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Architecture, an insecure profession

Good architecture defies explanation

Insecurity in architecture

Neena Verma

'I myself do not believe in explaining anything', wrote Shel Silverstein. It seems that architecture is always looking to explain itself. Definitions of architecture seem almost common knowledge; ask a bartender,[1] biologist,[2] computer scientist,[3] economist,[4] legislator,[5] birdwatcher,[6] quilter[7] or scientist,[8] each of whom analogises their field with respect to architecture. And several within the profession can themselves define architecture's limits quite elegantly. Most recently Steven Holl defined architecture as consisting simply of abstract, use, space and idea.[9] However, seeking a rationale or explanation for architecture – its role in society, its impact, its value – remains an open debate. This debate has consumed the field, in academia and practice, for centuries. It suggests a dire insecurity.

Build, explain, repeat

Shifts in architecture's self-perception and self-explanation often relate to formal styles. Any text on architectural history covers these styles, from Neolithic to contemporary, including accompanying sub-movements such as, for the early modern category, Expressionist architecture, Art Deco, and the so-called 'International Style'. Each style is often imagined a product of, or reaction to, a preceding style, and much the same can be said of accompanying trends in the explanation of architecture. This essay, and its underlying argument, is itself a reaction to the current state of affairs.

In the twentieth century alone, the trending explanation of architecture and the architect's perceived value fluctuated hugely. In a 1918 edition of *The American Architect*, George Maher wrote that the 'architect to-day occupies a rather hazy position in the estimation of the community'.[10] Two decades later, glass company Libbey-Owens-Ford published an advertisement with the tag line 'Consult an architect when you build [...] he's [*sic*] a doctor of better living.'[11] Architects of the 1980s critiqued the apparent trends in the field. Paul Goldberger reflected in *The New York Times* that 'to many young architects today, architecture is a highly intellectualized pursuit – they have come to the field in search of [...] very analytical exercises'.[12] In his 1996 article titled 'Can Architecture and Politics Mix?', James Russell rhetorically posited the architect as a 'local peacemaker', salesperson, community designer, and city builder.[13] Two years later, Peter Davey argued that architects should prioritise 'biotechnic[s]' over style.[14] And, as the next century turned, three explanations of architecture took hold, each becoming highly familiar.

> *'Definitions of architecture seem almost common knowledge; ask a bartender, biologist, computer scientist, economist, legislator, birdwatcher, quilter or scientist'*

First, architects were imagined as digital 'editors'. Digital technologies and 'curvilinear forms' excited the masses as no longer solely tools for representation but now tools for form generation.[15] As Branko Kolarevic puts it:

> *For many architects trained in the certainties of Euclidean geometry [...], the emergence of curvilinear forms poses considerable difficulties. In the absence of an appropriate aesthetic theory, the blobby forms often seem to be utterly esoteric and spatially difficult to comprehend, and are many times simply dismissed as another architectural fad.*[16]

In the twenty-first century, the designer effectively became imagined as a curator of digitally generated design output, while ultimately relying on his or her aesthetic sensibilities in choosing a form.

> *In contemporary architectural design, digital media is increasingly being used not as a representational tool for visualization but as a generative tool for the derivation of form and its transformation – the digital morphogenesis. In a radical departure from centuries old traditions and norms of architectural design, digitally generated forms are not designed or drawn as the conventional understanding of these terms would have it, but they are calculated by the chosen generative computational method. Instead of modelling an external form, designers articulate an internal generative logic, which then produces, in an automatic fashion, a range of possibilities from which the designer could choose an appropriate formal proposition for further development.*[17]

Second, architecture explained its reach to include landscape architecture. In 2008, *Architectural Record* formalised this explanation in its piece 'Landscape and Architecture Firms Grow Closer'. The article recognises that, with the increasing integration of 'environmental details' into architectural design (with such details including water collection

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systems and green roofs), landscape design is becoming part of architectural design. As the author claims, as green roofs continue to blossom, the relationship between architect and landscape architect is sure to do the same.[18]

Third, architecture was explained as a sustainable practice. Once a drain on the environment, architecture became responsible for transforming itself into a positive 'green' force: '[t]he challenge now facing 21st-century mankind is to provide evolved buildings that no longer endanger the Earth's fragile ecological systems'.[19] The prevalence of rating systems reflects this suggestion: in the USA, LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) standards for homes were launched in 2006 and the National Green Building Standard for homes was launched in 2008. Since the respective launches, as of July 2010, over 5,000 LEED-certified homes and over 1,050 NGBS-certified homes have been constructed.[20]

Architecture is often explained today in digital, landscape or sustainability terms. All three approaches have become woefully formulaic and therefore can be imagined, by their nature, as inhuman. In response to this digital default, Alberto Pérez-Gómez argues that '[o]ur built environment is pregnant with ambivalent meanings exacerbated by the mock impartiality of technology. In this sense it is unimportant if buildings in search of novelty look like circulation flows, blobs, shoe boxes, or spiky stars'.[21] In response to the landscape default, Renzo Piano argues, 'I hope the next generation of architects design buildings that breathe with, work with, and make use of nature, so that it's not just architecture as usual plus a bit of green on top.'[22] (In fact, in June 2012, water advocacy group American Rivers launched an online tool which allows people to apply a green roof on any structure and calculate the corresponding financial and water savings.)[23] As to the sustainability default, reliance on rating systems began to falter; 'if "green building" is design that incorporates improved environmental performance, precise knowledge of the specific performance criteria is essential to the success of the project'.[24]

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A human turn

The next reaction, our most current state of affairs, is a human one. You have witnessed it yourself: structure as saviour. Architects begin design with strategic ends that have an impact on human existence. Examples of such strategic ends are the creation of community, the streamlining of work processes and the nurturing of learning. While architecture is certainly transformative of human existence, as Tadao Ando recognises, there are limits: 'the way people live can be directed a *little* by architecture' [author's emphasis].[25]

Approaching architecture as driven primarily by strategic ends will inevitably lead the public to view architects as anthropologists or environmentalists or economists or politicians or community organisers. While such public perception is romantic, it places the profession of architecture in peril by diluting its focus. Architects must rather honour the professions that specialise in the accomplishment of human strategic ends by allowing those professions to retain primary governance over their respective realms.

