

FIVE

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CRITICAL

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ESSAYS

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ON

Alan Dunlop

ARCHITECTURAL

ETHICS

James Woudhuysen

CRITICAL SUBJECTS

Five Critical Essays on Architectural Ethics

FIVE CRITICAL ESSAYS will explore the general discussions affecting, *inter alia*, design, architecture, culture and politics. The ideological premise of the journal is to facilitate a critical engagement with ideas, and to interrogate established topics objectively. Taking a leaf out of EP Thompson's review of *New Society*, the 1960s cultural review magazine, we aim to offer 'hospitality to a dissenting view (as) evidence that the closure of our democratic traditions is not yet complete.' Our purpose is to re-open civic debate.

FIVE CRITICAL ESSAYS will introduce a theme for each issue and recruit five writers to comment freely and openly on the subjects to generate space for a conversation and further enquiry. The conclusion of each journal will not necessarily mean a resolution. Indeed, it is intended that there will be five robust views on display and that their interventions will be a spark to further discussion.

FIVE CRITICAL ESSAYS will be an agora where genuine interpretations are proposed and where arguments that will hopefully advance the understanding of the subject are confidently proposed. We aim to provide a nuanced perspective on a variety of issues, whether exploring ethical dilemmas, interrogating contemporary arguments or challenging well-established orthodoxies.

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Five Critical Essays
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Foreword

Austin Williams

These days it seems that ethical behaviour has become a given; a paradigm that we have to learn – and learn to comply with – without thinking. Slavoj Žižek wrote recently how our contemporary ethical paradigm has also ‘become increasingly authoritarian and intolerant.’¹ Step forward an army of self-appointed gatekeepers willing to tell us what the permissible and impermissible moral behaviours are, and to punish the independently-minded hoi polloi.

It seems that an ethical professional is now someone who merely obeys the designated standard of behaviour permitted by the prevailing orthodoxies and by the creators of an ever-expanding lexicon of behavioural codes. Ethics has stopped being a difficult philosophical tussle about how things should be. The intellectual battle about the various interpretations of the meaning of life have been ceded to compliance spreadsheets reliant on scientific, empirical or mechanistic evidence. Nowadays, teachers of ethics need simply explain what you can and cannot do: and if you follow their advice, demonstrate obeisance, all will be well. Gone is ‘ethical ambivalence’² in place of a need for certainty. (Here the word ‘ambivalence’ does not mean that we should be ambivalent towards ethics, per se, but reflects the doubt, questioning and moral ambiguity that are intellectually essential for social advance).

Historically, ethics has been a contested arena, where various sides engaged in a battle of ideas to further one view over another as a means of reaching a better understanding of a situation and a way of striving for the truth. Philosophical thought across centuries has tended to enable people to choose whether they subscribe to the social contract of Rousseau, for example, or the more individualised Objectivist position of Ayn Rand. Do you align yourself with Kant’s striving for moral certainty or Nietzsche’s critique of moral values? Socrates or Aristotle? Peter Singer versus

Hannah Arendt? Surely, as a creative profession, we should be able to discuss these ideas frankly and not confine ourselves to one polarised opinion without challenge. To paraphrase: ‘That which doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.’

Various oppositional positions and alternative worldviews have formed the intellectual foundation for society’s understanding of what it means to be human, to be a good person, or to live well. These debates also allow us to challenge ourselves and others to try to reach a better appreciation of the good life. Sadly – increasingly – it seems that ethics today tends to be devoid of conflict, by which I mean that there is frequently an official narrative in which moral behaviour is *not* to be contested. It doesn’t mean that moral disagreements have been resolved, far from it, it simply infers that if you think about an issue differently to the consensual mainstream then you can be dismissed as someone in need of an ethical reboot to bring you back online and on message.

In many instances, 5,000 years of philosophical thinking about normative ethics has become unknown, or of little consequence, to a new generation of architectural instructors through whom students are now taught to understand ethics within a mere 5- or 50-year-old timeframe of environmental activism. Of course, ‘the environment’ is clearly a moral issue to be considered in the equation of how we build, but there is surely a wider palette of ethical issues to be taken up. As James Woudhuysen argues in his chapter, it might be useful to weigh up whether we should be building more houses, regardless of carbon impacts, in order to house the homeless or improve the lives of the under-developed world. Under the contemporary catechism of single-issue, ethical orthodoxies, exploring this avenue is seldom on the cards.

We are told that ‘gentrification is an immoral urban process’.³ We are told that demolition is unacceptable ‘if we stand any chance of averting climate catastrophe’.⁴ We are told by the Architects Registration Board (the body that polices architects) that architects must commit to equity, diversity and inclusion ‘always in an ethical’ manner’.⁵ Heaven forbid that you might disagree with any of the above: such is the insidiousness of moralising blackmail.

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Natural selection

The Royal Institute of British Architects’ ‘Ethical Practice Guide’ is co-written by a co-ordinator of the Architects Climate Action Network. (We could ask whether it is ethical to shoehorn political advocacy into

a mandatory guide for architects, but we'll leave that to one side for a moment). The author in question is also a steering group member of the activist organisation, Architects Declare, a political alliance that requires participating practices to affirm, amongst other things, that they are 'co-evolving with nature... that we are part of nature... not separate from it.'⁶

Undoubtedly, many people would find that there is nothing concerning in that statement at all. For them, it is self-evident that we are part of nature even though centuries of philosophical thought has contested the primacy of such an opinion. From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and beyond, philosophers have tended to regard humanity's mere biological nature, and our mortality's accommodation to the laws of physics and the natural sciences as the least interesting aspect of our moral lives. What elevates humanity is its separation from nature: our ability to shape and control our lives beyond the constraints of the natural world and to transcend nature through the exercise of human subjectivity.

Architects Declare (self-identifying as 'an industry recognised initiative') have every right to challenge perceptions and try to push government in a direction that might better suit their position. That is their democratic right. We can all lobby and try to set agendas. But there is little democratic about an environmental industry that argues that, in order to disrupt society, we do not need elections, or a popular mandate, or a majority: just 3.5% of the population needs to be mobilised.⁷ Getting into positions of authority and capturing the narrative to push an agenda without winning the arguments seems more draconian than ethical.

One advocate of environmental ethics states that 'architects must practice collectivity and intersectionality to unsettle conventions and complacencies (and address) decolonisation and decarbonisation.'⁸ Again, there is nothing wrong with such a political rallying cry, but surely, that has to be met with a counter perspective. What if you don't believe in the collective, or if you are gender critical and think that 'intersectionality' is nothing more than a 'self-defeating cult of victimhood.'⁹ What if you simply believe that none of the above are the most important concerns for you, preferring, say, to challenge underdevelopment, poverty or class politics?

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Silence please

For the authors of architectural guides to contemporary ethics, the failsafe reference to a Climate Emergency is enough to silence critics and bring

opponents to heel. In a different era, the ethical response to significant practical problems in society might have been to build more, to create more and to debate more about the moral imperatives of what needs to be done. But the current ethical dogmatism elevates the environment, sees humanity as the cause of the problems and portrays human impact as inherently detrimental. And there is no place for disagreement.

By setting issues upon self-defined ethical pedestals, other opinions are deemed somehow less legitimate or even unacceptable. In other words: unethical. The moralistic pressure to conform to the dominant narrative is intense, however much you might find it morally repugnant to do so. Of course, many of us realise that practical questions should really be asked about why professionals are not speaking out, how education policy is being shaped by the faddish ‘degrowth’ agenda, and why the political establishment is allowing this to happen. But with no desire to rock the boat – to mix my metaphors – the juggernaut continues. Such intellectual passivity within a critical vacuum cannot be good for creativity, knowledge, competence, or moral clarity.

The story of humanity is one of civilisational progress. While some may wish to wallow in fear and loathing of the future, claiming that ‘we’re crashing critical life support systems and putting our world on a perilous trajectory,’¹⁰ global, societal and individual development has relied on the rejection of fatalism and determinism in favour of human reason. This always used to be an important aspect of ethics (moral philosophy) enabling us to determine the progressive benefit of an act for our individual selves and for society in general. Historically, humanity has striven to realise its potential by working out what’s best for itself. It demands that our independent opinions are not reducible to a slogan and our desires are not to be sublimated to a lobby group’s plea for moral compliance. Like science, ethical positions must be contestable.

