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Professional Virtue and Citizenship: An Ethical Framing of the AIA

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Professional Virtue and Citizenship: An Ethical Framing of the AIA

Abstract

This paper proposes that the American Institute of Architects (AIA), a corporate collective of the architectural profession, if it wishes to be more than a professional trade organization speaking to the economic self-interest of its members (and being perceived as such), has available to it two ethical courses to pursue: 1) That of improving the knowledge, skills and judgment of architects – defining and working on the virtues of the architect; and 2) That of participating in public policy decision-making and speaking out with regard to environmental design, whether proposals be public or private. Both of these concepts are embedded in the AIA's Objects. The reasoning developed here draws parallels between personal professional responsibility and collective responsibility with respect to the essentially ethical condition of architecture as explored in three themes: What Could Be, What Ought to Be, and the Architect's Virtue. When we first make conjectures about a change in the environment, we cast about for what could be, the potential for a good change. Specific design proposals define what ought to be, an ethical imperative of the right thing to do. The architect must possess certain qualities of virtue to merit the title and the responsibility to be one of the leaders in shaping the environment.

Keywords

Architectural Ethics, Architecture Ethics, American Institute of Architects Ethics, Professional Ethics

Disciplines

Architectural Engineering | Architectural Technology | Architecture | Construction Engineering | Cultural Resource Management and Policy Analysis | Historic Preservation and Conservation

Comments

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Professional Virtue and Citizenship: An Ethical Framing of the AIA

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Abstract:

This paper proposes that the American Institute of Architects (AIA), a corporate collective of the architectural profession, if it wishes to be more than a professional trade organization speaking to the economic self-interest of its members (and being perceived as such), has available to it two ethical courses to pursue: 1) That of improving the knowledge, skills and judgment of architects – defining and working on the virtues of the architect; and 2) That of participating in public policy decision-making and speaking out with regard to environmental design, whether proposals be public or private. Both of these concepts are embedded in the AIA's Objects. The reasoning developed here draws parallels between personal professional responsibility and collective responsibility with respect to the essentially ethical condition of architecture as explored in three themes: *What Could Be*, *What Ought to Be*, and *the Architect's Virtue*. When we first make conjectures about a change in the environment, we cast about for *what could be*, the potential for a *good* change. Specific design proposals define what *ought to be*, an ethical imperative of the *right* thing to do. The architect must possess certain qualities of *virtue* to merit the title and the responsibility to be one of the leaders in shaping the environment.

Gregory Palermo is Professor Emeritus of Architecture at Iowa State University. These remarks (© Gregory Palermo) were delivered at the AIA/Ohio Annual Grassroots meeting, March 17, 2000, in Columbus, Ohio. The other session presenters were Shannon Criss of the Mississippi State University School of Architecture; Fr. Richard S. Bullene, CSC, PhD, the University of Notre Dame; and Henry I. Reder, Esq., AIA, principal in the practice of law. The session was organized and moderated by Daniel S. Friedman, Director of the School of Architecture and Interior Design at the University of Cincinnati. KEY WORDS: "architectural ethics" "architecture ethics" "American Institute of Architects ethics" "professional ethics"

Architecture Is:

About people and places
Meeting utilitarian needs
Inescapable art
The design of space
Structures that make space
Free thought and ideas
History and cultural heritage
Student definitions from the first day of class
in "An Introduction to Architecture" 11 Jan.
2000

Introduction

Prior to my current full-time academic pursuits and doing things like teaching studio, admonishing the AIA (see my letter to *AIArchitect*, Aug. 1999, criticizing AIM), and co-authoring *Ethics and the Practice of Architecture*, I was engaged in practice for more than 20 years, was a senior vice-president with HOK, and an officer with other national and regional firms. One of my projects with which you may be familiar is St. Louis Union Station. We live multiple lives as AIA leaders -- my first one spanned 1979-1990; then served

on NAAB board and as president in 1994; in 1992 I began a new AIA life with AIA Iowa and am currently on the Board. Which is to say, I have seen my fair share of Grassroots, and professional service meetings -- in fact, as Membership VP, I chaired the National Grassroots in 1989.

