

INTERSECTIONALITY, OPPRESSION, AND OPPORTUNITY IN ARCHITECTURE: CLAIMING THE SOCIAL COMPLEX

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ABSTRACT: We review three dimensions of architecture's complicity in institutionalized social oppression and offer a trans-disciplinary lens for transformative opportunities. Equity deals with the history of elite classes dominating the common populace, and rulers in marble palaces and servants in dirt floor homes. Social justice is then a contemporary residual of class discrimination and a force of emancipation toward equal access to public resources, aspirational prosperity, and well-being. Finally, sustainability attends to underlying damages that accrued in previous eras of short-term thinking, unfair commodification of resources, and institutionalized greed.

This paper is not, however, an exercise in political, legal, planning, or technical solutions. Instead, we frame the relation of architecture and institutionalized oppression within the concept of intersectionality (i.e., the complex social dynamic that compounds those multidimensional problems). To balance architecture's naïve and negligent guilt, we conclude with emerging opportunities in architecture towards promoting broad welfare, social justice, and class equity. Three such opportunities are discussed: social activism, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability.

KEYWORDS: Intersectionality, oppression, equity, agency, class

INTRODUCTION

Architecture's contract with society is a bargain of care toward "health, safety, and welfare." Stewardship over the built environment is thus inherent in the profession's collateral monopoly. Nonetheless, the architect's burdens toward political, legal, technical, economic, and behavioral toxicology aspects of their charge have been relatively ignored. Consequently, there is increasing evidence of architecture's complicity in institutionalized oppression. Thankfully, there are also corresponding opportunities to promoting broad social equity.

1.0 ARCHITECTURE AND OPPRESSION

In this paper, a few historical notes must suffice as background. We basically argue that monumentality, class distinction, and ecology are fundamental aspects of architecture's complicity in institutionalized oppression.

1.1 Class, dependency, and monumentality

First, consider the contradiction of rich architectural monuments as they have coexisted across history side-by-side with poverty and squalor. How many great buildings were in some way exploitive of the public realm in all the ages of class segregation? How many temples, castles, and palaces were built from social capital largely for the privileged elite (Fig. 1)? And how many workers labored in poor conditions with little or no compensation? Although chattel slavery has advanced to organized labor, and self-determination has increased within democratic frameworks; how much of the architecture that we celebrate today resulted from bondage, servitude, exploitation, and dependency? Monumentality itself contributes to class distinction and exclusivity as an awe inducing element of social control. Such control is exercised through sensory exploitation, either as opulent signals of class segregation; or as appeasement via public spectacle such as the Roman Coliseum or "look how good you have it" World Fairs (Ley and Olds 1988).

1.2 Segregation, gentrification, and walled neighborhoods

Charleswell (2014) posits that the "built environment is socially constructed and has historically been formed and maintained through residential segregation." Legal literature shows how various design methods are used to prohibit people from areas where they are not wanted (Schindler 2015). City planners have, for example, constructed physical barriers to keep people segregated from more desirable areas: a low bridge, a busy highway, a one-way street... all elements designed to manipulate mobility.



Figure 1: Pena National Palace, Sintra, Portugal, rebuilt by King Ferdinand II from the ruins of a 14th Century monastery in 1838-1854 as a summer residence for the royal family. It is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the Seven Wonders of Portugal. Photo by the authors.

American cities in general show high levels of inequality and poverty. Increased income and resource inequality since the 1970s has worsened “exclusionary zoning, heavy regulation, real estate steering, lending and insurance policies, purchase contracts and private surveillance” (Silver 2012). Gentrification brings higher property values, dislocates low SES residents and entices high SES influx. Slowly neighborhoods become more segregated by income and race. Meanwhile, an increasing number of Americans move to “suburban enclaves surrounded by walls” while others, mostly Black and Hispanic people, live in controlled neighborhoods with limited access to adequate services and schools (Goldsmith & Blakely 2010). “Walls, fences and highways separate historically white neighborhoods from black ones” (Schindler 2009). The built environment thus acts as a form of illicit regulation by limiting diverse interactions and increasing class isolation. Schindler’s example of the Jones Beach’s bridge which was “built intentionally low” to prevent buses from accessing the public beach is typical in this regard. Schindler also emphasizes how design can regulate access, pointing out how wealthy white residents of the Northern Atlanta suburbs opposed the construction of the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit into their neighborhoods to exclude people of color. Limited transportation is a form of discrimination that restricts job opportunities, education, recreation and housing.