A contemporary tactic in modern-day ethical discourse is to assert that a particular issue is consensual and unassailable – that criticism of such a position is an aberration – thus painting opposition as totally unreasonable. But, as Professor Denis Hayes argues in his chapter, everything must be criticised, especially given the unequal reality of social relations. In Trotsky’s ever-relevant book ‘Their Morals and Ours,’ he says ‘A means can be justified only by its end. But the end in its turn needs to be justified.’ He continues: ‘From the Marxist point of view, which expresses the historical interests of the proletariat, the end is justified if it leads to increasing the power of man over nature and to the abolition of the power of man over man.’¹¹

In today's context, Trotsky would be chastised by his leftist tormentors, not for his desire for permanent revolution, but for his hubris. His expression of the transformative power of human agency over nature is anathema in today's moral universe. Increasing the power of man over nature would be enough to get him exiled from polite society. But it is a moral maxim that would serve architects well. After all, the essence of architecture is to transform nature (not kow-tow to it) and to improve the lot for ordinary people, not blame them for daring to want a better life.

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Taking ethics seriously

Dennis Hayes

In this opening essay, I will focus solely on what it means to take ethics seriously in a professional discipline. In ordinary language the terms ethics and morals are often used interchangeably: we can call an action immoral or unethical and our choice of words makes little difference. But if someone tries to force us to accept and act on their view as the only acceptable one, we can easily become irritated and accuse them of ‘moralism.’ Moralism has given moral issues and the idea of ‘morals’ a hard time.

Ethics seems to be a more open, thoughtful and serious subject. But, as we shall see, ethics as a philosophical subject might also be said to have given genuine moral questions a bad name.

In philosophy, ethics is the study of morality or moralities. Moralities are the systems of beliefs, values and judgements that say how any person, group or society should live. It is impossible to summarise ethics as a philosophical field of study because it is vast and covers centuries and civilisations. The ethical theories of Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Mill, Wittgenstein, Ayer, Moore, and other contemporary thinkers are complex and have spawned a vast literature.¹ But outside the academic study of philosophy two nineteenth century ethical theories still influence our thinking. There is John Stuart Mill’s *utilitarianism*, that asks us to judge any course of action by how it makes people’s lives better and Immanuel Kant’s *deontological theory* that asks us to judge an action by whether it is right according to our beliefs, no matter what the consequences. The ghosts of these ethical philosophies haunt the disciplines whether we can name them or not.

In a practical subject, if we ask, ‘What ought I to do?’ or ‘What ought to be done?’ we are beginning to think ethically. However, we are not helped by the vague references to understanding ethical theories that often appear in the syllabi of university professional programmes. These seem to have no real function, because to understand ethics in any meaningful way

would require much more in-depth study than is allowed in most professional or practical courses. In fact, these lectures and modules merely give access to soundbites and seldom allow students and academics to tackle the subject seriously and in depth, preferring to cut-and-paste an ethical theory or philosophy to fit the text. A full understanding and commitment to a theory goes beyond postcard philosophy (i.e. the casual reference or quote from an ethical superstar such as Mill or Kant).

More often than not, nascent moral questions about what ought to be done are dealt with in a cursory manner by reference to a set of ready-made values promoted by professional organisations, academic institutions or political bodies. These issues are often described as moral duties with no sense of an alternative perspective: ‘We ought to do X because it is ‘sustainable’, ‘inclusive’, ‘diverse’, etc.’ Unreflective demands may have an ethical gloss because they embody fashionable concepts, but they are ethically superficial. Applying concepts in this way is not to take ethics seriously but to simply conform to existing orthodoxies and contemporary values.

In fact, when conformity is demanded of a student or professional or if any viewpoint is forced upon our thinking, then this is unethical. It might be called *moral bullying*. To avoid moralism and moral bullying, critical thinking about any issue is necessary. Without critical thinking, ethical thinking is impossible.

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Genuine Ethical Issues

The philosopher Rush Rhees recalls a conversation with Wittgenstein in 1942: ‘Wittgenstein said it was strange that you could find books on ethics in which there was no mention of a genuine ethical or moral problem.’²² Rhees interpreted Wittgenstein as thinking about problems that required us to think of a solution.

To a moralist, a person with fixed beliefs, who asks, ‘What does my moral belief X tell me to do?’ or ‘What does my moral belief Y tell me to do in this situation?’ there is no need to think in order to reach a solution. The solution is given by the set of moral beliefs. But genuine problems are those that require critical thinking and debate, and Wittgenstein thought that writers on ethics did not take ethics seriously.

Almost twenty years later, Mary Warnock made a similar criticism of ethical philosophers, saying that they had trivialised the subject by avoiding real ethical issues. Later she thought the situation had improved but

that ethics was now threatened by a ‘creeping relativism which morality itself, let alone moral philosophy could not survive.’³ The moral relativism that she was warning us about is driven by the fact that there are so many worldviews in a plural society that it seems impossible to prefer one over another. In this way, moral judgements become nothing more than expressions of personal preferences.

Warnock believed that to think ethically you had to talk about genuine issues: a practice that she followed in her philosophical thinking and in her political life, notably as the chair of inquiries on Special Educational Needs and on Human Fertilisation and Embryology. For her, the discussion of genuine issues challenges the simple application of a moral belief or of any ethical theory, including utilitarian and deontological theories.

In a famous essay on ‘The Universalizability of Moral Judgements’ the philosopher Peter Winch argued that when you approach a genuine moral issue with sensitivity you must look in detail at the concrete situation that involves individuals with thoughts, beliefs and feelings. You cannot just read off ethical solutions to a particular case by the simplistic application of previous ethical judgements. Asserting moral beliefs without examining each genuine moral issue is to be morally presumptuous and the universal principle will be ‘idle’.⁴ To take ethics seriously is to examine each concrete situation even if you consider the case to be ‘exactly similar’ to previous cases. This is hard work that involves criticism of the principles that you and other actors are bringing to bear on any case.

The first step in taking ethics seriously is to look at the specifics of genuine problems. But how can we take this approach when we are faced with a professional climate infected by moral relativism?

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Tackling Relativism

Plato refuted relativism over two thousand years ago but forms of relativism remain rife and the battle against it never ends.

There is a quick refutation of epistemological relativism available to us. Suppose someone says: ‘There is no such thing as truth’ or ‘There are many truths’, the reply to either is ‘Is that true?’ The consequence is that the statements are shown to be self-contradictory. Relativism about truth cannot be stated. There are more complex refutations, but this quick test provides a pointer to how they work.⁵

Moral or cultural relativism has an appeal for those wanting an easy life. Ideas of being ‘open’ and ‘accepting’ of different worldviews without judgement or conflict are attractive to professional practitioners. We can all get on and work together. So different worldviews are never subject to criticism, and this is where the idea of a ‘refuge’ or ‘safe space’ comes in. Working in a consensual environment in which we often hear that ‘all ideas are equally valid’, we need never put forward any reasons or justifications for our beliefs or our judgements.

The adoption of such a relativist position means that our moral or cultural worldview is reduced to something that is protected from criticism and challenge. Indeed, any criticism or challenge is likely to be met with hostility, censorship... or the sack, giving lie to the idea that relativism is an open, kindly and inclusive philosophy. Relativism in professional practice is an authoritarian way of protecting any worldview against change and development.

Taking ethics seriously means to reject all forms of relativism.

The Scottish-Australian philosopher, John Anderson, said that: ‘The Socratic education begins...with the awakening of the mind to the need for criticism, to the uncertainty principles by which it supposed itself to be guided.’⁶

This is not the sloppy fad of ‘Socratic questioning’ – a ‘skill’ that many teachers and trainers use to get practitioners or students to question and reject values that they hold and replace them with more acceptable ones. In fact, it really means that we should subject our principles, beliefs and opinions, to unrestricted criticism. If we do not do this, we cannot know if what we *think* is the case, *is* the case.

It is only by subjecting our ideas to constant criticism that we ever get the knowledge we need to take ethics seriously. The primary condition of moving from your personal conscience – protected by relativism – to a serious ethical approach to practice is to bring knowledge back in: to justify an ethical position requires knowledge.