A human strategic ends explanation of architecture is so standard and widespread in academe that architecture students generously sell their designs as transformative; of communities, of cultures, of epidemics, of geographies, etc. Common to student architectural theses are proposed built forms that, in a significant way, cure society's ills. Thesis titles typically include a gerund (an action verb + '-ing'), suggesting that architecture is achieving an end of sorts. Further, some participants in Architecture for Humanity and various university community build initiatives become involved because they want 'to do good for the world', itself a human strategic end.[26] While this 'good' could be anything from an urban farm to a neighbourhood plan, these example projects are wholly different from one another and should attract different architectural participants for different *architectural* reasons. These participants should want to do good design, and not primarily want to accomplish a general strategic end of 'doing good for the world'. This end is wonderful but such ends should not drive architecture because if the *architecture* is itself good, it will accomplish these goals.

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Good

Good architecture should be driven by architecture, nothing else. Dutch architectural journal *OASE* opened its issue titled, 'What is Good Architecture?', with an emphatic plea for an understanding of the term. 'Many problems in today's architecture world would vanish if every once in a while it was clearer what is meant by good architecture.'[27] Any specific definition of a 'good' architecture is another arguably cyclical rationale that conscribes architecture by limits outside of itself. Rather, good architecture simply begs no explanation, formally or metaphorically – its initial driving force is the creation of architecture.

In a 1935 essay, Linus Burr Smith articulated an inward-looking and bare understanding of such 'good architecture':

> *A building is created from within outward as surely as it is built from the ground upward. With slight reflection one realizes that architecture is the best and most beautiful use of space, within as well as without; it should be a satisfactory machine in which to live, work, or play* […] *The building which is adapted with rare skill to the purpose for which it is created, one that lends itself perfectly to its numerous uses is frictionless.*[28]

This idea of seamless beauty and utility stems from intention. By their training, skill set and earned intuition, architects think in an entirely specific manner; they

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must so think with intention. This is the creation of good architecture. This architecture is quiet. It is transcendental.

This is not naïve or idealistic thinking, it is rather a brave moment of self-awareness. Good architecture can accomplish goals beyond beauty and utility. As Martin Filler argues, '[t]ruly great architecture always transcends its stated function, sometimes in unanticipated ways'.[29] One of the truest joys in architecture is discovering these often inadvertent ends. Architecture will, however, fail to be good if it is driven first by other – currently human strategic – ends, because it will have lost its focus. It will have lost its intention. As architecture concerns itself primarily with such other ends, the field appears dynamic and interdisciplinary. This appearance is an affectation – architecture is merely projecting a deeply rooted insecurity.

'One of the truest joys in architecture is discovering [...] often inadvertent ends'

Insecurity

While a strategic ends-driven architecture may have necessarily resulted from the in-human digital, landscape and sustainability movements, it is but another expression of architecture as 'an insecure profession'.[30] Arguably, architects' need to constantly rationalise and explain architecture stems from a dire insecurity. Thus, architecture constantly fights to validate its existence as a profession. In some ways, it feels like architects are making a sleazy last-ditch sales pitch. While marketing professionals traditionally argue that products can compete on price, differentiation or market segmentation,[31] a 'value innovation model' adds a fourth basis for differentiation: the recognition of a facet that competitors cannot match or beat.[32] Human strategic ends (or sustainability or biotechnics) are value differentiators. Further, constantly screaming 'validate me' manifests a sort of self-effacing rejection of luxury born of a guilty conscience. Architecture has traditionally constituted itself as an artistic pursuit, its vital necessity challenged daily by the

'[...] constantly screaming "validate me" manifests a sort of self-effacing rejection of luxury born of a guilty conscience'

hundreds of buildings erected without the involvement of an architect: '[i]n the U.S., some 80 percent or more of houses are built without an architect's involvement'.[33] Engaging an architect is often a luxury. Architects feel guilty, aware that architecture is a field that serves those who can afford it. This feeling of guilt motivates the cyclic rationalisations that plague the field.

Why are architects always explaining themselves? Will Alsop may have captured it best when lamenting architects' irrelevance at a cocktail party:

> *Today we are quietly forgotten* [...] *It is as though not one of us artists, architects or designers has anything to offer. We have become a part of the Treasury's view of culture as an expense to be avoided. The economy as a whole is risk-averse, and we are a risk.*[34]

Embrace the risk. Be confident in it. Make good architecture. Stop explaining.

Neena Verma studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania and Tulane University, where she was Adjunct Faculty (teaching writing) and a Masters candidate (in architecture), building a house with eleven other students. Between her undergraduate and graduate studies, she was a practicing attorney. Architecture is her true love.

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