The question of the ethics of the built environment

I want to address the question of the ethics of the built environment in what I take to be its most fundamental form. This might seem only appropriate in a book on this subject. Even so, I think that to the extent that most people might think about this question at all, they would probably find it extremely difficult to focus fairly and squarely on the question of the ethics of the built environment in the sense in which I want to here. The issue can be put this way. I think that most people, and certainly most philosophers, would not consider the built environment to be an appropriate focus of moral concern in its own right. Instead, I think that most people, including philosophers, would consider that questions regarding built environments should only enter into moral discussion in so far as these environments are considered to matter to, impact upon, or in some way affect, those kinds of beings or entities in respect of which we think we have direct moral obligations. This directly morally relevant class of beings or entities has typically been restricted to other people (sometimes not all other people). (I have elsewhere described this traditional focus of ethics as ‘the closed moral universe of the Old Ethics’; see Fox, forthcoming, for a full discussion.) More controversially, the morally relevant class might be taken to include sentient creatures in general, life forms in general (i.e. whether sentient or non-sentient) or even widely distributed systems that maintain some sort of holistic integrity over time, like ecosystems and the ecosphere. But whatever the case, the non-rational, non-sentient, non-living, non-self-organising, non-self-renewing built environment is not generally thought of as being of moral consequence in its own right. The value and
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relevance of the built environment to ethical discussion is generally considered to be purely of a secondary, derivative, or indirect kind.

This response immediately raises the following challenge: Do we even need an ethics of the built environment *per se*? If the built environment is only of moral consequence to the extent that it is useful or in some sense valuable to other kinds of entities then surely all we need is an ethics that applies to those kinds of entities. It will then follow as a logical consequence that in respecting those entities we will have to take into account those things that are useful or in some sense valuable to them, including, where relevant, the built environment. Since the built environment *per se* is only of moral consequence in this indirect way, the very idea of an ethics of the built environment *per se* is unnecessary, surplus to moral requirements.

However, if that is really all there is to be said about the ethics of the built environment *per se* then we are left argumentatively/rationally helpless to respond to the following sort of situation. Consider two examples of the built environment: houses, office buildings, roads — take your pick. Suppose that they are of similar overall usefulness or value to people, to sentient creatures, and even to life forms in general (for the sake of the argument, we’ll set aside the philosophical questions regarding whether or not something can really be said to be useful or valuable to an entity that is non-sentient). Suppose that these two examples of the built environment even have the same overall impact on the self-renewing properties of their surrounding ecosystem and the ecosphere in general. *By definition*, then, there is no indirect morally based reason to favour one of these built environments over the other, since they are just as useful or valuable as each other to all the main candidates for membership of the moral class.

Now suppose that one of these examples of the built environment — let’s assume it’s a building — is simply imposed upon its natural and built environments in a very arbitrary way, a way that bears no particular relationship to these environments in terms of its design (even though, as we have said, its measurable physical/environmental impact upon the world is no worse than that of the other building). And suppose that, in contrast, the other building is designed in such a way that it clearly relates to, or *coheres* with, its natural and built environments. Now, to you, being the design-sensitive person you are(!), the former building might be such a distressing sight to behold that your gut reaction might be that ‘there ought to be a law against it’. Indeed, I think this is a very common experience in today’s world — and, of course, there are laws and regulations that would forbid such building in some areas and places. Yet, as we’ve already said, in this hypothetical instance, your view (and
those of any others who happen to share it) is cancelled out, or at least swamped, by the preferences of other people who:

1. may not like the design of the building either but whose preferences for its overall usefulness to them are significantly stronger than yours;
2. may simply not care very much one way or the other – or not even really know how they feel about its design (also a common experience I think); or
3. may in fact actually like the design of the building or have grown to like it (e.g. they might only care about how exciting the design of the building itself is and not care or even notice whether the building fits in with its larger natural and built environmental contexts).

