Technology and Humanism

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As the call for papers states, this conference is interested in "the relationship between evolving technology and changing premises for human well-being." The "changing premises" phrase merits further comment. Based on multiple studies, there is an increasing awareness of mass media technologies as instruments of human alienation. Humans are being systematically disconnected from immediate experience of the world. Given the apparent contrast between traditional humanist values and the distractive omnipresence of technology in general, how might they be reconciled? Besides the concerns with social and mass media, how might technology be rendered to serve essential human needs for shelter? These questions will be considered from two paired perspectives: humanism and technology, autonomy and ethics.

HUMANISM and TECHNOLOGY.

"Humanism" generally refers to the belief regarding the human being as the center and source of meaning and value. As Protagoras of Abdera stated, "Man is the measure of all things: Things that are that they are and things that are not that they are not." In architecture, however, this is not always the case. Instead of prioritizing human needs, architects explore agendas privileging function, structure, material, technique, industrial production, economics, and so on. The goal of humanist architects is to serve daily human needs and functions and providing experiential environments that engage emotional and psychological needs. Are these two positions really that far apart?

In Classical Greece, architecture and art were accounted for under the term *techne*. *Techne* was concerned with functional excellence and the perfection of types: an object was good if it fulfilled its functional requirements; the more functionally satisfactory it was, the better it was, the more beautiful it was. As Socrates concludes at one point in the *Hippias Major*: "let us assume that whatever is useful is beautiful."[1] In Platonism, the word *agathon* referred to the highest good, the ideal. The *arete* of a thing, that is, its functional excellence, was its *agathon*, its good. Each thing had a unique potential in relation to fulfilling its functional excellence. The very general meaning of *techne*, especially as found in Aristotle, is associated with anything deliberately created by humans in contrast to anything not created by humans. The latter is a product of *physis*, or nature. Yet in his *de Partibus Animalium*, Aristotle denotes nature as the paradigm, of functional excellence, of *arete*: "The absence of chance and the serving of ends are

found in the works of nature especially. And the end for the sake of which a thing has been constructed or has come to be belongs to what is beautiful."[2] *Arete* as *techne* could be achieved through *mimesis*, that is, using nature as the paradigm of functional ideals. By emulating nature, its perfection could be approached.

Techne assumed a knowing and a making: knowing the goal and the best way to achieve it.[3] The success of a work (whether a vase, a statue, a temple, or a speech) was judged according to principles of measure involving proportion, scale, harmony, and unity. The artist was thus required to know measure, without which the creation of beauty was impossible. Critically, materials and technique were subservient to the functional value of the work; potential conflicts were overcome through a commitment to creating harmonious unity between function, technique, and material. Associating the functional with the good, all regulated by rational principles, was the basis of *techne* and constituted the concept of the beautiful. *Techne* involved ethical considerations.

A formula for the practice of architecture in terms of *techne* is provided by the oldest extant architectural treatise, the *Ten Books of Architecture* written by Vitruvius in the 1st century C.E. According to Vitruvius, architecture is concerned with *Utilitas*, *Firmitas*, and *Venustas* (that is, with utility or function, durability and structure, and beauty or pleasure). In other words, architecture is evaluated according to how well it works, how well it lasts, and how well it pleases. This triad essentially is in keeping with the notion of *techne* and has provided the backdrop for the discourse of western architecture in general and modernist discourse in particular. The issue of ethics is always involved.

AUTONOMY and ETHICS.

"Autonomy" (from *autonomos* from *auto,* "self" + *nomos*, "law") is the ability to follow one's own volition. What, then, might the relationship be between architecture and autonomy? To whom is the architect accountable? This paper argues that architecture is neither an autonomous nor a heteronomous discipline but a balancing act between the two.[4] It is not a case of either/or but both/and. On the one hand there is the stereotype of the successful architect as a practitioner facilitating the professional resolution of numerous competing interests - often diametrically opposed - to produce a work acceptable to all interested parties. On the other, there is the architect as an *agent provocateur* speculating on the possibility of architecture and challenging the status quo and even viability of ethical practice. Most architects, however, operate somewhere in this spectrum of possibilities.

