



## **Underpinnings**

A Soul Practitioner

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Craig L. Wilkins

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“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home...they are the world of the individual person: the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works.”<sup>3.1</sup>

**Eleanor Roosevelt**

<sup>3.1</sup> Remarks to the United Nations on the 10th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, March 27, 1958.

<sup>3.2</sup> Paul Polak, M.D., “¡Viva la Revolución!” October 6, 2011, accessed December 15, 2014, <http://www.paulpolak.com/viva-la-revolucion/>.

<sup>3.3</sup> John Gavin Dwyer, “Delivering the goods: Architects must find a way to bring better design to more people,” *Residential Architect*, June 2007.

<sup>3.4</sup> In his article, “Delivering the Goods,” Dwyer states, “According to RSMean cost data, the average residential architect charges about 10 percent of the construction cost for design. Standard practices place the bulk of this payment before bidding. If bids come back over budget, the typical contract deflects any responsibility from the architect and gives the owner three options: Get more money, redesign (and pay more in design fees), or abandon the project....So, if I hire an architect to design my \$300,000 house, I would have to shell out an additional \$30,000 up front without any guarantee that what's designed will meet my budget. If it doesn't, I either need to beg for more money or throw my \$30K in a recycling bin. How many people can afford to take that kind of risk?”

As design entrepreneur Dr. Paul Polak first observed in 2005, “the majority of the world’s designers focus all their efforts on developing products and services exclusively for the richest 10 percent of the world’s customers. Nothing less than a revolution in design is needed to reach the other 90 percent.”<sup>3.2</sup> In architecture, the gap is even worse. Architect and professor John Gavin Dwyer echoes the statistics verified in other studies and publications when he claims, “[q]uite simply, the architecture profession has failed to create a way to deliver design that's accessible to the other 98 percent.”<sup>3.3</sup> There are a myriad of reasons for this, beginning with the fact that most people don’t know or understand a lot of what architects do—and what they think they know has very little to do with the lives of everyday people.<sup>3.4</sup> But what if things were different? What if the vast majority of the public knew exactly what the profession provides? What if all people could see the everyday and long-term value of architectural services? What if architects worked to provide those services to the many people who are traditionally positioned outside their target clientele? *It is about community design, yes; but also about something more. In essence, it asks important questions about just whom architecture is intended to serve.*

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### *Defining Profession*

Before I begin, I'd like to first make clear what I mean when I use the term profession, and by extension, professionals. The word is often employed with the assumption of general understanding, but commonly misunderstood and misused in most contexts. This is unfortunate, because as socially authorized and legally protected groups, professions have developed into one of the most important forces we have for ensuring a just and egalitarian society.

A profession requires specialized training and legal or formal certification. It also implies a sense of vocation and special purpose. *Professionals wield a vast amount of influence and power over how our social world is ordered*, by virtue of their monopoly over critical areas of knowledge. Through the daily exercise of their protected and exclusive expertise, the world's doctors, lawyers, architects, and engineers preserve public health, define and uphold justice, and design and build safe buildings, bridges and highways, while routinely making life-and-death decisions that affect people now and for decades to come. This is a significant amount of power over our lives to be allotted to a small, self-selected group of people to administer exclusively, and it does the public a disservice when the misuse of the term distracts from and diminishes the recognition of this most critical point.

Still, the proliferation of professions as we know them is a rather recent phenomenon. In the still-blossoming scholarship in this area, a dominant, definitive, generally accepted theory about the origin of these new professions has yet to be established. In fact, theories abound not only about how they've come into being, but also whether their continued existence is really necessary in a modern, information-rich society. Perhaps the most widely accepted understanding of professions asserts that certain minimal conditions must be met for a system of collective living to move beyond self-interested chaos into a generally ordered community: a method of gathering/creating sustenance and shelter; a method of knowledge and skill sharing, agreed-upon rules on how to live together, and methods for keeping well. In an ordered community—we'll call it a society—those willing to take on the responsibility of providing those elements critical to its establishment and well being are thus rewarded for doing so. Society provides them with a certain amount of standing and prestige for

<sup>3.5</sup> Sarah Wigglesworth, in “The Crisis of Professionalization: British Architecture 1993,” states, “The development in the early nineteenth century of a professional body representing the interests of architects was motivated by a desire to secure standards of practice in return for status within society. Broadly speaking, the profession guaranteed society that it was the master of an area of esoteric knowledge. In return, society rewarded the professional with a respectable salary and social standing.” *Practices*. Issue 2. (Spring 1993), 14.

<sup>3.6</sup> Robert Descimon. “The ‘Bourgeoisie Seconde’: Social Differentiation in the Parisian Municipal Oligarchy in the Sixteenth Century, 1500–1610” *French History*. v.17. n.4. (2003). p.388-424; Terence C. Halliday and Charles L. Cappell. “Indicators of Democracy in Professional Associations: Elite Recruitment, Turnover, and Decision Making in a Metropolitan Bar Association” *American Bar Foundation Research Journal*, v.4. n.4 (Autumn, 1979), 697-767.

<sup>3.7</sup> C.S. Bellis. “Professions In Society” *British Actuarial Journal*. v.6, n.2, (2000), 320.

<sup>3.8</sup> Malham M. Wakin, Brig Gen (Ret.). *Integrity First: Reflections of a Military Philosopher*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), 116.

<sup>3.9</sup> The need that we have for health care, for example, is unlikely to go away and it is that need that over time has generated what we know today as the medical profession. It may come as a surprise to some to learn that the health care professions do not exist for the sole purpose of providing employment to health care professionals or profits for health care organizations. It is because of societal need that our communities develop and maintain medical schools and nursing schools. Similarly, every organized society will express its interest in justice by providing some variation of a court system and a legal profession. We need an ordered society; we want to be treated fairly; we seek justice. We train our judges and our lawyers in law schools supported by the community because of the important value that we place on justice.

