

The **Value** and **Values** of Architecture

Like most architects, I believe that what we do is valuable to our clients and to society at large. Probably, most of us believe that what we do is also value-laden, reflective of our own values as well as those of our clients and the larger community. But we have not been good at converting others to these beliefs; we have not been as effective as we should be in proving the value of what we do or in articulating the values implicit in our work. And yet, I can think of nothing more important for the profession right now.

Our inability to prove our value or articulate our values has a lot to do with the increasing marginalization of the profession within the building process, as competing service providers—program managers, construction managers, project managers—push the architect further and further away from the client, and delay the architect’s input to ever more belated stages of the design process. These managers are hardly more skilled or more knowledgeable than we are. They simply have been much better at convincing clients of their

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value and, not insignificantly, convincing clients of our relative lack of value. They have not only told their story; we have allowed them to tell our story, to our detriment.

A growing number of engineers and interior designers have been able to convince clients that they can produce a functional building or interior as well as an architect can, and that they can come closer to meeting the client's budget and schedule. At the same time, a growing number of program managers have been able to convince clients that they can put together a project team and manage the building process more effectively than an architect, justifying their fees by squeezing those of everyone else.

There is plenty of evidence to the contrary. An engineer or design-builder, perhaps with an architecturally trained person somewhere in the back room, may indeed produce a functional building, but rarely one that provides far more than what was required of it in the program, as good design should. A program manager may be able to deliver a project on time and in budget, but rarely without eliminating through the cost-cutting measures of "value engineering" some of the very things that added value in the first place, such as long-term durability.

Knowing the real limits of these other players in the process won't get us very far if the client has come to believe their version of our value or if the client does not understand the values inherent in what architects do. Nor will we get very far if we play into the caricature others make of us: living up to our unfair reputation as expensive aesthetes with no sense of time or money management, or, according to one developer, as engineers with an attitude.

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There are several reasons why we have played into our competitors' hands. First, we have tended to deemphasize written and verbal communication, having perhaps put too much trust in our drawing and modeling skills to convey our meaning, knowing full well that many clients have difficulty reading drawings or understanding the ideas in a model.

Admittedly, we also have tended to underestimate the importance of a working understanding of economics and finance, and of non-architectural skills such as time management. The schools have been partly to blame for this, mistakenly thinking that such things are vocational and thus beyond their responsibility. In doing so the schools have ignored the fact that these subjects are themselves areas of intellectual inquiry with methods related in some respects to those of design. But the blame goes beyond the schools; my first "all-nighter" was not at school but in a summer job at a firm that consistently ran behind schedule and over budget. The firm no longer exists.

A second, and possibly deeper, reason for some of our current troubles stems from the way many of us think about ourselves. In reaction to the perhaps overly rational quality of Modern architecture, we have, since the late 1960s, engaged in a kind of romantic rebellion that we call postmodernism, in which design has been seen as a personal exploration, a signature of each individual architect. Whatever else that has allowed, it has made it nearly impossible to analyze design or attempt to prove its value, since any such efforts are regarded by confirmed romantics as a threat to the mystery of our art, as if art and analysis are mutually exclusive.

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A third and related difficulty also arises from this romantic rebellion. Most of us were taught in school to think of ourselves as individualists and even encouraged to be iconoclasts. One result of that individualism is that it has accustomed us to think of ourselves as competitors, something more characteristic of a trade than a profession. (Professions, for example, share information and build a common knowledge base; trades keep secrets.) This, in turn, leads to a self-destructive cycle in which the more embattled we become in the marketplace, the more competitive we become for the work still available, the less collegial we are in our conduct, and the more difficult it is to work together to address our value, not as individual firms but as a profession.

Another result of our cultivation of iconoclastic individualism is that we have difficulty articulating our values or relating them to those of the larger society. There is, to be sure, a certain critical perspective gained by such alienation from the larger culture, leading to the call in the avant-garde for a “critical architecture” or a “critical practice.” Alienation, however, is problematic in this, the most social of the arts. I would argue that the greatest architecture of the past ennobled its culture rather than shunned it. Our responsibility as professionals is not to do “our own thing,” but to do the right thing, to assert the common good over personal gain or expression, to represent the values to which we aspire as a culture.

To remain silent about the values represented in what we do, either out of mistaken belief that professionals must remain ethically neutral or out of a romantic dismissal of all normative values, is to eliminate one of the main reasons for the profession’s very existence.

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Many of our competitors can draw, build, and manage buildings. The architect has a somewhat different charge: making sure that what gets built not only meets the needs of the client, but of the larger public good—of the people who will use the building, members of the community who will look at it and visit it, and future generations who will have to maintain it. In that light, the difficulty we have in demonstrating our value is tied to the larger problem of our economy's unwillingness or inability to put a value on a building user's happiness, a community's aesthetic pleasure, or the accommodation of future generations. Our value is tied to protecting something that economists, at least, do not put a price upon. And yet the public itself still very much values such things, evident in the rise of design review boards, preservation commissions, and the like. While many architects sit on such committees, these entities have been assembled, in part, to protect communities against the inappropriate or self-serving projects that have characterized the work of too many architects.

I saw this cycle at work in the architectural magazines, whose current troubles reflect those of the profession. Compared to other fields, such as law and medicine, our profession has not exerted the same control over or provided the same support for our journals. We largely depend upon commercial publishers, as opposed to nonprofit or academic presses, to supply our major publications, which has enabled us to pay considerably less for annual subscriptions and to receive relatively higher quality printing and photo reproduction than what other professions enjoy. We have paid a price, though, for this bargain. The architectural magazines have had to pay as much attention to what sells as to what needs to be said or known. Those

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two motives are not mutually exclusive, and several of the architectural magazines have managed to do both well at different points in their lives. However, the architectural press in general has stood out among professional publishing in its focus on the most celebrated practitioners, on the most idiosyncratic projects, and on the most current fashions. Measured against journals in other fields, ours have devoted relatively little attention to common practices, typical problems, or broadly applicable solutions, and, as a result, we have had a rather poor record in building the sort of knowledge base that other professions have constructed and maintained with great care.

