

Pidgin

Issue 18

Princeton

"The present inquiry," Aristotle writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "does not aim at theoretical knowledge... for we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good."

Ethics, by definition, are universal. They constitute a shared, evaluative guide to personal, subjective action. The post-WWII backlash against any appeal to the universal has left us in an anomic state of complete indeterminacy: failed signifiers and absolute contingency. Following suit, contemporary architecture is not only incapable of evaluative judgment, it seems to lack a shared, universal language through which it might convey meaning—whether semiotic or syntactic. Be it form or function, the emphasis on the particular, the heterogeneous, and the indeterminate has rendered inadequate any criterion for objective evaluation.

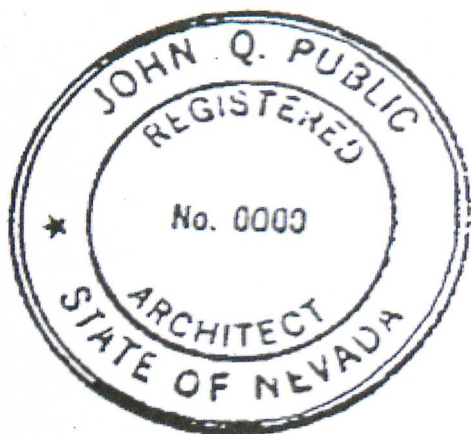
The boundaries of architecture have expanded from self-reflective formal and functional space into transnational realms of social and political space. These new networks and systems have inevitably implicated architecture today into questions of ethics.

Pidgin 18 is interested in these contested spaces. This issue presents appraisals, statements, methodologies, and examinations that question the ethical conditions and relations in which architecture is produced and experienced.

Athanasiou

WE ARE
PROFESSIONALS
AFTER ALL

Geolas



25

(a) Architect" means, "architect" as defined in RSA 310-A:28, I namely "a person who, by reason of having acquired through professional education and practical experience an advanced training in building construction and architectural design and an extensive knowledge of building standards created to safeguard the public from hazards such as fire, panic, structural failure, and unsanitary conditions, is technically and legally qualified to practice architecture and who is licensed by the board or otherwise authorized by this subdivision to engage in the practice of architecture.¹

A
(1)

(2)

B.

FIGURE 1
State of Nevada Revised Seal

26

ATHANASIOU GEOLAS

The State of Nevada provides an example of a Registered Architect's stamp on their official website. To demonstrate the look of the stamp they fill in the identifying information with a quintessential anonymity: "John Doe, Registered Architect #00000." Their generic example of our authorizing insignia echoes the toe tags of the anonymous dead in another branch of state bureaucracy. While nothing more than a placeholder, it is a chilling analogy for the perceived power of Architects today. Interpreted in this way, the Architect's seal ironically signifies a lack of power. Here we are little more than one more bureaucratic anachronism within the building industry.

In fact, it is problematic to even call these stamps "our" insignias of authority. Neither the authority nor the signification of the stamp is really ours. Both are offered to us as part of our compliance or participation in the system (depending on how one looks at it). The word "Architect" is a protected title; a title which, like the stamp, is also contingent. Our relative control over our professional definitions (the title, the stamp, and our authorized actions) becomes significant once we begin to ask how a professional "ought" to act in the world; that is, how a professional might act ethically rather than instrumentally.

It is not trendy to insist on disciplinary boundaries, to claim or even suggest that the limitations which

1. "New Hampshire Code of Administrative Rules" New Hampshire Board of Architects, accessed Sept. 14, 2014. <http://www.nh.gov/boards/architects.htm>

once kept disciplines apart may now be necessary for their survival. Where once our “disciplinary blinders” needed to be removed in order to keep us alive, today it seems that architects want to look everywhere except the path laid out directly at their feet. In this now multi-disciplinary field, I am not surprised that *Pidgin* asks in this issue not how, but *if* there are forms of ethical engagement “for a profession whose survival may depend on its capacity to serve and leverage power.”

This question hinges on an implied paradox between acting ethically and leveraging power. Has exploiting our professional authority become tantamount to exploiting the subjugated masses? Has interdisciplinary dispersion glossed over the bureaucratic fact that architects exercise power with every drawing they stamp? As the perceived power of architects wanes, architectural firms seek out new models of practice. They are diversifying, seeking new funding sources, and new avenues towards profitability. In so doing they are also finding new ways to employ their knowledge and skills and creating partnerships and structures never before imagined. But what about the stamp? What about public authority, licensed and guaranteed capacity, or “technically and legally qualified practice?”

In an attempt to remove the implicit paradox between (ethical action) and (exercising state power), and to reformulate this question of ethics in architecture within the profession of architecture itself, I

would rather ask how Architects can ethically leverage the power of their public authority. Have we in our slow plodding, hobbled by the removal of our disciplinary blinders, forgotten that we were headed somewhere specific? Practicing architecture as an Architect is already a form of engagement through which to actively grapple with the power relations of the status quo. The difficulty of acting ethically in architecture is a sign of how important it is to continue trying, not a suggestion to look elsewhere. •

① see S.

* Ref. W. Lippman (1922: 73)
on "blind spots" + stereotypes

Editors

Melissa J. Frost
Van Kluytenaar
José Meza
Gina Morrow
Nicholas Risteen

Design

José Meza

Typography

Arnhem
Avenir

Printing

Brilliant, Exton, PA

ISBN

978-0-9891194-5-0

Copyright

© copyright 2014 *Pidgin*, all rights reserved.

All material is compiled from sources believed to be reliable, but published without responsibility for errors or omissions. We have attempted to contact all copyright holders, but this has not been possible in all circumstances. We apologize for any omissions and, if noted, will amend in any future editions.

Contact

pidgin@princeton.edu | www.pidginmagazine.com

Pidgin is a publication edited and designed by graduate students at the Princeton University School of Architecture. The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the attitudes and opinions of the editors or of the school. *Pidgin* is made possible by the generous support of Princeton University School of Architecture, Elise Jaffe + Jeffrey Brown, and a grant from the Barr Ferree Foundation Fund, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.

Issue 18



Architecture

Magazine