1.3 Ecology and public health

Although the Romans knew of lead and asbestos poisoning 2200 years ago, the built environment has often included such toxins. Lead in gasoline, paint, and ink has, for example, been scientifically linked to crime, learning disabilities, aggressivity, low IQ, low infant birth weight, and colic (Needleman 1999, Reyes 2007). Removing lead from gasoline under the 1970 Clean Air Act directly resulted in an estimated 56% drop in US violent crime in the 1990s (Reyes 2007). Despite that, the lead in old plumbing, fungal dust, and garden soil are still concerns (Salares, Hinde, and Miller 2009). Today, carbon dioxide, ozone, and methane are known links between the built environment, architectural design, and public health. Given the history of tobacco, CFCs, PCP, MTB, PBA, and other toxins, the issue is cause for concern.

1.4 Architecture’s complicity

[The] “built environment [is] ... a man-made space, where people live, work and recreate, ... and includes one’s neighborhood and all of its available resources – parks, bike lanes, libraries, schools, clinics/hospitals, full service grocery markets, etc., one’s home and family unit as well as their place of employment. As such the built environment encompasses legislators, city planners, engineers, and architects.” Charleswell (2014).

Norman Foster (2014) believes that “architecture is an expression of values: the way we build is a reflection of the way we live.” He states that “buildings and the infrastructure, or urban glue, that binds them together do not design themselves—they are designed by people...” As such, architects are responsible for reducing the impacts of undesirable environments. They should raise “public awareness of critical social and environment issues, and take an active role in influencing the built environment” (Stelmack, Foster, and Hindman 2014).

Complexity in the built environment compounds our difficulties. All democratic societies have inherent social stratification, but when class differences result in segregation, social control, and exploitation, several elements collude

(Fig. 2). The primary factors create a self-perpetuating downward cycle. It is what Ackoff aptly termed “a mess:”

- Elitist privatization of high profile architecture (Laws 1994)
- Social construction of authority and power (e.g., Yannick and Dewitte 2016)
- Commodification of public space (e.g., Arnqvist 2006)
- Exploitation of sensory awe by opulence or spectacle (Joye and Verpooten 2013)
- Exploitation by bondage, servitude, and dependency (e.g., Buckley 2013)
- Disadvantaged public health and local ecology impacts (e.g., Reyes 2007)
- Locational isolation and distance from employment or other resources (Schindler 2015)
- Food deserts where grocery retailing becomes unattractive to merchants (Urban Land Institute 2013)
- Gentrification of neighborhood culture and disruption of intergenerational continuity (Hamraie 2013)
- Increased susceptibility to climate change and climatic disasters (Pachauri et al. 2015)
- Increased susceptibility to secondary factors: crime victims, obesity, disease, under-education, unemployment...



Figure 2: Deplorable working conditions in the United Arab Emirates exemplify the exploitation of low socio economic construction workers, mostly expatriates from Bangladesh and India (Buckley 2013). Unsanitary living conditions, low pay, withheld compensation, and high worker suicide rates are rampant. Photograph courtesy of Thomas Mülchi.

2.0 USING INTERSECTIONALITY AS A FRAMEWORK

Intersectionality helps explain institutionalized oppression. It also links to the conference theme of complexity and to this paper’s transdisciplinary goals. The term originated with Crenshaw’s (1989) Black feminism approach, which emphasizes the “multidimensionality” of marginalized individuals’ experiences. Initially, intersectionality research focused on the juncture of sex and gender to explain inequalities. This concept has since been used extensively, especially in gender studies. Davis (2008, 68) describes intersectionality as the “interaction between gender, race and other categories of difference in individuals’ lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies; as well as the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power.” While intersectionality emerged largely as a way to fight racism, it also explains how norms are created and power relations interact (Kaijswier and Kronsell 2014). For architects then, intersectionality links design to issues of social oppression, policy development, and class discrimination. Understanding the dynamic should help avoid benign neglect. Quoting Ackoff again:

A problem never exists in isolation; it is surrounded by other problems in space and time. The more of the context of a problem that a scientist can comprehend, the greater are his chances of finding a truly adequate solution.