However dire our situation may seem, I remain hopeful because I believe that the public remains open to being convinced of our value. Our profession, like all the major professions, was founded on the idea of our looking after the public good, and I think the public wants us to do that. We, in turn, need to do at least two things.

First, we need to find a way, as a profession, to prove the added value of architectural services. That will demand going beyond a smattering of advertising and public relations based on broad and largely unsupported generalizations that design improves the quality of life. We must begin to document in a rigorous manner the consequences—good and bad—of what we do and to communicate those effects in a way that ordinary people understand. Done well, such an effort would begin to counter the perception among too many people that architecture is an expense to be minimized or that architects are aesthetes who must be managed. The documentation of the value we bring would also equip us with the tools we need to demonstrate that we can protect people's investment by making sure

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that it is spent in the most effective and creative way to meet the greatest number of needs in the most timely fashion.

Other fields offer us an example of how this might take place. Consider the brokerage profession. Its members are well paid and it has attracted a tremendous amount of both public and private investment, even with the knowledge that the investment may lose money. The stock market in the 1990s has reached record highs, in part because that profession has done a very good job of demonstrating that stock investments outperform all other kinds of investments over the long term, an argument that every broker makes and has ample evidence—available industrywide—to prove it. That united effort at proving the value of brokerage services has occurred in spite of the intense competition that exists among the various brokerage houses. Each individual firm set aside its differences for the good of the whole.

Of course, architecture is not like investing and buildings are not like stocks. Nevertheless a building, like an investment, performs. We can measure that performance in a variety of ways, be it in terms of assessed value or leasing rates or worker productivity or retail sales. The main difference between our field and that of brokerage is that brokers know not only how particular stocks have performed, but also how the industry as a whole has performed over time. Brokers can demonstrate that investing in the market is, in the long term, better than, say, putting one's money in a savings account or under the mattress. Architects have remarkably little knowledge of this kind. It is only now becoming a more common practice for architects to return to their buildings and rigorously assess what worked and what didn't. (During the last few years of *Progressive Architecture* magazine's

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existence, we began returning to buildings a year or two after completion and found a great deal of anger among clients and users. The resentments arose not so much from the fact that not everything worked perfectly, but that the architects had never returned to ask about the problems.) And we have almost no knowledge of how architect-designed buildings have performed in relation to those that are not—even though to a client with an increasing number of options for the delivery of a building, that may be the most pertinent information upon which to base a decision.

The reason clients could use that information brings us to another parallel between investing and architecture, one that we often don't face as squarely as stockbrokers do. That is the matter of risk. We tend to downplay risk, holding up our compliance with the building and zoning codes as evidence. Clients, however, are well aware of the risk in hiring an architect, not because there is a possibility of the building falling down but because the outcome of investing their money and time seems so unpredictable. As opposed to a prefabricated metal building, for instance, architecture involves an exploration, a process of discovering solutions to complex needs or tectonic problems. The result of such a process is unknown at the beginning, in the same sense that the outcome of a stock investment, even in the most blue chip of companies, is unpredictable.

The long-term record of stock performance minimizes the sense of exposure for investments. We do not possess such data, which may be why some clients, operating in a highly volatile economy, go to those who offer a more predictable result, such as an engineer or a turnkey design builder or a package interior designer-manufacturer.

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But the brokerage industry has used risk to its advantage, showing how risk and return are related. Even neophyte investors are aware that the higher the risk, the higher the potential return on their investment.

We, too, should know what the return has been for architects who have taken relatively larger risks versus those who have not. The reason has to do with fees. Without this knowledge, everyone is competing based on the lowest fees, which makes it difficult to do any high-risk (exploratory, ground-breaking) architecture. In such a climate, too many architects are forced to do unimaginative “low-risk” work, and a few architects to do high-risk work for ridiculously low fees. Besides the need to know the return on high-risk work, we should know what kind of risks are worth taking and which aren't. This would enable us to charge fees based not on bidding or price cutting, but on the degree of return we historically have provided.

Building such a knowledge base may seem too daunting a task, but I believe it is possible and absolutely necessary if this profession is to thrive. It is possible because the means of accomplishing this are at hand, and the main obstacle has more to do with our own romantic self-image than it does with the allocation of time or money.

The process might go something like this: a representative group would establish a method by which firms begin collecting information about their own work, using certain agreed measures depending upon the building type, client type, and so on. Residential architects could collect information on assessed values of the houses they have designed and on how those assessments compare with the value of similar houses in the area. Commercial architects might compare the rental rates or leasing percentages of their buildings to similar buildings in which

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design played a minimal role. Industrial architects might examine the operation costs of their buildings or the productivity of employees and compare them to other mass-produced facilities. The profession, in other words, could become a frontline data collector. The common good would impel all firms to pool the information, anonymously if so desired, to begin to build a shared database.

The schools of architecture could help in instructing firms about basic data-gathering methods and could work with the American Institute of Architects to pursue funding to begin cataloging, organizing, and redistributing this information to every architect for use with clients. In that way, we can begin to create an information loop related to the value of architectural services, arming the profession with the kind of knowledge it needs to compete and providing appropriately supportive and essential roles for both the schools and the AIA.

There would be risks here, as there are with every research project. For example, not every architecturally designed building may perform substantially better than those delivered by other means, but all the more reason to find out where the real value of what we do lies, where the risks we take pay off and where they don't. There are also significant rewards for such a sustained effort in demonstrating our values as a profession. When I write about buildings and, in the process, talk to various people from the architect to the janitor, I am constantly struck by how often the discussion involves questions of values—what people want in their work or their home, how people see themselves and how their environment might reflect that, and how people interact with each other and what is required to make that interaction happen. I am likewise struck by how wide a gap sometimes

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exists between the values of building users and those of architects. The addressing of values is, I think, the very stuff of architecture, what sets it apart from mere building. But we cannot exclude from examination our own values as a profession, values that, particularly in the past fifty years, have tended to diverge from those of the people we design for. I don't mean to portray the architect as a social deviant. Most architects share in the aspirations of the larger culture: property ownership, familial security, community involvement, personal liberty and growth. But the architectural culture, like the arts culture generally, has set itself apart from the bourgeoisie on matters of taste in a tired refrain from the old Modernist avant-garde. We should not overreact to that tradition and, as some postmodernists have done, blindly accept popular taste and willfully pander to public prejudices. Rather, we should look critically at what we value, examining the assumptions, contradictions, and consequences of what we hold dear.

