

8 Lo-Fi Architecture

Elvis Lives

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I first saw Elvis Costello when I was an undergraduate student at Cambridge University in 1978. It was at a May Ball, a captive audience of drunken gilded youth on which to vent his bitter pills. Costello stood over us, spitting words; his anger hit like waves. It was only later that I realized his bile was directed not to us personally but to the situation that the country was moving toward, a situation in which a bunch of privileged and complacent students in black ties and gauche ball dresses epitomized one half of the divided society that Margaret Thatcher was to exploit so ruthlessly. Drunk though I was, it was mesmerizing.

I was happy to grow older with Elvis, and his songs became the soundtrack for my graduate student days in London. I needed Costello on the night that the HMS *Sheffield* was sunk in that meaningless war in the Falklands that she—Thatcher—had instigated to preserve an absurd notion of empire, a war that she shamelessly, shamefully, used to launch an election campaign. Later Costello wrote the lyrics to a song, *Shipbuilding*, which “evoked the numb waste of war and the destruction of traditional British industries under Thatcher’s government.”¹ Robert Wyatt’s voice translated the anger we all felt into a lament, with Costello’s words at their most precise, but in that control still more damning of the consequences of Thatcher’s imperial games.² I played the record endlessly; the cover fell apart.

About the same time as *Shipbuilding* came out, I was working late. It was the final year of my studies, and I had adopted the absurd life pattern that is the ritual of graduation year for architectural students. Long days (not really that much work). Long nights (too tired to work). An inefficient and self-imposed form of boot camp which one feels one needs to endure in order

to become a “proper” Architect. It was early morning, the time when one clings to the radio as a connection to the outside world. An interview with Costello was being repeated. “After recording a song, I get the engineers to play it back through a cheap radio. I need to hear how it sounds in real life. How it sounds over the noise of a breakfast table.”³

That interview has always stayed with me. There he would be, in a recording studio cut off from light and life, engulfed in black speakers, polishing the nuances of the twenty-four tracks on a mixing desk with the technical complexity of an aircraft cockpit. Perfected sound. But what really counted for Costello was the sound coming out of the cheap little transistor radio on the kitchen table to accompany the crunch of cornflakes. Lo-fi sound.

The analogy is direct. The architect in the studio, cut off from the world. Creating hi-fi architecture on high-end equipment, fiddling with key-strokes and mice, dreaming of that perfected delivery in the polished aura of blue skies and happy people. When in fact they should be dealing with the cheap radio end of things, imagining the moments of occupation, of cornflakes showering crumbs onto the shining floor, of maybe sad people. Lo-fi architecture.

This is not the first time a radio has been invoked to support an architectural argument. In *Towards a New Architecture* Le Corbusier advocates the experience of listening to music on a radio over going to a concert hall: “the wireless will give you exact interpretations of first-rate music, and you avoid catching cold in the concert hall and the frenzy of the virtuoso.”⁴ However, the message of Le Corbusier’s radio is very different from mine. He privileges the purity and exactitude of the mechanical reproduction, which would surely have been hi-fi if such a thing had existed in the 1920s, precisely to be rid of the annoying interventions of the outside world (the “contingent presences” we have seen him rail against before). “Catching cold” says everything about his fear of contamination, be it aural, architectural, or personal. My interpretation of the radio is not about the equipment per se, but the context in which it is situated. It is not the single man locked up in front of his stereo speakers, but the family for whom the transistor radio is the background soundtrack for everyday life.

Lo-fi might sound disparaging, a lowly form of production that demeans the high ideals of the profession; but this would be to misunderstand the purpose of Costello’s breakfast table radio. The writing and production of the song is handled with all the attention and detail of a great artist. It is in the intent of its playing out that Costello makes the shift from the normal criteria of “high” art. He recognizes that he has to give up control over the

final reception of his work, and adjusts the parameters of the making of the work accordingly. The painter or sculptor knows that the prime context for the appreciation (in both the aesthetic and economic sense of the word) of their work will be the gallery, and therefore aims specifically at this controlled and rarefied environment. But the songwriter does not have this luxury of knowing the precise circumstances under which their work will be received. Nor does the architect, which is one among many reasons why the close identification of architecture with art is such a misconception. However, just because the conditions in which architecture and popular music eventually find themselves are not culturally elevated in the received version of the elite, this does not mean that they are by implication lowly or should be treated in a dismissive manner. Quite the opposite. The lo-fi architect has to be just as precise and just as creative as Costello in the assembling of their work, but also just as prescient about where and how that work will be played out. Costello's artistic ambition is as high as that of the aspirational architect; it is just that he is more real about the means of its transmission and reception, as well as combining it with a political ambition. Lo-fi architecture thus asks the architect to design to their highest ability and, at the same time, be acutely conscious of the conditions which that design will finally encounter.

Exploding into Reality

In opening this chapter with Elvis Costello, I am flirting with the danger of being dismissed on the twin counts of vulgar populism and complete irrelevance. Isn't there something embarrassing in middle-aged professors attempting to show off their street credentials through resorting to quoting their teenage heroes, and what has this got to do with architecture anyway? These charges, however, stick only if they are thrown from within the sanctuary of "high" culture, within whose walls architecture too often places itself for protection. My brief excursion into Elvis Costello is to weave another warp into the weft of architecture. In using a "popular" source, this warp brings to architecture a necessary sense of the everyday, but also with Costello a necessary sense of the political. As the American academic Michael Bérubé notes (in an article called "The Elvis Costello Problem," but that is no more than a convenient coincidence), to ignore popular culture is to ignore the complexity and contradictory nature of contemporary culture.⁵ This is especially the case with architecture; most buildings are inescapably embedded in the everyday world, and therefore need to take into account that context

and the way it is engaged with, bodily, materially, spatially, and symbolically. Unfortunately, the production of architectural culture is dominated by those building types that are more or less removed from the everyday: history books full of the sacred; magazines dominated by one-off houses, museums, and theaters; award systems that favor the extraordinary program and budget over the ordinary ones.⁶ That gap again between how architecture reflects itself and how it is experienced in the reality of the everyday.

This gap is founded on the unnecessary tension that is set up between architecture and the everyday, which in turn is sustained by wrongly perpetuating the binary of high and low, Cathedral and bicycle shed. Never was this more clearly shown than in the seminal exercise in architecture and the everyday, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's *Learning from Las Vegas*. The title alone suggests an active intention for the high to engage productively with the low, notwithstanding the fact that Las Vegas is not quite normal in the first instance. What happened was that the imagery of the Las Vegas Strip was seized for its aesthetic and formal substance; what had previously been denounced as beneath architectural dignity was championed as a rich source of visual and symbolic content. The project has good intentions of serving "a social need for architectural high art to learn from and relate to folk and pop traditions if it is to serve its real clients and do no further harm in the city."⁷ But in the end the process is one of reification, both in the original sense of the word—turning something into matter—but also in the Marxist interpretation—that this procedure is also one of commodification. The everyday is raided for its visual stimulus, which in the case of Las Vegas is already conveniently excessive, but the social content of the life within is ignored. The high codes of the visual are refreshed, leaving the low still low. The commodification comes when Venturi and Scott Brown's brilliant rhetoric is transformed into the architectural capital of postmodernism. As we saw in chapter 7, those newly fresh, popular forms are appropriated by the market as velvet gloves for the iron fist of corporate capital, wrapping hard space in a quasi-familiar image, most obviously in places like Disneyworld, more insidiously in business parks and housing estates throughout the world.⁸

Lefebvre sounds the warning of collapsing into trite populism; the danger lies in "magnifying the life of the proletariat" to such an extent that one loses its human content, "of people who knew how to enjoy themselves, how to get involved, take risks, talk about what they felt and did."⁹ His response is to enact a reciprocal transaction that dissolves the borders between high and low: "for we must be careful neither to abandon the



(acquired or potential) wealth of the content, of the 'human raw material'; nor to lose whatever is achieved in the highest, most intense moments. The problem is therefore to define the reciprocal relation of these activities and realities: the simple moments and the highest moments of life."¹⁰ In this way the everyday is not "abandoned to vulgarity" because that would "grant art, science, ethics and philosophy the inordinate privilege of constituting superhuman—and therefore inhuman—'worlds.'"¹¹ It is also a transaction that rescues the everyday from being the site of pure alienation and banality. Lefebvre is acutely aware that the condition of the everyday is at the same time as full of transformative potential as it is full of potential oppression, and it was to counter the latter that he championed the former.¹²

In terms of lo-fi architecture, Lefebvre's critique of everyday life has important implications. If, returning to the Costello analogy, architecture is to be played out around the equivalent of the breakfast table, then it has to take the conditions of the everyday into account if it is to remain relevant. To put it simply, an architecture that ignores the everyday will be ignored every day.¹³ But this does not mean a collapse into the everyday as a mere repetition of the architectural dross that is already there. Nor does it mean a sardonic display of popular motives in the patronizing hope that this will meet the demands of the everyday populace. What Lefebvre essentially does is to banish the fear that the everyday is merely ordinary; rather, it is the site that contains the extraordinary within the ordinary, *if one is prepared to look,*

the place where “creative energy is stored in readiness for new creations.”¹⁴ There is an understandable urge among architects and architecture students to escape the ordinary—after all, why just repeat what is already there, in all its dreariness?—and therefore to look upward for inspiration: to the gods, to the specialized, to the rational, to the high minds of philosophers, to the extraordinary. And then turn from looking upward to looking inward, to one’s internal stock of formal and linguistic tools, in order to display that invention. This upward and inward movement is the operation, and ultimately the autonomous fate, of the avant-garde in their failure to engage with the reality of the lived world.¹⁵ But what if that original content does not always lie beyond the everyday but within it? Then to discover it one also has to look outward and downward, and not forget “the earth beneath, which has a secret life and richness of its own.”¹⁶ Only then can architects meet Tafuri’s challenge to get out of their boudoir and effect the “explosion of architecture out towards reality.”¹⁷ And only then can we understand that lo-fi architecture is not lowly at all, because it has moved beyond the opposition of high and low.¹⁸

In moving beyond this separation of high and low, lo-fi architecture is necessarily transgressive not just of these categories but of others as well. Stallybrass and White open their classic work on transgression with the contention that “cultural categories of high and low, social and aesthetic . . . but also those of the physical body and geographical space, are never entirely separable.”¹⁹ This set of transgressions presents a complex context for anyone to operate in; not only do they mix the four domains (the social, the aesthetic, the bodily, and the spatial) but they also deny the comfort of separating them out into neat hierarchies of low/high, good/bad. We have already seen in chapter 2 how the tendency of architects when confronted with this jumble is, maybe understandably, to separate out and then classify these categories, so as to order and then control them more easily. One idea in a single category, rigorously carried through from large scale to the detail, is often seen to be enough. Mature architecture is identified by a consistency of approach, with clarity in the parts. Mature architecture is seen to fit into a genealogy of architectural progress, from which awkward moments, inconsistencies, and hybridity are edited. Architectural critics establish these genealogies through their writings, defining neat packages of styles, method, techniques, and taste. If you fit into one of these categories, you are an architect. If you define one of these packages, you are a great architect. Seminal buildings are those that establish a new category, be it Le Corbusier’s early villas, Foster’s Willis Faber Dumas, Michael Graves’s

Portland Public Service Building, or Frank Gehry's Guggenheim. But if you transgress these packages, these categories, you are dismissed as wayward, immature, self-indulgent, maybe even not a proper architect.

It is 1997, an era before climate change had made the move from scientific journals to front-page news. Our building is still rumbling, half-designed, around our heads when the call comes. It is from the organizers of Inter-build, the largest trade show for building materials in the United Kingdom. They want us to build a section of our house on the main exhibition stand, in a display called "Façades of the Future." We are both flattered and gently amused at the idea of sneaking in a straw wall as an example of a pioneering future. A hairy Trojan horse. But we waver. We have not even designed, let alone detailed, the wall yet, and the exhibition is to open in five weeks' time. What eventually sways us is the promise that our exhibit is to be placed next to a section of the Lords Media Centre by Future Systems, described to us over the phone as seven meters long and shiny. The temptation of juxtaposing our hairy agricultural wall with the smoothness of their nautically inspired technology is too much to resist.

We suspect we have been called in as the token eco-people: straw = hairy = handholding = female = amateur = crude = nonrational. This is a concatenation of lowly elements, which by association devalues the sustainable message that we have set out to deliver, particularly when set against the clarity and single-mindedness of Future Systems' progressive cant.

Five weeks later we arrive, three amateurs (two of them women) with a self-drive van in a hall full of trucks and big, skilled men. We have three days to erect a wall that will be seen by over 100,000 people using a method never previously used. The lack of any technological precedent is scary (we have to research everything from scratch and improvise where necessary), but also consoling since there is nothing to judge it against; our method is neither right nor wrong, it is just there. But this does not stop endless big-bellied men coming over, curious and judgmental, waiting to see something they can shake their heads over in the time-honored construction industry tradition:

"You're doing it wrong, mate."

"But there is no wrong."

