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Moral conflict as the basic fact of morality in architectural practice *An opinion against the formulation of a code of ethical principles in architecture*

Architecture is at present “the only liberal profession whose welfare – possibly its very survival – depends on its ability to enunciate and rally around a set of moral principles. The fact that these principles shift and evolve only makes the topic more intriguing and worthy of study” [4]. At present only? The first to write of the notion of *truth* from a moralising and uncompromising perspective in the architectural context was the British architect A. W. Pugin in the 19th century¹. His idea, of architecture as a socio-ethical crusade, grew into rhetoric in the 20th-century period of the modernist avant-garde. It was then too that it became clear just how much caution is needed in applying the notions of truth and falsehood, for they may be abused, and more: shown to be empty without the attitude of one who bandies them about². Apparent at first glance is the extent to which the area is sensitive and susceptible to duplicity and hypocrisy; with the significance for our work, all the more caution is required in attempts to perceive it. The British philosopher Bernard Williams warns: “If there is such a thing as what people are **really**, it may be that ... it does not very much differ from what people are **in fact**, in whose lives moral considerations play a significant, shaping, but often uncertain role” [7]. With the complexity of human nature and its conditioning, there is no way to establish a single ideal of morality, behaviour which would always be *good*. Aristotelian ethics, that basis of

bases in which the practical and theoretical reasons of man are singled out and roles given to human abilities and learnt virtues, does display weaknesses when analysed in terms of qualities uniquely human. These, writes the philosopher quoted above, turn out to be morally ambiguous³. While ethics and aesthetics today are in large measure dominated by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, setting in order principles of human behaviour and giving instructions for the interpretation of reality, from this no specific recommendations for architecture come, for they cannot. Consciousness of the most important values builds up in minds slowly and is subject to change. Several decades ago, when energy was inexpensively acquired, neither construction with energy-intensive materials nor the premise of replacing through demolition buildings on precious land were morally reprehensible. Conviction and contemporary awareness of the need to cooperate for sustainable development as an ethical value, is derived from, among other sources, the conception of ethics of Baruch Spinoza (1632–77), the 20th-century works of Samuel Butler and the reflections of Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, and has been developing for over 300 years⁴. Supported at present by resource analysis and demography, it is shown to be a basic *good*, that is, the *ethical* conduct of all who shape the frames of human life, including architects. It should, in writing of this, be noted at once that it is difficult to

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¹ The book *Contrasts* and the larger work *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, after: Saint A., ‘Practical wisdom for architects: the uses of ethics’ in: Ray N. (ed.), *Architecture and its ethical dilemmas*, Taylor and Francis, London and New York, 2005, pp. 7–21.

² Modernist architects with mouths full of such terms did not always act according to the meanings in their own lives. As Andrew Ballantyne writes [1, pp. 11]: “Mies van der Rohe left fascist Germany only when he realised that the regime would not allow him to carry out his projects. Le Corbusier would have collaborated with the Nazis occupying France if they had asked him for this”.

³ Williams writes [7, p. 88]: “For if a distinguishing feature of man is the use of intelligence and tools in the shaping of his own surroundings, a distinguishing feature of man is to an equal degree the use of intelligence to get his own way, and tools for the ruin of others. If a distinguishing feature of man is the fact that he possesses a conceptually structuralised and fully conscious vision of himself as an individual among other individuals with feelings similar to his own, this is an initial condition of both kindness and (as indicated by Nietzsche) cruelty”.

⁴ Andrew Ballantyne writes interestingly of this in the article ‘Hearth and Horizon’ in: Ray N. (ed.), *Architecture and its ethical dilemmas*, Taylor and Francis, London and New York, 2005, pp. 115–122.

respond explicitly and accurately to the question of what *good* actually means. While a general doctrine for the functioning of the word exists, it is not always possible to distinguish whether it relates to fact or to value. For ethics itself – knowledge dedicated to *good* – relates to “doing things which are good and theoretically we know that this is exactly how we wish to act ... Our dilemmas in practice appear when we realise that different people lend one ‘good thing’ greater weight than another” [1]. This breeds conflicts, and must.

For conflict is a state of difference and dissonance between incompatible or contradictory elements, the result of a clash of contrary interests. It is both “open combat ... like a struggle of opposing forces ... It results usually from differences in the goals, assumptions or expectations of individuals or groups. It also appears as a result of competition for specific resources or as a result of contradiction” [2].

