

# Architecture after Virtue: Questioning the (Inter)disciplinarity of Ethical and Architectural Theory

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**Keywords:** architectural theory, ethics, interdisciplinarity

**There is much to indicate that ethics is an important field of inquiry for contemporary architects; and yet there is little evidence that this field has been defined in a way that will support ongoing academic and practical inquiry. One impediment to the formation of such a field is the divergence between disciplinary and interdisciplinary understandings of ethics and architecture. Does the conversation on ethics and architecture reflect an interdisciplinary movement? Or is ethical theory already intrinsic to architectural theory? This short essay takes up two antithetical positions in order to initiate a line of questioning critical of both. These positions include, on the one hand, the survival/revival of virtue ethics within the phenomenological school of architectural thinking, identified herein with the architectural theorists Joseph Rykwert and Dalibor Vesely, and on the other hand, the interdisciplinary arguments of architect William Taylor and moral philosopher Michael Levine.**

There is much to indicate that ethics is an important field of inquiry for contemporary architects. In his plenary talk at the 107th Annual Meeting of the ACSA,<sup>1</sup> Antoine Picon criticized the academic tendency to “pulverize” architectural techniques without achieving much insight into social practice. He argued there was a need to theorize action ethically; knowing what should be done was more pressing than knowing how something could be made. In a recent interview, Joseph Rykwert echoed the same sentiment:

“The most pressing challenge to any architect seems to me the ethical one... [Architects are] ethically bound in their attitude to the existing environment and use of materials, learning to respect the ecologies both of production and of place. If the ethical stance is defied, perhaps the architect must learn to walk away” (Rykwert 2015).

The urgency and frequency of these calls for ethics arises from a raft of global concerns facing contemporary architects. Given the pressing nature of these concerns, one would be forgiven for expecting a well-defined field of academic and practical

inquiry to have been formed by now. No such luck. Taylor and Levine (2011) have argued that the lack of a coherent field is due to the epistemological demands of interdisciplinarity; but their notion of two disciplines engaged in conversation contradicts a long history of architectural theory locating ethics at the foundation of the architectural discipline. Here is our question: Does the conversation on ethics and architecture reflect an interdisciplinary movement? Or is ethical theory already intrinsic to architectural theory? Perhaps we can undertake a thought experiment: Who would populate a research center dedicated to ethics and architecture? And what questions would frame their conversation?

The argument for interdisciplinarity arises partly from the claim that the questions posed by the discipline of moral philosophy are well-defined compared to the questions posed by architectural theory. Philosophers would likely disagree with this assessment; nevertheless, most general descriptions of ethics maintain a trio of well-worn theories that address, on the one hand, what is right or just, and on the other hand, what is good, valuable, or virtuous. These three approaches are: consequentialism, which views right action as determined by the consequences of an action, as in the modern philosophy of utilitarianism; deontological approaches, which argue for moral justification based on duty or obligation apart from any consequences; and virtue ethics, stemming from Aristotle, which accounts for the qualities of exemplary conduct, toward which actors or agents strive.

Of these three approaches, the history of western architectural theory is replete with analogies that give virtue ethics a foundational role in the discipline. (Despite their abundance, these affirmations seems to have escaped the same degree of criticism leveled against modernist utilitarian or duty-based approaches.) Indra Kagis McEwen (2011) has shown how the abundance of references to Ciceronian virtue (*virtus*, i.e., “manliness”) in the architectural treatises of Vitruvius, Alberti, and Filarete reflected an extensive project to legitimize political authority. For his part, Rykwert had already apologized for Alberti’s politics in his translation of *On the Art of Building* (1988), where he asserted that Alberti intended a more ancient Greek idea of *arete* or excellence:

