

ETHICS VERSUS AESTHETICS IN ARCHITECTURE

MAURICE LAGUEUX

There is little doubt that, today, most disciplines are increasingly attentive to ethical questions, but it is in biology and medicine that this phenomenon has become most evident. A new discipline, bioethics, has been conceived to face the troublesome questions raised by recent developments in biomedical sciences. In a matter of a few decades, an increasing number of research centers specializing in bioethics or oriented mainly toward bioethical questions have been created. At the same time, a number of analyses concerning previously unsuspected bioethical problems have been discussed in specialized conferences and diffused in media of every stripe.

When considering this phenomenon, one might wonder whether a parallel development in architecture should be expected. Why have we not witnessed the birth and rapid development of a new “archit-ethics” devoted to the analysis and discussion of ethical problems raised by architecture? After all, an increasing number of architects and theoreticians of architecture have convincingly drawn attention to the ethical dimensions of their art. One might think that the absence of such a development is due to the fact that architecture is an art rather than a science, the former being, by its very nature, committed to aesthetical rather than ethical values, as was repeatedly claimed by the advocates of art for art’s sake. However, whether or not we agree with the latter doctrine, this would be to forget that architecture is very different from other arts, since its function is to create places and contexts in which social life goes on. Architect’s works have such an impact on the way people behave that the development of a new field devoted to the analysis of problems associated with this impact does not appear implausible.

The author would like to thank Michael Levine and Bruce Mann for their very useful comments and the SSHRC (Ottawa) for financial support.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ETHICAL PROBLEMS

The true reason why there is not an archit-ethics on the horizon is that ethical problems raised by architecture are of a very different nature than those raised by biomedical sciences and by most applied sciences. Whereas the latter are clearly *external* to the disciplines that have generated them, the former remains *internal* to it. Let me illustrate what I mean by this distinction. The development of biomedical sciences have generated unsettling ethical problems by offering to humanity the possibility of making new choices that may have a considerable and even terrifying impact on its destiny. Thanks to these sciences, it has become possible to control the number of births and the moment of death, to determine the sex and traits of future children, to clone animals or even human beings, to use DNA tests in such a way that has enabled the state to increase its control over citizens and citizens to engage in otherwise unimaginable proceedings concerning parenthood, and so on. Suppose now that an esteemed scientist involved in biomedical discoveries acknowledges his (or her) total incompetence in solving the ethical problems raised by such discoveries. In this situation, the scientist's scientific credibility would remain absolutely unaffected by such an acknowledgement. Such ethical questions simply do not figure into the practice of biology or medicine. They are of concern to jurists, philosophers, theologians, sociologists, politicians, columnists, and simple citizens, but not to biologists as such. If the latter get involved in such debates, it is in order to provide technical expertise, rather than solutions, in regard to the scientific sources of ethical problems. Thus, such ethical problems are totally *external* to biomedical sciences. Moreover, the questions they raise are, to a large extent, new questions, even for those who have traditionally concerned themselves with ethics. Therefore, the idea that new interdisciplinary centers devoted to analyzing such questions with only ancillary participation on the part of biologists and physicians seems quite appropriate.

In contrast, let us consider a somewhat parallel situation in architecture. It is true that, by their very activity, architects are responsible for the existence of buildings that considerably affect the lives of their users and inhabitants. One could even argue that this impact is more important than that resulting from biomedical discoveries because it *continuously* affects the life of *each* citizen. The decision to build giant habitation units rather than family-oriented cottages, the decision to make use of (or not to make use of) traditional ornamentation or unexpected attractive spaces to neutralize the dullness of low-cost housing, the decision to provide for community gathering and communication in a building or urbanistic scheme, the decision to organize schools in a way that contributes to children's socialization in a climate of self-confidence, the decision to build hospitals in a way that creates hope in the lives of patients faced with death, the

decision to plan prisons in a way that reduces prisoners' violent compulsions, and so on, all such decisions have considerable impact on people's lives. Since they affect ways of life and corresponding values, determining which decision is appropriate in all such cases is clearly an ethical problem. But suppose now that an esteemed architect whose work involved the type of decisions described above candidly acknowledges his (or her) total incompetence in solving such ethical questions. In this case, this architect's credibility is likely to be dramatically affected. Architects who are not concerned with the best ways to improve the lives of their building's users or inhabitants are very poor architects indeed. Architecture continuously raises ethical problems, which, however, are nothing more than normal problems that architects must solve in practicing their art. It is for this reason that these ethical problems can be called *internal* to their discipline.