<sup>3.10</sup> C.S. Bellis. “Professions In Society” *British Actuarial Journal*. v.6, n.2, (2000), 319.

their efforts. In turn, those granted this status must promise to use their skills in the best interests of society as a whole. This is essentially the rationale behind professions.

Reasonable? Of course. Yet this is but one theory. Others range from the cynical—that professions are nothing more than an organized cabal of self-interested individuals who artificially drive up the value of their services by claiming production of a higher-quality product than otherwise possible<sup>3.5</sup>—to the naïve—that professions are a justifiable recognition by society of rare abilities, intellect, and moral standards found in only a small, select type/class of person.<sup>3.6</sup> Of course there are others still, but for brevity’s sake, I’ll conclude here.

Now...there’s probably more than a bit of truth in each of the above statements, but to begin to make sense of the varied paths each suggests, it might be useful to look at the word itself for some direction:

The oldest English usage [of profession] was “avowal or expression of purpose”. It implied religious and moral motives to dedicate oneself to a good end. Even at this early stage, societal distrust of these claims was indicated by attaching connotations of deceit.<sup>3.7</sup> [Emphasis mine]

The definition above suggests that the acknowledgment of a profession was originally predicated on society’s belief that there is something more to a profession than the desire for wealth or entitlement; that “the very existence of the professions results from some fundamental need that society has.”<sup>3.8, 3.9</sup> Hence, a profession might be more fully defined as an organized, structured, socially acknowledged practice:

founded on specialized educational training, the purpose of which is to supply disinterested counsel and service to others, for a direct and definite compensation, wholly apart from expectation of other business gain.<sup>3.10</sup>

Barry Wasserman further clarifies the ethical/moral duty implied by the term “disinterested,” which in the quote above refers to a suppression of

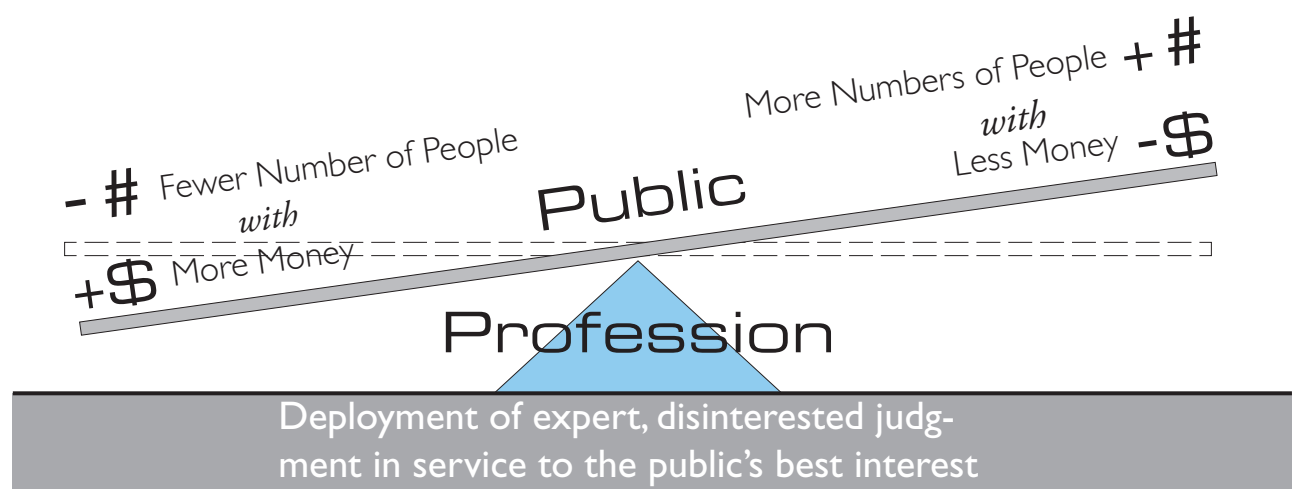
personal interest to a higher purpose—the “good end” previously mentioned. He argues that professions are different from trades and other commercial pursuits because at their very base, they encompass the following:

- Specialized expertise exercised with judgment in unique situations;
- Autonomy of the professional group;
- Guarantee of a basic level of competence from its members;
- Commitment to public service and trust—a public duty.<sup>3.11</sup>

<sup>3.11</sup> Barry Wasserman, et. al. *Ethics and the Practice of Architecture*. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2000), 70  
 Wasserman, et. al. go into specific criterion of professions:  
*Fundamental criteria for determining contemporary professions that are broadly shared by scholars of professions include:*  
*University-level education in a special are of knowledge that is central to the profession being discussed;*  
*Internship and supervised entry-level performance in order to master application of that knowledge in practice;*  
*Knowledge and practices that require the unique exercise of learned judgment for each new situation(rather than technical knowledge);*  
*Establishment of disciplinary identity and uniqueness of the professional group thorough the establishment of professional organizations, journals, systems of education, and standards for licensing;*  
*Autonomy, earned by the profession and recognized and granted by society through state licensing, in defining and mastering the knowledge and practice of the profession, resulting in self-policing with regard to the standards and practices and ethical conduct;*  
*Having the knowledge and expertise necessary for the well-being of persons in society.*



**Figure 3.1**  
 Role professions are designed to fill in society:  
 Maintain a balance in all public v. private access  
 and application of professional services as it relates  
 to the built environment.