Instead of this binary oppositional cliché of the autonomous architect/artist versus the heteronomous architect/artist, let's ask: What is it to build in a relevant and appropriate manner in any given time and place? Without responding to this question, there is no ethical accountability or responsibility. Moreover, if architecture represents cultural identity, what is the responsibility, ethical and otherwise, of the architect?

The question of ethics for architects of all stripes remains a central concern. "Ethics" comes from the Greek word ethos, which means "character". A related term Virtue (Latin: *virtus*, Greek: "arete") refers to a person's ethical accomplishments. Is ethical accountability too much to ask of architects?

For Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*), the State is an institution that provides the individual with opportunities for achieving the good and happiness. It is to the individuals advantage to be a "good citizen" in order to benefit from a "good State". Interestingly, Aristotle points out that ethics and the good is not something that can be defined exactly like a mathematical formula but is arrived at through reason discussion based on experience. The highest good, the highest aim of all humans is *eudaimonia*, that is, well-being or happiness. What makes a virtuous character (*ethikē aretē*) possible? Right actions and right habits often with the guidance of a teacher are necessary. So perhaps virtues can be taught.[5]

The American Institute of Architects in the USA has numerous courses in how to practice ethically. NCARB has an online training course in ethics, the AIA has a document titles "Professional Code of Ethics." Even UNESCO has delved into architectural educational policy. Most schools of architecture now have instituted "Studio Culture Policy" documents spelling out the roles and responsibilities for students and teachers. Why are they necessary now? Why is ethics such a concern at this time?

What established principles might we reference? We could start with "First, do no harm", a saying attributed to *Hippocratic Oath* of the 5th century BCE. This phrase, however, does not exist there so a more likely source is a phrase in the *Epidemics* by Hippocrates that reads "to do good or to do no harm".

Ethics involves the notion of right or good and wrong or bad conduct. How should one live one's life in a just and therefore good manner? Architectural discourse cannot marginalize the ethical dimension by claiming architecture as neutral or silent. Architecture cannot be considered in such terms, that is, autonomously operating outside the ken of ethical engagement and responsibility.

Even the most provocative of current architects as ideologically diverse as François Roche and Quinlan Terry insist that ethicals are the foundation of their practices. Their values drive their work. Roche is today's most disruptive and inflammatory *agent provocateur*. But there have always been those with passionate personal agendas such as Terry and Roche. Just think of Jean-Jacques Lequeu or Étienne-Louis Boullée or Lebbeus Woods or Douglas Darden.

Some architects choose not to build to avoid ethical compromise. They prefer to operate in more autonomous spheres. Yet how does an individual operate with free will

and self-determination within given society, within the system of constraints and limitations?

Howard Roark, the heroic individualist in Ayn Rand's 1943 novel *The Fountainhead*, for many represents the archetypal, self-serving, self-indulgent, self-declared creator for whom the world exists to serve his genius.[6] Others see him as a creative genius struggling against the status quo and continuously threatened by those who resent his talent – "the parasitic collective".[7] Roark is the cliché of the suffering artist struggling against the reactionary forces of ignorance. Many deeply believe that Roark is a paradigm of everything that is wrong with architecture today; others that he is a role model if architecture is to blossom.

Often reneging on the social contract, current "starchitects" end up realizing clever novelty acts that often do deserve to be blown up. One can identify those of Roark's attitude operating today. In contrast, architecture is promoted an interdisciplinary discipline with the architect necessarily collaborating to resolve the constellation of often contradictory interests involved in realizing a building. This is what generally is taught in schools and confirmed by the profession in general. The harder the architect struggles for autonomy, the harder the chain pulls back. The architect is unavoidably a heteronomous agent.

IMAGE: Secessionist motto: *Der Zeit Ihre Kunst Der Kunst Ihre Freiheit*.

