

Nikos A. Salingaros
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POLITICS, PHILOSOPHY, CRITICAL THEORY, AND HUMAN PERCEPTION

Nikos A. Salingaros & Kenneth G. Masden II

As the architects of tomorrow, today's students must come to understand the role and responsibility of their profession as something intrinsically tied to human existence and the lived experience. A new suggested educational system provides a direct means to design adaptive environments, in response to growing needs of the marketplace (client demand). Nevertheless, most architectural institutions continue to propagate a curricular model that has sustained an image-based method and its peculiar ideology for decades. We can trace this support to early twentieth-century anti-traditional movements. Reform is impossible without addressing the system's long-forgotten ideological roots.

Introduction.

Evolutionary compulsion forces human beings to establish a system of relationships between the physical body and the human mind's mental perceptions, which enable us to experience the world and our existence. These relationships provide us with our sense of wellbeing, our sense of belonging, and our deeper sense of who we are. Through the physical and the visual aspects of human perception, the body managed humankind's earliest interactions with the world.

Evolution developed a neurological structure in humans by which they could negotiate the immediate conditions of their lives. Through the surrounding informational fields — physical and visual information embedded in the natural structure of the world — humans successfully evolved to construct artifacts for living. These creations range from jewelry, to furniture, to buildings, and ultimately to cities.

As the human mind continued to develop through the impulse of emotion, there came a point where humans were able to manufacture abstract ideas and thoughts, outside the physical reality that confronted them on a daily basis. The schism between the subject/object natures of perception permits the manufacture of an alternative reality. This mental capacity has been the protagonist of human thought and enquiry for millennia — leading to some of the greatest achievements of the human mind — at other times it led humankind towards the greatest atrocities imaginable. During the last century, architecture — as the formation of a world outside our bodies — has been

consigned by contemporary doctrine to the intellectual creations of a purely subjective mind.

The informational fields that surround us are more important today than ever, given the dependency of students on image-based learning. Supplanting natural information by intellectual abstraction effectively removes the essential informational content needed for human engagement with the outside world, replacing it with blank walls.

Throughout the twentieth century, one of the important situational constructs that enabled architects to substitute images for what is real was their ability to use the written word to subsidize their informationally-poor structures. So began a long history of political and polemical texts operating as the philosophical surrogate for embedded knowledge, which was henceforth lost from the built world.

“Critical Theory” and image-based learning.

Architecture schools now rely heavily, if not exclusively, on loosely-construed philosophical postulates for educating their students. Schools proffer philosophical doctrines (we cannot call them theories) in the absence of intelligence-based design and direct human experience. The way philosophy is currently taught to architects tends to mix political ideology with idiosyncratic and subjective insights into society, and this muddled mess is presented as a theoretical basis for architectural and urban design. This practice is a terribly dangerous mix, as it gives students a perverted and erroneous, if not fraudulent basis for their profession. Students are normally unable to separate what is useful analysis from what is political rhetoric and so learn little or nothing about buildings and cities.

Certain authors on the political left provide a picture of what is wrong with aspects of contemporary society, offering useful critiques from outside the capitalist economic system. Nevertheless, their proposed solutions are the same unworkable utopian dreams that have in the past led to totalitarian states. One stream of philosophy running throughout contemporary architectural education goes back to the Frankfurt School, which introduced “Critical Theory” into philosophy. The essence of this 1930’s movement was to apply extreme anti-traditional prejudices to the new industrial society of the post World-War-I era. The original Marxist authors proposed radical social change through revolution, technology, and the subjection of the individual to collective class structure. They declared tradition to be the enemy of progress, a position that of course included all architectural traditions. Historical notions of beauty were condemned, while art was to be produced henceforth through the negation of universal truths, inspired instead by contradiction, despair, and the shock of human suffering. Schools inherited this prejudiced approach to analyzing built form, in many writings that bear the epithet “critical”. Such texts are not helpful in designing buildings but only in the formation of ideological tenets.

Independent of the written legacy of Critical Theory and the Frankfurt school, the post-war tradition in architecture and the arts has inherited the misdirected anger and desperation of 1930’s European intellectuals. Those individuals were reacting against earlier class oppression while being threatened by the rise of Nazism. After the Second World War, those same intellectuals reacted to the horrors that had just been perpetrated by casting the blame onto traditional society and its humanistic

architecture. These extremely powerful emotions survive in a visceral hatred of traditional architectural forms — an indignation that is transmitted to architecture students today through Pavlovian conditioning.

Even though the majority of architecture professors are not overtly political, and even less declared Marxists, architecture schools have been dominated by a philosophy that arose from the radical political left. Critical theory and its architectural derivatives (which represent ideology rather than theory) continue to dictate architectural texts. Students lack sufficient knowledge to recognize when fourth-generation derivative authors talk about architecture using hidden agendas about the supremacy of technology, class struggle, and abolishing traditional society. While this ideological objective is never made explicit, it colors supposedly theoretical expositions and situates itself in the values of students. After all these years, few people have caught onto the original deceit: while pretending to censure the aristocracy, this rhetoric in fact reviled all of popular vernacular architecture, to boost the personal careers of the Bauhaus members. Now the very same system is used to prop up an architectural elite.

“Critical Regionalism” and intellectual submission.

Critical Theory has had its most insidious effect on architecture with the spread of the doctrine known as “Critical Regionalism”. Proponents of this self-contradictory ideology assert that vernacular tradition and culture are dead, and that henceforth, regional architecture must adapt to modernist uniformization. They proclaim that the patterns and practices from which a region’s identity is derived are mere “nostalgia”, and instead recommend the abstract aesthetics of international modernism. Any architectural expression, other than those possible within the restricted modernist aesthetic, is rejected.

