

In his *Ten Books on Architecture*, Vitruvius creates a portrait of the architect as a person of broad learning and various talents. Most of the philosophical advice presented by the author, however, is either too antiquated or prosaic to be of much service to contemporary designers. No one can be expected, for example, to examine the livers of a few slaughtered cattle to determine the propitiousness of a proposed site. One Vitruvian assertion, however, has exercised a tenacious hold on the architectural imagination. This is the statement, delivered almost as an afterthought in a discussion of building types, that all architecture "must be built with due reference to durability, convenience, and beauty," in Latin, *firmitas, utilitas, and venustas*.<sup>1</sup> All subsequent theories of architecture's basic values have been obliged to grapple with the simple wisdom of Vitruvius' statement.

Despite its longevity, the Vitruvian formulation of what good architecture provides carries with it a built-in quandary. How does one begin to prioritize the imperatives of *firmitas, utilitas, and venustas* in cases where these values conflict and a trade-off is required? If these are the basic architectural values, and if they are, indeed, irreducible, then to what superior value does one appeal for judgment when these imperatives pull in opposite directions rather than reinforce each other? An obvious source of judgment is one's ethics.

As many of his readers have observed, Vitruvius possessed an unreflective temperament. He ignored the possibility that conflicts between the irreducible values of *firmitas*, *utilitas*, and *venustas* would be a source of dismay for architects seeking guidance in the creation of good buildings. Vitruvius was satisfied that a properly prepared architect would possess the necessary skills to resolve such conflicts. In addition to a liberal, practical knowledge base, the adequate education of an architect would include an inculcation of virtues. An architect would be “high-minded and not self-assuming . . . courteous, just, and honest without avariciousness” and would “keep up his position by cherishing a good reputation.”<sup>2</sup> Vitruvius did not think that such preparation would be an easy matter, but neither did he perceive the logical problem entailed in holding proper preparation to be the solution to the problem of conflicting values.

The logical problem that arises from Vitruvius’ formulation is this: if good buildings result from the deliberations of knowledgeable and virtuous architects, then it follows that a person could be a good architect without having actually designed any buildings, simply by virtue of the fact that he or she is adequately educated and of good moral fiber. This conclusion, however, is at odds with commonsense views of how an architect’s reputation is made. Ordinarily, we would think that one’s status as a good architect depended on the merits of one’s buildings. We may go with Vitruvius on this issue and still hold a weaker position, that a good building is an *indicator* of the presence of a good architect, we just cannot hold that one’s capabilities as an architect are defined by one’s buildings without circularity.

We might reasonably ask, what else—in addition to one’s built work—should be required to establish one’s worth as an architect. Must the good architect also be able to demonstrate that he or she is a benevolent employer, prudent with finances,

or a talented draftsperson? Probably not. These traits may be desirable, or make architects more likely to produce good designs, but the reputations of many otherwise highly regarded architects would suffer considerably if these traits were held out to be requirements of a good architect. Rather, many practitioners prove themselves to be good architects despite a glaring lack of some of these corollary traits.

This is not the only problem generated by Vitruvius’ response to the issue of irreducible and conflicting architectural values. How can someone who is considered a good architect still produce a bad building from time to time? When the definition of good architecture is not made a function of the architect’s preparation and character, this problem does not arise.

Vitruvius may well have gotten the dependency relationship between good architecture and the good architect backwards in his *Ten Books*. Practitioners are regarded as good architects because they have designed buildings that are widely recognized as good. With the relationship stated this way, the problem of how a good architect could design the occasional bad building disappears. Enough bad buildings and one’s reputation sags. Furthermore, one might be regarded as a poor architect but luck into an occasional good design without raising an ontological problem. The problem of circularity disappears. Along with it, however, goes the solution to the problem of conflicting values—that skill is all that is needed to guide architects through conflicts in values. Design skill is certainly necessary, but not sufficient in and of itself. Clearly, the problem of weighing the values of *firmitas*, *utilitas*, and *venustas* is more complex than Vitruvius would have it appear.