Building the architectural knowledge base thus entails not only quantifiable measures, but qualitative documentation of what people value. We may find that our values do not jibe, but understanding and to a degree empathizing with values one does not hold is central not only to architecture but to politics, both of which must find ways, organizationally and structurally, to bring people together. We can have all the information possible about the consequences of what we do, but we also need a better grasp of the political judgment necessary to apply that knowledge appropriately, at the right time in the right place. We call that design, but it also goes by the name of leadership, and there are few things in this world that people value more than that.

As a magazine editor, I spent years visiting architectural firms, and while most architects eagerly showed me their work, very few ever talked about their practices. When I inquired about the latter, I would hear virtually the same thing: whether busy or not, practitioners admitted that profits or compensation could be better. Why, I wondered, did the architectural profession accept this situation as if nothing could be done about it? Why did well-educated, highly experienced, extremely knowledgeable professionals tolerate incomes lower than those in fields requiring less schooling and much less risk? Why did we seem so fatalistic about our practices when we often show such confidence in finding design solutions to almost any problem our clients present us with?

One reason, I think, has to do with the compartmentalized way we view design and practice. Most schools encourage us to think of design and practice as separate realms, relegating the practice “support” courses to the end of the curriculum, long

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after students have come to think of design as the making of form and the shaping of space. Likewise, the specialization so characteristic of higher education discourages those who teach the practice courses from connecting their subject to what students learn in design studio.

The division between design and practice carries into the work world. Few partners think of applying to the organization and operation of the firm the same creativity employed in their architectural work. As a result, the design of the firm often has no connection to the design work produced by the office: avant-garde architects frequently run the most conservatively structured work environments. We cannot blame individual offices and schools for this disconnect between design and practice. They are part of a culture in architecture that has maintained this split for a long time, and part of a mind-set that can be traced back centuries to divisions, in Western culture at least, between art and business, thinking and doing, gentry and merchants. Questioning these false dichotomies is what every architectural firm and school must do if it is to thrive in the coming years.

Architectural practice, in short, has become one of the major design problems of our time. While addressing this problem will demand changes in how we practice, it must begin with a redefinition of design. By defining design in the narrowest and most conventional terms, such as giving form to environments or objects, we have created an unnecessary obstacle for ourselves, limiting the application of our knowledge and, not coincidentally, limiting the influence of our discipline. If, instead, we see design as the finding of optimal solutions to difficult and complex problems, then the notion of designing architectural practice becomes comprehensible, part of a continuum

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of design thinking that need not stop with our own offices or even our own discipline. The question then becomes, How do we apply design thinking to practice?

As with any design problem, we must begin by defining its nature. What needs must we address? What context must we work within? What means do we have at our disposal? The conditions in which most firms now practice have given a sense of urgency to such questions. The context surrounding the architectural profession has changed so much in recent years that many offices now find it difficult to achieve even the most basic motivations for professional practice: personal satisfaction, professional respect, and profit. *Until we first understand these contextual changes, we cannot define our needs or how we might accommodate them.*

One of the major changes surrounding practice involves the decreasing input and influence that architects now have in projects. Earlier in this century, as soon as clients had perceived the need for a building, they typically commissioned an architect to help them through the process. Now, other entities, including accountants, contractors, and developers, have become dominant at the front end of the building process, guiding clients through decisions about such things as location, siting, size, function, and financing, all of which have a tremendous impact on the final outcome of a project. Architects, in turn, have been pushed back in the schedule, having less influence over critical early decisions. Not only has this shift in power produced a lot of bad buildings, but it has resulted in architects adding less value and so commanding lower fees and less respect.

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Another critical change in the context of architectural practice has been a reduction in the control we have over our work. Related to the timing of our involvement in projects, this change stems from a shift in many clients' perception of us. Certainly one way in which program managers, construction managers, and project managers make themselves look good in the eyes of a client and help justify their fees is to disparage the architect who traditionally provided such services. As a result, more and more clients have over time come to see architects as unable to control projects and in need of outside management. Our profession is not alone in this. The management of professionals has become a booming business, as doctors know when they have to get *permission from HMOs to recommend procedures* or as lawyers know when corporate accountants require them to bid for work or to cap the number of hours spent on a case. In construction, this has created a situation in which the architect, once the leader of the building team, has been relegated to the role of just another participant, often with remarkably little control over decisions about the work. We have sometimes been our own worst enemy: the gradual reduction of our responsibilities in the standard contracts we ourselves issue has aided our marginalization. But we are not the only losers; the public loses as well, as the focus on the bottom lines of budget and schedule degrades the quality of the environment we all live in.

A third change in the context of architectural practice has to do with the time allowed to do our work. The less influence and control we have, the more likely others, who may not be aware of what architects actually do, will determine how much time we have to work. The increasing pace of our work reflects a similar expectation across

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the entire economy, fueled by information technology and automated systems of various sorts that operate at a speed (and a stupidity) unmatched by humans. The computer, like most technology, has made practice easier at one level and much more difficult at another, and we, as a profession and as citizens, have not addressed the difficulties nearly enough. Along with clients' expectations for ever-faster service, there exists an expectation of error-free performance on the part of professionals. This reflects the quest, also pervasive in modern culture, for certainty, perfectibility, and infallibility. At a time when clients can insure themselves against almost anything, they increasingly want the same insurance in the very complicated and risky business of construction, often at the expense of architects and their insurers. Any delay, any error, and we pay.

