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AGAINST ECOPHOBIA: TOWARDS A HUMAN HABITAT

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Most building and planning today follow unwritten rules that have no empirical foundation, being based strictly upon visual/ideological constructs from the early twentieth century. Contemporary design avoids any criterion of quality that draws upon evolved precedent and tradition from a prior era, and thinks that this refusal is a great virtue. In this way, architects and urbanists end up obeying simplistic criteria for design, rejecting any sense of beauty that links human beings with their land, tradition, and culture.

Introduction.

The term “ecophobia” refers to an unreasonable but deeply conditioned reaction against natural forms. It has also been used in clinical psychology to denote a phobia against one’s dwelling, but that specific use now appears to be antiquated. The philosopher Roger Scruton coined the related term “oikophobia” to denote an unreasonable hatred of one’s native culture. We believe that these two terms “ecophobia” and “oikophobia” may in many cases be used interchangeably. (Linguistically, the common Greek root for “house” can be written either as *ecos* or *oikos*).

Regarding the social domain, our age is experiencing deep philosophical and social tensions. These are as serious as the concerns with our detachment from nature. The 21st century has begun with a continuation, and perhaps intensification, of the worst prejudices seen in the twentieth. Those prejudices include a disdain of traditional cultures, and all that links a human being to his/her local history.

Scruton reminds us that: “the oikophobe repudiates national loyalties and defines his goals and ideals *against* the nation, promoting transnational institutions over national governments ... defining his political vision in terms of universal values that have been purified of all reference to the particular attachments of a real historical community.” Here we have the “modern man”, who embraces all forms of technological toys while he rejects evolved solutions that have held society together for millennia.

Ideology and publicity.

As Scruton points out, there is a deep political component in ecophobia, since many political parties promote themselves by promising liberation from society's problems through embracing universal (yet abstract) utopias. Governments of radically distinct political orientations nevertheless fall prey to an infatuation with foreign goods and ideas, and this dependence is manipulated for the benefit of multinational corporations. It is easy to be helped along by advertising, now reaching into even the most remote places on this planet, which promotes foreign products loudly in the local market.

At the same time, local traditions are erased, along with what held that society together. The underlying phenomenon is a disregard or even loathing of one's own culture, and its artifacts and practices. This hatred drives people to reject what is traditionally theirs, and to embrace new foreign symbols of capital progress as somehow better.

Architecture as image, operating in the service of global capital, is now present in everyone's backyard. To sacrifice identity for globalization corrupts the values and beliefs that people of traditional cultures have sustained for millennia.

Today's fashionable architecture instead serves a culture of "capital and consumption". That culture's values and beliefs underlie and structure architectural practice in the U.S.A. and increasingly throughout the world.

Fueled by billions of dollars in capital, this process of promoting new foreign symbols is sustained by influencing the rest of the world to buy what the West is selling. As universities and cultural institutions from the West seek greater access to the untapped resources of other industrializing countries, they present, under the guise of Western prosperity, a set of circumstances that serve only to destroy culture. Those values effectively destabilize traditional civilization. Strong commercial interests are aligned with economic exploitation via the imposition of hyped-up contemporary architects on the rest of the world. Governments mistakenly believe that they are doing good for their people by erecting "showcase" buildings such as museums by internationally famous architects. Instead, they are letting in agents of intolerance, paving the way for an extinction of the local architectural heritage.

Us, masters of the absurd.

Young persons are exposed to promotional images of design in schools and the media, and are told that this is what they must value from now on. They are indoctrinated to hate and destroy traditional architectural expressions, as something noble to pursue.

Many people correctly blame the West and powerful local interests for turning the country's young against their own culture. For the wealthy Western nations, teaching nihilism is just another silliness of contemporary society, along with pseudo-art that intentionally profanes God. But developing countries stand to risk all they have — their traditional art and architecture — in imitating the West on this point.

Our proposal is for education reform that would immediately stop teaching hatred of one's own architectural heritage and culture. No crime is more unpardonable than parricide: killing one's own parents. But how do we judge an architecture school that

teaches students to despise their own heritage, and instills in them an eagerness to destroy it?

The target is the society that brought forth those individuals, in a shared responsibility with their biological parents. We read with alarm about Bauhaus images and practices introduced into the architectural education of developing countries. The press announces these as “progressive” moves, little realizing what danger that poses to that country’s tradition.

A great deal is gained from utilizing scientifically-based knowledge as a new paradigm of how to teach architecture. The way to re-establish architecture as a knowledge-based discipline is simply to rebuild its knowledge base. Without a knowledge base grounded in the reality of human perception and science, architecture remains open to corruption and is prey to the whims of ideology, fashion, and the cult of the individual. Making allowances for the inherent differences between architecture and science as disciplines, there are many lessons to be learned through the immediate juxtaposition of their intellectual structures. Science and scientific enquiry operate through the application of an accumulated knowledge base. Scientists undertake research desiring to extend their discipline’s corpus of knowledge. They meticulously document successful results of their investigations for inclusion into the greater body of knowledge. To this end, scientific disciplines develop languages for this explicit purpose over time, to enable transcribing and saving discovered knowledge for posterity. Knowledge itself rests upon having efficient information storage systems.