The point of this history is this: having sat where you are sitting, I wonder, what has ethics got to do with a being here today? Aren't architectural ethics business and professional matters -- so long as we follow the law and respect the AIA Canons regarding General obligations, Obligations to the Public, to the Client, to the Profession and to Colleagues? **My comments today, stemming as they do from my inquiry into architectural ethics, are not about personal professional ethics, but rather collective professional ethics: those of the AIA as an organization of professionals.**

While by common understanding architects "design and supervise the construction of buildings or other large structures" (*American Heritage Dictionary*), **architecture is not theirs to possess.** Consider this shadow of doubt cast by Aristotle on the architect's claim to monopoly knowledge:

"There are some arts whose products are not judged solely, or best, by the artists themselves, namely those arts whose products are recognized even by those

who do not possess the art; for example, the knowledge of the house is not limited to the builder [architect] only; the user of the house will be a better judge than the builder."¹ (*Politics*)

The conception and construction of the inhabitable landscape is a social-cultural endeavor central to the quality of life. Architecture is broader than buildings alone, and more inclusive than buildings as works of high art. Contemporary architects, while perhaps occupying center stage, share the architectural domain with sponsoring clients, user clients, the general public, developers, financiers, construction managers and contractors, engineers, interior designers, and craftspersons. Spending time trying to close out these other participants turns the AIA into a **mere protectionist monopolist trade organization.** To not speak out on environmental design issues because AIA members are not of a single mind, reduces our essential purpose to that of an **economic interest business organization.** An alternative is, **rather, to focus AIA efforts on the collective general concepts of habitat formation and professional excellence. The aspirations of the Objects of the AIA fall into two broad ethical pursuits that provide such an alternative:**

<p><u>The Virtues of the Architect</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To promote the aesthetic, scientific, and practical efficiency of the profession • To advance the science and art of planning and building by advancing the standards of architectural education, training and practice 	<p><u>Architectural Citizenship</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To coordinate the building industry and the profession of architecture to ensure the advancement of the living standards of people through their improved environment • to make the profession of even-increasing service to society
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I read the pursuit of these four objects in ethical terms. To be effective as the leading informed citizens regarding the environment, wielding positive influence for the common good with respect to the inhabited landscape -- to merit the trust by others that Aristotle found lacking -- architects must first merit that trust. Most of the last 150 years we have attempted to do so via the path of professionalization of architects. Rather than a professionalization systemic look, I

would like to propose a value and knowledge based exploration of political participation in communal environmental decisions, and shaping the architect.

An approach to this is exploring certain aspects of the ethical nature of architecture -- and how that translates to ethical implications for the AIA's mission - and ethical demands for you as leaders of the profession.

Could Be, Ought To Be, And The Architect's Virtue

Architecture (shaping the landscape we inhabit) is fundamentally a projection about a future state of affairs: *what could be*. The origination of architectural projects lay in some person, a committee, a board of directors, or a community of persons dreaming and conjecturing about the future: if I(we) were to build a new place (a church, an office building, a genetics research laboratory, a school, etc.) then *life would be better* (worship would be more meaningful and inspired; the work and laboratory environment more commodious and supportive of productivity; learning would be enriched, etc.). We do not undertake architectural ventures to lower the quality of life. Making architecture, thereby positively influencing the quality of life, is about creating that beneficial situation toward which humanity strives: what Ethicists refer to as *the good*. And, architectural practice is a futures oriented process: designing and making decisions regarding the particular way that future *state of affairs ought to be*. The shift from what *could be* to what *ought to be* is an *ethical shift*.

By common definition, an architect is a person who possesses the skills and knowledge, and who practices the art and science of building design, including landscapes within which buildings occur, and the spaces within buildings. What are the attributes of that knowledge, skills, and practicing capabilities that comprise the definition of the architect's virtue: that is the qualities of excellence without which one cannot be an architect?

These themes are explored in five sections: 1) what could be; 2) what ought to be; 2-a) material realization of what ought to be; 2-b) experiential result; and 3) the architect's virtue.

A1. What Could Be

Alberti takes up the theme architecture's and the architect's contribution to the quality of life -- this being the central ethical concern of architecture: the quality of life. In his Prologue to *On The Art of Building in Ten Books*, he says:

"Some have said that it was fire and water which were initially responsible for bringing men together into communities, but we, considering

how useful, even indispensable, a roof and walls are for men, are convinced that it was they that drew and kept men together. We are indebted to the architect not only for providing that safe and welcome refuge from the heat of the sun and the frosts of winter (that of itself is no small benefit), but also for his many other innovations, useful both to individuals and the public, which time and time again have so happily satisfied daily needs." After listing various contributions, he begins his summation "To, conclude let it be said that the security, dignity, and honor of the republic depend greatly upon the architect: it is he who is responsible for our delight, entertainment, and health while at leisure, and our profit and advantage while at work, and in short, that we live in a dignified manner, free from any danger."²

Architecture arises when we decide to change the environment we inhabit to suit some intention of ours. Environment is used here rather than buildings or architecture to encompass a range of scales from the rural and urban landscapes, to the room, and the furnishing and outfitting of rooms. We dream or make careful conjectures of what it is we desire. This occurs not only through the names we give to types of places and their functions (school, factory, prison, power plant), but also through our feelings (to give visible formal expression to our civic institutions, to satisfy our need for more beautiful places). Architectural intentions emerge in particular social, political, economic circumstances. They are never value free; they are always then value laden.