2.1 Intersectionality and the built environment

Many intersectionality studies demonstrate how race is often central to disparity. In the built environment however, poverty and socio economic status (SES) better explain how class categorization contributes to discrimination (lower education, poverty, and poor health). Inequalities of affluence and wellness are rising due to disproportionate differences in SES. Consequently, neighborhood stratification is largely based on SES, race, ethnicity, employment locations, population density and distances (Silver 2012). Class structure often determines low economic development, limited access to health facilities, and low levels of educational attainment. Low SES is also associated with community problems such as residential and racial segregation (Sennett 1992, Sennett and Cobb 1972), and thus isolates

communities of color and emphasizes classicism and power relations among groups.

Despite individual foci on past, present, and future dimensions, it is clear that the built environment has always been subverted by monumentality, class distinction, and ecology. Minority neighborhoods with high rates of social inequity and disparities are obviously the most affected (Charleswell 2014). Since oppression is mediated through social, cultural, legal, and economic structures, using intersectionality allows us to examine the interactions that produce oppression and inequity, and perhaps identify ways to provide a more democratic future.

2.2 Stakeholders and social justice

Approaches to social justice emphasize either the redistribution of goods (Rawls 1971) or social processes (Young 1990); but all approaches concern equity (Sen 2006). Theories of social justice frequently challenge inequities at their source and require people to question social and power relations. According to Potts and Brown (2005) social justice is about: ...transforming the way resources and relationships are produced and distributed so that all can live dignified lives in a way that is ecologically sustainable. It is also about creating new ways of thinking and being and not only criticizing the status quo (284).

A social justice approach to health equity thus has the potential to transform social structures, which is essential in addressing the root problems of institutionalized oppression.

Closely tied to social justice, equity is concerned with fairness. Per Braveman and Gruskin (2003), equity in public policy exists when social systems are designed to equalize outcomes between more and less advantaged groups. Equity is not interchangeable with equality: inequality may refer to differences in outcomes of interest while inequities exist where those differences are unfair or unjust. Architects must consider projects through not only an intersectional equity lens, but also contemplate the impacts of the intersections of multiple positions of privilege and oppression (Hankivsky, Grace, Hunting, Ferlatte et. al. 2012). Resistance and resilience have recently been added as key principles of intersectionality-based analyses (see Hunting et al., forthcoming) because both empower marginalized populations to disrupt oppression. One such resistance from subordinated groups is to use collective actions to destabilize dominant ideologies. Policies and discourses that label groups of people as inherently marginalized or vulnerable undermine the reality that there are no 'pure victims or oppressors' (Hankivsky, et al. 2012). Categorical top-down policy approaches reinforce conceptions of difference between groups, obscure their shared relationships to power, and prevent collaborative work. These problematic situations demand bottom-up stakeholder perspectives; so when projects are skewed towards top-down priorities by policy or client, then architects must advocate for better balance. If intractable project parameters lead unavoidably to social oppression, architects should know when to walk away.

3.0 CONCLUSION: ARCHITECTURE, THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT, AND SOCIETY

Since early industrialization, social progress has promoted self-governance, broader participation, and more enlightened perspectives about how we share the world. Our current globalized situation should now lead to even more inclusive viewpoints. Given the now commonplace evidence of everyone's systemic interrelatedness within our world's collective economy, ecology, and politic; the opportunity to contribute to harmonious and healthy habitat is increasingly likely to become the forefront of architectural practice.

The architect's current role in the dynamic of money, power, and knowledge is typified by Gadanho (2016) as an overly "top down versus bottom up" approach that is more obedient to the short-term commercial aspects of architectural practice and less responsive to long term user-needs and to society at large. In terms of patronage, this critique illustrates how every work of architecture has five client stakeholder clients: an owner who pays, a user who occupies, a government that regulates, critics who analyze, and, ultimately, the society which collectively owns, occupies, and animates the built environment. As law professor Clowney (2013) puts it:

Landscapes do not arise through the work of a divine hand to celebrate the deserving and promote truthful accounts of history. Rather, the built environment is shaped by the tastes of government leaders and ruling elites--the only groups with sufficient resources to organize costly building projects and install permanent memorials on the land. It takes little effort to see that those with dominion over the land may use their power to teach the public their own desired political and historical lessons. The landscape, as a result, tends to either exclude the heritage and memories of subaltern groups or appropriate their stories for dominant-class purposes.