If space allowed we could flesh out the above abstract comparison with all sorts of particular, real-world (or least potentially real-world) examples. But, in each case, what would be at stake with respect to the buildings themselves in these comparisons would be ‘simply’ a matter of the extent to which their designs suit, fit in or cohere with their context. I have guaranteed this in the abstract comparison above by making it clear that the overall usefulness or value of the buildings under discussion is the same with respect to all the most likely candidates for inclusion in the moral class. But so what? What’s so important about such a comparison? Isn’t it the case that emphasising the contextual ‘fit’ of a building’s design might be seen as a concern that lies a long way down any ‘ethics of the built environment’ priority list? Surely there are many nitty-gritty issues that are ultimately both more urgent and more important than finessing the design details of a building in the direction of greater contextual ‘fit’ (whatever that might mean). A quick list of some of these (allegedly) more urgent and important issues might include (1) matters relating to employment; (2) social equity (e.g. who pays for the building or subsidises it? Who gets to use it? Where will any profits from this usage go?); (3) accessibility of the site by foot, public transport and private vehicle; (4) accessibility to the building itself for the elderly, infirm and disabled; (5) public participation in the design process; and (6) impact upon the natural environment in terms of both the building’s construction and ongoing operation (the building’s ecological footprint). In the face of all these important issues, it is easy to imagine a hard-headed politician or businessman lampooning a concern for a building that fits its context as expressive of, say, ‘the aesthetic preferences of the cappuccino crowd’. And why should ‘the aesthetic preferences of the cappuccino crowd’ be allowed to stand in the way of the ‘most reasonable cost option’ for a building that is as good as any other (perhaps even better) on most other grounds?
However, the reason I have highlighted the contrasting designs example, which can lead to challenges of the above kind, is precisely because it serves to present the question of the ethics of the built environment in its sharpest and most fundamental form. This follows from the fact that all the issues mentioned above in regard to the ethics of the built environment – employment, social equity, accessibility of the site by various means, accessibility to the building, public participation in its design and ecological sustainability – can potentially be reduced to the question of what is best for or most useful to some class of entities that are thought of as being of moral consequence in their own right. But if all these questions can be reduced in this way then we are back to the questions I asked at the outset: Do we even need an ethics of the built environment per se? If ethical questions concerning the built environment are reducible in this way then isn’t the very idea of an ethics of the built environment per se surplus to moral requirements?

On the other hand, if it could be shown that the ‘mere’ design of one building should be preferred to another in principle (i.e. regardless of whether or not the two buildings are of the same overall usefulness or value to whatever moral class one wishes to specify), then we have established the ground for an ethics of the built environment as such. Moreover, like other general evaluative principles, any principle that served to underpin, legitimate and even require this differential evaluation of the two designs would presumably have to be one of considerable depth or generality. And if this were the case then it would be reasonable to expect that this principle would necessarily flow into a great many other aspects of our judgements with respect to the construction of buildings, including the list of ‘nitty-gritty’ concerns given above (i.e. this principle would apply to these concerns regardless of the extent to which these concerns might also be analysable in terms of issues of usefulness or value to some morally relevant class). Under these circumstances, it would seem that one could then speak of ‘the ethics of building’ or ‘the ethics of the built environment’ as a wide ranging bona fide area of enquiry in its own right.

Responsive cohesion as the foundation of value theory in general and, hence, ethics in particular

I want to propose that there is in fact a foundational principle at work in value theory in general and ipso facto ethics in particular (‘ipso facto ethics in particular’ because ethics is centrally an evaluative enterprise and, hence, necessarily a part of value theory). Moreover, I want to claim that when this foundational principle is applied to the built environment,
it does indeed require that we judge some forms of the built environment as better than others, even when considered ‘merely’ at the level of the extent to which their designs suit, fit in or cohere with their context. I refer to this foundational principle as the principle of responsive cohesion and will argue for it below. The usual caveat is required in a contribution of this length as to the necessary brevity of the argument that follows for such a strong claim, but I nevertheless trust that what follows will be more than simply suggestive in its overall thrust.

Beginning with ethics in particular, we can observe that, whatever our particular preferences in ethical theory at the fine-grained level (some version of virtue ethics? duty/principle based ethics? consequentialist ethics?), the ethical theories that reflective judges consider to be best are those that exemplify the principle of responsive cohesion in terms of both their method and their content. I will consider these in turn.