We have the final laugh when three days later our not wrong, but maybe improper, wall is completed on time and according to plan, defeating the collective skepticism. This is in contrast to the promised seven meters of the Lords Media Centre which, when it arrives, has shrunk to a sample one meter square. Something about a "problem with production." Our exhibit



even looks “good,” and becomes the inspiration for the part of our future house where the straw is displayed in all its agricultural and golden glory. The display certainly delivers the provocation that we intended. The reason is that we have added a twist to our detailing: to wrap the straw in a transparent polycarbonate screen sourced from an Italian DIY catalog, so that the straw is exposed to view. It is a transgression of material, technical, and ideological classifications. Hairy meets slick; natural, nonnatural. The eco-people are offended by the polycarbonate (plastics are not wholesome). The technocrats are put off by having to confront the natural stuff. A surveyor comes up and smugly tells us that he makes money out of people like us whose buildings fail. A man shouts into his mobile phone: “I am standing in front of a fooking haystack and they are calling it the future.” A bathroom tiles rep asks if it is an art project. That is a lot of contraventions in one wall.

Monstrous Hybrids

What happens when a great architect appears to transgress and move from one category to another? A collective outpouring of anguish, that's what happens, or at least it did when Le Corbusier was seen to switch from one package, rational modernism, to another, organic rawness. The British architect James Stirling led the attack in two articles, one comparing one of Le Corbusier's early white villas, the Villa Garches of 1927, to the brick and concrete Maisons Jaoul of 1952; the other discussing the chapel at Ronchamp in terms of a "crisis of rationalism."²⁰ Three interrelated issues appear to be at stake. The first is a break in continuity: "More than any other architect of this century," writes Stirling, "Le Corbusier's buildings present a continuous architectural development which, however, has not recently been supplemented."²¹ In breaking that continuity, Le Corbusier is transgressing categories. The second is the issue of logic, Stirling insinuating in the very title of the second essay that Le Corbusier's recent work was tainted by dint of it being "irrational" in comparison to the rationality of the previous work.²² Third is the sense that in admitting elements of folk art and popular culture, Le Corbusier is somehow demeaning the sanctity of architecture. Stirling notes how Ronchamp appears to have been a hit with ordinary people simply because of its visual appeal. "This entirely visual appeal and the lack of participation demanded from the public may partly account for its easy acceptance by the local population," he writes sniffily.²³ The implication is that normal people just like the look of things and are not capable of reaching the heights of architectural thought. Not only is this a strange interpretation of Ronchamp, which is both intensely cerebral and deeply phenomenal as an experience, but it is also breathtaking in its dismissiveness of "the they," drawing up clear lines between us architects and them unwashed.

The outrage, however, is misplaced. Le Corbusier may have changed his spots, but underneath the consistency of a great architect's hand is still in place, doubly so because he has the brilliance to define two categories in the space of a lifetime. Perhaps the most telling words of all in Stirling's essays are when he writes: "As homes the Jaoul houses are almost cosy and could be inhabited by any civilized family, urban or rural. They are built by and intended for the status quo"²⁴ This is not a compliment, contrasted as it is in the next sentence with the utopian and progressive stance of the earlier houses to which "all architects must aspire if modern architecture is to retain its vitality." So the real symptom of Le Corbusier's transgression is

that he has flirted with the ordinary: the houses could be lived in by anyone! *Quelle parodie!* “Almost cosy” becomes a term of derision for the “proper” architect, whereas for the lo-fi architect it might be an aspiration. The real project of modernism for Stirling is to retain the vitality and purity of architecture in its own right, and if the normative needs of users, the imperfections of popular art, or any other aspects of the status quo presume to intervene, then they need to be expelled from the House of Architecture.

Presented with these multiple transgressions (of styles, of the contamination of the rational with the irrational, of pure architecture with popular art, and so on), Stirling’s unease and subsequent dismissal is archetypally modern; “the horror of mixing,” says Bauman, “reflects the obsession with separating.”²⁵ The two are but two sides of the same modernist coin. As Bruno Latour clearly identifies: “moderns . . . refuse to conceptualize quasi-objects as such. In their eyes hybrids present the horror that must be avoided at all costs by a ceaseless, even maniacal, purification.” But this cleansing comes at a cost: a mushrooming of a certain type of idealized object “expelled from the social world, attributed to a transcendent world that is, however, not divine.”²⁶ As we have seen, however, this task of purification is an impossible one, because the more one turns upward to construct artificial worlds of purity and transcendence, the more one has to turn one’s back on the social construction of the world, and in this turn a blind eye to the mixing of things with people. The mixing takes place anyway, wherever one’s eyes are cast, and so “the proliferation of hybrids has saturated the framework of the moderns.”²⁷

Latour’s response to this false hope of the moderns is to come up with a “non-modern” constitution, one of whose guarantees is “to replace the clandestine proliferation of hybrids by their regulated and commonly agreed upon production.”²⁸ This is not, absolutely not, about the formal construction of aesthetic hybrids by mixing up two pure forms to make a third one, but about the social construction of hybrids rubbing together things and people, architecture and life. The formal production of hybrids has been underway in architecture for the past forty-odd years. In their own ways, and for their own reasons, postmodernist and deconstructivist architects disturbed the purity of modernist form by combining formal elements to create new hybrids. However, with both the historical collages of the former and the geometric distortions of the latter the hybrid game is played out on a strictly visual field, and one that privileges the internal obsessions of the architect in its exploitation of the aesthetic excess of the hybrid. Latour’s production of hybrids takes into account far more than the visual, acknowledg-

ing as it does the relationship of the nonhuman to the human—of things to their social context, of objects to subjects, of nature to politics, and so on. And, crucially, “the production of hybrids by becoming explicit and collective becomes the object of an enlarged democracy . . . a democracy extended to things themselves.”²⁹ What Latour suggests here has direct implications for architecture: the production should be at the same time intentional *and* participative, and all in the name of contributing to an expanded political field. Hybrids are here released from their previous identification as something horrific to be rid of, and instead revealed as something remarkable to be employed positively. So when I talk about monstrous hybrids, it is not in the derogatory sense of the English word but in the prodigious, fantastic sense of the Italian word: *mostruoso*.³⁰

All this begins to fill out the sketch of lo-fi architecture, if we are to treat it as a hybrid in Latour’s sense of the term. First is the sense that it is much more than an aesthetic issue alone, but brings in the social and the ethical. Attention is thus displaced from architecture as object and into the negotiating of a much more complex set of relationships. Second is the sense that its production is collective and thus dependent on far more than the guiding hand of the single architect. The intentionality of the production is thus a matter of negotiation, not of imposition, and the tenor of that intent is laying the ground for possible consequences rather than the positivist expectation of certain ends. Third, lo-fi architecture, as an intentional hybrid, transgresses conventional boundaries, both in terms of content and in terms of cultural categories. It is neither precisely high nor determinedly low, but can accommodate the highest and lowest moments. Fourth, lo-fi architecture is always alert to the context, physical and social, in which it will be played out. Generalized or abstracted solutions will be quickly unraveled by the particulars of those contexts, which means that the lo-fi architect has to work with and within them.

This all chimes with the idea of situated knowledge which, as we saw at the end of chapter 3, forms a good basis for making the choices that the contingent world presents us with. In this, learning from situated knowledge, the lo-fi architect is full of vision and optimism, but modest and grounded enough not to turn these into false hopes that will flounder in the face of the particular. Although lo-fi architecture must deal with the particular, this does not imply that it is wholly local. Much is written about the tension between the local and the global but, as Latour suggests, this straightforward binary is no longer sustainable. Instead, confronted with the confusion of the contemporary labyrinth, he says there is “an Ariadne’s thread

that would allow us to pass with continuity from the local to the global, from the human to the nonhuman. It is the thread of networks of practices and instruments, of documents and translations . . . the two extremes, local and global, are much less interesting than the intermediary arrangements that we are calling networks.”³¹ The important term here is networks, which suggests a set of negotiations between the extremes. This is different from the now commonplace term the “glocal,” which implies an uncritical and inevitable combination of the two. The rallying call of the glocal (“think global, act local”) is in the end despairing in its ordering of its terms, in which the intellectual and social conditions of the global overwhelm the simple action of the local. Latour’s networks imply that there is such a thing as local knowledge,³² but that this needs to be played out in a context in which strict modernist categories are dissolved into more hybrid conditions. The beauty of lo-fi architecture is that because it asks the architect to project the potentially autonomous activities of the design studio out through the equivalent of the cheap radio, the architect necessarily has to address all those cross-breedings; the contingent studio is, to push the Costello analogy just once more, a veritable mixing desk.

How They’ll Tell if Your Building Is Gay

So, I hear you say, what does this lo-fi architecture actually *look* like? How can you write a book about architecture and not show pictures of what you mean? Aren’t we, after all, a visual profession? To the last of which my answer is yes, and overly so. If I showed you pictures it would shut down what is meant to be an open argument. You would say: “So it looks like Lina Bo Bardi / Geoffrey Bawa / Neave Browne / Herman Hertzberger / William Lim / Sambo Mockbee / Jo Noero / Cedric Price / Jean Renaudie / Kenzo Tange / Sarah Wigglesworth / Shadrach Woods / . . .” and then maybe try to compile a list of common visual features, and conclude: “So he likes the *dirty* stuff,” and suddenly my carefully assembled warp and weft of arguments would be smothered under a misplaced aesthetic. Already, in that teasing list of names, I have given away too much. But who knows, it may be a false trail, insofar as it is just the names of individual architects (and all those men in an argument that owes much of its genesis to feminism), when in fact my visual curiosity is equally stimulated by anonymous places, the interstices of buildings and things beyond architecture. The main issue, however, is that my argument is founded not on architecture as object, in which the visual presence often overwhelms critical thought, but rather on

architecture as agency. It is to this agency that we now turn, to excavate its operation and find its potential, not to display its good or bad looks.

It is 1995. I am in the office at the top of the house. Sarah, Duncan, and Katerina are out in London putting in place the final arrangements for *Desiring Practices*, their mammoth and selfless enterprise in bringing gender theory into the center of architectural discourse (they are purposely holding the main conference at the headquarters of the RIBA, an organization that is “the central locus for the production and control of the patrimony of architecture”).³³ I am manning the phones, selling tickets, and handling press queries, most of the latter of which can barely disguise their skepticism of the premise of an assorted bunch of feminists, queer theorists, historians, ecologists, and artists storming the bastion of architecture. Particularly insistent, and particularly sneering, is someone from *The Daily Telegraph*, the Conservative broadsheet. My hackles are already up: the *Telegraph* will want the story only so as the better to set it up for a fall. The scorn in the voice makes it clear that talking to a minor academic (“Kingston *Polytechnic*, did you say?”) is beneath the dignity of someone more used to passing on the platitudes of Tory grandees.

“But what does this women’s stuff look like?” he presses.

“It is not the way it looks that matters,” I say, “it is about the ideas behind it.”

“How about the gay stuff then? Do they like it bendy, if you see what I mean?”

“I am not sure that I do” (not rising to the bait).

“OK, then tell me where I can go and see this *gender* architecture,” he says, twisting gender into a term between hilarity and mockery.

Worn down by the cross-examination, I relent and tell him about Jane Rendell’s piece on the Burlington Arcade.³⁴ He has got what he wants, the promise of visual evidence, and puts the phone down.

Sure enough he goes off to Piccadilly, and sure enough he mangles Jane’s interpretation in with lots of other stuff, and sure enough he comes back with a piece that manages to knock architects, feminists, gays, and lefty theorists into one risible hat, killing off many birds with one slightly jokey stone.

The headline is: “How They’ll Tell if Your Building Is Gay.”

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III ARCHITECTURE : A DEPENDENT PROFESSION

Till, Jeremy. Architecture Depends.

: MIT Press, . p 164

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Till, Jeremy. Architecture Depends.

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Part III deals with architecture. Where Giedion's focus is on architecture as final object, I am more interested in the processes that go toward creating that object. Architecture is thus discussed as agency. The introduction of dependency as a defining feature of architectural practice, and in particular the introduction of others into the processes and products of that practice, brings with it political and ethical dimensions. This in turn suggests a reformulation of aspects of practice: a move from the idea of architect as expert problem-solver to that of architect as citizen sense-maker; a move from a reliance on the impulsive imagination of the lone genius to that of the collaborative ethical imagination; from clinging to notions of total control to a relaxed acceptance of letting go.

Chapter 10, on ethics, states that the architect's ethical duty is solely in terms of a responsibility to others: the users and recipients of future buildings. The book ends with an outline of how such architects, in their role as transformative agents, may be involved in the construction of hope. Architecture's dependency is finally seen as an opportunity and not a threat, with the architect working out from the contingencies of the given situation and using their embedded knowledge, skills, and imagination in an open and curious way in order to contribute to the making of new spatial possibilities.

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9 Architectural Agency

Lost in Action

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I recently conducted a very bad piece of research. It was at a party full of architects, at the headquarters of the RIBA. I asked six of these architects at random what the letters RIBA stood for. Three said *Royal Institute of British Architects*. Two said *Royal Institute of British Architecture*. One spluttered *Right Ignorant Bunch of Assholes*, but he was drunk and so sadly must be excluded from my unscientific sample. The other five reflected a confusion common among architects, and within the RIBA itself. The Royal Charter, granted in 1837, sets out the objectives of the institution as: "The advancement of architecture and the promotion of the acquirement of the knowledge of the various arts and sciences connected therewith." It would be logical, therefore, to assume that the "A" stands for "Architecture," but in fact it stands for "Architects." The Royal Institute of British Architects.