**Figure 3.2**  
 The lack of an expressed ethical position specific to the practice of architecture results in decisions being made and justified based on legal or economic concerns. Such choices inevitably lead to an imbalance in the access and application of professional services.

This is a significant collection of requirements, to be sure. What would induce a group to take on such hefty public responsibilities? Several possibilities come to mind, the most immediate being the allure of almost complete autonomy: As long as there is no violation of individual rights, professions have almost absolute power in determining who they are and what they do. They can control who becomes a member and by what criteria, determine how long before one can request admittance and under what set of circumstances such requests shall be accepted; set the parameters for specialization; determine what skills are required and where those skills will—and will not—be applied. In short, *professions are granted the social authority to determine the educational, behavioral, certification, and practice standards for their members, as long as such standards are positioned to be for the public good.* They are given, in effect, an absolute monopoly over as broad a knowledge base and skill set as they can master, in return for the public “being able to entrust a group of people with shouldering some of its more difficult ethical dilemmas.”<sup>3.12</sup> It is this reciprocity requirement—and the implicit guarantee that all of its members are capable of fulfilling this requirement—that sets professions apart from other occupational pursuits. Yes, its members are paid for a service but what makes that service unique and proprietary—in other words, professional—is their ability and obligation to apply disinterested judgment in the delivery of that service. As such, “no member of the professions can escape these ties to the community since they constitute the very reason for the existence of the professions.”<sup>3.13</sup>

3.12 Tom Spector. *The Ethical Architect: the dilemma of contemporary practice.* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), 8-9.

3.13 Malham M. Wakin, Brig Gen (Ret.). *Integrity First: Reflections of a Military Philosopher.*

### *Rebuttal*

“But what about ball players, accountants, bus drivers, and other skilled workers? They too have important jobs and get paid for their skills. Are they not also professionals?” One may reasonably ask. For those who would argue that the previously established definition does not provide space for a whole host of other skilled occupations too numerous to list here, I say, you are correct. The above definition indeed does not include the litany of occupations that we now call professions. And that’s the point. Because they aren’t—at least, not in the way the term and its reason for being are intended.

First, one is not a professional simply because of payment for services rendered. The payment is the *recompense*, not the *reason*. It is the centrality of vocational judgment in the interest of the public good that sets professions—and subsequently, professionals—apart. Similarly, having a career does not in itself accord the status or demands of a professional career. Although many skilled occupations, including that of bus driver, professional cook, and plumber, benefit from specialized training and excellence of judgment, the use of such specialization in the broadest possible public interest is not a central feature of these applied occupations.

“Well,” you say, “what about professional athletes?” True, they possess a high level of specialized knowledge and skill that has taken them some time to study and apply with confidence. One might put forth a strong argument that sports provide a particular kind of service to us as a society—especially, let’s say, during the Olympics for example—and thus render a public duty. However, “professional” sports do not guarantee that each member of their “profession” will be competent enough to provide you with the kinds of public service that you may require. If, in fact that were true, then what sport itself provides us—the test of athletic skills on the field, the unknown outcome—would be undermined. If we knew the outcome, if such were guaranteed, then what would be the purpose of the test? What public value would it hold for us? The very value of sports is the fact that we don’t expect the same level of performance. We expect someone to fail—we just hope it’s the other player. In addition, should one show the talent—or even potential for talent—one can demand an opportunity to prove his or her worth sans formal educational means (minor league, college, developmental leagues, and the like). Even should all of the above be discounted, there is still the matter of disinterested judgment. What, exactly, is the disinterested judgment for the public good exercised in professional sports—which arguably houses the largest group of self-interested members on the planet? Not to cheat so that the general public can know the game is fair? Um...steroids, anyone? So, yes, you may even have the kind of skill needed to become an athlete—and very few do—this still does not, in the true sense of the term and in the manner in

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<sup>3.14</sup> Spector. *The Ethical Architect*, 8.

which I am employing it here—accord the designation of professional status.

I trust you are getting the picture here: remuneration, possession of a singular skill, or dedication to a trade do not a profession make. Professional status requires more. Being a professional is a serious responsibility, wherein one must continually ask, “To whom am I ultimately responsible: the public, the profession, my employer/employee, my client or myself?” *A professional is expected to come up with the correct answer every time, and the stakes are often high.* It is not an easy condition to live with, but “[l]iving with a certain amount of internal conflict is the price professionals pay in exchange for special status, regulated entry into the field, and some degree of business monopoly.”<sup>3.14</sup>

Thus, for our purposes a professional can be defined as a formally educated expert in a particular body of knowledge and/or possessing a specific set of skills of a socially essential nature, trained to apply these skills with disinterested judgment for the public benefit. The application of these abilities is exclusively a professional’s to exercise. The competence of the professional is certified by a body of similarly educated and skilled members, and can be measured against an objectively established set of standards by which each agrees to abide.

### *Architecture and Its Professions*

As I wrote in my last book, *The Aesthetics of Equity: Notes on Race, Space, Architecture and Music*, practice without theory has no purpose.<sup>3.15</sup> Meant it, too. Still do. Some theorizing—introspection, contemplation, whatever you wish to call it—is essential for members of any profession. In fact, it is precisely that introspective reflection on the nature of their work that separates the professions from other occupations. *To be a member of a profession is to understand the full panoply of its efforts over the course of time, in order to best consider how to viably continue forward as a society.*

For the public, the belief that what the profession offers is a time-honored, ever-increasing and of course, essential service is key to its willingness to allow [it] to continue; for the professional, the belief that what they do is not only all of the

<sup>3.15</sup> Craig L. Wilkins. *The Aesthetics of Equity: Notes on race, space, architecture and music.* (Minneapolis: UMN Press, 2007), vii.