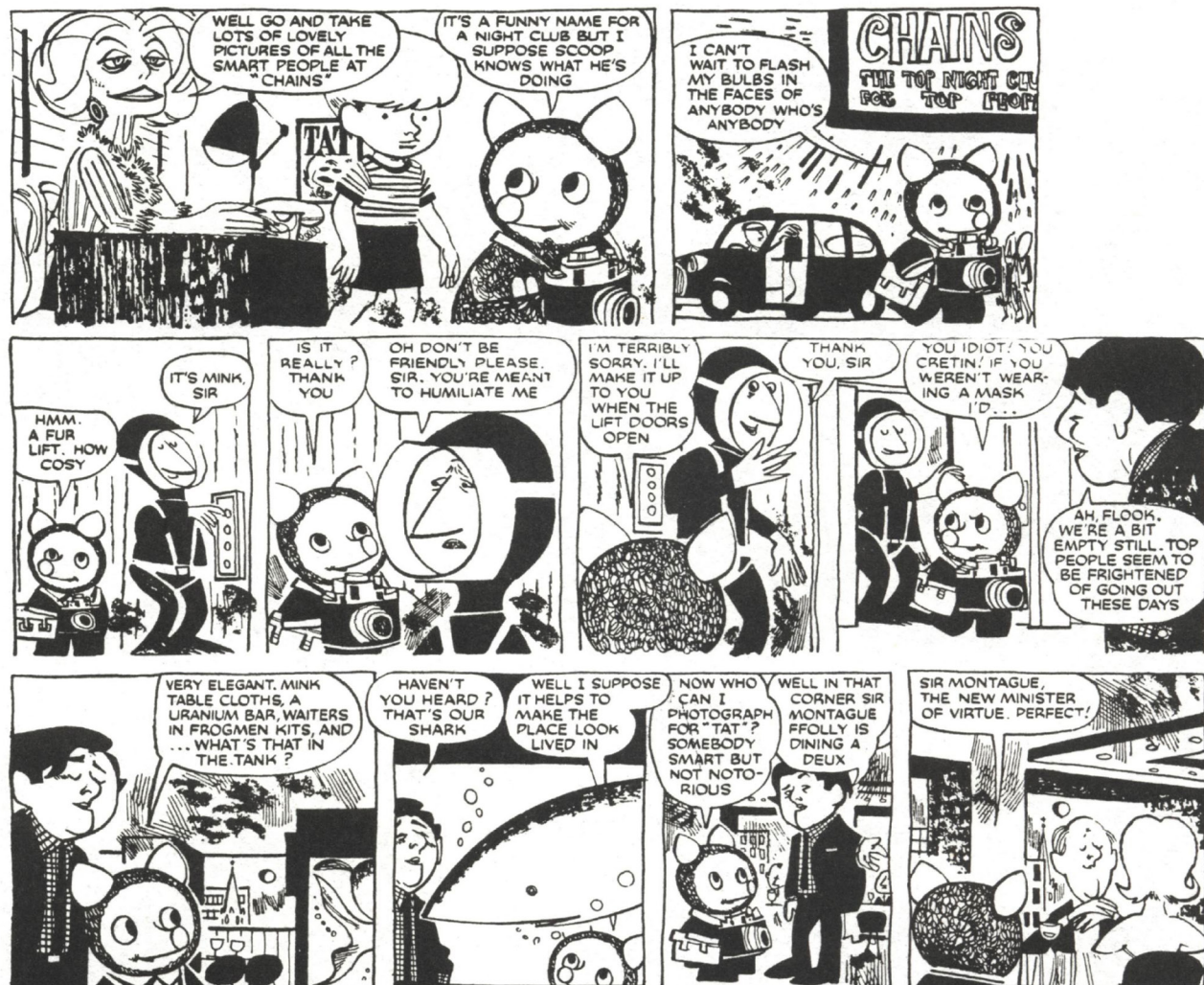


Figure 1. Above: William Fawkes. "Flook," *Daily Express*. 11 September 1965. The nightclub mentioned in the cartoon is Wips, which was designed by Joseph Rykwert in 1963. See also: Rykwert (2017).

"The difficulty in translating [virtus] is to clear it of its moralistic patina. In antiquity it meant 'excellence' and 'good action'—with the emphasis on the action. In fifteenth-century Italian it translates as *virtù*, which was used by Alberti to convey gifted activism in matters pertaining to civic life and society in general" (426).

