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Thomas Fisher makes a case for engagement and ethics among architects.

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In 1995 *Progressive Architecture* – arguably the most forward and sharply critical architecture magazine in the USA at the time – was laid to rest at age 75. Cause of death: sold to the company that owned *Architecture* magazine. ‘And then there were two,’ the obituaries read.

‘Now we may go down to only one healthy architecture magazine in this country,’ Tom Fisher says when we meet in St Paul at his University of Minnesota office one ice-cold day in December. For 15 years prior to the magazine’s untimely death, Fisher was an editor at *P.A.* and, eventually, its editorial director. Now he is dean of the University of Minnesota’s College of Design, where he also teaches. ‘I enjoy my work at the academy,’ Fisher tells me, ‘but I define myself as a public intellectual who writes about architecture.’

‘I find formalism too conservative politically. It’s not radical’

Later, he adds, ‘We [architects] are public intellectuals whether we want to be or not.’ It’s a role that the remarkably erudite and reflective Fisher does not take lightly.

Educated both in architecture and intellectual history, Fisher is a passionate and prolific writer and lecturer who has 35 essays and over 250 journal and magazine articles to his name, not to mention six books published in the last eight years. His most recent book, *Ethics for Architects*, considers 50 case studies of architects facing ethical dilemmas. But the dilemma I’m here to discuss with Fisher isn’t covered in those pages. ‘It’s funny you’ve come to talk to me about this now,’ Fisher says. ‘I’m just about to give a talk to several government leaders about the profundity of the change in media we’re currently experiencing.’ That’s the one. So architecture and media are in a boat together on the open seas, and the weather’s changing: what happens next? If anyone knows, I figure it’s Fisher.

What is the ‘profundity of the change in media’ as you see it?

Fisher: I think our digital age will have as profound an impact on culture as did Gutenberg’s printing press. There will be nothing that won’t be touched by this digital revolution, and among the most profound changes are those that will occur to our metaphor about reality. After the printed book and the rise of science, we began to think about the world as a machine. We saw cities as machines, the human body as a machine. Now the digital revolution is changing that metaphor to be much more about a web. Reality is no longer mechanistic, but rather ecological or biological. I see our architecture students wanting to move laterally, connecting things in a way that is more weblike than linear. Linear thinking came from the printed book – start from the beginning and go to the end. With hypertext, of course, there is no beginning and no end, but a sea of linking information.

What we’ll eventually see is a change in education, professions and every single sector of the economy. Media will also change. It’s going through a very difficult time right now, and all my journalist friends are hoping they will still have a job next year. But media will continue to be as important as it has always been.

What does this mean for architecture media, specifically?

Not too long ago, in the 1970s, there were four major architecture journals in the US. In the ’80s and through to the mid-’90s, there were three. Then two, then one and a half. Now we may go down to only one healthy architecture magazine in this country. In terms of total numbers the US has, arguably, the largest group of architects in the world, and we can support only one magazine for them? That’s amazing to me. But I think that’s happened, in part, because of other sources from which architects can get information and with which they can communicate ideas.

That’s the paradoxical condition we’re in: we have too much information and haven’t quite figured out how to pay the people who are giving that information meaning and who are identifying what’s really important and trustworthy – and what isn’t. We can’t

just assume that bloggers will do that for us forever, working out of their spare bedrooms for no money. There’s also the issue of knowing whom to trust. Why should I pay attention to what this blogger thinks is good? There will always be a need for people to edit and filter, and I’m convinced there will also be a role for print.

I’ve read that you are an admirer of historian and literary critic Lewis Mumford, who openly lamented the loss of architects in the public realm.

Yes, Lewis Mumford was a mentor for me when I was in college, and one of the things he said to me was that, in some ways, the architectural profession had come to disappoint him. He said that in the 1920s and ’30s architects were really much more central in the larger public intellectual debate, but that after World War II, in the ’50s and ’60s, it struck him that architects got very busy doing big corporate headquarters and houses for the rich, and started to withdraw from public discourse. Mumford thought that was a loss for both the profession of architecture and the general public.