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above, but also both specific and special is critical to attracting future practitioners to perpetuate the profession.<sup>3.16</sup>

<sup>3.16</sup> Wilkins, *The Aesthetics of Equity*, 66-67.

<sup>3.17</sup> Daniel S. Friedman. "Architecture Education on the Verge" *AIA Journal of Architecture*. (July 2006). Vol 4. Issue 2, 8.

Professionals spend much of their education developing critical thinking skills of the highest order because for "decades we have argued that theoretical investments in the humanities repay the profession in the form of moral leadership."<sup>3.17</sup> This is the primary, if not the only, reason that professional education is firmly entrenched in the university system and situated in the liberal arts—both to ensure that the individual can engage in a broad external view of what architects do, and to encourage a deeper, internal view of one's own practice. I mean, let's face it, classes in archaeology, literature, linguistics, philosophy, musicology, astronomy, physiology and the like rarely help you complete a project on time and under budget. They do, however, help you evaluate the benefits and risks to the general public if you undertake the project. To encourage and prepare one for ethical thinking is the underlying purpose of university education for the professional.

Unofficially, architecture has historically claimed justification to the title of profession through the assertion that architecture is both art and science; however, officially the profession claims rights to the title due to its avowed mission to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the general public. At the same time, recalling the words of Polak and Dwyer at the beginning of this essay, 2 to 10 percent of the population do not a society make. For any of the above claims to be valid—for the profession to be a legitimate profession—the benefits must extend to the public as a whole. Thus below, I argue the efforts of design centers and other socially engaged practices satisfy both the profession's unofficial and official *raison d'etre*. In the process, these practices can also address a heretofore unattended 90 to 98 percent.

### *The Artistic Argument*

The "Architecture is art, and the architect is thus an artist" thesis proceeds something like this: Similar to art, architecture's contribution to the world is creating buildings that elevate us from our daily lives and give us something more profound to consider. As art, architecture's value lies beyond the

mere technical aspects of why and how it stands, what shelter it provides, what function it facilitates. From a certain perspective, a truer statement is difficult to find. Regardless of your level of acclimation to the practice, there are undoubtedly structures in this world that simply take your breath away, if not make you openly weep from joy and excitement upon a lucky meeting. True, those buildings might be different for different people, but the fact remains that, like art, architecture has the ability to move us, both individually and collectively. No one asks how the statue of David stands. They simply marvel at its stance. Thus, the claim follows, the real value of art—and consequently, architecture—is in our heads and hearts. Still, the tears one might shed upon that chance encounter with works of art or architecture are not the only method of identifying works of value.

If the real value of art and architecture is in our heads and hearts, design centers ask, “What is the full range of ways architecture can raise the heart?” For example, a home where one can feel safe, comfortable, and able to invite friends and family; where one has neighbors who create social capital and camaraderie; where one finds a haven from the soul-draining acts of the world, might raise the heart for some people as much as the Milwaukee Art Museum does for others. Do not such buildings also provide important, consciousness-raising, life-affirming moments in our daily lives? The creation of a process whereby communities can effectively engage each other and create aesthetically pleasing structures and neighborhoods—as in Favela-Barrio in Rio, HOMEmade in Bangladesh, and Mitchells Plain in Cape Town—is as important to the critical thinking about life as the design of Chandigarh, Pisac, or Seaside. Should that not also rise to the level of art?

I am not arguing against the kinds of architectural objects that are clearly singular moments in the architectural narrative. Gaudí, Barragán, Siza, Piano, Botta, Williams—the list goes on—have produced architecture we’ve rightly hailed as exemplary. That is not the only architecture that can lay claim to such accolades, especially when the criteria are broadened. Architect and professor Bill Hubbard convincingly, albeit narrowly, argues in his book, *Architecture in Three Discourses*, that there are at least two other perspectives on the creation of architecture: as an instance of aesthetic

order, yes, but also as an embodiment of values and/or an object to bring about results. I would argue that this might very well be the order, should architects rank these concerns in order of importance. Such is not necessarily true for non-architects. Thus, one must question why architects all but tether the value of their work—both within and without the profession—to only one of the three discourses (i.e., aesthetics, with no connection to expressions of social values, nor results)? As Kathleen Dorgan, quoting Andrzej Piotrowski of the University of Minnesota College of Design, will remark later in this book: “New buildings are frequently designed to meet one primary requirement: to be photogenic. In these cases, instead of designing a building for the way people interact with it, an architect designs for, and benefits from, the effect the building’s image produces.”<sup>3.18</sup> Piotrowski’s observation suggests that generally, the profession considers other reasons for creating architecture to be incidental, or at best understood as following the first, when in fact, this is not always the case. There are plenty of aesthetically pleasing structures—high profile ones—that are quite non-functional and bring about either no results or the opposite results for which it was intended.<sup>3.19</sup> And these are just the ones we hear about. “*The paradox of architecture is that a building ought to look good from the outside, but be usable from the inside. Some architectural fashions do well on the first but fall flat on the second.*”<sup>3.20</sup> While perhaps unfathomable to most architects, not everyone wishes to live by design ideas.

Architects are people who are sufficiently moved by design ideas to want to live this way. They feel not sacrifice but a positive joy in enacting William Morris’ dictum to have nothing around you that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful... They forget as well that even for a person with the requisite resolution, the ideas they would resolve to enact might not be design ideas.<sup>3.21</sup>

Many people have other priorities in mind. Sometimes architects offer design solutions where they are inappropriate, because they believe that to do less is to not offer anything, to not be held in the same regard as the names above, to not be architects. The practice of design centers rejects

<sup>3.18</sup> Andrzej Piotrowski. “On the Practices of Knowing and Representing Architecture”. *The Discipline of Architecture*. Andrzej Piotrowski, Julia Williams Robinson, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000), 56.