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The very founding of the RIBA reflects this confusion. In the first place it was an act of self-protectionism. The defining feature of any profession is to distinguish itself from the ordinary; professions inscribe territories in order to better control them, and thereby give themselves status and economic power.¹ But such naked self-interest is not what one receives Royal charters for, and so the foundation of the RIBA is publicly marked in the charter by a statement not about architects but about architecture, with the implication that the advancement of the subject is in some way for the greater public good. The fact that this responsibility is vested in the Institute of Architects (and not Architecture) only goes to confirm that it is architects alone who control this patch of knowledge called architecture. Under the worthy cloak of the charter, the whole operation is essentially self-serving; in a circular logic, the knowledge as to what constitutes architecture is defined

Architectural Agency

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by architects, who in turn are therefore deemed to be the only people capable of delivering that self-defined architecture. The RIBA is not alone in this; nearly all the national architectural bodies have the word *architect* in their titles.² The implications are clear: architecture is defined by architects. Further control is exerted by allowing the term *architecture* to have a dual meaning; it refers both to the professional activity and also to the outputs of that activity, the stuff out there that elevates itself above mere building. Architects thus presume to define, and so control, the whole field of architecture from its internal processes to its external products.

The founding address of the Institute of British Architects makes this system of closure, and its obvious benefits to the profession, very clear. The second paragraph states that the Institute “must be obviously advantageous to the country at large, from its responsibility to public opinion for the direction and maintenance of the national character for taste, and from its affording a body to whom Individuals may have recourse for its opinion upon professional matters.”³ Only we, architects, can define taste, and it is for your convenience, ordinary people, that we have grouped together to better advise you. There is a barefaced cheek in hiding the expediency of private gain behind the mask of public good. Many, especially the ordinary many, would argue that things have not moved on much since this self-satisfied opening to the very first transactions of British architecture in 1836.

This degree of self-satisfaction is really possible only under a belief system that conflates architect (as expert) with architecture (as profession) with architecture (as practice) with architecture (as product), because it is assumed that a chain is set up which passes the accepted virtues of the expert—the source of the self-satisfaction—down through to the products, the buildings. Historically the RIBA has perpetuated this conflation. At times a learned body there to promote the knowledge of its experts through lectures and reports, to regulate that knowledge through its educational influence, and to protect that knowledge in its library. At times a trade union there to protect the interests of the profession against the marauding hordes of surveyors and engineers, and to counter the insatiable claims of clients and contractors. At times supporting the practice of architecture through legal advice and best practice prescriptions. At times displaying and advocating the products through exhibitions and awards systems.⁴ Small wonder, then, that the President of the RIBA, as with other international architectural figureheads, wears his various hats rather uncomfortably. What exactly is he (and it always has been a he) representing at any one time? Put on the feathered hat of the award-giver, and all the outsider sees is

the cloth cap of the self-protectionist. Wear the mortarboard of the learned leader, and the members demand the bowler hat of the businessman. So many costume changes that the profession gets lost in the action.

This conflation of incompatible elements does the profession of architecture no real favors, but it is clung to in the belief that there is a direct and virtuous set of links along the line expert-profession-practice-product. However, the assertion of the direct transmission of values along this line is difficult to maintain: it is a chain that successively unravels as one moves down it, the architect gradually losing authority within the increasing contingency of each link. The weakest link is the last one, in which buildings, as the products, are finally exposed to forces way beyond the architect's direct control. This exposure can be seen as the profession's Achilles heel. No "strong" profession is so closely associated with things as opposed to knowledge; law is the exercise of codified knowledge, medicine is defined through procedures guided by expert knowledge. In this, the two professions can protect themselves from the outside by always asserting control over their particular knowledge base. The profession of architecture in its close association with things, in all their dependencies and flux, cannot claim this authority.⁵

The only way to avoid the apparent loss of professional authority as one moves along the line from expert to building is to reel in that final link in the chain, that of the exposed building, and to situate it in a closed loop: the expert defines the profession which orders practice which produces buildings which in turn define the knowledge of the expert. The means of achieving this closure is to limit the architectural knowledge to those aspects that are controllable by architects. Which brings us back to Vitruvius, that monkey on the back of architecture, and to the modern version of his triad: function, tectonics, and aesthetics. These are areas in which architects feel they can exercise their expert knowledge: function as an abstraction of the complexities of use, tectonics as a codification of the vagaries of construction, and aesthetics as the "maintenance of taste" through various theories of form and composition. This circumscribing entails a severe editing of those social and political aspects deemed beyond architectural control, and with this architecture becomes limited in the conditions that it addresses.

With the assumed controlling of knowledge, professional closure is effected. The key aspect of this operation is its very circularity, because in this closed loop autonomy is founded. Part I of this book attempted to show the fallibility of such an assertion of autonomy. As Garry Stevens notes in his acute analysis of the profession, architecture "like other cultural fields . . . strives to increase its autonomy," but at the same time no other discipline

is less autonomous in terms of its relationship with other cultural fields.⁶ This creates an intolerable tension between the will to separate in order to maintain professional power, and the inevitability of being conjoined with societal forces. He argues that to look at architecture as an art, science, or profession alone has no utility: “these are all simply inadequate concepts to apply to such a complex entity.” Instead one must understand “that architects are but one part of a much wider social system.”⁷ This includes the social construction of notions of expertise, from which so many of the values of the profession flow. In order to intervene in the circle of influence from expert knowledge round to buildings and back again, and the way that those values are pushed around it, it is necessary to unpack some of the underlying assumptions of being an expert as the first step in challenging the false autonomy of the profession, before moving on to proposing alternatives.

I have ordered the original 1837 charter of the Royal Institute of British Architects from the British Library. I am curious about any evidence that there might be around the edges: who the printer was, what the introduction was like, how it was laid out, pencil marks. It is also good just to hold and sniff these old things. (I remember trembling as we were handed original Borromini drawings in the Albertina in Vienna; we had bluffed our way in and now felt overwhelmed by the fragility of the pencil marks—what if we sneezed?)

It was disappointing, therefore, when the woman at the issue desk told me that the charter was “missing.” She looked sad on my behalf; they knew me by now.

“But if it’s missing from here, the citadel of knowledge, what does that mean for British architecture—is it lost too?” I mumble, half to myself. “What happened, does it say?”

“The docket just notes: ‘Lost in World War 2,’” she replies. “Looks like they got your profession as well as your buildings. Lost in action. Didn’t anyone ever tell you?”

Self-Control

When Zygmunt Bauman states baldly that “expertise creates and enhances the need of itself,”⁸ one is quickly made to rethink the basis on which any profession operates. Being an expert suggests a positive activity, helping society solve its problems through the application of expert knowledge. It is on the basis of this affirmative contribution to the common good that professions assert not just their economic worth but also their moral authority.

It is not just a matter of needing experts (and thus needing to pay them) but also a loftier mission of meeting collective aspirations: for society to build better, be healthier, have better jurisdiction. The word *vocation* is telling as a description of a profession, since it operates between the poles of straightforward service provision and a higher calling.

What Bauman and others point to is that expertise is not quite as benign as it is often assumed to be. The self-serving nature of the establishment of the architectural profession in the UK is indicative of a wider pincer movement that has been well documented by the historians of the professions. Thus Randall Collins notes how the skills of professionals are often “answers to self-created problems; the skill is intrinsic to the professional structure and does not exist without it.”⁹ In this light the development of the expertise of any given profession, far from being mainly for the general good, can actually be seen as a means of self-legitimation, and so self-perpetuation. Take the example of quantity surveying, the profession that defines costs in the UK construction industry; as a profession it does not exist in every country, and so elsewhere its particular area of knowledge is dispersed and, some would say, less restrictive. But in the UK it is an established profession, and therefore needs vehicles to show off its expertise. One such is the Bill of Quantities, an archaic practice of reducing a building in all its constructional complexities down to a list of its constituent elements, there the better to be quantified and so costed. In large parts of the world—notably the USA, where Quantity Surveying does not exist as a profession—Bills of Quantities are not deemed necessary, but in the UK they remain as a very narrow conduit through which some building projects are still forced to flow, the moment where control is seized from the architect and placed firmly in the hands of another set of professionals.

UK architects attempt to exert the same control over their unruly practices in many ways, one of which is by constricting them to the linear procedures of the “RIBA Plan of Work,” a document that divides the briefing, design, and construction of buildings into neat stages. The outline document cleverly manages to combine on a single page the setting of problems associated with each stage together with the tasks needed to find solutions to each problem. In the final column the people involved are identified; in all but one of the twelve stages architects are required. Well, one might say, they would be: it is they who have set the tasks.

It was really the first building that I had ever designed, a small block of apartments for a social housing provider on a nondescript back street in London.

Nothing special, but nonetheless I was immensely proud of it and fought for every corner. This was in the early days of design-and-build contracts, and we had been working for a contractor from the early days of the process. Working drawings had been done, costs had now been agreed, contracts signed, and the site cleared. Foundations were just about to go in. At this stage the development officer from the housing association rings.

"Where's the Bill of Quantities? We can't start without one."

"But the cost is agreed, signed off, as are all the drawings," I reply. "We know where we stand. Why bother with a Bill? It's too late for that now."

"But we need one, to know where we are."

"What are you," I ask, "some kind of surveyor?"

"Oh you clever-clog, smarty-pant architects. All the same."

And of course he was a surveyor, and of course in the end he got his own way; he was, after all, the client. He insisted on a Bill of Quantities being drawn up, in all its redundancy. For him as an ex-Quantity Surveyor the building did not exist except as a Bill of Quantities. For me it did not exist, then, except as a set of drawings.

I still remember the absurdist conversations with the quantity surveyor appointed to draw up this document that no one else but he and the development officer would ever look at.

"What about the tiles round the basin?"

Tiles are a particular obsession for some QS's; they come in all shapes, sizes, colors, edge tiles, corner tiles. Lots of stuff to quantify.

"Do them as the drawing," I respond.

"But is that edge tile a special?"

"Yes," I say, "and it's purple. And the special corner ones are yellow, and the ones in the middle are like a Battenberg cake, spotted yellow and purple in a checkerboard pattern. Absolutely no cutting, and it is important to start with the spotted yellow at the top left of that central section. And, oh yes, the grout is black." I was young then, and these things meant a lot.

This was all grist to the QS mill; the more problems, the more he could exercise his skill. One square meter of tiling ended up as over a page of description. The contractor, probably sensibly, ignored us both and put in what he could get down the local merchants where he had an account; a car crash of splattered colors and cut ends. It was painful for me to see. Not that it mattered in the long run: I recently went back to see the building to check my memory. It had been demolished to make way for something much grander, the nondescript street having been levered into desirability by the machinations of the London property market.

Left Brain, Right Brain

There are countless other examples of professions self-defining in order to self-perpetuate: the voracious spiraling effect of more lawyers leading to more litigation leading to more lawyers is probably the most striking, particularly in the USA. All point to the truth in Bauman's analysis that "expertise becomes its own cause (rather than its own purpose)."¹⁰ It is significant that these words come from Bauman's masterpiece, *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Bauman sees the expert as one of the key agents in modernity's war on ambivalence and the consequent overriding of contingency with the presumed virtues of certainty. Experts, endowed with the authority of professional knowledge, legislate what is the right or wrong way to deal with issues. If this operation assumes the status of a battle with the forces of uncertainty and disorder, then this just serves to reinforce the heroic status of the professional. It appears that Vitruvius, that monkey on my back, was mindful of this when he opened his treatise with a set of military metaphors. The well-educated architect, "fully armed" with the knowledge of both theory and practice, will reach his goal "speedily and with authority." As Indra McEwen notes, "swift attack appears to be the watchword here," and the ultimate goal is that of order.¹¹

If the trust of the nonexpert is to be gained, it is important that the professional's decisions are founded on certain principles rather than open interpretation. Trust, as Anthony Giddens notes, is a necessary if sometimes uncomfortable part of dealing with the juggernaut of modernity.¹² In the face of all the increasing complexities of the modern world, one has to place one's trust in experts, and to do this one has to be reassured that their systems are reliable. As Bauman says, "expert knowledge caters for another crucial need of the individual, that of rationality . . . lay desire to be rational lubricates the flywheel of expertise."¹³ Rules are acceptable, hunches are not. However, this placing of trust comes with reservations. "Lay attitudes to science and technical knowledge," says Giddens, "generally are typically ambivalent . . . this is an ambivalence that lies at the core of all trust relations . . . for trust is only demanded where there is ignorance. Yet ignorance always provides grounds for scepticism or at least caution."¹⁴ The nonexpert needs the expert to take in hand their ignorance, but at the same time feels resentful of this passing over of control. The result is that people "make a 'bargain with modernity,' in terms of the trust they vest in symbolic tokens and expert systems. The nature of the bargain is governed by specific admixtures of deference and scepticism, comfort and fear."¹⁵ The

layperson is unwillingly exposed in their ignorance, hence the skepticism and fear, but cannot survive in ignorance, hence the deference and need for comfort. They are pairings that play beautifully into the hands of the expert; for example, the plumber who moves quickly from establishing fear to demanding deference with the inevitable opening line: "Oh dear, oh dear. Some fathead hashed this one right up; this is going to take some sorting," or the mystifying jargon of the computer expert that sets up fear of the unknown and at the same time comfort that only the geek can deal with it.