We have not moved from the world of ethics when we bring knowledge back in. Everyone is familiar with Socrates’ remark, in the *Apology*, that ‘the unreflective life is not worth living.’ Today this can be seen as an injunction to narcissistic navel-gazing. But there is a different lesson to learn from Socrates. For him, knowledge was a value. If we do not seek to know, then we lead a worthless, unreflective life. The pursuit of knowledge is an ethical pursuit.

Taking ethics seriously requires us to pursue knowledge.

Criticise, Criticise, Criticise

If we want to take ethics seriously in any professional discipline, we must subject all viewpoints, all moralism, to constant and unrestricted criticism. This is the only way to ensure that we do not hold on to and promote ideas that may turn out to be dangerous, inhuman and immoral.

Moralists can feel that their ideas are superior and unassailable only because the critical spirit has disappeared from the disciplines and all too often criticism is now seen as negative and destructive.⁷ How often do we hear from professionals and professional bodies that ‘positive’ criticism of their ideas is welcome? Positive criticism is criticism that is bounded within the scope of the ideas being proposed; criticism that helps *reinforce* the idea being proposed. Maybe this is to promote EDI, ESG, or other alphabet soup political mandates but restricted criticism is not criticism at all: it is merely a call to conform. Real criticism is negative. It begins when we say ‘no’.

This may seem to be a set of statements that leads to utter negativity and dependency. Someone may ask for consistency and demand that we put all ideas to unrestricted criticism. One philosophical response to this suggestion is to point out that this requires criticism of their suggestion.

Another answer is to accept that someone may reject the need for criticism and prefer to conform. Of course, many people do (and would use a term like ‘accept’ rather than ‘conform’, but intellectual conformity is what it is). To conform to popular ideas, the ideas of others, is to willingly accept intellectual servitude. To reject criticism and embrace intellectual servility takes away any possibility of taking ethics seriously. Only criticism can guide us towards an ethical or moral compass.

We must revive the critical spirit that was once the norm in academia and the professions. Without the critical spirit we cannot seek the knowledge and understanding on which to base our practical, ethical judgements. If we fail, all we will have left are faddish and fashionable forms of moralism and a worthless professional practice. Again, John Anderson put this well: ‘So long as we do not set anything above criticism, we can make progress.’⁸

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Codifying moral behaviour

Eleanor Jolliffe

Professional conduct has traditionally been associated with behavioural qualities such as honesty, integrity, ethical probity and a certain degree of knowledge of one's subject. When seeking professional advice, we seek a dispassionate, unbiased opinion based on knowledge we don't possess.

Architecture is, by definition, expensive. Whether a small residential extension sought by a homeowner, or a mixed-use development commissioned by a professional developer, the capital sums required for architectural projects are of high financial and emotional significance to the client. Clients leverage their financial and emotional wellbeing when following architects' advice. Professionalism when carrying out architectural services should, therefore, be a given. However, sadly, human characteristics creep into the most well-meaning and professional of people, and even the best architects may allow personal interests or preferences to creep into their advice.

Historically, architects sought to ensure minimum standards of professional behaviour by the creation of professional societies. The first expression of serious professionalisation was a meeting on 20th October 1791 at the Thatched House Tavern. It was a group of Royal Academicians and architects, including James Wyatt, Henry Holland and Samuel Pepys Cockerell. Together they formed the rather originally named Architects Club. It started as an academic and august monthly meeting, where topics such as professional qualifications, fireproof construction, the undertaking of another architect's unfinished work and professional fees were discussed. However, despite it lasting 30 years, evidence shows that specific discussions about the profession dried up after the first few years, and what remained was apparently a convivial and exclusive, but perhaps not terribly significant, dining club.

Between 1806 and 1831, at least a further five architectural societies

were founded – but aside from the odd volume of essays, little transpired from them beyond good intentions. The opportunities inherent in the economic boom catalysed by the Industrial Revolution had led to a construction industry rife with fraud, with architects so poorly regarded by public opinion that Charles Dickens could satirise them in the character of Seth Pecksniff, the architect villain of his 1844 novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

In an attempt to protect their role and safeguard the profession by holding it to recognised standards, a group of architects formed what would become the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). It was not founded in the most straightforward or ethical of ways, but what these men eventually achieved was the recognition of architecture as a new profession; one that could still be dabbled in by aristocracy, distinct from the increasingly corrupt turmoil of construction.

The RIBA went on to lobby hard for protection of both title and function of architecture and was eventually rewarded by seeing the architectural profession regulated by specific standards, codes of conduct and – crucially – a defined education. Today, the title ‘architect’ is legally protected in Britain. The register of all architects is held by an independent body, the ARB, that has no vested interest in architecture or architectural services. To be recognised as an architect in the UK is to be legally held to a certain set of standards. To be a Chartered Architect (that is, to choose to be an architect member of the RIBA), is theoretically to be held to an even more stringent code of conduct.

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Simpler times

These architectural codes of conduct have undergone revisions and adjustments in the centuries since their first drafting. The world has changed, the practice of architecture has evolved, and so must the codes. In 2019 however the RIBA code of conduct increased in volume by 900%. While it needed revision and to be updated, the sheer detail of its specificity seems slightly shocking.

Prior to the revisions, for instance, it was deemed sufficient that ‘members should respect the beliefs and opinions of other people, recognise social diversity and treat everyone fairly...’ and that, ‘members shall be aware of the environmental impact of their work’.

Following the revision, the RIBA seems to be requiring positive action and a broader sphere of influence from its members as, among other

things, members ‘shall provide their professional services... in a manner that encourages and promotes equality of opportunity and diversity’, ‘shall seek and promote social justice’ and ‘shall encourage their clients to adopt sustainable practices at the earliest opportunity’.

To promote equality of opportunity and diversity is no doubt a good thing in the broadest sense, but the application may be tricky. Would working on a single sex school be in contravention of these codes? Arguably this does not promote equality of opportunity, yet it is a common and accepted educational choice in the UK.

To choose a more controversial ethical quandary, many large and respected UK practices offer architectural services to clients in the Middle East. The ethical norms of some of these countries differ from those of the UK. Do the RIBA codes suggest that architects in the UK should attempt to impose their ethical and cultural norms onto these clients in an effort to promote greater diversity or enhanced social justice? While my personal reaction to this may be that greater social equality can only be a good thing, the imposition of British values, ethics and priorities onto other groups was a significant part of our Imperial past, and one that has not aged well. These are areas in which we should tread carefully, which would seem to sit outside the scope of our professional expertise, and indeed raise different ethical questions to the ones assumed in the codes.

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Stating the obvious

The 2019 codes are well-researched and written, socially and environmentally responsible, and significantly more comprehensive. They clearly indicate the RIBA’s opinion on significant issues such as the environment, modern slavery, client relations and work-life balance. I applaud them and the sentiments behind them. However, they seem to signal a reduced level of trust in the architectural profession by its largest representative body.

There is no doubt that the RIBA closed loopholes in 2019. But the 2005 codes were concise and implied that you were an adult, and a professional. They suggested that, with your extensive RIBA accredited education, you already possessed the tools to practise architecture to a high standard, and that these guidelines were merely helpful reminders.

The RIBA now believes it is necessary to instruct that: ‘Members shall not allow themselves to be improperly influenced by their own self-interest’ (1.1.4); ‘Members shall abide by applicable laws and regulations

at all times' (2.1.4); and 'Members must not seek to pass off someone else's work as their own' (3.1.4). It goes on, and on. Architects must not, it seems 'knowingly violate the law...' (2.11.1) and should 'accept professional responsibility for the professional services provided by them to their clients...' (2.1.3). Do we really need to be told to be law abiding or indeed, professional?

It could be argued that to not state these seemingly obvious standards is to rely on what might be termed 'good chap' assumptions. However, is it unreasonable to assume a certain level of ethical and moral conduct in a professional? Actually, isn't every member of society expected to 'not knowingly violate the law'?

The traits of a 'professional' include honesty, integrity, ethical probity and a certain degree of knowledge of one's subject. The advice clients seek from professionals is not common knowledge; some level of reasoning and application of theory to real life situations is implied. If the RIBA feels it must spell out that professionals must accept professional responsibility for their services, then how can it possibly trust them to ethically reach their own conclusions on matters architectural? If an architect cannot be trusted to not be improperly influenced by their own self-interest as a default assumption, they are surely incapable of offering professional advice or services.