There is a question of what both intuitively desired and expected cohesion in activity and cohesion in moral reflection consist in; the answer leads the philosopher directly to the promise of the statement that it is conflict which is the basic fact of morality⁵. Easy movement across the value system in architectural practice is therefore more determined by broad analysis of possible conflicts than by formulation of a code of principles for conduct. It should be observed, however, that on precisely this last plane a lack of cohesion in moral reflection, and in particular declared and postulated moral attitudes with the real actions of individuals and groups, is the factor which especially lowers the image of the architect and level of ethics in the profession. For we learn ethical stances through imitation, as Aristotle stated, not doctrine. A large part of our ethical convictions is a part of our temperament, character and upbringing. “I usually do what I regard as good. From where does this conviction come? From where do I draw the information for it? The response which I wish to give here is that I draw this from habit” [1, p. 116]. The term ‘habit’ is here close to the term ‘ethos’, which describes the sum of the values by which we are persuaded, which were instilled in us, in which we believe, though it is difficult for us to say at once how every detail of our ethos was shaped. Samuel Butler, referred to earlier, states simply in *Life and Habit*, exactly 100 years old, that we are most forcefully convinced of those things which we have ceased to consider principles, and have so absorbed them that we cease to consider them at all – they are part of us. All principles, he thought, ethical principles included, should be absorbed rather than imposed⁶. Butler stressed in his work that “as many people were ruined by principles as by desire to possess them” [1, p. 116]. This alone is warning against the formulation of a code of moral principles, which each may illustrate with observations of history and other people, but also of themselves. If we consider that which philosophers

have observed of the esotericism of individuals absorbing values, acceptance of the inevitability of conflict wins additional reasoning. Moreover, imposition of values in the 21st century has the whiff of propaganda. It is altogether different, however, to teach attainment of that independent judgement held in high culture. Nor does criticism of the imposition of a system of values constitute the assent of the author to their relativisation or negotiability⁷. Appraisal of values may take place in a manner unforced, through the ‘absorption’ postulated, through study of the virtues contained and described in the classics – in works being abandoned in schools at present, and unnecessarily, under the pressure of mass culture. These works contain multiple timeless references to true values and virtues⁸ [7]. A persuasion to values in which well-educated architects conscious of the diversity available believe must therefore be assumption number one for a profession in which, as has been said, they form a condition *sine qua non*.

Conflicts in the sphere of morality appear in architecture not only as a clash of values, however, but also in the area of motivation. The first basic field of conflict for the architect are those motivations leading to acquisition of a contract and the conditioning of its execution. An architect, especially one responsible for the people with whom he or she works and wishing to provide for them, offers work – the design. This, optimally, is a sum of ideas based on the ideals professed. The architect thus offers a ‘self’, his or her own – though not selflessly. There then appears that basic conflict, the self-seeking benefactor of values. Morally it reads badly. Yet in the situation described the values within the design are not the object of the sale, but the content of this object. The motivation of the architect is the willingness to perform services for the client, within the rules established for the profession. These rules grant the option of remuneration for the work offered, hence such conflict ought not to be detected here. It is nonetheless visible in Poland in, for instance, embarrassingly low remunerations in competitions, where it is expected that the potential given architects to articulate

⁷ The conservative philosopher Roger Scruton devotes a very interesting essay to this, entitled ‘Culture Counts: Faith and Feeling in a World Besieged’ [5]. While the author does not agree with some theses of this essay, e.g. those concerning appraisal of Le Corbusier, this disquisition on a return to timeless works in the shaping of attitudes and judgements is one which is close to her.

⁸ May an example of this be an excerpt of the Latin prose present in the books of Tadeusz Kotarbiński, unfortunately not studied in architecture at higher educational institutions:

*Esto bonus miles, tutor bonus, arbiter idem
Integer, ambiguae si quando vocabere testis
Incertaeque rei, Phalaris licet imperet ut sis
Falsus et admoto dictet periuria tauro,
Summam crede nefas animam praeferre pudori
Et propter vitam vivendi perdere causas.*

(Be a brave soldier, a brave carer, a flawless judge. If ever they summon you as witness to support an ambiguous and dubious matter, were even Phalaris himself to demand of you falsehoods and, threatening torture, dictate testimony as would be perjury, **have as the ultimate in wickedness the placing of survival above virtue and be not willing to retain life at cost of losing that for which alone living is worthwhile.**)

In: Tadeusz Kotarbiński, ‘Zasady etyki niezależnej’ in: *Problemy etyki. Wybór tekstów*, compiled by S. Sarnowski and E. Fryckowski, Agencja marketingowa Branta, Bydgoszcz, 1993, p. 154.

⁵ Of this Bernard Williams promises discernment [7]. This author makes no attempt even at an analysis, awaiting the opportunity to acquaint herself with such in further publications by Williams.