The changing context of architecture in many ways defines the needs that any redesign of practice must address. We need to find ways to advance our design input to earlier stages of the decision-making process, we need to improve our control of project budgets and schedules, and we need to defend the time that the design process requires to produce the desired results. At the same time, we must use as leverage what means we have to address these problems, since clients or other disciplines are unlikely to do it for us. Here, the division between design and practice has become most acute. While we doggedly pursue ways of achieving aesthetic goals in buildings, we act rather timidly in the pursuit of public policy changes that would enable us to reach no less ambitious goals in practice. The main channel for such changes, the American Institute of Architects, generally sees its responsibility rather narrowly, pursuing legislation

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that will benefit architects in the short term, such as increasing investment in buildings or cities, defending architects' professional turf, and so on. Proposing any effective public policy that addresses the broader changes in the context of practice has yet to happen.

A small but growing number of architectural firms have not waited for the professional association to act. They have, instead, begun to redefine what they do and to redesign the way they do it. While this has occurred across a broad spectrum of practice, this redesign falls into roughly four groups.

Firms that have redefined the geography of practice constitute the first group. Operating at an international scale, such firms, as they have come in contact with other cultures and other modes of practice, have had to reenvision who they are, what they have to offer, and how they operate. The notion of a firm doing work overseas is not new; throughout the twentieth century, the largest offices have operated across the globe, sometimes with branch offices in foreign lands and other times by using the telephone and mail to communicate with associate architects on location. In previous decades, that geographical spread had relatively little impact on the design of the firm itself.

Now, we see hybrid organizations of various kinds emerging, all with globalism in mind. Some firms have used electronic technology to treat distant offices as contiguous with their own, employing computer modems to dispatch drawings back and forth so that projects can be worked on around the clock. This addresses the desire of clients for the super-fast production of documents and the need of firms to be more productive and thus better paid. A similar approach, equally dependent upon electronics and telecommuting, is the "virtual" firm.

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Such firms exist across a wide territory without there being a central office or, in some cases, a central firm at all. Smaller firms especially have begun to form strategic alliances or affiliations that allow each to still practice independently in their local area, but to compete together on larger projects, to share information among themselves, and to complement the expertise of each other. They can thus achieve the economy of scale enjoyed by large firms but without the overhead, sometimes maintaining only a small front office with meeting rooms and a reception area in which to greet clients.

While similar in their use of technology, these two approaches differ in an important way. The global firms, like those in the communications and financial industries, have discovered that their value increases with their ability to move information or data rapidly and to keep it flowing twenty-four hours a day. Because we associate architecture with the making of large, physical objects, we tend not to think of our field as primarily an information activity, but that is what it has largely become, and the global firms have recognized that fact. The “virtual” firms have used as leverage a different advantage: the need in the global economy to respond rapidly to changing demands. These firms bring together teams of experts to address a particular problem or to apply a highly developed skill, disbanding the group once the needs of a particular client are met. They have, in essence, expanded what most architectural firms do already in assembling consultants to work on buildings.

A second group includes firms that have redesigned themselves by expanding the services they offer. This comes, in part, because of the incursions that others outside the field—construction managers,

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engineers, interior designers—have made upon the traditional turf of architects. At the front end of the design process, program managers, competition consultants, strategic planners, and a host of others have positioned themselves to divert clients before they ever reach the architect, offering guidance at the inception of projects with little of the regulation, less of the liability, and none of the licensure requirements that architects face. A smattering of architectural firms have responded to this competition by offering clients strategic planning, facility analysis, even real estate and development advice. Such services have attracted higher fees than those typically paid to architects, and for some firms this work has grown faster than any other part of their practice. Larger firms have added staff to provide these services; smaller offices have done so by developing networks that include disciplines such as finance and organizational management. This diversity of disciplines creates a challenge in offices, in getting professionals with different values, expectations, and languages to communicate and collaborate effectively. But success in offering front-end services requires such communication, since firms cannot reasonably offer strategic services if they, themselves, cannot act in coordination.

Meanwhile, facility managers and building operations specialists of various kinds have begun to populate the once-undeveloped areas beyond the building's delivery, providing services over the life of the building rather than, as architects have traditionally done, up to the point of the structure's completion. The property at the back end of the design process covers much more territory than what architects have traditionally occupied. Buildings last a long time and their upkeep

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and operation demand ongoing services, which differ from the relatively short burst of activity that constitutes design and construction. Facilities managers have not competed with architects so much as taken a lot of turf that the profession might have staked out for itself.

Some architects have taken the initiative in this regard. Offering facilities management services, these firms have learned that staying involved with clients, in the way lawyers counsel clients for years, has long-term benefits, generating an extraordinary amount of repeat work. In one firm, over 80 percent of its work is repeat business because of the office's ongoing relationship with clients as their facilities manager. Much of this repeat work, as well as much facilities management, lacks glamour, but such services position firms to get the major commissions when they do appear because of the office's proven track record and knowledge of the client company.

The blurring of the architectural profession's traditional boundaries brings us to a third approach that many firms have taken in the redesign of practice: expanding the discipline itself. Despite the often broad interests of architects, the profession tends to look inward, rarely engaging in discussion with other fields. A number of firms, though, have begun to embrace other disciplines seemingly far removed from what architects do. Some firms, for example, now employ computer scientists to develop software, graphic designers to offer corporate identity services, and experts in areas such as health care or education to solidify their position in the design of particular building types. More unconventional partnerships have arisen as well. One firm, focusing on the design of "healthy" buildings, includes a physician who examines the components of proprietary materials to

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gauge their effects on users' health. Another, providing security services, includes a criminologist and a specialist on terrorism.

Such partnerships reveal a dilemma at the heart of the architectural profession: the question of specialization. Some argue that we must all become more specialized in order to thrive, while others feel that our strength rests with our being one of the last generalist professions. To a certain degree, both sides are right. Our interdisciplinary problem-solving skills do set us apart from other professions, although most clients also value us according to the extent of our specialized knowledge, seeking out firms that have done other projects just like the one under consideration. The resolution seems to lie in bringing a generalist's insight to specialized knowledge, enhancing the latter without losing the former.