It is at these lines that codes of conduct start crossing the line from upholding ethical practice in delivering architectural services to policing the moral and ethical framework of individuals and of society. Is it right that the codes of conduct of a professional membership body sit comfortably alongside the rule of law, or even religious texts? Is it right that our ethics are defined by our profession, rather than by the society in which we live?

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Fast and furious

Let us try this thought experiment unrelated to architectural services. Many religions practise fasting: Muslims in Ramadan for example, and many Christians fast or 'give something up' for Lent. Individuals raised in, or converting to, these religious beliefs are likely to follow these behaviours.

Were a professional membership body – the RIBA, or even the BMA, to issue an edict to its members that 'all architects must fast in June' or 'all

doctors should skip lunch' we would, quite rightly, consider this odd. If it was determined that fasting in June had improved the delivery of architectural services, or that doctors skipping lunch meant they could diagnose illnesses better, there might be the merest hint of justification. However, if the edict was issued because RIBA or the BMA thought it made the professionals in question better people it would be reasonable to conclude that they had overstepped their role. Professional membership bodies do not serve the role of a government or a religion in our society. They exist to protect the public by holding the delivery of services to a recognised standard. They are not, nor should they seek to become, an ethical or moral framework in and of themselves. They augment society but should not seek to change it.

To continue this in terms of our fasting metaphor, were fasting to become a societal norm, the RIBA should perhaps offer guidance on the effective delivery of architectural services while fasting; but should not seek to establish rules on how architects should fast.

The modern world has seen a remarkable growth in the role of non-traditional moral authorities in our society. In an increasingly secular and global western world the historical arbiters of ethics and morals – governments and religions – have a decreasing role in defining the moral framework of the individual. In an increasingly mobile society, we look less to the local community and established social networks to provide social and mental wellbeing. Companies and employers are increasingly called upon to offer pastoral support in a way that would have been unthinkable even twenty or thirty years ago; they are often looked to in the way a village community or religious organisation may have been in the past. It is perhaps therefore natural that professional membership bodies are assuming a more parental role towards their members.

However, to be a professional is to sit apart from emotive reactions and dispassionately to seek the best solution in service to one's client, and to the wider society. Do these increasingly prescriptive codes of conduct do that? Is this the best service they, and we, can offer to clients of British architectural services? And, more importantly, do we trust that the writers of the professional codes of conduct are worthy guardians of our personal ethics and morals? That level of trust is not one that I personally would bestow lightly.

Eleanor Jolliffe Eleanor Jolliffe, associate, Allies and Morrison; author and columnist

Uneven Development

Jide Ehizele

The matter of poverty reduction is a global ethical challenge that national governments and global institutions have been battling with for many decades. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals are centred on both rhetorical mandates and practical action to end poverty. Poverty impinges on human and capital development crucial to creating prosperity for a nation. However, the UN goes beyond this; the manifestations of poverty include hunger, malnutrition and social discrimination which encroach on human dignity. The UN describes these conditions as 'extreme poverty' and countries in sub-Saharan Africa are classified by the African Development Bank as 'underdeveloped'.¹

Almost 700 million people across the world live in extreme poverty with just over half of these people situated in sub-Saharan Africa. Extreme poverty tends to find itself in areas where it is difficult to eradicate i.e. conflict-afflicted (lack of stability) and rural areas (isolated). Rural poverty accounts for between 65-90 percent of poverty in sub-Saharan Africa.

Great strides have been made over the years in tackling poverty and we have seen continuous reduction in global poverty (although this has predominantly been due to China's development, lifting around 600 million people out of poverty since 2000; it is this that improved the statistical average). The elevation of the poor in poor communities across the world looks set to be derailed given that a lot of progress was lost during the Covid lockdown years. Low-income countries that saw poverty increase during that period have not yet recovered and are not closing the gap.

Africa is expected to have the largest and youngest workforce in the world by 2025 and over 500 million people in the labour market. In 2022, a survey of more than 4,500 young people in Africa, aged 18-24, found that 52 percent of them were likely to consider emigrating in the next few

years, citing economic hardship and education opportunities as the top reasons. Action is urgently needed to expand decent work opportunities for the rapidly growing youth populations of Africa. Developing countries must therefore find ways to grow their economies, so poverty and its associated issues can be effectively addressed.

It is clear that the level of economic development required to change the fortunes of low-income countries must be transformational. Every country that has gone through a rise in the living standards of its populace has had to go through a process of industrialisation. Industrialisation boosts economic activity along with value chains; from raw materials to finished products. Surely, it would be unethical to try to prevent it.

The first industrial revolution in Britain is a good example of the transformational benefits that can arise from growth, modernisation and industrialisation. Admittedly it is not a simple, guaranteed, linear graph, but in general, goods became more affordable and more accessible, as did valued social benefits like housing provision and medical care. These changes led to a sustained rise in real income per person in England and, as its effects spread, in the rest of the Western world. China has experienced its own industrial revolution during the latter half of the 20th century with its economic rise described by the World Bank as ‘the fastest sustained expansion by a major economy in history.’ In the same period, China’s infant mortality decreased by 70 percent, for example. This is no coincidence.

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Travel broadens the mind

Transport infrastructure has played a major role in aiding the industrialisation process globally by enhancing connectivity. The use of trains during the industrial revolution in Britain enabled faster and more efficient movement of goods and people. Greater mobility results in better job matches, lower business costs and faster product deliveries to customers. This increases productivity, an essential driver of business expansion and economic growth. Transport is also vital for the quality of life and economic health of rural areas which are prone to poverty.

We can see its impacts in Lima, Peru, where an additional 100,000 jobs will be available to people living in the poorest districts thanks to the introduction of a new metro line. In Ethiopia, access to all-season roads increased consumption growth by 16 percent and reduced the incidence of poverty by 6.7 percent. Improved rural access due to rural road

rehabilitation schemes has led to an increase in attendance at hospitals in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Philippines by 20 percent.²

Unfortunately, belief in the benefit of progress has waned during the early decades of the 21st century, especially in influential Western circles. As environmental considerations have come to the fore, the need to correct the ‘negative impact’ of human actions – by reducing our use of resources - has emerged as the dominant narrative. As a result, many necessary, efficient, speedy and comfortable forms of transportation are regularly portrayed as a harm rather than a liberation, and we are enjoined to reduce our need to travel alongside other edicts to produce, consume and waste less.

One researcher goes so far as to critique and reject ‘the universal idea of ‘economic growth = progress’.³ But unsurprisingly, the real ambitions of the poor and marginalised in the underdeveloped world tell a different story.

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The Nigeria Story

Nigeria is located on the west coast of Africa. It is often called the ‘giant of Africa’; this name comes from the vastness of its land and diversity amongst its people and languages. It is also the most populous country in Africa. Nigeria has experienced overall rapid growth since the 1990s, but this has not been reflected in a reduction of the country’s poverty rates. In 2018, Nigeria overtook India as the country with the largest number of people living in extreme poverty despite averaging 8 percent yearly growth during the 2000s. A lot of this poverty was situated in rural areas: growth has not been distributed fairly across society with opportunities for all. Let’s examine the ethical concerns of people living in a developing country through the prism of mobility and transportation infrastructure.

Investment in transport infrastructure was specified in the country’s Economic Recovery and Growth Plan to improve the competitiveness of the Nigerian economy. Nigeria’s transport infrastructure stock is inadequate for the size of the economy and constitutes a major cost and constraint for businesses, employees and customers. The 25-year railway development plan is seen as one part of a holistic solution to driving inclusive growth. It involves constructing strategic rail projects to connect major economic centres across the country as well as rehabilitating existing railways.

The railway modernisation project comprises a standard gauge railway line from Lagos to Kano with connections to Abuja, via Minna and Kaduna. They connect regional economic hubs to one another. Intercity travel tends to capture the business/commuter market segments, i.e. those who are already economically active and on the wealthier side of the income spectrum.