In terms of method, a good ethical theory is one that is open to continual feedback and mutual accommodation between the theory and the personal evaluations of moral agents. For example, suppose that someone claims that the best ethical approach is one in which moral agents should strive for the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people (a version of consequentialist ethics, specifically utilitarianism, which might, on the face of it, sound like a fairly sensible and appealing position). It would seem that a straightforward consequence of this view, as written, is that it would be morally permissible to sacrifice the life of an innocent person (or perhaps a presumed-innocent-until-proven-guilty person as in, for example, the handing over of a pre-trial prisoner to a lynch mob) if that seemed to be the best way to secure the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. (This is a common form of objection against utilitarianism.) However, this course of action is likely to rub against the personal evaluations of good and bad actions, or right and wrong actions, of a great many reflective people. They are then confronted with a choice. On the one hand, they can consider the merits of the theory more closely and perhaps come to the view that, on balance, the arguments in its favour are so compelling that they ought to modify their personal evaluations in the face of them, and so come to accept this (originally) unpalatable course of action as justifiable. On the other hand, they can consider the reasons for their objections to this course of action more closely, and perhaps come to the view that, on balance, these reasons are so compelling that the theory ought to be modified in order to accommodate these objections – or perhaps even be abandoned in favour of a better theory. Either way, this process then continues as the revised personal evaluations or theory are repeatedly tested against each other with respect to new problems.
This procedure of moving to and fro between personal evaluations and an ethical theory in order to reach a point of mutual accommodation represents the basic method in rationally based ethical discussion. The influential American philosopher John Rawls (1972) has famously described this method in ethics as ‘the method of reflective equilibrium’. Indeed, Rawls’s descriptive label for this method is so famous that some people now seem to associate the method itself with Rawls. However, Rawls hardly invented this method; rather, he simply helped to highlight this way of proceeding in ethics by giving it a name and explicitly drawing attention to it as a method (i.e. as opposed simply to employing this method in an implicit way, as is typically done). Rawls himself was aware both of this and of the fact that ‘the process of mutual adjustment of principles and considered judgements is not peculiar to moral philosophy’ (Rawls 1972: 20).

I would be more inclined to refer to the basic method of rationally based ethical discussion outlined here as ‘the method of responsive cohesion’. (Owing to space limitations, I cannot outline my reasons for this preference in relation to Rawls’s terminology here, but I do so elsewhere: see Fox, forthcoming.) The term cohere literally means to cling, hold, stick or adhere together (from Latin cohaerere, from co together and haerere to cling, adhere). The adjectival term responsive (from Latin respondsum, answer) suggests that the way in which we should strive to reach a state in which theory and personal evaluations cohere or ‘cling together’ is through a process in which each side is responsive to, or answers to, the challenges thrown up by the other side. This responsiveness can take the accommodating form of accepting the challenge that has been made, and thus modifying the side against which the challenge was made, or the oppositional form of a critical counter-challenge to the other side. The upshot of this process is that cohesion between the two sides is ultimately brought about, assuming this goal is reached, through a process of mutual accommodation, adjustment, adaptation or reconciliation between theory and evaluations.

In contrast to the method of responsive cohesion (or Rawls’s reflective equilibrium), bad procedure in ethical theorising consists in the extremes that lie on either side. One extreme is that of coming up with a rigidly fixed code that is completely impervious to criticism based on considered personal evaluations, for example a code that is claimed to be ‘God given’, or sanctioned by an inflexible tradition, or sanctioned by a King (or equivalent power) who has a ‘divine right’ to rule. The general message is this: the code is right, any contrary personal evaluations you have are in error; ergo, the correct ‘method’ of reconciliation is this: you must modify your personal evaluations whenever they conflict with the code.
The other extreme to that of having a completely rigid code or ‘theory’ is that of eschewing the organising function of theory altogether. On this scenario, one’s personal evaluations are always right, whatever they are, and don’t need to be justified or modified in the light of any thoughtful arguments to the contrary. In other words, anything one thinks is OK goes: relativism and nihilism rule, OK? It’s hard to know which of these extremes is worse: the unchallengeable static, rigid order of the former or the equally unchallengeable all-over-the-place chaos of the latter. In contrast, ensuring that ethical theories and personal evaluations are responsive to each other, and so working towards a cohesion (or ‘clinging together’) between theories and evaluations on that basis, would seem to be infinitely preferable.