But, to follow Adolf Loos, let us not confuse the architect and the artist for to do so is to neutralize the valuable role and responsibility that each plays in culture. Artists have a critical responsibility in society to also document and reveal the neuroses, dysfunctional, tragedy, loneliness, despair, etc. of existence. As such, much of contemporary art practice has distanced itself from the traditional notion of architecture. Architecture simply cannot focus on self-interrogation in the manner of contemporary art. There is nothing quite as disappointing as architects posing as artists. If architecture is an art, it is a social one with an unavoidable ethical component.

CONCLUSION.

As a student, I struggled to understand what architecture is and how one practices it. I came across a polemic by Adolf Loos that left me rather disconcerted.[8] In this essay "Architecture 1910," he wrote:

> "May I take you to the shores of a mountain lake? The sky is blue, the water is green, and everything is at peace. The mountains and the clouds are reflected in the lake, as are the houses, farms and chapels . . . And everything radiates beauty and quiet . . .

What is the discord, that like an unnecessary scream shatters the quiet? Right at the centre of the farmers' houses . . . stands a villa . . . All I know is that beauty, peace and quiet have been dispelled.
Thus I ask: why is it that every architect, whether good or bad, desecrates the lake? The farmer does not desecrate it.
By culture I mean that balance of man's inner and outer being which alone guarantees rational thought and action.
One obeyed the commands of the hour and did not look forwards or backwards."

IMAGE: Georg Grotenfelt, *Huitukka Sauna***, Juva, 1982.**

Should we not advocate for a quiet and modest architecture functioning discretely to serve humanity and society?

Meaning is constituted from the contingencies of individual experience and practice, from multiples and differences rather than from "a harmonious and organic unity." I am more and more attracted to the vast residue of "unknown magnitude" that eludes appropriation by grand narratives.[9] As *knowledge designers*, we should exercise self-reflection, perpetually interrogating underlying assumptions to preserve hope for intellectual accountability as we offer social strategies, however tentative and fragile. After all, that which we hold most dear has the greatest potential for unraveling and disillusion.

To conclude, let us circle back to the beginning. To build in an appropriate and relevant manner in any given time and place constitutes *utilitas, firmitas, venustas*. Technology should always be subservient to this goal; it does not dictate possibilities but serves human needs. Technology is an essential instrument but it is never more than a means to an end.[10] Again, we find the ethical in architecture as always already there simply waiting to help mediate and reconcile the human with the technical.

THM. Aspen, July 31, 2017.

NOTES

[1]Plato, "Greater Hippias," *Collected Dialogues*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 1548. Hippias, with whom Socrates is debating, concurs with this position.   This notion is repeated by Socrates on p. 1549: "Then we are now right in affirming that the useful is pre-eminently beautiful." But on p. 1559, after much debate about the nature of the beautiful and beauty, Socrates concludes "All that is beautiful is difficult."
 Inherent to this notion was progress through evolutionary improvement.   Hippias agrees when Socrates asks him "Then we should be right in saying that just as other arts have advanced until the craftsmen of the past compare ill with those of today, so your art, that of the Sophist, has advanced until the old philosophers cannot stand comparison with you and your fellows?" (p. 1534).

[2]Aristotle, *de Partibus Animalium*. Quoted in G.E.R. Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 70.

[3]J.J. Pollitt, *Art and Experience in Classical Greece* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 69, defines techne as "usually translated as 'art' but meaning, more precisely, the orderly application of knowledge for the purpose of producing a specific, predetermined product."

[4] Heteronomous: subject to a law or standard external to itself. Autonomous: having the freedom to act independently of external influences.
> Ethics & Autonomy call for papers: " . . . ethical dimension in both architecture and philosophy has been compromised because both disciplines have not established a clear interdisciplinary understanding of autonomy . . . we must reconsider what autonomy means for both architecture and philosophy, or rather, for architecture philosophy (sic)."