To put this into perspective, an economy class fare for the Kaduna-Abuja trip costs 3000 Naira (\$8 at 2021 exchange rates). A day trip return journey will therefore cost 6000 Naira (\$16). A commuter who uses the train service would spend approximately N120,000 per month on transport costs. This is four times greater than the N30,000 national minimum wage and one third of the average monthly salary of N339,000. By contrast, travelling by road in a private vehicle would cost a quarter of the rail fare. Rail transport is not just substantially costlier than road, but it excludes a sizable chunk of the populace. It raises an ethical dilemma for the government's rail fare policy: excluding so many members of the public from a so-called public transport system at the very time that the opportunity to transcend one's locality has become technologically possible. Should the government spend money on transport infrastructure while so many are dying in poverty (remember, half the population of Nigeria live in dire straits, earning less than \$1 per day)? Or is it a moral imperative that people be provided with real transport opportunities to travel further afield to earn a wage?

There is a real moral challenge regarding the economic viability of modern transportation in the existing socioeconomic environment of developing countries where income per capita is low. The Lagos-Ogun mass transit passenger rail service that runs on the old Western narrow-gauge line (constructed during the colonial era) was heavily subsidised by the government. Analysis indicated that the revenue from ticket fares barely covered 5 percent of the railway's operational costs. As a result, even though the railway was affordable for the poorer members of society, it was economically unsustainable as a profitable venture. A consequent lack of investment in both locomotives and rolling stock has reduced the capacity and utility of the rail system even further.

The consequentialist versus deontological tensions raised by Professor Hayes in his essay in this pamphlet are expressed in whether to make the railway inclusive to all – thus allowing immediate economic benefits to be equitably distributed – versus running an economically inefficient railway.

It is clear that rich people travel more frequently and more extensively than the poor. To be more specific, poor people stay local while the wealthy

are more likely to make regional/inter-city trips. Most travel routes for poor people occur within their immediate vicinity, with the occasional trip into the major town. We also see this play out on the Kaduna-Abuja line. In an investigative report by Al Jazeera, a market trader who has been selling the sugarcane he grows on a small farm in Rijana said that he had never been to the train station (Rijana) that is less than 15 minutes from his farm since it opened in 2016. He stressed that there was no reason for him to travel to Abuja. Indeed, he had never set foot in the capital city.⁴

Therefore, it makes sense to focus on delivering rail passenger services that are tailored to the wealthier sector populace as they are more likely to engage in activities that lead to business/leisure trips at major hubs. However, is it ethical to spend on such a strategy? Is there an alternative for a poor nation? Wealthier strata of society have a much greater perception of the value of time and so reduced journey times would generate more impactful time savings for the regional economy. But would this tackle the matter of penury, ill-health and poor education that developing countries face?

In some rural Nigerian communities, the nearest functioning hospital is as far as 40km away. Poor rural areas often need special transport. Most people in these areas do not own motorised vehicles, and are therefore not directly benefiting from a conventional transport planning approach which focuses on roads and motorised transport. One report notes that in many African cities, ‘walking is the primary mode of transport for the majority of people, with 78 percent of people walking for travel every day... for around 55 minutes.’ For many Western academics, this pedestrian narrative is spun as an environmental ‘asset’ rather than a symbol of underdevelopment. The United Nations applauds Ethiopia’s ‘Non-Motorised Transport Strategy’⁵ for example – although one study showed, unsurprisingly, that in Nigeria ‘the strongest predictor of walking is the non-possession of personal vehicles.’⁶ Ultimately, what we find on the ground is that to achieve ‘inclusive growth’ is not an economically efficient process, relying on ‘active travel’ is naïve, and developing countries have a limited budget to grow their economies.

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What next?

The ethical considerations of Western budget alleviation, of environmental demands for restraint, or of Chinese debt repayments are some of the external factors affecting the country. But the internal ethical challenges

are as substantial in Nigeria as they are in so many other developing countries, arising from the stratification of society and the intractable issue of poverty eradication. At first glance, the solution seems relatively straightforward: ‘grow the economy’.⁷ However, there are practicalities that raise several issues, as previously hinted at. The development of transport infrastructure is no doubt essential but how can this be utilised for the existing demographic? It needs careful consideration.

The national government finds itself in a challenging position. Ultimately, transportation is a social good. The central purpose of rail networks is to serve society’s mobility needs, but this objective along with the inclusivity agenda is undermined if the vast majority of Nigerians can’t afford the fares.

Most areas within developing countries would still be described as ‘rural’ or low in economic activity. There are clusters of high economic activity that can be found in urban centres, but these are currently not enough to generate sufficient economic growth required to transform the entire nation. Economic reforms are central, along with infrastructural development, but most developing countries possess neither the political structure nor the financial muscle to fund a massive scale infrastructure investment programme.

Developing countries must focus on the economic efficiency of their railways and wider transport infrastructure, even if that means mainly serving the wealthier sections of its population. It must prioritise markets that can generate significant and direct economic gains. However, this doesn’t mean that the inclusive – the ethical – agenda should be abandoned.

Actually, in recent years, drone-based technologies have demonstrated their potential for tackling transport connectivity challenges, especially in rural regions. Drones are delivering medical supplies to rural communities in Ghana and Rwanda, carrying 35 percent of blood supplied for transfusion and helping to save lives every day. In Nigeria, 84 percent of internet access was recorded on mobile devices, helping remote connectivity. Is it too presumptuous to hope that the potential for a Fourth Industrial Revolution might be Africa’s? For a start, rethinking about the way that we transport goods, services and people provides much-needed opportunities to improve healthcare, education and business in rural areas. But for any of this to happen, we need to refute the idea that lower mobility, less infrastructure and economic subservience is, in any way, an ethical standpoint.

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Common Sense

Alan Dunlop

Many architects, myself included, consider Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) to be the greatest American architect of all time. In 1957, after a lengthy career, he explained that:

*'The mission of an architect is to help people understand how to make life more beautiful, the world a better one for living in, and to give reason, rhyme, and meaning to life.'*¹

Wright held architecture to be 'the great mother art, behind which all others are definitely, distinctly and inevitably related.' He advocated apprenticeships as the best way to transfer architectural skills, both theoretical and practical, and was wont to challenge his students rather than coddle them. He stressed that they needed to acquire the fundamentals: the notion that excellence comes from understanding and satisfying clients' needs; designing appropriate to the site; and enhancing the environment.

What is often forgotten (or has been sent down the memory hole) is that Wright privileged common sense, which he judged to be lacking in many of his students and indeed in some of his contemporaries. He bemoaned that 'there is nothing more uncommon than common sense.' What would he say about today's common sense vacuum?

Common sense is much maligned by the cognoscenti and features nowhere on the current learning schedule of students (as Shelagh McNerney explained in an earlier *Five Critical Essays* pamphlet²). The Scottish Enlightenment proponents of Common Sense ethics, like Thomas Reid, explored and defended 'the pre-theoretical moral judgments of ordinary people.'³ Today, that is the last thing that we rely on. The architectural and intellectual elite regularly show utter disdain for anything common, (especially the common people who they believe lack sense and sophistication) preferring to wallow in the obscure and the esoteric.

Like Wright, I value Architecture as Art. Done well, it's a wonderful fusion of creativity, innovation, communication, and craft. At its best, architecture is a practical art that finds its highest expression in the delivery of the built form. There is no sadder thing than a building carefully and sensitively designed but never built; and every real architect carries such scars of projects unrealised. Common sense in architecture is the discipline that comes from knowing that what is envisioned in the architect's head must be capable of being translated into pleasing and functional form. All else is ego, frippery, and dilettantism. To stress the obvious: what can be thought of, even seductively communicated in a plausible way (increasingly through technologically assisted design tools), does not always make for architectural quality. What is needed is an understanding of built legacy, confidence, and skills bedded in common sense.

It is perhaps timely to issue what has become a requirement in contemporary discourse, and in pedagogy particularly: a 'trigger warning.' Readers of a sensitive nature may want to turn away as what follows contains statements that do not fit with current architectural dogma and may even be uncomfortably political and unfashionably critical.

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Falling apart

Architecture has lost its way, mired in a fog of 'progressive thinking' that chokes innovation, strangles individual agency and stifles intellectual muscle such that the capacity for an architect to develop and defend alternative opinions and perspectives has atrophied. From a moral standpoint, everyone's 'lived experiences' and propositions are valid... except where they diverge from the politically acceptable norm.