<sup>3.19</sup> See the *Architecture of the Absurd: A Case Against Dysfunctional Buildings* by John Silber for a frank and persuasive argument on this point.

<sup>3.20</sup> Ian Stewart in “A Conversation with Three Scientists: Physicist Philip Ball, Biologist Brian Goodwin and Mathematician Ian Stewart.”

<sup>3.21</sup> Bill Hubbard, Jr. *A Theory for Practice: Architecture in Three Discourses*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).13-14.

out of hand any validity in that line of reasoning. Their concern centers on the “scarcity of *good* architecture, not the scarcity of great architecture. Great architecture has always been scarce.”<sup>3.22</sup> The value of architects as professionals lies in the making of habitable buildings *and* places. The value of architects as artists lies in making aesthetically pleasing objects. I would argue that the former is the most difficult and messy—and ultimately where the real value, the justification for professional existence resides. Without it, an architect is no more a professional than the person who awakens one day with a burning desire to see his or her work in a museum. They quit their job, buy paint, and work for years until they feel they’ve developed enough skill and product to exhibit their work. The only thing that stops them is the judgment of the critic and public. No license required; no schooling beyond that which they decide to undertake. No degree required; nothing more than a desire to do. That very person might, on the other hand, decide that instead of making a sculpture for display or writing a song for recording, they’d like to design a building for construction. Should they be allowed to simply do so? Of course not—because there is something beyond the simple desire and ability to design that is essential in the title of architect. Architects are professionals—and that requires something more.

[A]n architect is charged with resolving often incommensurate demands. It is this activity, ultimately, that justifies the architect's special status as a professional.<sup>3.23</sup>

Resolving those often-incommensurate demands begins with addressing our own often-incommensurate demands about what it means to practice architecture. *As artists as well as professionals, our role in society is to comment on the condition of its people. We are called to hold a mirror up to society, to contemplate the world we live in and the people who construct it—including, in particular, ourselves. In this manner, the artist serves a crucial role in society. By moving away from judging the merits of architecture on its visual aesthetics alone, to include its visible ethics as well, the artistic justification for architecture’s professional status is exponentially strengthened. Design centers base their work on this broadened premise,*

<sup>3.22</sup> Hal Box. *Think Like An Architect*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 51.

<sup>3.23</sup> Spector. *The Ethical Architect*, 6.

**As artists as well as professionals, our role in society is to comment on the condition of its people.**

<sup>3.24</sup> Bradley Guy, quoting Rex Curry in “Community Design Primer.” Unpublished paper for the Environmental Leadership Program. (February 2002). Community design has been described as a:

[C]omplex set of activities including architectural design and planning, education and training, community organizing, land and housing development activities, research and analysis and political advocacy, typically on the behalf of lower-income and inner city areas seeking to improve economic and social conditions and fulfill physical development needs such as affordable housing.

<sup>3.25</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*. (NYC: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1297.

ethical as well as aesthetic, as a matter of course, every day, routinely producing works that raise the head and heart.<sup>3.24</sup>

### *The Scientific Argument*

To begin the “Architecture is a science, and thus the architect is a scientist” discussion, I’d like to provide a working understanding of the term science. As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, science is “*the intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment,*” employing a specific practice based on the collection and analysis of empirical data, often referred to as the scientific method.<sup>3.25</sup> As such, science is grounded in logic and reason—observe, hypothesize, test, conclude, repeat, expand—a precise, exacting process of objective understanding of the observable world.

Now to be sure, there are forward-thinking educators and practitioners who do, in fact, employ scientific methods in their architectural work, seeking new ways to build and testing new ideas on a consistent, methodical basis that can be legitimately referred to as research. For a time during Modernism’s heyday, in fact, a modified scientific research method briefly became the design process of choice, especially in academic circles. Nonetheless, as practitioners, architects are great users. They employ technologies from a vast array of sources and apply them in ways that are often novel. This is not at all a bad thing—on the contrary, it is a great strength, demonstrating their unique ability to organize disparate elements of the human environment into a comprehensive, creative whole. For the majority of practicing architects, research in general—and the scientific method of research in particular—is simply not part of their *modus operandi*—design or otherwise. *As a discipline, architecture does not enthusiastically embrace or support scientific method.* The photovoltaic specialist is just a lighting geek to most architects—that is, until Kennedy and Violich discover a breakthrough, whereupon we claim their individual and singular achievement as part and parcel of what the profession produces.<sup>3.26</sup> The pre-fab modular researcher is simply a housing geek, until

<sup>3.26</sup> Pilar Viladas. “A Lot-Ek Solution”. *New York Times Magazine*. The Architecture Issue. (June 8, 2008); also see “A Bag Full of Sunshine: A Way to Bring Electric Light to Isolated Communities”. *The Economist.com* (Dec 5th 2007). accessed December 15, 2014, [http://www.economist.com/science/tm/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=10241549](http://www.economist.com/science/tm/displaystory.cfm?story_id=10241549).

<sup>3.27</sup> Gabrielle Birkner. "MoMA's Prefab-Housing Project" *New York Sun*. (May 29, 2008); also see the Museum of Modern Art's website for the "Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling" exhibit, accessed December 15, 2014. <http://www.momahomedelivery.org/>.