Having briefly considered the question of the best method of ethics, let us now turn to the question of the content of ethics. With respect to this area too, I want to argue that, whatever our particular preferences in ethical theory at a fine-grained level, the ethical theories that reflective judges generally consider to be best are those that exhibit the principle of responsive cohesion in terms of their content. Expressed simply, thoughtful reflection generally suggests that, whatever their specific details, the best approaches to ethics are those in which we are permitted the freedom to be responsive to our own goals and desires, but not to the extent of trampling on the interests of others in doing so. Why not? The answer is that at the same time as we are permitted the freedom to be responsive to our own goals and desires, we are also required to be responsive to others who are also permitted the freedom to be responsive to their own goals and desires. The upshot is a considerable degree of freedom within which to pursue our own goals and desires, but not so much freedom that we are morally permitted to ride roughshod over the interests of others in doing so. There are arguments about the extent of the infringements that each of us ought to be able to make upon the interests of others, about exactly what classes or kinds of ‘others’ are deemed to have moral claims upon us, and so on, but this remains the broad outline of the content of those ethical theories that we consider to be worth taking seriously. It is a shared commitment to this general kind of understanding that defines a responsive – and hence adaptive – moral community (where ‘community’ refers to a form of social arrangement that coheres or ‘clings together’ because of its own internal social dynamics). In a moral community of this kind, individuals are viewed as being loosely (hence, fluidly) coupled to each other rather than tightly coupled (in which case individual freedom is diminished) or not connected at all (in which case the sense, and the fact, of living in a community disappears).
This solution to the moral problem — the solution of significant individual freedom within a loosely coupled moral community — exemplifies the general principle of responsive cohesion between moral agents. This is because this form of cohesion is brought about through the process of moral agents being responsive to both their own goals and desires and the needs of others to be responsive to their own goals and desires. This, again, represents a middle way between the extremes on either side. On the one hand, there is the extreme of what we could call ‘moral slavery’, where the freedom to pursue one’s own goals and desires is largely or even completely curtailed by the extent of our moral obligations to others and/or in respect of some overarching authority. This represents a ‘tightly coupled’ and/or rigidly organised moral community in which one is not permitted the freedom — or sufficient freedom — to be responsive to one’s own goals and desires. On the other hand, there is the possibility that Thomas Hobbes famously associated with the raw ‘state of nature’ in which there is a ‘war of every man against every man’ — in other words, social disorganisation, anarchy, chaos. This represents the complete lack of a moral community in which one is only responsive to one’s own goals and desires and not at all responsive to the goals and desires of others (unless it happens to be one’s pleasure to be so). In contrast to these extremes, it is those ethical theories that exemplify the principle of responsive cohesion in their content that reflective judges generally consider to be the main candidates for being taken seriously when it comes to guiding the actual ways in which we ought to live, which, after all, is the main point of ethics.

To this point, then, I have tried to show that, whatever their specific details, good ethical theories are those that exemplify the foundational principle of responsive cohesion at the level of both method and content. The next point to make is that ethics is just one area among others, albeit a very significant one, in which we make evaluative judgements, that is, judgements of good and bad, better and worse. Although philosophers tend to think of value theory (or axiology, from Greek axios, worthy) as consisting primarily of ethics and aesthetics, it is clear that we in fact make judgements of better and worse in a great many other areas of life too. For example, we make judgements of better and worse in regard to issues concerning epistemology in general and science in particular, the personal psychologies or mental states of others, politics, skills (including sports), the quality of the natural environment and the quality of the built environment. Perhaps the philosophical tendency to confine the realm of value theory (axiology) to ethics and aesthetics reflects little more than the fact that philosophy still largely retains these disciplines as its own. But however that may be, it is clear that all the major areas of
life that I have just listed are grist for the mill of value theory, broadly conceived.

The way in which the argument I am presenting develops in these ‘extra-ethical’ value theory contexts can only be indicated here rather than developed at any length, but the general point is this: I want to claim that, whether they realise it or not, informed observers make judgements of better and worse in each of these contexts on the basis of a general principle that could reasonably be described as one of responsive cohesion. Many other more fine-grained sorts of considerations will enter into judgements in each area that are specific to that area of course, but the principle of responsive cohesion is always at work at the very foundation of these judgements. Let us consider some examples, albeit with appalling brevity.