Without denigrating "top down" responsibility to the owner-client, the architect's "bottom up" contract with users at large and society in general must be accepted. Public health, safety, and welfare are not to be unheeded in search of personal success. But is architecture relevant to these issues of oppression? Currently a number of other crises threaten architects' autonomy and claims to mastery: corrosion of professional boundaries, increased regulation, performance commissioning, value engineering, loss of public trust, and dismissal of the architect's heroic figure for example (Bachman 2014). Worse, those challenges are compounded by architecture's "permanent conflicts between autonomous

ideals and external demands” (Sahin-Dikman 2013). At the crossroads however, postindustrial society and its emerging globalized, interconnected, complex dynamic offers a new perspective; and perhaps multidimensional intersectionality is a useful lens to that transition (Bachman 2013). Anderson (2014) writes:

By incorporating values of inclusivity, social justice, and equity, public interest design inserts a critical lens into contemporary architectural thinking, practice, and pedagogy. Its emphasis on inclusive process and action over product creates a praxis that draws on trans-disciplinary knowledge to create change.

Three opportunities for that change shape our conclusion and counterbalance architecture’s complicity in institutionalized oppression.

3.1 Social activism

Social activism is a general form of architectural resistance to oppression. As benevolent agency, it now transcends the limited bounds of pro-bono and academic design work. The Auburn University Rural Studio, founded by Mockbee and Ruth in 1993 is a notable precursor. Habitat for Humanity is another such social project that architects and architecture students engage with some regularity. Design/Build programs in architecture schools also come to mind, as do the post-catastrophe design efforts that followed hurricane Katrina. More essentially, architects such as 2016 Pritzker winner Alejandro Aravena “has clearly demonstrated the ability to connect social responsibility, economic demands... and the city” (Pritzker 2016). With socially minded Glenn Murcutt and Richard Rogers on Aravena’s Pritzker jury, perhaps a fundamental shift is afoot.

3.2 Stakeholder engagement

To practice social activism, architects must embrace Gadanho’s bottom-up inclusivity. The struggle for balanced priorities, resistance and project refusal was covered in section 2.2 above. Cupers’ book (2014) provides an excellent set of perspectives to that end. Likewise, Vorhees (2015) focuses on how building partnerships among project stakeholders can help avoid discriminatory gentrification.

The emergence of Public Private Partnerships (P3) offers another tool for leveraging public interests with private and corporate resources. P3 arrangements are typically long term contracts to finance, build, operate, and maintain a project wherein a private developer assumes all costs and responsibility. In return the investing developer keeps all profits from the project for a contracted period of time, after which local government assumes ownership. Normally at the turnover stage, said developer provides a maintenance warranty to assure continued value. Sustainability is even part of some such P3 endeavors. It is easy to imagine how urban development could employ such strategies to promote social welfare with no upfront expense to city budgets or occupant investment.

3.3 Sustainability and the commodification of resources

Our global population of about 0.6 billion in 1500 had a negligible physical and ecological footprint on total land area. This persisted even as population doubled to some 1.2 billion people at the beginning of the 1800s’ industrial revolution (Fig. 3). By 2000 however, with the population exceeding 6.0 billion, human use had disrupted 60% of total land area and negatively impacted all the waters and ice areas of the planet as well as every layer of our atmosphere. While urban areas still cover only 3% of the earth’s land area, the infrastructure that surrounds and supports our cities and towns is part and parcel of what it means to craft the built environment. Note that the commodified urban, cropland, and pasture areas of the earth now approach 50% of the total land area. With recovering secondary forest and non-forest areas, only 20% of the natural world remains.

Links between sustainability and ethical design practice are framed by how we promote well-being through occupation of the built environment at all scales. If we further understand design as a preferred way to realize a better future, then the needs and aspirations of present generations are clearly linked to the sustained well-being of future generations.