<sup>3.28</sup> Gary Stevens. "USA Architects Want Status Without Effort" Key Center For Architectural Research, accessed December 15, 2014, <http://www.archsoc.com/kcas/statusnoresponsibility.html>. Also, see Lori Thurgood, Mary J. Golladay and Susan T. Hill. *US Doctorates in the 20th Century*. National Science Foundation Special Reports. NSF 06-319. (October 2006), 3. The United States is unique in the extent to which fundamental research is conducted at universities, typically with the assistance of graduate students. Doctoral education is organized around an intensive, real-world research experience... American doctoral education produces cutting-edge knowledge and highly trained personnel who go on to fill specialized positions as teachers, researchers, and professionals in academe, industry, government, and nonprofit organizations.

<sup>3.29</sup> Blogger Charles Davis, Jr. tells a story of poet and urban philosopher June Jordan's self-education in design, which included a perspective-changing encounter with a depiction of a spoon at the Donnell library: "At the Donnell I lost myself among rooms and doorways and Japanese gardens and Bauhaus chairs and spoons. The picture of a spoon, of an elegant, spare utensil as common in its purpose as a spoon, and as lovely and singular in its form as sculpture, utterly transformed my ideas about the possibilities of design in relation to human existence." June Jordan. "One Way of Starting this Book," *Civil Wars* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), xvi-xvii. As first seen at *Race and Architecture*, blog, accessed December 15, 2014, at [http://raceandarchitecture.wordpress.com/2013/11/26/writing-and-building-black-utopianism-representing-the-architectural-musings-of-june-jordans-his-own-where-1971/#\\_ftn4](http://raceandarchitecture.wordpress.com/2013/11/26/writing-and-building-black-utopianism-representing-the-architectural-musings-of-june-jordans-his-own-where-1971/#_ftn4).

Lot-Ek makes it to the front pages, at which point the Museum of Modern Art becomes interested and we again take the opportunity to hail architecture for its dedication to testing ideas.<sup>3.27</sup> As a rule, however, architects do not invent, test, nor develop technologies; researchers do. The profession of architecture does have scientifically trained and Ph.D.-credentialed researchers who make the aesthetics of scientific investigation the guiding principle of their praxis, but as a group, this... is not what architects do, in practice or academia.

While their universities changed around them into research institutions, the architecture schools never really accepted scholarship as their responsibility... that qualification is not only rare but scorned in architectural academia. Who needs a Ph.D. to be a great architect?<sup>3.28</sup>

Notably, the work of design centers provides a compelling response to the contention that architects don't do scientific research.

The practice of architecture emerges from both a specific socio-cultural need as well as a desire to go beyond it, and its creation tells us much about who we are as a society. Similar to the manner in which a spoon, while coming in a variety of types and designs, is at its base fundamentally grounded in our everyday actions and speaks to specific ways of living. For example, one can convincingly argue the development of the spoon evolved out of a moment in time when Western culture decided that eating with an instrument was preferable.<sup>3.29</sup> So too, is architecture an artifact that speaks to how we live. Thus, architecture isn't just for architects; to the contrary, it is less for architects than it is for the society in which they practice.

Because architecture responds to the larger question of who we are as a social organization, I propose that architects who claim a scientific stance should seek to emulate the social sciences of sociology, psychology and behavioral science, rather than the natural sciences such as biology, chemistry, physics and the like, although Christopher Alexander would likely

<sup>3.30</sup> See Christopher Alexander's "New concepts in complexity theory arising from studies in the field of architecture: An overview of the four books of *The Nature of Order* with emphasis on the scientific problems which are raised." (May 2003), accessed December 15, 2014, <http://www.natureoforder.com/library-of-articles.htm>.

disagree.<sup>3.30</sup> I assert that the discipline of architecture has much in common with these disciplines, sometimes referred to as the sciences of quality. The work of design centers clearly demonstrates this commonality.

Design centers work methodically with social groups over time, discerning and understanding the causes as well as the effects of a community's material conditions, and using that knowledge in a systemic, reproducible manner to address the built environment. This is indeed scientific research, designed to be shared, applied, and refined over time by other practitioners. In fact, it is a design center's ability to engage in this kind of iterative, objective research that often prompts clients to seek them out. When a community seeks the help of a design center—and particularly when that community has been historically underserved—its members' questions concerning design may encompass the narrow definition of architecture as aesthetic practice, but are also typically embedded and linked to a larger context of environmental concerns that a design center is uniquely equipped to investigate.

The biggest nod to the scientific nature of design centers (and the social science heritage of design research in general) lies in the nature and applicability of its research across practitioners and disciplines. To quote the biologist Brian Goodwin:

I take [the science of qualities] to be a major challenge now for addressing many of the pressing issues with which we are faced. This includes the design of buildings and housing, and the way in which we use our land and resources in sustainable ways.<sup>3.31</sup>

<sup>3.31</sup> Bryan Goodwin in "A Conversation with Three Scientists: Physicist Philip Ball, Biologist Brian Goodwin and Mathematician Ian Stewart". Interviewed by Dr. Brian Hanson. Transcript published in *Katarxis N° 3*, accessed December 15, 2014, [http://katarxis3.com/Three\\_Scientists.htm](http://katarxis3.com/Three_Scientists.htm).

The efforts of practitioners engaged in, as Goodwin puts it, the science of qualities can be seen in the growing popularity of its products like the [National Charrette Institute](#), the [Environmental Design Research Association \(EDRA\)](#); *Planning to Stay*, by Bill Morrish and Catherine Brown; the *Design Studies* journal; and *The Community Planning Handbook*, by Nick Wates, as well as in the work of leading researchers like Tamara Winikoff, Henry Sanoff, Wendy Sarkissian, and others. In addition, the development of specific community design programs at the universities of [San Francisco](#), [South Florida](#), and [North Carolina State](#), as well as the growth of design studies programs within the sciences themselves, are all indications that the intentional, conscious development of architecture's social science

legacy is likely to continue. As Daniel Friedman, Dean of the [University of Washington College of Architecture](#) has observed:

[T]he hunger for solid research in the profession has never been greater, and a long tradition of social scientific, behavioral, technical, and evidence-based scholarship may finally enjoy its proper audience.<sup>3.32</sup>

<sup>3.32</sup> Daniel S. Friedman. "Architecture Education on the Verge" *AIA Journal of Architecture*. (July 2006). Vol 4, Issue 2, 8.