With respect to epistemology and science

Reflective judges generally consider that the best ways of coming to know ‘the way the world is’ involve a responsive cohesion between theory and observations: on the one hand, theory is answerable to relevant observations and, on the other, what counts as a relevant observation is answerable to (a function of) the theory that one is testing. (This is similar, but not identical, to the situation in ethical methodology, where, as we have seen, ethical theory informs personal evaluations and personal evaluations inform ethical theory.) This approach to knowing the world stands in contrast to the extremes on either side. On the one hand, there is the extreme of rigid adherence to a theory in spite of substantial contrary evidence (theoretical rigidity/stasis). On the other hand, there is the extreme of rejecting the organising role of rigorously tested theory altogether, in which case one either lives in ‘a wilderness of single instances’ (observational chaos) or extrapolates from experience left, right and centre (‘wild speculation’, theoretical chaos).

With respect to personal psychologies

Reflective judges generally consider that a person is in the best psychological state when there is a responsive cohesion between their various internal psychological forces (in which case their thoughts, emotions and desires – or cognition, affect and volition – are judged as being well integrated) and between the person as a whole and their external surroundings (in which case their responses are judged as being appropriate to, in keeping with or coherent with their surroundings). This stands in contrast to the extremes on either side. On the one hand, there
is the contrast of rigidity in a person’s inner psychological organisation and ways of dealing with the world (psychological and behavioural rigidity/inflexibility). In this case, we might colloquially describe the person as ‘stuck in a rut’, ‘acting like a zombie’, and so on. On the other hand, there is the contrast of a lack of cohesion in a person’s internal psychological organisation and ways of dealing with the world (psychological chaos and/or causing havoc through their behaviour). In this case, we might colloquially describe the person as ‘falling apart’, ‘all over the place’, ‘a mess’, ‘not together’, and so on.

**With respect to politics**

Reflective judges generally consider that the best forms of politics are those in which there are mechanisms in place to ensure mutual feedback and accommodation (thus, responsive cohesion) between government and people (a situation that is loosely analogous to the relationship that obtains between theory and observations in science or theory and personal evaluations in ethics). In this situation, people are answerable to the laws passed by government and government is answerable to the people through the institutions of free elections, a free press, freedom of expression generally, an independent judiciary, and so on. This responsive cohesion approach to politics stands in contrast to the extremes on either side. On the one hand, there is the contrast of rigid, totalitarian forms of ‘government’ in which the people must be responsive to the ‘government’, but in which there are no mechanisms to ensure that the ‘government’ must be responsive to the people. This typically results in a rigidly imposed form of political cohesion rather than a responsive form of political cohesion, and its grip is often only broken through a rebellion that flips the society (at least temporarily) from a situation of rigidly imposed control to one of social anarchy and chaos. This situation represents the extreme that lies on the other side of a responsive cohesion approach to politics, namely the extreme in which the legitimacy and organising function of government is rejected altogether.

**With respect to skills and the arts**

Reflective judges generally consider that the best examples of skills and arts (whether we are talking about chess, furniture making, high diving, music, drama, novels or painting) exhibit an internal responsive cohesion in that they are judged to ‘hang together’ well (or be cohesive) through the various ways in which each aspect of the whole is seen to answer to (or be responsive to) the other aspects. As ever, this responsive cohesion
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approach to the topic under consideration stands in contrast to the extremes on either side. In this case, there is, on the one hand, the contrast of a skill or art that coheres in a way that is judged to be rigid, forced, imposed or 'wooden' (i.e. where the elements of the skill or art are judged as being unresponsive to each other, all of which bespeaks a rigidity of imaginative or technical capacity). On the other hand, there is the contrast of a skill or art that lacks cohesion and so is judged as being 'all over the place', as 'not hanging together' or, like a high dive or a bad move in chess, as coming 'unstuck'.

Skills and arts can also be judged in terms of their responsiveness to the tradition (or cultural context) within which they are located. In contrast to the above emphasis on the degree of internal responsive cohesion of a skill or art, this can be thought of as referring to the external (or contextual) responsive cohesion of a skill or art. Again, reflective judges generally consider that the best examples of skills and arts are those that not only make sense within, and so cohere with, a recognisable tradition but also respond to that tradition and so add to its development. This, again, stands in contrast to the extremes on either side. On the one hand, if an example of a skill or art blindly repeats a tradition, then it is cohesive with that tradition in a rigid (or unresponsive) way, even if the resulting product displays considerable internal responsive cohesion. It then pays the price of being judged as 'cliched', 'stereotypical', 'hackneyed', 'formulaic', 'plodding', 'unimaginative', and so on, in its design or execution. On the other hand, if an example of a-skill or art bears no obvious connection with the tradition in which it claims to partake (i.e. if it doesn't answer to that tradition in any recognisable way) then it doesn't make any sense in terms of that tradition and is judged as a bad example of its kind. It is dismissed as 'novelty for novelty's sake', 'pretentious', having 'more style (if it has that) than substance', and much worse!