Why does it matter, and what has this got to do with common sense? Firstly, I challenge you to deny that 'these are the times that try men's souls'⁴ or to refute that we are living in an uncertain and confusing age? There are cultural upheavals and forces that appear to seek to subvert workaday knowledge and to overturn what we recognise with our senses and feel with our hearts. To quote W.B. Yeats:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, ...
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.⁵

Certain things which used to be self-evidently true, or ethical positions that were until recently commonplace have turned on their heads in a very short space of time. As a result, stable frames of reference have been destabilised. We no longer hold truths to be self-evident, but at the same time, there is little open debate (other than in pamphlets such as this series). Nowadays, to reach consensus – a word that used to embody democratic engagement and a robust exchange of contrary ideas – there exists a crushing atmosphere that enforces conformity. No thought need be applied. The demand for compliance demands that self-censorship becomes the dominant mode of *miscommunication*.

Much of what is happening can be categorised as collective hysteria, a contagion that humans have been prone to throughout history.⁶ Contemporary symptoms include compliance to novel and bizarre behaviours often instigated and spread by social media. There are unprecedented fears of exclusion, a growing propensity towards violence – both on the individual and the perpetually warring state level – extraordinary displays of ersatz religiosity, and the overweening and ever-increasing application of petty rules by organisations and authority figures. As a consequence of everything being mandated, common sense becomes a redundant, unnecessary quality. As Harvard Business School professor, Shoshana Zuboff says, ‘without autonomy in action and in thought, we have little capacity for the moral judgment and critical thinking necessary for a democratic society.’⁷ Clearly much scientific discovery across history has resulted from *not* accepting common sense explanations of phenomena, but even generative AI and machine deep learning requires common sense *reasoning*.⁸

All too frequently, knowledge that has been built up over millennia is dismissed as a function of ‘privilege’ and ‘colonialist thinking.’ What a world! But what can be done about it? Reclaiming social legitimacy through reconstituting the memory of common sense is, I believe, a necessary corrective to the unrealities and lies that flourish around us like Japanese Knotweed, and which will suffocate us if left unattended. We have to reclaim our human facility as mature moral agents.

I am increasingly saddened to note the collective reticence of architects to speak out. The common sense silent majority, albeit quieted by a combination of cowardice, a lack of confidence, and a dislike of confrontation means that there are very few willing to challenge the cant. Those who do are easily dismissed as mavericks- ‘mad, bad and [certainly] dangerous to know’⁹ who have to be prepared to risk reputation, income, and status. Nonetheless it concerns me that so many are so plainly willing to ‘go along

to get along’ thus ensuring that arrant nonsense often goes unchallenged. This is disappointing, immoral and, in the end, self-defeating: the voice of the non-captured professional is heard less and less.

The nineteenth century French polymath, Charles-Marie Gustave Le Bon wrote:

‘Whoever be the individuals that compose it, however like or unlike be their mode of life, their occupations, their character, or their intelligence, the fact that they have been transformed into a group puts them in possession of a sort of collective mind which makes them feel, think, and act in a manner quite different from that in which each individual of them would feel, think, and act were he in a state of isolation.’¹⁰

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Exclusive inclusivity

The architectural and design professions are poorly led, ill served by their professional bodies¹¹ and academic leadership has been blown off course by issues that defy common sense: the immiserating promotion of Net Zero, the cult of DEI, the self- flagellation of ESG, the insidious creep of the ethically correct language police, and the intolerance of viewpoints that don’t conform with tolerance policies. The result is that architecture is less confident, less financially secure, excluded from policy matters and only tangentially connected with the lives of most people.

It is common sense that there are real and pressing problems requiring the attention of architects that are not being addressed. *The Big Issue* for example reports that homelessness in the UK is at record levels and the National Housing Federation records over 8.5 million people with ‘unmet’ housing needs. It is alleged that only six percent of new homes in the UK are designed by architects.¹¹ Why are architects not responding to real, material problems that require common sense solutions?

It seems that politicians of all stripes are merely wringing their hands. The weasel words of the 2019 Conservative party manifesto promised 300,000 new homes every year by the mid-2020s but the latest housing supply figures show only 212,570 built in 2022/23. Builders blame planners, planners blame politicians – but generally, architects are nowhere to be seen. Michael Gove (Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities), a self-declared ‘champion of aesthetic excellence in the built environment’, recently urged architects to ‘build new homes of beauty designed to endure.’¹² He used Poundbury as an exemplar, a town where

the average price of a ‘modest detached property’ in 2023 was £658,478 – ten times the reported annual income of a salaried partner or director in a British architectural practice and almost twenty times the mean annual full-time salary of a UK worker.

There was a time when architects saw problems, probed dilemmas and helped to design solutions. It was a time of common sense in the sense of being ‘*a simple and non-self-conscious use of logic.*’¹³ Affordable solutions to housing shortages in the post-Second World War era were logical no-brainers and many socially committed practices including Alison and Peter Smithson, Archigram, Farrell & Grimshaw, James Stirling, and RMJM were all engaged either in, or collaborating with, local authority housing departments to fill the void. Today, only 1 percent of UK architects are employed by public bodies in England, with a further 10 percent in housing associations.

Plainly, for whatever reasons, architects are no longer involved in the design and delivery of housing, which must be one of the key issues that really matters to most people and something that would bring architects popular appeal. Instead, architects – contrary to common sense – are indulging carbon targets that can only throw into question whether we should be building homes in the first place. If construction is the largest emitter of carbon emissions, architects are too wracked with guilt to propose any substantial, urgent and practical solution. They are too busy in environmental training programmes, worrying about 100-year timescales, nudging behavioural change, and blindly following regulatory mandates, while looking down their noses at those who simply want a place to live. How ethical is that?

Terry Farrell called this marginalisation ‘the paradox of the Maggie’s Centre’ contrasting the design and build quality of these buildings with the ubiquitous ‘sometimes woeful mega-hospitals’ with which they often share a site. The centres were designed to meet clients’ therapeutic and spiritual needs unlike the hospitals where one-size-fits-all. Critically, the charitable funding that supported these Maggie Centre endeavours left the architects able to cast off the conformity imposed elsewhere and design with common sense humanity – designing with genuine empathy and generosity – rather than applying a template of acceptable social-policy diktats.

In conclusion, architecture has lost its common sense. Society has lost its common sense. If it is to survive, we must push against the prevailing orthodoxies and deliver common sense solutions that are life sustaining. To make humble improvements in the built environment and ordinary

people's lives – rather than imagining that an architectural project can manipulate the global climate – is a great privilege but also a duty. We architects too often shirk that basic obligation. It makes no sense, common or otherwise.

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Moral grandstanding

James Woudhuysen

For architects and designers, Net Zero presents real ethical issues. Often, there is a palpable refusal to think through the consequences of the environmentalist approach to what the Design Council calls ‘Design for Planet’.¹ This is not quite insouciance: it is a wilful refusal to accept that there are *any* ethical dilemmas associated with the opinions of the gatekeepers of climate change policy.

Implicit in this position is the idea that science doesn’t just tell us *about* climate change, but also about what we should *do to fix it*. Here, in general, the received wisdom backs reducing consumption and carbon footprints (‘mitigation’). There is much less talk, and still less action, about strengthening infrastructural defences against floods (‘adaptation’): indeed in 2022, in England, Whitehall laid out just £742m for this cause.² Yet parts of Britain are repeatedly flooded – and for some reason serious projects of civil engineering think that sandbags (rather than, god forbid, plastic mobile flood barriers or permanent concrete structures) are the low-tech solution called for by ‘the science.’

In fact, science (still less ‘the science’) cannot tell us what to do about climate change. That is for politics, for the people – including politicians, economists, technologists, architects and designers – to debate and determine. What to do about the impact of the climate involves ethical choices, which are not the province of science.

Here are four examples of why the quest for Net Zero cannot be termed ethical.

1. Construction vs homelessness

One of the enduring myths of the architectural profession is that it is ‘doing its bit’ for people and planet by designing low-carbon homes, offices, hotels and commercial premises.