A fourth area in which architects have begun to redesign practice involves not expanding, but regrading the profession's own turf. Our turf has traditionally had three distinct regions occupied by different kinds of firms—design firms focused on form and aesthetics, service firms geared to responding to clients' needs, and production firms structured to turn out contract documents quickly and efficiently. Clients, however, have come to expect all three: fast delivery, attentive service, and good design. That, in turn, has led a number of firms to reexamine their practices to eliminate inefficiencies and speed up the process, while still producing high-quality work.

At one large firm, the designers have institutionalized a preschematic phase in which they generate a strong, simple concept for the project that all team members understand and support, which speeds up later design stages and which informs the decisions everyone

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makes through the completion of the project. (This firm wins design awards from the profession and service awards from client groups.) At the other extreme in terms of design, but not profit, is an equally large firm that has developed a “kit of parts” for the particular kind of building they specialize in, enabling them to generate a site plan within twenty-four hours of the client’s first visit and design drawings in a week or so. Both of these firms indicate that the once-clear lines between different types of offices have begun to blur. Design firms can be very service oriented, service firms very production oriented.

Such firms raise a question about the relationship of architectural practice and time. Most architectural schools inculcate a culture in which time seems *infinitely expandable*, or rather, *expendable*, with “all-nighters” viewed as a badge of honor, a necessary induction into the club. This quaint view runs up against a world in which all work has had to become more productive, to accomplish more in less time. Some argue that design cannot be tethered to the clock, that creative ideas do not always come when summoned. But other creative fields—writing and journalism, for example—defy that myth, as their practitioners have learned to create under tight deadlines. Architects must learn to do the same. The schools need to put more emphasis on time management and architectural offices need to find ways to increase the pace of design and production, without affecting quality.

How successful have these various redesign efforts been? A few firms report higher profits, faster growth, and better compensation. The profession, however, has yet to engage in a rigorous “postoccupancy” evaluation of the changes occurring in practice. The absence of such analysis is a reflection, perhaps, of our general inability to evaluate

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buildings after the fact for fear of exposing mistakes and for lack of funds for such work. If we are to improve our lot as a profession, we must find a way to describe and evaluate the diversity of our methods. The same is true if we are to improve our lot as designers. In analyzing the design of our practices, we will begin to discover how design thinking relates to all forms of human action and organization, not just in our own offices but in those of our clients. All too often, clients need not just a new building but a new identity for their products or services, new ways of organizing and motivating employees, a new way of making or delivering product. All of these needs also involve design, and when we see all such operations as within the architect's purview, we will have reached a significant turning point in the profession. We will no longer be just building form-givers, but architects in the broadest sense of the word, which, I would argue, is our rightful place in the world.

In February 1988, *Progressive Architecture* magazine published the results of a survey polling one thousand randomly selected North American architects for their opinion of professional ethics. The results were not encouraging. Some 65 percent of those polled thought that a significant number of their colleagues engaged in some form of unethical behavior; 78 percent thought that the code of ethics and professional conduct of the American Institute of Architects was too weak to have much of an influence over practitioners; and 90 percent thought that the AIA would be reluctant to enforce the code even if violations were brought to its attention.

Why such disillusionment with the behavior of our colleagues and with the AIA's code of ethics and its enforcement? I don't claim to have an answer to such questions, but I thought that I might offer some perspective as to why we have a code of ethics in the first place, why it has not been as effective as we might hope, and what we might do about it.

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The author of that 1988 *P/A* article, John Morris Dixon, attributed the unethical behavior to the profession's being "engaged in intense competition, pressed for money, and tempted to please clients at any cost." Dixon also acknowledged that "the possibilities of self-policing in the profession are limited both by lack of agreement in some areas and by the government's restrictions on efforts that might affect competition."

If competitive pressures push architects toward unethical behavior today, they were also the cause of the very first discussions of ethics in the profession. As Henry Saylor writes in his history *The AIA's First Hundred Years*, competition was "perhaps the most disturbing factor in the relations of architect to architect and architect to potential client." As a result, in December 1909, the Institute wrote the first code of ethics, with the catchy title "Circular of Advice Relative to Principles of Professional Practice and the Canons of Ethics."

To our ear, some parts of that first code sound downright uptight. "It is improper," it said, "to (1.) engage in building; (2.) guarantee an estimate; (3.) accept payment from anyone other than a client; (4.) to pay for advertising; (5.) to take any part in a competition not approved by the AIA." Other parts of that first code, however, sound all too familiar, such as calling it unethical "(9.) to injure falsely or maliciously the reputation of a fellow practitioner; (10.) to undertake work in which there is an unsettled claim; (11.) to attempt to supplant another architect already engaged."

The biggest changes in the code of ethics from 1909 to this day have been the disappearance of prohibitions against competition and the increased use of broader ethical concepts, such as honesty, fairness,

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dignity, and integrity. These changes have made the code more safe; even the Justice Department cannot dispute the advocating of honesty or fairness. But, as the *P/A* reader poll suggests, such terms may have made the code so broad as to be ineffectual. The AIA's own Office of the General Counsel offers evidence of that in its advisory opinions, which it writes in response to specific ethical dilemmas that members face, such as uncompensated design services, referral fees, endorsements, gender discrimination, use of another architect's drawings, and so on. Those opinions are useful and interesting to read. They highlight, however, the deficiencies of the code, whose broad statements seem contrary to the specificity and concreteness that ethics demands.

Ethics arises out of a dilemma, a situation in which right and wrong are not entirely clear, and codes of ethics are an attempt to prevent such dilemmas from recurring by developing principles to guide our behavior. The question is why, in 1909, did this occur in architecture? What dilemmas did the profession face that prompted the writing of the first code? And why, some fifty years after the founding of the Institute, did members see a need to regulate the behavior of their colleagues?