If design centers don't participate in the social sciences—the science of qualities—then the discipline itself just doesn't exist.

### *The Practical Argument*

Arguments over architecture as art or science are typically internal propositions, more germane to the interest of architects than to anyone else; to a large degree, their disposition is of little public importance. These are not the arguments that architecture employs to establish its public position as a profession. The critical one—the one that trumps all others publicly and justifies architecture's professional status—is the "profession of architecture is sworn to protect the health, safety and welfare (HSW) of the public"<sup>3.33</sup> position, and for good reason.

<sup>3.33</sup> *National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB) Certification Guidelines Handbook*. (Washington DC: National Council of Architectural Registration Boards, 2013), 2.

"The National Council of Architectural Registration Boards, a nonprofit organization, is a federation of the architectural licensing boards in each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. These 54 boards constitute NCARB's membership. "NCARB serves to protect the public health, safety, and welfare by leading the regulation of the practice of architecture through the development and application of standards for licensure and credentialing of architects. NCARB is responsible for establishing, interpreting, and enforcing national standards for architectural licensure."

It should be abundantly clear that the construction of buildings, from the smallest treehouses in Sheboygan and Des Moines to the tallest hotels dotting the skylines of Shanghai and Dubai, rightly falls under the interest of public welfare. The people involved in such a critical and prodigious effort must know exactly what they are doing; beyond that, the public must trust that they do. Not only is the physical protection of the public paramount, but so is their psychological protection, as it were: their confidence in the architect's work. Someone must be responsible for the public's well being; and it is the architect's claim to be uniquely qualified to do just that.

A reasonable outline might be stated thusly: In the area of *health*, architects make sure that structures built in the public realm won't make you ill (i.e., won't foster unsanitary conditions, damage the environment, contain materials hazardous to health, and so forth). In terms of *safety*, architects ensure that buildings won't endanger your life by falling down, are reasonably secure against adverse or catastrophic environmental conditions,



and are clearly navigable in times of emergency. Finally, in terms of *welfare*, architects pledge that buildings won't pose obstacles to the performance of everyday life, but will instead give equal access to all users, provide natural light, and offer views and other features that encourage well being. In short, HSW means that structural interventions into the shared environment will, to borrow a phrase from the medical profession, "first and foremost, do no harm."

But how are such promises secured? There must be an objective standard that both the public and the profession can trust, as well as an objective method of testing and monitoring that standard in practice. In the United States as in many other nations, the building code is the answer to the first and the building inspector the second.

Codes are basically standards that have been developed and disseminated to ensure a basic level of compliance for all building types. Failure to follow these rules can result in expulsion from the profession and, depending on the severity of the infraction, civil and criminal charges as well. The profession requires that its members follow codes religiously—as it should—but based on its claim to professional status, this begs the question: Is simply applying the code—already established by other entities—enough to claim exclusive and proprietary responsibility of ensuring the public HSW? It's a valid question. Again, design centers provide a clear, viable answer to this primary element of architecture's professional responsibility.

Through their engagement with a broad array of issues in the built environment, design center practitioners have come to realize that holding to the letter of narrowly defined HSW concerns is no longer enough to secure professional status. Primarily through their own indifference, architects have allowed HSW to be controlled by entities outside of their purview and, for the most part, simply consider their duties done if they follow the regulations provided by these entities. Design center practitioners ask how, pray tell, is that any different than anyone who wishes to participate in the building process? Shouldn't being a professional require more—at least more than the ability to read and follow the BOCA code? Responding to this question with a resounding "Of course it should!", design center practitioners posit that notions of HSW can no longer simply

be contained to the building itself. Concern for HSW must, by nature and purpose, be extended to the built environment.

Health is not something that can be measured with an instrument, though specific physiological measurements can be useful in reaching judgments about well-being and disease in bodies...we need to take responsibility for our actions as participants in this creative cosmos...this is the lesson I take from the new science, that goes beyond the post-modern to a new form of ethical realism...<sup>3.34</sup>

<sup>3.34</sup> Bryan Goodwin, "A Conversation with Three Scientists: Physicist Philip Ball, Biologist Brian Goodwin and Mathematician Ian Stewart." Interviewed by Dr. Brian Hanson. Transcript published in *Katarxis N° 3*, accessed December 15, 2014, [http://katarxis3.com/Three\\_Scientists.htm](http://katarxis3.com/Three_Scientists.htm).

Goodwin's observations highlight a critical point that, by employing a kind of ethical realism in their work, design centers raise

the possibility of locating within the profession a larger social role—a role concerned with something beyond the beauty or quality of the built environment. Architecture could begin to serve as the locus for addressing some of society's most pressing issues, such as the conflict between public and private property rights or the influence of high density on human well-being.<sup>3.35</sup>

<sup>3.35</sup> Spector. *The Ethical Architect*, 22.