The incentive of science.

This process of documentation allows scientists to build upon previous discoveries. It saves having to reinvent the wheel every time one needs to perform a basic application. Science also has a mechanism that allows one to sift useless or outdated information from the working corpus of knowledge. A theory that is superseded or proven wrong is immediately discarded or consigned to having strictly historical interest. This replacement occurs because a better method than the old one is found THAT EXPLAINS THE PHENOMENA. Science is therefore constantly expanding its information base, while maintaining its order and relevance in a compact corpus of knowledge. This process exists through an ordering and compacting of scientific information, much as libraries develop a coherent ordering system to handle enormous and steadily increasing amounts of information. Knowledge can only be useful if it is easily retrievable, and that depends upon having an efficient systematization.

By contrast, architecture has yet to develop an effective system of ordering its inherited information. In fact, what happened in architecture is unthinkable in the sciences: sometime in the 1920s, in their quest for design innovation, a group of ideologues arbitrarily threw out architecture’s informational basis. The excuse for this elimination was to help the discipline to venture off into new territories. Those wanting to do this in the name of innovation felt no obligation to conserve the knowledge previously developed or discovered. Obviously, since those individuals felt no need to document inherited information, they also considered it unnecessary to develop an ordering system for current knowledge. Ever since, architectural innovation has been judged to be successful strictly by how completely it disregards previous knowledge.

Aesthetic taste.

Paradoxically, this devastating practice has led to the accumulation of both rigid dogma and a plethora of mutually contradictory styles. Architects failed to develop or implement an ordering system even for architectural styles that they deal with and refer to daily. Champions of each distinct style fight against the other styles, declaring them to be useless, outdated, or morally indefensible. This irresolvable dispute is the source of tremendous systemic conflict and instability (which hinders instead of encouraging development). Styles are validated only if approved by the discipline's self-appointed "taste makers", a defensive gesture to make architecture more mysterious and unavailable to those who are not tutored in its multifarious "theories".

Scientific debate, on the other hand, while it can become quite contentious, has strict guidelines for resolution. The scientific criterion for validity is whether any knowledge works to explain phenomena adequately, and whether in the process it creates or establishes something of value to humanity. Scientists abandon an old belief even though it may be supported by a large number of followers, if it fails to explain observed structures. Conflicts can be intense, but are usually brief. Eventually, scientists reach a consensus on an experimental basis.

The loss of information.

If we adopt the scientific approach, we drop nothing arbitrarily from a discipline's informational store. Most architects don't yet treat architecture as a scientist would, since they refrain from looking for its evidence base. The catastrophic loss of urban and architectural information that occurred following World War II, implemented by modernist-trained teachers taking over architectural schools, would never have been allowed to occur if we had followed a scientific model in determining our architecture.

Derived knowledge is far too valuable to throw away capriciously. Older knowledge can be superseded only by an updated explanatory framework, not by unproven ideas or opinions. Again and again, we return to the need for a set of evidence-based criteria for judging what is valuable in architecture.

In typical courses of architectural theory, a collection of mutually contradictory and oftentimes obscure readings leave a student bewildered about what is relevant or irrelevant. Yet, all are presented as being equally valid, since they are included in some authoritative anthology. Students are not given any criteria for judgment: indeed, neither their professor, nor the author of the anthology would dare adopt any measure that makes such a judgment possible. Doing so would be perceived as preferring one point of view over another, hence undemocratic.

The cult of useless ugliness.

Nevertheless, this flawed notion of plurality unravels what any intellectually-developed discipline has found necessary to evolve. Outdated or discredited notions that keep reappearing in architectural readings should finally be allowed to fade into obscurity. Without a criterion of what is valid or not, architects cannot really allow

anything to drop if it is associated with a reigning ideology. This means that they endlessly perpetuate useless intellectual bric-a-brac.

Diverse styles can indeed be tied together by the commonality among positive solutions that each has to offer. Introducing a theoretical classification of architectural typologies is an essential part of the needed new curriculum. Such an explanation ties together diverse styles from among competing contemporary movements, and from those developed in the past. Some of these styles are judged inadequate because they do not serve human needs, and the faculty of existing architectural programs must be prepared for this. If one looks carefully, one discovers that many of the unstated principles in use today are not founded on anything architectural, but rest strictly on ideological arguments. Architecture can never go forward if it continues to blindly support design dogmas.



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