The answer to those questions lies, in part, in a shift that occurred in the profession in the latter part of the nineteenth century away from a vernacular, apprentice form of education to the competition-based French system of education associated with the *École des Beaux-Arts*. While that system is still very much with us and has been the source of much good in the profession, its transplantation to these shores created some enormous conflicts for architects.

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In France, competitions largely occurred for governmental projects within a political system that was highly centralized and regulated. When that same system was imported here, however, our less regulated free-market system and less centralized government began to use competitions differently from what was done in France. As Saylor observes, competitions became an opportunity for exploitation by unscrupulous clients and a major source of unethical behavior on the part of some architects.

Ironically, while the number of competitions and the amount of corruption associated with them increased, architects were simultaneously attempting to control competition through *professionalization*. Like other professions, we sought to have the various states grant us a monopoly over our area of practice through licensure in exchange for the greater good that comes from our advancing knowledge and attending to public health and safety needs. Other professions such as law and medicine have managed, until relatively recently, to limit competitive pressures on their fees in the marketplace. But unlike those others, the architectural profession has been of two minds about competitions, making a code of ethics almost inevitable for us. If we couldn't control the behavior of clients in the system we ourselves had helped establish, we could at least try to control the behavior of our colleagues—with mixed results, as the *P/A* survey shows.

The mixed results are, in some respects, inherent in the very idea of a written code of ethics. First, codifying ethical behavior in a set of principles is extremely difficult. Such principles either become so prescriptive that they run afoul, at least in this country, of our

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government-enforced free-market system, or so broad that they become platitudes that few can argue with and everyone can ignore. Second, ethics has a dynamic quality that can get lost in the codifying. Ethical dilemmas are ever changing and so difficult to address with codified standards. Indeed, the frequency with which the AIA has rewritten its code of ethics demonstrates the difficulty of trying to reduce behavior that is almost infinitely varied to relatively few principles.

Experiencing similar difficulties, other professions have begun to see ethics not just as the subject for a written code, but as the basis for an ongoing conversation about what constitutes good behavior or the right decision under particular conditions. Legal ethics and, most notably, medical ethics have become major areas of debate and discussion in those fields, with whole conferences and entire journals devoted to the subjects.

The architectural profession, I believe, needs to begin its own ongoing ethical discourse; at the least, symposia addressing the subject should be a regular feature of professional conferences. Like our colleagues in other professions, however, we face real obstacles to engaging in that conversation because of the desiccated state of modern ethics. “The resources of most modern moral philosophy,” writes the philosopher Bernard Williams, “are not well adjusted to the modern world.” Ethics, he continues, “is too far removed, as Hegel first said it was, from social and historical reality and from any concrete sense of a particular ethical life.... It is not a paradox that in these very new circumstances very old philosophies may have more to offer than moderately new ones.”

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Like Williams, I believe that some “very old philosophies” can help us understand and resolve many of today’s ethical dilemmas. To show how and why that is so, I will use four classical theories of ethics as a framework within which we might begin a conversation about some of the ethical issues we face as a profession.

Before I take up those questions, let me provide a bit of the ethical context surrounding the AIA’s 1909 code. It emerged at a time when ethics was undergoing a modernist revolution of sorts, set off by the work of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and the English philosopher G. E. Moore. In books such as *The Will to Power*, published in 1901, Nietzsche argued that the dominant Christian ethics of his day weakened Western cultures in the Darwinian struggle for supremacy. Turning traditional ethics on its head, Nietzsche elevated the values of the individual will and the power of the strong over the weak, the very things that moral philosophy had for so long sought to curb.

In a more mild-mannered but no less radical move, G. E. Moore in his 1903 book *Principia Ethica* argued that the “good” is a simple, unanalyzable property that we can know through intuition, but cannot define. Moore and his students, such as Bertrand Russell, succeeded in removing ethics as a subject about which we have anything to say.

I don’t mean to suggest that the AIA’s code of ethics was a direct result of these books. I doubt that more than a handful of architects were even aware of Nietzsche or Moore at the time. But I think that, as so often happens in the history of thought, these philosophies articulated a point of view that had already become relatively widespread; the speed with which Nietzsche and Moore’s ideas were embraced indicates a readiness on the part of many people for them.

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By dismissing most of the ethical past and envisioning an ethical future of personal intuition and individual will, Nietzsche and Moore mark a shift in Western ethics. No longer could we assume that people would obey the traditional standards and expectations of behavior, the so-called gentlemen's agreements upon which much of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century society relied. In response, more explicit and more legalistic forms of regulating behavior arose in the early twentieth century. Codes of ethics, along with building and zoning codes, were established during the same era to control by external means the restraints that in previous periods had been internalized in most individuals and enforced through more informal means such as tradition and peer pressure. The AIA's code of ethics, in other words, might be seen as a response to and a product of modernism. The discourse about ethics that has begun to emerge in recent years among the professions might be seen as a modernist critique, an effort to recover guidance for the future from the ethical debates of the past.

Let's begin at the traditional starting point of Western ethics, with Plato. He argued that unethical behavior stemmed from a lack of knowledge or, put another way, that people would act ethically if they understood the full consequences of not doing so. This is admittedly an optimistic and idealistic view; Plato assumes that unethical behavior arises from ignorance rather than, say, evil. His position, which has been extremely influential over the past 2,300 years, underlies a number of the standards and rules of conduct in the AIA's code of ethics.

For example, the opening line of the code states that members should "strive to improve their professional knowledge and skill," echoing the Platonic belief that ethical behavior derives from education

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and self-improvement. At the same time, Plato believed that an absolute “good” exists for every situation and that we can arrive at it through continual questioning, echoed in the code’s urging members to “continually seek to raise the standards of aesthetic excellence, architectural education, research, training, and practice.”