Around the same time of Rykwert's translation,<sup>2</sup> Aristotelian virtue ethics was enjoying a revival in the academy (Fischer 2012); indeed, Rykwert was a friend and colleague of Alasdair MacIntyre, whose book *After Virtue* (1981) was largely responsible for the so-called "aretic turn" in moral philosophy that emphasized conduct and character.<sup>3</sup> Thereafter, conduct and architectural character became a central topic in the research of Rykwert's students, including Alberto Pérez-Gómez (1985) and David Leatherbarrow (1993).<sup>4</sup> Leatherbarrow, especially in his reliance on Emmanuel Levinas (Leatherbarrow

2009), is more willing to argue that ethics is a "first philosophy" of architecture (Levinas 1991, 304). And we already heard the echo of virtue in Rykwert's more recent suggestion that the best action an architect can do may be to "walk away" regardless of the consequences or obligations.

From Vitruvius, to Alberti, to Rykwert and beyond, with occasional stops at the exemplary works of Michelangelo, Loos, and Le Corbusier, it would seem that it is not altogether difficult to sketch a history of one approach to ethics (virtue ethics, for example) within a certain tradition of architectural theory (the western canon as it was interpreted by the so-called Essex School). But is a history of ideas enough to guide or define a field of inquiry for ongoing research into the practical knowledge of what should be done? Can one approach to ethics alone explain more generally how values are described by the practice of

architecture and provide a basis for criticizing improvised or constrained claims?

Similar tendencies to define a field of architectural ethics by appealing to virtue in Siegfried Giedion (1974), Karsten Harries (1997), and Tom Spector (2001). In *The Ethical Architect*, Spector has taken up the topic unambiguously. For him, contemporary architectural practice presents moral challenges when the elements of the Vitruvian triad conflict with one another; ethical resolution is achieved on an ad hoc basis through the avoidance of universal criteria and the exercise of the architect's particular virtues.<sup>5</sup> His most lucid example is the debate over the central plaza of Louis Kahn's Salk Institute. But Spector does not reasonably explain the relation between his interpretation of the classical categories and the striving for virtue in contemporary practice; and like many books dedicated to architecture and ethics – especially those modeled after business ethics (Fischer 2008; 2010) – his remains more anecdotal and allegorical than historical or critical. Despite his diversity of pronouns, Spector reinforces the authority of Roman virtue ("manliness") that McEwan identified with empire (McEwan 2003), while simultaneously adding weight to the disciplinary differences between ethical and architectural theory. His claim for virtue ethics in architecture cannot sustain criticism of its incoherence or its colonial enterprise.

While virtue ethics is a promising model for self-reflection, there is little to indicate that its relation to architectural theory will ever transcend a monumental history of ideas.<sup>6</sup> Based on these examples (but without delving at this time into the already well-worn criticism of utilitarian and duty-oriented ethical approaches) we are obliged to pursue the argument that ethics in architecture ought to be an interdisciplinary conversation, lest it fall into patterns of a legitimating discourse. The problem with this argument is the epistemological problem with interdisciplinarity in general. What can we expect to come from bringing together disciplines that were conceived separately and discretely by different so-called "critical constituencies" or "disciplinary communities" (Said 1982; Bruffee 1984). How can we proceed without first considering the institutionalization of these communities within our universities? Furthermore, how are we to avoid the pitfalls of dilettantism?

Taylor and Levine (2011) argue eloquently for an interdisciplinary approach to ethical and architectural theory, but they suffer the effects of an equivocating dilettantism. Take for example the idea that if ethical knowledge is appropriate to the discipline of moral philosophy, then "aesthetics is the philosophical subject most obviously relevant to architectural discourse" (36).<sup>7</sup> This interpretation of architectural theory from the view of philosophy ignores their own warnings to situate the production of knowledge critically and historically. Indeed, one contribution of the discourse on architectural virtue ethics (outlined above) was the production of interpretative schema that deployed disciplinary evidence to circumvent an aesthetic

interpretation of architectural practice. In particular, the architectural analogy between bodies and buildings – best explained by Rykwert (1996) – is at least as much a matter of health and human conduct as it is a question of beauty. This is not meant to proffer a natural opposition between aesthetics and ethics, but rather, to identify the perils of defining the problems and questions of one discipline from the vantage point of another.