Subsequent architects and theorists have contended with the problem of conflicting architectural values in several ways. Some have insisted that, although Vitruvius was correct about



the plurality of values, one value can always be identified as superior to the others; its trump value does the necessary prioritizing. Others have argued against the Vitruvian idea of the irreducibility of architectural values, proposing instead a unity of values, such as function and beauty. A third, and more recent, response to the problem of multiple and conflicting values in architecture asserts that one should withdraw from the inevitable compromise between values—the residue of a bankrupt humanist ideology—and instead concentrate design efforts on breaking up this ancient antagonism. Each of these ideas has something to offer the Vitruvian dilemma.

#### PLURAL VALUES

Robert Venturi set the stage in recent times for asserting the plurality of basic architectural values with his assertion that “architecture is necessarily complex and contradictory in its very inclusion of the traditional Vitruvian elements of commodity, firmness, and delight.”<sup>3</sup> Following his lead, an embrace of mixed and possibly conflicting values came to characterize the developing postmodern sensibility to such an extent that architectural theorist Charles Jencks could assert, “pluralism is the Post-Modern ideology above all others.”<sup>4</sup>

There was really nothing new, however, about this affirmation of the Vitruvian diversity of architecture’s values. Leon Battista Alberti echoes Vitruvius on this point almost word for word, although he went on to address the problem of a conflict of values, claiming that when utility and structure were adequately addressed, beauty was an almost inevitable result.<sup>5</sup> Andrea Palladio, too, subscribed to the Vitruvian values. He dispatched the problem of potential conflicts by arguing that reason would perform the function of supreme arbiter between the demands of *venustas* and *utilitas*. In his 1624 *Elements of*

*Architecture*, Henry Wotton took up the same position. “The end is to build well,” he wrote. “Well building hath three conditions: *Commoditie*, *Firmitas*, and *Delight* . . . the place of every part, is to be determined by use.”<sup>6</sup> Following Wotton, Sir William Chambers expressed much the same idea, arguing that beauty should be justified in terms of the utilitarian benefits it bestows on man’s well-being.<sup>7</sup> While acknowledging the potential for conflict among architectural values, Karl Friedrich Schinkel gave priority to *venustas*, maintaining, “the task of architecture is to make something practical, useful, and functional into something beautiful.”<sup>8</sup>

The turn away from the Vitruvian tradition by nineteenth-century rationalists, which subsequently evolved into modernist functionalism, has made the postmodern adoption of a plurality of values seem more like an avant-garde rejectionist movement than a simple return to earlier, conservative values. To be sure, postmodernists gave the problem a new spin by insisting not only on the independence of *firmitas*, *utilitas*, and *venustas*, but on the value of their being independent as well. The plurality of Vitruvian values was not only a fact resulting from the inability to reduce *firmitas*, *utilitas*, and *venustas* to a single value, but it was considered a morally good thing in and of itself.

The term “pluralism” has a democratic ring, something easily endorsed in an age suspicious of united fronts. Does postmodernism, however, endorse the “cooperation among equals” that we associate with political pluralism, or does it support—as many have charged—only a pluralism among the aesthetic elite? The famed double-coding of postmodernist monuments, whereby a building talks down to or up to its audience depending on their level of sophistication, is certainly lost on most. But even so, this shortcoming may not warrant a wholesale condemnation of the postmodern movement.