Plato’s ethics works best when the consequences of actions are clear. For example, when the AIA’s code of ethics calls for members to “uphold the law in the conduct of their professional activities,” the consequences of not doing so are obvious. The law becomes, if not the absolute good, at least that which we should absolutely avoid breaking. Indeed, the code has more of a legal tone than it does an ethical one, using such legalistic terms as *human rights*, *discrimination*, *fraud*, and *conflict of interest*. That no doubt reflects the Office of General Counsel’s involvement in helping draft the AIA code. It also shows, however, how much ethics itself has been reduced to and defined as legal behavior rather than in a traditional sense of the “good.” The AIA’s code of ethics doesn’t even use the word “good,” perhaps because of the difficulty of defining it in a court of law, even though the definition of that word lies at the very heart of ethical discourse.

Back to Plato. His ethics, for all of its insight, fails us when the consequences of behavior lack clarity. In the *P/A* survey, for example, readers split over whether or not certain actions were unethical, such as paying recent graduates exceptionally low wages in exchange for work experience. Some 35 percent thought it was unethical; 65 percent thought not. Plato’s ethics offers relatively little guidance here, in part because the consequences of paying low wages are not obvious. It clearly affects the employees, who may not make enough to live on,

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but what if they accept the low wages as a trade-off for desired experience? Low wages also affect the bottom line and reputation of the firm, in opposite ways, but how much weight do we place on one over the other? Also, if such a practice became common enough, it would negatively affect the image of the profession, which it already has to some extent. But is that enough to overcome the practice's other benefits?

Such questions are the sort that a discourse about ethics in the profession should take up. They lie beyond the generalities of the written code, which simply states that “members should provide their associates and employees with a suitable working environment, compensate them fairly, and facilitate their professional development.” Arriving at a consensus about such dilemmas demands an ongoing conversation, because only then will we come to know their full meaning and their real consequences.

One of the strongest critics of Plato's ethics was his student Aristotle, who believed that more than one right course of action existed for a given situation, and that we had to have a way of judging the good without waiting for full knowledge of its consequences, which often is impossible, anyway. Ethics, for Aristotle, had as its goal a happy life, which he believed was best achieved through the moderation of extremes. The ethical person, for instance, exhibits a proper pride as the mean between empty vanity and undue humility or a liberality with money as the mean between prodigality and meanness.

The AIA's code of ethics has many passages that echo that Aristotelian moderation. In the standard that urges members to “serve their clients in a timely and competent manner,” timely could be said

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to represent the mean between, say, super-fast-tracking and outright sloth. But what about competence? Is it really the mean between incompetence and overcompetence? Imagine telling your client that you offer a moderate amount of competence, but not too much.

If Aristotle's ethics encounters difficulties dealing with concepts that don't lend themselves to the moderation of extremes, so, too, does his ethics fall short when dealing with such absolutes as the law. Take the rule in the AIA code that says "members shall not ... knowingly violate the law." Violating the law in moderation—as the mean between being law abiding and, say, a major criminal—is not an ethical option.

Still, Aristotle's ideas can contribute to a discourse about ethics *in the profession*. A number of ethical dilemmas that can occur in the course of architectural practice, such as accepting gifts from contractors and building product manufacturers or moonlighting while employed in a firm, could benefit from an Aristotelian analysis. Do all gifts or all moonlighting count as unethical, or should the size of the gift or the amount of moonlighting affect our view? Is occasional moonlighting that does not affect an employee's performance the same as someone working two full-time jobs? Is a modest gift given as a token of appreciation, with more sentimental than monetary value, the same as one given to influence a decision?

The AIA code implies a difference when it says, for example, that "Members shall neither offer nor make any payment or gift to a public official with the intent of influencing the official's judgment." Yet how can we measure someone's intent or base an enforceable code upon it? Such are the questions that Aristotle's ethics can help us sort out.

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The “old philosophies” of the Romans also offer some guidance in dealing with our ethical dilemmas as a profession. For example, stoic thinkers such as Epictetus or the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius thought that unethical actions occur when people are overly influenced by and dependent upon external circumstances. Ethical behavior, they believed, stems from individuals becoming indifferent to outside influence and taking responsibility for only that which the individual can control.

Those ideas find their way into the AIA code in statements such as “Members shall not sign or seal drawings, specifications, reports, or other professional work for which they do not have responsible control,” or “Members should avoid conflict of interest in their professional practices.” Such stress on the avoidance of responsibility or conflict recalls the stoic goal of achieving a calm indifference as the route to a good life.

The difficulty here is that professionals can rarely afford to be indifferent, even if we’d like to. As most architects learn at some point in their careers, denying responsibility for actions beyond our control does not mean that we will not get sued. Nor does the denial of responsibility jibe with the notion of the professional as a person prepared to take knowledgeable risk, or with our own self-image as a profession concerned about public issues. Can anyone engaged in this most social of the arts afford to withdraw into a stoic calm?

There is a reason, though, why we hear the echo of stoicism not only in the AIA’s code of ethics, but in the AIA’s standard contracts, which over the years have sought to relieve architects of responsibility and with it, some claim, an adequate reward for our

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effort. The connection between stoicism and American law runs deep. As the legal theorist W. Friedmann writes, “The stoics first developed a coherent legal philosophy based upon the individual as a reasonable being ... [with] inalienable rights,” which, in turn, has been the intellectual basis of much American jurisprudence. Attorneys—like good stoics—seem constitutionally driven, both literally and figuratively, to insulate us from risk. Any discourse on ethics in the profession must address this issue. We need to decide whether we want our code of ethics to reflect our values or those of our lawyers.

Another useful ethical position that we inherited from the Romans is hedonism. The inverse of the stoic’s avoidance of pain, the hedonist seeks pleasure as the sole good. And, in part because so much of our ethical codes have derived from stoicism, hedonism seems like the very thing we write such codes to guard against. After all, the unethical behavior of professionals often involves the taking advantage of a person or a situation for personal gain or pleasure.

The notion of pleasure that hedonism originally propounded, however, was not at all inconsistent with a code of ethics such as the AIA’s. The Roman philosopher, Epicurus, held that the greatest pleasures of life are knowledge and the mutual respect of friends. So, when the AIA’s code urges members to “recognize and respect the professional contributions of their employees, employers, professional colleagues, and business associates,” it has a distinctly Epicurean sound.