It is interesting to note that, if understood in the sense that I propose here, confronting *internal* ethical problems is almost a peculiarity of architecture as well as of urbanism, which may be considered as an extension of architecture to urban contexts. What I mean is that the bulk of ethical debates raised by architecture concerns problems that are so intrinsically linked with the very practice of architecture that architects can hardly dissociate the success of their work from the solution they bring to those problems; they can hardly be praised for their achievements and leave to the rest of society, as biologists typically do, the responsibility of finding solutions to the problems raised by their activity. Therefore, while I do not claim that architecture could not raise external ethical problems—an example might be the eventual ethical problems associated with certain kinds of legal servitude that most architects would be all too happy to pass on to jurists—I observe that these relatively rare examples are far from being representative of the problems encountered in the usual discussions about ethics and architecture.

But what about other disciplines? Let us first consider the case of science and technology. It is not usual for scientists in their laboratories to be directly concerned with ethical questions. Science is oriented toward truth or, if one prefers, toward the accumulation of reliable and objective knowledge. Were scientists to let ethical considerations significantly interfere with their research, science's objectivity would be seriously compromised, as the history of science clearly shows. Even social and human sciences, which concern human behavior, should not, as sciences, be guided by ethical criteria. At the very least, it would be totally unacceptable to deny the competence of a scientist who has scientifically established or documented a fact, on the ground that knowledge of this fact might be morally undesirable. Similarly, applied sciences and technologies are oriented toward efficiency and control. An engineer will be praised as successful for improving techniques that permit the attainment of a given goal. Insofar as it is a matter of competence, such a judgment should depend on the difficulty of the problem and on the ingenuity of the solution, but not on the ethical merit of

the goal. When engineers work with architects, it is normally the latter and not the former who are responsible for ethical choices. This is not to deny that ethical questions raised by applied sciences and technology are seen as highly important to those involved in these disciplines. It is even reasonable to say that scientists and engineers should consider that it is their duty to refuse contributing to the development of sciences whose applications would be judged by them deleterious to humanity, as illustrated by the ethical debates concerning scientists involved in the development of nuclear armaments or in human cloning. The point is that these ethical problems are *external* to science and to technology in the sense that the ethical merits of those who contribute or refuse to contribute to enterprises that may have moral consequences for humanity have nothing to do with the scientific quality of their achievements. Like most problems dealt with by bioethics, such problems are external to science and concern many, including scientists as citizens and human beings rather than as scientists. It is true that sociologists may be totally devoted to solving problems raised by social conflicts in such a way that the success of their scientific enterprise may depend on their ability to solve ethical problems associated with this conflict. Can we say that, in this case, we face ethical problems internal to science, as is the case with architects? Like the architect, the sociologist cannot, without discrediting himself, invoke incompetence in solving such ethical problems. One may observe that solutions proposed by different sociologists differ radically, but the same is true with solutions offered by different architects. Nonetheless, it would be pointless to claim that the ethical problem concerning sociologists is internal to sociology because, by hypothesis, such problems are not raised by the *practice* of sociology, whereas ethical problems faced by architects have much to do with the very practice of architecture. Scientists may devote themselves to solving many types of problems, including ethical problems, but the question discussed in the present paper concerns only the ethical problems raised (at least partially) *by the practice* of disciplines such as biology, medicine, physics, engineering, sociology, painting, or architecture. Only in this context is it meaningful to distinguish ethical problems as either internal or external to a discipline.

Let us now consider the case of other arts, which is more complex but more instructive. Clearly there are some arts—it is surely the case of design—that are so closely related to architecture that they are in a relatively similar situation in regard to their relation to ethical problems. But what about arts such as painting and literature that, in contrast to architecture and design, cannot be considered as primarily responding to the requirements of social life? It is well known that many works of art, especially novels and films, have often been evaluated and criticized from an ethical point of view. Should we conclude from this that ethical problems discussed in such a way are *internal* to the practice of these arts? Do artists thus have a responsibility to provide appropriate solutions to such ethical problems?

Since modern aesthetics' beginnings at the end of eighteenth century, the more or less standard answer to this question has been that, though ethical evaluations of artworks are legitimate and frequently useful, they have little or nothing to do with the aesthetic value of these works and consequently should not be confused with judgments on artistic achievement as such. Therefore, one might be inclined to conclude that the relation of artists to the works they create is similar to the relation of scientists to their discoveries: if those works are aesthetically valuable, they should be praised for that, but if they raise ethical problems, those problems should be debated and solved outside the realm of art as such by all those, including artists qua citizens, who are interested in solving such problems.

