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Architecture Ethics

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Notwithstanding the massive impact that architecture and, more generally, the built, or human-constructed, environment has on people and the planet, serious attempts explicitly to address ethical issues associated with architecture and the built environment have thus far been few and far between, whether we consider approaches to this topic from the philosophical side or the design and architecture side. Thus the study of *architecture ethics*, the *ethics of architecture* or, more generally, the *ethics of the built environment*, the *ethics of the human-constructed realm*, or the *ethics of design*, is still in its infancy (see the introduction to Fox 2000 for more on this point as well as a fairly complete listing of the few books and paper-length contributions on architecture ethics that preceded that publication).

Why is this important field of architecture ethics so underdeveloped? On the architecture side, we can cite several possible reasons. First, we can note Fisher's (2000: 123) point that architecture "has long been viewed as a branch of aesthetics rather than ethics. If anything, ethics has been thought of as applying to architects and not to architecture, to the actions of professionals, not the traits of buildings." (Fisher immediately proceeds to warn that "Our profession, however, has not attended enough to the connection between buildings and ethics, and that has gotten us in trouble", and calls in his concluding chapter for "a conversation about ethics" within the architecture profession.) Second, to the extent that architects do think about ethical issues in their work, they might consider these issues to boil down to little more than the need to follow one's "common sense" or to comply with – or at least not fall foul of – a code of professional conduct such as that developed by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) or by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) (both of which are readily obtainable online). Third, and potentially in significant contrast with the second point, architects might consider some complex ethical issues – including the wider ethical implications of what they do – as too messy to explore in detail ("Let's not open *that* can of worms") or as a "luxury we can't afford" in the context of busy working lives. And, finally, to the extent that architects do wish "to open that can worms" and enter into a serious "conversation about ethics", we can cite the fact that they are trained, obviously enough, in architecture, not in the formal study of ethics. Thus, although thoughtful architecturally schooled commentators will sometimes gesture in ethical directions in their lectures and writings, these gestures are generally viewed from the perspective of formally trained

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ethicists as amounting to little more than that. They are either not explicitly advanced within a developed ethical framework (such as those afforded by the major ethical theories) or, in any case, are not systematically argued.

Turning to the neglect of architecture ethics from the philosophical side, we can cite the fact that Western ethics has, at least for all earthly purposes (i.e. setting aside any putative duties we have in respect of God), been overwhelmingly focused on our obligations in respect of people. This anthropocentric focus of interest has run from the origins of Western ethics in Athens in the fifth century BC, through the Christian-dominated period (initiated by the Roman emperor Constantine in the fourth century) until the Renaissance and beyond, and on through the development of the more secular, rationally grounded forms of ethics that have characterized philosophical discussions from the eighteenth century to the present. Indeed, it is only since the 1970s that (some) philosophers have begun to devote serious, systematic attention to ethical questions in respect of non-human entities such as other sentient beings, living things in general, and ecological systems. These post-1970s developments have gone under the general name *environmental ethics*. However, in their concern to escape the anthropocentric legacy of Western ethics, environmental ethicists have been overwhelmingly concerned with the ethics of the *natural* environment (including non-human animals and other living things) and have largely ignored the *built* environment. Thus, just as the non-human world has constituted a major blind spot in theorizing associated with traditional, anthropocentrically focused forms of ethics, so the built environment has constituted a major blind spot in theorizing associated with the development of environmental ethics to date. The upshot is that the field of “environmental” ethics has not yet realized the full implications of its own name.

But, even if architecture ethics is still in its infancy as a formal field of inquiry, it is undeniable that the actual practice and products of architectural work do issue in a great many ethically relevant concerns. As Wasserman, Sullivan and Palermo (2000: 31) state in their first-of-its-kind textbook *Ethics and the Practice of Architecture*: “Architecture, in its many manifestations, is as much an ethical discipline as a design discipline.”

If we think of ethics as being concerned with *the values we should live by*, then it is helpful to think of the kinds of ethical concerns that are raised by the practice of architecture as falling into at least six (not entirely exclusive and not always compatible) categories:

- (1) Basic forms of professional conduct. This category covers issues that are relevant to professional life in general such as honesty, fair dealing, honoring commitments, gaining and maintaining sufficient skills to perform tasks competently, respecting and advancing the profession, and so on.
- (2) Physical impact of the product of architectural practice (i.e. a built form of some kind) upon people who have direct contact with it (because they live or work in it, use it in other ways, or live close enough to be directly affected by it). Many of these kinds of issues are dealt with these days under the rubric of “health and safety”.
- (3) Psychological impact of the building upon people who have direct contact with it (again, because they live or work in it, use it in other ways, or live close enough to be directly affected by it). This category is concerned with such things as whether

- a building is experienced in a quite straightforward way as, say, drab, dreary and depressing or inspiring and enlivening. Needless to say, these matters can affect people's "quality of life" just as surely as those covered in the previous category.
- (4) What we might call "cultural fit" or "symbolic resonance" (e.g. building an immigration center – or any building for that matter – in the shape of a swastika would be widely regarded as deeply offensive). This is distinguishable from the previous point in that a building could be experienced as inspiring and enlivening were it not for – or perhaps even in spite of – its offensive cultural or symbolic resonances.
 - (5) Physical impact upon the environment. This concern is clearly of immense importance to the future of the planet and has spawned the burgeoning field of sustainable or "green" architecture.
 - (6) What we might call a building's "design fit", that is, the extent to which a building fits with its natural, social and built contexts when considered purely in terms of its design rather than in terms of its actual physical impact or even the preferences that people might have in regard to it.