Those writers’ avowed intention is to create forms that do not belong to the vernacular form language. What results from this schizophrenic approach is not regional architecture in any sense, but a set of self-referential objects detached from their cultural roots, created and manipulated without regard to their regional context. (One occasionally sees an attempt at site-specific climatic adaptation, but nothing more).

Teachers thus use purely ideological arguments to validate a narrow set of design styles for students. That is as wrong as it is unsupported. It is only a means to further sustain a cult ideology that has dominated architectural education for the past several decades. The point is that good architecture and urbanism have nothing to do with political beliefs. Worst of all, teachers apply techniques learned from political ideologues to coerce students and other academics into intellectual submission. Such forms of censorship are typical of a system that considers itself above all others. It gives itself the authority to re-frame every member’s worldview. Whenever evidence is ignored, and is substituted by the irrational, that creates dogma. This erroneous style of teaching has become solidly established in today’s system.

One way to maintain the mystique of “architecture as an art” was to embrace ever more abstruse and incomprehensible texts, so as to shield the discipline’s shaky intellectual core from outside scrutiny. This obsession (or defensive tactic) has led architecture to embrace the nihilistic and deconstructive philosophers. Having architecture students read Derridean and Deleuzean philosophical texts disorients them,

breaking down their critical faculties. Such disorientation could in fact be deliberate: a necessary psychological preparation for imprinting stylistic preferences in their minds (This topic has been treated at length in our book [*Anti-Architecture and Deconstruction*](#), 2004). Throwing the burden of teaching architects onto obscure philosophical texts enables architecture schools to endorse a very narrow set of design styles, embracing those currently in fashion.

Philosophy informs architecture.

The common justification given for studying philosophy is that architecture and urbanism are intimately tied to social phenomena, so that philosophy prepares a student to confront architectural problems. This explanation is a subterfuge, however, operating more as a means to avoid teaching architecture to students directly. The modernist teaching method, wherein all useful derived knowledge is thrown out in the *tabula rasa* approach, cannot openly admit that architectural and urban knowledge ever existed. If it did, then someone would have to explain how over 2,000 years of knowledge was lost, discarded, or ignored during the modernists' 70-year reign. By diverting architecture students towards carefully selected philosophical authors, this action conveniently covers up the deliberate avoidance of any genuine, newly-derived or historically-relevant architectural theory.

So much of what now passes for "architectural theory" is therefore little more than doctrine. It conditions students to have absolute faith in a body of beliefs established in the absence of real-world criteria. Those beliefs set up the student's worldview as shaped by the dynamics of in-group affiliation: a cognitive filter that bends information to fit, and rejects information that does not fit.

Architectural education must in the future clearly separate architecture from politics, and also separate architecture from self-referential philosophy. Only teachers can train their students to do this. Both teachers and students can achieve this clarity of thought only after they understand the genuine theoretical basis of architecture, expressed in strictly architectural terms. Schools have a responsibility to teach a genuinely architectural basis for design.

Architecture students should ultimately study philosophy, but that is productive once they have formed a basis of what is really going on in architecture. And the philosophy they study has to be positive and humanistic. Many philosophers throughout history emphasize the necessity for human beings to connect to the universe, but architects hardly ever study those authors.

What we propose as *Intelligence-Based Design* has deep philosophical foundations. Humanly-adaptive architecture and urbanism arise out of a respect for humanity's higher meaning in an infinite universe. There exists a vast body of philosophical work connecting humanity both with nature and with the sublime. In his four-volume treatise [*The Nature of Order*](#) (2001-2005), Christopher Alexander establishes a genuine philosophical foundation for an adaptive architecture.

A humanistic basis.

Philosophers whose writings are essential for the sustainability of humankind try to understand otherwise puzzling human actions outside a strictly scientific framework. They help us to delineate good from bad in human activities. This historical notion of “morality” recurs throughout the traditional treatises on philosophy of the entire world. Numerous contemporary philosophers celebrate life and the sacredness of humanity.

Traditional religious texts are founded upon morality stories that help humanity to see beyond the limitations of human beings existing as animals or purely subjective beings. But none of this is ever incorporated into architectural teaching today — which still turns to the same peculiar handful of (Western) philosophers, relying upon them to justify “architecture for architecture’s sake”. Judging by how inhuman its forms are, the driving ideology is purely nihilistic, even as it serves global capital.

The separation between nihilism and humanism is total and uncompromising, however. We have to choose very carefully which philosophers, and which texts to offer students for their reading assignments. A school cannot abrogate its responsibility by teaching architecture as a set of self-serving beliefs.

In the twentieth century, architecture became a mass movement under the influence of leading architects who exploited specific philosophical texts to support their ideals and to promote themselves. Architecture detached itself from any higher order in human existence, turning away from both nature and from the sacred. It was the first time in human history that humans began to intentionally create unnatural structures that are uncomfortable to inhabit and to experience.



This is a section of a longer paper “Intelligence-Based Design: A Sustainable Foundation for Worldwide Architectural Education”, ArchNet-IJAR: International Journal of Architectural Research, Volume 2, Issue 1 (March 2008), pages 129-188. The same extract was reprinted in two parts with comments in Archiwatch (February 2009). Original paper is available from <<http://zeta.math.utsa.edu/~yxk833/Intelligence-Based-IJAR.pdf>>.