Given your views on the paradoxical condition of architecture media today, where do you believe architects stand in the larger public debate?

I think one of the reasons architects were active in the 1930s is that when there’s little work architects get more engaged in writing. Architecture, like all the arts, often advances in periods of economic downturn. So now I see an enormous shift toward what we’re calling ‘public-interest design’. Instead of focusing on corporate headquarters and houses for the rich – a practice that benefits maybe 5 to 10 per cent of the world’s population, at best – architects are taking a greater interest in the other 90 per cent. I see this as a re-engagement within the public realm, globally. Of course the dilemma now is: how do you aggregate people around a movement? The web makes a lot of information available to a lot of people, but it’s extremely decentralized.

I wonder what kind of information shaped your own thinking about architecture. Were certain books particularly influential for you?

It may say a lot about me that every year or two I read *Walden*. Everyone simply thinks [that Thoreau] went off and lived in a little cabin by the lake, but there is such a richness of politics, economics and social theory in that action. There is philosophy. I actually read quite a lot of philosophy and of the history of ideas in ethics. My father was a psychologist and one of the founders of a form of psychotherapy called ‘rational emotive therapy’, which is based on Greek and Roman Stoicism. I grew up reading the Stoics – Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius – and I still read a lot of Greek and Roman literature, ethics and the classics. I still read Plato. I read the great books largely because of Mumford, who told me: ‘If you want to write about architecture, you have to know about something other than architecture.’ So I’m always trying to put my own writing about architecture in an intellectual context, to try to understand it as an aspect of the history of ideas and the history of thought.

Talking about the massive changes in architecture and the information available about architecture makes me wonder how your reading list differs from Mumford’s.

It’s interesting that as I get older I find myself disagreeing with Lewis Mumford as much as I once agreed with him. There were times, particularly late in his life, when he seemed to be angry at the modern world. I’m not angry at the modern world; I’m energized and excited about the world we’re in. I don’t want to be an angry old man. I want to be an enthusiastic old man. Still, my reading list is much the same as his. Architects need to do the old-fashioned thing and read Plato and Aristotle and, I would say, the Stoics as well. Read Epictetus and Aurelius, read Descartes, read Hegel, because their ideas are still with us. The way I see it, the ancient Greek and Roman idea of ethics was really a question about the nature of a good life. And I think every architect, whether he or she acknowledges it or not, has an idea about the good life or what constitutes the good life, because architects put that idea into their design work all the time. It’s something of an unquestioned assumption, though, and one of my goals is to try to make it more apparent. When I read Hegel for the first time, for →

Thomas Fisher's reading list:

Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*; and author unknown, *The Bhagavad Gita*
These two ancient texts from China and India argue for the connectedness of all reality and the paradoxes that arise when we try to control or fragment it.

Plato, *Dialogues*
Simultaneously radical and conservative, these fascinating conversations include the ideas of Socrates, the first public intellectual, and Plato, the first formalist.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*
Still one of the best books ever written on the subject, *Nicomachean Ethics* reminds us, in this era of sometimes monstrous extremism, that moderation matters – and why.

Epictetus, *Discourses*; and Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*
These two books, one written by a slave and the other by an emperor, explain why the things that many people think will make them happy won't.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*
One chapter of *Walden*, 'Economy', shows the extent to which architecture remains inseparable from questions of freedom, happiness and the nature of a good life.

Lewis Mumford, *The Conduct of Life*
This is one of several books by Mumford that portray the physical world as a reflection of our ideas on civil society and that discuss how to lead a humane life.

Jane Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities*
This prescient book anticipates a reality in which city-based, university-centred regions are the primary economic unit.

Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*
Hadot reminds us that thinking is meaningless unless it leads to action, and that we must live our ideas and beliefs and not just profess them.