What resources can the field of ethics bring to bear on these kinds of issues? The main approaches to ethics are referred to as *virtue ethics*, *deontological ethics*, and *consequentialist ethics* or just *consequentialism*. Virtue ethics is concerned with identifying the kinds of virtuous qualities of character that we ought to develop; deontological ethics (from *deon*, duty) is concerned with identifying those principles that we are obliged (i.e. have a duty) to respect in our conduct (independently of concerns about consequences); consequentialism is concerned with identifying the kinds of outcomes that we should strive to maximize (the best-known form of consequentialism is *utilitarianism*, which enjoins us to maximize the general happiness). These forms of ethics are all highly developed – especially in regard to inter-human ethics – and they can all be employed to address the above categories of issues. This does not mean that we simply crank an ethical handle and get an ethical answer; there is as much disputation in ethical discourse as in other high-level forms of discourse. (That said, this fact of intellectual life should not obscure the fact that, as in other high-level forms of discourse, from science to law, there are also substantial areas of agreement.) Rather, it means that we can address ethical questions within systematically developed frameworks of thought that enable us to offer well-developed reasons for our views and so enter into reasoned discussion with others.

In regard to the six categories of issues listed above, we can note that established, anthropocentrically focused forms of virtue ethics are especially (but not only) applicable to the issues covered by the first category, that is, the category of basic forms of professional conduct. Similarly, established, anthropocentrically focused forms of deontological and consequentialist ethics are especially (but not only) applicable to the second, third and fourth categories I have listed above, that is, the categories of direct physical impacts upon people, direct psychological impacts upon people, and impacts upon people that are more obviously culturally/symbolically mediated. The fifth category – that of physical impact upon the environment – can be addressed either *indirectly* by established, anthropocentric approaches to ethics (i.e. by focusing on the indirect impact that the built environment has on people through its direct impacts upon the

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wider natural environment) or *directly* by the approaches that are being developed within environmental ethics from animal welfare ethics to life-based ethics to (especially) ecological integrity based ethics.

At this point, however, a critic might say: "OK, I can see that the practice of architecture raises a great many kinds of ethically relevant questions, but it turns out that these questions can all be dealt with in terms of either established, anthropocentric approaches to ethics or the newer approaches being developed in regard to the ethics of the natural environment; so, although we need to discuss ethical questions concerning architecture, these questions do not confront the field of ethics itself with any genuinely new kinds of challenges. Questions concerning the ethics of architecture are simply *reducible* to other approaches to ethics such as those concerning our obligations in respect of other people, other sentient beings, other living things, or ecosystem integrity. Thus, architecture ethics cannot be thought of as a genuinely independent field of inquiry; it is just another field that is ripe for the *application* of ethical approaches that have been or are being developed elsewhere."

This criticism might have some force were it not for the sixth – "design fit" – category listed above. If people see a building that "sticks out like a sore thumb", they will often spontaneously exclaim words to the effect that "There ought to be a law against it" (and sometimes there is). Moreover, even if it turns out that the building has a relatively low environmental impact in measurable, physical terms and is, on the whole, accepted by others (e.g. perhaps other people "don't mind it" in part because it provides more car parking space than other buildings or perhaps they take some kind of perverse pride in the fact that it has helped to "put the place on the map"), someone might still object to this building *in principle* on the grounds that its design does not fit its context. Is this "just" an aesthetic reaction? Or is it a more strongly normatively laden reaction – as the expression "There ought to be a *law* against it" suggests? This is a key question for architecture ethics for this reason: if we agree that the values we should live by (which is to say, the *ethics* we should adopt) are such that we should object to this kind of building *regardless* of both the preferences of others and the (physical) environmental impact of such a building, then it means that the field of architecture ethics does indeed deal with questions that are not reducible to traditional, anthropocentric approaches to ethics or the newer approaches being developed in regard to the ethics of the natural environment (or, for that matter, aesthetics, since the stipulation that we are concerned with *the values we should live by* specifies that we are dealing with concerns that are, at base, ethical rather than aesthetic, or only aesthetic). It means, in other words, that architecture ethics must be considered as a field of inquiry in its own right. Indeed, it might even be that in tackling this theoretically challenging – but architecturally central – "design fit" issue ethicists are forced to develop new approaches not just to architecture ethics but to ethics in general (see Fox 2006 for an approach to ethics that proceeds on this basis).

References and Further Reading

- Fisher, T. (2000). *In the Scheme of Things: Alternative Thinking on the Practice of Architecture* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press).
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