chose to investigate issues concerning the present, and I am interested in the great variability among many architects rather than the prominent and well known. For that reason offices were randomly sampled, and they exhibit great differences in many respects. The initial study was carried out in 1974, and it included 152 Manhattan offices and the architects who worked in them. After a severe economic recession a second study of the same firms was carried out in 1979 in order to explain how they generally fared and why some survived while others did not.

There are established interdisciplinary ties between sociologists and architects. They have collaborated with one another in user surveys and in neighborhood and community impact studies. Besides, sociologists, as well as psychologists and anthropologists, have carried out research on the interdependence between the built environment and the attitudes and behavior of people who work and live in that environment. This is research with which many architects are familiar. Such collaborative activities and research endeavors are motivated by humanistic concerns—to improve the quality of residents' lives and to enhance the urban environment. The reader who expects this book, written by a sociologist, either to add to our knowledge about the interrelationships between the built environment and people's attitudes and behavior, or to provide guidelines to professionals who want to improve the amenities offered by buildings, may be disappointed. This is because the research centers on the ways actual practice is influenced by its social context, not on how architects can ameliorate the social functions of buildings.

Indeed, the findings of this study indicate that most architects already want to give priority to the needs of users, yet the expression of that priority in built form is difficult to achieve, given the prevailing social and economic conditions. That is, architects' intentions to improve the usefulness of buildings are thwarted by multiple constraints—clientage, the market, and the organization of architectural practice. These constraints set close limits on the way in which practice can be carried out. Rather important shifts, it is inferred, would have to occur in the political economy of American society before there could be a fundamental change in the design of buildings so that they would better accommodate the psychological and social needs of users.

Although I assume that architects' intentions are thus shaped by the opportunities they have and the constraints with which they must contend, a similar assumption is not made about architectural design. Any cultural product, I assume, has an aesthetic character or style that has considerable autonomy and cannot be reduced to the social structures in which it is produced and embedded. Conventions that guide architecture as aesthetic expression are similar to those that guide the developments of music, the visual arts, and dance, and become incorporated into them. Such conventions are not very different

in this respect from the conventions that underlie the way in which scientific knowledge is produced. Whether it is a novel design form, a new artistic statement, an important idea in science, each will make a dramatic impact in its own field and reshape the thinking of practitioners. This is not to imply that social norms, interpersonal influences, and the resources offered by organizations and work environments have no effect on the likelihood that a new "discovery" in each of these various fields will occur. After a creative discovery is made, however, it will become an integral part of a stylistic repertoire or a body of knowledge and will have long-lasting influence. That influence is independent of the initial facilitating social conditions. Thus, I do not assume that architectural styles are socially determined. Yet, because architects have different experiences, backgrounds, and different colleague relationships, their convictions about style and aesthetic merits of buildings do vary, and these convictions are socially patterned within the professional community. One of my purposes is to map these convictions and to examine how these patterns have consequences for the way in which practice is carried out in architectural offices.

How firm practice under ordinary times is altered by the conditions of dire economic straits is considered in the last chapter. The theme that there are structures of risk that arise from the contradictory features of practice and the profession of architecture are most apparent when we consider which firms fail, which firms barely survive, and which ones prosper during a severe economic recession. The legend of Daedalus provides the metaphor for the logic of the theme that structures of risk underlie the process whereby an initial contradiction unfolds to become advantage and disadvantage, success and ruin.