Clients express these qualities of what could be in many ways. It is rare that someone building a home does not have a sheaf of clippings and color photos of "places they like", or have visited, that "are like" what they want: but not exactly of course: they want something fresh and new, theirs. The program is not the square footage and the list of spaces but rather the spirit of what they understand to "new" and "desired" to be. For institutional and corporate clients, we go to visit precedent projects; same thing: what is out there that is like what we aspire to, but which is a *departure point* for us not an end point.

One client presented me and the project team with a one page program for a \$135 million project. At

the bottom it said: "Design the hotel with this idea in mind: when you return on your next visit, the doorman will remember your name." Another client, a private college with a 170 year old central quadrangle bounded by red brick and limestone buildings, wanted to build a computer/satellite/distance education media center on the last open site framing the boundary of the quadrangle. One of the trustees asked: "You are not going to put some steel, concrete and glass building in there are you? We don't want you to copy the existing buildings, but we don't want you to affront them either." These are value statements about the quality of what a place could be, the spirit and character that ought to infuse design proposals. Designing the form of those proposals is the task of architecture.

The ethical center of architecture is this: architecture does not belong to the architect. Architecture is about distilling the essence of what *could be* in the *client's* terms, however broadly *client* may be defined. It is the essential act of discerning architecture's purpose in a given circumstance. Such listening and understanding is more than a programming and design skill, is more than good business practice, it is an *ethical mandate*. Without it, architecture is an abstract formal exercise in search of a reason for being.

Not only public projects, but also private projects often deeply affect the common well-being. It is then that the AIA is in a position to speak collectively about policy decisions that affect the landscape.

Δ2. What Ought To Be

Daniel Libeskind addresses the position of a work of architecture in time --not only as a bridge to the past, but its obligation to the future:

"When we build, we have not just a responsibility to ourselves and our clients, but to those who came before and those who will come after. architecture transcends local issues. Questions of space, light and material, what makes a great building, are separate from client and site. Yet they are realized in a specific way, according to a *genius loci*."³ (*Architecture* magazine)

When conjecture about the environment moves to action to bring about a desired end, a shift happens. Intentions are defined more formally in terms of spaces and needs, desires and value expectations are

more clearly articulated, budgets are developed, site locations and contexts are defined, etc.: the architectural project is defined. The architect's contribution is this: explorations, analyses, inventions, and creation of specific design proposals that address the issues at hand. Form and image are made specific; how a place *ought to be* is definitively proposed. Utilitarian objectives are resolved, structural, environmental conditioning and construction assemblies are designed, appearance beauty and image are determined; all of this is subject to economic resource allocation. Out of an infinitude of possibilities, a singular, or at most a limited number of proposals are shaped. The architect's invention *redefines* what *could be*, as what *ought to be*. It becomes in Karsten Harries' terms, "construction of ethos."⁴

No amount of design value discussion about accommodation of heterogeneous readings, alternative generative models of architectural space and form, or virtual possibilities changes the fact that the architectural proposition is ultimately, if only for a short time *fixed*. It is what it is. In any design proposal, there are a particular set of relationships between landscape and building form, exterior form and interior space, the room and the object, image and meaning: these are physically, visually, and experientially particular. They are how *it ought to be*; the *it* being the place and the manner of inhabitation to be inseparably constructed. The architect has made an *ethical determination* of the best way to change the environment to support the better way of life that was the originating position of the project.

As with considering what *could be*, final decisions of what *ought to be* may also be the subject of public discourse. This again presents the opportunity for the profession to speak through the AIA.

Δ2-a. Material Realization Of What Ought To Be

Two fundamental aspects of what *ought to be* in proposing and realizing architecture are its *material realization* and the *experiential result*.