Architects have been good enough at exploiting these tensions: expediently swapping the hats of scientist and artist, they have two cards to play. Through recourse to codes, techniques, and typologies, the profession attempts to provide itself with a strong knowledge base founded on rational principles and their associated methods, which only architects have the skill and knowledge to manipulate. A quote from Peter Eisenman gives explicit illustration of this action of professional legitimation: "When one denies the importance of function, programme, meaning, technology and the client—constraints traditionally used to justify and in a way support form-making—the *rationality* of process and the *logic* inherent in form become almost the last 'security' or legitimation available."¹⁶ What he is intimating is that the issues of use, meaning, and clients are too diffuse to pin down with any authority, and so one has to find more rational parameters to describe architecture as both process and product. This provides the comfort, at least to the left side of the brain, which processes the rational. The deference is obtained when the objective ground of reason is overlaid with the mystique of the artist-genius whereby the architect alone can, in an almost magical way, give aesthetic form to the rational principles. The idea of architect as artist plays an important part in establishing architectural culture to the outside world. The uncanny thing about architectural creativity is that, despite many attempts, it resists complete explanation; it is exactly this enigmatic quality that raises its value on the external market. It also affects the internal economy of the profession, with the "star" architects underpaying their staff, but offering an osmotic relationship with artistry in return. With the left-brain, right-brain, double punch of objective reason and subjective genius, professional closure is effected. The most successful architects are those who deliver these punches in quick succession.

I once had a very talented student who went to work for a very famous architect. This student had a remarkable facility to draw quick but cogent sketches. The famous architect recognized this talent, and would take the

student to initial client meetings. While the client and architect discussed the problems of function, site, and cost, the student would sit quietly at the back picking up hints that the architect was subtly dropping—"it would be most efficient to have the entrance on the lake." "The sun angle gives a curve here as the optimum solution." "The plot ratio says go high."—turning them into suggestive sketches. At the end of the meeting the architect would present these drawings. You could knock the client over with a feather. It was normally a done deal.

Remember I'm the Bloody Architect

Of the six people I questioned about the meaning of RIBA it was disappointing, but maybe not surprising, that not one referred to the nickname by which it is known to others in the construction industry: "Remember I'm the Bloody Architect." It is a phrase that is at the same time sad and desperate, speaking of a lost authority. The reason for this loss may be that the knowledge that is needed to define the profession is different from the knowledge needed to effect architectural practice. The profession of architecture and the practice of architecture are clearly different but often treated as if they are the same. The profession of architecture is internally defined and necessarily self-contained; the practice of architecture is a set of external networks, and necessarily dependent. The knowledge that is developed to meet the internal needs is of a very particular kind, and not at all the same as that required to deal with those external contingencies.

Professionals, as Burton Bledstein argues, attempt to "define a total coherent system of knowledge within a precise territory."¹⁷ If that knowledge is to be totalizing, then it has to lift itself above particular conditions, and so is developed away from particular tasks. Professional knowledge thus tends toward the development of common principles and set methods arising from them, all underwritten by the mandate of reason. It is this combination of detachment and rationality that is typical of professional knowledge, combining two clichés: the calm voice of reason is delivered by the remote figure of authority. The problem comes when the principles and methods that are needed to define the profession are instrumentally transferred across to become the rules and procedures of practice. In medicine and engineering we would be deeply concerned if the knowledge base of the profession was *not* directly played out in practice; without this instrumental application people would die, buildings would fall down. There are good hearts and bad hearts; knowledge of how good hearts operate allows doctors

to deal with the specifics of the bad heart. This does not mean, as Ivan Illich so clearly shows, that the medical profession does not define the limits of that knowledge base and, through its institutionalization, control it, but it takes someone as intellectually and personally brave as Illich to completely desist from that knowledge.¹⁸

In architecture, however, the knowledge is being transferred from the apparent security and stability of the self-defined domain of the profession into a much less stable and predictable set of conditions. Bringing the paradigm of certainty to the world of uncertainty is foredoomed. The more typologies, codes of conducts, plans of works, schedules, and specifications are sharpened into categories and systems in order to control those unruly conditions, the more they will be blunted by them. The "RIBA Plan of Work" is not intrinsically a useless document, but it is if one trusts it as a true description of an unfettered linear sequence: every single project will loop back and forward to revisit or accelerate stages as costs, briefs, clients, and other conditions change. It is professional insecurity in the face of such potential unraveling that reinforces the quest for certainty, but the result is an endless chasing of one's own impossibly beautiful tail in that internalized loop. One symptom of this is the exercising of architectural knowledge less on the fluid practices and more on the static objects. Analyses of design processes, reflections on the profession or discussions of social occupation, are overwhelmed by attention to the building as aesthetic and tectonic object. Taking Bryan Lawson's useful model of the processes, products, and performance of architecture as a description of the various stages of architectural design and occupation,¹⁹ the normal focus is on the stable middle of the product rather than on the more open-ended outlying terms. The result is a false sense of detachment; products can be treated as neutral objects of contemplation, removed from their political and social ramifications.

Professions are quick to engage with politics when it directly affects their professional status in terms of protection of title or funding for their area, but much less quick to acknowledge the political constitution of their actual practices or the wider consequences of their products. Architects are no different in this. The twin poles of objective reason and creative artistry are both seen to rise above the political world. But just saying that something is not political does not mean that it actually isn't. Quite the opposite: the assumed innocence makes it more vulnerable to appropriation. Objective reason is commandeered in the guise of greater functional efficiency and control, and creative artistry in the guise of aesthetic commodification. As

we have seen, architects are complicit in this appropriation of professional values by the market. Yet they prefer not to acknowledge this raid on their professional capital, and instead focus on the pursuit of the higher ideals, using the smokescreens of perfection and beauty to disguise any dealings with dirty reality.²⁰

At this point I was going to tell a story, of life before architects and life with architects, the latter's ideals built on the lofty shoulders of philosophers, but then I found that the Roman author Seneca had beaten me to it by two thousand years, and says it better. Listen:

That philosophy discovered the arts of which life makes use in its daily round I refuse to admit. Believe me, that was a happy age, before the days of architects, before the days of builders! All this sort of thing was born when luxury was being born; this matter of cutting timbers square and cleaving a beam with unerring hand as the saw made its way over the marked-out line. The primal man with wedges split his wood. On another point also I differ from Posidonius, when he holds that mechanical tools were the invention of wise men. . . . It was man's ingenuity, not his wisdom, that discovered all these devices . . . invented by some man whose mind was nimble and keen, but not great or exalted; and the same holds true of any other discovery which can only be made by means of a bent body and of a mind whose gaze is upon the ground.²¹

The Crucible

"That was a happy age, before the days of architects." This is a severe view, and hardly one that as an educator and architect I can subscribe to without severe hypocrisy. But I can subscribe to the general sentiment that to deal with issues in the "daily round," a different kind of thinking is required: full of ingenuity, keen, nimble, eyes to the ground rather than raised up with pretensions to detached greatness. The disjunction between the type of knowledge that the profession needs to legitimate itself and the form of thinking that practice requires is best summarized in Bauman's distinction between legislators and interpreters. Legislators are the thinkers of the modern era, granted authority by access to "superior (objective) knowledge." It is a form of knowledge that reflects the modern view of the world as "essentially an ordered totality" that can be the object of control.²² In its objectivity and authority the knowledge of the legislator aligns with that of the professional. Interpreters, on the other hand, are the thinkers of the postmodern, in the sense of a condition which accepts uncertainty and lack of order as inescapable features of life and thought. The interpreter

attempts to make sense of this more fluid landscape, working from within the context of a particular issue rather than observing it from without.

Faced with conflicting demands, as any architect inevitably is, the legislator will attempt to smother them through imposition while the interpreter negotiates with them. While professional knowledge is predicated on the efficacy of set ways of doing, what practice really needs is nimble ways of thinking. That gap, again, thus opens up between what the profession thinks it should do and what practice actually requires it to do. To overcome this gap demands, in Bauman's terms, "the replacement of the dream of the legislator with the practice of the interpreter,"²³ the significant word here being *dream*, because the longer the profession holds to its false dreams the longer it will fail in its responsibilities to others, and the more it will be moved to the margins.

Interpretation clearly demands different ways of thinking that do not assume there is a perfect answer. Hermeneutics, as that branch of knowledge that invokes interpretation, "pits itself against the notion that human affairs can finally be formalized into explicit rules which can or should function as a decision-procedure."²⁴ Importantly, hermeneutics works with rather than against contingency; indeed, it needs the very openness that the contingent field provides for any interpretations to be made free from preconceptions. As the philosopher Nicholas Smith argues, "the recognition of contingency serves to define the theoretical outlook and practical momentum of hermeneutics . . . in opposition to the idea that the correct grasp of a matter can be gained by following neutral methodological or procedural rules, hermeneutics insists that what counts as a sound understanding cannot be fixed in advance of the contingencies of real engagement."²⁵ The interpreter thus not only needs but relishes the engagement with contingency; the variables and potential conflicts are not something to be smothered but become the crucible for exchange between a mix of interpreters: professionals, amateurs, dreamers, pragmatists.²⁶ The crucible is the setting of the almost miraculous transformation of coarse, incompatible elements into something miraculous—or at least, that is how it is seen in my backyard, Sheffield, the birthplace of crucible steel. It is in this light, the brilliant light of the crucible, that architecture's dependency, far from being its weakness, becomes its opportunity, with the architect acting as open-minded listener and fleet-footed interpreter, collaborating in the realization of other people's unpolished visions.

This model of the architect as interpretive agent, and thus of architecture (as profession, practice, and product) as transformative agency, is depen-

dent on a revised version of professional values, asking them to come down from their detached heights and instead engage as one set of informed principles among many. It does not—and this is important—ask that architectural knowledge should be disbanded, but does ask that it should be reconsidered away from any notions of authority and certainty. The disavowal of knowledge in the name of dissolving the authority of the expert is only to throw the baby out with the bathwater. This was exactly the predicament of the community architecture movement in the 1970s and 1980s. In the name of political rectitude, power was passed from architect to community; in the enforced relinquishment of power, the expert professionals also relinquished their knowledge (because, in the well-worn formulation reduced from Foucault, knowledge is power). As mere technical facilitators the architects were not able to use their embedded knowledge transformatively; rather, their skills were just used instrumentally. The Brazilian social theorist Roberto Mangabeira Unger makes much the same point in the construction of his idea of the transformative vocation, without a commitment to which a professional “soon finds himself driven down to the instrumental conception of work.”²⁷ The technical know-how of the expert is not enough to enable others to expand on their nascent but unarticulated desires, and so these remain at the level of the lowest common denominator. The philosopher Gillian Rose, in her brilliant critique of community architecture, captures it perfectly in the memorable phrase: “the architect is demoted; the people do not accede to power.”²⁸

However, maybe all this talk of promoting and demoting, detached and engaged, is in fact a distraction if, along with Lefebvre, we understand that “superior, differentiated and highly specialised activities have never been separate from everyday practice, [but] have only appeared to be so.”²⁹ What this suggests is that professional knowledge needs to be seen as part of a network that weaves together human and nonhuman, specialized knowledge with everyday insights, rules with instincts, the social sciences with the social.³⁰ It asks the profession to be part of the networks of others, and in this confronts it with its very worst fear, that of being normal. If a professional is deemed to be like any other person, they lose everything, hence their insistence on being different. This, however, is to misinterpret these networks and their hybrid use of knowledge. Instincts and everyday insights are not random impulses; they are developed from within the context of embedded experience (which is where the professional can claim a distinctive understanding) but are delivered in a context that is shared with others (which is where the professional engages). In fact, as Unger argues, the

institutional ideas of a profession “have to be realised by collective action. They remain unpersuasive and dreamlike until we have complemented them with a view of the social activities that might establish them.”³¹ This notion that professional knowledge is actually dependent on others for its development and transformative enaction usefully punctures that balloon of self-aggrandizement in which the original members of the RIBA lifted off. Those early professionals persuaded themselves that they “were obviously advantageous to the country at large,” but the reality is that we are all mutually reliant—not just in terms of economic exchange, but also in the context of intellectual exchange.