However, in recent years this standard view has been increasingly challenged by theoreticians who, with the help of various arguments, claim that ethics *matters* in the aesthetical evaluation of artworks.¹ According to ethicism defended by Berys Gaut,² it is aesthetically essential that artworks suggest a response, and eventually an ethical response, to the content they are presenting, and if this response is defective by not being merited, the work itself is aesthetically flawed. According to such a perspective, the novelist or filmmaker who presents a narrative that, typically enough, has ethical implications should realize that he (or she) is responsible for suggesting an appropriate (and merited) response to the ethical problems involved; otherwise the work would be flawed even from an aesthetical point of view. Thus, were we to adopt such a view, it would be fair to claim that ethical problems are internal to the practice of arts, at least of narrative arts. Similarly, if one concludes with Mary Devereaux that Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* was aesthetically flawed, given its wrong political vision that, according to her, is intimately linked to its aesthetical value,³ one may also claim that the ethical problem associated with the political vision of a film is internal to the practice of this kind of filmmaking. However, this view is far from being generally accepted. Many would acclaim Riefenstahl's film as an aesthetic masterpiece irrespective of its ethically reprehensible vision. Formalism and aestheticism still have many supporters and their views on artworks exclude the very idea of internally imposing on artists any kind of ethical responsibility. And if we consider other approaches that, in a more moderate fashion, emphasize aesthetics' ethical dimensions, the question of the internality of the ethical problems becomes more ambiguous. Noël Carroll's moderate moralism⁴ underscores the

¹ I thank Michael Levine for drawing my attention to the importance of this literature.

² Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," Jerrold Levinson, *Aesthetics and Ethics, Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 182–203.

³ Mary Devereaux, "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*," Levinson 227–56.

⁴ Noël Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996): 223–38.

fact that appropriate ethical views are required from an audience for it to aesthetically absorb various works of art, but this fact does not really imply that it falls on artists to *provide an acceptable solution* to ethical problems associated with their work, as it is required from architects.

Thus, depending on the theory adopted regarding this question, it seems sensible to claim that ethical problems are either internal or external to arts, or at least to narrative arts. Since this is not the place to take issue in the debate concerning this delicate question, I will rather claim that, in contrast to other arts, it is in a different and more systematic way that ethical problems are internal to architecture. This is due to the fact that the solution of such problems is literally a constitutive part of practicing architecture. To illustrate this, let us note first that it is admitted, even by defenders of moralism, that not all artworks are concerned with morality in the sense discussed above.⁵ Appropriate examples of artworks concerned with morality are usually associated with narratives developed in novel, drama, film, and possibly narrative painting. Abstract paintings and purely musical pieces, for example, have hardly anything to do at least with the kind of moral problems encountered in novels and films. But architecture *is an abstract art* in the sense that, if we put aside a few hilarious exceptions, it does not represent or narrate anything, at least in the common meaning of representation and narration. If it is *nonetheless* associated with ethical problems, it is because it produces an obligatory framework for social life, which it directly influences. Therefore, it is reasonable to think that architecture can induce in people various feelings that make them more or less pessimistic, oppressed, depressed, revolted, and aggressive, or rather optimistic, liberated, communicative, peaceful, and possibly egalitarian. As we will see, architects are sometimes inclined to think that the influence of their building on human behavior and human values may go still further.

Certainly, literature and film may have similar effects on their consumers, but only because of narratives, whose content *can* (wrongly or rightfully, as we have seen) be evaluated independently from their aesthetic quality, whereas the effects of architecture can hardly be evaluated independently from such qualities. After all, criminality and Nazism are not directly associated with literature and cinema, but problems concerning decent dwellings are directly associated with architecture. Therefore, a racist film can be acclaimed as an aesthetic masterpiece, *at least* by those who reject ethicism, whereas it would be much more difficult to praise, even aesthetically, an architectural or an urbanistic scheme which through seclusion, isolation, and compartmentation tends to encourage racism. For the same reason, while it is theoretically conceivable that a skillful architect may build, out

⁵ See Carroll, "Moderate Moralism" 225–26, and Noël Carroll, "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research," *Ethics* 110 (2000): 352 and 357.

of sheer perversity, a housing scheme that intentionally generates violence, it would hardly be conceivable that such a building would ever be considered a *great* work of architecture. As we have seen, it is at least questionable to debase a film or a novel's artistic quality simply by claiming that such a work of art may provoke pessimistic and other negative sentiments on the part of viewers or readers. Who would claim that Kafka is a poor novelist because he wrote novels that may accentuate feelings of desperation in some readers? But one can question the quality of an architect whose buildings inspire pessimistic sentiments and despair in its users. It is true that Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin and James Ingo Freed's Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington were acclaimed for the pessimistic and dismaying feelings they inspire, but this is because it is precisely this kind of impact that is considered ethically appropriate for buildings of this type. Were such museums designed in such a way that they offer a too-pleasant experience to their visitors, their architects would have been criticized for failing to provoke the appropriate moral sentiments.