In Africa, the United Nations promotes the idea that household access to local sources of off-grid, low-carbon energy – principally, solar – is the way forward. The UN predicts that by 2030, urbanization and population growth in Asia and Africa will mean that approximately 40 percent of the world’s population, three billion people, will lack access to adequate housing. To meet that surge in demand, the UN noted in 2016 that the world would need to build 96,000 new, affordable and accessible housing units... every day... until 2030.³

What has happened since? No architects have come forward with mass solutions to the world’s housing crisis. Nobody has teamed up with the Pritzker Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Elon Musk or, say, IKEA to begin to mass manufacture the homes that developing countries will need.

Right now, Toyota only manufactures 15,000 homes a year. In the US in 2022, just 2 percent of new single-family homes were made in factories; the rest took an average of 8.3 months to build, a month longer than it took back in 1971. Meanwhile, around the world, perhaps two billion people already still lack proper housing.

In the EU, nearly 900,000 people are homeless on any given night.⁴ With mass immigration to the US and the UK, there are still no plans to move the architecture and construction of high-quality, well insulated homes on to the war footing that is clearly required. Neither are there plans to bring assembly lines and robots to the cause of replacing the slums of India or Nigeria. Instead, architects have put their shoulders to a different wheel: saving the planet by ensuring that every new, laboriously hand-crafted, one-off building incorporates all the latest green techniques.

That is not ethical. That is self-serving, and myopic. It is a stance that wants to have its green project featured in the glossy pages of *Architectural Digest*, but not one that sincerely wants to meet the world’s housing crisis. For Net Zero enthusiasts, the very scale of mass production required to solve this crisis would be an affront in terms of raw materials extraction, assembly line electricity, factory consumption, land use and site waste.

So which side are you on, my architect friends? More rammed earth and bamboo designer kitchen extensions, or taking the side of humanity and the three billion new homes it will need in just seven years’ time?

2. No more trickle vent economics

For many, the insulation of Britain’s homes is a hill to die on, and a key step towards Net Zero. Back in 2022, Ed Miliband promised £60 billion over the next decade to insulate Britain’s 19 million cold, draughty homes.

In 2023 Labour said that job opportunities for almost four million workers would be created under its plan.⁵ As Insulate Britain, founded by six members of Extinction Rebellion puts it: ‘Insulating the homes of Britain will save lives and provide warm homes while pound for pound making the most effective contribution to reducing carbon and providing meaningful jobs. Insulating Britain is the levelling up agenda writ large.’⁶

What could be more ethical than that? The problem is that retrofitting insulation to buildings is a tricky business, and disruptive to homes where families or old people live. Perhaps that is why the Conservative government’s £1.5 billion Green Homes Grant lasted just six months before it was abolished, and why its subsequent £1 billion Great British Insulation Scheme reached just 2,900 properties in its first eight months of operation – against an annual target of 100,000 homes.⁷

Of course, the complacent point will be made that Britain’s leaky housing stock will be with us for centuries, so that is the place to start dealing with the most energy-inefficient homes in Europe. And of course, Labour loves to haul the Tories over the coals because of the slow pace of efficiency improvements. But the point about the weight of Britain’s old and chilly stock is an argument for half a million new homes a year, not for an industrial revival through rock wool and cavity wall insulation.

Miliband’s Ten-Year Plan is simply not going to happen. To suggest that it can is to be guilty of bad faith or gullibility. It cannot be ethical for architects to support patching things up when the pressing need in the UK is to build millions of new homes: *fast*. It must also be, dare we say it, in the interests of architects to see more and better homes built, not just lofts wrapped in blankets.

3. Patronise less

Britain’s offices face a productivity crisis. People are voting with their feet and taking time off at home to deal with mental health issues. While management often seems bereft of direction, Human Resources departments grow in power. Meanwhile, and less noticed, the trend toward hybrid forms of working means that it will be easier for employers to insist on downsizing space per worker in the office, as more and more desks are made over to hot-desking, or ‘hoteling’. In the five leading cities of the Netherlands, for example, property specialists CBRE expect the decline in office space per worker to accelerate, reducing from more than 13m² in 2012 to less than 6m² in 2030.⁸

These developments, however, seem to do little to bother architects,

facilities managers and workspace planners. What matters more is progress to Net Zero.

Talk to an influential firm such as PwC and you'll find that as early as 2017 it claimed to have refurbished its offices, re-used old laptops, phones, furniture and employee uniforms, and recycled food waste. Why? No doubt it unwittingly took a leaf from the Chinese Communist Party's 11th Five Year Plan... and the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, BT, B&Q, Cisco, Kingfisher, National Grid, Renault, World Economic Forum and McKinsey. PwC wanted to replace 'the existing, linear, 'take-make-dispose', global system of production and consumption, by which we extract resources (by mining or growing them), and then manufacture, transport and use products, before disposing of them.'⁹ Thus, in its latest report, the company says it has been exploring 'fully circular solutions which alleviate pressure on materials, water and the climate.'

Yet to the average office worker, disgust with society's reputedly careless, throwaway model for making and disposing of things may be tempered by genuine cynicism about what looks like *a vertical and hierarchical economy* – with offices and chicken-coop workstations to match. Employees may also notice how the Net Zero cause affects finally to deliver that elusive sense of corporate mission while at the same time talk-ing down to staff. Thus PwC's 'Let's Talk Rubbish' campaign named bags of mixed rubbish 'Bertie Bundle', packaging smeared with food 'Larry Leftovers', and compostable coffee cups 'Verity Vegware.' Tackling 'waste behaviours', it was reported, was best done in this 'fun, light-hearted way.'

Such a 'we're all in this together' piece of Net Zero faux camaraderie is nothing more than a patronising charade. Here Net Zero conformism forms a degraded displacement activity that is a substitute for clear goals and ways of reaching them. Save the planet seems to come before any consideration of the jobs at stake, the working conditions, or the self-respect of employees. In the process of lowering their carbon footprint, many corporates – and indeed the captured unions – ignore how workers' wages and personal space has been contracting for years. It's OK. Just look the other way and plant a tree.

4. Stop tilting at windmills

Our last example of misplaced ethics around Net Zero concerns the use of energy by households and organisations, as well as the energy bound up in electric cars.

In recent years, the Sisyphean desire to lower fossil fuel consumption

has been applied not just to gas and electricity in homes and workplaces (heat pumps, solar panels, corporate wind farms), but also to the sending of emails, the running of data centres and the maintenance of the Large Language Models upon which Artificial Intelligence depends. We can be sure that the making of digital twins in architecture, already deployed to calculate energy use in buildings, will itself become stigmatised in years to come, as eco-zealots explain how much electricity these machines and information repositories devour.

There are no limits to the Manichean ethics of reduced fossil fuel consumption. Once again though, there is a refusal to see the wood for the trees. For years, commentators have held out the possibility of not just lowering the emissions bound up with driving, but also of powering homes through the batteries of electric vehicles (EVs).

But wait. Today's tiny numbers of ethical EVs are not just made of cobalt, which millions of us now know to be mined by children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but they are also composed of vast amounts of metal, plastics, textiles. All made with 'unethical fossil fuels'.¹⁰

Once upon a time, EVs were the ethical solution to all our woes. Barack Obama once declared (in 2008, before becoming US president) that 'one of the most important infrastructure projects (America needs is) a whole new electricity grid (because) if we want to use plug-in hybrids then we want to be able to have ordinary consumers sell back the electricity that's generated from those car batteries, back into the grid. That can create five million new jobs, just in new energy.'¹¹

But in the 15 years since, not only have we not seen five million jobs, but battery electric vehicles are still very much powered by carbon-based fuels: renewables can never generate electricity in the large, centralised and thus efficient style of, say, gas-fired electricity plants. And since plug-hybrids draw power from the grid, there can be little point in their owners selling electricity back into it.

There comes a moment in the pursuit of Net Zero when the short-sightedness appears *so* short, the technological dreaminess *so* dreamy, that it can be neither rational nor ethical. Yes, we can relocate the high-emissions production of load-bearing steel to China, just as we send our waste to the East. Europe can also have its EVs made cheaply in China, just like its solar panels and its wind turbines. But the fact remains that the UK elite's Puritan restraint and ethical righteousness over its greenhouse gas emissions is, in fact, immoral.