All this reinforces the argument made at the end of chapter 3 that architectural knowledge, as situated knowledge, should not be applied as an abstraction from the outside, but developed from within the context of the given situation. This calls for a new type of knowing. The profession is traditionally predicated on a knowing “that” and a knowing “how.” Architects deploy their knowledge either in the form of a set of facts or theoretical principles (knowing “that”) or else as a set of technical and instrumental skills: drawing, detailing, planning (knowing “how”). John Shotter argues that these types of knowledge are “decontextualised.” Instead Shotter calls for a knowing “from within,” a developmental knowledge that adjusts to, and grows out of, the social-cultural surroundings in which it is situated. In Shotter’s terms, this is “knowing of the third kind,” unlike the first two (knowing “how” and “that”).³²

The Problem of the Problem

In order to move away from the model of knowing “how” and knowing “that,” architects are going to have to abandon the paradigm of problem-solving; this assertion might come as a shock, because problem-solving is often seen as the defining characteristic of the architect’s role. In education, the architectural studio is held up as an exemplar of problem-based learning, the space where students are set a “problem” and, through the creative, and reflective, act of design, come to a “solution.” In architectural practice, the “problem” is what gives the profession something to act upon in a specialized manner. As Reyner Banham notes, “a professional is a man with an interest, a continuing interest, in the existence of problems.”³³ Solving problems is how the profession legitimates itself; setting problems is how it perpetuates itself. It is no surprise that buildings are offered as the only solution to architecturally defined problems, since it is architects who are

professionally legitimated to deliver buildings. Problem-solving is also the symptom and cause of the wider professionalization of the built environment in which, as Habraken notes, “what used to remain unquestioned has been taken up as a design problem to be solved: nothing may be taken for granted. . . . Built environment, the ubiquitous, stable, ordinary background for architectural innovation, is now itself being reinvented by professionals, bit by bit, time after time.”³⁴

It is difficult to reconcile the notion of transformative agency with that of problem-solving. Problems look determinedly backward, while agency looks hopefully forward. The negative connotation of the term *problem* casts a gloomy pall over the design process, implying that the best we can expect from the solution is to make the world a slightly less bad place, as opposed to transformative agency which is founded on a mutual aspiration to make the world a better place. John Chris Jones gets it just right when he says: “to think of designing as ‘problem-solving’ is to use a rather dead metaphor for a lively process and to forget that design is not so much a matter of adjusting to the status quo as of realizing new possibilities and discovering our reactions to them.”³⁵ In this light, problem-solving is revealed as an inherently conservative act of incrementally shifting around what is already there in a manner directed by preconceived ideologies.

If one problem with the problem is the way it closes down the potential for new possibilities, the other is that the framing and solving of the problem is an exclusionary act, and thus inappropriate for the terms of transformative agency involving the voices and networks of others. Problems require a certain type of professional, expert knowledge to solve them. The identification of the problem thus inevitably privileges the expert over the nonexpert, limiting the possibility of the architectural agency as a shared enterprise.

Of all the challenges to the strictures of the architectural problem, the most direct and devastating is Cedric Price’s dictum that the best solution to an architectural problem is not necessarily a building.³⁶ It is devastating because it so clearly exposes the fallibility of the closed loop of the expert (the one in which the expert defines the profession which orders practice which produces buildings which in turn define the knowledge of the expert). If buildings are removed as the only solution, then what is left to the profession or, worse, *of* the profession? As Price’s own oeuvre indicates, a lot, but to find this expansive field the profession needs to shift the application of architectural attention from objects to agency.

This entails the exercising of architectural intelligence rather than the imposition of architectural knowledge. Architectural intelligence is the

application of flexible thinking; this is different from architectural knowledge, which is predicated on the search for stable foundations, a search that Jonathan Hill likens to pouring water into a colander.³⁷ Architectural intelligence, when freed from the shackles of attempting certainty and fixity, is far more febrile than the intelligence of other professions. Architectural education, when not obsessed with the production of visual imagery, exposes students to an extraordinarily broad range of intellectual activity, from poststructuralism to the structure of posts. This provides the potential for the development of exactly the kind of flexible thinking that is required to cope with the contingencies of architectural practice. The stumbling block is that the professional validation process, to which nearly all architectural education is subjected, finds it difficult to legislate architectural intelligence and the judgments that arise out of it, and so stifles them under demands for the acquisition of skills and knowledge, thus privileging the outputs of problem-solving exercises.

We therefore need to find an alternative paradigm to problem-solving as the basis of the architectural practice. In an eloquent paper, the planning theorist John Forester suggests that we should replace the normative metaphor of design as the search for a solution with the idea of design as “sense-making.” “Sense-making is not simply a matter of instrumental problem-solving, it is a matter of altering, respecting, acknowledging, and shaping people’s lived worlds.”³⁸ Central to Forester’s argument is that such a move from the problem to sense-making necessarily brings with it an acknowledgment of the contested social situation in which the design process is first initiated, and of the contingent social world in which buildings and their users will eventually be situated. “If form giving is understood more deeply as an activity of making sense together, designing may then be situated in a social world where meaning, though often multiple, ambiguous and conflicting is nevertheless a perpetual practical accomplishment.”³⁹ Where problem-solving, predicated as it is on positivist thinking, tends to either abstract or exclude the social and the political, sense-making inevitably engages with them and, in so doing, accords with a model of architectural agency in which social and political issues are brought to the fore and then negotiated through spatial discussions.

In order to gain the full force of making sense, one has to address the complete range of conditions with which design, as the application of architectural intelligence, might be involved. It is normally assumed that the most creative part of design is concerned with the building as object, hence the fixation with formal innovation, but it may be argued that the most

important, and most creative, part of the process is the formulation of the brief. The brief is often seen simply as an instrument of rationality: how one can most efficiently get functions into rooms. Often written by the client, with the assistance of surveyors and project managers, briefs reduce architecture to abstract quantity, and are swiftly translated into deadening room data sheets.⁴⁰ These reductions are then passed as *fait accompli* to the architect, who is left with little more to do than turn these systems of flows and efficiencies into plans (a mainly technical act) and then disguise the deficiencies of the process (and their own marginality within it) through dressing the building up in various skins (a merely aesthetic act). Worst of all, the defining of briefs in abstract terms suppresses their social content under a set of conservative norms. The shift from the design of the object to the design of the brief, on the other hand, inevitably brings the social to the surface. The creative brief is about negotiating a new set of social relations, it is about juxtapositions of actions and activities, it is about the possibility to think outside the norm, in order to project new spatial, and hence social, conditions. This process of evolving a brief may not provide the immediate rush of visual stimulation that is associated with the creative design of an object—a rush which has proved addictive to architects over the ages—but it does have a much longer-term and profound effect.

Letting Go

One of the reasons that the design of the object is so privileged over aspects such as briefing is that it is one aspect of the whole process where the architect still retains nominal control. Even if this design control is highly mediated by the actions and demands of others (clients, cost managers, builders, and so on), the architect in the detachment of their studio can still dream of the hi-fi reproduction of their design ideals. It is under these conditions that the production of objects is attached to the power that Nietzsche accuses the architect being “under the spell of”; he associates the power with object-making (“architecture is a kind of eloquence of power in forms”) in a way that results in the power “reposing in itself, fatalistically, a law among laws.” In this isolated world the self-interest of the professional leads to a certain blindness to the state of others.⁴¹ However, with the shift from object-making as a form of problem-solving to the idea of architectural agency, the execution of this detached power is not ethically sustainable. Briefing is but one of many architectural activities that involves others, and in their role as interpreters architects have to assume a stance of modesty.

“The thought of flux . . . makes us wary of power . . . hermeneutics is a lesson in humility; it comes away chastened from its struggle with the flux,” writes John Caputo. “It understands the power of the flux to wash away the best-laid schemes of metaphysics. It takes the constructs of metaphysics to be the temporary cloud formations which, from a distance, create the appearance of shape and substance, but which pass through our fingers upon contact.”⁴² Faced with the storm of forces that constitute the architectural scene, one can but be humble; the modest acceptance of making best sense as opposed to the imperious assertion of “truth” is the only realistic option if architecture is not to be another of those evanescent clouds. This means letting go of the traditional values of authority and passing over some of the associated control to others, while retaining and exercising the febrile architectural intelligence that defines the profession. But most of all it means acknowledging that in this architects are not acting for themselves but on behalf of others, and this means acting ethically. It is to ethics that we now turn.

10 Imperfect Ethics

Bad Ethics

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I am sometimes asked if I like architecture. This question usually comes at the end of a lecture when I have rhetorically bashed away at some of the holy cows of the discipline. Maybe you are feeling the same way by now.

My answer is always the same. I love architecture for its potential, but despair of architects for too often throwing away that potential in their stubborn attachment to a certain set of values. I know that even this might read as a generalization. I know that there are of course architects operating out there who do not fit my—at times—cussed characterization. My issue is not with these individuals, but with the collective and the culture that sustains it. If this critique comes across as intemperate, then it is meant to be no more than tough love, a small call to save the profession from itself, from its distracting addictions. This chapter, however, is not tough love, it is just plain tough. No jokes, no stories; the evidence will speak for itself. It is tough because it is about ethics, a notion that is used all too freely and vaguely in architecture, and in this way is misappropriated as a convenient smokescreen under whose cover unethical values are allowed to perpetuate.

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There is something about the inclusion of the words *ethics* and *morals* in architecture writing that too often makes me see red. When a book sanctimoniously opens with a critique of “the ethics of statics” and replaces it with a vague notion of “the ethics of motion,” and then gives us vacuous pictures of blobs floating in empty space.¹ When a distinguished philosopher writes a lucid book on the ethical function of architecture and ends up with a picture of the US Capitol to illustrate the argument.² When architects conflate professional codes of conduct with an ethical stance. When another

distinguished philosopher mutters about the way “aesthetic principles (of twists, curves and color) are coded in ways that carry significant ethical and social weight.”³ When organizers of an architectural conference string poetics, ethics, and reconciliation together in the title, and then wistfully hope that each term will virtuously rub off against the other.⁴ When architects burble on about the ethics of construction as if “honesty” in structure and detail somehow fulfills a moral purpose. When another philosopher argues that a well-made brick wall shows that the maker cared, and in this caring there is some kind of moral stance.⁵ When Le Corbusier shouts: “Whitewash is extremely moral.”⁶ When beauty alone is seen to have a redemptive ethical purpose . . . I could go on, but you get the point: these things make me see red, and if in this one paragraph I have stepped on every type of architectural and intellectual toe, then maybe that is as much a reflection of the extent of the problem as it is of the extent of my irascibility, something that maybe I share with Manfredo Tafuri when he talks of the “pathetic ‘ethical’ relaunchings of modern architecture.”⁷

Then there is the biggest architectural moralist of all, Mies van de Rohe. He said (or is said to have said): “God lies in the details.”⁸ But what happens when you place this pious bead on the architectural rosary against Mies’s opportunist entanglement with the Nazis?⁹ What happens then to that insistent morality? It should collapse under its own hubris, that’s what should happen. I once pointed this out in a review of a Mies exhibition, in which the curators, in a paean to his rigor and artistic genius, had dramatically underplayed his political expediency. A letter came back: “Doesn’t the eccentric professor realize that (a) Mies was driven out by the Nazis (b) Mies was a great architect,” or words to that effect. *Don’t mess with Mies* was the message. However, it is necessary to mess with Mies as a good starting point in the untangling of the tortured relation between architecture and ethics.

That letter says so much. It is factually incorrect (Mies was hardly cast out of Germany, but went to America on the invitation of a number of suitors) but the repetition of a commonplace mistruth conveniently casts him as a victim, thereby accentuating his heroic status as “great” architect, a status in which he is elevated up above the political foibles of mere mortals. So in one line the letter manages to establish the myth that architecture is a world unto itself, and in this separation operates under its own moral laws. Franz Schulze, in his “critical biography” of Mies, says as much when he observes: “politically Mies was a passive soul; his active moral energies were turned toward his art and away from practically all else.”¹⁰ No one could remain

politically “passive” in the face of the rise of National Socialism, but maybe, just maybe, they could trick themselves into believing in a parallel universe, a retreat to a higher plane of consciousness in which morality is associated not with other people but with the rectitude of architecture as the rigorous discipline of fine, godly detailing and strict aesthetics. Only in such a parallel universe, presided over by the gods of architecture, could one believe that “there is an ethical project that is carried out precisely in the work.”¹¹

Here, perhaps, I should be feeling pity at these delusions, but I still see red at the abuse, and conflation, of the terms *ethics* and *morals*. To explain why, it is first necessary to define what I understand by “ethics.” There are four common usages of the word, all rather different. The first is the association with ethos, the originary sense of how human beings exist in the world according to commonly agreed, and virtuous, custom; for Karsten Harries, the ethical function of architecture is “its task to help articulate a common ethos.”¹² Second is the meaning derived from Aristotle, in which ethics is associated primarily with the development of the good self in the pursuit of good conduct. Third is the sense developed by Kant, in which a universal code of morals is seen as part of the wider project of reason. Finally there is the utilitarian interpretation of ethics being the deployment of knowledge to bring about the greatest benefit for the greatest number of people. As will become apparent, none of these understandings of ethics suits my purpose, because all in one way or another tie ethics to the broader assumption that there are definitively right and proper ways of doing things. To execute ethics under any of these guises is therefore to smother exactly the contingency and otherness of the world which, I have argued, should be allowed to flourish.

My understanding of ethics is informed by Zygmunt Bauman, who in turn acknowledges “the greatest ethical philosopher of the twentieth century,” Emmanuel Levinas, for whom ethics is defined simply and directly as “being-for the Other.” To assume an ethical stance means to “assume responsibility for the Other.”¹³ It is this, and this alone, that should guide the ethics of architecture. The “other” here is the diverse mix of builders, users, occupiers, and observers of architecture, people whose political and phenomenal lives will be affected by the construction of a building and its subsequent occupation. A number of implications arise out of this ethical dimension. First, because architecture is engaged primarily as a spatial experience, it follows that the focus of ethical attention should be on the dynamics of social space, not on the statics of vision. Second, the desires and needs of the “Other” are different from those of clients, which means

that any ethical stance must be clearly separated from the codes of professional service, the latter of which are concerned primarily with meeting the demands of the client. Third, the spatial and social conditions of contemporary life, in all their flux, need to be met with new kind of ethics, not with the restitution of a previous form of ordinary ethics. Finally, the “Other” is inevitably diverse and unpredictable, and so an ethical stance must accept this difference rather than attempt to muffle it under a blanket of universal morals. The rest of this chapter attempts to flesh out what such an ethics might mean to architects.