This peculiarity of architecture is due to its fundamentally functional character. It is true that other abstract arts such as music may provoke ethically charged feelings as well, but since the primary function of such arts is not to design the obligatory framework in which social life takes place, the success of a musical piece, for example, can hardly be so immediately determined by its moral impact. Therefore, ethical problems could be said internal to its practice only if the intention of the composer is to generate such ethical feelings through music and if the fact that the work is praised or blamed depends crucially on the moral feelings it generates. But since their works are, more typically, freely chosen to be enjoyed by an audience, artists can be praised for producing works that generate whatever kind of feeling (optimistic or pessimistic, etc.) people may choose to experience at appropriate moments in their life. In contrast, since they are designing the theater in which social life necessarily takes place, architects have the duty to plan buildings that are able to generate feelings that are ethically acceptable. It is in this sense that ethical problems are necessarily an internal part of the problems they have to solve in order to achieve success in their art. One might maintain that this difference is only a difference of degree, but it is an important one, one that allows us to understand the atypical development of debates about ethics in architecture.

Therefore, one must acknowledge that, when it comes to characterizing its relation to ethics, architecture is in a very peculiar position. Indeed, artists practicing other arts are not so directly obliged to concern themselves with ethical problems, and scientists involved in pure or applied sciences can leave to others the ethical problems raised by their practice. But when it comes to architecture, ethical judgments are hardly distinguishable from aesthetical ones. Indeed, both kinds of judgment being internal to this art—aesthetical judgments are internal

as well, since it is obviously architects who must solve the aesthetical problems that architecture raises—they must constitute together the basis of a single architectural decision. Moreover, this conflation of ethics and aesthetics has often led architects and architecture theoreticians to present as the accomplishment of an ethical duty the endeavor of those architects who spontaneously adapt their work to the aesthetical sensibility of their time. But let us see how this particular situation has influenced and even distorted the debates regarding the relation between ethics and aesthetics in architecture.

ATYPICAL ETHICAL DEBATES ABOUT ETHICS IN ARCHITECTURE

In fact, though it is only since the nineteenth century that debates involving ethics and aesthetics in architecture have become a key issue, architects and theoreticians of architecture have always been concerned with the importance of satisfying people's needs in relation to both the ethical values and aesthetical standards accepted in their respective communities. Though ethics as a branch of philosophy has been solidly established at least since Aristotle, it is not until the development of a philosophical aesthetics at the end of eighteenth century that the question concerning the possibility of conflict between these two dimensions would come to occupy a central place in the agenda of architectural theoreticians. For medieval and Renaissance architects, there was apparently no better way of satisfying the ethical values of their respective periods than by designing beautiful buildings. However, in the nineteenth century, matters became more complicated. Not only were ethics and aesthetics two well-developed branches of thought that were often characterized by their mutual opposition, but a consequence of aesthetically oriented scholarly research was the specification of various styles among which architects were almost obliged to choose. In this context, ethical considerations associated with a particular style could be confronted with ethical or aesthetical considerations associated with another style. In a period described in Britain as the "battle of styles," A. W. N. Pugin, who had recently converted to Catholicism, strongly recommended a return to the gothic style, which he believed was more inclined to promote moral sentiments compatible with Christian ideals than the classical style. However, in his campaign in favor of a more *ethically* valuable style, one of his most striking arguments was based on a somewhat *aesthetical* comparison between the charm of medieval architecture and the horror of nineteenth-century buildings.⁶ While claiming that the duty of the architect is to promote morality when building the city, Pugin

⁶ A. W. N. Pugin, *Contrasts: Or, a Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries and Similar Buildings of the Present Day; Showing the Present Decay of Taste*, 2d ed. (Leicester: Leicester UP, and New York: Humanities Press, 1969).

could not dissociate the realization of such a program from an endeavor aiming to make the city more beautiful.

A further step in this fusion of beauty and morality was taken by John Ruskin, whose influence was undoubtedly more considerable. For Ruskin, the link between what is beautiful and what is good was reinforced by the quasi identity of these two fundamental values to a third, truth, which, according to medieval thinkers, constitutes (with the two formers) the third member in a set of three transcendental concepts. Even if truth is just one of the “seven lamps of architecture,” it occupies a central place in Ruskin’s thought. Ruskin was indefectibly and viscerally committed to truth because, according to him, deception is inherently sinful. An architect who intentionally hides structural supports in order to suggest that a building stands by itself when this is not really the case, or who introduces pseudo-supports that do not play their apparent role, deceives honest people and, because of this deception, discredits his profession. Trompe-l’œil, which was used so extensively by Renaissance and baroque architects, is harshly condemned since it intentionally deceives people. Even pieces of decoration mechanically produced are denounced because they are false (and ridiculous) imitations of the fruit of a meritorious handicraft labor. However, all of these condemnations derive as much from aesthetical as well as ethical principles. For example, in support of his ethical views on the structural truth of gothic construction, Ruskin observes that, “the beauty of its traceries would be enhanced to him [an intelligent observer of a gothic structure] if they confessed and followed the lines of its main strength.”⁷