In an example of 'limp jingoism', British enthusiasts for Net Zero claim the country leads the world in reducing emissions. But this has little to

do with improvements in, say, the energy efficiency of buildings, and a lot more to do with systematically shifting emissions from West to East: shrugging off responsibility, cooking the books – and then turning round to impose, by 2027, a tax on carbon-intensive imports, from the East, of steel, aluminium, cement, glass. And the consequence? The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism is already realising that its levies imposed on imports look set to inflate the price of building materials.

Back in the UK, millions of homes and workplaces remain dilapidated, so architects have an ethical choice. They can look forward to lower UK emissions through lower growth, higher energy and materials prices, less construction, more smart meters and more insulation. Or they can put the comfort and health of residents and employees first, while still taking care to lower emissions where it is possible and where it really counts – in the provision of a reliable and affordable supply of electricity.

Stick to your job, oh architects! It is for you to design great buildings, and for power engineers to see about lowering emissions. When architects presume otherwise, when architects tell people to make do with less, they confirm that their Net Zero mantra is just immorality packaged with an ethical bow.

James Woudhuysen is co-author, 'Energise! A future for energy innovation.'

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Afterword

Patrik Schumacher

This group of essays goes against the grain of the increasingly moralising tendency in our discipline. This tendency echoes a general societal trend, imposing ready-made values like sustainability, inclusion and diversity, as Professor Dennis Hayes observes in his contribution. These values demand allegiance and active confirmation at every occasion. James Woudhuysen writes about ‘the misplaced ethics around Net Zero’ and corporate hypocrisy in his essay. Reinier de Graaf, in his recent book ‘architect, *verb*’ is our ally in this push-back; lamenting that the imposed, obligatory moralising themes crowd out a genuine architectural discourse.

De Graaf calls this ‘Prof speak’ in allusion to Orwell’s notion of ‘Newspeak.’ Alan Dunlop, in his contribution, talks about the ‘cult of DEI,’ ‘enforced conformity and self-censorship’ and an ‘ethically correct language police.’ Eleanor Jolliffe points out and criticizes the telling fact that in 2019 the RIBA Code of Conduct increased in volume by 900 percent and is now much more swingeing in ‘requiring positive action’ from its members. She is worried that the code of conduct has started ‘crossing the line from upholding ethical practice in delivering architectural services, to policing the moral and ethical framework of individuals and of society.’

What happens in the Code of Conduct has been happening in architectural academia for much longer: the overburdening of our discipline with moral issues like social justice that cannot be solved within the confines of the discipline’s remit and thereby implies an overreach in competency that is both infeasible and illegitimate. This is not only a question of missing expertise, but it also ignores the fact that practically all architectural intentions and proposals are initiated and defined outside of the discipline, prior to the architect’s engagement.

Hayes rightly objects that issues like sustainability, inclusion and diversity are posited ‘as moral duties with no sense of an alternative

perspective.’ There are no arguments put forward. These values are taken for granted and are immune to criticism. Strangely, this dogmatism goes hand in hand with a prevailing moral relativism. To make sense of this we need to call out the intruding moralising agenda more specifically: identity politics, a worldview more recently referred to as ‘woke.’ It is this ideology that plagues our discipline, as well as wider society. This ideology is contradictory. Wokeism can sustain its contradictory ways by the aggressive, self-righteous moral disqualification of its critics. The insistence on an open-ended diversity of equally legitimate group identities and forms of life is at the heart of this ideology.

The underlying framing of all social ills is based on the schema of oppressor/oppressed meant to explain differences in group success. While Hayes is not naming wokeism directly, he is calling out the flaw of moral relativism in a way that implies woke ideology as the target: where ‘all ideas are equally valid, we need never put forward any reasons or justifications.’ That a contradictory wokeism is the target becomes even clearer in the next paragraph: ‘The adoption of such a relativist position means that our moral or cultural worldview is reduced to something that is protected from criticism and challenge. Indeed, any criticism or challenge is likely to be met with hostility, censorship, or the sack, giving lie to the idea that relativism is an open, kindly and inclusive philosophy.’

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Against the grain

The correct response here is, as Hayes rightly suggests, to allow criticism free reign. Criticism of ideas, of positions, of proposed or applied moral values should neither be construed as ad hominem hostility, nor met with hostility. It should be welcomed as a contribution in a societal learning process. Unrestricted debate, openness to criticism and the quest for the better arguments is indeed the *conditio sine qua non* of any rational endeavour, including professional self-regulation, or wider societal ethical self-determination. However, I would like to argue here that we can and should go two steps further than Hayes.

First: As Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas have convincingly argued, this readiness to let open discourse, rather than dogma or power, shape the shared systems of values that order societal life, already contains a very basic, general set of moral commitments, namely the commitment to the social structure and ethical principles that are constitutive

preconditions or criteria of the very institution of rational discourse (including science).

Before the recent woke erosion of modern discourse culture, Habermas' Discourse Ethics indeed offered a compelling reflective self-confirmation of the morality of modernity, updating Kant's earlier reflective affirmation by positing an actually instituted deliberative communication process, as substitute for Kantian self-consciousness as transcendental subject.

That the woke ideology is no longer (not even implicitly) adhering to the principles of discourse ethics, shows that it implies a devastating regression from the achievements of the Enlightenment which made both modern material freedom (prosperity) and modern social freedom (individual liberty) possible.

Apel/Habermas refute the philosophical doctrine of moral relativism by pointing out that discourse ethics is universally presupposed by all discourse. Its denial within philosophical discourse is therefore a 'performative' contradiction. This refutation does not, of course, deny the reality of societies whose prevailing morality violates the principles of discourse ethics. However, it does deny the rational possibility of a philosophical, discursive defence of such a morality, and thereby it also denies the coherence of the philosophical claim that all moral systems are equally valid. In any event, moral systems that violate the principles of discourse ethics, i.e. virtually all pre-modern forms of morality, have been shielding themselves against criticism via censorship. The same applies now to woke morality.

Second: The fact that the principles of discourse ethics are universally implied by all modern societies that value philosophy, science, knowledge, free debate, etc. does leave ample room for a further detailed elaboration of ethical life and moral sensibilities beyond the very general, abstract framing determinations of discourse ethics. This is borne out by the 300 years of historical, ethical evolution of modern enlightened societies, always accompanied by critical, ethical debate, including book-length treatises.

That concrete moral sensibilities have momentarily evolved since 1800 is evident. I would like to propose that this discursively steered ethical evolution was (and remains) adaptively bound up with the momentous technological and socio-economic transformations of social life. What is also clear is that there is ample scope for local adaptive variations in the historically evolving ethical best practice, in accordance with the world division of labour. This includes differences in the professional ethics of different professions. These local or sector-specific differentiated

moralities are, to be sure, embedded in a global moral framework that regulates communications that transcends regional and professional boundaries.

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Ethical self-determination

My formulation of ethical best practice ties moral principles and sensibilities to the historically specific conditions of economic progress or productivity gains. Therefore, I argue that for the historically-specific determination of the current ethical best practice, the recent socio-economic transformation from Fordist mechanical mass production to a Post-Fordist network – and knowledge economy, accompanied by the neo-liberal revolution in the realm of politics – is decisive.

Work and life processes have dramatically changed in this transformation, calling for a different ethics, transformed social relations, personality structures, virtues, ideals, aspirations, etc. I can only give a few hints via catchphrases here: entrepreneur vs bureaucrat, self-directedness vs obedience, opportunity vs loyalty, self-reliance vs solidarity, flexibility vs predictability, creativity vs reliability, disruption vs continuity, freedom vs security, meritocracy vs equity, charity vs entitlement, cosmopolitan vs national, etc.

My argument is that the left backlash since 2008 against the 1980s neo-liberal revolution is regressive, and that wokeism is the latest, devastating stage in this regressive ethical trajectory, throwing us back into a highly maladaptive, almost premodern ethical condition (as might be gleaned from the fact that woke ideology too often defends premodern ideologies like fundamentalist Islamism against Enlightenment-based criticisms). For me, ethical self-determination *against the grain* therefore means the promotion of a libertarian ethics that embraces and facilitates competitive capitalism as the innovation and prosperity engine.

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The Future Cities Project has been critically exploring issues around the city and society for nearly two decades. From the so-called Urban Renaissance, through the Big Society, Brexit, Covid 19 and the cost of living crisis, we have written books, articles, and organised local, national and international events that have tried to unpick the arguments.

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