⁶ An analysis and association of analyses by S. Butler and G. Deleuze, after Andrew Ballantyne [1, p. 116].

ideals and values removes the potential to receive monies for such. The architect should, according to many, place the good of others before his or her own, ergo care more for the interests of not only the client, but the users of the space designed too. This is true, but without also caring for his or her own good it will be impossible to pursue the profession at all, for bankruptcy. To the rescue here comes it seems the philosophy of D. Hume, who stated that beyond *motives*, *premises* are significant [7, p. 99]. An individual guided by interest – as the architect must be if head of a team – need not be simultaneously self-seeking. The self-seeking architect obtains *good* for others by chance. In seeking those contracts most financially attractive a respectable design may be produced, though ‘by the way’ as it were. Yet the good of others, moral philosophers tell us, may not be ‘fate’ [7, p. 99]. The architect guided by considerations of interest – in the business sense – has different premises and different motivations than self-seeking and is, on account of this, morally in order. Remuneration commensurate with involvement, costs and liability incurred is not in conflict with the fact that a design promotes values, theoretically ‘unsaleable’.

Deliberations on this subject summon another problem, of who in the circle of architects it is that wins public respect for the profession. Is it the iconic architects whose designs and realisations enter mass culture, or those offering solutions at a high level, but not promoted by the media – often the so-called ‘meritocracy’? The answer is not simple. ‘Star’ architects guarantee quality (most often, we will admit, high) and other advantages, e.g. ease and profitability in letting if a commercial investment. Yet many times, beyond economic aspects, they also bring a high symbolic capital, understood according to the conception of Pierre Bourdieu⁹ [6]. Architects working often with a sense of mission for very low remunerations, in such areas as communal housing, certainly prompt – and deservedly so – sincere respect and admiration. They do not contribute, however, in the same way as spectacular and innovative works do to the building of autonomy for a discipline which, after all, aspires to the sphere of art, though the value of the architecture created certainly need be no more modest. Evidence of this is, say, the work for the homeless of Krzysztof Wodiczko¹⁰. Hence this symbolic capital, the manner of its generation and its actors, present on

the architectural stage, are in this context worthy of analysis, not a mistakenly understood social justice or lack thereof. Autonomy allows architecture to avoid mediocrity, allows it to develop and keep pace with changes in other spheres of art, and is thus important for the profession. In light of these deliberations, rewarding investments from public funds in a distinct ‘nobler’ category, as the SARP Main Board does in the annual competitions of the Award of the Year cycle, is further reward for architects who are anyway privileged by a guarantee of participation in the building of symbolic capital which society and local authorities bring.

In observation of the role of ‘stars’ it is also worthwhile turning attention to a perhaps uniquely Polish trait, the sometimes excessive respect bestowed upon foreign architects favoured with contracts by investors both private and public on the basis of the renown won in their countries, where the market for promotion developed far earlier than at home and where chiefly its mechanisms promoted them, sometimes disproportionately to the architecture created¹¹. It is also worth considering that many architectural solutions regarded as textbook on account of their modesty, economy in means of expression and other features permitting them to be seen as the proper response in a world filled with hunger and homelessness relate to individual homes for wealthy owners. So it was with Le Corbusier in the 20th century; so it is in the case of Robert Konieczny in the 21st. There is in this nothing reprehensible – it is but evidence that more than once a wealthy and aesthetically conscious employer provides a chance for the development of an idea, covering the experiment of the realisation so that the whole of society may benefit, associating with high quality architecture and having the ability to duplicate those prototypical formulae proven within. The stereotypical approach – unfortunately present in Poland – which lends architects working for private investors, including those most abominable to some groups, i.e. ‘developers’, the traits automatically identified with them, is grossly anachronistic and, in light of the above deliberations, ethically unfounded. The phenomenon in Poland of ‘developer diktat’ and ‘fenced’ estates is, beyond the significant facets of sociology and mores, above all an emanation of the weakness of Polish municipal authorities. It is certainly not – and definitely not as a rule – the result of an attitude of compromise on the part of the designers of the estates, who do not participate in decisions on land ownership or on resolutions or arrangements as to their administration. Attacking architects, authors of designs for these estates, especially environmentally, is a distortion of reality and no contribution in defending the reputation of the profession. In fact the role of the architect today, although some might wish it decisive, is merely – as Nicholas Ray writes [3] – the role of a dramatist, one sometimes also influencing the direction of the play written, but not the dramatist, performance sponsor and theatre director [3]. Thus the script of the play which we write must – beyond providing any audience – take care to attract an audience which demands and appre-

⁹ “Symbolic capital [as opposed to economic capital – E.K.] has certain distinct advantages over either money or the use of brutal force: symbolic capital can be deployed in such a way as to seem more natural, and invested in those who truly deserve it. Thus, through the employ of symbolic capital, society’s elites can enlist those they want to dominate in their own domination, making the job much easier. The mere fact, for example, that the National Gallery or the British Museum chooses to add a certain item to its collection gives that item a certain built-in presumption of legitimacy, even if little is known about the item itself. It suddenly becomes a work of art or a piece of history to contend with by virtue of the symbolic capital these institutions wield”. [6, p. 105].