For Pugin and Ruskin, aesthetic values could not be dissociated from ethical ones, because these authors were conscious that architecture was transforming the world in which their society was evolving. In this context, architects were endowed with the immense responsibility of progressively replacing the horrible buildings that accommodated nineteenth-century industrial society with a world more akin to the gothic spirit, which, in their mind, was associated with honesty, with truth, and with an exalting beauty. Ethics is not dissociable from aesthetics because ethical problems generated by irresponsible architecture must (internally) be solved by architects guided by better aesthetic principles. To attribute such a duty to architects, it was not necessary, however, to reject the nineteenth century and modernity. On the contrary, most champions of the ethical role of architecture were inclined to define the architect’s duty as the obligation to express through their buildings the spirit of the period in which they live. Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, though as fascinated as Ruskin by the virtues of Gothic architecture, was convinced that architects should contribute to the development of a

⁷ John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: Lovell, n.d.) 40.

rational architecture appropriate to their own time. Still more systematically, modernist architects of the first half of twentieth century did not miss an occasion to claim that their commitment to the development of an architecture adapted to their time was a moral duty. Their rejection of traditional architecture was not a pure matter of taste; it was literally an operation of cleaning the architectural world and of improving, by the same token, the life of its inhabitants. Other artists such as painters made their way to modernity still earlier and surely not with less conviction, but since architects' commitment to modernity was based on an alleged duty to provide a better framework for social life, it took the form of an astonishing crusade against anything that was associated with traditional adornment and perceived therefore as inimical to authentic values. In 1908, Adolf Loos harshly condemned the lavishly adorned architecture of Vienna by claiming that a backward-looking complacency in ornamentation is "a crime against the national economy" resulting "in a waste of human labour, money, and material."⁸ The emphasis on the economic aspect of this moral crime illustrates fairly well how even an aesthetically elitist architect such as Loos was fully conscious that architects were engaged in the socioeconomic enterprise of rebuilding a better world for an increasing population. And for him, this ethical conviction was not dissociable from the idea that architects must live up to the requirements of the period in which they live. The excessive expense of adorning buildings, which Loos compared to the primitive custom of body tattooing,⁹ was condemned as a mark of historical regression. For a modernist such as Loos, modern society is an adult society that should not indulge in such regressive practices and should rather devote itself to the construction of a better world for everybody. But, for Loos, such an ethical orientation was not dissociable from an aesthetical stand since he scorned adorning and tattooing not only for generating irresponsible expenses, but also for being a manifestation of a poor and childish taste. This explicit association of ethical and aesthetical judgments with a philosophy of history based on the idea that humanity is animated by the mission to overcome its own limitations became a trademark of modernist architecture.

During the 1920s and 1930s, when socialist utopias exerted in Western Europe an attraction not yet tempered by the revelation of the disappointing experiences in the East, modernist architects were particularly inspired by their calling to transform and improve the social world. After all, they were planners by profession and revolutionary in virtue of their commitment to modernity. The most famous architects of the time, Le Corbusier, Gropius, and Mies van der Rohe paid at least lip service to socialism at some moment in their career and others like

⁸ Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime [1908]," Ulrich Conrads, *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT P, 1970) 21.

⁹ Loos 20.

Hannes Meyer, Mart Stam, and Ernst May overtly embraced it or even became communists. Whatever the degree of their socialist involvement, there is no doubt that architects of this period were convinced that it was their duty to improve through better buildings the way of life of their fellow citizens. Many of them expressed this conviction, but few did so in terms as unequivocal as Bruno Taut when describing the improvement of social behavior through efficient architecture as the triumph of ethics inseparable from aesthetics:

If everything is founded on sound efficiency, this efficiency itself, or rather its utility, will form its own *aesthetic* law. A building must be beautiful when seen from outside if it reflects all these qualities [. . .] The architect who achieves this task becomes a creator of an *ethical* and social character; the people who use the building for any purpose, will, through the structure of the house, be brought to a better behaviour in their mutual dealings and relationship with each other. Thus architecture becomes the creator of new social observances.¹⁰

According to this modernist view, if architects do indeed have such an important role to play in society's improvement, they must avoid being guilty of the sins of their predecessors. Not only must they strive to bring about a better built world, free from the encumbering and useless elements that handicapped the architecture of the past, but, as educators of the society emerging with this new architecture, they must also strive to make the latter perfectly transparent. They must avoid deceiving people through artifices of construction, as was so often the case in baroque and other classical styles of architecture. Thus, modernist architects gave a second life to Ruskin's sense of the association between architectural transparency and morality. It is this view that, along with his fellow Masters of the Bauhaus, Marcel Breuer defended in his apology for clarity understood as "the definite expression of the purpose of a building and the sincere expression of its structure." According to him, "one can regard this sincerity as a sort of moral duty [. . .]."¹¹ For modernist architects, it was self-evident that the improvement of social life "through the structure of the house" required that this structure be honestly made visible. One may wonder why a clear expression of the structure of the house has such ethical significance, but for these architects, who were often sympathetic to socialism, reacting against the ideology of a *bourgeois* society in a context where any manifestation of this ideology was seen as imposition and treachery, it was important not only to liberate the rising working class from the cumbersome traditions of the past but also to let them clearly see the symbols of this liberation.