More problematic for postmodern pluralism—especially as it applies to *emustas*, or aesthetic judgment—is that the movement falls apart once a basis of agreement between people becomes too particularized or fragmented. In the United States, where Democrats, Republicans, Reform Party members, and other groups continue to slug it out, pluralism functions as a valuable tool for insuring the well-being of society. Some general points of agreement—what constitutes basic human rights, what the social value of cooperation is, what a just society looks like—that are shared by all groups prevent a descent into anarchy. Fear of the consequences of not agreeing helps to sustain the whole enterprise. Without some points of widespread agreement save a commitment to pluralism itself, no compelling reason could be found to prevent individuals from pursuing their own political agendas. In the case of artistic pluralism, however, no such urgency informs a need to agree. Artistic differences do not result in civil wars. Some viewpoints may be considered more informed than others, but all are without the force of an ethical imperative behind them. This is the paradox of postmodern pluralism. Due to what it regards as the moralistic excesses of modernism, postmodernism keeps morality out of the discussion of artistic decisions. By claiming allegiance to the ethic of pluralism, it attempts to claim a moral basis for otherwise arbitrary preferences and hence greater social relevance. Pluralism in architecture, however, is not the same as pluralism in politics. Pluralism in art cannot count on any further relevance within the realm of ethics.<sup>9</sup>

of moralizing its art. Some say it makes no such claims, that its only claims are for the liberation of art; social benefit is at best a by-product of such action. These architects were happy to stick to art and technique, leaving morality to the politicians.

Without some claim to morality, however, even the phrase “building well” loses its normative meaning. One practitioner might say it means responding to what people like. Another might argue it means challenging people visually. Still another might maintain that it means following the modernist agenda. To say that everyone is equally correct smacks of intellectual dishonesty or cowardice. Yet why would an architect feel motivated to find a common area of agreement? Postmodernism cannot restrict the terms of the debate without disavowing its most fundamental proposition of pluralism. To liberate art from morality and then to endorse pluralism in art without simultaneously referring to reasons for commonality is to deny the role of widespread agreement in critical evaluation. Anyone’s opinion is as valid as anyone else’s, and no compelling moral reason for solidarity can be summoned without disavowing the one value to which the postmodernist was willing to commit. One could try, instead, to summon artistic reasons for solidarity, but these reasons will have to compete with everyone’s personal reasons and agendas.

Another result of endorsing pluralism is that one form of monism—the modernist emphasis on function—is replaced by another—the postmodernist emphasis on diversity. The propensity of a design solution to promote diversity becomes the ultimate criterion of its goodness—an odd measure of design excellence. Before postmodernism burst on the scene, we would have been more likely to judge a design excellent by how well it combined beauty, functionality, and structural integrity, rather than by how many different interpretations we could wring out of it. Although pluralism may form the bedrock



No longer a means to elicit a fresh perspective on the world, dishabituation becomes an end in itself.

The value-laden activity of judging a building according to function or beauty is exchanged for the opportunity to engage in the value-free activity of reading architecture as a text. This activity of "reading" encourages a high-degree of intellectual detachment from the object at hand. There is never the slightest interest in discerning whether all these dislocating, dislocating moves are actually achieving something important for mankind. Indeed, the critical positions assumed by posthumanism's proponents are notably apolitical and asocial. As McLeod notes, these positions "have erred . . . in their abjuration of all realms of the social and in their assumption that form remains either a critical or affirmative tool independent of social and economic processes."<sup>48</sup> The clearest justification for such moves is that they allow the people making them to engage in the kinds of critical enterprises they find interesting. The champions of posthumanist withdrawal would do well to heed Richard Rorty's observation that similar kinds of enterprises by leftist intellectuals serve no social purpose:

More generally, one should see the intellectual *qua* intellectual as having a special, idiosyncratic need—a need for the ineffable, the sublime, a need to go beyond the limits, a need to use words which are not part of anybody's language-game, any social institution. But one should not see the intellectual as serving a *social* purpose when he fulfills this need. Social purposes are served, just as Habermas says, by finding beautiful ways of harmonizing interests, rather than sublime ways of detaching oneself from others' interests. The attempt of leftist intellectuals to pretend that the avant-garde is serving the wretched of the earth by fighting free of the eerily beautiful is a hopeless attempt to make the special needs of the intellectual and the social needs of his community coincide.<sup>49</sup>