Peter Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*
Singer argues that utilitarian ethics, correctly understood, leaves us no choice but to support social justice, sustainability and planet consciousness.

Bryan Bell and Katie Wakeford, *Expanding Architecture*; John Cary, *The Power of Pro Bono*; and Kate Stohr and Cameron Sinclair, *Design Like You Give a Damn*
A few of several excellent books that chart the growth of the public-interest design movement and that remind us of architecture's ethical responsibility.

example, I saw just what Mies and Corb were up to. When I read Rousseau, I realized why Wright did what he did. My understanding of what architects do was enriched. Take the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the time; that's a Hegelian term that Corb and Mies talk about. It's woven into their work. When Mies argued that we live in an industrial age and that buildings should reflect the spirit of industrialism, it was an idea that came from Hegel.

I think that we tend, as a profession, to use a lot of concepts that we've borrowed from other fields without necessarily being aware of it. And that's okay. In a way, it's given me a role as a writer who's trying to point that out. But I do think that, at its base, architecture is a public act. The work, even if it's for a private commission, is out in the public and is embedded with shared ideas. We're public intellectuals whether we want to be or not.

Where does the 'not' come from? Do you sense resistance to this notion?

Well, one line of thinking that I find fascinating and also somewhat repulsive is what some people cynically call 'blobitecture'. Generally, I am not a formalist. I find formalism too conservative politically. It's not radical; it is not engaging with politics, with equity or economics. A lot of it doesn't seem to be engaged with sustainability. And when an architect takes those things off the table, it means that he or she – as a public intellectual – is accepting the status quo. I think that if we become formalists – just manipulators of form – we will become completely irrelevant.

You know, we tend to think of the political left and right as being on opposite ends of a line. In fact, politics exists in a circle: the most radical left and the most radical right bump into each other. Therefore, this so-called radical architecture we're discussing is extremely conservative in almost every way, except maybe in form.

For years I was in and around New York City as an editor, and there was so much focus on who's doing the hot new building and who's hip. In a curious way, coming to the Twin Cities [Minneapolis/St Paul] from that world has made me more sceptical of the avant-garde, just as I'm much more sceptical of

neo-traditionalists too. I've come to see that we, as a profession, are still stuck in the 20th century.

Likewise, one problem I have with the media is their anointing of a few star architects. The idea is that these few architects are at the top. My question is: at the top of what? The world isn't organized that way any more. We can no longer think in terms of hierarchy. It's the wrong metaphor. The most interesting architects for me are the ones that have the most connections and are doing the most things in many different realms. That is the new world we live in.

Are you satisfied with the platforms available to you as a writer who wants to voice his opinions and observations?

No. I'm not. There's no common place that the profession is reading much any more, and that's a problem. It's hard to know how to have a voice and how

'The media anoint a few star architects, but hierarchy is the wrong metaphor'

to be heard. But even as I say this, I'm also writing a book almost every year. Who knows if anyone's reading it, though. Is anyone reading at all any more? I don't know. This is the dilemma we have in media: how does one's voice get heard? And, more importantly, how does one find other people who are thinking a certain way? Where is the intellectual community, in this regard? It's very hard to find it. We've fragmented our intellectual community.

I think what architects are missing is a business model. Just think of how doctors have organized their body of knowledge. When I approach my doctor with a question, he does a keyword search that results in an incredible amount of available research. We as architects should be able to do the same, but we're not there yet. I've been working with colleagues on the establishment of a National Academy of Environmental

Design that would organize our knowledge and make it accessible to every practitioner. Right now in architecture, there's a lot of research, but it's in journals scattered in academic libraries that nobody knows about. In the same way that we bring medical information to every doctor's desktop, we need to bring architectural information to every architect's desktop. My hope is that communities of people within architecture will find one another. As for me, I'll keep writing and I'll keep looking. ←