Codes and construction safety, professional and construction insurance, and sustainable design practices might find their roots in the Hammurabi *Code*. The legal and *moral* obligations with regard to construction contracts, building safety, and construction quality are addressed in Sections 228-233 of the

Code. Section 274 concerns itself with the compensation to be paid to a builder. The following three regulations provide a good indication of the depth of professional obligations the architect/builders incurred in Babylon 35 centuries ago:

“229: If a builder has built a house for a man and his work is not strong, and if the house he has built falls in and kills the householder, that builder shall be slain.

232: If goods have been destroyed, he [the builder] shall replace all that has been destroyed; and because the house that he built was not made strong and it has fallen in, he shall restore the fallen house out of his own personal property.

233: If a builder has built a house for a man, and his work is not done properly, and if a wall shifts; then that builder shall make that wall good with his own silver.”⁵

In this *Code*, the obligations to build well, and to build safely, go beyond legal minima. The ethical concept invoked for failure of professional duty with respect to material production is that of ‘just deserts’

Envisioned environmental changes -- the architectural design -- are realized through tectonics: construction methods and assemblies. Particular materials and technologies, possessing particular visual, sensual, durability, constructive, and economic qualities which extend a design concept into reality are selected and specified. Architectural fabrications tend to be large, using many material and energy resources, some renewable, some reusable, and some not renewable or reusable. Fundamental to design configuration is the manner in which environmental forces that demand energy control such as heat, humidity, and cold impact the interior of a structure -- because such energy forces require that countervailing energy resources be expended to ameliorate them for comfortable human occupancy. A building, normally considered a design invention, a spatial and decorative work, or a construction of inert material, is also an ecological construction.

The *ethical content of material production* has several aspects to it beyond fire safety and structural integrity: durability to withstand weathering and use; life expectancy; sustainability; labor contribution, etc.

Material realization is a broad public concern. The AIA has a role here.

A2-b. Experiential Result

In the end, architecture is not ideas about architecture, its generative models and methods, or the events of its origination and construction. It is not its representations of itself: it is not graphics, computer visualizations, or models. It is itself. It is a phenomenon to be experienced. Not only visually, (the Western eye is powerful in its shaping of experience), but in time and motion, and via scent and sounds, and heat and tactility. Our mental/poetic interpretation of the direct experience of a particular architectural work may sense that work's origination; may ascribe an imagined history to it; or may evoke realizations or remembrances in us; and we may judge and resonate to its aesthetic character from our perspective.

It will be inhabited and judged for its capacity to support our lives: solitariness, communal social gatherings, the rituals of social institutions, the rituals and habits of everyday life -- they all take place somewhere: the places, the architectural frameworks of our experience. Buildings are physical, built, material, cultural artifacts that are an expression of cultural values. We create, inhabit and are shaped by them. As put succinctly by Winston Churchill in 1943 when proposing that the war-destroyed House of Commons be rebuilt in its original English Gothic mode with a rectangular form and opposing benches to preserve the parliamentary process:

“We shape our buildings, and afterwards, they shape us.” These thoughts were first expressed by Churchill nearly twenty years earlier at the Architectural Association in London: “There is no doubt whatever about the influence of architecture and structures upon human character and action. We make our buildings and afterwards they make us. They regulate the course of our lives.”⁶

The ethical challenge is this: no design decision, e.g., relation to context, form and space, functional resolution, aesthetic quality, material fabrication, is neutral. The architect needs to understand the experiential implications of design proposals. They are all culturally connected; they are all consequential for the present day life and into the future. **It is this situation that virtually demands that the AIA speak to issues of public policy with respect to architecture, de-**

sign controls, settlement policies, access to affordable housing, community choices with respect to life quality that are affected by environmental design.

Δ3. The Architect's Virtue

The architect's virtue is this: the capacity to design ethical landscapes. Virtue in this sense is rooted in the Classical Greek concept of excellence that enjoins expectations, practices and results. Vitruvius, as he does in many matters, provides a definition of the studies an architect ought to master, bringing together theory and practice:

“... architects who have aimed at acquiring manual skill without scholarship have never been able to reach a position of authority to correspond to their pains, while those who relied only upon theories and scholarship were obviously hunting the shadow, not the substance. But those who have attained both ... have the sooner attained their object and carried authority with them.”⁷

From here he goes on to name geometry, drawing, history and meaning, ethics, climate, construction law, physics, knowledge of materials, etc.

