Intentions and Outcomes

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EVERY DAY, IN OFFICES WORLDWIDE, HUNDREDS OF ARCHITECTS MAKE THOUSANDS OF DECISIONS. MOST OF THESE DECISIONS ARE BENIGN. HOWEVER, THERE ARE ALWAYS A HANDFUL WHOSE OUTCOMES HANG IN THE BALANCE BETWEEN GREATNESS AND CATASTROPHE.

INTENTIONS AND OUTCOMES
assigning value to architectural decisions
Perhaps that was somewhat melodramatic but it can generally be agreed upon that architectural decisions, with their implied financial and physical commitments, hold greater weight than decisions of a smaller physical scale. These decisions are made in alignment with intentions, however it is important to recognize that intentions and outcomes are not synonymous. Intentions birth and drive a project, while outcomes are the ultimate measures of success. The phrase “it’s the thought that counts” cannot so readily be applied to architectural practice. If the built outcomes do not live up to their promises, the intentions are irrelevant in the face of the newly created reality.

But for a moment, let’s take a step back and look at the root of the intentions themselves. Of course, the client and the prescribed program provide much of what the project hopes to accomplish but architects are rarely hired to fulfill only the minimum requirements. When given basic requirements, practicing architects are often expected to extract a larger objective for which the project might aim. They imbue their projects with their own personality through a new, self-defined intention. Different designers may favor aesthetics, socio-cultural issues, environmental consciousness, pure experiment, or any other directive. However, there is danger in this power when the desires of the architect may precede the greater realities of the project.

In the academic realm, this is a considerably more personal issue. Without the reality of built work and external implications, the weight of the student’s intention effects only them. Students are encouraged to explore and experiment, and rightly so. Exercise begets strength and without these mental workouts we would not be strong enough to enter practice. While personal exploration is not lost as the shift is made from academics to practice, the hypothetical intentions formed in school shift to account for external matters of the real world. In academia and practice, whether internal or external, outcomes are required to measure the success of the intentions and how effectively they were met. If this were not the case, students would not worry about their GPA’s and professionals would not conduct post-occupancy reports.

As architectural intentions are reflections of personal ideals, it is particularly difficult to assign them value against any singular unit. As such, defining something as “architectural good” is an exercise in subjective argument. However, it is much easier to recognize “architectural bad” if the outcomes fall short of their intentions.
Santiago Calatrava, no stranger to the debate, is being sued once again for the outcomes of his practice. This time, the city of Valencia, Spain is suing him for the state of disrepair his opera house at the Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias has fallen into. The multi-million dollar project has been partially closed to the public due to falling mosaic cladding, just under a decade after its completion. Having recently visited the project, I can assure you of this unfortunate state of affairs. The strangely utopian park reeked of unfulfilled promises. Despite their structural and spatial prowess, Calatrava’s designs, on occasion, fall short of what the public comes to expect of architecture. Threatening user safety, many of his designs are frequently labeled failures.

Architectural decision-making is rarely black and white however. More frequently than not, an architect is challenged with two or more conflicting decisions with equally meritorious outcomes. Here is where the practice is most complex. The AIA Code of Ethics and Professional Practice attempts to resolve complex issues by outlining professional obligations to the public, the client, colleagues, the profession, and the environment, but does little to combat any internal conflict between these obligations. It is also unreasonable to expect the architect has enough time and resources to weigh every possible outcome within a typical project timeline.

In his text The Ethical Architect, Tom Spector searches for more definitive means of choosing between conflicting options. He uses the term “moral currency” as a decisive unit, rooted in morality, against which each architectural decision might be measured. However, as previously stated, decisions reflect the architect’s intentions, and intentions reflect their ideals. If “moral currency” is a means to making a decision, then it is not a universal unit, but rather is self-defined.

When practicing, architects need to be particularly mindful of this ability to self-define a projects intention, the results of which, have a slow but assured effect our world. Only after the decision has been made real can its value be determined as the built work takes public stage, for better or worse.

by Alex Olevitch

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