¹⁰ Bruno Taut, *Modern Architecture* (London: The Studio Limited, 1929) 9, qtd. in David Watkin, *Morality and Architecture* (Chicago: U of C P, 1984) 40; emphasis added.

¹¹ Marcel Breuer, *Buildings and Projects 1921–1961* (New York: F. A. Praeger, 1962), 261, qtd. in Watkin 13.

However, in these years of High Utopia, the link between the ethical mission of architecture and a vision of history that tends to reinforce this mission should not be reduced to that based on the socialist convictions of architects of the time. The most influential theoretician of architectural modernism, Siegfried Giedion, and the most influential historian of architecture of the twentieth century, Nicholas Pevsner, capitalized on the association between morality and modernity to develop a theory of history according to which architects have an “historic mission” not only to improve the social world with the help of better buildings, but also to reveal to people the new possibilities of architecture conceived of as one of humanity’s great enterprises. In *Space, Time and Architecture*, the bible of many modern architects, Giedion devotes a chapter to the “demand for morality in architecture”.¹² However, one would be at pains to find anything amounting to a discussion of moral principles in this chapter; it is divided into two parts, one praising architects such as Van de Velde, Berlage, or Wagner who “honestly” devoted their lives to introducing new techniques and new visions to architecture and the other praising in an equally eloquent manner ferroconcrete! In the 1940s, a period which saw the development of abstraction in painting, more than thirty years after the introduction of cubism and sixty years after the heyday of impressionism, the fact that, in order to satisfy the desiderata of a well-to-do clientele, so many architects were still constructing as their grandfathers did was perceived as a treason by those who were engaged in a fight for the acceptance of modernity in architecture. The fact that modern techniques of construction (the use of steel structures, large panels of glass and reinforced concrete allowing for free planning, unusual shapes, gardens over the roof, etc.) had remained for so long unexploited by architects was perceived as a sluggish refusal of one’s duty to find the best ethical and aesthetical solutions to the problems raised by modern living. If the moral duty of modernist architects was to transform people’s lives by way of innovations that made possible the development of a built world that matched the development of other sectors of human life, then it was tempting to conclude that it is for architects an ethical duty to make sure that their architecture corresponds to what the period requires. It was still more tempting to give to this duty a Hegelian philosophical dignity by invoking the necessity for architecture to be an expression of the *Zeitgeist*, of the “spirit of the age.”¹³

But what of those, such as Charles, the Prince of Wales, who are morally convinced that traditional architecture was much more apt than modern architecture to satisfy the real needs of the people? What of those architects, such as Quinlan

¹² Siegfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture, The Growth of a New Tradition* ([1947] Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982) 291–333.

¹³ Nicholas Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* ([1943] Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1963) 17.

Terry, who, in spite of what is required by the *Zeitgeist*, build today attractive tenements that look exactly like the architecture that flourished three centuries ago? It is to defend their right to ignore and defy the spirit of the time that David Watkin wrote his little essay titled *Morality and Architecture*. It is only the unexpected amalgamation of ethics, aesthetics, and the theory of history that can explain the fact that this book, which, according to its title, addresses—possibly for the first time in so explicit a fashion—the fundamental question of the relation between ethics and architecture, bears paradoxically much less on ethics than on the philosophy of history. Throughout his book, the author invokes Karl Popper’s famous critique of historicism in order to denounce those architects and theoreticians who claim that the development of history requires that the work of architects comply with the spirit of the time and who blame those who adopt a more personal approach instead of obeying the diktat of history.¹⁴ One may feel sympathetic to this plea for freedom of design and to this rejection of historicist enslavement, but one may nonetheless estimate that ethical problems raised by architecture remain important; problems that were virtually ignored throughout the book.

Long before Watkin, Geoffrey Scott, in a chapter titled “The Ethical Fallacy” in his classic book, *The Architecture of Humanism*, denounced the Ruskinian moralization of architectural choices, which, according to him, should remain purely aesthetical and technical. According to Scott, Renaissance and baroque architects merit our admiration precisely because, in order to produce their masterpieces, they have ingeniously used *trompe-l’œil* and similar techniques that Ruskin judged so inimical to truth and to morality.¹⁵ Faced with Watkin’s and Scott’s understandable recriminations against the negative and paralyzing effects of submitting architectural choices to moral criteria, one might conclude that there is really no room for ethics in architecture. But it would be to seriously misunderstand the misunderstanding from which this situation results. Scott’s appeal to aesthetic values did not imply a rejection of ethical considerations in architecture. Rather, he concludes his chapter on the ethical fallacy by strongly emphasizing the close relation between ethical and aesthetic values: “There is, in fact, a true, not a false, analogy between ethical and aesthetic values: the correspondence between them may even amount to an identity.”¹⁶ Such a conclusion anticipated another reached by Roger Scruton who, by the end of a book whose title—*The Aesthetics of Architecture*—leaves no ambiguity as to where the emphasis is put, draws attention to the “deep, *a priori*, connection between moral

¹⁴ Watkin, see “Popper” in index.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Scott, *The Architecture of Humanism: A Study in the History of Taste* ([1914] London: W. W. Norton, 1974) ch. 5.