¹⁰ “The housing industry for the homeless or the greening of the construction industry have a polite press, but what adds fuel to the debate of professionals is more the esotericism, e.g. deconstruction. Someone ... who has devised a way to use the energy of the poor in the process of constructing high quality residential buildings does not excite comment, while someone who has constructed little but with daring aesthetic solutions is on the lips of all and winning the most desirable professional prizes...” (ibid.).

¹¹ E.g. the contract for Helmut Jahn from the developer firm Hines in Warsaw in 2008.

ciates the values, even if for both sponsor and director these are issues of lesser weight. We do not, however, influence the theatre director in ticket pricing.

The moral conflicts in the field of architecture are also to be found, researchers reveal, in the specificity of every other social undertaking. According to the systematics of Thomas Nagel¹², the first plane is the obligations of the architect in relation to the client, who is of course not always a user. The sole aid in pacifying these conflicts may be proper use of ‘moral imagination’, as the pragmatic philosophy of J. Dewey defined it¹³. The second plane is formed by the legal regulations in force, which the client often wishes to exceed; the architect, bound also with regard to society, must restrain the client in this. A certain aspect of this type of conflict is the issue of retaining spatial order and its definition, for since the days of Nietzsche the artist has, after all, perhaps had the right to act in opposition to aesthetic codifications [3, p. 27]. The third plane is interpretation of utility, this including the responsibility of the architect towards a specific client, but also towards potential future users, the need for the necessary visionary imagination on account of the permanence of some realisations, and the responsibility for the anticipated technical

condition of innovative or overly conservative solutions. The fourth plane is the striving of the author for perfection and personal involvement in relation to the work – the building – which is not his or her private property. Within the orbit of this fourth is also the marginal question of whether promotion of the highest values, optimally obtained in this work, must be accompanied by impeccable personal moral conduct on the part of the author. The so-called Gauguin syndrome teaches that societies are able to forgive immoral behaviours, i.e. those variance with the code of convention, where these were necessary to obtain a masterpiece [3, p. 28; 7].

Conflicts ought to be identified and monitored. They are, as the author has attempted to show, a natural element of the architectural scene, which is activity in the social arena. Contradictory interests ought to be reconciled by sharing responsibility, all interested parties devoting time to it – architect, client and society. The alleged recklessness of an architect believing in an experiment appraised negatively by society need not occur at the expense of the client, or be seen as a result of excessive artistic expression sought at the cost of others, if both sides consent to the dedication of scheduled project time and a part of the budget for research and simulation. The arguments of all parties ought always to be considered and adjudicating in advance who it is that is morally more positive is impermissible, for it is not in this, as has been seen above, that the morality of architecture is planted. Above all it is.

Translated by R. Barker

¹² [3, p. 26].

¹³ See e.g. Collier J., ‘Moral imagination and the practice of architecture’ in: Ray N. (ed.), *Architecture and its ethical dilemmas*, Taylor and Francis, London and New York, 2005, pp. 89–101.

References

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Konflikt moralny jako podstawowy fakt moralności w praktyce architektonicznej. Głos przeciwko formułowaniu kodeksu zasad etycznych w architekturze

Konflikt jest stanem różnicy i dysharmonii między niekompatybilnymi lub sprzecznymi elementami, skutkiem zderzenia sprzecznych interesów. Jest zarówno [...] *otwartą walką* [...], *jak zmaganiem przeciwnych sił*. W psychologii definiowany jest jako *walka psychiczna, wynikająca z przeciwnych lub funkcjonujących jednocześnie impulsów, pragnień bądź tendencji*. Wynika zwykle z różnic celów, założeń lub oczekiwań jednostek bądź grup. Pojawia się również w wyniku rywalizacji o określone zasoby lub w wyniku sprzeczności. Odpowiedź na pytanie, na czym polega spójność działania i refleksji moralnej, prowadzi

do konstatacji, iż właśnie konflikt jest podstawowym faktem moralności. Poruszanie się po obszarze systemu wartości w praktyce architektonicznej jest zatem bardziej zdeterminowane analizą możliwych konfliktów i ich aspektów, niż formułowaniem kodeksu zasad postępowania. Dotyczy to tak dydaktyki architektonicznej, jak i wykonywania zawodu. Na tej ostatniej płaszczyźnie brak spójności refleksji moralnej, oraz deklarowanych i postulowanych postaw moralnych z faktycznym działaniem jednostek i grup, jest czynnikiem obniżającym jakość wizerunku architekta i poziom etyki zawodu.

Key words: system of moral values in architecture, potential conflicts' analysis

Słowa kluczowe: system wartości w praktyce architekta, analiza możliwych konfliktów