**Clearly, the act of taking on the ethical dilemmas of building must begin, not end, with simply keeping buildings upright.**

These are the kinds of concerns that legitimize the professional status of architecture, not simply making sure a building doesn't collapse. Since Raphael Sperry, Stephen Vogel, and others will discuss this proposition later in the book, I won't belabor the point here. *Clearly, the act of taking on the ethical dilemmas of building must begin, not end, with simply keeping buildings upright.*

#### *Architecture and Its Discontents*

Understandably, the position I stake out is a controversial one—and has been for at least half a century. Its main rebuttal takes the form of something akin to this statement: "That kind of responsibility is way beyond the scope of what architects are supposed to provide. I don't want to do it; I won't do it—it's not what I signed up for." The simple response to this is that as a professional, it's exactly what you signed up for. And in today's world, it is even more important to acknowledge this and act accordingly.

In a time when rapidly developing communication and transportation technologies facilitate greater linkages among formally disparate societies, thus making vast amounts of readily accessible information—factual but also often inaccurate, incomplete, misleading, or purposely false—available to anyone who seeks it, the need for knowledge—the ability to sift through and decipher the mounds of available material and separate the useful from the superfluous—is ever more critical. It is important to remember that information and knowledge are two distinctly separate things. While necessary to reach for knowledge, mere access to information does not inevitably lead there. This crucial point cannot be overstated. I reject the notion that professions are increasingly anachronistic in an information-rich world. My position is just the opposite: professions and professionals play an ever more vital role in the exponentially expanding society in which we now operate, because it is professionals who can turn information into knowledge. Yet this is only one element in the argument for their continued relevance.

Even further than the need for professional knowledge is the need for such knowledge to be employed—to the best of one person’s ability—in a manner best suited to ensure an overall public benefit. To do that, one must be able to go beyond the limits of both individual and professional gain.

*One must act within a larger spectrum of common concerns that include not only one’s area of expertise, but those of other professions and their members as well.* This is not an insignificant responsibility, yet it is the choice one makes when one chooses to join a profession. To abdicate that responsibility is to engage in professional malfeasance, if not professional and social suicide.

For these reasons, professional education begins as a liberal education, to bind knowledge with judgment in the interests of the common good. Engaging the broader questions of building is what keeps the licensed practitioner in the position of legal authority, based on the moral and ethical considerations from which the profession itself operates. However uncomfortable one may be with moral imperatives, it is simply inexcusable that the deeper ethical exploration of architecture has all but left the building.

**One must act within a larger spectrum of common concerns that include not only one’s area of expertise, but those of other professions and their members as well.**

If it is true that the architect is hired at least in part to take on the ethical dilemmas of building, can it truly be said that those questions begin and end solely with what is legal, particularly when legal requirements change all the time? How can a profession exist, *as a profession*, without a sustained discussion about its ethical responsibility, which by definition goes beyond legal definitions? Ethics are supposed to be messy. All professional codes of ethics outline actions, but the exceptional ones attempt to define why those actions are appropriate or not. By simply following the regulation itself, one fails to understand the thinking behind it—and as a result, one endangers the status of the profession itself. I, and others more knowledgeable than me, argue that the notion of ethics transcends legality, that what is legally correct is not always ethically justifiable. Professionals *must* understand the difference and act accordingly. Where, exactly, is the critical thinking necessary to ethical behavior, if one is simply following codes and perhaps actually ignoring needs?

Long ago, professions like law and medicine embraced the fundamental axiom that to deny someone access to their services diminishes their claim to professional status and the monopoly on which it rests. Homelessness, sick buildings, the aftermath of hurricanes Gustav, Katrina and Sandy, concentration of poverty, spatial profiling, environmental injustice, redlining, and the prevalence of the NIMBY mentality all across our nation and the world, demand a significant shift away from the limited, and frankly self-serving, interpretation of the profession's HSW responsibilities. The role of the professional architect is no different than the role of any other professional: to balance the needs/desires of public interest with the needs/desires of private individuals within the constraints of their expertise. To the best of one's ability, professional practice requires the exercise of the highest moral, ethical, social, and fiduciary judgment for the benefit of all who engage the built environment, even should that judgment signal an outcome that is personally distasteful to the individual professional. As a professional, one is always in service to the many, even if only a few or one is financing one's actions. As long as you ply your trade in the civic arena, you are by very definition working for all people, and upholding the public trust is paramount. Without it, the profession—the legally protected monopoly over the stewardship of the built environment—ceases to exist.

<sup>3.36</sup> Spector. *The Ethical Architect*, 30.

As Tom Spector concludes, “Architects cannot have it both ways; they cannot continue to expect to enjoy unchallenged public protection for indulging themselves as artists.”<sup>3.36</sup> It is a rare moment indeed when the ethical and the practical align. On this issue, however, such is the case.

### *Architecture and Its Future*

If this essay has given you the impression that I’m asking the profession to give up anything it is currently doing, perish the thought. On the contrary; I’m asking the architectural field to recognize what design centers illustrate: that architects can—and must—expand their view of the profession’s purpose. At the present time, the works of design centers are rarely included in lofty critiques of the profession and its products. Why? Primarily because, if one were to ask the typical architect, design centers “don’t really do architecture” at all. Design centers advocate so many things that seem foreign to traditional architectural education and practice that they are often ignored or at best, tolerated. They engage in participatory design, provide pro bono and discounted fee services, work with small, non-profit clients often in distressed communities with shoestring budgets, and unapologetically pursue social activism. Most design centers, when discussed at all in educational institutions, are described as “alternative practices” in polite company, and relegated to the kind of attention that term connotes. Conventional architectural wisdom has determined that design centers simply aren’t the kind of practices worthy of the finely detailed diatribes found in most architectural texts or public debates. Yet, as I hope this essay, and indeed this entire publication, can show, design centers are not an either/or proposition for the architectural profession.

**In fact, it is necessarily, just the opposite.**