To criticize posthumanists for their inability to make a social contribution falls short of advocating a return to the same old humanism of Geoffrey Scott. Scott's humanism, too, is a much better critique than a construction. Scott faces the problem of how to justify the place of *venustas* in a world largely measured by utility. His justification both for preserving the independence of the aesthetic dimension and for the superiority of humanist architecture culminates in his claim that, "We have transcribed ourselves into terms of architecture."<sup>50</sup> This is a magnificent premise for the creation and evaluation of architecture according to a set of values—a set of values we might very much like to subscribe to and champion—but this concept is too vague to provide any real framework for design. Short of the Caryatid Porch on the Erechtheion, actual representations of human form in architecture are rare. Scott may have had in mind some level of abstraction, perhaps in the sense of the classical orders' embodiment of the proportions of the human body. This would circumscribe the aesthetic dimension of architecture, returning it to the renaissance/neoclassical models of which Scott is so fond. It serves as a reason for preferring classicism, but also for excluding such great buildings as Dulles Airport for appreciation. The concept of "transcrib[ing] ourselves in terms of architecture" is vacuous.

By failing to acknowledge the enormous role that convention plays in the communication and perception of aesthetic effect, Scott fails where posthumanist critics score their biggest points. Posthumanists have accurately charged that humanism is limited in its ability to stand back and regard itself critically, and they have presented serious works of architecture that act as a corrective. Eisenman's Wexner Center, Tschumi's Parc de la Villette pavilions, and Zaha Hadid's angular compositions demonstrate that challenging the

role of convention in communication and perception holds potential for opening up architecture to fresh, exciting observations. What posthumanist architects are not able to demonstrate is whether this opening up serves any end beyond itself.

#### RETURNING TO VITRUVIUS

Certainly, the modernist ideal of an ethically unified architecture has yet to be rehabilitated from its disrepute. Watkin was amply justified in excoriating its tendency “to deny or falsify the role of aesthetic motivation and to claim instead guidance from considerations of ‘naturalness,’ utility, functional advantage, and social, moral, and political necessity, or simply from correspondence with the ‘spirit of the age.’”<sup>51</sup> Modernism’s attempted synthesis of art and utility all too often took more than it gave; it required people to give up traditions, familiarities, and forms that contributed much meaning in life and offered in return both the prospect of a life suffused with art and a rationally, ergonomically, and economically devised environment. Rather than bringing art into everyday life, areas of life that had formerly been reserved for art became dominated by utility—or, just as bad, utility was tortured by attempts to mold it into art.<sup>52</sup> Modernism lost its moral imperative when it became obvious to enough people that it was not keeping up its end of the bargain.

Several attempts to redefine the relationship of architectural values for architecture following the collapse of modernism’s moral imperative have been discussed here. Pluralism is not able to count on the urgent need for agreement that political pluralism trades on, and it compartmentalizes the aesthetic realm. Those wishing to reinstate a large role for art and aesthetics against the claims of utility lack strong

arguments. Their one strength is that the intimacy between ethics and aesthetics has a certain resonance that other theories fail to capture. Humanism appears to rely on a justification that, ironically, does not square with actual human experience. Posthumanist theories tend to descend into radical subjectivity; when seeking justification in some kind of cultural good, they buy into humanism after all.

The Vitruvian definition of architectural values leaves the door wide open for conflict, yet it remains the most durable. How best to cope with the ethical dimension of architecture has yet to be resolved by the leading architectural theorists. Does their failure in this regard portend that any account of the moral dimension of architecture is doomed to inconsistency? Is the fact that little agreement exists concerning the place of moral deliberation in design, or even the importance of architecture to the greater good, telling about the prospects for such agreement? Architectural theory has not explored these issues with the help of the perspectives moral philosophy can supply. The remainder of this book will address this void through a detailed examination of the values and moral dilemmas unique to architecture.