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# Architecture Ethics Justice

## **Abstract**

The title of this talk includes no conjunctions and bears no punctuation in order to heighten the conception of the simultaneity, the unitariness of three conceptions that we often perceive as disparate realms. As I put together these remarks, I have begun to think in terms of shaping a more complete paper with this same title – entering into a territory (perhaps presumptively!) not unlike Heidegger’s “Building Dwelling Thinking” of his earlier period -- which is not a dissimilar associative lead. Today though is not the time for a tightly argued philosophical statement regarding the premises of such a conflation.

## **Disciplines**

Architectural History and Criticism | Architectural Technology | Architecture | Cultural Resource Management and Policy Analysis | Historic Preservation and Conservation

## **Comments**

This is a proceedings from *Ethics and Architecture*” symposium at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, NYC, April 21, 2001. Posted with permission.

# Architecture Ethics Justice

Gregory S. Palermo, FAIA  
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## Introduction:

Gregory Palermo is Professor Emeritus of Architecture at Iowa State University. The following remarks (© Gregory Palermo) were delivered at the “Ethics and Architecture” symposium at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, NYC, April 21, 2001, which was co-sponsored by the City College of New York (CCNY) School of Architecture, Urban Design and Landscape Architecture, and AIA/NYC. The other keynote speakers included Professor Jean Gardner of Parsons School of Design; Professor Robert Geddes, FAIA, Dean Emeritus of Architecture at Princeton; Carlton Brown, founding partner of Spectrum Development; Rev. James Parks Morton, Director of the Interfaith Center. Respondents to the keynoters were Dean George Ranalli, CCNY; Dean Ward Ewing of the General Theological Seminary; and Rt. Rev. Arthur Walmsley, retired Episcopal Bishop of Connecticut. The panel was moderated by Lance Jay Brown, Chair of Architecture at CCNY, and organized by Mary Zaboglio Donovan.

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## Architecture Ethics Justice

The title of this talk includes no conjunctions and bears no punctuation in order to heighten the conception of the simultaneity, the unitariness of three conceptions that we often perceive as disparate realms. As I put together these remarks, I have begun to think in terms of shaping a more complete paper with this same title – entering into a territory (perhaps presumptively!) not unlike Heidegger’s “Building Dwelling Thinking” of his earlier period -- which is not a dissimilar associative lead. Today though is not the time for a tightly argued philosophical statement regarding the premises of such a conflation.

In thinking about today’s theme, and the charge to consider future responsibilities with respect to ethics, architecture and the environment, I have developed at least three beginnings, and a conclusion. I also have case examples, and the outline of the philosophical argument alluded to, but these I will set aside. So I will try out my three beginnings and

my conclusion experimentally here, with the sustaining arguments to follow in the longer future paper. Along the way in exploring these I expect to challenge the traditional ground of architecture: Vitruvius’s “firmness, commodity and delight” which even today is the starting point for architectural discourse, proposing that in our schools, and in practice that we ought to confront, address and incorporate consideration of the embedded issues of ethics and justice into our curricula and practices. This is key to architecture’s relevance in the future.

## Beginning Number One: MOM and MOB

MOM and MOB are a correlated pair of thoughts. Canonical architectural history, and the heart of disciplinary desires and drives – why we become architects; the desire to make a ‘great’ building; the ‘great’ architects that are remembered; the history that we study; the projects that we visit and that are written-up in the NYT Arts section and in

tour books – *that* architecture is a March of Masterworks and their Precipitating Moments, or more directly put: the “March of Monuments” (MOM).

The correlated thought is that the March of Monuments and Moments is simultaneously a “March of Blood” (MOB). Think about it. The great Gothic cathedrals were built on the blood of the Christian Crusades against Islam which even though they failed actually stabilized trade opportunities in the Mediterranean which among other generators gave rise to greater wealth which undergirded cathedral building. Howard Zinn points out that it is the blood of the Americas that fueled the wealth of the Renaissance. The post-WWII boom was the wake of genocide and war in our time; and that of the Antebellum south, the blood of slavery not so distant from our time; Carnegie Libraries and other great ‘gifts’ at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries on the blood of industrial revolution labor, and Pinkerton clubs.

Thinking about MOM and MOB, they do seem a bit grim for beginning a discussion about Architecture Ethics Justice. I do not wish to make architecture seem joyless – for indeed its premises are the improvement of life and its results are most often filled with many satisfactions. Perhaps MOM and MOB overstate the situation, but all buildings demand raw resources, labor that transforms raw resources into building products, and labor that assembles those into buildings; and energy to operate the buildings, etc. Buildings are not neutral, even if ‘blood’ in our day is more limited than in the past. We in the developed US perceive our architecture to be of relatively limited costs, when in fact, we exist on a thin veneer that glosses over great global expenditures.

Consider the hammer. I went to Home Depot to select a hammer. One selling for \$12.95 bore the following label: “Head, China; Handle, USA; Assembly: Mexico.” Market: Globally! This most ubiquitous of construction tools is a multi-national, multi-continental object. We are well aware of clothing sweatshops, but we do not think of construction sweatshops. Enough! Of MOM and MOB, and the reach of wealth and power and cost that underlies our architecture.

