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Between aesthetics and ethics in architecture

Although there are no doubts that the esthetic issues are universally considered an important aspect of the discourse about architecture, the ethical issues, which are also present, sometimes known, and sometimes concealed, remain in the shadow of the former. They are limited primarily to the requirements of professional codes of ethics which operate in the realm of obligations. In the context of architecture, the ethics of attitudes, convictions, and the ethics of architecture are rarely discussed¹. Are the ethical requirements then an obstacle in the realization of the esthetic program? It is no coincidence that “less esthetics, more ethics” was the slogan of the Venetian Biennial of Architecture in 2000 [5]; was it supposed to mean that ethics is the opposite of esthetics?² Do we have to choose between esthetics and ethics in architecture, or do esthetics and ethics complement each other? Wittgenstein [13] put it like this: *Ethics and esthetics are one*. If, however, ethics and esthetics can be considered “one”, then what is that union about in architecture if it is not at all so universally acknowledged as obvious? Finally, can we rationalize the ethical and esthetic issues in architectural practice as well as their inter-dependence and use them for the benefit of the designer? Or is it just about the workshop and the attitude?

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¹ Kucza-Kuczyński writes: *It is the present that extended the questions regarding not only the ethics of an architect, but also such new notions as “immoral architecture,” “morality of architecture,” and even “ethics of architecture.”* [...]

The questions about ethical responsibility extend from man-architect to include the architecture itself and space [6, p. 10].

² Massimiliano Fuksas, the director of the Biennale, wrote: *What we needed was the re-discovery of the idea that the quality of architects and their works is not everything. The schizophrenic conflict between good architecture (which is still created, though it is never enough!) and the incredible transformation of urban spaces causes the risk of moving us away from that new reality once and for all. [...] The choice is always the same: to be a part of the process or to continue to live beyond it in the state of permanent acceptance of everything* [5, p. 12].

It seems that the evolution of the notion of environment and the esthetic and ethical conceptions connected with it can have some bearing when considering these questions. The old “nature-culture” dichotomy dividing the reality into natural environment and social environment was replaced with the conception of the comprehensive vision of the natural-social environment.

Today we cannot avoid social issues in architecture. This is not only its *differentia specifica* when compared with other fields of art, this is its essence, whereas the social issues have ethical aspects. Today’s interest in the environmental issues and their significance in architecture has two sources: the natural environment is threatened by the senseless human interference, whereas the social environment is to a similar degree thoughtlessly deprived of its history, identity, and social bonds. The urban space is subject to “desocialization” and the reversal of this process became as challenging as saving the Earth, especially when, according to the comprehensive conception of the environment, the acknowledgement of the natural and social inter-dependencies between its components is the fundamental principle.

In its broad sense, the natural environment is not something independent and separated from us; we constantly live in it and are a part of its processes. In the opinion of Berleant [3] such a concept of the environment does affect the evolution of thought of its esthetic and ethical aspects³. This can be approached in two fundamentally different ways. One of them considers the environmental esthetics a kind of pleasant admiration, which is explicitly different than in the case of art. The other assumes that admiration of nature and art is essentially the same. The

³ Berleant notes that *it is problematic for traditional esthetics which claims that an esthetic experience requires a receptive and contemplative approach. Such an approach is typical of an observer; however, nature does not know an observer – nothing is “outside” of it or indifferent* [3, p. 12].

former maintains the traditional esthetics unchanged; the latter requires the rejection of that tradition for the benefit of esthetics which on the same terms comprises both art and nature. That esthetic engagement, as Berleant called it, results in revising the theory of esthetics which is close to environmental esthetics, where the contemplative admiration of a beautiful object or a scene is replaced with a continuous engagement – connection with the world of nature. The environmental esthetics perceived in this way has significant implications not so much for the theory of esthetics as for our understanding of a broader social matrix of perception and consideration. The esthetic aspect, released from the caring supervision of the museums and concert halls, can no longer be excluded from the broad range of social needs and activities. The environmental esthetics no longer concerns only buildings and places. It also deals with the conditions in which people become participants in complex situations and it deeply concerns our moral perception of human relations as well as social ethics. This leads Berleant to conclude that *The environment is a “seamless” unity of organism, perception, and place that is suffused with values. [...] Esthetics is not then an illusory escape from the moral sphere, but ultimately it becomes its direction and fulfillment at the same time.* The concept of the environmental esthetics then leads through esthetic engagement to the discovery of its connection with ethics. However, at the same time, a reverse process can be observed: it is the ethical challenges posed by contemporary civilization that lead to the reflection over previous esthetic concepts and as a result to their reevaluation. What are these challenges?