[5] Another obvious reference is a Socratic Dialogue, the *Meno* in which the young Meno asks Can virtue be taught? Socrates replies (p. 354) "The fact is that far from knowing whether it can be taught, I have no idea what virtue itself is". Meno think he does and gives Socrates a list of various virtuous qualities. But Socrates wants Meno to state what virtue is while leaving it whole and not broken into such pieces as justice, temperance, and so on. Meno finally states that it is the desire for good. But, Socrates says, everyone desires good, no one ever desires evil. [?] As usual, we are set adrift to seek our own answers – a condition that some of us (perhaps even here) cherish.

[6] The book was made into a film in 1949. Here is a video clip of 2:48 seconds showing Roark's disappointment with how his design was being compromised.
> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClYDwE2Obnk

[7] Howard Roark's court speech, *The Fountainhead,* 1949.   Based on the 1943 novel by Ayn Rand.
> http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRXcaWVr_uI
> http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swOxKu80JpU
> "I designed Cortlandt. I gave it to you. I destroyed it.
> I destroyed it because I did not choose to let it exist. It was a double monster. In form and in implication. I had to blast both. The form was mutilated by two second-handers who assumed the right to improve upon that which they had not made and could not equal. They were permitted to do it by the general implication that the altruistic purpose of the building superseded all rights and that I had no claim to stand against it.
> I agreed to design Cortlandt for the purpose of seeing it erected as I designed it and for no other reason. That was the price I set for my work. I was not paid.
> I do not blame Peter Keating. He was helpless. He had a contract with his employers. It was ignored. He had a promise that the structure he offered would be built as designed. The promise was broken. The love of a man for the integrity of his work and his right to preserve it are now considered a vague intangible and an inessential. You have heard the prosecutor say that. Why was the building disfigured? For no reason. Such acts never have any reason, unless it's the vanity of some second-handers who feel they have a right to anyone's property, spiritual or material. Who permitted them to do it? No particular man among the dozens in authority. No one cared to permit it or to stop it. No one was responsible. No one can be held to account. Such is the nature of all collective action.
> I did not receive the payment I asked. But the owners of Cortlandt got what they needed from me. They wanted a scheme devised to build a structure as cheaply as possible. They found no one else who could do it to their satisfaction. I could and did. They took the benefit of my work and made me contribute it as a gift. But I am not an altruist. I do not contribute gifts of this nature."

[8] Adolf Loos, "Architecture 1910," *The Architecture of Adolf Loos* (London: Arts Council, 1987), pp. 104-109.
> p. 107   ". . . Today most houses only please two people: the client and the architect.
> The house has to please everyone, contrary to the work of art, which does not. The work of art is a private matter for the artist. The house is not. The work of art is brought into [p.108] the world without there being a need for it. The house satisfies a requirement. The work of art is responsible to everyone. The work of art wants to draw

people out of their state of comfort. The house has to serve comfort. The work of art is revolutionary; the house is conservative. The work of art shows people new directions and thinks of the future. The house thinks of the present. Man loves everything that satisfies his comfort. He hates everything that wants to draw him out of his acquired and secured position and that disturbs him. Thus he loves the house and hates art.

Does it follow that the house has nothing in common with art and is architecture not to be included amongst the arts? That is so. Only a very small part of architecture belongs to art: the tomb and the monument. Everything else that fulfills a function is to be excluded from the domain of art."

[9] Michel Serres, *Genesis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 23: "The philosopher keeps watch over unforeseeable and fragile conditions, his position is unstable, mobile, suspended, the philosopher seeks to leave ramifications and bifurcations open, in opposition to the confluences that connect them or close them."

[10] Given the evolving innovative techniques, structural systems, and materials of the global construction industry, is a humanist architecture feasible? Is such a goal simply delusional hope? How can one build thoughtfully given, for example, the overwhelming and unprecedented scale of housing needs in China for an estimated 300 million people migrating into cities by 2030? In China, late capitalism is demanding basic housing for workers in urban industrial zones on a scale without historical precedent. What is the value of humanism and ethics in such a context?