Taylor and Levine's response to the question above regarding the place of ethics in relation to architecture is ultimately rather equivocal:

"Ethical considerations are often intrinsic, as well as extrinsic, to architecture as such and hence are, in part, definitive of them. It is when architecture comes under scrutiny and architects, planners, and politicians are held morally accountable, that argument on behalf of ethical judgments inherent in architectural practices becomes increasingly clear. We are forever wholly immersed in a built environment, and architecture, at its best and its worst, not only reflects values, but contributes to the active construction of our future selves in relation to our past and present" (41).

This equivocation is partly the result of their intention for ethics and architecture to be reciprocally transformative; for ethics to benefit from architectural considerations as much as architecture benefits from ethics. Such balance seems untenable and unnecessary when viewed in light of the pressing concerns that have initiated the call for ethics in architecture.

In this short essay, which compares only a few selected works of theory, the question of the disciplinary or interdisciplinary identity of ethics and architecture remains unresolved. Perhaps the question is unresolvable as posed; nevertheless, it provides a path for advancing open and critical reflection on pressing matters in contemporary practice; a vehicle for thinking and acting otherwise. At the very least, this questioning offers a divergence from the foundationalism inherent in academic appeals to architectural morality. Finally, on the thought experiment proposed above, it would seem that our center for ethics and architecture would be lost without active participation from at least ethical and architectural scholars.

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## ENDNOTES

1. The theme of the 107th Annual Meeting – "Black Box: Architecture's Core in the Post-Digital Era" – orbited around an inquiry into architecture's disciplinary identity. This paper is largely a response to some of the key questions raised at this meeting.
2. Rykwert annotated the Leoni translation of Alberti's Ten Books on Architecture in 1955 then produced his own translation with Neil Leach and Robert Tavernor in 1988.
3. MacIntyre's study cannot be properly summarized here, but a few of his broad themes can be outlined. MacIntyre found contemporary moral philosophy to be in a "state of grave disorder" and the commonplace theories of moral action to be entirely incoherent when subjected to rigorous scrutiny. He objected, on the one hand, to the determinism of socialist theories that proposed a science of human behavior modeled after the natural sciences, and on the other hand, to emotivist theories that assigned all actions to willing or desiring subjects. Not only were these positions incoherent, they were also incomplete. No theory of human action could claim to be a general theory as such without attending, in some way, to the possibility of human freedom. Hence, MacIntyre undertakes an archaeology of knowledge, attempting to assemble from the fragments of the history of philosophy, a more coherent theory that, by simply making room for human freedom, could claim to be more complete. Throughout *After Virtue*, MacIntyre gradually recollects Aristotelian virtue ethics with the concept of practice and practical reasoning at the center. See also: Lutz (2012).
4. Pérez-Gómez and Leatherbarrow are also students of Dalibor Vesely. MacIntyre's analysis of practical reasoning had a contemporary parallel in Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1975), as well as his later *The Idea of the Good in Aristotelian-Platonic Philosophy* (1986), which had an influence on the Essex School through Vesely's teaching of architecture. Gadamer's analysis of Aristotle's "phronesis" – knowledge of things which can be otherwise and can only be learned over time – wrestled the concept of practical reasoning from the periphery of Heidegger's thinking to the center of an inquiry into architecture history and theory. In this inquiry, know-how or technics is opposed or otherwise subsumed by knowing-what to do, i.e., ethics.
5. For his part, Rykwert's interpretation of Vitruvius is entirely within an hermeneutic tradition. He takes the text at face value. For Rykwert, the text is absolutely truthful, but only partial, hence the challenge is to see through the fragments to a more coherent and complete whole beyond. Vitruvius is significant not as a source or origin but as a relay within an hermeneutic process.
6. I have in mind here Nietzsche's description of "monumental" history (Nietzsche 1999).
7. Ethics and moral philosophy relating to a broader view of architecture and the built environment has been taken up more frequently by geography, anthropology, and urban theory.