Phony Ethics

The 2000 Venice Architecture Biennale was launched with the challenge “Less Aesthetics, More Ethics,” a provocation from the overall curator, Massimiliano Fuksas, for architects to address issues beyond the aesthetic. It was a well-meant call, but fatally flawed because those four words still wedded aesthetics to ethics; they just asked for a rebalancing of the priorities. They suggest that if you just play down aesthetic excess, then ethics will emerge in the gaps that are left.

Fuksas is far from alone in linking aesthetics to ethics; it is a persistent strand in architectural thought, and the one most responsible for the delusions found in the parallel universe where morals are attached to objects. One can list a whole series of pronouncements from famous architects and theorists that build a picture of the insistent connection between aesthetics and ethics.

In the last resort great art will be distinguished from that which is merely aesthetically clever by a nobility that, in the final analysis, is moral; or, rather, the nobility in life, which we call ‘moral’, is itself aesthetic.

—Geoffrey Scott¹⁴

A building must be beautiful when seen from the outside if it reflects all these qualities. The architect who achieves this task becomes a creator of an ethical and social character.

—Bruno Taut¹⁵

We are an ethically confused but still morally strong and simple-hearted people, a people that will yet instinctively bring forth strong and healthy art when ethics and a true philosophy take hold.

—Frank Lloyd Wright¹⁶

We are aspiring to a new ethic. We are looking for a new aesthetic.
—Le Corbusier¹⁷

In a long life I have become increasingly aware of the fact that the creation and love of beauty not only enrich man with a great measure of happiness but also bring forth ethical powers.
—Walter Gropius¹⁸

The mass production house, healthy (and morally so) and beautiful in the same way that the working tools and instruments which accompany our existence are beautiful.
—Le Corbusier¹⁹

To us clarity means the definite expression of the purpose of a building and the sincere expression of its structure. One can regard this sincerity as a sort of moral duty.
—Marcel Breuer²⁰

I was left with a deep conviction of the moral rightness of the new architecture.
—James Stirling²¹

The common message arising out of these voices is simple: that ethics and aesthetics are mutually dependent; good aesthetics, in the form of beauty, leads directly to a good life, in the form of an ethical society, and equally that ethical society is the necessary context for the context of good aesthetics. This closed loop is very consoling for architects, because it places them—as arbiters of aesthetics—as central figures in the ethical process. The iteration of this loop was precisely the response of most architects to Fuksas's provocation at the Venice Biennale; not less aesthetics but actually more, on the understanding that as long as aesthetics can be equated with ethics, more aesthetics results in more ethics. Thus in writing about David Chipperfield, one of the architects chosen to represent Britain at the Biennale, Jonathan Keates argues that: “while not setting himself up as a moralist, Chipperfield appears continually to enforce the moral dimension surrounding an architect's work, whether in sharpening our apprehensions of beauty . . . or through ennobling activity by allowing it sufficient breadth in which to achieve, or at least to aspire to, suitable proportions of dignity and grace.”²² It is sanctimonious (and, it must be said, vapid) sentiments such as these that allow architects to enter into a comfort zone in which they believe that they are doing good by doing what they do best, namely making beautiful things.

One can equally easily make a list of quotes that equate rectitude in construction with an ethical stance. From Ruskin's moralist admonitions about the "deceptions" that architects have played in terms of presenting structure, surface, and materials in a "dishonest" manner, through Pevsner's "sham materials and sham technique are immoral,"²³ to Kenneth Frampton's discussions on tectonics, introduced in an article with the title "Rappel à l'ordre."²⁴ Frampton's title is telling because it implies, just like Ruskin and Pevsner, that tectonics (described as "the activity that raises construction to an art form")²⁵ is a means of creating a visual order, which in turn is associated with a social order. But this argument can be sustained only in a rarefied and reified atmosphere.

It is rarefied because the values of tectonic order are so internalized. Others do not share the obsessions of architects with shadow gaps, "crisp" detailing, and articulate joints. It is an elite language spoken only by the few and sometimes misunderstood, more often ignored, by the many. The same is true of the upper echelons of aesthetic discourse and its presumed ethics. In both the aesthetic and the tectonic the ethical association is so far removed from the world of social dynamics, where ethics has to be situated, that it becomes a phony ethics. In both cases there is also a worrying coercion going on: you (the world beyond) can have access to these ethical standards, but only if you join us in our parallel universe. Ethics are thus detached from their essential condition of being worked out through shared negotiation and instead are situated in a very controlled environment that positions the architect as arbiter. This detachment explains the very different perception of how architects see themselves, and how others see them. Within the limited value system of aesthetics and tectonics, architects can assure themselves that they are indeed doing good, whereas from outside these values are seen as either marginal or impositional, and the architect is cast as a removed (and possibly reviled) figure of authority. An impasse is reached in the phony ethics of architectural discourse: no architect sets out to behave badly or to inflict unhappiness on the world; the problem is that their priorities as to what constitutes the good are so misplaced.

The underlying reason for the impasse may lie in the second feature of associating visual order with social order, namely its reification. In materializing ideas as objects, the reification of ethics as aesthetic form results in the abstraction of ethics, and in this the creation of something that is not ethics. Ethics, to go back to my understanding of it, is the responsibility for the other; it is, at its core, to do with social relations. For the architect to engage in the ethical field therefore means to engage with how these (social)

relations are played out in (social) space. The phony ethics of aesthetics and tectonics freeze that dynamic and place all the attention on the contemplation of the object beautiful and refined, a state of removal for both viewer and viewed that can be reached only away from the flux of everyday space. In this, any connection to ethics as played out through social, spatial, relations is broken.

To put it simply: a brick has no morals. The careful placing of two bricks together, Mies's definition of the starting point of architecture, is not an ethical act; it is in fact, as Beatriz Colomina pithily notes, "just about the dumbest definition of architecture that I have heard."²⁶ There is no redemption in shadow gaps. People are not elevated to a higher plane of virtue through the appreciation of beauty. Blobs do not possess an "ethics of motion"; they are, at best, just blobs, at worst, part of the commodification of architecture and thus part of an ethically reduced world.

Arguing that aesthetics do not equate to ethics does not imply that one should throw away attention to the way that things look and are made. The accusation may come that in dismissing the ethical function of aesthetics and tectonics, I am dismissing them altogether; that in effect I am arguing for ugly, shabby, thrown-together buildings. However, this accusation stands up only in the court of law which legislates that "people who wash their shirts, paint their houses, clean the glass in their windows have a different ethic from those who cultivate dust and filth."²⁷ It is a court of law that places bad aesthetics in the dock and charges them with bad morality. This is a shabby and simplistic allegation; the really pernicious side of the aesthetics = ethics coin is the reverse, namely that ugly, dirty architecture is both symptom and cause of ugly, dirty morals. It is so dangerous because it associates architecture deterministically with society, as if the cleansing of one will lead to the cleansing of the other. The *bad architecture = bad morals = bad behavior* argument was exploited to greatest effect by the sociologist Alice Coleman in her 1985 book *Utopia on Trial*.²⁸ Her argument was that that symptoms of bad social behavior, expressed through counts of litter, graffiti, vandalism, and feces, were directly related to the design failings of modernist housing estates. The depressed areas of London, exposed to mass unemployment at the time of her study, provided ample evidence to support her arguments. It is not surprising, but may be sobering, that Coleman's ideas were taken up by the Thatcherite government of the time, because not only did they disassociate these symptoms of urban decay from societal causes (poverty, social division, collapse of the public infrastructure) but they then tied them in with the failures of the era of state housing,

and so by association with the failure of socialism. The ideas effectively and conveniently made urban decay someone else's problem, and certainly not the government's. By calling the book *Utopia on Trial*, and so firmly identifying these failed utopias with architectural rather than political conditions, Coleman was able to lay the blame firmly at the feet of design, thus absolving society from the responsibility. The trouble is that architects had set themselves up for this attack. By promoting the *good aesthetics = good ethics* line, they made it all too easy for critics such as Coleman to make the opposite charge of *bad aesthetics = bad ethics* when things start to go wrong.

The *aesthetic = ethics* equation is flawed for the simple reason that far from society being dependent on architecture, the reverse is true. *Architecture Depends*. To argue that there is not a direct, causal link between aesthetics and ethics is not to argue for the dismissal of the role of aesthetics and tectonics, but to more realistically understand the role they play in the context of the much wider set of social dynamics to which architecture contributes. This effectively relieves the pressure on the design of the perfected object beautiful, and of its reception as the be-all and end-all of architectural culture. By all means craft the building, compose the elevation, worry over the detail, but at the same time see these as just some tasks in service to another. The key ethical responsibility of the architect lies not in the refinement of the object as static visual product, but as contributor to the creation of empowering spatial, and hence social, relationships in the name of others.

Social Scales

One way to reconsider the role of the architect is to look again at the use of scale in architectural design.²⁹ The scale drawing is the foundation of architectural production, insofar as it is the site of both technical and cultural evaluation; builders can build from it, surveyors cost from it, other architects form comparisons with it, and clients make a stab at understanding it. The classic architectural scale is 1:100. Throughout the world, architectural students are exhorted to draw up their schemes at 1:100. Plans, sections, and elevations. It is a scale that is detailed enough to give a semblance of reality, but not so detailed that one has to confront the actuality of spatial occupation in all its mess and uncertainty. In its removal and abstraction, 1:100 is a comfort zone in which architects can twiddle with compositional niceties and play aesthetic tricks. What if, instead of being a scale of abstracted metrics, 1:100 is first considered as a social scale? *1 to 100: one architect to one*

hundred citizens. What does one do when faced with one hundred different characters? In this light, 1:100 as a social scale assumes an ethical dimension, facing up to one's responsibility for others.

The same move from the metric to the social can be applied across other scales. 1:1, the scale at which real obsession with the aesthetics and technics of the architectural detail is exercised, becomes the scale of the personal, the intimate, the human. *1 to 1: more than just a detail*.

1:10,000, the scale at which cities are pushed around on the end of a felt-tip pen, lining up streets empty of life. One thinks one can understand the city at this scale, squinting down from on high through fingers of abstract patterns, and dreaming of ordering all that complexity with the sweep of a mouse or the streak of a pencil. But, as Michel de Certeau put it, to be "lifted to the summit is . . . to be lifted out of the city's grasp." 1:10,000 is a large scale, but is maybe best understood as an accumulation of the smaller scales, "one's body grasped by the streets . . . by the rumble of so many differences."³⁰ And so to see better, it is necessary to surrender the view and claim the experience, to come down from on high, both literally and metaphorically, and to listen to the voices coming up. *1 to 10,000: these are stories, not streets*.

In all these scales, and in ones in between and beyond, the social assumes priority: the metric scales of aesthetic and technical composition remain, but are in service to something beyond their normally self-referential realms. It is this idea of service to, and responsibility for, something beyond the autonomous walls of the profession that should be the irreducible core of an ethics of architecture.

Codes of Misconduct

One of the most commonly made mistakes is to confuse professional propriety with an ethical position, as if acting in accordance with the codes of professional conduct will ensure ethical behavior. It is a confusion encouraged by the ARB (Architects Registration Board), the registration body for architects in the UK. The introduction to their code of conduct states: "the code should be central to the life of an architect, not only as a *source of ethical guidance* but also as a commonsense indicator to the principles of good practice."³¹ However, this high-minded intent is simply not delivered in the detail of the code. There are twelve standards that must be followed by anyone using the title architect. Just listing keywords from the heading of each standard is enough to show the ethical paucity of the ARB code. *Acting with*

integrity · Adequate professional, financial, and technical resources · Truthful and responsible promotion and advertising · Conscientious execution of work · Regard to users · Maintain professional and technical competence · Security of client's monies · Adequate indemnity cover · Manage own finances prudently · Promote the standards of the code · Organise work responsibly and with regard to clients · Deal with complaints promptly and appropriately. I reckon my hairdresser could meet those standards. In fact, I reckon he exceeds them, having turned down the business of a certain well-known architect who had behaved badly just once too often. The point, as Tom Spector notes, is that these standards are aimed at “clarifying the architect’s responsibilities to the client,” and nothing more.³² Even the one standard—*Regard to users*—that gives one hope that there is a responsibility beyond meeting the immediate demands of the client is significantly compromised in the detail. In the headline it states: “In carrying out or agreeing to carry out professional work, Architects should pay due regard to the interests of anyone who may reasonably be expected to use or enjoy the products of their own work.” In an apparent admission that this goes too far away from serving the client, the headline is immediately qualified: “Whilst Architects’ primary responsibility is to their clients, they should nevertheless have due regard to their wider responsibility to conserve and enhance the quality of the environment and its natural resources.” “Nevertheless,” a word that says so much about the ethical deficiency of the code. The client is seen as primary, and the responsibility for anything beyond framed as a secondary environmental, not social, issue. The user is suppressed.