¹⁶ Scott 125.

and aesthetic understanding.”¹⁷ We have seen that such an apparently paradoxical conclusion can be understood: Since most ethical problems raised by architecture are *internal* to this art, in the sense that they are nothing but problems that architects must solve in practicing their art, it is almost impossible for them to clearly dissociate their aesthetic solutions to artistic challenges from solutions they propose to ethical dilemmas. After all, Pugin, Ruskin, Viollet-le-Duc, Loos, Breuer, Pevsner, and Giedion never doubted that aesthetic considerations were absolutely crucial to architectural works. Otherwise, how would it be possible to distinguish architecture from engineering?

It is true that Karsten Harries whose *The Ethical Function of Architecture* is an impressive and long-awaited contribution to the topic, claimed at the outset his opposition to the aesthetic approach in architecture, which, according to him, valorizes works of art as “autonomous” entities requiring no other justification than the aesthetical pleasure they can provide.¹⁸ More precisely, he denounces the view, which he attributes to Scruton, according to which “beauty is understood as the object of a distinctive kind of pleasure.”¹⁹ However, one can understand that such a charge against the tendency to associate beauty *only* to a “distinctive kind of pleasure” implies that, for its author, a sane aesthetics of architecture should *never be dissociated* from ethical considerations. Construed in this fashion, Harries’s approach is not so different from Scruton’s, in which aesthetics connects to morality in such a way that, for him as for Scott, there is a quasi identity between ethics and aesthetics. Thus, the internal character of ethical problems in architecture explains the fact that, whether analyzed from aesthetical (Scruton) or ethical (Harries) starting points, ethical problems cannot be dissociated from aesthetical problems, both of which are internal.

WHY ARCHITECTURE PROVOKES SUCH ATYPICAL ETHICAL DEBATES

The paradoxical aspect of these *ethical* debates is that they all bear on beauty, truth, and historical time much more than on good or on morality. An apparent exception to this trend is Harries’s claim that art, and especially architecture, has a much more serious function, one that is occluded by an aesthetic approach. According to Harries, the highest function of architecture is to provide an authentic dwelling to human beings who are so cruelly lacking of such a thing in modern times.²⁰ Moreover, since a dwelling cannot isolate human beings from their

¹⁷ Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (London: Methuen, 1979) 252.

¹⁸ Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT P, 1997) 21–23.

¹⁹ Harries 12.

²⁰ Harries, pt. 3.

community without depriving them from an essential means of realization through intercommunication, the ethical function of architecture is also to create the conditions of an authentic community life.²¹ There is little doubt that this mission is an ethical one and that it is clearly *internal* to architecture since the latter's success is presented as depending on its solution. Biomedical sciences can be successful without needing to solve bioethical problems, but if one accepts Harries's views, architecture cannot be considered successful without seriously attempting to solve ethical problems. But why are these latter so difficult to solve? It does not seem to be because of technical reasons. From an engineering point of view, building houses of various types and places allowing a community to come together does not present particular technical difficulties. Modern housing and meeting places may respectively provide efficient and structurally resistant shelters and be functionally well adapted to all kinds of human and communitarian activities and yet not satisfy Harries's criteria for successful architecture. It is worthwhile to note that people who do not feel at home in modern housing schemes having such structural and functional qualities, or who tend to desert urban places having similar qualities without being sufficiently attractive, usually describe such housing schemes and places as ugly; at the very least, they will strongly resist any attempt to describe them as beautiful. For the same reason, to complain that a building is uninspiring is to denounce an architectural failure both from an aesthetical and an ethical point of view. A painting or a drama may be considered a masterpiece of great beauty even if it provokes discomfort in its spectators, but a building may hardly be considered beautiful if it produces the same result. In contrast, a house in which one feels at home because its details as well as its global arrangement are harmonious and well thought out will be spontaneously characterized as beautiful. It is not certain that such a house would meet all of Harries's requirements for successful dwellings, but such an aesthetical appreciation would not be unrelated to his ethical quest. Be that as it may, what this situation illustrates once more is that, despite Harries's objections against aesthetics, solving ethical problems in architecture is not separable from solving aesthetical problems.