In the opinion of Sztompka [10], [...] *a real society is no longer perceived only as a coalition of interests but also as a moral community. A moral community assumes a special way of relating to others whom we define as us. The criterion of belonging to that category is defined by three moral obligations. Us is those whom we trust, towards whom we are loyal and about whose interests we care in the spirit of solidarity. In other words, within that framework the three basic components of a moral community include: (1) trust, that is expecting an honest behavior of others towards us; (2) loyalty, that is an obligation not to violate trust that we put in us by others, and fulfill the promises granted; (3) solidarity, that is care for the interest of others and willingness to undertake actions for their benefit even when it violates our own interest.*

E. Rewers [8] notes that for conscious citizens a city is *a common good, good life, consciously and willingly concluding contracts that enable the movement from coexistence to cooperation, the political aspect of social space encompassing the ethical aspect so they become inseparable, the issues established in the tradition of the European cognition of public space and which are today acknowledged also as a normative basis of life in a city*⁴. From that perspective [...] *the most important issue in modern cities*

is [...] a broad opening to social dialog of spaces which are degraded, abandoned, underground, mobile, and belong to nobody – those obvious opposites of contemporary counterparts of agora – inhabited/defined by “life” also by those who are not citizens. [...] It is no longer only about the fact that the city cannot be created by one urban planner-law maker - no matter how talented - but by its citizens who, while solving conflicts, learn to live together in the common world and leave material traces of that cooperation. If we accept different kinds of rationality, we also must agree that we allow a lot of entities to speak, that we do not speak for them without asking for permission and that we are ready to sacrifice our time to hear them out. [...] We are talking about public space as opposed to private space and we look for examples in urban space. We are then trying to combine an effort to construct ethics of coexistence, on the one hand, and ethics of responsibility with private space, on the other hand.

However, the ethical challenges – as perceived from the European perspectives – become less relevant when faced with the global situation (especially of the inhabitants of the Third World countries). More than half of the population live in the cities; a third of it live in slums which do not have the most basic technical infrastructure. In the situation in which the resources are dramatically limited and they are short of almost everything, the fundamental challenge for the architects is the necessity to reject the idea of “designing for...” in favor of “designing with...”, which makes it necessary to include in the education of architects the development of “new professional skills” of an architect – participant and advisor and not a creator [11]. That dramatic limitation faces radicalism of the ethical attitude: *Let me commit complete architectural heresy: it doesn't matter what “it” looks like – “it” should function; it should fit the place and it shouldn't harm. Obviously it is important that “it” is not ugly but it may be an additional aspect to the fact that “it” works, fits, and is useful* [7]. Such an attitude does not mean, however, resigning from esthetic ambitions; it assumes making a difficult effort to find the formula of “esthetics of necessity”. The following examples illustrate such efforts.

Example I

Program for Low-Income Housing, Aranya, Madhya Pradesh, Indies [4]. Architect: Balkrishna Doshi, Vastu Shilpa Foundation for Studies and Research in Environmental Design, 1983–1986.

Balkrishna Doshi rejected the model of a contemporary residential community – a neighborhood depriving its inhabitants of the flexibility of use, the possibility to extend, and imposing a lifestyle detached from the usual, local customs. Observing *shantytowns* allowed him to see their positive aspects: inhabiting *bric-à-brac* in small units with stores, shops, public spaces, busy streets, encouraging to make contacts, creating all-inclusive projects where families find services, solidarity and freedom of building. The project for Aranya comprises six neighborhood units, accessible from the main road. Each of them consists of settlements, each with ten houses divided by patios. After obtaining the design of a model unit the Foundation

⁴ E. Rewers refers here to Aristotle who wrote in his *Politics* about citizens of *polis*: *all people in all their actions follow what they deem to be good.*

encouraged families to adopt it for their needs and extend it by adding new rooms on their own. In the opinion of Doshi, habitation should be a process and not a product. The project, which is deeply rooted in the indigenous culture and economy, continues the simple, vernacular “aesthetics of necessity” and participation.

Example II

Resorption of a Shantytown for 100 Families, Iquique, Chile [4]. Architect: Alejandro Aravena, Studio Elemental, 2004.

Aravena’s key principle is *Más con lo mismo* (do more from the same). The city is the most important renewable resource, whereas environmental designing is designing flexible, affordable (low-cost) buildings satisfying various needs. The project is the realization of the idea of minimum habitation – providing the roof, shell of the building, rooms with access to running water, and leaving the space for free arrangement. Chile Barrio company bought from the city an area of slums to be demolished and had the design prepared and a group of three-storied residential buildings with work places constructed. The ground floors of the row half-houses have mainly workshops and storage space. Above them, there is a two-storied residential part with free space which can be arranged by inhabitants according to their needs and material availability (the other part of the half-house). The architecture of the settlement successfully combines the frame of the open structure designed by an architect with a spontaneous, transformable, vernacular structure in line with “aesthetics of participation”.

Example III

Bryant Hay Bale House, Hale County, Alabama, USA [8]. Architect: Samuel Mockbee with Rural Studio, 1994.

The program of Samuel Mockbee and his famous Rural Studio is about designing sustainable, simple architecture, defined by necessity (*Ours is a simple sustainability born of necessity*) and teaching students architectural ethics. It was implemented in a system of 6-month-long workshops for graduates of architecture, co-designing residential and services buildings for poor, mainly African-American population of Alabama. Mockbee introduced the rule of “three unities” building the attitude and experience of the students. They include: the unity of place (area of Hale County), the unity of time (for six months students live in the place where the project is executed) and the unity of action (experience of being fully responsible for the project – from program to completion.) Another rule that applies here is co-designing with the participation of the inhabitants and the unity of ethics and aesthetics.