With respect to the quality of the natural environment

Reflective judges generally consider that the best examples of natural environments – those natural environments that we openly refer to as being well preserved – are those that exemplify long-standing mutual accommodation (i.e. responsive cohesion) between the forms of life that inhabit them and their environment. In well-preserved natural environments, the forms of life that inhabit the environment have been interacting with each other and their environment for considerable periods of time in evolutionary terms. They have not recently been significantly disrupted by such things as an asteroid impact, the arrival of large numbers
of highly invasive plants and animals or anthropogenic destruction of habitat. The upshot is that well-preserved natural environments possess an unmistakably cohesive or systemic quality, but one which is, of course, fluid and dynamic, since they are continually subject to all manner of internally generated fluctuations borne of the multifarious ways in which the forms of life that inhabit them respond to each other and their environment in seeking to survive and reproduce. This ecological form of responsive cohesion stands in contrast to the extremes on either side. On the one hand, there is the contrast of a natural environment being ‘managed’ by being ‘deep frozen.’ On the other hand, there is the contrast of an ‘open-slather,’ ‘anything goes’ policy (ecological chaos). Deep freezing an ecology rigidly maintains the existing cohesion of natural processes but robs them of their dynamic or responsive nature whereas the ‘anything goes’ approach maintains the dynamic or responsive nature of these processes but robs them of their long-standing cohesion.

The foregoing analysis represents an abbreviated version of the case for the claim that the quality or property of responsive cohesion is a foundational principle not only in informed judgements about the method and content of ethics but also in other major areas of life in which we make judgements of better and worse. That said, where we draw the line as to exactly where ethics ends and the rest of value theory begins is a moot point. For example, we clearly think that the way in which we treat other people belongs to the realm of ethics, whereas we don’t generally think of one’s evaluation of, say, scientific theories as an ethical issue. But these waters can be muddied very quickly. For example, where there are very sound evidentially backed reasons for judging one theory as better than another (e.g. the theory of evolution by means of natural selection as opposed to the views of ‘creation science’) then it is no longer clear that this judgement is purely a matter of value theory that lacks an ethical dimension. All we would need to do to turn this issue into an overtly ethical one would be to invoke the sort of principle advanced by the British philosopher W. K. Clifford (1845–79) in a famous paper significantly entitled ‘The Ethics of Belief’ (1877) in which he claimed that ‘It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone [i.e. it is categorically wrong, or wrong in principle], to believe anything on insufficient evidence’ (a view that saw Clifford himself move from Catholicism to agnosticism). If one agrees that insisting on a preference for one theory when there are far stronger grounds for preferring another is not simply perverse but rather wrong in principle, then the realm of
epistemology becomes intertwined with the realm of ethics and it becomes possible to speak of *epistemological ethics*, or what Clifford called the *ethics* of belief.

Given this lack of clarity or widespread agreement as to exactly where what we call ethics ends and where the rest of the general study of value and evaluation begins, I am (as indicated by my title) happy to speak in this context about the development of either an *ethics* of the built environment or, more generally, a *value theory* of the built environment. But whatever the terminology, my central claim here has been to establish and uphold the claim that the principle of responsive cohesion lies at the very foundation of our best and most informed judgements of better and worse.

**Responsive cohesion and the built environment**

I have argued that the principle of responsive cohesion represents the *foundational principle* that is at work in our best evaluations with respect to a wide range of evaluative domains. Indeed, given the breadth of the evaluative domains I have considered, the clear implication of my argument is that this principle lies at the foundation of whatever evaluative domain one cares to nominate. Even the *method* by which we arrive at our best judgements of better and worse – namely, the approach of making evaluative theories and personal evaluations answer (respond) to each other in order to work towards a cohesiveness between them – exemplifies this foundational principle. What happens, then, when the principle of responsive cohesion is applied to the built environment? Let us go back to the comparison I offered at the outset between two buildings that are of the same overall usefulness or value to whatever class of entities is deemed to be deserving of moral consideration (including even the natural environment itself if required), but that differ only in their design such that one blends in with its natural and built environments whereas the other sticks out like the proverbial sore thumb. If we accept the foundational nature of the principle of responsive cohesion in making judgements of better and worse then we clearly possess a strong basis for objecting to the latter building *in principle* (i.e. irrespective of the overall usefulness or value of the building to any morally relevant class of entities). This is because this example makes it quite explicit that the latter building fails to exemplify the principle of responsive cohesion with respect to its natural and built environments.

