

Contingency and autonomy in designing architecture

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One of the most important ethical considerations in the context of designing architecture is that of the relationship between designers and those they design for. There is an asymmetry to this, where, for the most part at least, the agency over design decisions lies with the designer while the effects of these decisions impact on others. This asymmetry can be problematic in the context of designing architecture where questions have no clear right answers due to conflicting requirements or ill-defined goals (qualities that follow from the involvement of others within these questions and which are characteristic of those situations designers typically encounter; Cross, 2007; Rittel, 1972) yet are not merely matters of preference as they impact on others in ethically significant ways. While in similar situations in everyday life we will often try to find some consensus or compromise between different stakeholders, such an approach is, except in the simplest possible circumstances, impossible to achieve in designing architecture because of the number of stakeholders, many of whom the designer will not even encounter (passersby, future users), and the complexity of the issues involved.

Considering the relationship between designers and those they design for, architecture is a conspicuously contingent discipline. It is dependent on all sorts of unpredictable factors (see for instance Till, 2009) and, given this, it is implausible that designers can act autonomously. However, this contingency also leads to an understanding of designers as being autonomous in a different sense. It follows from there being no right answer to a design question (which itself follows from the involvement of others) that the designer is ultimately responsible for his or her own actions and the reasoning for following any one particular course rather than other viable ones. In this way, designing is an activity where action is both contingent on context and at the same time not determined by that context. While designers are dependent on matters beyond their control, they are nevertheless autonomous in the sense of being completely responsible for their designing.

While it is implausible that designers act autonomously (in the first sense above), this does not mean that they do not attempt to do so by minimising their engagement with others. However, when we consider the interactive way that designers work (Cross, 2007; Gedenryd, 1998; Glanville, 2007; Schön, 1991) it makes no sense to separate their own interests out from those of others (which is not to say that they do not still conflict). Indeed there is a sense in which the most fundamental activities of designers, such as drawing, are attempts to anticipate how others will appreciate a proposal (meaning that in design the aesthetic and epistemological cannot be separated from the ethical and participatory; Kenniff and Sweeting, 2014). In this understanding of design activity, the attempt to minimise the involvement of others is not just ethically problematic but also practically counterproductive in that it reduces designers' understanding of their own acting.

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