## Beginning Number Two: A Quote

“I still remember my first sight of New York. ... The Park Avenue I grew up on, which is still standing, is dark and dirty. No one would dream of opening up a Tiffany’s on that Park Avenue, and when you go downtown you discover that you are literally in the white world. It is rich – or at least it looks rich. It is clean – because they collect the garbage downtown. There are doormen. People walk about as though they owned where they are – and indeed they do. ... You know – you know instinctively – that none of this is for you. You know this before you are told. And who is it for and who is paying for it? And why isn’t it for you?” James Baldwin, “A Talk for Teachers,” 1963; in Delores Hayden, *The Power of Place*, MIT Press, p. 2.

Baldwin is cited in a book that I have my “Introduction to Architecture” students read. Hayden’s work highlights issues of gender, race and ethnicity, and power and wealth relations in the city – and the public memory that is conveyed through place. We need to understand this dimension of architecture: *architecture is an act of discrimination*. Architecture makes boundaries, provides thresholds and doorways, marks here and there, those within and those without, public and private space, differentiated realms. These boundaries carry with them images that reinforce their position; imagery conveys messages. This cathedral and city halls share symbolic imagery along with their boundary making. Boundaries by definition demarcate space, and thus are considered discriminatory acts: so that wealth, power, access, and often race or ethnicity are the terms of admittance or occupancy. This is what Baldwin so keenly felt and eloquently conveys.

Architecture also includes other discriminations: choices regarding materials, and energy efficiency, details and material selections with varying capacities to weather and endure, etc. It defines the rooms we occupy, the paths we tread.

How deeply are the issues of discrimination embedded in form? In design studio one year, I issued a project to expand the government offices of the city of Des Moines with a new City Hall program. Af-

ter we talked about the building forms of the American Democracy adopted during the 19th century, our comfort with them, etc., I asked about what we did not feel comfortable with. A Japanese student offered this: "I find the imagery of the typical city hall with the domes and flags oppressive. I am Japanese; our people and all Asians have been subjected to tighter quotas than other peoples, particularly Europeans. The US 'open door' democracy has systematically discriminated against Asians. I would like to try to make a non-hierarchical architecture that we can still identify as civic, and which is more egalitarian." The issues of power and subjugation, the multiple readings of various architectural forms and images, even those 'the majority' people find to be positive, will be increasingly important in an increasingly heterogeneous world.

Well, so here we are – another dark reading! It is not intended so – it is intended as a reminder that the discriminating acts of architecture, its essential activity, bear with them multiple demands and multiple readings, some of which are perhaps inevitably oppressive.

### Beginning Number Three: Another Quote

"The mouth kisses, the mouth spits; no one mistakes the saliva of the first for the second."

With this visceral text, David Leatherbarrow and Moshen Mostafavi (*On Weathering*, MIT Press, p. 109), explore the issues surrounding purity and degradation in architecture. They are referring to concerns of architecture's modernist purists with unsullied forms and the inevitable forces of weathering which either destroy or can be captured to enhance architecture. It is but a small step to consider and to remind ourselves of the ethical demands of architecture – the opportunities and dangers of fashion; the deep satisfaction and beguilement of beauty; and the enhancement to life and the limits of whose life is enriched. Which is to say, this particular quote identifies the dualities that the previous two beginnings -- MOM-MOB and discriminating design -- tried to get at.

### Conclusion

Without proposing cases and arguments to substantiate the following, for they demand more time and detail, I offer the following conclusions in proposition form:

Δ1) That humankind builds in order to perfect living life. While this of course can be perverted (Nazi genocide machines), we build to enrich our inhabitation on earth. The well-being of humankind, the well lived life, is the ethical core, for example, of Greek, Epicurean and Stoic ethical positions: eudaimonism.

Δ2) The ethical center of architecture is this: architecture does not belong to the architect. Architecture is about distilling what could be in the terms of the client or community and transforming it into architectural proposals. The virtues of those proposals, including beauty, are the subject for another time. The architect is an actor on behalf of others, not solely or predominantly for him or herself. The art of architecture is mastery of the discipline; but not towards Howard Roarkianism.

Δ3) That in our efforts (architect, client, community, etc.) to perfect living through building, that we shift from dreams of what could be to the ethical imperative of what ought to be built. This idea transcends budget, utility, square footage, construction quality or beauty. It is a manifestation of social order; of boundaries and barriers; of inclusions and exclusions; of gendered and racial space; of the edge of private and public domains. Architecture generally confirms prevailing majority mores: those of wealth and power. It is the prevailing order that defines the terms of the satisfactions (and dangers) of its poetics.

Δ4) That in bringing what ought to be built (architecture) into being, we are constructing ethics and justice. Architecture embodies material resources; labor; wealth exchange; and environmental management or degradation. Built works, in ordering our way of being, entail opportunities or limitations on access; fairness; equity. These are less about contracts and the law, than they are intrinsic to architecture, its *sine qua non* as surely as "firmness, commodity and delight."

It is this last issue that is my concluding note here today. Architecture's contribution to society is

its cultural construction, or as Karsten Harries puts it: “the construction of ethos.” (*The Ethical Function of Architecture*, MIT Press, p. 4) This construction most often is the core of traditional architectural concerns of utility, durability and beauty – what makes it a joy for most of us to be in this space (St. James Chapel) today. However, such beauties, though often inspirational, are not neutral.

The embedded ethical and justice concerns of architecture are not explicitly addressed in education and practice. We may recognize situations of

conscience, but we do not necessarily understand their ethical import or how to go about reasoning through them. It is my proposal that the traditional foundations of architecture’s disciplinary concerns be augmented with understanding the indivisibility of Architecture Ethics Justice.

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