But the principle of responsive cohesion also allows us to say rather more than that about the construction of the built environment. For example, the principle of responsive cohesion also has built into it the
idea that we should construct buildings (or built environments) that represent a creative adaptation to their ecological, social and built contexts in that overall order of preference. Why that overall order of preference? The answer turns on the fact that the ecological context generated and continues to support humans and, hence, the human social context, and the human social context generated and continues to support the built environment context. The principle of responsive cohesion clearly suggests that while a newly introduced feature can, will and ought to be able to alter its generative and supportive context (as, say, any organism modifies its environment), it is the new feature that ought, overall, to be made to defer to its generative and supportive context for this simple reason: for a new feature to radically alter its generative and supportive context is to undo a lot of already existing responsive cohesion. We would also say, colloquially but rightly, that it is ‘crazy’: a good example would be adding some new notes to a beautiful, responsively cohesive symphony (i.e. a symphony that ‘hangs together’ well, precisely because of the way in which its various elements ‘answer’ to each other), finding that the new notes don’t ‘work’/fit/cohere, and then proceeding to tear apart the already existing responsive cohesion of the symphony in order to recreate the work around the ill-fitting notes. Responsive cohesion is best preserved overall where the generative and supportive context (whether it be a symphony or the natural environment) has the lion’s share of the influence with respect to the new feature (whether that new feature be a musical theme, human society or an aspect of the built environment). The architect Christopher Day captures the general thrust of this point quite simply when he says that ‘To be harmonious, the new needs to be an organic development of what is already there, not an imposed alien’ (Day 1990: 18).

As ever, the principle of responsive cohesion stands in contrast to the extremes on either side. With respect to the built environment this means the following. On the one hand, there is the contrast of the kind of rigid forms (often massive in scale), rigidly imposed upon the landscape that characterise so much of contemporary building. On the other hand, there is the contrast of the kind of ‘anything goes,’ ‘all-over-the-place’ architectural ‘free-for-all’ that can arise as an allegedly ‘liberating’ reaction to the former. These are exactly the extremes that the architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz identifies as ‘general monotony’ on the one hand and ‘arbitrary fancies’ on the other hand, when he says: ‘The modern environment in fact offers very little of the surprises and discoveries which make the experience of old towns so fascinating. When attempts to break the general monotony are made, they mostly appear as arbitrary fancies’ (Norberg-Schulz 1980: 190). In contrast, ‘responsive
cohesion' seems to be a very good way of describing (in formal language) what it is that makes 'the experience of [some] old towns so fascinating'; of describing what it is that can lend to the built environment the sense that it exemplifies a 'timeless way of building,' to borrow Christopher Alexander's (1979) evocative term.

We've tried the spiritually deadening, rigidly imposed dormitory-suburbs-drive-to-the-shopping-mall approach to the built environment. A number of architectural leaders have recently been experimenting with the allegedly-ironically-'playful'-but-to-others-somewhat-imaginatively-desperate historical pastiche approach of post-modernist architecture (much of which will surely end up looking like anything but a 'timeless way of building'). And we've tried much in between that hasn't worked well either, ecologically or for the human spirit. The approach I have advocated here, based on the foundational principle of responsive cohesion, suggests that we now need to turn (and, to some extent, return, albeit in a modern context) to the preservation and creation of built environments that exemplify a responsive cohesion both internally and with respect to their ecological, social and built contexts (in that overall order of preference). Eschewing rigidly imposed, monotonous order on the one hand and novelty for its own sake ('arbitrary fancies') on the other hand, the principle of responsive cohesion points the way to a built environment that both coheres with living systems and is enlivening to the human spirit.

References
Fox, W. The New Ethics (in preparation).