Yet, the *P/A* survey suggests that the unethical treatment of employees and colleagues ranks among the most common violations. Respondents listed “putting one’s seal on drawings one has not supervised” as one of the most frequent abuses, followed by such

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actions as “accepting full credit for work that others collaborated on” or “hiring/keeping employees with false promises of advancement.”

Why the frequency of this behavior? It may stem, in part, from the very nature of architectural practice, which seems structured to promote the pleasure of a few over the many. The division of labor and structure of relationships in all but the smallest architectural offices set up situations in which partners get credit for the work of employees or sign drawings others have produced.

With such an ethical dilemma, a modified version of hedonism—utilitarianism—might be of some use. The nineteenth-century thinkers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill proposed the principle of utility as a way of overcoming the problem of equating hedonism with personal pleasure and power. Instead, they argued, we must look to what produces the greatest happiness or pleasure for the greatest number of people.

Although the principle of utility may now be as misunderstood as hedonism, it does at least give us a way of evaluating the effects of exploiting employees or misrepresenting responsibility in an office. An action that fails the test of utility—that does not extend the greatest happiness or satisfaction to the greatest number of people—fails for everyone, the perpetrator of the action as well as its recipients. A selfish hedonism literally has no utility, no use especially in a setting such as an architectural office where the interdependence of employees and employer makes the happiness of the greatest number crucial to the ability of the firm to perform.

At this point, you might be wondering what good all of this talk about ethics is if it can't be enforced. Remember that 90 percent of

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those who responded to the *P/A* poll thought that the code of ethics would not be enforced even if violations were brought to the attention of the AIA.

There are a couple of ways to think about enforcement, one that is more common and another that is more effective. The more common approach says that a violation of the code of ethics can lead to the suspension of membership in the AIA or, depending upon the violation, prosecution under the law. This echoes the ethical position of the eighteenth-century thinker Immanuel Kant, who argued that we have a duty as members of a society to obey its ethical obligations and that society, in turn, has an absolute right to punish us for our lapses in this duty. He acknowledged that there might be situations that demanded we act according to our conscience, even if it goes against a societal practice, and he gave us a few rules to go by in this: “act as if every action were to become a universal law” and “treat every person as an end, rather than as a means to some other end.” You hear these precepts in such passages in the AIA code as “members shall not engage in conduct involving fraud or wanton disregard of the rights of others.”

The difficulties you run into with Kant’s formalism, and with depending upon the threat of punishment as the basis for enforcing the code of ethics, involve situations in which there is a conflict between duties. One example relates to the conflict in the AIA code between the standard that says that “members should uphold the law in the conduct of their professional activities,” and the one that says that “members should safeguard the trust placed in them by their clients.”

It may happen that one aspect of the law, as written, appears to violate another, as was true in a recent first amendment case involving

the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota. Because the Mall is privately owned and so able, according to property law, to determine the speech and behavior of those who enter, its owners created a place for free speech outside, in the middle of a traffic island. The state courts, however, decided that this violated the first amendment of Minnesota's constitution, which not only protects free speech but also prohibits any physical act that would prevent it (a decision that was subsequently overturned upon appeal). Which law does the architect follow in such a case? What happens when the client's wishes meet one interpretation of the law and violate another? And how can an organization such as the AIA punish violators of a code when the ethical issues underlying the code are so variable in interpretation?

The second, less common, and possibly more effective way of enforcing ethical behavior draws from the work of the twentieth-century thinker John Dewey. In some ways, Dewey's ethical position echoes that of Plato in the sense that both believed that we can judge right or wrong by informing ourselves of the full consequences of an action. Dewey and Plato part ways, however, where Plato held that there is a single, universal right action for every ethical dilemma, which, if we don't see, simply means that we are uninformed. Dewey instead realized that notions of right and wrong change over time and from one culture to another.

The advisory opinions from the AIA's general counsel are full of Dewey's consequentialist thinking. One example deals with an architect who took a referral fee from a contractor. "The acceptance of a referral fee from the person that the architect recommended affects the interest of persons other than the architect and the contractor," the opinion

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states, going on to say that it affects the building owner and potentially the public at large.

The difficulty that has always been raised with Dewey's approach is the same as the criticism leveled at Plato: how does one know what are the full consequences of an action? How can one put off making ethical judgments until one has all the information? As an individual, you can't. But you can as part of an organization and as a profession, which is precisely what the medical profession is engaged in. Through conversation, debate, and documentation, it is slowly building knowledge of the consequences of one medical decision versus another, and is developing ethical principles based on that knowledge.

As I said, *the architectural profession needs to do the same, if for no other reason than to be able to enforce our own code of ethics.* Enforcement here would not be through punishment, but through the ability to inform those who would act unethically—employers who think they don't have to pay employees, clients who think they can ask for free services, architects who think they can slander competitors—of the real, negative consequences of such behavior. Ethics, in the end, defines what we, as a community and a society, agree is in our collective best interest. It is through our acting as a community, informing each other of the consequences of actions and conversing about what consequences we judge to be good or bad, that we may begin to achieve the ethical behavior we aspire to.

There will undoubtedly remain architects who are skeptical about any sort of ethical discussion. Whether conscious of it or not, they may adhere to the ethical naturalism of Nietzsche, which pits one person against another in a survival of the fittest, or in the ethical

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realism of G. E. Moore, for whom any attempt at defining the ethical good is impossible. The problem such views pose for architecture is that they undermine our discipline in particular. Ethics looks at not only what constitutes good behavior, but what constitutes the good life, and both are intimately connected to the making of architecture. I do not mean to suggest that one must be a good person to make good architecture; history has long ago relieved us of that illusion. Rather, I want to argue that all good architecture puts forward a proposition, whether the designer is aware of it or not, about the good life, about how we should live and what we should live for. A sustained discourse about ethics, in other words, would help us to create not only a better profession, but better architecture, and that is a good we all share.