It is consistent with ARB’s statutory role that their codes are so focused on the service to the client. ARB’s regulatory power concerns “the protection of the consumer,” the consumer here being the person who procures the services of the architect, not the people who live out their lives within or around the buildings of the architect. The problem lies in the assertion that the codes provide “ethical guidance”; they do not, often quite the opposite. A client’s demands, particularly in the private sector, are often short-term, opportunist, and potentially exploitative. It takes an enlightened client to understand the long-term benefits of user well-being or environmental responsibility, mainly because the market is geared toward the maximizing of development value in the short term. Serving the client through fulfilling the code of conduct is not only likely to be incommensurable with the wishes and needs of the future users, but may actually work against them. It may, in fact, be unethical on my terms.

The RIBA promises more, but delivers still less. Although the claim in the introduction to the recent RIBA Code of Professional Conduct is one of being more “outward looking than its predecessor,” with a focus on “the consumer and society at large,” the detail suggests something quite different. The first two sections on integrity and competence more or less repeat and expand on the ARB statements. The third section on “Relationships” states clearly in its headline: “Members should respect the beliefs and opinions of other people, recognise social diversity and treat everyone fairly. They should also have a proper concern and due regard for the effect that their work may have on its users and the local community.” This sounds promising. However, in the guidance notes all this good intent is thrown away with a series of statements relating to other professionals: *Duties to other architects* · *Supplanting other architects* · *Verifying offers of work (in relation to other architects)* · *Taking over someone else’s work* · *Acknowledging the contribution of others* · *Commenting on the work of others*. No mention, again, of the user, so that one is only left to assume that the real other in the headline “members shall respect the relevant rights and interests of other people” is the other architect. Once again the interests of the wider public come up against those of professional self-protection, and it appears the former are steamrollered by the latter. The tragedy is that the driver of the steamroller is wearing a hat called “professional ethics,” and therefore believes that there is something acceptable going on beneath.

I could extend this argument: the American Institute of Architects (AIA) slams all the terms together in its “Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct,” a document that also asserts the “obligations” to clients, architects, and colleagues over that of the obligation to the public, in relation to the latter of which the Code basically says: “stay within the law.” The point, whether in the ARB, RIBA, or AIA Code, is the same: behaving according to professional “ethics” is not the same as behaving ethically. Indeed, they might actually be Codes of Misconduct.

The only way out of this apparent conundrum is clearly and insistently to separate the two spheres. There are ways of acting professionally and there are ways of acting ethically; the two operate according to different parameters. The former, professional, life is prescribed by the various codes. These codes are overseen not by a sense of duty to society at large, but by service to the client and employer. These have no aspirations; they are there merely to draw a line across minimum, extremely basic, standards.³³ As minimum standards they are reasonably easy to fulfill; the problem is that they are

Till, Jeremy. *Architecture Depends*.
: MIT Press, . p 196
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often taken as the complete description of an architect's duties. Meeting the demands of these codes is a necessary, but not sufficient, part of an architect's role. It is not sufficient because they do not address the wider responsibility of the architect.

A client may argue that they are not paying for an architect to address these broader ethics, and an architect may say that the whole idea of wider responsibilities smacks of idealism. But the point is that issues of social ethics are inherent in the design of any building, and just to ignore them does not mean that they will go away. Better then to face up to them, and in this deal with the tension between the values and priorities attached to the professional codes and those implicit in social ethics. The former are framed by a short-term transaction between architect and client, and thus tend to focus on short-term delivery in which architecture is reduced to a commodity; the latter operate beyond these fiscal exchanges and in the long term. The negotiation between the brute reality of immediate demands and the long-term vision of how to relieve the pressures arising out of short-term expediency is, as we shall see in the final chapter, at the heart of the architect's role. As Unger argues, the visions have to arise out of an engagement with the realities.³⁴ In this light, not to engage with the dirty reality of short-term demands is as much a form of escape as the positing of utopian proposals of a harmonious ethic.

In both engaging and envisioning, one inevitably enters the arena of conflicting demands. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the quantitative claims of cost, efficiency, and speed, and in this to neglect the social needs of the long-term future. Never has this tension been more acute than with the issue of the environment. Designing to address the cause and effect of climate change is necessarily a long-term issue. One cannot justify it within the limited value system of the market-driven production of the built environment, which is why much of the early "sustainable" design played no more than lip service to the word *sustainability* through expedient technological fixes. As many have noted, to frame sustainability in technological terms is only to try to solve the problem with exactly the same tools that created it, setting up a self-defeating circle.³⁵ If, however, the environmental crisis is seen in sociological rather than technical terms, then it immediately becomes an ethical issue, insofar as a concern for others is directly understood as a concern for the future well-being of others and how they will be able, and enabled, to live their lives in an environmentally degraded world. As an ethical issue, the architectural approach to sustainability becomes much

more than short-term technical fixes: it has to take on the wider interactions between nature and society, humans and nonhumans.

The architect has the opportunity and means to deal with the tensions between short-term demands and long-term visions, in environmental issues and many others, more than anyone involved in the process of construction. The reason is that (social) space escapes the reduction to the rule of quantity alone. Because of the complexity of architectural production, there is no one right and proper solution that can be systematically evaluated, only a range of options that are open to multiple interpretations. It is exactly this openness and inexactitude that the architect should seize and use as an opportunity to enable and empower others. It is here that architecture's very dependency becomes the means of finding its independence, paradoxical though that might sound. In the external force field nothing is fully controllable or capable of exact replication. One can thus tell the client, perfectly truthfully and with no duplicity, a set of good reasons why things should be like that and at the same time get on and deliver the real reason.

Equally, there is no one way to behave professionally. There are always opportunities in spatial design that exceed the basic demands summarized in the professional codes; indeed, it is precisely the limited nature of these codes that allows and encourages one to go beyond them while at the same time satisfying them. The important thing is for the architect to be alert to these other potentials, always in the service of the other. This does not mean that one purposely compromises the demands of the client, but is a recognition that there is no one absolutely right way of meeting those demands in the name of short-term efficiency, and therefore there is always the potential to wring the most phenomenal, environmental, and social advantage out of the various spatial alternatives. Architects have at their disposal a whole range of elements that affect the social occupation and perception of space: the placing of doors and windows, the proportion of rooms, the width of circulation, the admittance of light, the material characteristics, and so on. Equally importantly, the creative briefing process allows different social relations to emerge, both in terms of the way that uses are arranged and also in the ability to adapt these over time. In the phony ethics of aesthetics and tectonics, all these elements are exploited in the name of visual or constructional display; in the social ethic the elements and relations are deployed in the name of the other through the formation of empowering spatial contexts.

The Ethics of Responsibility

The question remains: on what basis should these decisions be made? The answer has to come from an understanding of “the other.” In the traditional versions of ethics, the divergent voices of the other are often subsumed under a uniform moral code. First, in the Aristotelian version, one gets communitarian philosophers such as Alasdair Macintyre proposing local communities of individuals all “situated” in a common good. Macintyre talks of the “new dark ages which are already upon us . . . the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time,”³⁶ and in reaction proposes a revival of Aristotelian virtue. The problem with this solution, as many critics have observed, is that for these arguments to succeed one has to assume a closed and static system in which communal norms become stable and coherent.³⁷ However, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues, “no community can be immured from interactions with a changing environment, nor can the heterogeneity of its members be altogether eradicated and their potential conflicts altogether prevented. Where difference continuously emerges it must be either continuously negotiated or continuously suppressed, the latter always at somebody’s cost and often enough, it appears in the long run, at considerable communal cost.”³⁸ This means that any ethics has to take into account this diversity, and negotiate within it.

Macintyre’s version of ethics is at heart one of a revival of a state of prelapsarian virtue; pre, that is, the lapse into the amorality of the modern world. It is a version that resonates with those who call for the return to some form of primordial, originary ethics.³⁹ John Caputo, in his critique of originary ethics, knocks both Heidegger and Macintyre into the same hat: “although they are otherwise unlikely bedfellows, [they] agree in all the essentials: the great beginning in the Greeks, the terrible decline in modernity, the hope in a new beginning; nostalgia, anti-modernism. They both look to antiquity for light and a time of original solidarity.”⁴⁰ It is a similar version of originary ethics that is implied, but not explicitly demarcated, in the most influential recent work on architectural ethics, Karsten Harries’s *The Ethical Function of Architecture*. The book is a cogent argument for the reestablishment of an architecture that takes into account that human dimension of dwelling which has been suppressed by the forces of modernity. But one looks hard for a precise definition of what is meant by ethics beyond “its task to help articulate a common ethos.” The establishment of an ethical function is wrapped up in a critique of the dangers of modernism, the distractions

of postmodernity, the false hope of aesthetics, and the autonomous backwaters of architectural language. The ethics are then assumed to arise out of an attention to the authentic dimensions of dwelling. When, toward the end of the book, Harries finally states clearly what the ethical function of architecture is, the message is very telling in its call to something beyond: "Architecture has an ethical function in that it calls us out of the everyday, recalls us to the values presiding over our lives as members of a society, it beckons us toward a better life, a bit closer to the ideal."⁴¹ The implications are that an ethical life can be found only in a state of removal from the everyday, with "dreams of another and better world."⁴²

The problem with this kind of originary ethics is that it finds the ethical solution outside of the realities of the everyday world rather than within them, turning its back on Macintyre's barbarians rather than engaging with them. Its retreat provides hope of a new dawn, but one that allows the "forces of oppression [to] ravage the land" that is left behind.⁴³ The Achilles heel both of this form of originary ethics and of the Enlightenment notion of universal morals is that they believe a version of the common good can be found. The flux of the contemporary world presents a disturbing vision of irreconcilable difference, and this, by these two accounts, must be amoral inasmuch as no shared vision can be found. The reaction on the one hand is to walk away from the mess, on the other to order it through the imposition of "objective" moral systems. Zygmunt Bauman's solution to the apparent problem of finding an ethical stance in what might appear an irreconcilable condition is one of his most brilliant intellectual maneuvers. He suggests that "ethical choice and moral responsibility assume under the postmodern condition a totally new and long forgotten significance; an importance of which modernity tried hard, and with considerable success, to divest them, moving as it did toward replacement of ethical discourse with the discourse of the objective, translocal and impersonal truth."⁴⁴ Modernity divested the individual of the responsibility to make ethical decisions, passing that task to the higher authority of reason and totalizing moral systems. In the postmodern condition, however, these moral truths are dispersed in the storm of forces and differences, which means that "the ethical paradox of the postmodern condition is that it restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised."⁴⁵ The brilliance of Bauman's move lies in his insistence that postmodern conditions do not lead to a form of moral relativism in which anything goes, nor should we think that the extraordinary openness of the postmodern field

absolves us from the need for an ethical stance.⁴⁶ Instead, in the face of uncertainty, the individual is thrown back to their irreducible ethical core and is asked to make choices; not certain choices or perfect choices, but the best possible choices in the name of others. “If in doubt consult your conscience,” writes Bauman at the end of his *Postmodern Ethics*; “moral responsibility is unconditional and infinite, and it manifests itself in the constant anguish of not manifesting itself enough.”⁴⁷

Bauman’s approach effectively gives us what we need: a new ethics for a new era. It is not reliant on the restitution of previous models, nor does it have any pretensions to foundations or absolute correctness. Instead, it works from *within* each situation rather than imposing an abstract set of moral codes from without. This ethics thus has to work with the contingencies of each context and not attempt to stifle them. Contingency here, far from being a threat to the establishment of firm rules, becomes the necessary context for the development of an ethical position. John Caputo’s version, which he calls the “ethics of dissemination,” “offers not overall strategies, not total schemes or masterplans, but only local strategies for local action.”⁴⁸ In all this particularity, worked out in response to the concrete conditions of the specific context, the resultant ethical sense is inevitably partial—both incomplete and on the side of the other. In this it does not meet the standards of providing for the common good by which previous ethics have measured themselves. But these standards have been found wanting in the face of uncertainty, and so if the new ethics is imperfect according to the values of the previous models, then it wears that badge with pride. This is because an imperfect ethical solution is a realistic recognition that the diverse points of view in any situation can be resolved only in as best a manner as possible and not as perfected a manner as possible. Imperfect ethics is not a contradiction in terms but an aspiration, because right at the heart of that term is a responsibility for the other and the appreciation of the differences of the other. As Hans Jonas puts it, “the starry-eyed ethics of perfectibility has to give way to the sterner one of responsibility.”⁴⁹

It may feel lonely for the architect out there, exposed to conflicting demands, with a responsibility for others but no moral codes or rules of reason to fall back on. But the new ethics relieves the pressure of the creation of generalized perfection; it works modestly and realistically, and because it works with and through others, loneliness is dispersed. For the feminist theorist Carol Gilligan, an ethics of responsibility emerges “from the experience of connectedness, compassion and sensitivity to context,”⁵⁰

words that are the antithesis to the social indifference and autonomy of the phony ethics of aesthetics and tectonics. They are words that will grate with the macho construction of the architect as legislator, but in their challenge to the distant voice of authority to come down and listen carefully to the stories of others,⁵¹ they begin to sketch a figure of the architect as an agent of hope, an idea that will be developed in the final chapter. Roberto Mangabeira Unger, our guide to that chapter, says it far better than I ever could: “the architect at his best must make forms enabling people as individuals and as groups to express themselves by changing their situations. In this manner he becomes like the lover for whom the fulfilment of the beloved’s life plan is part of his own life project. He lives out his transformative vocation by assisting someone else’s. Then, we can forgive him his signature on his buildings. We can forgive him because he makes pieces of stone serve hearts of flesh.”⁵²

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11 Hope against Hope

Gymnasts in the Prison Yard

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In the last chapter of *Architecture and Utopia*, Manfredo Tafuri writes of the impossible position of the architect: caught within the structures of capitalism, the architect has lost any means of resistance. Tafuri's most devastating argument is that architecture has deluded itself into believing that the production of form alone can intervene productively in the social world, and that this delusion has hidden the real state of affairs in which fresh form has been appropriated by the very forces of capital that it presumes to escape. The final sentence of the book talks of "impotent and ineffectual myths, which so often serve as illusions that permit the survival of anachronistic 'hopes in design.'"¹ Tafuri's trenchant argument—he talks of being "uselessly painful" because it is useless to struggle for escape when completely enclosed and confined without an exit,²—leaves no apparent way out of the conundrum, and so led his critics to talk of the death of architecture. Answering this charge, Tafuri sees "architecture obliged to return to *pure architecture*, to form without utopia; in the best cases to sublime uselessness."³ It is too easy to take these words at face value, to escape from the pressures and just fiddle with form while the world burns. But that sentence is surely not a prescription but a provocation, with all its caustic sarcasm meant to shake the profession out of its slumber. In another book Tafuri talks of "how ineffectual are the brilliant gymnastics carried out in the yard of the model prison, in which architects are left free to move about on temporary reprieve."⁴ It is a prison yard of architecture's own making, doubtless well-designed but all the more ensnaring in its distracting beauty. This final chapter attempts to escape Tafuri's trap, hoping against those

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anachronistic “hopes of design,” in order that architecture’s gymnasts are not damned to permanent imprisonment.