This is not to say that it is impossible to isolate the ethical *problems* raised by architecture. Most architectural decisions affect the lives of many people, and as such imply a choice among ethical values. Should the architect build houses that open onto public spaces or rather increase the intimacy of family life by reducing and concealing such openings? Should an architect enhance secrecy and individualism inside a dwelling or favor a family's collective life by way of large living and dining rooms? Should the shapes and the colors of buildings such as

²¹ Harries, pt. 4.

churches, schools, and hospitals awake sentiments of joy or invite profound meditation? Should libraries be conceived of as austere temples devoted only to scholarly research or be designed as attractive as possible in order to incite people from any educational background to use them? All these questions have clear ethical implications, but responses may be considered architectural only if they satisfy aesthetical requirements as well. For example, the abstract decision as to whether a library should be open to the general public or to scholars concerns librarians, civil servants, and politicians; but the decision as to whether such or such a shape or partitioning of spaces is aesthetically attractive in a way that satisfies the ethically oriented demands of one or many types of users is an architectural decision. One might even say that a solution that, while complying with structural, functional, and other requirements, attracts through aesthetical means as many types of users as possible is a solution that bears the mark of a great architectural achievement. If Alvar Aalto, for example, has literally reinvented this kind of building with his marvelous and unique libraries built in various towns of Finland, in Wolfsburg, Germany, and in Oregon, it is because he found aesthetically attractive solutions to the ethical problems that library raises. But this is just one among numerous architectural achievements whose merit is due to the aesthetical quality of the solution provided to ethical problems.

The drift in debates on architectural ethics toward the philosophy of history can also be explained on this basis. By its very nature, modern aesthetics is always renewing itself. What is considered an aesthetic achievement in painting must be in some way different from what has been accomplished up to now. Who would see a beautiful impressionist landscape painted today as a masterpiece of painting? From an aesthetic point of view, a painter who does not explore new avenues and reveal new possibilities is of little merit. Since architecture is, like painting, an art, it is tempting to expect of it that it too explore new avenues. Moreover, the fact that the potential development of this art is closely related to the exponential development of technology accentuates this expectation. It is not so clear that, from a purely *ethical* point of view, new avenues must be explored in architecture, but, if it is true that, for an architect, ethical problems cannot be separated from aesthetical problems, one is tempted to conclude that the new aesthetic possibilities discovered by an innovative architecture are also those which are the most likely to satisfy humanity's ethical needs. It is only a short step from here to conclude that architects have the *duty* to express the spirit of their time. This step was taken by most modernist architects and by those, such as Giedion and Pevsner, who developed, on this basis, a progressive philosophy of the history of architecture. It is that philosophy of history that Watkin has systematically denounced in a book allegedly devoted to *morality* and architecture.²²

²² Watkin, esp. pts. II and III.

However, the “quasi identity” of aesthetics and ethics in architecture is not a true identity. It is in reality just another way to emphasize the fact that ethics, as well as aesthetics, is internal to architecture. If such is the case, for ethical problems, being “internal” implies that they must be solved by architectural decisions that at the same time address aesthetical problems. Conceptually, both kinds of problems can nonetheless be characterized in quite different terms. Conceiving of a place that allows people to realize themselves, a place in which people may feel at home and which encourages profound interpersonal relations, is not the same as, let us say, conceiving of a building that, for whatever reasons, satisfies the senses and the mind. For sure, it is theoretically conceivable (and rather probable) that someone may feel fully at home in an ugly place or that an aesthetically admirable building may generate negative reactions from an ethical point of view. The point is rather that architecture does not consist in providing ugly houses for those who might feel happy in them or beautiful objects that are inimical to the values of their users. It is true that architects have often failed in their attempts to solve aesthetical or ethical requirements, but the important point for the present discussion is that, for them, aesthetical and ethical problems corresponding to the fulfillment of these requirements could never be solved independently from one another and that this interdependence explains the ambiguity and the atypical character of the literature concerning the relation of ethics and architecture.

Since architects themselves must solve ethical problems by virtue of their internal character, one should not expect from philosophy the keys to their solution. Philosophical ethics, whether eudemonist, utilitarian, contractualist, or communitarian, is not in a position to suggest solutions to architects, whose business is to find aesthetical solutions applicable to ethical problems. Therefore, the present paper does not try to determine what ethical orientation an architect should take; rather, it proposes no more than an analysis of what characterizes architecture’s ethical problems and of what distinguishes the latter from those encountered in other human activities.

Two important branches of philosophy, aesthetics and ethics, often come home to visit each other during the choices we make when designing the place in which we live. What are the paradigms we use to decide on lifestyle issues? How does art help with our basic human needs for food, shelter and clothing? In our calling as teachers, what are the issues we should raise with children to build their awareness of art and aesthetics? What is useful for the visual choices they will make in everyday life no matter what they elect to do vocationally? Most may not design and build, but everybody selects