Example IV

Mixed Communities, Great Britain [12].

The idea of *mixed land use* is the basis for the development of a sustainable residential environment for instance by lowering consumption of energy used for traveling. Its objective is to reverse the processes of ghettoization which are com-

mon in the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural British society. The social diversity is considered to be a value. The arguments supporting that premise derive from the positive, trusting vision of life in an inclusive society, whereas the arguments in favor of uniformity are based on doubts, fears, and even hatred. Are there any principles of designing which could contribute to balance the socially diverse residential projects? The concept of three inter-dependent strategies: *mix, connection, and security* is such an attempt. This regards both the kinds of habitation – differentiating ownership, types, and sizes of houses, age of the buildings – integration of old resources with new ones as well as the policy of sustaining their affordability. The policy of supporting building “mixed and sustainable” residential estates, which are called new Mixed Income Communities (MINCs), has been in place in Great Britain for years. It is an important element of that policy to care for the quality of spaces used by children and special attention is paid to proper design and management of that kind of communities created in the neglected city center areas. The research which was conducted suggests that the main factors encouraging families with children to those communities include safe, clean, and friendly neighborhood, good school as well as open areas where children could play and have contact with nature, the appearance of the buildings, integration of social and free market housing projects as well as proper administration and management. The architecture of MINCs should be *tenure-blind* in order to avoid stigmatization of the inhabitants with low income; it is a surprisingly unusual contribution to the discussion about the connection between ethics and aesthetics in architecture.

Although the examples presented above regard situations which differ not only geographically but also socially, economically, and culturally; they address the communities which are to various degree degraded or excluded. The solutions they apply are firmly integrated with the local reality which strongly limits freedom of designing. These restrictions forced architects to reject the proven design patterns and rethink its ethical and esthetic stereotypes. It could be expected that the projects designed in those conditions will substantially differ from one another. This indeed was the case but what is interesting is what connects those projects. This is the basis going beyond the accepted standard conduct, breaking the special exclusivism of contemporary architecture for the benefit of environmental designing which “includes the excluded” and is sensitive to social and cultural issues, local character, and the continuation of communal habitation patterns. They are connected by the awareness of deep ethical and esthetic interdependences.

Contemporary architecture is criticized for its inability to adjust to the place, the lack of understanding of the environmental consequences of architectural interference in the sensitive social environment and focusing on originality and peculiarity at the expense of ordinariness and stagnation, which in fact determine the quality of life. The necessity to make an intellectual recollection regarding the system of values in architecture and its position in the modern society is then a new challenge for architecture [2]. Jean-Luc Godard said that *It may be true that one has to choose between ethics and aesthetics, but whichever one chooses, one will always find the other at the end of the road.*

Summary

The discourse about architecture is dominated by esthetic issues, whereas ethical ones have been put aside as being often considered hindrance to the designing process. An increased significance of the social issue in the development of the human residential environment provokes deeper reflection over ethics of architecture and its influence on esthetic concepts. The all-inclusive environmental approach facili-

tates the discovery of the connections between esthetic and ethical aspects in architectural design. The contemporary human residential environment is the source of new ethical challenges, resulting in socialization of the designing process and leading to reevaluation of the esthetic concepts for the benefit of esthetic participation.

Translated by B. Setkowicz

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Między estetyką i etyką w architekturze

Od architekta, jako wykonującego zawód zaufania społecznego, wymagana jest świadomość istnienia etycznego wymiaru aktywności zawodowej. Każda relacja, w której uczestniczy architekt, zobowiązuje do określenia własnej postawy zarówno w odniesieniu do przestrzeni, jak i wobec człowieka – w osobach współautora, inwestora, klienta, użytkownika. Przemyslenia z dziedziny aksjologii przestrzeni stanowią istotne wsparcie w pracy zawodowej. System wartości formowany jest w okresie przygotowującym do pracy zawodowej („okres tworzący”), a podtrzymywany i rozwijany w trakcie wykonywania zawodu

(„okres twórczy”). Wartości przestrzeni tworzą obszerny katalog w trzech podstawowych dziedzinach: witalnych, kulturowych i moralnych. Rozeznanie aksjologiczne w odniesieniu do wartości moralnych stanowi szczególnego rodzaju drogowskaz zachowań w pracy zawodowej. Historia kształtowania przestrzeni wyobraźnią i talentem architekta pozostawiła ślady rozmaitych lekcji z zakresu etyki zawodowej, np. lekcji pokory, szacunku, prawdy, sprawiedliwości. Przedmiotowa i podmiotowa odpowiedzialność za przestrzeń – jej piękno i użyteczność – nie bierze się znikąd, odzwierciedla dylematy wyboru wartości.

Key words: architectural ethics, influence of ethics on aesthetics, environmental design, ethics of participation

Słowa kluczowe: etyka architektoniczna, wpływ etyki na estetykę, projektowanie środowiskowe, etyka uczestnictwa