The Flight to Utopia

How could architects ever propose utopia? U-topia. Not-place. It is a contradiction in architectural terms. Architecture needs place if it is to be real; anything else is pure fantasy. Despite this, the flight to some form of utopia has a powerful attraction. “In the midst of the present—messy, fetid, rambling and chaotic, and thus deserving of the death sentence,” writes Bauman, “utopian thought was a bridgehead of future orderly perfection and perfect order.”⁵ Hope is here founded in new futures, untainted by the scars of history and unfettered by uncertainty. “Let’s drive away the agony of the unknown,” shouts Le Corbusier, again exposing his fear of the uncontrollable, “let’s reconstruct everything: the roads, the ports, the cities, the institutions.”⁶ Here Le Corbusier conflates the spatial (cities) with the social (institutions), but as an architect the spatial aspects come first, hoping to set the ground for social transformation. The geographer David Harvey’s analysis of utopia in his book *Spaces of Hope* is acute in identifying two prevalent forms. First the utopias of process, those which rethink the social structures of the world, “usually expressed in temporal terms . . . they are literally bound to no place whatsoever.”⁷ Second the utopias of spatial form, which expel time in their pursuit of idealized formal solutions. Harvey notes that both approaches are flawed. Utopianism of process “inevitably gets upset by its manner of spatialization,” while utopias of spatial form “get perverted from their noble objectives by having to compromise with the social processes they are meant to control.”⁸

In denying on the one hand space, and on the other time, these two forms of utopia inevitably fail. Harvey’s solution is to propose an “explicitly spatiotemporal” utopianism, or what he calls dialectical utopianism.⁹ In proposing this utopianism Harvey is very aware of the dangers of flight and fantasy, and sees the challenge as one of working out a spatial and social language that is “materially grounded in social and ecological conditions but which nevertheless emphasizes possibilities and alternatives for human action through the will to create.”¹⁰ Harvey’s spaces of hope thus arise out of a transformation of what is given, rather than as inventions torn from spatial and temporal contexts. The figure that David Harvey uses in fleshing out his argument around spaces of hope is that of the architect; not, he stresses, the architect as a professional person but the architect

as a figure who “struggles to open spaces for new possibilities.”¹¹ It is the architect, effectively, who can still maintain a hope against hope, turning away from flights to utopia and toward a critical engagement with the world as found.

Formative Contexts

For the given to be seen as a place of potential, one has to rid it of the negative connotations of mess and chaos. The only way to do this is by understanding the contingency of the given, in its very uncertainty and openness toward establishing something else, as an opportunity and not a threat: to see that freedom is to be found in the recognition of contingency and not outside of it. Of all the people who have made sense out of this apparent riddle—of finding hope within the conflictual ground of reality—the writing of Roberto Mangabeira Unger stands out. *False Necessity*, the title of the centerpiece of his magnum opus *Politics*, is clear in setting an intent of working against the idea that there are necessary and inevitable patterns in the development of society. In relation to how progress might be made, Unger takes issue with two positions. The first is that which takes existing conditions and moves the bits around without essentially transforming them, a paralyzing condition in which “people treat a plan as realistic when it approximates to what already exists.” He calls this latter “reformist tinkering.”¹² The second is that of the utopist: he describes the utopian proposal as “little more than the inverted image of current reality,”¹³ and that mirroring leaves reality unscathed.

It may be argued that architecture takes up each of these positions. On the one hand the uncritical perpetuation of social conditions that constitutes a lot of architectural production, all the stuff that falls below the radar of the academy or the media, but equally all the stuff that most profoundly affects the environmental quality of the world and the lives of its citizens. On the other hand the flight to the iconic buildings of prize ceremonies and the media that both sustains architectural culture and masks the reality of the production of the dross. However, the argument is much more than one of form and aesthetics; Unger’s thesis is based on the premise that “everything is society is politics,” and so to understand its implications for architecture, we have to understand architectural production in its political context.

Unger’s central theme in *False Necessity* is that of formative contexts, the structures and frameworks of social life. This is a term that has negative

traits, insofar as the formative contexts “circumscribe our routine practical or discursive activities and conflicts . . . and resist their destabilising effects.”¹⁴ It is only through an awareness and understanding of these restrictive features of formative contexts that one can break through them transformatively. Unger’s essential contribution is to see that in every formative context there is the potential for change; these contexts might be shaped by existing frameworks of social and economic life, “but they are not shaped completely.”¹⁵ He argues that even the most entrenched context has the potential for change, or rather, that the most entrenched context demands change.¹⁶

The key agent in this transformation is that of imagination, because it is only through the exercise of imaginative vision that one can see the potential for change in what otherwise might appear restrictive. Social or architectural reality, if viewed as a set of determinate rules and procedures, tends to shut down the imagination, because the apparent certainty leaves no gaps for vision to open up. However, the contingent, with its multiple but uncertain potentials, allows the imagination room to project new futures. Here it is worth quoting Unger at some length:

The visionary imagination of our age has been both liberated and disoriented. It has been liberated by its discovery that social worlds are contingent in a more radical sense than people had supposed; liberated to disengage the ideas of community and objectivity from any fixed structure of dependence and dominion or even from the determinate shape of social life. It has also, however, been disoriented by a demoralising oscillation between a trumped-up sanctification of existing society and would-be utopian flight that finds in the land of its fantasies the inverted image of the circumstance it had wanted to escape.¹⁷

This imagination, therefore, is not the imagination of the detached dreamer; it grows out of the real, fueled by the very uncertainty that the rationalists and utopists found so threatening. It is an imaginative vision that both projects new futures and also embraces their imperfections.

Although Unger’s work is generally concerned with formative contexts found in the constitution of governments, in economic organizations, and in local politics, it is possible to transfer the ideas to the architectural field without, I trust, demeaning the theory. Indeed, Unger himself hints at this transfer in his notion of the transformative vocation and his later association of this with the architect.¹⁸ To view the setting of an architectural project as a formative context is to see the architect playing out the role of the imaginative interpreter, and because these contexts are by their very nature social,

that role is played out with and for others. The action of the architect is here not about the implementation of generic solutions to particular problems. It is not about the architect as the detached polisher of form and technique, but as the person who gathers the conflicting voices of a given situation and makes the best possible social and spatial sense of them. Hope is not discovered in the clouds of ideals that are blown away by the slightest breeze; hope is founded in the interstices of the given, and since it has a tough start in life, this hope is a survivor. Where Tafuri identifies the prison and then throws the keys away, constructing a seamless barrier of capital contra architecture that leaves the architect helpless, Unger allows us to see opportunities in the smallest gap. Even the seemingly most compromised and fixed condition offers some prospect of change. Unger's model is not about wholesale revolution from on high, but is one of engaging with existing structures and "establishing small-scale, fragmentary versions of the future."¹⁹ Such hope has to be established first in the reconfiguration of the social, not in the false hopes of form and technique. If one accepts that social relations are embedded in spatial relations, then the architect has an important role to play in this reconfiguration, as long as the tenets of the transformative vocation are followed: work out from the given context, be both practical *and* imaginative, critical *and* visionary. In every case there is a formative context that can be transformed, and in every case there is a productive tension between realism and imagination, because "we must be realists in order to become visionaries and we need an understanding of social life to criticize and enlarge our view of social reality and social possibility."²⁰

Finally, then, we can see how architecture's dependency is not just a truism but a positive condition. Remember Hegel's definition of contingency—the "unity of actuality and possibility"²¹—in which the openness of that possibility is too much for the philosopher of reason to tolerate, and so has to be suppressed. But what if, not in the name of irrationality but in the name of seizing the moment, we see the unity of actuality and possibility as an opportunity to celebrate? In the actual there is always the possible. It is too easy to think that the external forces are so overwhelming that there is no room for maneuver. But in casting a critical eye over those forces and then projecting an ethical imagination against them, gaps open up.²² In any architectural situation there are freedoms and opportunities to be found, not in terms of wholesale changes but in terms of "fragmentary versions of the future." Perhaps the architectural project, if accepted in all its dependency, is the paradigm of the formative context, because in each project there is the chance for the construction of a small chunk of (social)

spatial hope. And so architecture, finally, may show others how to struggle for, and find, their independence through depending.

Angels with Dirty Faces

I spoke earlier of the contingent researcher purposely crossing disciplinary boundaries, welcoming each new book with a sense of curiosity, finding their way through the networks guided by intent, and taking competing fragments and filtering them with that intent. The contingent researcher—and now, we see, the dependent and contingent architect—has to be light enough on his or her feet, and modest enough, to allow that intent to be shaped by other events and ideas, but at the same time purposeful enough not to be overwhelmed by them. For the contingent architect the book is replaced by the project as the site of curiosity, and the intent is guided by the aspirations to reform space in the name of others. It is a model for architects as Angels with Dirty Faces. The inspiration here is Wim Wenders's film *Wings of Desire*. The secular angels, in black and white, first look down observing and commentating but removed from the world. They then sweep down, colored and embodied, discursive and slightly grubby as they drink cheap coffee from street stalls. It is movement from on high to low and back again that is necessary for architectural angels if one is not going to get overwhelmed by the brute realities of the everyday world. This is why the philosopher Merleau-Ponty says that "one must be able to withdraw and gain distance in order to become fully engaged."²³ One needs to draw back and gain distance in order to have the space to speculate, but one needs to come back down in order that those speculations are not false dawns. Each informs the other in a symbiotic relationship; vision lifts and transforms the given, but the given feeds the vision with nuggets of reality, saving it from irrelevance, stopping it from floating free into implausibly pure zones.

One of Wenders's angels notes wearily:

I've stood outside long enough. I've been absent long enough. Let me enter the history of the world. I get tired of my spiritual existence . . . of forever hovering above. I wish I could grow a weight which would bind me to the earth. To guess for once instead of always knowing. To have a fever. To blacken my fingers reading the papers.

Maybe, just maybe, that angel then raises his stained fingers and absent-mindedly rubs his cheek. Angels with Dirty Faces. *Angels*, "able to pass

through space, time and walls,"²⁴ *with dirty faces*, and then able to bring them all together. *Angels*, androgynous imaginers of possibility, *with dirty faces*, which is always engaged. *Angels*, the original messengers, *with dirty faces*, human and slightly flawed. Architects modestly bound to the earth but with the vision, environmental sense, and ethical imagination to project new (social) spatial futures on behalf of others.

I am at the stage in writing this book when the basic argument is in place but, in the paranoid manner of academics everywhere, I am worried about the loose intellectual ends that critics might delight in unraveling. I am therefore, in the self-centered manner of academics everywhere, pleading with my publisher for a later deadline in order to give me time to tie up those ends. I realize that this is an impossible task and one that is incompatible with the tenor of the book, but it is still more important to me than getting into the Spring catalog. But I know my time is up when the email comes from Roger Conover, my editor at the MIT Press. I do not even have to read the message; the subject line is enough. It is to do with the placing of the comma, which is somehow both threatening and encouraging:

"final deadline, Jeremy Till"

And now that deadline is here, so that is it. Not an end, but a point on the way. My argument could never be complete anyway, because that would presume to all the certainty and universality that this book has resisted. Architecture, in all its dependency, has to remain open. I kind of hate this deadline because there is so much more to say. But then I actually need this deadline because by not saying more I retain some of that openness for myself and, I hope, for you.