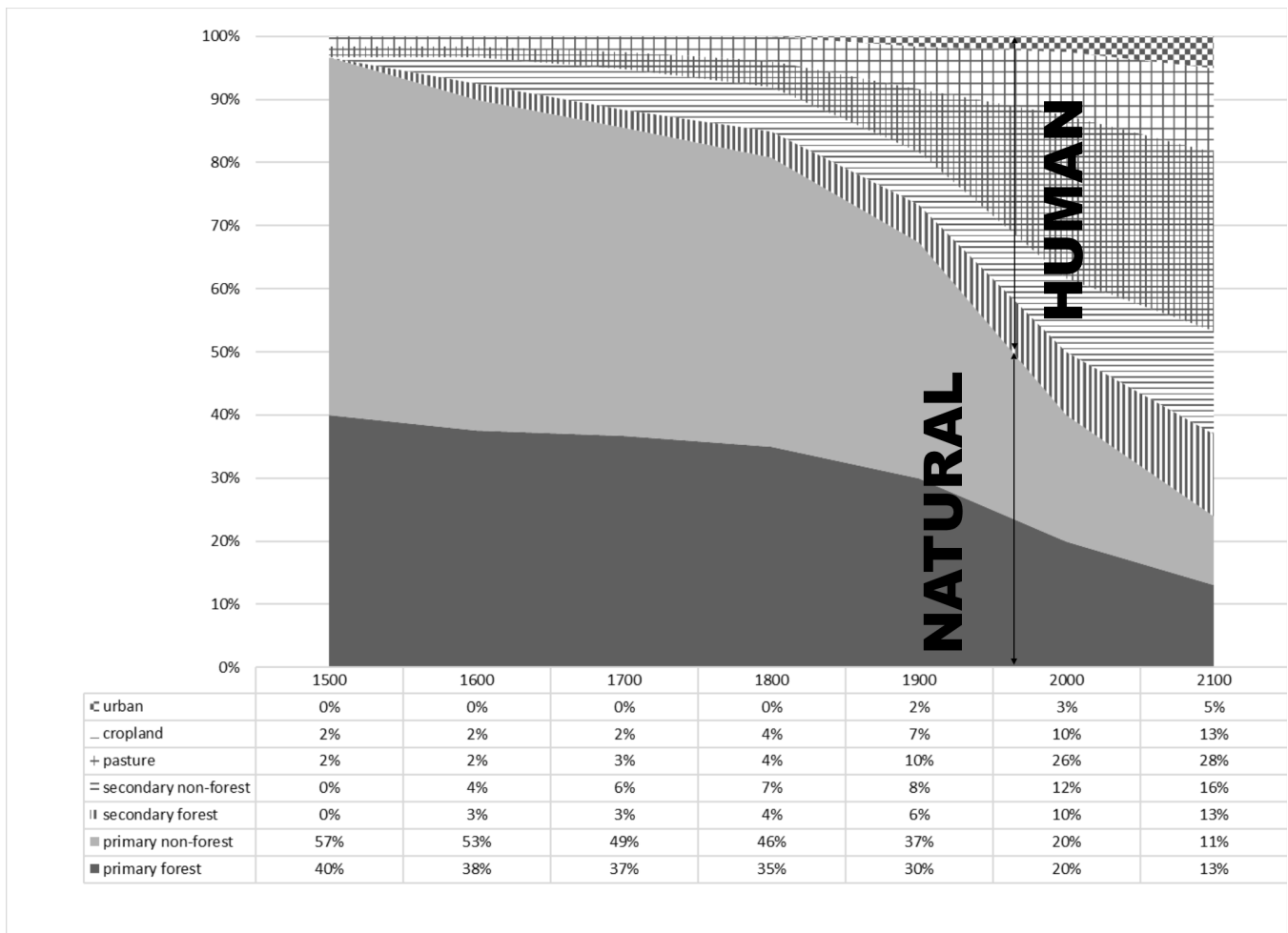


Figure 3: Land use change since 1500. Includes 50,166,447 miles² (129,930, 5555 km²) of ice free land area. Source: Graph by authors; data from Goldewijk 2001, and Goldewijk et al, 2011.

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