Following Vitruvius, we continue to normatively describe the *stuff* that an architect needs to master. Architectural practice in our time will of necessity be framed in the terms of our time. Mastering these requisites is a condition of the architect's virtue. Without them, the architect does not possess the capacity to design ethical landscapes:

- exploring architectural history and precedent to date;
- developing and maintaining a knowledge base of architectural theories and ideas;
- continuing to develop effective methods of design and invention;
- rethinking the cultural heritage of the West and its position in a compressed diverse "e-" world;
- mastering a respect for, and basic understanding of, the material and productive technologies through which architecture is realized;
- utilizing emerging technologies;
- nurturing greater understanding of global sustainability and addressing sustainability

through design decisions; and understanding site ecology

- understanding contemporary conditions of practice and professionalism; developing the capability to conduct design processes that engage the public, government officials, contractors and craftspersons, clients and other designers.
- fostering collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches to addressing environmental design questions;
- searching for forms of these times and those of the near future rather than seeking comfort in nostalgia;
- developing a capacity to invent architectural space and form.

We add to this all sorts of specialized knowledge such as that of contracts, design media, and the specifics of contemporary construction systems, the policies and techniques of historic preservation, how to calculate beam sizes and heating loads, and the capacity to be a continuous learner, etc. This core knowledge of the architectural discipline supports the gift of talent, and personal initiative and passion to pursue excellence.

These are beginning points. The specific relevance of many of them will fade in the future, with new aspects taking over. The larger ambition of continuous self-motivated learning about architecture, and recognizing the manifestly rich and ethical role that architecture plays in life is what will prevail.

However, this knowledge in the abstract has limited merit. One remains, as Vitruvius points out in *Book I* of the *Ten Books of Architecture*, "chasing the shadow, not the substance of architecture." Two fundamental ethical challenges for the architect are described here: the discernment of what could be (conceptions of what would be *good*), and the generation and realization of design solutions for what ought to be (determination of what is *right* in order to bring about that *good*). **Only when core knowledge of the discipline is refined and applied to the inherently ethical dimensions of architecture is the architect's virtue realized. This leads us back to the AIA.**

Is It AIA Business or AIA Ethics

I would urge you to consider each activity of AIA Ohio, your As AIA leaders local Chapters and Sections, and initiatives of National in ethical terms. Evaluate them in

terms of how well they contribute to the common welfare. Proposed here are two vectors: that of professional competence and performance, and that of participation in public design initiatives. The AIA is already active on several of these fronts:

<u>The Virtues of the Architect</u>	<u>Architectural Citizenship</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• AIA Gold Medal (defines paragon of architect)• AIA Firm Award (defines paragon of practice)• CES (demands maintenance of currency)• PIA's (national networks of exchange of advanced specialized information)• Participation in accreditation• Serving as mentors to architectural interns	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Livable Communities Initiative• Participation in Code processes• Design Awards (recognize design quality that contributes to the common good)• Sustainability and green architecture initiatives• AIA brief on the schools Congress attended• AIAS (reaches children; assists in their understanding of the built environment)

The challenge is for each of you to reflect on why you are active as a peer leader, to consider what the common professional and public good ethically demand of the AIA and your leadership within it.

Notes:

1. **Aristotle**, 4th-C BCE. This section of the *Politics*, 1282a18-23, Loeb ed., the intent of which I broaden here, is referenced by Daryl Koehn, *The Ground of Professional Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), in a discussion of the client's knowledge, and contractual relations with professionals, p 37, and Footnote 8, p 188
2. **Leon Battista Alberti**, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books* (1452), trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, Robert Tavernor (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 3
3. **Aaron Betsky**, "Libeskind Builds," *Architecture* v87, n9, Sep. 1998, 102-. Betsky is quoting Daniel Libeskind.
4. **Karsten Harries**, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), p 4
5. **Hammurabi**, King of Babylon, *The Hammurabi Code and the Sinaitic Legislation*, trans. Chilperic Edwards, 1904 (reprint, Port Washington, NY/London: Kennikat Press, 1971)
6. **Winston Churchill**, *Winston Churchill: His Complete Speeches, 1897-1963*, 8 Volumes, ed. Robert Rhodes James (New York and London: Chelsea House and R. R. Bowker, 1974). The quotes are from a speech in the House of Commons, 28 Oct 43, vol. VII, 1943-1949, 6869; and a speech at the Architectural Association in London, 25 Jul 24, vol. IV, 1922-1928, 3467-8
7. **Vitruvius**, *The Ten Books on Architecture* (1st-C BCE), trans. Morris Hicky Morgan, 1914, Harvard University Press (republication, pbk., New York: Dover, 1960), Bk I, Ch 1, p 5 & ff